GIFTED DROPOUTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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by

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Gifted dropouts: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

James Zabloski. GIFTED DROPOUTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY. (Under the direction of Dr. Fred Milacci), School of Education, April, 2010.

This qualitative phenomenological study of the life experiences of seven rural gifted individuals who dropped out of school investigated whether they shared commonalities that might have led to the phenomenon of dropping out. The problem was that no one had asked them to share their stories prior to this study. By searching for meaning in their individual and combined stories, the overarching theme of relationships weaved through all of them. Three themes emerged which contributed to their drop out decision: relational traumas, relational losses, and relationships with teachers. All of these gifted dropouts experienced a significant relational trauma in middle school which affected later learning experiences. By focusing on their progressively declining interest in school through the lens of relationships, new data emerged which added to existing literature.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wife, Linda, and my two gifted sons, Ross and Taylor, for their input and support during this four year journey. They provided counsel, inspiration, motivation, prayer, and the occasional knock on my basement office door with a concerned, "Are you all right in there?" I couldn't have (and wouldn't have) done this study without their backing.

I also want to thank the seven participants who shared their time, their emotions, and their secrets because they believed in doing so we could make a difference. I am not sure which was more difficult for them, living these events or reliving them in story form. I am honored they gave me the chance to hear their stories and to become their friend.

Thank you to my committee members, whom I deeply respect and greatly admire. Their input, support and interest in this study truly kept me going. Dr. Brian Ratliff and Dr. Beth Ackerman love education, and it shows. I am honored to be called their peer and now their friend. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to my mentor, advisor, chair, and friend, Dr. Fred Milacci. His balance of challenge and compassion, and of listening and teaching inspire me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The phenomenon of giftedness has been under investigation since the early 1900s, but the preponderance of research completed on gifted students took place in the decade following the release of Sputnik and the height of the space race (Kulik, 1992). Since the early 1970s, significant studies in gifted learning grew infrequent, with an average of seven to ten year intervals between major studies (VanTassel-Baska, 2006), many of which were quantitative in nature. While quantitative research may provide valuable numerical data, it may not reveal the meaning behind the numbers. When investigating the phenomenon of gifted dropouts or other phenomenology, meaning is important because it describes a lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). There are stories behind statistics. This research sought to find an answer to the question: What factors led gifted students to drop out of school?

Several of the most influential writers on gifted education issued a call for deeper investigation into the stories and lives of gifted dropouts (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Matthews, 2006; Renzulli & Park, 2002). There was concern that large numbers of gifted students were dropping out of school due to boredom and disinterest on the part of teachers and administrators (Kanevsky & Kieghley, 2003).

Out of all high school dropouts, as many as 20% of them may be gifted (Renzulli & Park, 2000); some drop out; some turn to narcotics. Other gifted students deal with bullying, depression, anger and suicidal ideations (Cassady & Cross, 2006). Out of frustration, some students, even honors students, turn to violence and become school

shooters to get their voices heard (Dedman, 2000). These incidents bear further investigation.

Problem Statement

The problem is that the individual stories of gifted dropouts have largely been ignored. Students are treated less as individuals in research and traditional learning environments, and more as part of a group (Kyberg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). The emphasis in some public schools may focus on getting the majority of students to meet minimum competency levels. Addressing the needs of the individual can become secondary. The American public school system and the No Child Left Behind programs focus on teaching to the middle, emphasizing group-think, and moving students through the system as quickly and equitably as possible (Stanley & Baines, 2002). While researchers like Matthews (2006) and Renzulli and Park (2000) argued over the meaning of giftedness and whether to divide it into subcategories for research purposes or to gather better data, gifted students were dropping out because in the traditional public school setting the individual gifted student becomes, as one gifted dropout put it, "invisible" (Carper, 2002, p. 65), a term one participant in this study also used.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project was to understand the factors which resulted in the phenomenon of gifted students dropping out of school. Information regarding their upbringing, attitudes about their giftedness and about school life, and an exploration into other factors that may have led to their leaving school were all critical to understanding the phenomenon of becoming a gifted dropout. Gifted labeling offers some unique educational opportunities for the gifted student, but these advantages are at times

insufficient to keep them in school. The factors that led them to drop out were complex.

These dropouts shared commonalities which could generate further research on the

development of dropout intervention programs. The purpose of this qualitative research

was to learn from their past and thus allow administrators to consider changes for the

future.

Significance of the Study

Research on gifted students and on gifted education is not new. The first major

study took place in the early 1900s. Today several universities such as University of

Connecticut, University of Virginia and Stanford University have entire programs

dedicated to the study of giftedness. What is relatively new, however, is qualitative

analysis using deep and rich information derived from the students' own words. This

current study was critical because it not only raised a topic of concern, but presents

opportunity for further potential study on the subject. As Creswell (1998) argued, one

should "use a qualitative study because of the need to present a detailed view of the topic.

The wide-angle lens or the distant panoramic shot will not suffice to present answers to

the problem, or the close-up view does not exist" (p.17).

The impact of this research may be far-reaching. It revealed the reason(s) gifted

students dropped out of school. It may offer other researchers a baseline for further

research. This research may provide administrators an opportunity for reviewing their

current dropout prevention programs and focus on a unique population currently not

serviced. The findings may encourage other gifted dropouts to come forth and tell their

stories in future research. To date, only one other qualitative dissertation on gifted

dropouts addressed this issue (Carper, 2002), and this study contributed additional

information and validity to the information described in Carper's research. Another researcher may take a different approach to that of Carper's study or this one; if so, then this study becomes even more relevant because it will have generated study where currently one finds little information.

Finally, findings emerging from this research may provide impetus for new or deeper discussions in other educational communities. The topic of gifted dropouts is not well known nor made a top priority in educational circles. It endures a much lower priority than issues such as NCLB (Gentry, 2006), differentiation (Callahan, 2001; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005), acceleration (Gross, 2006), ability grouping (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002; Shields, 2002; Tieso, 2003), lethargy, (Caraisco, 2007), underachievement (Matthews & McBee, 2007; Seeley, 2004), failure (Franklin, 1998), tracking (Sheehan, 2000), or even online learning and distance educational options (Rice, 2006; Shimabukuro, 2005).

Focus and Intent

The research project focused on the factors leading up to and including the life-changing decision to quit school by gifted students. Research focused on gifted adults currently between the ages of 18 and 40 in order to reveal fresher memories, emotions, and stories leading up to the event. By gaining insight into the lives of these unique individuals, and by sharing their stories, others in similar situations may come forward to voice their concerns and recommendations toward a viable solution. Also, by focusing on those gifted students who abandoned formal high school education, one hopes that policymakers and administrators can create better legislation and programs to intervene in contemporary traditional educational settings.

It was the intent of this project to reveal any commonalities or trigger patterns among these former students that may be useful in future intervention strategies for other gifted students pondering the same end. The goal was to reduce the number of gifted dropouts as a result of information gathered from this study.

Theoretical Framework

The study of why gifted students drop out best fits Jerome Bruner's constructivist theoretical framework of epistemology, cognition, axiology, and pedagogy (Smith, 2002). Bruner studied the cognitive development of children and the appropriate pedagogy for delivering information to them, and he postulated what the appropriate forms of education might be for different students (Smith, 2002). He further contended that learning is an active process and is based upon previous knowledge. To express this theory, he suggested thinking of learning as a spiral upon which previous knowledge builds (Bruner, 1971).

Bruner's epistemology and cognition theory stated that various ability levels internalize material uniquely (Bruner, 1971). He said in that same writing, "With respect to making accessible the deep structure of any given discipline, I think the rule still holds that any subject can be taught to any child at any age in some form that is both honest and powerful" (p. 122). This framework matches the thinking that gifted students also range in ability from their peers and process information differently and that educators should accommodate these learning differences (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007; Belcastro, 2002; Buchanan & Woerner, 2002; Caraisco, 2007; Caruana, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gross, 2006; Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Johnson, 2000; Mann, 2006; Stanley & Baines, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 2003).

Regarding axiology and the value of education, Bruner argued that education's purpose was to help students reach their full potential and cognitive mastery. While he did not specifically address gifted education students and today's high stakes testing mandates, his writing indicated that he would object to them when he said, "We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself […] Knowing is a process, not a product" (Bruner, 1966, p. 72 as cited in Smith, 2002). He added that education's purpose was to develop competence and not performances. He argued that the greatest stimulation to learning was interest, not grades or competition. Education must stretch children to think to their limits (Bruner, 1971), not to pass set examinations. For Bruner, education had a higher call and moral objective; thus it was not morally neutral (Bruner, 1971).

Bruner's philosophy of pedagogy (that students can learn anything at any age and in any manner when intellectually and sociologically motivated) (Bruner, 1960) fits into the current research on gifted education which contends that gifted students thrive on independent study and learning modes which incorporate options such as virtual schools and self-pacing options. Bruner's theory of discovery learning states that learning is not imparted by a teacher, but it is discovered by the student. The review of literature discusses these concepts in greater detail.

In educational theory, Bruner's model fits the theoretical framework of leaders in the field of gifted education (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Mooij, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005) who, like Bruner might contend that a gifted student who may be able to learn colors in kindergarten, or geographical locations or algebraic equations in third grade should not be prohibited from doing so. If the child is ready and willing to learn, then educators

should accommodate willingness and ability. Some of the information presented in the review of literature regarding gifted students addresses inappropriate or under-challenging curriculum. Regarding gifted education, Bruner would argue that because the student can learn, it is the learner who dictates what should be taught, not the curriculum, pacing guide, government, administration or teacher.

Situation to Self

My role in this research study was both personal and professional. As a father of two gifted teenage sons attending a rural high school, it concerned me that the educational opportunities offered gifted or talented high school students in rural schools were lacking. Then, too, given that research showed that a lack of challenge was a first step toward boredom (Kanevsky & Kieghley, 2003) which inevitably may lead to the decision to leave school, I was personally concerned that my children may experience a lack of mental challenge in school. I was personally interested in determining the internal locus which caused similarly gifted students to make the choice not to finish school.

Professionally, I wrote unpublished gifted curriculum when little was available for lower middle school students. Having taught in both homogeneous and heterogeneous settings, experience did play a role in the desired research. As a professional educator, I found it disconcerting that as many as 20 percent of all dropouts may be gifted students (Renzulli & Park, 2000). If those numbers are accurate (and there is opposing research indicating that it may be less) (Matthews, 2006), the question still remained as to why any gifted student would leave the learning environment. The school environment may provide answers, or it may be something entirely unrelated to the school setting. One may theorize, it seemed prudent to ask the gifted students who dropped out.

A recent field work project confirmed what Renzulli and Park's (2000) research predicted; gifted students do drop out and are dropping out, and they are doing so stealthily. A pilot study revealed that administrators and educators in their high school may not listen to gifted students. Evidence from other research suggests this phenomenon may be wide spread (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007).

I served on the Gifted Advisory Council for a school district which monitors the state of gifted education, makes recommendations and proposals for change, and reports to the school board periodically any relevant findings. Upon publication of this dissertation, the information in it could be of interest to the university from which the student population came, to the Gifted Council, and to the local school board. My hope was that the results of this research would generate action items which might engage future dialog, programs and remedies to prevent more gifted students from dropping out.

Guiding Questions

In existing research published on gifted dropouts, much of what appears is quantitatively addressed (Carper, 2002; Cigman, 2006), or is so global in nature as to be rendered useless on a phenomenological basis. Though statistical analysis comes from large numbers, one must remember that individuals drop out; groups do not. At the heart of every gifted student is an individual with complex needs, characteristics, issues, emotions and questions. The decision to leave school is complex and while it may be singular, there is a temptation in research to simplify the data. One study concluded that there are precisely 35 reasons why students underachieve in school (Matthews & McBee, 2007). This writer contended that students' reasons for dropping out, including the academically advantaged, may be more complex than that. This research intended to go

deeper into the lives of fewer students by asking questions which went beyond surface answers. The best way to investigate this issue was to go to the sources directly and as the students themselves voiced, simply to listen. To do that, the following peer-reviewed questions guided the writer in this research project:

1. How did gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of high school? Most research on gifted dropouts or underachievers uses purposeful sampling, but typically on a wide scale involving hundreds or thousands of students. In one study, Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004) queried hundreds of participants from 29 of Alabama's 128 school systems. There is some specificity in such research, but it may be too broad to find potential commonalities. Gifted students may have high or low socio-economic standards; some have educated parents; some have single parent homes; others have moral situations such as teen pregnancy or co-habitation issues (Renzulli & Park, 2000). Thus, research into a phenomenon such as gifted students dropping out requires depth rather than breadth in order to extract and analyze this data. It was conceivable that this guiding question would allow the research to cover decades per participant, depending on the age. It also allowed for richer interviewing, lengthier responses, and less directed questioning. While this first question seemed broad, it granted participants the opportunity to explore what was meaningful to them. It neither focused specifically on the decision to drop out, nor on that moment. This was deliberate; the findings of this study concluded that a common event that happened to each gifted dropout in their middle school years may have catalyzed a later decision to drop out. Guiding question one left such options open by being broad and deep.

2. How did gifted dropouts respond to specific traditional educational constructs?

Uncovering and discussing a student's response to school constructs such as teachers,

homework, gym class, bullying, etc. elicited great data when exposed. Hansen and

Johnston Toso (2007) touched upon this in their recent studies by allowing the gifted

dropouts to express sentiments and memories unfettered. This guiding question provided

insights into topics the participant alluded to in guiding question one, but which bore

further investigation. The participant may purposely avoid a topic, and this second

question opened opportunities to discuss that topic in greater detail.

     3. How did participants' responses compare or contrast? This question revealed

whether there were any common factors that led these individuals to drop out of high

school. Through the search for commonalities one sought for a saturation point or a

common event, history, or circumstance. Then too, the question may have revealed no

commonalities among participants. Since every gifted dropout had a story to tell, this

question revealed any themes or patterns which emerged. As a result, it may prompt

further studies.

Definition

     A clear understanding of definitions is critical to any research proposed on gifted

dropouts. Wide variations occur between researchers on the terms *dropout* and *gifted*

(Renzulli & Park, 2002; Matthews, 2006).

     Because the working definitions for both *giftedness* and *dropout* vary so widely

among gifted education researchers, it was difficult to settle on one over the other.

Therefore, this researcher took the most workable parts from various definitions, and

selected those portions which were both reliable and accessible. Specifically, portions of

those definitions with which other researchers would not find fault, and which best met

the purpose statement in this study were neither the least restrictive, nor the most restrictive definitions but chose the middle ground.

Dropout. For the purpose of this study, a dropout was defined as one who: 1) was not currently attending high school, and either 2) did not graduate with his or her class, 3) earned a GED or other nontraditional diploma, or 4) did not complete his or her high school education. The definition of dropout could have been more restrictive, but the rationale for this choice was since the federal government used this definition, and many researchers used the government's data (Renzulli & Park, 2000), this research followed similar established guidelines.

Gifted. For the purpose of this study, a gifted student was one whose school, county or district where the student previously attended labeled or identified them as such. Verification of this would have been in the student's permanent school record. If the school system tested, assessed and identified a student as gifted, this researcher abided by their assessment.

Summary

This study was designed to look deeply into the life stories and experiences of adults who fit the profile of a gifted dropout according to the definitions used above. Through a series of verbal and written interviews, this writer used three guiding questions to discover not only what motivated the participants to make this decision to drop out, but also to determine whether the individual phenomenon was a shared one. Further, the researcher sought to present the life stories of these participants through the use of thick, rich descriptions so the reader could share their lived experiences.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the number of gifted and talented students in public schools is 2,926,000 (NCES, 2000), and according to Marland (1972), and Renzulli and Park (2000), 18-20% of those students, or 526,000 gifted teenagers, will drop out of high school. Proponents and opponents of gifted education may have assumed that gifted high school students were doing well, particularly with the offering of such specialized classes as Advanced Placement (AP), honors, and dual enrollment. However, the now dated 1972 Marland report declared that 18% of all high school dropouts were gifted. According to Matthews (2006), that data may have been unintentionally misrepresented because the sampling used for that report did not represent a nationwide survey, but rather a percentage of gifted students in the 1950s from a rural, agricultural state (Iowa) who dropped out for reasons related to work needs. Matthews (2006) further argued that Marland inflated the data which may have been nearer to one percent. Even if the data were flawed, it served another purpose; Marland's report birthed a new interest in research on gifted dropouts.

One should review the history of giftedness and dropout research related to both the general student population as well as those labeled as gifted students. To form a cohesive and complete picture, additional elements such as demographics, characteristics, needs, and dropout factors of gifted students should be investigated. Such research may reveal whether there is a link between all the factors affecting a gifted student and a school system's failure to recognize any or all of those factors, thus resulting in the

student's decision to drop out of school.

Historical Perspective

  Tracking giftedness. Education of the gifted reaches back as far as the first century A.D. where more promising children were sent to schools with private tutors while their less able friends learned trades. Roman citizens birthed into a family of means and education were likely candidates for such tutoring (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). The process of identifying and isolating gifted students proliferated throughout the centuries on a hit or miss basis. Artistically gifted children such as Mozart, Michelangelo, Bach and Beethoven attended special schools for gifted children, although these schools and the children attending them were not labeled gifted, nor were they tested in any formal fashion. Rather, those in authority simply noted that such students were more able in one area than the general populace and required special education to meet those needs.

  It was not until the mid 1800s that formal testing and identification of the gifted appeared in St. Louis, Massachusetts, and New Jersey (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). Sir Francis Galton researched and wrote about giftedness, concluding that intelligence was a direct result of heredity and natural selection. Charles Darwin, Galton's older cousin, may have influenced Galton's conclusions (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Galton's British studies found their way to France, and in the 1890s Alfred Binet continued the research. Binet felt strongly that a standardized test would produce more reliable results than the teacher recommendations used at that time. Binet understood that mental age was different than chronological age, and wanted to assess whether students were on the same academic level or whether some students were outliers. The test was inadequate, and Lewis Terman later revised the testing procedure to arrive at the Stanford-Binet

Intelligence Test. In 1922, Terman (known as the father of gifted education) identified more than 1000 gifted children with intelligence quotients above 135 using his testing procedure. Those students were taught in homogenous groups. While Terman's testing had validity issues due to his poor sampling methodology (Colangelo & Davis, 2003), he established precedent showing that gifted students fared better when grouped homogenously.

The sampling process improved with Leta Hollingsworth in the 1920s and 1930s. Hollingsworth promoted gifted education and homogenous ability grouping, and concluded that early identification of the gifted was essential to future success. She fought for specialized gifted curriculum to meet the needs of gifted students, claiming that half the gifted students in traditional classrooms wasted time (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

The resurgence in gifted education came with the advent of the space race in the late 1950s. The cold war and the propulsion of Sputnik into space caused alarms to signal in Washington that American education might not keep pace with international levels. To augment deficiencies, the Educational Policies Commission noted that high ability students were not well educated to meet their needs in the 1950s. Programs such as condensed curriculum, ability grouping, elementary foreign languages, and dual enrollment abounded (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davis & Rimm, 2004). The fervor lasted only five or six years and revived in 1972 with the release of the Marland report.

Marland's report to congress took a different turn. It did not focus on gifted education programs so much as it reported that 18% of all dropouts were from the gifted population. While the results astounded congressional leaders, little was done for the next 12 years until the release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in

Education, 1983). The study did not specifically focus on gifted education, although it did recommend the kind of unique, rigorous curriculum geared for gifted students and the general student population generated in the post-Sputnik era. Both the Marland report and *A Nation at Risk* are dated, but the data in each showed a continual decline in the educational levels of students, in the challenge level in curriculums, and in the graduation rates of high school students.

In 1993 the U.S. Department of Education released the National Excellence report which showed similar results found by Hollingsworth 70 years prior that gifted students spent their school days with little specific attention to meet their academic needs, and that elementary gifted students knew 35-50% of the material presented to them (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Despite these warnings, curriculum content and graduation rates continued to decline. In 1994, congress reapproved the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Student Education Act which provided funding for gifted education as outlined in the 1988 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The Improving America's Schools Act (1994), (also known as P.L. 103-382 which incorporates the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act) noted that gifted students had specific needs, and that those needs included gifted and talented curriculum. This act established the National Center for Research and Development in the Education of Gifted and Talented Children and Youth, and allocated 11 million dollars toward gifted education. Even though the act covers all education issues, sections 8402-8404 mentioned five times that gifted students have specific needs (Improving America's Schools Act, 1994, Sections 8402-8404).

To offset both high dropout rates and low academic rates, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) enforced sweeping changes in

curriculum standardization. The NCLB is a revision of the ESEA. Until 2002, individual

states determined programs, funding, and standards, a disparity pointed out in *A Nation at*

Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education,1983). However, the NCLB took

the standardization to a federal level by requiring mandated achievement levels and

graduation rates under penalty of school closure. The focus of NCLB was on dropout and

low achievement rates; gifted education was mentioned peripherally.

The NCLB scatters references to gifted education throughout its hundreds of

pages, although it does continue funding for the Javits Act. NCLB does define giftedness

(No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Sections 910 & 1111) and allows, but does not

mandate, special programs for gifted students except as they relate to gifted students of

Hawaiian (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Section 7205) or native Indian descent (No

Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Sections 7134) as well as programs for homeless gifted

students (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Sections 722 and 723).

The most recent issue concerning gifted education concerns federal funding for

gifted education. Due to budget constraints, in 2009 Congress debated whether to

continue funding the Javits Act, but outcry from gifted advocates, parents, teachers and

students forced the house appropriations committee to change its mind. (National

Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The funding for gifted education may continue

throughout the 2009-2010 federal budget if the Senate votes to do so.

Tracking dropouts. The study of the dropout phenomenon is less than 100 years

old. Prior to the 1940s, leaving school before graduation was the norm. The first census

of high school graduates in the 1940s revealed that 50% of the adults ages 25 to 29

dropped out of high school (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). In the 1960s and 1970s several

sporadic studies identified a potential problem (Dentler & Warshauer, 1965; Elliot & Voss, 1974), but they were disregarded. Not until the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) did the public become aware of the dropout problem in the United States. Shortly after the release of that publication, the NCES began gathering dropout information on a national scale, and another report followed titled *A Nation Still at Risk* (Center for Education Reform, 1998). The report highlighted the achievement gap between American students and their foreign counterparts. It showed American 12th graders ranking near last in math and science, and in physics even advanced students scored last place. Considering the dropout rate, the study revealed that little had changed. From the period between 1983 to 1998 when the second report came out, more than six million American students dropped out of school. *A Nation Still at Risk* called for more parental involvement, less government intervention and oversight, more school choices, teachers qualified by life experience and not state certification, and an end to one-size-fits-all approach to education (Center for Education Reform, 1998).

Three years after the release of *A Nation Still at Risk*, the No Child Left Behind Act became federal law. Policymakers designed the NCLB to resolve both student achievement and dropout rates. The NCLB requires states to report dropout rates to the federal government in order to determine whether they have met adequate yearly progress (AYP) status, but according to Swanson (2003), states may create their own definition of *dropout*. According to Swanson's (2003) report, fewer than 12 of the 50 states use definitions consistent with the NCLB definition. As a result, graduation rates can vary from 66% to 88% (Bracey, 2009). By manipulating the data and forming their own

NCLB accepted definition, one school district had 1000 freshmen with 300 of them graduating four years later, yet the school reported zero dropouts (Jones, 2007).

Another study noted that a student receiving a GED certificate cannot be included in the AYP according to the NCLB because GED earners are considered dropouts; however, some states include them if they return to school (Swanson, 2003). Because graduation and dropout rates can change depending on the state reporting them, the NCLB does not require 100% graduation rates; the norm reported by states overall is 85% (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Swanson (2008) reported that of the top 100 metropolitan areas nationwide, only 50% of the students received diplomas. Some individual cities pull down the state dropout rates. Baltimore graduated only 34% of their students, Cleveland 34%, Indianapolis 30%, and Detroit 25% in 2007 (Swanson, 2008). These numbers may be exacerbated by NCLB's mandate labeling students as dropouts who do not complete high school within four years; any student held back a year, regardless of whether he or she finishes school and receives a diploma in five years is reported as a dropout per NCLB requirements (Swanson, 2003).

While achievement scores continued rising under NCLB annually (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009), so have the annual dropout numbers (Rycik, 2007). Davis and Dupper (2004) proposed that there may be a link between the two. They contended that the term *pushout* is more appropriate than *dropout* because the high stakes testing force underachievers to leave the system, leaving behind only students who can pass the rigorous tests (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Rycik (2007) complemented that theory by adding that although dropout rates rose, so have academic grades; he postulated that this

phenomenon may be due to the idea that the curriculum was "dumbed down" (p. 51).

Defining giftedness and dropouts. To date, there are no universal, conclusive

definitions for either the terms *dropout* or *dropout rate*. The federal definition labels a

student a dropout if a student leaves a district without requesting a forwarded transcript

(U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). In addition, a student who fails to

graduate on time (within 4 years from entering high school) is labeled a dropout, even

though he or she may graduate later. The federal government labels all students as

dropouts who: receive a general education development diploma (GED), a general

certificate, or who take more than four years to complete their diploma (Shannon &

Bylsma, 2006); dropouts are those who are incarcerated and unable to graduate with their

class, or who move without leaving a forwarding address (Sum & Harrington, 2003).

Renzulli and Park (2000) veered from the federal government's definition by labeling a

student as a dropout if he or she missed four consecutive weeks of school for reasons

other than illness. Matthews (2006) accused Renzulli and Park of using a definition that

was too broad in order to increase the gifted student population. He contended that

Renzulli and Park skewed the numbers to match Marland's report. A closer inspection of

Renzulli and Park's (2000) report revealed that while the definition for *dropout* was more

liberal than what Matthews would allow, Renzulli and Park did include other identifiers

and qualifiers to narrow the sampling.

Authorities determine dropout rates based on the number of students who drop out

in one year (event rates), the number of graduates within a specific group of students

(cohort rates), or the number of students not completing school in a timely manner (status

rates). These varied calculation tables skew the numbers declared by the government so

much that, depending on method of definition, reported dropout rates vary from four percent to 30 percent for the general high school population, and from less than one percent to 20 percent for gifted students. As the definition becomes stricter, the dropout rates diminish accordingly. However, even with Matthews' (2006) strict identification of dropout rates, he reported that two-thirds of all gifted dropouts were male, and that 54 percent of gifted dropouts do so in 11th grade.

Currently there is no universally accepted definition for giftedness (Davis & Rimm, 2004) and no standard methods for assessing giftedness (Ng & Nicholas, 2007). The federal government said that gifted students are those tested by a professional in the field (Caraisco, 2007), but did not specify the testing requirements. Testing requirements are determined by individual state and school districts. The state of New York in Chapter 740 of the Laws of 1982, Article 90 defined gifted as, "Pupils who show evidence of high performance, capability and exceptional potential in areas such as general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, and outstanding ability in visual and performing arts" (Section 4452). Cigman (2006) advocated not defining giftedness quantitatively, but defined in terms of "brightness," while others argued for stricter standards in the identification of giftedness (McCoach & Siegle, 2001). Tomlinson (2005) noted that advanced skills in just one area of study grants a gifted label for a student, but Gittman and Koster (2000) found that definition so broad as to be meaningless. Renzulli and Park (2002) accused his detractors of using a definition for *gifted* that was too restrictive and unsubstantiated. Belanger and Gagne (2006) considered opposing views. They reported that simply estimating the precise number of gifted students was speculative, and depending on the parameters and definitions set to identify them, concluded that the U.S.

population of gifted students could range anywhere from seven percent to 60%. They

further concluded that the more liberal the definition, the larger the gifted pool would

become. Thus Matthews' (2006) definition of *gifted* referred only to intellectual

academics; those who rank academically in the 95th percentile he considered gifted. As a

result, he concluded less than one percent of the dropouts were gifted students. Renzulli

and Park (2000) opted for a more generic definition to include "those who have

participated in their school district's gifted program or who have been enrolled in three or

more classes in advanced, enriched or accelerated English, social studies, science or

math" (p. 4). His results showed that 20% of dropouts were gifted students. Gittman and

Koster (2000) limited those labeled as gifted to students who scored high on test scores

alone but did not define the word *high*. Sheehan (2000) insisted that candidates meet

specific intelligence quotient (IQ) or scoring in the 85th percentile on ACT tests, or grade

point average (GPA) requirements between 3.5 and 4.0, while Cigman (2006) contended

that quantitative definitions limit the range and number of potential gifted students.

Whether researchers or administrators define the definition of giftedness strictly or

broadly, it varies depending on who is doing the research (Matthews & Foster, 2006).

The major players in the argument over whether gifted dropout rates are accurate

are Michael Matthews (2006) and Joseph Renzulli (2000). Matthews concluded the

number of gifted dropouts was significantly lower Renzulli and Park's (2000) research

reported (less than one percent versus twenty percent respectively), yet both used

scientifically valid and reliable research methods. Neither party will concede their

findings, nor can they be conclusive as long as the definitions they use vary so greatly.

Both of these leaders in the field of gifted education referenced the first major study on

gifted dropouts: the Marland Report presented to congress in 1979.

Marland gave six different definitions to explain giftedness in the congressional report, including general intellectual ability and leadership talent (Cigman, 2006). Prior to Marland's report, no definition included leadership which some now do (Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). Forbach and Pierce (1999) believed that using multiple methods of assessment including psychological profiles and other methods would better identify gifted students. Renzulli and Park (2002) concluded that gifted high school students were those enrolled for at least a year in their local district's gifted education program, and who took three or more advanced placement studies (AP) courses in specific subjects. Giftedness may be determined differently based on the assessor's individualized and preferred parameters.

Significant Research

While many documents covered various aspects of gifted education and the phenomenon of gifted dropouts in this review, several provided significant information and require deeper discussion. Shannon and Bylsma's (2006) reporting on dropout populations both nationally as well as in Washington state did not specifically focus on gifted dropouts, but their findings were useful in corroborating information found in other presentations. Their study presented information covering a decade using the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) from 2002. Shannon and Bylsma reported on dropout rates and the financial consequences resulting from them both for the student and the community at large. They showed how the unemployment rate for dropouts was 75 % higher than for graduates, and that dropouts typically earn $18,000 dollars a year compared to graduates of a four year college who earn $45,000 a year. Lower income

adults do not contribute as much to the tax base in a community, so dropping out of

school is not a momentary event but a lifelong one.

Shannon and Bylsma (2006) used national dropout information as a comparison

for their own state. They noted that nationally, the dropout rate for Hispanics was the

highest of all minority groups (28%); for Blacks the rate was 13%, and for Whites 7%.

From these larger figures many other statistics emerged covering race, ethnicity, and

gender within each subgroup. The researchers warned against gathering research study

material and making simplistic judgments or action plans. They concluded saying that the

study of dropouts was a complicated one and that no single program stood out as better or

more effective than the others.

Renzulli and Park's (2002) gifted dropout study used similar information found in

Shannon and Bylsma's (2006) study, but focused solely on the narrower demographic of

gifted students. Based on the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:

88), Renzulli and Park's (2002) study followed up three times at two year intervals (in

1990, 1992, and 1994) using information gained from questionnaires in the NELS: 88

report to determine which of the 25,000 eighth graders interviewed in 1988 continued on

through high school and either graduated or dropped out. The NELS :88 study gathered

information from students, parents, administrators and teachers, but in Renzulli and

Park's follow up study, they re-interviewed those students qualifying as gifted dropouts.

They used two different studies, two different sources of data, and two different

population samples. The purpose of the study was to obtain information on gifted

dropouts. The researchers surveyed students on reasons they left school early, and both

genders reported that they either did not like school or they were failing. While 75% of

the parents tried talking to their student about staying in school, few school counselors intervened. Forty percent of the gifted dropouts said they spoke to their parents once a week or less. Renzulli and Park (2002) also reported that 74% of the gifted dropouts rarely used a computer or other technology, 37% spent time on personal hobbies, and 81% said they never volunteered at school or in the community.

Renzulli and Park (2002) also reported when asked whether they planned on returning to school, only 35% of the gifted dropouts said they would. This number paralleled the responses from nongifted dropouts in the NELS: 88 report. Even though more than half the fathers of gifted dropouts urged their children to go to college, this study noted that 40% of the gifted dropouts had fathers who also dropped out of school. The education level of the father seemed to have a stronger impact on decisions of gifted dropouts than did the education level of the mother, and this was true for both male and female students.

In Renzulli and Park's (2002) summary, they stated that their research matched information reported in the NELS: 88 report which focused on the general population. Their report showed that overall, gifted dropouts matched the general population demographics of low SES, minority status, uneducated parents, and personal issues with relationships as well as a disdain for the school environment, particularly the curriculum and pace of instruction.

Hansen and Johnston Toso (2007) took a more specific look at the gifted dropout population. Their sampling did not generate from a larger report as did Renzulli and Park's (2002), but the surveys took place over a one year period in 2002. In this study, the researchers used a Leaving School Questionnaire designed the previous year which

covered 60 different topics as opposed to Renzulli and Park's seven questions. The topics ranged from personal information, test scores, race, jobs, families, school experiences, school staff, respect, curriculum, self-image, extracurricular activities, drug and alcohol use, relationships, teachers, and more.

Several differences stood out between Renzulli and Park's (2002) study and that of Hansen and Johnston Toso (2007). The latter reported that in general gifted students tend to be male, Caucasian, and middle class or above, while Renzulli and Park reported that the gifted dropout population demographics mirrored that of the general population. Also, the size of the sample populations varied greatly; Renzulli and Park's study encompassed hundreds of students while Hansen and Johnston Toso's population consisted of 14. Ten themes emerged from the interviews of those 14 students. Most notable among them were: problems began in elementary school for all the gifted dropouts; their talents went unrecognized at school; they received little or no counseling; they were not accepted by their peers; the curriculum felt unchallenging and uninspiring; they had issues with authority; their teachers did not respect them.

Although Hansen and Johnston Toso (2007) reported their findings in 2007, they completed their research the same year that Carper (2002) did. Carper's research also involved 14 gifted dropouts, but the methodology was different. Carper used qualitative phenomenological research questions over a period of six months. The male to female mix differed in this study to Hansen and Johnston Toso's; Carper's ratio of male to female participants was ten males to four females, while the former study's ratio was eight males to six females. Both studies used the snowball effect to gather participants as did Hansen and Johnston Toso.

Carper (2002) hoped to qualitatively investigate why gifted students dropped out of school, not through survey methods, but through face to face interviews. Carper collected the data, transcribed the interviews, and coded the information until themes emerged. Not all of the participants dropped out; several were considering it. While an analysis of the participant profile indicated that 12 of the 14 students in the study were from single parent homes, the author drew no conclusions from this information. Students complained about topics ranging from rushed academics, to boredom and busywork. The subject of teachers comprised a large portion of the dialog, and though Carper did not isolate the word in this study, a cursory review revealed the word teacher on most pages. Even when students discussed topics such as drugs, social life or parents, the parental theme reappeared. The author concluded that these gifted students dropped out as a result of feelings of exclusion or rejection.

Dropout Demographics

General dropout population. It is important to understand why definitions such as *gifted, dropout, underachievement* and the results of the research they report are significant. As late as 1940, approximately 70% of the U.S. population dropped out of high school. The national dropout rate currently varies between 10% (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006) and 30% (Sum & Harrington, 2003) depending on the definition parameters. According to Sum and Harrington (2003), regardless of the percentages, annual studies show that these numbers are not in decline.

Tanner (2003) investigated high school dropout rates, and reported that a singular common thread may be the deciding factor influencing a student to leave school. His research showed a direct correlation between a student's eighth grade reading

equivalency scores and the decision to remain in school in later years. Veitch (2004) showed that many factors influence a student's decision to drop out: poor language skills, and failing grades (almost all students with a GPA below 1.37 drop out). Shannon & Bylsma (2006) added other factors including poor attendance, moving frequently (more than 50% of all dropouts moved at least once in high school compared with 15% of graduated students), ethnicity (especially Hispanic, African American, and Native American background), influential friends, pregnancy, and low self-esteem). Peterson (2001) noted that students were at risk of dropping out if they exhibited underachievement or depression tendencies, or if they experienced family-related stress.

Gifted dropout population. Embedded within those general dropout population numbers are percentages of gifted students who drop out; their numbers can range anywhere from one (Matthews, 2006) to 20% (Renzulli & Park, 2002). There has been some argument that the number of gifted dropouts is high because these student profiles are similar in many ways to the general dropout population (Renzulli & Park, 2002). To come to any conclusion, one must know the characteristics of both the general population and the specific subgroup in question – in this case, gifted students. If gifted students have special needs, then proponents of differentiated learning or homogenous grouping should be given consideration. The label *special needs* may need to extend to include gifted students as well as those with specific learning disabilities. As Cigman (2006) stated, "What all learners have in common is that they are different" (p. 203).

Detractors of special programs for gifted learners (Slavin, 1995; Oakes, 1985) argue that since all students are equal, they should be given the same educational material. In their view, gifted students do not require unique curriculums or pedagogies.

On the other hand, proponents of specialized gifted programming (Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2003) contended that if gifted students are different from the general population, then they should be on a different academic plan which would not only include specific educational programs, but also specific dropout prevention programs. They further contended that if gifted students were unique, then so were gifted dropouts. When reporting on high ability dropouts, McCluskey, Baker, and McCluskey (2005) stated that more than 30% of those students had A or B averages in school, and fewer than 10% showed any sign of academic struggles.

Characteristics of Gifted Students

While gifted students are a part of the general student population, there are many things that distinguish them from the larger group. Much has been written based on the premise that gifted students are somehow different from the general population and in need of special education sparked many research studies. If gifted students are different from their peers in behavior, cognition, emotion, actualization or processing as some contend (Carper, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Kaufmann, Kalbfleisch, & Castellanos, 2000; Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Mann, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2001; Mendaglio, 2007; Peterson, 2006; Reid & McGuire, 1995; Renzulli & Park, 2000; Stanley & Baines, 2002; Sum & Harrington, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, 2003; Villana, 1998; Winebrenner & Berger, 1994), then those elements require further investigation. One area previously investigated at length concerns the characteristic makeup of gifted students.

Research on gifted students identified the following characteristics in this population: keen sense of humor, mathematical skills, leadership abilities, an internal

locus of control, varying interests, intense analytical thinking, creativity, goal-orientation, nonconformist attitudes, propensity to collect things, competitiveness, preference to work alone, complexity and ambiguity, ability to see the unusual or unique, vivid imagination, possession of large vocabulary and linguistic skills, and often an inability to do well in all subjects equally (Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright, & Jackson, 2007). Other characteristics reported by Smutny (2000) include a mix of an insatiable curiosity, a discernment of reality, a propensity to question things, a deep and clear understanding of sentence structure, large vocabulary, problem-solving skills, higher level thinking than their peers, advanced cognitive ability, faster than normal comprehension and longer than normal retention ability.

  Subgroups. Because there are different types of giftedness, not all gifted students share the same characteristics or traits. For example, creatively gifted individuals may not fit the profile of those who have academic giftedness. The creatively gifted student may differ from his or her academic peer by showing the following characteristics: highly energetic, highly motivated, highly creative, extroverted, adventurous, persistent, gregarious, introverted, risk-taking, and somewhat disorganized (Davis & Rimm, 2004). In some ways the creatively gifted are more difficult to identify and label because of their complexities. According to Colangelo and Davis (2003), the creatively gifted student likes mystery, independence, questions, and innovation, but tends to dislike authority, planning, and strict adherence to rules. Conversely, artistically gifted students (a subgroup of creatively gifted) are easier to identify because of their acute visual-motor skills. Early labeling is possible because of artistically gifted children show amazing abilities in drawing realistic and detailed images as early as pre-kindergarten (Colangelo

& Davis, 2003).

Students gifted in the area of leadership are the most difficult to identify; even though the U.S. Department of Education recognizes leadership as a gifted category, the identifiers are somewhat vague and open to interpretation. Students excelling in traits such as problem solving, charisma, intuitiveness, ingenuity, decision making, persuasiveness, integrity, responsibility and synergesis may lead to a gifted labeling. This brand of giftedness seems particularly prone to avoiding failure, and one of the negative characteristics of leadership giftedness is that the student will deliberately underachieve (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

Negative traits. Some characteristics for all forms of giftedness fall between positive and negative and are under scrutiny to see where they belong. One trait in particular (perfectionism) had been considered a positive trait, but is now seen as a negative one (Sondergeld, Schultz, & Glover, 2007); their research concluded that perfectionism in some gifted students borders on obsessive compulsive behavior and can have a paralyzing affect on the student. While Neumeister, Williams and Cross (2007) suggested that perfectionism is more prevalent in gifted students than nongifted peers, Mendaglio (2007) took an opposing view and contended that perfectionism is not a trait exclusively attributed only to gifted students, and as such should remain ancillary.

Gifted students also demonstrate specific negative traits, and the list is extensive. Davis and Rimm's (2004) studies showed that gifted students often exhibit interpersonal or social difficulties, precocious demeanor, underachievement issues, noncompliant attitudes, an urge for nonconformity, extreme emotionalism, over activity, edginess, stubbornness, impatience, absentmindedness, argumentativeness, extreme perfectionism

or extreme sloppiness, self-criticism, or anger. Extreme physical and emotional sensitivity and idealistic standards also surfaced (Perrone et al., 2007). Other negative traits included an obsession with justice and fairness, hypersensitivity, extreme detail-orientation, unusual sleep patterns, and suicidal fantasies (Cassady & Cross, 2006). Gifted students may have an inability to finish tasks before starting new ones and often demonstrate a compelling need for new material and information (Caruana, 2002). Many gifted students have a deep need for comprehension and constant mental stimulation (DeLacy, 2000). They must clearly understand a concept and become frustrated when they do not. DeLacy's findings also support Caruana's data showing that gifted students consistently need new information and less repetition.

A recent finding indicates that gifted students have two negative characteristics heretofore not reported: gifted students appear to have a much lower than anticipated threshold for stress management and risk assessment (Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). When gifted students are faced with unbearable pressures, whether internally or externally motivated, they tend to follow one of four survival stratagems: withdraw, conform, rebel or flee (Alvino, 1985). It is these last two stratagems that are cause for concern. Rebelling or retreating should not imply that gifted students under stress are unsociable, but according to Lee and Olszewski-Kubilius (2006) they are prone to take impulsive risks, often jeopardizing their own well-being. More research is needed to determine whether these two negative traits compound any likelihood that gifted students will impulsively decide to underachieve, drop out of school, or attempt suicide (Cassady & Cross, 2006) as a result of their educational situation.

In Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius' (2006) research on emotional intelligence and

moral judgments of gifted students, gifted females lacked the same emotional intelligence as their classmates; the same study found that male gifted high school students had significantly lower scores on items related to controlling impulsive decisions and managing stress than did their female counterparts. Further, gifted students were more prone to anger outbursts and impulsive behaviors than were nongifted students. The researchers admitted that they found it surprising and disconcerting that increased intelligence was associated with decreased emotional processing skills, and added that "abilities to reason and think verbally or mathematically do not give one an advantage in the handling or understanding of one's own or others' emotions" (Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006, p.59). Gifted students perceive themselves as being risk-takers (Field, 1998; Davis and Rimms, 2004), and dropping out of school may pose a greater risk than staying in school.

The previous list of characteristics may be present in gifted students of all ages. There are characteristics identified within the subculture of gifted dropouts that apply only to that specific sample group. Data reveals that compared to the general student dropout population, gifted dropouts seem to have a lower tolerance for boredom, a feeling of disrespect from teachers and peers, and a lack of self-motivation which may lead to underachievement (Reis, Colbert, & Hebert, 2005). This same research identified three unique characteristics of gifted students that bear deeper investigation: boredom, disrespect and underachievement. Disrespect and underachievement have a symbiotic relationship as will be discussed below.

Boredom. Boredom ranks number one among the reasons gifted students drop out of school (Sheehan, 2000), and played a major role in Hansen and Johnson-Toso's (2007)

report. Males are more prone to boredom than are females; the lack of challenging curriculum and poor pedagogy typically ranks first or second as the factors of gifted students' boredom (Kanevsky & Kieghley, 2003). When interviewed in this latter study, students complained about boring tasks such as copying, rote memorizing, repetitive activities, and waiting on other students to finish.

Asking gifted students about their experiences with boredom is a direct and valid path to understanding the phenomenon. When asked about boredom, Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) found that students did not hold back. They offered comments similar to these: "I remember always thinking I want to learn something and we're not learning anything and we did the same things over and over again[…] In high school, it's not like it's your opinion; you have to write what the teachers tell you to write and I really don't want to[…] Why should I have to wait if I got it the first time?" (p. 23). Hansen and Johnston Toso's (2007) interviewees stated similar feelings: "I wasn't learning anything new. There wasn't anything exciting or challenging." (p. 34). Students' boredom often turned to indignation and they complained that if they were compelled to attend school, the school should be compelled to educate them (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). Advocates of gifted education concur that these special students have certain unalienable rights, and among those is the right to receive an education commensurate with their ability level (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

Boredom may reach a point at which the student makes a decision: to acquiesce, to rise above, to underachieve, or to drop out (Alvino, 1985). According to Johnson (2000), boredom and slow pacing of the curriculum may be a catalyst for high rates of student withdrawal in math classes. Teachers may feel compelled to wait to move on to

new material until all the class has a grasp of the concept. Both Caruana (2002) and

DeLacy (2000) alluded to this in their studies. Hansen and Johnston Toso (2007) found

that when students were forced to learn what they had already learned, their minds

wandered; some students admitted that they completely tuned out from the beginning of

each class to the end. While the nongifted student may leave school to avoid a hostile

environment, the gifted student may leave to escape a boring one (Hansen & Johnston

Toso, 2007). That concept supports data showing that one trait gifted students share is

that they cannot remain idle or resign themselves to a bad situation; gifted students feel

compelled to do something, even if that action results in a negative outcome (Callahan,

Sowa, May, Tomchin, Plucker, Cunningham, & Taylor, 2004).

Kavenvsky and Kieghley (2003) focused specifically on boredom and suggested

that the relationship between learning and boredom may be mutually exclusive. They

concluded that boredom does not exist as long as learning is taking place. Their research

categorized students' complaints of boredom into five independent factors: control,

choice, challenge, complexity and caring teachers. They determined that when some or

all of those categories were present, and when each of these factors was compounded,

students' boredom decreased accordingly. If a student's experience in school lacked all

five of these elements, boredom was a certainty.

Disrespect and underachievement. Reis and colleagues (2005) found that the

second and third characteristics motivating gifted students to drop out may have a link to

their personal sense of meaning and importance. Because parents and teachers often

praised gifted students for their academic accomplishments throughout elementary and

middle school, as that adulation wanes in high school the affect can lead to unfavorable

emotional responses, including depression. To gifted students, others' lack of interest in their success comes across as a lack of respect from peers, and even worse, from teachers and administrators (Renzulli & Park, 2002). Little or no interest shown to an individual who thrives on adulation and attention may be seen as a form of disrespect. This often leads to low self-esteem, low-self-motivation and ultimately to underachievement. Renzulli and Park verified in their research that low self-esteem is a major contributing factor to underachievement and gifted dropout rates.

Opposing evidence (Field, 1998; McCoach & Siegle, 2001) showed that that underachievers may not necessarily lack in self-efficacy or self-esteem, but rather demonstrate exuberance, humor and a positive self-expression while simultaneously failing every subject. Because giftedness has a wide range of levels and abilities, grades alone cannot determine whether a student is performing below his or her potential. Gifted students achieving all A's effortlessly may be underachieving as well as the student making D's and F's (Davis & Rimm, 2004). While the grade of A indicates high performance, the academically gifted student may be capable of much more challenging work. Often gifted students with straight As in high school meet their challenge in college and are not prepared for it. In one post-high school follow up study, half of the high school gifted underachievers went on to graduate from college, while 30% of gifted achievers failed college (Peterson, 2000).

Like the terms *gifted* and *dropout*, the definition for *underachievement* is fluid. Some researchers concluded that no clear definition for underachievement exists, or that most definitions were vague (McCluskey, Baker, & McCluskey, 2005). Matthews and McBee (2007) proposed that clearer research mandated a firmer definition. Their

definition of underachievement determined that one would be performing at one to two standard deviations below the mean for one group. McCoach and Siegle (2001) defined underachievement more liberally as the difference between the teacher's expectation and the student's actual achievement (which is typically measured through achievement scores). They did not quantify or qualify who would determine those expectations, nor were they clear on what the expectations would be.

Defining underachievement may be as difficult as finding the causes of it. According to Ng and Nicholas (2007), there is no advantage to being a gifted student in terms of academic failure. Just how this academic failure or underachieving pattern begins is not known, but family relationships may have an influence. Evidence shows that male underachievers had a negative relationship with their fathers, whereas female underachievers had a common thread of weak but authoritarian mothers (Perino & Perino, 1981). Parents may play a large role in either creating an underachieving student, or in reversing the downward trend by providing the correct motivational learning environment (Smutney, Veenker, & Veenker, 1989). Research has not yet determined whether it is the family, the school, or the psychological traits of the gifted student (or a combination of these) that contribute to the problem of gifted underachievement.

Needs of Gifted Students

Gifted learners have specific needs not pronounced in typical learners, and these needs cross cognitive, social and affective boundaries (VanTassel-Baska, 2003). Proponents of gifted education have heralded the need for advanced and challenging curriculum, independent work, high-level thinking skills, and homogenous grouping (Davis & Rimm, 2004) in order to meet the needs of gifted students.

Specific research on the needs of gifted students is sparse. To compensate, this writer surveyed recent literature in various print and online journals, dissertations, government reports, online databases (including ERIC, AERA, and EBSCO), books and bibliographic information related to gifted education (Appendix A) to investigate whether any themes concerning the needs of gifted students might emerge. The first descriptor searched was the word *need*. As described needs arose, the descriptor list snowballed to include curriculum, learning, challenge, thinking, higher level, pacing, independent, caring, ability, teachers, social, self, attention, individual, technology and others. These key words were eliminated or recoded into fewer themes as saturation began.

The purpose of this analysis was to determine what needs of gifted students were being researched (subliminally or otherwise) and to compare those findings with needs expressed by the gifted students themselves during this study. From dozens of identified needs found across the literature, eight emerged as core needs: individual attention, challenging curriculum, unique pace, independent study, higher level thinking skills, technological applications, social interaction, and caring teachers. Since a preponderance of gifted research addressed these needs, a brief exploration of the eight core needs of gifted students follows.

Individual attention. Individual attention is a need of every student, not just the gifted student. Still, 66% of gifted students in one Philadelphia study reported having thoughts about dropping out of school solely as a result of the lack of personal attention (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007). Cassady & Cross (2006) showed that the lack of individual affirmation or "social isolation" (p. 301) could be the catalyst leading to depression in gifted students which may play a significant role negative behaviors and

even to suicide attempts by gifted students. Data exists showing that gifted students may be more highly emotional and impulsive than their nongifted counterparts (Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006) and therefore prone to ponder suicide as a viable option and at rates higher than previously reported (Cassady & Cross, 2006), but sparse conclusive empirical data exists relating the lack of individual attention and adverse responses by gifted students does not show that gifted students have any higher incidence of suicide than do non-gifted counterparts. Data does show, however, that gifted students do require individual attention of some significance in various school situations (Carper, 2002).

Two situations reported may offer insight into this core need: technological learning experiences and counseling experiences. While they may seem incongruent, they share a common denominator requiring individual attention. In their study on virtual reality (VR) learning platforms, Chen, Toh and Ismail (2005) concluded that students learn new processes quicker and more completely using virtual reality simulations than in traditional lecture-based classroom settings because those programs accommodated individual learning styles and preferences of the students. That gifted students are drawn to the online environment is a theory currently developing at Stanford University (Samuels, 2006), though research is yet to determine the cause. Chen, et. al. (2005) suggested that because student learning styles vary greatly (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004 reported that there were at least 71 identified learning style models), the one-size-fits-all model of pedagogy is outdated, particularly when new technologies such as VR are available. Individualization are characteristics of both the VR platform and the gifted student.

A second common situation requiring individual attention of all students,

particularly gifted students (Peterson, 2006), focuses on counseling. In this report, fewer

than half of all high school counselors surveyed had any training related to counseling

gifted students. As a result, Peterson concluded that "school counselors may not

understand or respond appropriately to the counseling concerns of those students" (p. 43).

Peterson (2006) found that gifted students were profoundly different than their nongifted

peers. Peterson further concluded that a lack of affirmation or individual attention from

peers and teachers may create psychological stresses for gifted students and may require

counseling.

Challenging curriculum. In Dickeson's (2001) survey, receiving challenging

curriculum ranked second on the list of gifted students' wishes, just below improving

teacher quality. Students voiced concerns that curriculums needed to be more vigorous,

rapid, challenging, technologically integrated, and less repetitive (Moon, Brighton, &

Callahan, 2003). Callahan (2001) concluded that if the curriculum used for gifted

students is not gifted-specific, then it is valueless and inappropriate. Schiever and Maker

(2003) recommended that gifted students should not be memorizing facts and procedures,

but should be synthesizing, evaluating and analyzing information.

Tomlinson (1995) strongly recommended implementation of gifted curriculum in

a differentiated setting, while J. Gallagher (2002) proposed legislation requiring the

development of curricula specifically for gifted students. However, because of the

legislated No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, American schools tend to have an

"obsession with coverage" (p. 39) with material and have been accused of being

academically "a mile wide and an inch deep" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p.39). These

same authors referred to pacing guides requiring history teachers to cover centuries in

one school year versus covering several decades in detail.

Recommendations on how to create challenging curriculums to better meet the needs of gifted students abound (Callahan, 2001; Clasen, 2006; Cramond, Benson, & Martin, 2002; Douglas, 2004; Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007, Passow & Rudnitski, 1993, Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, Tieso, 2003). Tomlinson (2005) recommended that for curriculum and instruction to fully meet the needs of gifted students, it should accomplish the following: focus on essential facts while digging deeper to gather new ideas; provide opportunities to express what they have learned; engage students cognitively and affectively; remain student centered and not information centered; allow for transfer of information to everyday situations; involve problem solving techniques; guide students into independent thinking.

What constitutes challenging curriculum is debatable, but insight comes from different educational views. Educational theorist Jerome Bruner (1971) referred to challenging curriculum this way: "What the children needed were opportunities to test the limits of their concepts" (p. 78). Tomlinson (2005) agreed, saying that, "Challenge is a highly individual state" (p. 163), and then explained. Tomlinson (2005) said that challenging gifted curriculum should include advanced materials, advanced expectations and objectives, multifaceted tasks, transformation of information, complexity of study methods, and differing points of view. In addition, the curriculum should allow students to reflect the impact of the information on themselves and others; develop critiquing and analyzing skills; reflect on thinking skills; assess significance of the material; create new applications; determine differences in thinking; make connections among ideas and

events; emphasize concepts and context; propose meaningful questions; and present problems and questions articulately.

Offering challenging curriculum options to gifted students in a heterogeneous group setting may be difficult. Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee (2004) suggested that distance learning may offer the best opportunity because distance learning programs can adapt to varying academic levels simultaneously in one class. Other alternatives such as International Baccalaureate (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007), curriculum compacting (which resolves the pacing issue) and independent contracts (which focus on the independence need) have proven successful in challenging gifted minds (Winebrenner & Berger, 1994). However, the curriculums must still be administrated correctly. Winebrenner and Berger (1994) contended that students who did not complete their independent study contracts should be penalized by having to return to the regular classroom and the generic curriculum making traditional curriculums seem punitive. Even with curriculum compacting and independent studies, the majority of teachers interviewed admitted that they were ill-trained in gifted curriculum and used options such as independent learning contracts less than once a year (Moon, Callahan, Tomlinson, & Miller, 2002).

Unique pacing. The traditional school setting and the mandates set forth in the NCLB Act constrain students from working completely at their own pace in every subject. Only recultured schools mentioned by Buchanan and Woerner (2002) allowed for fully self-determined pacing.

Rogers (2007) referred to the 1971 Study for Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) as well as replication studies which showed that gifted students did better in

fast-paced math classes, and retained more material than what gifted students learned in normal-paced classrooms. Unique pacing allowed students to complete two years of advanced mathematics in one year. Rapid and individualized pacing afforded students less down time, boredom and distraction; they provided more focus, challenge and retention. L. Coleman (2006) agreed with that summation, and found that fast-paced instruction increased learning rates.

Unique pacing is one positive characteristic offered by virtual schools (Clark, 2001). Russell (2005) explored the self-pacing capabilities allowed by virtual schools, but even with an open forum that online education provides, there are still deadlines. While classes, assignments, and conversations may be asynchronous, virtual schools still maintained a starting and stopping point. Gifted students desire the freedom to work on their own and often more rapidly than the rest of the class (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004). Often the opposite is the case; teachers tend to pace the entire class around the middle ability level (Stanley & Baines, 2002) and around the state mandated pacing guides (Scot, Callahan & Urquhart, 2009). Some school districts mandate a strict adherence to a pacing guide so that the entire class covers the curriculum uniformly. Sanders (as cited in VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005) reported that under those circumstances, gifted students who scored in the top quartile on standard tests regress to average achievement standards over time. To resolve this problem, schools may create homogenous classes exclusively for gifted students. Even students who are labeled gifted and placed in a school's gifted program are subject to group pacing, even though it is with other gifted students (Matthews & Foster, 2006).

Independent study. The promise of independent study is a primary motivator for

gifted students (Douglas, 2004), particularly those of the Net Generation (Barnes, Marateo & Ferris, 2007). Gifted students require (and indeed thrive on) independent study opportunities (Stanley & Baines, 2002). In studies by Rice (2006) and Shimabukuro (2005), independence was the one factor among many that gifted students said they appreciated most. Research showed that gifted students preferred more independent study than group work and they preferred working at their own pace; independent study had a significant impact on gifted students' motivation to learn overall (Rogers, 2007). Rogers noted that academically gifted students prefer to learn independently, and Caraisco (2007) added that teachers should plan to allow for independent study projects in lieu of (not in addition to) the required curriculum lest the additional work be seen as punitive in nature.

Higher level thinking. Villani (1998) reported that curriculum and pedagogy should focus on higher-level thinking skills. Analysis and synthesis building skills lacked in many presentations, discussions, and inquiries, particularly in language arts classes. While these skills are important for all students, they are desired by gifted students. Although researchers indicated that higher level thinking skills must be developed in gifted education programs, there seemed to be little consensus on precisely what this meant or how to initiate it (VanTassel-Baska, 1998; Stanley & Baines, 2002). VanTassel-Baska (2004) suggested that the solution may be as simple as reinstating Latin in the core curriculum requirements due to its cross-curriculum applications and higher level thinking requirements. Students studying Latin could synthesize how a word related to content studied in math, history, reading and science. According to Hansen and Johnston Toso (2007), many gifted dropouts voiced frustration at having to think along Bloom's

lower levels of taxonomy simply because they were grouped with lower-functioning students who could not handle complex cognitive challenges.

Technological applications. Often in educational settings a disparity exists for technologically savvy students. A lack of technological innovation and use in schools consistently ranked high in reasons why students wanted to leave school (Dickeson, 2001). Van't Hooft (2007) provided information by the Per Internet and America Life projects in his report which revealed that 87% of American teenagers have a full understanding of internet usage, and of that group 50% of them use it daily. The typical student has not known a life without computers, cell phones, or the Web (Roberts, 2006). Bonamici (as cited in Barnes, Marateo and Ferris, 2007) reported that this generation (referred to as the Net Generation) will have played 10,000 video games, spent 200,000 hours reading or responding to email, watched 20,000 hours of television, but read under 5,000 hours by the time they are 21 years of age. The very things which they associate with daily life (iPods, text messaging, cell phones, high speed internet, plasma TVs, and computer programs) are missing from gifted students' educational surroundings. Although the term *technology* is often equated with computers, it is much more than that.

In interviews with Net Gen students attending the University of Pittsburg, Roberts (2006) uncovered several views on how students interpreted technology. They suggested that technology was any electronically based program or equipment used for communication or research. They also added that technology was always new; there was no such thing as old technology. Finally, students agreed that technology adapts to the needs of the user and not the other way around. They suggested that the use of technology should not be an appendix to a lectured lesson, but should be fully integrated

into the learning process and pedagogy. This may be difficult for some classroom teachers. Data showed that the average age of faculty is over 50 (Oblinger, 2003), and they are not as comfortable nor as knowledgeable of technology as they should be.

Currently gifted students' demand for technology is fulfilled in every area of their lives, except in the traditional school setting. Van't Hooft (2007) suggested that technology is changing American culture, and the entire world, but in American classrooms pedagogy remains exactly as it was 100 years ago. Ng and Nicholas' (2007) study verified that technology is not a regular part of traditional classroom pedagogy. As a result, technologically gifted students in high school may view school as out of touch with contemporary life. While 68% of American colleges offer some form of online learning under the assumption that post-high school students are computer savvy (Belcastro, 2002), but according to Van't Hooft (2007) schools are lagging behind the culture when it comes to utilizing technology in the classroom.

Social interaction. In the search for socialization, gifted students often feel a kind of prejudice and ostracism that other students may not feel (Hansen & Johnston-Toso, 2007). Their academic ability often leads to a "precocious" attitude which other students find unappealing (Caruana, 2002). A common behavior among gifted students (regardless of cultural background or national origin) is the tendency to withdraw and underachieve in order to fit in with their peers (Gross, 2006). Research showed that gifted students view their abilities as both positive and negative, and they typically saw themselves as different from the rest of the group (Foust & Booker, 2007). Perino and Perino's (1981) earlier research complimented those finding by showing that gifted students often keep two different sets of friends: one set of achievers in school and another set of

underachieving friends outside of school.

Acceptance within a social group may be so strong, particularly among minority groups, that African-American males drop out of gifted programs for fear of the accusation that they are "acting White" (Grantham, 2004; Forsbach & Pierce, 1999). The pressure for social acceptance among Black gifted students resulted in a dropout rate of 10% from gifted programs, much higher than anticipated (Matthews, 2006). Getting into a gifted program and the peer pressure to get out of it are greater for gifted Black students than for any other demographic (Grantham & Ford, 2003). As a result, some have suggested that gifted Black males purposely underachieve to avoid being classified as gifted (Whiting, 2006), and this process may begin as early as eighth grade (Osborne & Rausch, 2001).

Caring teachers. Of all the factors influencing gifted students, the need for caring and sympathetic teachers ranks at the top (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Dickeson, 2001). Regardless of whether students are from small rural schools or massive urban ones, gifted students nationwide yearn for teachers who care (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Cross & Burney, 2005; C. Gallagher, 2002). "I left because of the lack of respect from staff," cited one male gifted dropout in Hansen and Johnston Toso's (2007) study (p. 35). In that same qualitative study of gifted dropouts, nearly all participants mentioned the lack of respect or concern from teachers as a deciding factor in dropping out. The students in that study understood the constraints of state-mandated curriculums, but resented the fact that teachers were unwilling or unable to adapt to their specific needs.

In successful gifted education programs, a common thread can be found as teachers cease behaving as dispensers of information and transform their role into caring,

counseling mentors (Buchanan & Woerner, 2002). Davis and Rimm (2004) contended

that the best way to resolve this issue is to hire gifted education teachers who themselves

were gifted. In their study, high-achieving students credited caring, involved teachers as

the primary factor in their success as students. Those same surveyed students in Davis

and Rimm's (2004) report said that the main reason they would consider dropping out

had some relation to teachers. These students added that from a list of twenty options, the

first change they would make in their school would be to improve the quality of teachers.

This compliments Dickeson's (2001) finding in a survey of 75 Indiana high achieving

students, when asked what the greatest detractor from getting a quality education was in

high school, 36% responded with "bad teachers".

Caring teachers can make a difference across all learning boundaries. In M.

Coleman's (2005) study on working with gifted students with learning disabilities,

students admitted that they succeeded primarily because they felt the teacher liked them

and believed in them. In another study of twice-exceptional gifted high school students

(gifted students with a specific learning disability) (Mann, 2006), administrators

instructed the teachers to focus on learning disabled, spatially-gifted students because

they showed a trend of dropping out of school. The goal of this program centered on

caring for the students to see whether it would have an impact on student retention and

graduation rates. Administrators said to their teachers, "Don't get caught up in

techniques; get caught up in the student" (Mann, p. 116). Teachers spent one full year

simply building relationships and trust between themselves and their gifted students

while mentoring them. The administration discouraged lectures and one-on-one

mentoring took precedence. As a result of shifting the focus from pedagogy to caring and

mentoring, all the at-risk students in the study group completed their high school diplomas.

Improving teacher-student relationships. While caring teachers were a significant need for gifted students, caring alone may not be enough. Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren's (2004) study revealed a strong desire among dropouts for teacher relationships; more than a quarter of all dropouts said they had no relationship with faculty. This echoed students in Hansen and Johnston Toso's (2007) results from interviews, but the latter study showed no significant teacher-student relationships existed with any of the dropouts in that study. McCluskey, Baker, and McCluskey (2005) concluded that in order for at risk students to remain in school, they needed a personal attachment to someone, a sense of belonging over an extended period of time, and they needed to feel they were valued and important. The longer a teacher develops a relationship, the more social capital they have with a student. Several researchers used the term social capital and the importance of it when reporting on teacher-student relationships (Christle, et. al., 2007; Hilty, 1998).

Studies have showed the importance in teacher-student relationships as early as kindergarten and elementary (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002) and the effect of those relationships in academic and behavioral outcomes. Yet as Phelan, Davidson, Locke and Thanh's (1992) researched revealed, those teacher-student relationships are paramount in middle and high school grades where students perform better based on their relationship with teachers. Pianta's (1999) report suggested that nowhere was the teacher-student relationship more vital than in middle school where students transitioned from small and safe elementary environments

to unfamiliar and somewhat hostile surroundings. Since some at risk students may come from hostile home environments, it becomes all important for schools to be a safe harbor. Schools with significantly lower dropout rates than other schools attribute their retention on teacher-student relations (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

Davis and Dupper (2004) reported a link between disadvantaged and their inability to develop trusting relationships. They also attributed strong teacher-student relations to a student's decision to remain in school. Positive, healthy relationships may provide the motivation to come to school, they suggested. Davis and Dupper (2004) and C. Gallagher (2002) concluded that dropouts consistently reported feelings of extreme alienation and disengagement from faculty; students' reported their feelings were constantly dominated by their good and bad relationships with teachers (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004).

Dropout Factors

Boredom ranked first among the reasons gifted students dropped out of school (Sheehan, 2000). Students frequently mentioned they experienced a lack of challenging curriculum (Kanevsky & Kieghley, 2003) as a boredom factor. Other researchers listed issues at home, such as conflicts with parents (Peterson, 2001), an inability to control their attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) (Kaufmann, Kalbfleisch, & Castellanos, 2000; Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007), peer rejection (Gross, 2006), and low GPA (Tanner, 2003). Hansen and Johnston Toso (2007) also interviewed students who added to this list uninspiring teachers, lack of personal attention, lack of acknowledgement of their specific needs, disagreement with the school culture, being ignored, frustration with busywork, being grouped with low achievers, being treated

disrespectfully by teachers, and a lack of challenging tasks. While females in Hansen and Johnston Toso's (2007) report mentioned personal relationships as a major factor in dropping out, male gifted dropouts mentioned conflicts with teachers more often as their motivation for quitting.

Relationship issues seemed to play a major role in many of the studies for this review. The relationship gifted students have with their peers and with adults in the educational setting may influence decision making related to dropping out. In a recent study by Callahan, et. al (2004), survey results showed that while gifted females rely on peers for support, gifted males rely on adults for guidance and comfort. However, when surveyed, school guidance counselors admitted they did not understand the specific issues related to at-risk gifted students (Peterson, 2006), and as Douglas' (2004) research indicated, gifted students were verbal and yet lacked skills needed to represent themselves and their arguments well in counseling situations. As a result, they could not self-advocate their concerns and could not voice their displeasure to counselors or teachers, nor could they offer solutions in a meaningful and respectful way. Some students felt their only alternative was to drop out because they could neither understand nor be understood. By the time they cried out for help or dropped out of school, it was too late to repair the damage (Douglas, 2004).

Family involvement and background also are factors in dropout rates for gifted students. Renzulli and Park (2002) reported that most parents of gifted dropouts were inactive in their child's life until the child decided to drop out of school. He further reported that gifted dropouts did not participate in extracurricular activities, were from lower socio-economic families, were from racial minorities, and many admitted to using

marijuana regularly.

While no research in this review demonstrated a clear link between gifted student dropout rates and educational funding, Stanley and Baines (2002) alluded to it as a potential factor. They reported that in the Chicago Public Schools' annual budget of two billion dollars, only 3 million (or one-tenth of one percent) covered gifted education, while funding for special education projects was 177 times that amount. They added that cities like Houston, New York, Los Angeles, Dallas and Philadelphia also spend less than one percent of their school funds on gifted education. VanTassel-Baska's (2006) study of 20 gifted programs revealed similar numbers. Research studies further suggested that a lack of funding for special curriculum for gifted students, well-trained teachers, and homogenous programs could play a role in gifted dropout rates.

A final drop out factor sparsely researched concerned gifted students who do not fit into the gifted student profile. Two small groups within the gifted dropout segment were particularly at risk for dropping out: students with spatial abilities (Mann, 2006) and those with ADHD (Reid & McGuire, 1995). In the case of gifted students with ADHD, this reviewer noted that three of the components needed by gifted students (structure, stimulation and individual attention) were also needed by ADHD students (Kaufmann, Kalbfleisch, & Castellanos, 2000). However, no research specifically addressed this link.

Discussion

It could prove beneficial to compare the reasons gifted students gave for dropping out of school with their needs and characteristics to determine whether a link exists. Once specific needs of gifted students are determined, school systems can formulate plans to fulfill those needs. This review presented findings concerning the need gifted students

had for caring teachers. For students to indicate they had an occasional uncaring teacher in a four-year period of high school is probably not uncommon. However, in one study of gifted dropouts, "not one dropout reported a sustained meaningful connection with a teacher" (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007, p.36). Like any student, gifted students desire personal attention, and this review cited research indicating they may need it more than the general population of students. Students also said they wanted curriculum designed to meet their specific needs. Gifted-geared curriculum options are available such as the Integrated Curriculum Model by VanTassel-Baska and the Parallel Curriculum Model by Tomlinson (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Both of these models take the needs of gifted students into consideration and integrate them into the curriculum and pedagogy of various subjects and grade levels. Using curriculum written specifically for gifted students has shown benefits (Rayneri, Gerber & Wiley, 2006) and is one way schools contribute to gifted retention.

Schools cannot control factors outside their sphere of influence which might prompt a gifted student to drop out of school. Better curriculums and vibrant teachers cannot control family struggles, socioeconomic status, financial ruin, parent-child interaction, homework completion, change of family status, or boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. Schools can improve items about which gifted dropouts complained the most in the studies previously cited: grading policies, programs, content, instructional method, pacing and teacher-student relationships. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in the state of Washington declared, "the most promising overall strategy for reducing dropouts is restructuring schools to meet the needs of *all students*" [emphasis added] (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p.43). The phrase all students includes gifted students.

There is evidence that while they attend with the general population, they are not the general population. They have a different set of characteristics and needs. VanTassel-Baska (2006) stated that the academic world does not need another ten years of study. Research cited in this review indicates that schools must change systemically in order to change at-risk student dropout rates, and they should focus on the two key factors influencing gifted dropouts most: better teachers and better curriculum. Several states and school districts mentioned below are already making inroads to providing better school settings, programs or curricula to try to reduce the dropout rate for gifted students.

While the argument continues in academia about whether gifted students are a dropout group in need of special attention, some acknowledge the research data and have responded accordingly. Research reveals that academically gifted students overall tend to have higher hopes and future plans than do their less advanced classmates, and gifted students tend to be more optimistic in their outlook on life (Mello & Worrell, 2006). If gifted students begin to lose hope in their future and their current educational situation, there are some options available.

Charter schools. Charter schools and magnet schools are an urban phenomenon. Magnet schools such as the Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax, Virginia exist to provide a traditional school setting for academically advanced students who score over 700 on SAT verbal and math subtests (Bracey, 2002). Unfortunately, few magnet or charter schools exist in rural areas. However, other options are available.

Virtual schools. One of the most flexible options for gifted students is virtual schools (Litke, 1998). These online schools provide relief for many of the core needs of

students mentioned earlier. One-on-one communication between students and teachers can help to meet the student's need for individual attention (Rice, 2006); challenging curriculum is offered to students based on academic ability and not on chronological age; students may study at their own unique pace; curricula are often challenging and difficult but flexible enough to allow the student to pursue independent study options; higher-level thinking skills are required because the material can require relational processing; the pedagogy and the modality are technologically demanding; social interaction is provided through small-group collaboration and discussion boards; caring teachers can counsel a student in the virtual setting in ways traditional settings render impossible (Clark, 2001).

Hundreds of virtual schools exist, though few of them focus specifically on meeting the needs of gifted students. Stanford University created a separate online private school for gifted students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004; Samuels, 2006). Though the cost per student averages $12,000 per year there, it is an option for students who can afford it. Other university based virtual schools focus on gifted students, but use different models of pedagogy. Several options include The Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University, The Talent Identification Program at Duke University, and The Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004). Other non-university related schools (the Regional Electronic Magnet School in Massachusetts; the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics and Humanities; and the Linwood Holton Governor's School in Virginia) also arose to specifically meet the needs of gifted students (Belcastro, 2002).

Virtual schools may be the answer that gifted proponents have been seeking to reduce the number of gifted dropouts. Existing research indicated that virtual schools

have positive effects on student cognitive skills, motivation and retention. Many of the elements found in online or virtual education address the core needs of gifted students. These courses provided independent work, self-pacing, technology fulfillment, discussion boards, deeper curriculum and multi-dimensional pedagogy. There were positive outcomes emerging as a result of online or virtual education endeavors. Research showed that students who took AP courses online scored higher on their exams than did their traditional classroom counterparts (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004). However, virtual schools are not without problems. A recent study revealed that nationwide K-12 virtual schools have dropout rates as high as 50% (Rice, 2006). The same study revealed that teachers were poorly trained and students reported high levels of frustration with the system.

Restructuring programs. Certain programs are in place for traditional schools to recreate themselves to better meet the needs of all students. The Talent Development High School and the Coalition of Essential Schools models materialized to reform schools structurally, organizationally and academically. These programs reported various areas of success, and new research from these Washington state programs revealed that retention was greater when schools focused on depth of material versus wide coverage of it (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). The strategy is simple: less is more. For schools entrenched in the traditional NCLB distribution of information, however, this strategy may be beyond reach. It may require finding creative ways to sidestep NCLB to create a new environment.

Five schools (Beacon High School in Oakland, CA; Foshay Urban Learning center in Los Angeles; Jefferson County Open in Lakewood, CO; School of

Environmental Studies in Apple Valley, TN.; and Vancouver School of Arts and

Academica in Vancouver, WA) created a new, defining culture entirely separate from the

traditional public school setting with specific objectives created to meet the needs of

gifted students. Contrary to how traditional schools try to meet the needs of gifted

students through programs such as Advanced Placement, honors classes, or International

Baccalaureate programs, these schools were groundbreaking. They are recultured

schools, meaning from their inception they examined various aspects of the traditional

way of doing school and reinventing new, innovative and sometimes controversial ways

to do them. Recultured schools are different than traditional schools in their approach and

philosophy of gifted education, and they are successful at retaining students at impressive

rates. The dropout rate for these five schools, combined, remains at zero percent

(Buchanan & Woerner, 2002). The data released from these recultured schools proved

that retaining gifted students is possible.

   Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. Other options to aid in

retention of gifted students are the Advanced Placement (AP) classes and the

International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

authorized. Students in AP classes admitted that their determination and ability help them

succeed in a difficult learning environment (Gentry & Owen, 2004). In one survey, 94%

of AP students felt their courses challenged them often, although 29% of those students

also admitted that the material presented was not as challenging as the amount of work

needed to simply complete the course (Sheehan, 2000). The IB is a pre-university

program constructed so that high school seniors complete dually their junior and senior

courses through a local college, while simultaneously receiving freshman and sophomore

college credit. Many students receive a high school diploma the same week they receive their Associate of Arts degree from a local college. This program appeals to gifted students because they take the equivalent of AP courses without the stress of taking the associated AP test, and assuming they pass the course, receive full college credit.

Students must qualify for the program, and each college sets the parameters; class rank and high school sophomore GPA's are important determinants. Without being specifically designed to do so, the program accommodates some of the core needs of gifted students as they study college-level material and take examinations in the morning on a college campus and then return to their high school in the afternoon for extracurricular activities such as sports or band. International Baccalaureate programs are proliferating. Twenty schools participated in the 1971 pilot year; by 2007 the number of schools increased to 520 (Kyberg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). Similar programs such as Upward Bound and A Better Chance (ABC) emerged specifically for underprivileged or minority high school students (Clasen, 2006). Gifted students may participate in any of these programs, but the gifted label is not a prerequisite for admission.

Summary

Understanding the character traits and needs of gifted high school students could reduce the number of gifted dropouts. Even if the percentage of dropouts is closer to Matthews' one percent than Renzulli and Park's 20%, the dropout rate may diminish even further if educators and administrators will listen to gifted students' concerns and make appropriate changes. Successful reduction in the phenomenon of gifted students dropping out requires assessment, understanding and intervention. The best place to

begin is with the student. Qualitative phenomenological research is a good methodology

for this because interviewing individual at-risk gifted students would provide deeper

information on current findings.

Chapter 3: Research Process and Methodology

Relationship to Research Genre

This research topic was analyzed qualitatively because the purpose of this study was to understand the factors which prompted gifted students to drop out, and because "qualitative research in general and phenomenology in particular is concerned with describing and interpreting human phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them" (Milacci, 2003, p. 2). As Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) stated, "Understanding is the primary goal of qualitative research" (p. 12). To understand why students felt the way they did, one needed to ask them to describe their experiences. Then, too, given the thin qualitative research performed on the subject of gifted dropouts over the past decade, this research genre was appropriate because:

> One of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory. This means that not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the research seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas. (Creswell, 2003, p.30)

Researchers associate the word *phenomenon* with the word *describe* (Groenewald, 2004; Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007). The purpose of phenomenological study is to "describe and interpret an experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in it" (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006, p. 461). From these data the researcher can interpret the meaning of the phenomenon, without attempting to solve a problem (Van Manen, 1990). A good process to gather the data is through an interview.

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews reveal histories, emotions, events, personality traits, desires, dislikes, disputes and more. Qualitative study is designed to be exploratory in nature, and this is particularly relevant with subjects such as gifted dropouts which have had little investigatory research. Thus, qualitative research is designed to "listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas" (Creswell, 2003, p.30).

Participants

This research project consisted of seven individuals between the ages of 18 and 40 who were identified as gifted at some point in their academic career. Moreover, they were admitted into a gifted program in their elementary, middle, or high school to qualify for this study. Verification of this was self-reported and where possible academic records confirmed this through a positional authority. Participants were a mix of male and female and were cross-cultural. At some point in their high school endeavors, they were considered a dropout. Given that the construct *dropout* can have several meanings, the following were true of all participants: 1) members were not currently attending high school, 2) members did not graduate with their class, or 3) members earned or were in the process of earning a GED or 4) they had not completed their high school education nor earned a GED at all.

Initially, some of the names came from the database of a large private university in the Southeastern United States. This database included 528 students who entered the university having completed their high school diploma via GED. Of those, 178 resided in the same state as the university and researcher and were considered first candidates. One hundred four of the 178 students were full time resident students, and 74 were considered

online students. The 178 GED students were emailed twice inviting them to participate in the study. Of those 104 full time resident students, seven responded negatively, and six positively. Of those six, three agreed to participate in the study but one later withdrew prior to the interview process. The other three who were interested did not complete the interview process. One other individual agreed to participate, but prior to the interview during the screening process the researcher discovered that he had dropped out of high school and earned his GED, but by the term *gifted* he meant he had a number of specific learning disabilities. He was eliminated from the study. Of the 74 distance learning students contacted, 12 responded negatively, and three positively. Of those three who agreed to participate in the study, one later declined, one did not complete the interviews, and one fully participated in the study.

When the university residential database lacked sufficient numbers of in-college gifted dropouts willing to participate in the study, a widening of the search included students currently enrolled in the university's Distance Learning Program (DLP) who entered as GED completers. Identifying participants using these lists allowed the researcher to identify students still in college and allowed for better access for face-to-face interviews. Had that query resulted in too few candidates, then the query would have widened a third time to include students who were admitted to the university within the previous five years through GED completion. However, the third level of query was not necessary.

As another measure to secure a sample population, snowball sampling, a process of expanding the sample population by having participants recommend other potential participants, (Ary, 2006; Bogden & Biklen, 2007) was considered an appropriate method

of securing participants since the researcher assumed that gifted dropouts may know

other gifted dropouts. One participant was secured using this method. The researcher

placed an advertisement on a personal web blog page asking for gifted dropouts to

participate in this study which yielded no respondents. Then the local community college

was contacted, but the researcher was denied access to the student records. Next, the

researcher contacted the local adult education center to determine whether any of those

seeking their GED might also have been in gifted programs. The administrator provided

the names of three individuals, two of whom she confirmed to be in the gifted program in

elementary and middle school, and those two agreed to participate in the study. A third

party sought her GED through the center while incarcerated. Through the adult education

administrator, the researcher contacted her. She confirmed her testing and admittance to a

program for gifted students in second grade, and agreed to participate in the study.

All individuals who initially qualified were interviewed either in person or in the

case of the incarcerated individual, in writing, to determine their interest in and

qualifications for the study. This initial interview served as a screening process. These

were the first and second purposeful samplings: locating potential gifted dropouts and

verifying both constructs. Because saturation could be reached with any number of

sample members, a specific number of students was not predetermined. While both Boyd

(2001) and Creswell (1998, pp. 65 & 113) concluded that ten interviews with participants

is optimal to reach saturation, the researcher and committee determined that seven

participants had provided enough deep and repetitive data for saturation.

Selection of Site

The site in this study began with an evangelical, co-educational private university

located in the Southeast United States; however, as stated earlier, snowball sampling extended the population beyond this single site. The town in which the university was located was a midsize town with a population slightly over 68,000. The town and five surrounding counties were considered rural with a total population of 222,000. This university was but one of four located in the town.

The university emphasized research through technology, knowing students gather information more through the web than through its library shelves. To that end, 95% of the campus had wireless access, and the university web site claimed all of the classrooms were "technologically enabled." There were more than 500 computers accessible to students in 17 computer labs located across the campus. The electronic library held more than 75,000 full text books and 60,000 electronic journals. Given that gifted students gravitated towards technology as did their generation overall (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007), the researcher assumed that a technologically solid school would attract some gifted students.

According to the school's registrar, the 2009 school year enrollment included 3399 freshman, 2234 sophomores, 1767 juniors and 2938 seniors. All commuter students, faculty and staff were required to attend one convocation per week, and the 12,000 resident students were required to attend three per week. The university had nearly 35,000 online learning students, thus widening the potential pool of potential gifted dropouts. Gifted students find virtual or online learning experiences to their liking because they offer unique pacing as well as independent study coupled with technology (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004; Samuels, 2006).

As a doctoral candidate, the researcher was employed by the university as an

academic evaluator for the registrar's office. To that end, certain student records were
available and accessible. The students in this study (and information about them) were
not readily accessible; for integrity and legal purposes, this researcher did not access files
which did not fall under his jurisdiction or area of responsibility. Therefore the
Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the registrar gave this writer permission to query
student records to identify any student who entered in as a GED graduate. Because of the
large student population, access to potential candidates increased as the number of
students increased to nearly 50,000, so the likelihood of finding gifted dropouts among
this student population was exemplary.

The rural town in which this study was conducted also had an adult education
center for those seeking to earn a general education diploma. The researcher contacted
them to inquire whether they had any students who might have been in gifted programs.
The administrator provided the names of three gifted adults who earned or were earning
their GED. The administrator (who confirmed two had been in gifted programs) set up a
phone interview with two of the individuals, and they agreed to participate in the study.
The third individual also agreed to participate in the research, but had to provide answers
to the interview questions in writing due to her incarceration.

Data Collection Process and Methodology

Once students who entered the university through a GED were identified, they
were contacted via email. If they responded to the email with interest in the research, the
researcher interviewed them personally. Those who agreed to participate in the study
were asked to sign a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) release form
(Appendix B) allowing the researcher to authenticate their self-report to have been in a

gifted program. They also signed an Informed Consent form (Appendix C) to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Written release permission was authorized by each participant according to Liberty University IRB policy and per approval of Liberty's IRB (Appendix D).

The researcher made every attempt to contact each of the schools or districts where the participant attended elementary, middle and high school to authenticate their admittance into a gifted program. The researcher was informed at times by the school administrators that access to student records were either denied despite possession of a signed FERPA release form, or that files had been purged, or that a lengthy appeals process involving the state board of education would delay the research. At this point, the researcher met with the committee to discuss options. They determined that every effort must have been made to contact a positional authority in the school or district where the gifted student dropped out. This was done, and in some cases repeatedly. Because of the age of some participants, many of their school records had been purged and any educator or administrator who could verify their giftedness could not be found. Two schools contacted indicated all high school records were purged per district policy two years after a student graduated. One gifted dropout assisted the researcher in contacting his fourth grade teacher who recommended him to the gifted program to verify his claim. Another participant provided the name of her high school biology teacher who, as it turned out, was currently the school's gifted education coordinator. However, two participants' records could not be confirmed because one was 38 years old and the school records had long been purged, and the other was serving time in jail and her records were in possession of the legal authorities. Both of these participants self-reported the year they

were tested and identified as gifted, name the program they were in as well as some of the activities in the gifted program. Regarding the participant who had been home schooled, his positional authority was his mother who indicated he demonstrated gifted traits and had taken several SAT exams and scored well, but had not been involved in a formal gifted program. Based on Simonton's (2008) research showing that the basis for giftedness is related to IQ, and that one's IQ and giftedness are stable, the individual was tested for giftedness in a local university by a licensed practitioner who confirmed that he would have qualified for a gifted program had one been available.

Once the gifted dropouts met the criteria, the researcher scheduled the interview appointment with each participant, and informed them of the nature of the study and the option to withdraw. For the seven who continued, a series of three guiding questions approved through peer review were used to frame the investigation.

Guiding question #1: How did gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of high school? The researcher interviewed all the qualified participants using audio recordings. Two recording devices were used to insure no data were lost. Because one of these adults was incarcerated, planned phone interviews were abruptly cancelled by the jail administrators, and face-to-face interviews were not permitted. Her interview questions and answers were then written. Several of the other particpants' follow up interviews were also written as a result of completing the questionnaire. The interview process consisted of asking semi-structured questions found in the peer-reviewed interview guide (Appendix E).

Field notes were taken during all interviews to record surroundings, voice inflections, facial responses, body language and other responses. A memo log was kept to

assist in replication of the study and to identify areas where it could have been altered. A reflective log allowed the interviewer to note any biases, opinions, feelings or thoughts.

Once the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, the audio recordings were downloaded to an external hard drive and password protected. The raw data were entered into an Atlas.ti qualitative computer program for analysis. All transcripts were printed out, dated and locked in a file cabinet. Those participants who requested it were sent via email a copy of the transcribed interview for member check review.

Several of the participants wrote additional thoughts or remembrances as a follow-up to the audio interview. One participant met with the researcher again for clarification on several points. The follow up interviews were unstructured.

During the initial interview process, each candidate was asked the specific question: Why did you drop out of school? This question was designed to remove any ambiguity on the part of the interviewer, and to do two things: to validate/triangulate the data, and to focus specifically on one aspect of the research.

Guiding question #2: How did gifted dropouts respond to specific traditional educational constructs? To address this guiding question, the writer administered a school life questionnaire via email attachment to all participants (Appendix F) except one, who wanted it covered during the interview. This questionnaire used a rating scale identifying different aspects of high school environments. Students rated these constructs according to how they felt about them from no emotional response (1) to having a strong emotional response (10). Topics for this questionnaire were derived from educational literature on gifted students (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Higgins & Boone, 2003; Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Lin & Overbaugh, 2007; Mann, 2006; Matthews & Foster,

2006; Peterson, 2006; Plucker & Levy, 2001). These constructs include the following in random order: boredom, homework, gifted, teachers, attendance, extracurricular, peer pressure, acceptance, rules, support, risk, bully, depression, choice, independence, caring, standard of learning (SOL), counseling, dropout, potential, grades, learning, guidance, challenge, advanced, excellence, imagination, perfection, and scholarship.

Liberty's IRB reviewed the questionnaire for approval. The questionnaires were created as a Word document and emailed as an attachment sent to the participants with instructions on completing and returning the document to ensure a higher return rate. All participants who delayed returning the questionnaire were emailed to encourage participation. The questionnaire contained an explanation of purpose, and addressed security issues by informing students that once questionnaires were returned, the email response and any attachments would be saved to a separate external hard drive for a period of one year, after which it would be deleted from the researcher's computer. According to Lin and Overbaugh (2007), some individuals appreciate and respond to email media as a form of communication.

The questionnaire and follow up essay were in email format to encourage participants to add attachments, web links, etc. as part of their response. The questionnaire included a statement from the researcher that no identification or email information would be given out, sold or distributed in any form or fashion. Only four of the participants returned additional comments. Despite two email prompts from the researcher, one participant did not return either the questionnaire or additional comments.

The questionnaires served to triangulate the data received in the semi-structured interview and in the member checks (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Because the

questionnaire invited additional comments, it was not used for analytical purposes quantitatively; rather, the written responses which follow were used as part of this qualitative analysis. The questionnaire was a bridge or tool to gather more qualitative data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). For each question in which the participant rated a six or above (indicating strong emotional response), the student was asked to support the response with a brief explanation as to why he/she felt strongly about that particular construct. These comments were then incorporated into the data provided by the student during the personal interview. Comments were tagged as an addendum to the interview by that participant using the same identifier, and were added to the student's transcription. The same codings used for the personal interviews were used for the supplemental information as well. The information from these questionnaire comments and essays were input into the Atlas.ti analytical program to search for and extract themes and patterns along with the personal interviews.

Data Analysis Procedures

Groenewald (2004) concluded that the term *analysis* was less accurate than *explicate* because analysis infers breaking information apart and investigating the parts, which is not the goal of qualitative work. To explicate one puts the parts together to revision the whole. However, since the term analysis is commonly understood in research, this writer used the term here. If there were commonalities or differences among gifted dropouts, they would have emerged and been identified here.

Guiding question #3: How did participants' responses compare or contrast? This writer used various methods of analysis to find meaning in the gifted dropout data.

Coding, evaluation, and interpretation. Analyzing qualitative data has a sense

of mystery to it because it lacks formulas and ground rules (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Information emerges as the researcher studies the data. Creswell (2003) recommended a multiple-step process for analysis and interpretation which involved 1) organizing, preparing and transcribing the interviews including field notes, 2) reading the data repeatedly and memoing reflections, 3) coding the data using in vivo terms if possible, 4) identifying and interconnecting themes from the codes, 5) narrating the analysis, and 6) interpreting the data.

Thus, the first stage of analysis involved familiarization with the material. Each audio interview was transcribed by the researcher, thus each sentence, paragraph and entire interview were replayed in part and in entirety at least three times. Each transcript was fully read at least three times prior to beginning coding. This included the questionnaire essays. Field notes, memos and reflective notes were dated to correlate them with the interviews. Some of these notes were written on the printed transcripts and some were entered into the Atlas.ti program. Some were kept in separate log files on the computer. The researcher maintained a reflective log during the review process to note personal thoughts and to bracket any biases. Backup copies of the full transcriptions, field notes and reflective notes were copied and stored in a separate hard drive.

During this process, the researcher used the constant comparative method of analysis. Any identifiable information regarding the participant on audio was stripped in the transcription to ensure privacy. Each student was given a pseudonym beginning with a unique letter of the alphabet to aid in transcription. Some pseudonyms identified the participant's characterization; for instance, Arnold's pseudonym was chosen because the participant was a body builder.

Words, phrases, interpretations of thinking patterns, feelings, and events were noted through open coding on the transcript in Atlas.ti. Some initial open coding included in vivo coding. This coding included topics and units of meaning. The material was then recoded using selective coding to search for clusters of meaning. After open coding the interviews three times, a total of 144 unique codes emerged.

The questionnaire itself was not considered in the data analysis. The intent was neither to quantify statistical material nor to generalize, but to determine whether a particular school construct or event elicited a consistent response among any of the sample gifted dropouts. The researcher designed the questionnaire to trigger an emotional response to which the participant could contribute additional comments. It served no other purpose. Several participants did comment on a few of the constructs in the questionnaire. Those comments were incorporated into the interview data as a secondary source and coded. Here again the researcher sought clusters of meaning in the data.

The clusters of meaning were regrouped into themes (Moustakas, 1994) from which 29 themes emerged. The researcher used the constant comparison method to analyze the data for the final guiding question. As each interview was read and coded, the researcher compared it to itself to check for consistency and to the other participants' interviews to determine 1) whether any gifted dropouts had shared themes, and 2) to determine whether gifted dropouts had unique perspectives on their personal experiences. Atlas.ti program allowed linking codes among and between interviews for data analysis. It also allowed analysis of co-occurrence of codes. During this compare/contrast process, duplicate or similar units of meaning and themes were merged, isolated or eliminated. This reduced the number of major coded themes to 16, all of which were influenced by

what Atlas.ti labels super codes. Those super codes were friends, family, and teachers.

Justification of analysis methodology. Gifted students complained of monotony and boredom in school as a factor leading to dropping out (Caraisco, 2007), so a variety of data gathering systems was recommended. Gifted students prefer verbal communication (VanTassel-Baska, 2006), which necessitated the use of audio interviews. They are also technologically savvy (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007), justifying the email-based questionnaire and response. The methodologies presented for each guiding question triangulate the data through the use of written questionnaire response, one or two audio interviews, and an email reply.

Statistical analysis procedures. While the questionnaire could have been construed as a statistical or quantitative measure, it was not. It was designed to reflect ordinal intensity of educational constructs for the participant to elicit further written or oral comment. It also served more as a triangulation instrument than a statistical one, and served as a prompter for topics that may have been overlooked by the participant.

Trustworthiness Issues

Trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Creswell, 2003) all speak to the issue of ensuring that the collected and analyzed data were as accurate as possible. Any trustworthiness issues were resolved through triangulation using multiple interviews, interview techniques, peer review, and member checking. Bracketing (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007) any author bias allowed separation of personal experiences and feelings from that of the participant. Bracketing was another validity procedure used to ensure triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Using rich, thick descriptions of the findings aided in transporting the reader into the life world of the participant (Groenewald, 2004), and is

seen as another triangulation tool. This researcher used member checking, peer review, multiple interviews, bracketing, and expression of rich descriptions to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Shortcomings. Other than the personal verification of gifted labeling by the participant's school system, no other document analysis was needed in this study. As stated earlier, document analysis became difficult (if not impossible) because of school policies to purge student records after a set number of years. This shortcoming was resolved by contacting any positional authority who could verify the participants' testimonies. Participants did authorize the writer to inspect school records beyond the gifted labeling to corroborate any information as needed.

Potential threats. There was a danger that the target school or school system might not permit research for any number of reasons, including FERPA laws or a conflict of interest on the part of the researcher who works for the registrar. Due to privacy laws protecting students, school authorities were hesitant to give out information. There was also the threat of having too few participants in the study, or of having to broaden the sampling to students not currently enrolled in college, however this threat was overcome by using the snowballing process.

Author bias could have been a threat to trustworthiness. Because a researcher cannot detach from his or her biases, the author resolved bias threats through the process of bracketing views and opinions before and during the interview process (Creswell, et. al., 2007). Bias was also bracketed through the use of memo and reflective logs. A bias may have manifested itself by the interviewer asking leading questions in the unstructured interview; this potential threat was checked by the chair ahead of time by

approving the interview questions.

Ethical Issues

      The voluntarily signed informed consent form reduced suspicion and encouraged sincere responses by informing the participants that they were participating in a research project to better understand their life experiences as a gifted student. The procedures, benefits and risks were stated clearly both verbally and in writing, and the subjects were permitted to withdraw from the study at any time.

Chapter 4: Research Results

Overview

As stated in chapter one, this research sought to investigate the lives and events of individuals identified as gifted who decided to drop out of school before completing their high school diploma. The scope of the interviews encompassed their entire life inventory and was not limited to only their high school experiences. The narrative which follows reflects the first of the three guiding questions: How do gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out? All the participants told their life stories. Yet as Bruner (2004) suggested, we assume everyone self-reports their life story precisely and correctly, and that they leave out no important details. Bruner (2004) adds, "But what is coverage? Are not omissions also important?" (p. 693). The findings in this chapter attempt to uncover not only what the participants said, but what the may not have said. This is critical to valid qualitative analysis, because as Riessman (1993) suggested, "The text is not autonomous of its context" (p. 21).

The participants' names below as well as the names of schools, counties, etc. are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. Their demographics varied significantly since they attended schools in different counties and in some cases different states as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1

Participant demographics

	Randy	Mike	Arnold	Buck	Diane	Shelley	Kristie
Age	18	18	21	23	23	38	32
Race	White	White	White	White	Black	White	Bi-racial
SES	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Upper middle	Poor
Marital	Single	Single	Married	Single	Divorced	Divorce, remarried	Engaged

All were in a gifted program in elementary, middle or high school and spoke of their admission into a particular program for gifted students including detailed descriptions of the program activities. Six of the participants received their GED; one was in the process. Five of the seven total participants attended different rural elementary, middle and high schools in different counties and in three cases, different states. All attended rural schools. Their descriptions of school life were explored through the semi-structured interview questions summarized by the second guiding question: How do gifted dropouts respond to specific traditional educational constructs? Finally, the explication of themes answers the third guiding question of how their lives compared and contrasted.

This chapter is divided into three main sections: participant portraits, themes, and summary of findings. The concept of portraits comes from Van Manen's (1997) translation of Van den Berg's description that phenomenology is more artistry than mathematics or science. Bruner (2004) said that just as art imitates life, so life imitates art. As such, portraits require detail; these portraits explore in detail the participants'

significant life events and relationships (Guiding Question 1), as well as their reactions to school constructs and school life (Guiding Question 2). The themes are an extension of the portraits.

The process of identifying, extracting, and explicating the themes later in this chapter required the researcher to view the data through three unique lenses both independently and also concurrently. The three lenses were 1) the lens of story (Riessman, 1993), 2) the lens of the researcher (Bogden & Biklen, 2007), and 3). the lens of relationship (Davis & Dupper, 2004). The personal portraits below were viewed and presented through all three lenses.

The Lens of the Story

Human experiences have been expressions of events told in story form since recorded history began. According to Creswell (2003) a researcher's epistemology (theory of knowledge) determines the methodology for uncovering a phenomena. This writer's epistemological understanding consists of two premises: 1) the data resides within the participants and 2) questions release the data (Groenewald, 2004). Specifically, this researcher asked three guiding questions: What was life like for gifted students prior to dropping out of school? How did gifted students respond to educational constructs? How did their lives compare and contrast? In other words, what were their stories, and how were they meshed?

Stories are effective in grounding the reader in a "concrete way in the subject matter" (Bogden & Biklen, p. 204). Some stories and events are lengthy, and the telling of them just as lengthy. "Presumably anything of an experiential nature is worthy of a lengthy account," (Riessman, 1993, p. 56). Leading qualitative experts contend that

qualitative study must be presented in detail (Creswell, 1998). Creswell further added that, "the wide-angle lens or the distant panoramic shot will not suffice to present answers to the problem, or the close-up view does not exist." (p.17)

Van Manen (1990) also rejected the parsing of qualitative information into bite-size pieces for convenience sake, saying that, "much of educational research tends to pulverize life into minute abstracted fragments and particles that are of little use to practitioners" (p. 7). The presentation of hermeneutic material often requires lengthy presentation, particularly when investigating the life experiences of people over an eighteen year period or longer. So that the reader may experience the participants' world, and also that a continuity of their experiences reveals meaning in them, the writer has told the participant portraits in unusual detail.

Riessman (1993), Creswell (1998), Goodall (2008), and Moustakas (1994) all encourage the qualitative researcher to present the stories of participants in a phenomenological study in great detail. What follows are purposefully woven stories. Though longer than may be found in other studies, this researcher agrees with Bloomberg and Volpe's (2008) contention that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand, and that to understand one must experience the stories, emotions, and voices expressed by the participants. To understand deepness of meaning the reader often needs to experience length of expression which is presented in lengthier participant portraits or storytelling (Denny, 1978).

The Lens of the Researcher

Bogden and Biklen (2007) suggested that what researchers accomplish when presenting qualitative data is more of a translation than simply reporting of material. The

researcher's life, feelings, emotions, intellect, and history become a viable part of presenting the participants' stories, and to that extent, the researcher "translates" the life experiences for the reader using his or her own unique language. "Life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some "deep structure" about the nature of a life", Bruner (2004) noted (p. 699). According to Groenewald (2004), the phenomenologist cannot detach himself/herself from presuppositions, feelings, history, or personal likes and dislikes and should not pretend otherwise. One could merely present the direct quotations from the participant interviews and leave it at that; however, even the very tonality of a question or answer bears the researcher's influence. Bruner (2004) noted that "Life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 708). Reissman (1993) added that qualitative phenomenologists merely "interpret the interpretations" (p. 5).

Good qualitative interviews are inter-views, or an exchanging of views between individuals around a theme of interest to both (Groenewald, 2004). The interviewer and interviewee talking and listening together (Riessman, 1993) produce a narrative; hence, the participant portraits and themes explored later are not merely a reporting of data analysis, but are an inter-view between the participant and the researcher. In essence, the two views become one. Here the writer presents individual portraits, yet every portrait bears the mark of its creator (Riessman, 1993).

Phenomenology requires the researcher to show the reader what a participant's life experience was like. It is the role of the researcher "to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10) for those providing the research data. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) said, "Understanding

is the primary goal of qualitative research" (p.12) and that "qualitative research is all about discovery" (p.96). To do this, the researcher must bring structure, order and meaning to the mass of collected data. This is achieved through investigation the participants' lives through the process of semi-structured questions. The data (their perspective on their life experiences) are then analyzed. Bogden and Biklen (2007) said of researchers, "We usually call your perspective on their perspective *analysis*" (p.213). Thus, the analysis provided in the portraits and themes below is in essence the researcher's story of the participants' stories.

The Lens of the Relationships

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), analysis of qualitative data consists of organizing it, creating categories, finding patterns and themes, and coding each of them. Bloomberg and Volpe also state that there is not a single best method to analyze qualitative data. The researcher discovered this maxim late in the explicating process.

Through the normal process of coding and recoding, a number of themes began to emerge as more significant than others. Themes emerged, but not consistently for all members. For example, Arnold, Diane, Buck, and Shelley used drugs or alcohol to cope with their situations, while Randy, Mike, and Kristie did not. Three of the seven participants (Randy, Diane, and Shelley) discussed peer pressure and perfectionism, while the others felt no influence from either one. Arnold said he was never bored in school while the other six members were. Kristie and Diane did not skip school, but Randy, Mike, Arnold, Buck and Shelley frequently did. All but Shelley grew up poor, were mobile, and came from dysfunctional homes. Mike, Buck, and Shelley loathed

math, while Diane loved math and Kristie won the math award in high school, and Arnold is now a double math major in college.

Significances of themes were determined through depth and length of conversation, reiteration of a topic by a participant, cross-referencing among participants, and overall emotional response in the interview to certain topics. Initially the transcript topical codes totaled 144. Many of those were merged or recoded several times until 29 sub themes emerged. Those were combined and reduced to sixteen major themes common to most participants. The sub themes were drop out decisions, drinking and drugs, regrets, middle school events, depression, socioeconomics, moving, boredom, homework, challenge, learning, attendance, mathematics, extracurricular activities, interest, and interventions. Once again, those themes were inconclusive.

Focusing on those specific themes, topics, or constructs derived from the literature and extracted from the individuals' personality portraits resulted in inconsistent findings. Moustakas (1994) suggested that transcendental phenomenology should not focus so much on the researcher's interpretation, but on the investigator taking a fresh perspective of the phenomenon. In other words, the researcher must look at everything as if being seen for the first time. It was not until Moustakas' transcendental approach to each entire life story was applied chronologically that several significant and consistent themes emerged. As Riessman (1993) put it, "Returning to research interviews, narratives often emerge when you least expect them" (p. 43).

Following Bloomberg and Volpe's (2008) and Riessman's (1993) notion that there was no single best method to analyze qualitative data, rather than looking at each sub theme to see how it impacted the participants' lives, the researcher flipped the

perspective and asked: How did the participants' lives affect the sub themes? It then became clear that the data revealed one thematic ribbon with sub themes permeating consistently throughout all the participants' stories. The themes and sub themes reflected a symbiotic relationship, and once each life was analyzed in terms of relationships with either friends, family, or teachers, the themes became evident.

The participant portraits (or stories) are "long, full of asides, comments, flashbacks, flashforwards, orientation, and evaluation" (Riessman, 1993) (p. 43). These individuals "have now sat for their portraits […] and their stories yield rich texts" (Bruner, 2004) (p. 700). The reader should note that whenever possible the stories are presented through the three lenses of relationships (either friends, family, or teachers.)

Participant Portraits

Randy. The interview took place at the adult education center where Randy recently completed his GED. Randy is an 18-year-old Caucasian, over six feet tall, with chiseled facial features surrounded by dark brown hair. His voice is immediately captivating, extraordinarily deep and did not seem to match his physiognomy. Initially he seemed reserved and distant, but over the hour and a half interview as he told his story, he became more animated and relaxed.

Randy lived in a country home with his parents and younger sister. When Randy was four years old, he watched his father drown in the family lake, saying he vividly remembered his father telling him he would swim across the lake and be back for him. Though he barely remembered his father, he shared fond memories of his dad teaching him to read and taking him around town to read to people. Randy said his mother

preferred his sister, and often left him to his own devices. His mother took no interest in his education, saying,

> There was never any hands on stuff with her. I never would ask her for help on anything. And I'm sure she wouldn't have offered it. She just kind of like - if I got a report card, she was just like, "Oh, all A's" and then she just signed it and sent it back. She never cared.

His relationship with his mother was strained, and he spoke of her only in negative terms. He resented her for gambling away his inheritance and his father's life insurance money. He stated,

> She plays bingo a lot you know, and that costs something like 30 dollars just to get in and then she'll also get a whole bunch on her cards and waste money on that all the time. And she would always get home from work and say, 'All right, I'm heading out to bingo' and I'm like, 'What do you mean you're heading out to bingo? We don't' - There'd be weeks when we would run out of groceries before payday. I don't know. She just doesn't know how to handle money at all. And it just makes me mad thinking about it could have been a whole lot easier for me and my sister just with all the money that she got.

Randy attended a private Christian kindergarten, and claimed his mother put him in public school to save money once his father died. It was there in second grade that he was tested for giftedness and entered the program. He was in the program until high school. Regarding the challenge of schoolwork, Randy said, "I guess just for elementary school, like I said, I just breezed through it and I got A's at that point."

Even though Randy was poor, he remembered having many friends in lower grades, especially others in the gifted program saying, "For elementary and middle school I was pretty much friends with everybody. Like I didn't have anybody who hated me." At home, it was a different story. His mother continued to gamble away his father's social security checks and remained distant. The only adult in his life he could recall was a second grade teacher who physically abused the students. Randy was afraid of her.

When Randy entered middle school, things began to change for him. Although his friendships remained the same at school, his family turmoil grew worse. He spent more time at his grandmother's house than at his own. When he was in sixth grade, his grandmother filed for custody to remove him from his mother's house. She lost the suit but won his affection and loyalty. He finally moved in with her at age 15.

In eighth grade, Randy won the class and school spelling bee, but decided he did not want to compete at the state level. He recalled how his French teacher called him a liar when he said he had won the bee and had to apologize at the year end awards assembly when he was recognized. Of his eighth grade math teacher, he said, "My 8th grade algebra teacher - she's got to be the worst. She hated me. She *hated* me." He could not recall having a positive relationship with any middle school teacher. Ninth grade was the turning point for Randy. Early on he grew bored with school:

> I guess, just as far as school itself, it's mainly just like, 'Oh what, another hour till we get out.' That kind of thing," and, I mean I definitely looked forward to the end of the day. The whole time I was just sitting there in each class I would look at the clock - five more minutes. Five more minutes. Four more minutes. The whole time I'm there I just didn't want to be there. I just wanted to get it all over

with so I could just move on, you know.

He said school "just wasn't interesting," and he voiced his opinion of homework.

I hated homework. I know that. […] I would never do homework at home. I

would always do it when I got to school in homeroom or just try to rush through it

real quick. I just - I didn't like homework at all.

He was not involved in any extracurricular activities. He did not like the peer

pressure, and for the first time in his life, his grades began to slip. "I was just kind of just

sick of it and I really wasn't paying any attention anymore." His attendance record

slipped also. Any time he told his mother he did not want to go to school, she simply

ignored him so he did not go.

Of his few friends he said, "I didn't have anything - I had, just my few friends,

and like I said, nothing was there to want to make me want to be there I guess, so - I

guess maybe that social life would have had a part to do with that." He did not have

many friends to begin with, saying he had a "small tight knit group of friends" in middle

school. The final straw for Randy came after being bullied repeatedly on the bus on the

way to school, not by strangers, but by his few former friends. His tight knit group turned

on him. He described his morning commute this way:

> My days never started off good for high school too because my bus - uh, they had
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> more students on that bus than there was seats, and I was the second to last stop,
>
> and there were a few times where I had to sit in the floor on the way to school and
>
> it, it was extremely frustrating 'cause everybody just laughs and you. I'm just
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> kind of like, 'What am I supposed to do about it?' You know what I mean? So I
>
> just grin and bared it.

Randy left school in ninth grade under the guise of being home schooled, a decision his mother never supported. He said no teachers, administrators, or counselors spoke to him or tried to dissuade him from leaving school. "But I guess maybe if I just had somebody saying, 'You know what? You really shouldn't do this 'cause you're going to – you've got to think about your future and everything.' But nobody ever said anything like that to me."

His sole source of support came from the grandmother who took him in. Randy spoke affectionately of her saying, "My grandma's the only one who looked out for me," although he is convinced that if his father was alive things might have turned out differently. When asked if anything could have prevented him from quitting school in ninth grade, he said,

> I don't want to sound, you know, just like - I don't want to make excuses or anything, but the best way it could turn out I think is if my dad hadn't died. Because I mean he would've, I mean my grandma even said he would've been way on top of these things. He never would've let any of this stuff happen. Um, that he just - it would've been a whole lot better.

After Randy left school, he said he had no contact with anyone for several months, but then he tried contacting a few friends only to discover they were no longer interested in him. He processed it by concluding, "It was just kind of like everybody just went on, so I guess everybody else just kind of changed."

Randy has no immediate plans, but said he was considering going into the marines to clear his head, to recover some of the money his mother lost, and to do

something with his life. He did not regret leaving school early. He still loves learning, and voiced optimism about his future.

Mike. Mike is also 18, and attended the same high school as Randy, although neither of them were friends when in school; nor are they now friends. Mike's interview was scheduled at the adult education center, but because the building was locked, the interview moved to the researcher's home office. Mike followed in a rusty, dated small pick up truck. He wore a green plaid flannel jacket over a t-shirt and faded jeans. His pack of cigarettes peaked from his coat pocket, and his pierced lip and shoulder length flyaway hair gave him an unkempt look. He is slightly overweight from eating too many burgers at the fast-food restaurant he has worked the prior three years.

Despite his tattered appearance, Mike is charismatic and immediately likeable. His sense of humor pervades his conversation, and he appears comfortable in new surroundings. His speech and vocabulary were articulate and his clarity of thought were captivating. He expressed his opinions freely.

Mike and his younger sister lived with both parents until they divorced when he was in middle school. For a time he lived with his father in their house, while his mother struggled to make ends meet in low rent housing. After a yearlong custody battle, he and his sister moved in with his mother. They moved several times throughout Mike's youth until his mother remarried and improved their living conditions. Mike voiced resentment at what his father put him through, saying, "I used to have a lot of animosity towards him but, but I've made peace with that."

He was introverted in elementary, and though he said he had some friends, he also said he struggled with self-image. "When I was younger I was a lot more shy. And so I

didn't want to you know, be too out there, you know. People would make fun of me or whatever." His memory of elementary grades was vague, but he did say he remembered his father reading to him and "teaching me words, you know, letters." By the time he entered kindergarten he could read and write independently. He also recalled one nameless second grade teacher who he described as "evil." This was not the teacher who recommended him to the gifted program, but another second grade teacher. Mike remained in the gifted program until high school.

Mike's "small close group of friends" continued throughout middle school, and though his social life was stable, his home life was an emotional time for Mike because his parents divorced when he was in fifth grade. He began suffering from depression, saying, "It started when I was a kid, and uh, you know they believe it had something to do with my schoolwork but they weren't 100% sure it was directly affecting my schoolwork, but you know I'd been diagnosed with depression and uh something else." He has experienced depressive episodes since the divorce. From that point forward, his grades began to suffer.

> Around fifth grade I started, ya know, slumping. Up until then it was straight A's all the way through. You know, I started slumping, I didn't care any more. It's like, 'Whatever. School is easy. You know, I can do this.' And so you know my grades started to slip.

Mike admitted that he could have done well in school, but from this point on he became an underachiever. "I didn't make straight A's but I could get by doing well on the tests and just passing."

It was during this time of emotional upheaval that a teacher reached out to Mike. She not only taught him in school, but formed a deep relationship with Mike after school as well. Her son and Mike became best friends, and Mike remembered her fondly saying,

I really don't know why, but she just stuck out as one of the most - she was one of the most caring teachers probably that I've ever had at any school, you know. And uh, you know I actually developed a personal relationship - not like "personal" like that, you know, but I knew her kids and everything, you know. We hung out and we were friends, so, she took care of me, she helped me out whenever I was having a hard time with anything.

Though Mike continued in the gifted programs, his grades continued to plummet. When asked why, he gathered his thoughts and said:

It was just that after being told so many times you know like 'Oh, you're smart, you're good, you're better than this,' I was like, 'Yeah, I am smart. Yeah, I am good. I am better than this.' And so I was just, you're not, you're not on the same level as me. I thought I was some kind of boy genius. I think it's important to let someone know they're gifted, that they're intelligent, but me, I felt like -- and I realize this now, I didn't feel like it back then -- but I was built up too much. You know how you build something up too much and you can't live up to it? People were constantly telling me, 'You're smarter than this; you're better than this.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, I am. So why should I even care?' you know what I mean? That's the way it was for me.

Two things happened as a result of the divorce and its after affects. Though he said, "It wasn't hard at all, especially you know in grade school, middle school and the

first few years of high school I had no problem," he barely passed most of his classes. Also, he began to weigh his performance in class according to his relationship with the teacher.

Once Mike reached high school, his social life blossomed. He joined the drama team, and for a time worked on the school newspaper. He admitted, "If anything I was just more concerned with social things than I was with schoolwork." He also admitted that while he had many acquaintances, he primarily had one close friend (and still does.) He struggled with schoolwork and said it was all quite boring.

Very, very, very prevalent. I didn't concern myself with the lessons most of the time because either I already knew it because I read ahead, or it was just something that I independently learned on my own a long time ago. So I just most of the time I just put my head down and drew pictures of something new just to pass the time. But I was, I got very bored in school you know, because it was just the same old same old thing.

He did not apply himself in school or out academically. He never did homework, suggesting that,

Forcing you to do homework the same work that you did in school just in a different environment isn't really going to help. But if it's the same thing you just taught me in the school environment why am I going to want to do it at home where I've got the computer, I've got the TV.

The only time Mike did well academically was when a teacher supported him or mentored him. He struggled with math more than any other subject, and said,

Algebra 2 was that one class where I just the one time I couldn't wrap my brain

around it. You know, everything else I had no problem with, I could sleep the whole class and wake up at the end of class, listen for five minutes, read whatever the chapter was, and then pass the test, you know. But with that class, that was the only one that I ever had that was just couldn't do it.

He faulted the teachers and their lack of concern; public school teachers in his view were impersonal, and "a lot of the math teachers wanted to give up on me," he declared. "They'd tell me, 'Well, you know you're not concentrating. That's why you're not getting this.' And I would say, 'Well, you're not teaching. That's why I'm not getting this.'"

Mike cited his geometry teacher who called him aside, spoke to him like an adult, and challenged him. From that moment on, Mike respected the teacher and did his best in that class. "That was the first time a teacher had ever talked to me as an equal, so I was like, 'Yeah, I'll do it.'" In contrast, he cited his drama teacher as one he got to know, and "the more I got to know her, the more I realized I disliked her." Despite his love for the theater, he quit theater because of her.

Mike's senior year ended his high school career early. One spring morning the campus police searched his car and found a weapon and marijuana; Mike was expelled from school that day and the school pressed charges. He said there were a few friends and teachers who supported him from a distance, but of his mother and stepfather he said, "They didn't give up on me. But they just came to accept, 'All right. This is what he's doing. Ya know, if he thinks this is going to be right for him, I know that he can do it. And let's just let him do his thing.'"

Mike said he regretted getting expelled so close to graduation, and of not achieving his full potential, and not trying as hard as he could have. Mike also said that if he had not gotten expelled, he likely would have dropped out anyway.

> Well, the main reason I wanted to was because I thought this would be easier for me and save me more time than having to work for a diploma. I could just drop out. I already know all this stuff; I just won't have the diploma. And that's what school is more about for me. It wasn't about the diploma. It was about learning things.

Mike's future plans include going back to college since earning his GED, and earning a Bachelor of Science in music theory. He would like to form a rock band and travel the country. He had not decided that, but he did say he planned on doing something with his life now that he's through with court dates and GED classes.

Arnold. Upon meeting Arnold in the student service center of a large Christian university, one notices four things about him: his beaming contagious smile, his muscular build, his deep southern drawl, and his extended ears. He keeps his hair cut short with only slight bangs showing. Arnold is 21 years old, recently married, and lives in a rural community in a new home recently purchased. He is finishing his Bachelor's degree in engineering and is a double math major. The interview took place in a professor's conference room early afternoon during a school day. Initially he declined the interview because of his background, but once he learned the study concerned gifted dropouts and not just giftedness, he agreed to participate.

Arnold began telling his story saying, "I grew up in a country home, out in the country. My dad was an alcoholic. His dad was an alcoholic. We were on welfare." As

far back as Arnold could remember, he was extremely poor. His older brother, younger sister, he, and his parents eked out a living on 230 dollars a week. He mentioned that throughout elementary school he had to wear sweat pants to school because they were so cheap to buy. In his early schooling, Arnold said his poverty played no part in the friendships he developed, "and so in K through five I was popular. I wasn't like uh, a weird kind of guy on the corner. And I really liked that. I looked up to people looking up to me." In kindergarten a private donor scholarshipped him to attend, but after that he attended public schools. Neither parent was educated beyond high school, and the welfare money dried up, so his mother earned her Associates degree and became an X-ray technician.

In elementary school Arnold had many friends. He fit into the crowd at his small rural school. Though the students were from different socioeconomic backgrounds, they grew up together and grew close. In third grade, at the recommendation of his teacher Arnold was tested for giftedness and admitted to the Talented and Gifted program where he remained until sixth grade. When asked if he ever sensed he was gifted, he said, "I never tried in school, you know? But I was still able to do the exact same things they were." When asked how he compared to other gifted students in the program, he added,

> I remember being different from the other people that were smart. They were
> smart because I believe they really tried hard. You know? I really started seeing
> people putting in the effort and being smart. Those preppie kids. When I was in
> the same program with them I knew that we weren't, we were- wasn't the same.

Arnold apologized for his poor grammar. He said it was the one thing he always struggled with in school. His favorite subject in grades one through five was math.

At the end of his elementary school time his mother returned to college and earned her Associates degree. That left Arnold home alone much of the time, or with his father who drank. Arnold needed an escape, which he found in the local roller skating rink a year later. He continued doing well at school; he said his grades were all As up to that point. Then things drastically changed in middle school.

Arnold moved to a different school, much larger than in elementary. Several district schools merged in sixth grade, and Arnold found himself in a class warfare. The wealthier friends he knew turned on him. He put it in this perspective, "It was all of us. And then they kind of went and done their own thing. And so I was no longer a part, you know?"

As a last ditch effort to keep his prior friends, he tried out for the sixth grade basketball team, but was cut while his old wealthier friends made the team. Arnold sought out others like him: poor, broken, friendless. "There was those other kids that were kind of like me, you know, uh not as well off as those other kids. And so yeah, in the sixth grade things really started going down hill. I got in a couple fights in the sixth grade. I wanted to be seen as bad, you know? I wanted people to not mess with me so to speak."

He shifted his relationships from school to the skating rink which he visited every weekend and many school evenings as well. When asked why, he said, "I kind of wanted to hang out with a lot of the older crowd. And so, um, yeah I hung out with a lot of kids at the skating rink and they were doing things that wasn't a good crowd to hang out with."

Added to the social rejection he faced in middle school, he suffered his greatest

personal loss in sixth grade when his best friend was killed. Through all of the emotional trauma, the change in behavior and the decline in academics, Arnold said that he never tried to form a relationship with any middle school teachers, nor they with him. He said middle school for him was simply to be endured. He found his fulfillment and acceptance at the skating rink, hanging out with much older boys who influenced him negatively.

"I remember smoking weed the first time behind the skating rink with this older, uh, acquaintance. Of course, I wouldn't call him a friend 'cause a friend wouldn't do that to you. But that was the first time that I tried drugs. I never got started on smoking cigarettes or anything." He was eleven. The pattern had begun, and Arnold told numerous stories of his adventures in middle school running from the police at night, getting in fights at school, trying different drugs and drinks that his friends at the rink gave him, and watching his grades plummet

For several months in the eighth grade, Arnold's life took a turn for the better. He was 'saved' in church and dated another Christian girl the latter half of the year. Her father mentored him and discipled him. They developed a deep relationship. He became active in the local church and left his skating rink friends behind. At this time he was retested for the gifted program (he was dismissed from the program in sixth grade) but he declined admission.

Upon entering high school in ninth grade, Arnold and his Christian girlfriend broke up. The girl's father abandoned his mentoring of Arnold, and Arnold returned to his old crowd. He tried following her to her school to repair the relationship, but that failed. He attended the private Christian school he had gone to in kindergarten, and was promptly expelled the first week for fighting. He made up his mind half way through the

year that he would drop out primarily to get away from his girlfriend, but because of his age he needed an alibi. No one tried to dissuade him. He said he was going to be home schooled, but that never happened. Instead, he spent all of his time at the skating rink with his old friends.

I had a car, and I was peddling a little drugs at the time. Thought I was somebody. And eventually up until when I started to turn 18 I was really getting heavy into selling drugs. Not just little things, you know, pounds and pounds a week. Quarter kees of coke, Thousands of pills. A lot of stuff. Partying all the time.

His parents were willing participants in his lifestyle. "Oh, yeah. Yeah. Knew we were doing it. We done it in the house. I used to have all sorts of friends over there. And my dad, I remember always used to uh - I've done stuff with my dad before. Um, 'cause he was a really bad alcoholic. I remember us drinking together." He carried an AK-47 with him in his car, and peddled drugs at the local college campus. Several times he had encounters with the law, and was booked for public intoxication. He said his life was in a downward spiral with no support.

One afternoon his mother reminded him of his encounter with God when he was in eighth grade. Arnold said that that moment affected him so greatly, he decided to turn his life around. He rid his home of the drug paraphernalia, and called on his prior Christian mentor to come help him do so. He renewed his relationship with God, and pulled away from his skating friends completely. He isolated himself for several months, and said he thought to himself, "And I knew that I had to change because I wasn't going nowhere. My friends that I went to high school with, they was all off to college somewhere, and I'm doing nothing." He decided to earn his GED, which he did without

attending classes and completed in one night. He attended community college for two years and earned his Associates degree. There a physics teacher also mentored him and developed a relationship with him. He encouraged Arnold to pursue engineering which he is currently doing.

Buck. Buck is 23, single, and was interviewed in a university library meeting room. He is well over six feet tall, lanky, and wears a red beard which matches his red hair. He walks with a distinct bounce and long strides. His demeanor is jovial, cordial, and warm. His speech is rapid, mumbled, and at times hard to understand. One immediately notices his clothing. Buck is a self-proclaimed eccentric, and at both interviews he wore a heavy sports jacket (even though the weather was warm), an ascot or a scarf, and his hat choices were either a tweed golfer's cap or a fedora with a feather in it. This matches Buck's purpose statement: "How is this different from everybody else?"

As a child, his parents moved every few years, but quickly settled into a Southern Baptist church once they moved in. Church life and Boy Scouts were the only social outlets Buck and his younger brother had. Buck was home schooled and never attended private or public school. His mother purchased and designed Christian curriculum for Buck and his two younger brothers beginning in kindergarten and all throughout middle school until early high school when Buck dropped out. His family did belong to an educational co-op, but primarily Buck's education took place entirely in his home with a few annual field trips interspersed. Because they lived off a single earner income, Buck said, "Being a lower middle class family you know we didn't always have money to spare." They always lived in rural settings and often in poorer housing in the South. He

indicated that he did not like the frequent moving and rural isolation. "It was hell. To put it mildly."

As early as he could recall, Buck said, "I was very - not introverted - but shy. I mean shy. I was very shy and very, very reserved. Worried about other people's opinions." Even when he was in social situations, he did not take advantage of them. He withdrew into books which was easy for him since he learned to read at a young age. "It was probably closer to five or six, so right around there. I remember us going to the library a lot and reading lots of simple books like that. But I remember enjoying them quite immensely and being able to do it myself."

Whether due to moving so frequently, or to being home schooled and isolated much of the time, Buck admitted that he had few friends throughout elementary and high school. "Most of being home schooled and being the family we were, we had people that'd come in for years at a time and then usually they'd go off or we'd go somewhere else. So and that was tough to deal with." Buck admitted that he had only one friend growing up. "Outside of my brother he's the only real best friend I could claim. We had that sort of relationship. You know, we may not talk for months at a time but when we get together nothing's changed." He regretted that he did not have other friends,

> Someone who, who does stick with you and then be close. But I didn't have many
> of those. There were some people I consider friends and some of them I still
> remember but they were none of those kind of harsh boyhood friends where you
> beat on each other more than you like each other.

It was difficult for Buck to parse elementary from middle and high school. As a home schooler whose parents did not annually test for academic progress (it was not

required in their southern state), Buck discussed his schooling in terms of curriculum and events rather than grades. He recalled that in elementary, "We used TV shows, Wishbone, Magic School bus that was the one about science the Magic School bus, you know." Home alone with his brother and mother, he described his education in elementary years as being "pretty structured." His mother stressed reading and history (Buck's favorite subjects) but not math. They used interactive learning strategies and computer programs often, and watched videos and television shows. At least in elementary grades, she encouraged the use of graded work sheets to supplement their schoolwork, which Buck described as "homework."

> Whew, it chaffs. Homework chaffs. Sometimes it's understandable. Um, say if there's a purpose behind it, if you taught a lesson and you want us to do more so I understand the lesson, cool. I hate busywork. If you want to give me work just because (inaudible) too slow, go away. Stop. No. Just stop. Blech. Cease.

Homework and math were two sore points for Buck. Because his mother never emphasized mathematics, it became a social struggle for him. When his family did connect with other home schoolers, they often faced off in academic competitions, particularly in middle and high school. Buck, already shy, buckled under the stage lights and having to do math problems in public. He reflected,

> I hated math, so I didn't do it. I remember being on youth trips, people doing little, I don't want to say math games but yeah, upper middle getting into high school now, yeah. We'd be freshman kind of year. People would be like, 'Uh, do some stuff,' and I'd know it but I didn't (snaps fingers) know it real quick. I didn't know my multiplication tables. I handled it fine, you know, up to addition,

subtraction, multiplication stuff like that. Um, it just wasn't drilled into me in school. I just didn't like it. I loathed math.

He added that when he took his SAT exam before finishing his GED, "Those were the worst four hours of my life. 'Cause on the math section, I -- most of the algebra and stuff at the time I didn't know any of it. So I sat there with a calculator pretending, pretending to do things so I didn't look nuts."

Back in middle school, Buck spent most of his time reading novels and history books at home alone. Occasionally his mother would take them on field trips. The outings were, in Buck's words, "random occurrences, random events, random field trips."

However, in middle school the family structure changed as did Buck's familiar world. Because of financial reasons, Buck's mother had to go to work outside the home, leaving Buck responsible for his own (and his brother's) education. Buck was truly on his own and independent, a trait he later describes as "horrible." In terms of schooling, it did not take Buck long to realize "I could fudge it off pretty well, you know? I'd be in bed downstairs and they'd be like, 'You need to be reading' and stuff like that. And I was like, 'I am reading.' (Snores.) And then just go back to bed." Once both parents left for work, he and his brother were left alone all day and they would play outside, play on the computer, or read Star Wars novels. Occasionally his mother would challenge him to read Jane Ayer or Huckleberry Finn, but she eventually caved in to Buck's growing willfulness and independence.

Buck declared, "I was a willful child." This was exacerbated once his mother left him to his own education. He began an educational decline, partially out of boredom "coming out of home school relaxed environment, you know, you're chilling till noon

and just flipping from thing to thing," and partially out of rebellion. Every day became a family fight to get Buck to do his schoolwork. "They allowed me to have - even with home schooling by the time I turned 14 my mom was like, 'Here. Just do things.' And a lot of people would judge her for that. Like, 'Well, you didn't do what you needed to.' Well, you know what? I've made my own course, hard as it may be." By age 14, Buck admitted that he began dropping out or "phasing out." He said around age 15 or 16 his mother sat him down and told him he must "choose your own path," meaning he was on his own. Schooling was "sporadic." By tenth grade, he completely dropped out and educationally in his words, "there really wasn't anything at all." He went to work full time with his father at 17. Buck was fully independent, something he reflected on both positively and negatively:

> I want to make my own path. I want to make I want to make my own singular way. And that's what a lot of it came down to. Was how is this different from everybody else? Um, if I had to learn this, how can I learn it differently than other people? You know, if I have to learn math, how can I learn it differently than other people? Some of that was intentional thought, some of that was intentional focus, but how could it be different and individual and not like everything else I saw? So even though I wanted to be on a different path, there's still a part of you that wants to be the same as everyone else. Masked. Horrible split of a person and (blech). Horrible. Trying to match up with others while trying to be different at the same time.

Buck's last sentence referred to the peer pressure he felt growing up. Being an isolated home schooler while other children attended public school together; doing poorly

in math competitions while others performed better; and learning to emerge from his shyness into a public world all were part of his informal education.

> Yeah, of course it's nice to have people to have fun with and hang out and everything like that. But when it comes down to it like, I don't need to try to be accepted by people around me, because that influences the way I think, the way I behave.

Buck said that he learned who he was and what he wanted while working with his father in a manual labor job which he hated. He decided he needed to get his GED and go to college to achieve his goal of creating a community theater group. He saw others his age progressing and felt his life was going nowhere. He regretted not working harder on his education in middle and high school, and regretted not developing more friends in life, but said he felt no regret dropping out of school.

Diane. Currently serving time in jail for drug possession, Diane is 23 years old now and hopes to be released soon. She violated the conditions of her probation by relapsing on her cocaine addiction. The jail where she is incarcerated would not permit person-to-person interviews, so Diane agreed to complete her interview in writing. Even though she is in jail, she had a bright outlook and sense of humor, agreeing to the interview and saying she said she had plenty of time on her hands. Diane is African-American. She was born in Washington D.C., and spent a great deal of time moving between two states growing up.

She and her younger sister (who is two years younger) and brother (three years younger) were raised by their single mother. Even though they were close in age, Diane said, "Growing up, I wasn't close with my siblings." Her parents were married after

Diane was born and divorced when Diane entered second grade. Her mother attended college but she was not sure her father did. Diane grew up poor, but complimented her mother by saying, "My mom was a gas station manager. My mom worked two jobs the majority of my childhood in order to ensure that my siblings and I were taken care of."

She did not know her father but has attempted to reconcile with him. Diane recalled that he was physically abusive to her mother which led to the divorce. She does not have a relationship with either parent, but said "I have made an attempt at it." She added, "I am passionate about my family and being there for them despite our past differences. I have always dreamed of us being a close family so being there for them, I suppose, is a way for me to make that happen." Diane's familiarity with abuse became personal when one of her partners turned out to be abusive. She poised it in her interview this way:

> I strongly dislike woman beaters and drug dealers. I dislike these things because I have seen women beaten, I've been beaten by men, and I am a recovering cocaine addict. Neither woman beaters nor drug dealers care how many people hurt in the process of self-satisfaction.

The constant moving from state to state had an effect on Diane's education, but even more so on her relationships with other children. She said, "I never really stayed anywhere long enough to really get adjusted or to be comfortable. That caused me to feel out of place in school and around the towns I lived in." She added, "I tried to fit in. Never accomplished fitting in." In conclusion, she said, "I was a loner." Still, she did say that she had one friend in elementary grades. "One I met when I was six. We played

together every single day I also slept at her house a lot. We got each other because her parents fought like mine. We were very close until I moved when I was 12."

In her isolation and mobility, Diane turned to books. She said she was identified as gifted in elementary school around the same time her parents divorced, and she was excited at the opportunity of entering a gifted program. School was not challenging to her. She said, "I amazed the teacher with how much I knew that I wasn't supposed to, so she sent home a letter suggesting I enroll ad [Deaver Elementary School for Innovation]." When asked if she felt different because of her giftedness, she added, "I didn't feel gifted because being smart was normal to me. I did feel special to be going to a school for smart kids, unlike my siblings." She liked elementary school and "didn't have any teachers or subjects in school that I had a bad vibe with."

In middle school, Diane's world flipped. She reflected, "I was molested at the age of 10 by my mom's uncle," but the after effects of that molestation would not become evident until Diane entered middle school where her behavior turned negative, and she moved in with a relative. Her godmother encouraged her schooling, and Diane admitted she did like math in middle school because the teacher "made me grow to love numbers." The godmother also tried to involve Diane in extracurricular activities such as color guard, but Diane turned her attention to making friends. "I was in a new school and she was nice to me. That sparked a friendship that lasted through the awkward times in my life. We went through smoking, drinking, boyfriends and other things together. That lasted until I was 15 and moved away."

At 15 Diane attended a new high school, and once again tried to fit in. There she said the "teachers cared about me, which made me want to impress them." She did well on the

state exams without studying for them. High school was not a challenge, she said, and she found herself "bored a lot of the time." She had opportunities to take advanced classes, but turned them down. Other than dress code, she had no trouble with rules or policies. Though she said she skipped class a few times, she had a perfect attendance record until she dropped out. Her grades in high school fluctuated. "My home life with my family and friends determined whether I performed well or poorly in school, to be honest. Sometimes it was good and other times it was bad." She hated homework, and "barely did it." In her new school she participated in a few extracurricular activities such as volleyball, track, and was manager for the girls' basketball team, but she admitted, "I only got involved in activities because my aunt and uncle I lived with made me. I enjoyed volleyball because the girls were nice to me."

Overall she had no objections to her high school experience in the classroom. She said her favorite subjects were "Biology, because it grabbed my attention with the study of genetics; math, because algebra is fun, and government, because politics makes my head spin." She had two different peer pressures: the pressure to "maintain an image; maintaining my status as a bright pupil in the eyes of others was very important to me." The other pressure "in school to conform" seemed to win out. Academics were not a problem for Diane, but friendships were. She admitted when it came to making choices, she "didn't make the best ones." Here she referred to her friendships and dating relationships.

Only three boyfriends stand out in my mind. My two high school boyfriends, one of whom I married, and my oldest son's father, who I met at age 17. The relationship with one high school guy, [Greg] was up and down. We have a lot of memories together

though. He proposed to me when I was 16 years old. I accepted, but we never married because I was too young and I still had to sow my oats. We actually separated because of my need to sow oats. I met my son's father after I left Greg and we were together for four years. That was a very emotionally abusive relationship on both of our parts.

In the end, taking care of a child, boredom, peer pressure, and drinking and drug abuse all culminated in Diane's decision to drop out of high school. She regrets quitting school and ending up in jail, but is working to earn her GED while in jail. She continues to study even behind bars. When asked why, she said, "I love to learn new things. Lately my favorite things to learn are how our government is working to handle our current situations, and how I can be a better Christian. The Bible and the news peak my interest." She said she might not have dropped out if she had received more support. She was basically on her own. Her goal is to get out of jail quickly and to become "a better person than my parents."

Shelley. This interview took place in a small, quaint, rural library in a town with only one stop light. The library was empty at 10:00 am, except for one tutor helping a special needs student at an adjoining table. Shelley was waiting in the library and waved to be noticed. She sat at a round table designed for four, and was friendly and smiling at the greeting. She is a statuesque woman with shoulder-length blond hair curled like Fuseli pasta and pulled back in a ponytail. Her long, grayish fingernails and dry hands revealed what she later said in the interview; she had worked with horses all her life, and had led a rough teenage journey. Now at age 38 and the mother of one 12-year-old special needs child, she spoke passionately about education from the start. She quickly

shared facts about her family background, including a statistic that every male in her immediate and extended family had learning disabilities.

Like all the participants in this study, Shelley grew up in rural America. Unlike the others, Shelley did not grow up poor. Her family owned a 181-acre ranch in a mid-Atlantic state where they raised horses and cattle. Shelley had her own horses, which she adored and still does. She gave no indication of having to do without while growing up. When Shelley was in elementary, she attended five different schools, and once in middle school her family did not move around. Her parents seemed happily married (although they are now divorced.) Her family is and was very close and supportive, even when Shelley decided to drop out of school in twelfth grade to live on the streets in a punk gang.

Elementary was 33 years ago for Shelley, so many memories were vague. She knew that she learned how to read at age four in kindergarten, and won various reading program contests for having read the most books, although she added that quantity does not equal quality, and even today has difficulty comprehending what she reads. She recalled her kindergarten teacher and her family, primarily because the two families had personal relationships. She still has a Christmas ornament given to her by her kindergarten teacher. Other than that, she remembered earning high marks on her report cards and being tested for giftedness in second grade, but could recall little else.

"In junior high my interests started going elsewhere. Junior high it became social. Um, and remained that way through high school." She had two vivid memories of middle school. The first concerned her favorite educator at that time, her principal. She had developed a long relationship with him because every day they had a routine where she

passed him in the hall and she tugged on his tie. He laughed often and they talked often. He reminded her of her grandfather in many ways, and he followed her to the high school because he was transferred there when she moved up. The second vivid memory was not as pleasant. She started dating a boy in eighth grade, and he was abusive. Often she had bruises from him, and told her parents she had fallen off the horse or made other excuses to cover for him. This middle school relationship affected not only Shelley, but her family as well over the next few years.

Once Shelley entered high school, her grades started fluctuating. "School was academically easy, but so boring that you stopped caring. It was easier to learn, and you just read books from the library," she said. Shelley added that she had "other priorities, the emotional things that were going on, um the anger at the school for the teachers. That was- that was a really big part of it. I mean it really was because I, I loved learning, and it made me want to stop learning, you know what I mean?" She complained of being bored in school, which she interpreted as "absolute frustration." She added,

> Classes I found very frustrating - well, like our history class was, we were given the exam with all the answers written in it the day before the exam. I mean it was just memorizing. That's all it was, and you wouldn't think that would upset me at the time because it was, made it very easy but it did really upset me. I did not like that.

Added to her daily boredom, Shelley had to cope with her abusive boyfriend who grew more and more violent. In one episode she explained that she came home from school and was home alone. Her boyfriend covered his face like a scarecrow, knocked on the door and when she opened it, he pointed a shotgun in her face. He fired it, but it did

not go off. Over the course of several years he threatened to kill her father, mother and brother. The boyfriend served five months in a juvenile detention facility, during which time Shelly tested and qualified for a pilot program for gifted students in the high school. She agreed, and remained in it until her ex- boyfriend was released. "This would've been in tenth grade," she said, "I know the program was new for the school. It was just starting. And I had just gotten into it when all of this stuff happened." The threats and violence grew worse, and Shelley tried to cope by drinking. She said she "started drinking quite heavily in high school," and for a while could cover it up. It finally surfaced when one of her friends committed suicide. She said she took her drinking to a new level, and drank a swig of tequila in front of the assistant principal in her car after the incident just to get a reaction. The principal surprised her and drank with her.

Shelley rebelled. She sought the company of "the misfit crew. That's basically what it was. You know if you have all your high school cliques and stuff? You have your cheerleaders, you have your jocks, this that and the other thing and it was the, um, the kids who liked to drink and listen to music and were into things like punk." She said she joined the punk group because not only were they the most rebellious, but because they were the most intellectual. She yearned for mental stimulation lacking in the classroom, and often had deep conversations with punk friends about government, society, economics, and more. Still, even with the abusive boyfriend, the drinking, and the lure into the punk scene, she remained in school and tried to make the best of it. Mostly, she said, she stayed because of her science teacher. He was popular, dynamic, interesting, challenging, motivating, inspiring, and innovative. Students skipped other classes to sit in

on his lessons. He knew the students and they loved him. Then the school suddenly fired him. Shelley recounts those moments:

> I mean because he was almost like a mentor too. He was - he just made you passionate about wanting to learn. I remember feeling that you know maybe, maybe it's not so bad. Maybe school's not so bad, learning, you know what I'm saying? That, um, entertaining the idea that maybe going to college one day, things like that. With him gone, it was like I didn't even care about school anymore. That made me mad at the school. I was a teenager who was just very mad at the school. I think I skipped school for like several days or so after he was fired because of that.

During those last few days when she skipped school, she went to a punk squatter's house with other punk friends, and made the decision to drop out of school:

> When, with everything that had happened, um, with the boyfriend that I had. He went to a juvenile detention facility for five months. He got out, and threatened to - not kill me - but to kill my brother, my mom, my dad, my horses. And that was my big thing for leaving. It was a protection thing for them. And I mean that's how I rationalized that at the time. It was kind of pushing them away and putting as much distance between them and myself as I could.

She lived on the streets, became a regular cocaine user, continued drinking, and moved constantly. When some of her punk friends overdosed on cocaine, she said she decided to go back and straighten out her life. She attended a community college after earning her GED, is now pursuing her Bachelor's degree, and hopes to get a Masters in psychology or special education.

Reflecting on her high school years, Shelly said, "When it came to staying in school, the bottom line was, what was the point?" Would she have stayed in school had her favorite teacher not been fired? She concluded,

> I can't really have any regrets of any of it because who knows what I could have been if I hadn't gone into drinking, or doing the drugs, or dropped out of high school, of if Mr. F. had never gotten fired. I don't think I would be here where I am right now. I mean it was a long road. It was a hard road. I mean, I'm very happy with where I'm at.

Kristie. Kristie's interview took place at her mother's farmhouse dining room. The doors and windows were open, and roosters and chickens were crowing and clucking throughout the interview in the background. A country setting seemed appropriate since she spent most of her life in rural settings. Her thin frame stands at five feet seven inches, and she greeted this interviewer with a welcoming hug. Kristie's black shoulder-length hair hung in large ringlets around her face lightly tanned face. At age 32 and the only bi-racial participant in this study, her physiognomy belies her genetics; she has Caucasian facial features. That point became important as she recalled her middle school years. Kristie felt the time was right to tell her story.

Her mother, who is Caucasian, married an African-American during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Because her father was one of the founders of the Black Panther movement and her mother participated in many civil rights protests, Kristie felt those activities affected her upbringing dramatically. For the first two years of her life, she never lived in one place more than three months. She seldom recalled living in one place for more than a year or two her entire life, and she changed schools often. She

spoke of living in a migrant worker's camp, and living in a battered woman's shelter for a time. She said, "I don't remember at all my father battering my mother though I know that that happened in front of us. Um, so my mother got tired of that and moved us up to the northeast." That move proved difficult as her mother had no skills and no income. For all of her school years, Kristie grew up "very poor." For several months she recalled they had no electricity and no running water in their rural shanty.

Kristie recalled various childhood traumas: of being left alone at home by her father, of being locked in a car overnight, of getting gift - a balloon - for her birthday and her brother popping it, of discovering her private back yard hideout was snake-ridden, of losing her cat on the move to the northeast, and of those events she jokingly mused, "I guess I have a lot of memories of unsafe, abandoned places." She recalled one of her mother's partners being angry and abusive and hiding from him. Kristie had only one early childhood friend: her brother. Sometimes she would make friends with other children. Her brother and neighborhood children would gang up on her and torment her at home or on the bus and her older twin sisters would rescue her. She was shy to begin with, and the ridicule became difficult. Of kindergarten she said, "I was not an outgoing child. Um, but, and the friendships from then on really, the friendships that I made were usually very 'intense. Like, just the two of us, very intense friendships so she was my best friend. I relied on her."

That pattern continued into elementary school. "Usually I'd have one really close friend in each grade, um, but I don't remember having any really in third grade. I remember who was my best friend in second grade and then I remember in 4th grade also playing with him again." In second grade she remembered reading much more than her

peers, and became aware "that I was better at most subjects than most of my classmates. I definitely knew by then, by second or third grade that I was smarter than most of the kids. Fairly apparent. In everything. In all subjects." Kristie gained the reputation for being the smart girl in her small, rural school. However, third grade math was a challenge, which she creatively overcame. She mused:

> There were some things that I was not very good at in third grade. I remember we used to have to line up around the room; they would combine the two classrooms, and we would all line up around the room to do uh, multiplication drills. And I would just sit there and I'm still not good at basic functions in math. Adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing - things that you're supposed to memorize, I'm like, 'Ahhh!' I remember in second grade I devised a little system to help me count. I would visualize a certain number of dots in each number. But multiplication especially I couldn't, I couldn't memorize them. I was really, really bad at it. It would just take me a while to like figure it out in my head. And I remember a lot of kids were pretty fast, so I would just stand there and pray and pray, 'Please give me a two or a five. A two or a five.' The sevens and twelves and I was just like, 'Oh, God no!'

Kristie reiterated several times that she severely disliked her third grade teacher because Kristie would draw realistic monsters in art class like the boys, but the teacher insisted she draw feminine-looking monsters. She said the teacher "just loved the girlie girls," a profile Kristie disdained since she preferred the company of boys. Pondering this, she added, "Actually throughout school I had a lot of, often my best friend was a male."

She switched schools when entering a much larger middle school which presented some positive and negative aspects. In sixth grade, Kristie recalled her achievement tests: I'd get my scores back and be in the 99th percentile or my bad one would be like the 97th percentile. I was sent to see the guidance counselor. I don't remember why, maybe for being depressed or something, but I remember, I remember him looking at my folder and being all like, 'Oh! Oh my God.' So surprised that I got what my test scores were like. And then he spoke to me about being in the gifted program and if I wanted to do that.

She was glad to be in the gifted program; reflecting on the regular classroom curriculum she said, "The classes were slower. The pace was slower. I remember thinking, 'OK, we've covered this. Can we move on now? And feeling frustrated by that."

In contrast to her delight at being gifted, Kristie lamented that "in junior high things were definitely, in fact moving to that school I felt like things got much more socially complicated for me." For the first time in her life, Kristie experienced racial discrimination, and not from the general student population, but from her closest friends.

In middle school Kristie resented the popular students, and even more so the teachers who favored the popular students. She spoke ill of one seventh grade teacher who was the cheerleading coach who liked all the cheerleaders except Kristie because she was not popular. She particularly liked her eighth grade English teacher who also was a minority (Jewish) in that community. They bonded because they were both so different from the crowd, and this teacher encouraged Kristie to read obscure or avant-garde books and subjects she had not considered before.

Kristie entered high school, saying, "By that time I was becoming so different from the other students. I mean my, the reading that I was doing on my own had brought into focus a whole different world from the world I was living in. And most of the students I went to school with weren't interested even in, in discovering that there was another world." Academically, Kristie said she was floating above the crowd. "There wasn't - there were no other likeminded individuals who also felt like wow, I really need something more challenging." She was dissatisfied with the lack of rigor in school and tried finding alternatives to challenger her mind. She wanted to learn Spanish (her school near the Canadian border only offered French.) She approached the counselor about taking Spanish at a nearby community college, but he immediately denied her appeal. She said she always wanted to learn Latin as well since it would be "useful for vocabulary, science, for learning other languages." Again her appeal from the counselor was denied. Her high school only offered one AP course in English, and she did not like that class because the teacher preferred the popular students. She liked one math teacher who moved up with her from the middle school, and she had him for different classes over several years. She excelled in science and higher math because those teachers granted compacted curriculum, and she respected and admired those teachers.

However, of the high school counselor to whom she appealed many times for independent work, she fumed, "I really hated the guidance counselor, too. He was like the stereotypical sort of like fat, lazy cop kind of TV character. Like he was always disheveled, and like he pretty much wanted everybody to do the same thing so he wouldn't have to try and figure anything out for people."

When Kristie reflected on her high school friendships, she said she had one

female friend she hung out with. Kristie was not interested in having a social life in high school. She and her friend would talk for hours on the phone about how "lame" the other students were. She turned her focus on friendships to the outcast population saying, "I kind of sorta liked the freaky people once I got into high school." In addition to extracurricular activities that "made school more bearable" like the math team, drama club, chorus, tennis, cross country, speech and debate, she joined the band because she said trombone players were "weird" and the French horn players were "iffy." While fun, those acquaintanceships were not academically or mentally challenging.

> I'm not, I'm still not good at acquaintanceships. I am not at all skilled at - I think I find most people pretty boring. Ya know? I'm interested in people initially; I'm good at meeting people and making them feel comfortable and initiating conversations and having, ya know, but then I don't really have any interest in continuing to have, once I know the interesting parts about them. I'm not good at talking about, I don't know, most things that most people talk about. And I often say, 'If I prefer my own company to yours, then why would I be with you? It's more interesting to be alone with my thoughts than to talk to you.' […] It's not that, you know the popular kids weren't' interested in me, but just I wasn't interested in them. The weren't interesting, ya know? The things that they were interested in and doing, hanging out and the things they talked about were boring.

With no friends and no mental challenge, Kristie began pondering why she should continue going to school every day. At the end of her sophomore year, she made the decision. She told the high school counselor off and turned in her books. The GED was a quick acquisition for her. She applied to an innovative college for gifted students in

another state and went there for two years. She thrived, saying at that place "we could talk about economics, and we could talk about our political theory class, and isn't this fun? We could talk about Buddhism just for hours and hours and hours. It was incredible." Kristie had no regrets about leaving school. She contended that "there weren't real opportunities for growth in my high school. I felt by the time I was a sophomore, I felt like I had outgrown them. There was nothing. I thought, I didn't really feel like spending another two years in high school was going to teach me anything more." When asked if she thought anything could have prevented her from dropping out, she added:

> I mean if I had been able to if, when I went to the guidance counselor he'd been like, 'Yeah, let's make this possible so that you can go to this large school and take Spanish.' You know? And then I would've been open to a slightly larger pool of people, and even if there had been one teacher who could've said, 'Hey, instead of one of your academic classes, why don't we do one independent study sort of course.' But overall I don't think anything, I don't think the school really could've been changed enough to keep me there.

Themes

As stated earlier, the themes that emerged organically through transcendental means (Moustakas, 1994) revealed a web of relationships that affected the participants uniquely. Some of those relationships were positive; many were not. What became evident is that all discussed their life stories in terms of relationships with friends, family or teachers. Many times some or all of those relationships affected the sixteen sub themes mentioned earlier. They did or did not do schoolwork based on whether they had a

relationship with a teacher. For example, Mike said regarding his underachievement and his teacher relationships, "It did motivate me in some instances. Ya know, if it was teachers I was close to, I'd be like, 'Ya know, I can do better than this,' and I'd raise it up." Their relationships (or omission of them – (Bruner, 2004)) with friends, family or teachers had an influence on their desire to learn and the decision to drop out.

For some, they saw their giftedness in terms of their relationship with a sibling or other classmates. When Randy and Diane were asked about their giftedness, their first response was to reference their giftedness to their siblings who were not gifted. Randy's first response to the question, "Where do you think you got (your giftedness) from?" was, "I don't want to sound mean as far as my sister, because my sister is not smart." Diane's response was similar: "I did feel special to be going to a school for smart kids, unlike my siblings." Diane also stated that her grades and whether she did well in school had a direct bearing on how things were progressing in her relationship at home and with friends.

According to Davis and Dupper (2004), many children from rural or poor backgrounds lack the skills to develop trusting relationships because of prior relationship disappointments. They further contended that there is growing evidence that interpersonal relationships play a much greater part in the drop out decision by gifted students than previously thought, and that "this is achieved, in part, through on going positive relationships with significant adults" (p. 183). Positive relationships are a strong motivator to attend school, but Gallagher (2002) reported that most dropouts had few positive relationships with peers, adults or teachers. This research supports Gallagher's findings. What differentiates this study from Gallagher's and other studies is the

magnitude of relational dysfunction these seven gifted dropouts faced. Those

dysfunctions are explained as relational trauma and relational loss.

      Relational trauma. This theme emerged after Kristie reflected on her early

childhood, saying, "I guess I have a lot of memories of unsafe, abandoned places. Yes.

Lots of trauma." Here Kristie referred to a number of early childhood events at home:

- The first two years of her life, she never lived anywhere more than three months.

- As a toddler she was abandoned by her father and left alone to wander through the
  house.

- At age four her father left her in a locked car overnight, and she recalled the terror of
  the event and shame of relieving herself in the car.

- On her fifth birthday, because she was poor she received only one present, a balloon,
  which she "loved" and which her brother popped.

- Her parents separated when she was five and her mother fled to a battered woman's
  shelter. Along the way, her beloved cat ran away. She also remembered "one very
  strange little girl there who used to play dirty games with her Barbie dolls. And I
  remember her pretty clearly that she was – she made an impression on me."

- The following year at age six her parents were divorced. Her father visited her only to
  tell her he wanted the divorce finalize.

      Many of the other participants listed a litany of relational traumas during their

childhoods. Randy rehearsed how at age four he watched his father die before his eyes

after promising he would swim across a small lake and return. Diane's parents divorced

when she was in preschool. Buck watched his favorite uncle slowly die from cancer

while lying in a hospital bed in Buck's living room. Arnold's father was an alcoholic and

he had to deal with that behavior and inconsistency. Some of the participants suffered more relational trauma than the others.

Each individual in this study faced a significant trauma during their middle school years which birthed a change in their attitude regarding school. For Mike, it was his parents' divorce. Until that event happened, Mike had good grades and was a performing student. After the divorce he reportedly suffered from bouts with depression, and he became a textbook underachiever (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). He distinctly remembered having to leave the beautiful home he and his family shared to move into dangerous, low rent housing. It effectively ended his childhood. He said,

> For a couple of years it was just me, my mom and my sister and we were - we had very little money. You know, we were kind of struggling. And I was the man of the house, so I had a lot of responsibility. […] But you know at the time I still didn't care that much.

Randy's relational trauma came during a heated custody battle between his grandmother and mother when he was in middle school. He became an emotional pawn in the fight over who wanted him (his grandmother) and who did not (his mother). He was rejected by the one person a child typically trusts:

> When I was in sixth or seventh, I was living with my grandma because I had just it started out just as us staying over there during the summer just for her to sort of watch us when mom was at work, and then it was kind of like, 'Well, I don't want to leave them. Just stay here.' And my grandma at that point had actually filed for custody.

Arnold faced two significant traumas in middle school. When he was in middle

school his best friend was shot. He recounted the tragedy:

> He was one of my best friends. He was at the skating rink, I met him at the
> skating rink. And he died that year 'cause one of his best friends that skated with
> him also, he was older than me. They were playing with a handgun and he got
> shot, and so that was sad. That affected a lot of the school 'cause this kid that I
> liked, that I would've considered my good friend, yeah, he died, you know? And
> so that was sad. Really sad.

Added to that trauma, Arnold's wealthier friends with whom he had grown up rejected him because he was then seen as poor, "broken," and not of their social status. Arnold turned violent and apathetic, explaining,

> Going into sixth grade a lot of new students came in. I would say that that would
> probably be why. And why I was very popular with this crowd in fifth grade, you
> know? It was all of us. And then they kind of went and done their own thing. And
> so I was no longer a part, you know? I would probably say that might have a little
> something to do with it. There were different kids coming in from different
> elementary schools and so they all started to mingle together. So all my old
> friends in the fifth grade they started making new friends and so I wasn't really a
> part of them, and uh so I really set myself apart, I guess. The rich crowd, I guess
> you could say. Um, the perfect kids. And so I really set myself apart from them
> going into middle school. Because, um you know, I wasn't like them, you know?
> It was like, not that I was pushed away, but I wasn't accepted in their clique
> anymore, you know? I wasn't like them. I was broke, you know? And they all
> lived in this subdivision in [town] the nicest subdivision. And so I'm like, 'Well,

that's fine. I'll do my own thing.'

Like Arnold, Kristie's world changed in middle school as her loyal elementary school friends rejected her because of her race. Though she appears Caucasian, she is bi-racial, but she unexpectedly dealt with racial discrimination, depression and anger simultaneously. She recounted her middle school trauma this way:

The school that I moved to was much bigger. And especially coming at that time all those kids had been together forever, and sort of a social hierarchy had already been established. And I was treated very much like I was different there. I felt very left out. People were more openly discriminatory there. Like would call us names when we got off the bus, and even the people who were like the girls who were supposed to be my friends would say things like, 'Oh, you know, we want to get a tan this summer - but not like Kristie.' I'd be like, 'OK. A tan, but not my tan. Because that's the bad kind.' Or like I'd say I'd have a crush on a guy and they'd be like, 'He doesn't date black girls.' I'd be like, 'OK.' Um, since I was *thee* black girl. But there it became - that's the school where I really started feeling like, like I was not white. Ya know? Where it became really, 'You're of a different race than us.' And especially what irked me, there was another girl in my class who was I don't even know where her family was from, probably eastern Europe, but she had skin that was darker than mine but very straight hair. Yeah, I didn't really know where she was from, but uh, but she was OK because she had straight hair and kind of Anglo features and even she would kind of join in on the 'Well, I'd like to get a perm, but not like Kristie's hair." And I was like, 'So everybody wants to get tanned, and spiral perms, but it's bad because I'm tanned

and have curly hair.' I definitely felt angry at them.

This turncoat behavior by Kristie's friends in middle school sent her into an angry, depressive state with suicidal fantasies (Cassady & Cross, 2006; Plucker & Levy, 2001). Already shy, she began to withdraw even further.

I just wanted to lay in bed and um, and my grades started dropping, and I didn't really want to be a smart student. And my teacher got together with my parents and they all talked about it, and I got sent to a psychologist. And basically what came out of that was I wasn't allowed to read depressing books anymore (laughs). And I got over it. But for sure when I got to the other middle school I started having a *lot* more problems with depression. I mean, I journaled. So I can look back through my journals and see, ya know many, many like (sighs) sort of, I don't know mock suicide notes, and just really, really angry like digging into paper about everything I hate. About my life. And um, and I felt, I think I started really keeping a distance between myself and the people that I knew at school.

Diane's significant trauma started when she was 10. Her mother's uncle sexually molested her just prior to entering middle school, but the effects of that molestation became manifest as she was shuffled to live with a guardian as a direct result of that event. Her mother could not contend with her personality change, and gave guardianship of Diane to someone else. Diane testified, "I lived with my godmother for the majority of my teen years due to behavior issues that resulted from being molested." She was compelled to leave her mother, siblings and friends and move to another state at a time when she was dealing with the onset of puberty, sexual battery, and emotional and psychological trauma. She later stated, "I was diagnosed manic depressant at age 12."

She began to deal with deep, diagnosed depression at that time.

Buck had three adults in his life: his favorite uncle who passed away in his home, his father who traveled often, and his mother who nurtured and taught him at home. Buck's middle school world became destabilized when his home schooling mother left home to work to help make ends meet. Similar to Mike's testimony, this left him alone as a child suddenly dealing with adult responsibilities; he had to feed, clothe, and education himself and his younger brother alone in his rural, isolated home. "I'm the oldest. So I feel responsibilities sometimes. Sometimes too much," he lamented at the opening of his interview. He explained this later referring to his sudden overwhelming responsibility for him and his brother. He starts with his mother:

> It was hands on with her designing her own curriculum and stuff like that. Uh, up until middle school. I was 11,12 somewhere around there. Um, my mom had to go out to work for the first time of having kids because of, it's just the way finances were. And so she worked at Kroger for a while. And um, we'd get up at nine, whenever. They'd leave me with my siblings. And I'd just after they'd leave we'd go back to sleep. We'd have assignments we were supposed to do, and um, I'd get some done the ones that I liked to do. Oh, not even that. That was a horrible statement. 'Cause it was just like, 'Mom's gone. I'm going back to bed.'

Last, Shelley began dating an abusive boyfriend in middle school and she had to lie to her parents to cover up the physical abuse, which later spawned even more abuse, lies about drinking, drugs, stalking, grades, and more.

> Junior high my interests started going elsewhere and um, I think they started dropping some, and then in high school they fluctuated greatly if I remember

correctly. But I couldn't exactly tell you what they were. I – the first boyfriend that I had um, ended up being incredibly abusive. Um, and between soccer and horses I was really able to keep that from my parents because I got hurt all the time with the horses and soccer.

While the data cannot conclusively prove that these middle school events were the sole contributing factor of all of the participants' final decisions to drop out of high school years later, there is clear evidence that all of those interviewed did deal with a major event that may have contributed to that decision. Gallagher (2002) reported that "moving into an unfamiliar community from one that is known can lead to disorientation and cultural conflict" (p. 47). These gifted students' worlds changed significantly in middle school, and not for the better. To the casual observer, there may be no comparison between Diane's molestation in middle school and Buck's mother going to work. However, this study is not about the observer, but the participant and their life experience, and the significance of an event can only be determined by the one who experienced it. That three of the seven gifted participants (Mike, Diane, and Kristie) suffered from debilitating depression after their middle school trauma took place may be an indicator of just how significant these events were. Research is mixed, but Plucker and Levy (2001) suggested that there may be a link between depression, suicide and giftedness.

Because these individuals were gifted, it is unlikely they would have sought out help during or after their traumas given their propensity toward independence (Douglas, 2004; Stanley & Baines, 2002). According to Lee and Olszewski-Kubilius (2006), it is probable that even though they had superior academic abilities, they may not have had

the emotional intelligence to know how to deal with the situation and as a result, devised coping mechanisms to help them through it (Callahan, Sowa, May, Tomchin, Plucker, Cunningham & Taylor, 2004; Foust & Booker, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Peterson, 2006). Each participant chose to deal with life's traumas in different ways, some which manifested itself later in high school. Some adjusted; some like Randy became "invisible", some altered their behavior, and some self-medicated the pain with sex, drugs or alcohol (Peterson, 2006).

Table 2

Coping Strategies

Randy	Mike	Arnold	Buck	Diane	Shelley	Kristie
				Addiction	Addiction	
		Anger			Anger	Anger
	Depression			Depression		Depression
Fantasy game play	Humor		Eccentric behavior		Eccentric behavior	Eccentric behavior
		Rebellion	Rebellion	Sexual promiscuity		
Withdrawal	Under-achievement	Violence	Under-achievement			Withdrawal

This middle school trauma became significant for three reasons. 1) None of the participants were asked to reveal a middle school life changing event; the data emerged from the life experiences (Moustakas, 1994). 2) All of the participants referred to it with pathos and passion. 3) Analysis of the personal portraits after the middle school event indicates that this traumatic event's effect was substantial enough to be considered a

significant influencer for change in behavior, outlook, grades, emotional state and other issues.

Relational loss. As one progresses chronologically through the life stories of these seven gifted dropouts, there are times when they had strong relational support, times when they did not, and times when relational support was withdrawn. It is this latter relationship loss that emerged as a significant theme. One must consider each portrait and the relational loss associated with it. As stated earlier, the typical characteristics gifted students enjoy can also have negative aspects to them, particularly when it comes to relational loss. "Feelings of loss associated with family changes (e.g., structure, location), altered friendships, and even moving to a new developmental stage may be exacerbated by sensitivities," (Peterson, 2006, p. 46). In addition to the significant trauma they all faced, these gifted dropouts also had to deal with negative relationship changes.

Randy had strong support from his father as a young child. When his father drowned, that support disappeared. He had no support from his mother at all. His grandmother was and is his only caring relation. When speaking of family relations, he put it this way:

> My mom's side of the family prefers my sister, and my dad's side of the family
>
> prefers me. And my sister sees it too. And when I go to my nana's and papa's, my
>
> papa just beams when he sees my sister. Maybe he sees my mom in her, but they
>
> don't ever really talk to me."

His friends who supported his giftedness in elementary and middle school reversed and became the ones to bully and abuse him on the bus in high school.

I had a couple of friends on that bus, but most of them had kind of changed I

guess. Switched their whole friends. So they were kind of like, 'Oh, hey, how's it

going?' And it was just like, 'Yeah.' So I didn't- wasn't really, really friends with

them anymore. I just hated that bus, I guess. I was, I was kind of, um, nobody

noticed me I guess. I just sort of hid. Just sort of invisible.

The need for invisibility is a normal behavior pattern for unaccepted gifted

students (Stanley & Baines, 2002). It did not please Randy. After several months of being

gone, he told of trying to reunite with what few friends he had. They seemed uninterested

in him and shortly completely disconnected from him.

Well, for the first few months I had no contact with anybody. None of my friends

or anything. […] And I maybe, you know, went over to each other's houses like

maybe four times after that. And then there was just no contact. I mean it was just

kinda like everybody just went on.

Teachers, counselors and administrators offered no support when he announced

he was leaving school. When he went in to tell the counselor he was quitting school, she

told him to make sure he returned all of his books. According to Randy, there was no

inquiry, and no concern, and no one asked him to stay in school. He went home and from

that point on he said, "I was basically shut in."

Mike's relational support changed several times. He lived with both parents, then

they divorced and he lived with his father. A year later after a custody battle, he moved in

with his mother. After that point and until very recently he did not have a relationship

with his biological father. In the interview, Mike said that he was bullied as a child

because he was smart (Stanley & Baines, 2002), and that he "had a weird growing up

period." He had a few caring teachers in his life, but most were "impersonal." The few times he approached his high school counselors, he said, "I feel like they don't help." When he was expelled from school, all of his friends abandoned him except one.

Arnold's support did not come from his alcoholic father, nor from his "naïve" mother, nor from counselors ("I didn't get along with the high school counselors 'cause I was always causing trouble") but from "an irresponsible delinquent." He did have one Christian man who mentored him, discipled him, and "poured his life" into him as long as he towed the line and dated his daughter, but once Arnold started reverting to his old ways the mentor abandoned him.

> I wanted to go to the school that she was at, of course, 'cause she was my
> girlfriend. I thought I was in love at that time. And so I switched to [her school].
> The first day [there] I remember getting into some fights there. So I don't know if
> I was saved then or not. But there was one time when I was 14 or somewhere
> around that time that I had gotten saved and I was really on fire for God, you
> know, a new Christian trying to save the world telling everybody about Jesus.
> And, so yeah, me and her broke up and he was no longer my mentor.

Buck did have the support of his mother who was also his only teacher, but once she started working and left him on his own she grew frustrated with him and eventually handed him his education and said, "Here. Choose your own path." He had no friends to speak of outside of his home for support, and no extended family. Because he was home schooled, he had no access to counselors, and because they moved so often, not even youth pastors with whom he had a relationship.

Diane never knew her father and ended up living with a guardian during her

formative teen years. That move meant she lost her one best friend from elementary school. She moved often and said she felt like she "never fit in." Friends were few, and she did not testify to having any relationships with teachers or counselors. She found relationships with young men her age, but admitted those relationships were primarily sexual in nature. They did not last long. She said, "I married a guy I dated in school, Junior, during the course of that four years. My marriage lasted only 28 days because he committed adultery." Her romantic relationships left her with only divorce papers and a child to support.

Shelley did have family support, even after she ran away from home and joined a punk group. That was consistent throughout her development and continues to this day. Her breakdown in relational support happened at the personal and academic levels. Her choice of abusive boyfriends were unsupportive of her needs, she watched friends in her punk group die from drug overdoses. Though she mentioned that one of her favorite teachers was her middle school principal who moved up with her and became her high school principal, and that they had a warm relationship, she later said the school administration was unsupportive of her academic desire to learn at her own pace and in her own way. She said, "We were all just supposed to be pliant, accepting, and quiet while riding down the conveyor belt of the factory that school was."

Kristie's relational losses fluctuated. She had a father, but he abandoned her in literally and figuratively. Her mother was there for her most of the time, as were her older twin sisters, while friends teased and tormented her. She discussed relational loss when referencing her middle school years, and the racial tension that emerged at that time. Her best friends turned against her because she was not equal to them, and she withdrew.

When reflecting on her life with her siblings, she sensed that she was not equal with them either. Kristie said, "As a pre-teen and early teen acutely aware that I was the unspecial middle child. I mean the twins are identical twins, very identical. Very special. And my brother of course is the only boy, the baby. So I was quite frequently referred to as 'the other girl.' Ya know, people would be like, "Oh, is this one of the twins?" "No, this is the other girl.""

As she progressed through high school, Kristie found fewer people with whom she could communicate on her intellectual level. She had support from the "misfit" crowd and found comfort there. She sought friendships exclusively with males, especially after her female friends treated her so poorly in middle school.

Relationships with teachers. In terms of quantity of data gathered, the majority of conversations and references reflected back to the participants' teachers. Regardless of whether they reflected back as far as kindergarten, or mentioned their last memories of high school, they referenced teachers. This theme was overlooked until the writer applied Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology once again. "The way the story is told provides clues about meaning," said Riessman (1993). This writer overlooked the obvious. While searching for themes and sub themes, the theme of student-teacher relationship was evident, but because it was so prevalent, deemed inconsequential. Here, Bruner's (2004) question came into play: "Are not omissions also important?" (p. 693). Sometimes while analyzing a portrait, the art critic misses the use of color while searching for brush strokes. Such was the case with teacher-student relationships.

Throughout the narrative, every participant put into view their relationships with teachers at various times throughout their schooling. It is less important to determine

whether their relationships were good, bad, protagonistic or antagonistic; their discussions of them below will reveal the tenor of the relationship. What is significant is that they did have relationships, and indeed, wanted deeper and more frequent relationships with their teachers.

Nationwide, only six percent of dropouts said they saw their teachers as friends (Altenbauch, 1998). Gallagher (2002) noted that few dropouts had relationships with any adult while in high school, thus interpreting the lack of relationships as lack of caring. Davis and Dupper (2004) reported that at risk students need the community of strong, positive relationships with a caring adult in their lives and urged implementation of programs geared toward enhancing teacher-student relationships. Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) stated that, "Teachers are an important source of social capital for students, and teacher-based forms of social capital reduce the probability of dropping out by half" (p. 333). It is consequential that these gifted dropouts referred to their relationships with teachers more often than the teacher's pedagogy, curriculum, or other peripheral factors.

Riessman (1993) lamented, "Readers only see brief excerpts, snapshots, or moments" (p. 31). However, the various snapshots presented below provide the basis for the third significant theme: teacher relationships. By looking at a core narrative chronologically, what Riessman calls "a kind of radical surgery" (p. 43), it allows the reader to grasp the heart of the matter. These core narratives speak not only of the participants' various relationships with teachers, but of how those participants viewed those relationships, and thus give them meaning.

Of various teachers Arnold said: In middle school I don't believe that I tried to

develop any relationship with my teachers […] although there were those teachers and some cared, but a lot of them didn't.

Buck said: I really don't remember my dad doing a whole lot. He didn't, I mean, it wasn't that he didn't care. It's just that mom had everything under control […] She got tired of fighting with me. Tired of trying to go do this, do this. It was finally, "OK, you can do this if you want to."

Diane said: Mr. [Pepper], my math algebra teacher. He made me grow to love numbers […] Teachers cared about me, which made me want to impress them.

Kristie said: I just felt so disappointed in her so often. 'Cause I thought she must be pretty smart if she's like teaching the honors English class. So, why does she act so silly? Ya know, with sort of bouncing around and like, I didn't really care for her. I thought she was superficial and silly […] I really hated the guidance counselor, too. He was, like, he was like the stereotypical sort of fat, lazy cop kind of TV character. Like he was always disheveled, and like he pretty much wanted everybody to do the same thing so he wouldn't have to try and figure anything out for people […] I remember very clearly in high school I had this guy for my homeroom teacher. I thought he was really sort of pathetic […] I didn't have any mentors at the high school. I didn't have anybody to help me do those sorts of things.

Mike said: I really don't know why, but she just stuck out as one of the most, she was one of the most caring teachers probably that I've ever had at any school […] It did motivate me in some instances. Ya know, if it was teachers I was close to […] When I was in school, I always felt like even after I turned 18 I always felt

like I was being belittled. Like I was a kid […] She was my favorite. I just knew her. Ninth grade I met her and I liked her, you know. I got to know her […] I was like, you know that was the first time – you know teachers will talk to you, but not as an equal. And that was the first time a teacher had ever talked to me as an equal […] I thought of her, I'd call her evil […] He's a lot more, for lack of a better word, just a hard ass. And uh, he was a real jerk. He was the only one I ever really had problems with […] I just found it hard to learn because she was, I don't want to say hostile but just, I dunno, she wasn't easy to be friends with and listen to […] The more I got to know her, the more I realized I disliked her […] No matter how close you get to the teacher, even personally, they're still just your teacher […] You know, I've had, obviously everybody gives you advice, but you know I never really had a singularly mentor person like that.

Randy said: I guess that's why you have your favorite teachers and teachers that you don't like. The ones that are passionate and the ones that aren't […] My eighth grade algebra teacher. She's got to be the worst. […] If you're in the classroom but the teacher's talking to the whole class, if you have a problem with anything, it's kind of hard to say, "Well, I've got a problem with this," because the teacher doesn't want to stop to help just one student. You know what I mean? […] Nobody ever asked me anything about talking or anything […] People didn't really care.

Shelley said: My principal was my favorite person […] Miss O, the drama teacher. She was a fun big sistery kinda way. Miss M, the chorus teacher, was more the grandmotherly kind of figure […] Those three favorite teachers of mine

that were let go were all let go the same year. So that was a big part of me losing

even more interest in the school.

Summary of Findings

Taken separately, one could make a case that any of the sixteen sub themes (drop

out decisions, drinking and drugs, regrets, middle school events, depression,

socioeconomics, moving, boredom, homework, challenge, learning, attendance,

mathematics, extracurricular activities, interest, and interventions) played a factor in the

decision to drop out of school for some of these gifted dropouts. Many of the participants

had experiences in common. All expressed a deep love for learning. Randy said, "I like to

learn new stuff." Mike added, "Instead of making classes dumber, we need to make them

smarter. Because instead of focusing on everybody passing, why don't we focus on

actually teaching people things?" Kristie opined, "I'm still jealous when people tell me

they had Latin. It would be so useful to know that. Just for knowledge." Diane reflected

Randy's sentiments, saying, "I love to learn new things." With challenge missing, the

participants faced a number of mounting unpleasant issues including boredom.

Still, the sub themes were not the mitigating factor separately nor together in their

decision to leave school early. All those elements had one theme in common with each

other and with the participants: relationships. All of the interviewees had relationship

issues, from dysfunctional families to unsupportive friends and teachers to abusive

boyfriends.

These seven gifted dropouts desired deep and personal relationships with their

teachers, but rarely did this occur, as in Gallagher's (2002) and Hansen and Johnston-

Toso's (2007) findings which stated, "Not one dropout reported a sustained meaningful

connection with a teacher" (p. 36). In other studies (Davis & Dupper, 2004), the most frequently cited reason that dropouts gave for leaving school was due to poor or nonexistent relationships with teachers.

For some of the gifted dropouts in this study (Randy, Arnold and Kristie), some form of social rejection fueled the decision to leave school before graduating. They had no friends in school, and given the lack of academic rigor they found there, they concluded there was simply no reason to continue going. The individuals in this study used words such as "sick, pathetic, boring, horrible, unchallenged, devastating, disappointing, frustrating, and uninteresting" to describe school and school experiences. Although in elementary school all were high achievers and liked school, they gradually lost interest in the rural school environment.

In comparison to Carper's (2006) study on gifted dropouts, none of the participants in this study mentioned or complained about school overcrowding, large classrooms, or lack of technology in the learning environment, nor did they speak exclusively about their dropout experience. These interviews were life-long in scope, allowing for deeper investigation into motivational factors.

Despite home, school and social problems, all of the participants were optimistic in school and in their decision to leave school and following. They wanted to make the decision and move on with their lives. They all earned their GED except for Diane who is currently pursuing that. Kristie earned her Bachelor's degree, and Arnold, Buck and Shelly are working on theirs. Shelley and Kristie plan on continuing on to their Master's degree, and Arnold has hopes of earning his Ph.D. They faced many obstacles and traumas, but persevered through them. They exuded a sense of destiny and control over

their lives. For these gifted dropouts, leaving school early was not the end of the world, but the beginning of a new opportunity.

Finally, the gifted dropouts in this study were aware early in their academic studies that they were somehow special and gifted, and yet they managed to fit in socially for a time. Only when their middle school event happened did they begin having issues with depression, anger, rejection, or withdrawal. Now as adults, they are able to reflect back and see what took place and evaluate it, and though some expressed regret at having dropped out of school, all of them had goals and plans for a brighter future.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Summary

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research project was to understand factors which resulted in the phenomenon of gifted individuals dropping out of school. No attempt was made to generalize the data; it was an investigation of the unique life experiences of seven participants who dropped out of school prior to receiving their high school diplomas, and who either received their GED or were currently working on one. One cannot infer that other gifted students would react as these participants did; each life and response to life's circumstances is unique. Understanding how these gifted dropouts responded to life experiences as they did was the intent of this study.

The problem was that while quantitative research provided specific numbers of gifted students dropping out, the individual stories of gifted dropouts had been ignored, and students were not treated as individuals with unique needs. The testimonies of these participants supported both the purpose and problem stated in the research. All of the participants in this study were eager to tell their stories, and several mentioned that this was the first time anyone had asked them or showed interest in their story, thus validating the problem statement.

The method used to gather this information took the form of personal oral or written semi-structured interviews. Initially, 170 students attending a large university were contacted who had entered the school through passage of a GED. Those students were between the ages of 18 and 40. They received an email from the researcher asking if they were identified as gifted, and if so, would they be willing to share their life story. A

second email was sent three weeks later as a follow up invitation. Of those contacted, eight replied positively, and six signed documents agreeing to participate. One of those later withdrew, and another did not respond in spite of repeated contact attempts. Other individuals were identified by contacting the adult education center in the county where the researcher lived. Two gifted students who had recently received their GEDs participated, and another earning her GED while incarcerated agreed to participate. Finally, a gifted dropout living in another state was contacted; she was eager to participate. Other attempts were made to continue contacting potential candidates through other county administrators, and even through a gifted administrator in another state. Eventually the total number of participants ended with seven because at that number, the data were saturated.

The researcher transcribed all interviews which aided in analysis (Riessman, 1993), and formed no theories and made no assumptions prior to the analysis of the data. There was no attempt on the part of the researcher to persuade the reader or to criticize schools, teachers or parents. This study was a narrative of gifted dropouts' life experiences. As such, it required an interpretation of those experiences (Riessman, 1993).

Discussion of the Results

Glatthorn (2005) proposed that the discussion section should answer the primary question, "What does your study mean?" (p. 207). In the context of this particular study, the primary result means that understanding gifted students, and the phenomenon of gifted dropouts in particular, is incomplete and emerging. The findings from this study validate much of what has already been reported, but also included several new discoveries.

Three major themes covering relational trauma, relational loss, and relationships with teachers emerged from the data. While the participants discussed many different topics, the majority of the deep, meaningful conversations centered on relationships. Relationships focused primarily on family and friends, but also on places and times they faced social rejection. All of the participants discussed how they ultimately came to the crossroad decision of dropping out, and volunteered what interventions (if any) might have prevented it. Even though the participants may have answered the question simplistically as to why they dropped out, deeper investigation into the data showed that their reasons were complicated, multidimensional and at times, lengthy. As Gallagher (2002) pointed out, the decision to leave school was not spontaneous; it took a lifetime. Still, in this study a significant event occurred following elementary school which negatively affected the participants' attitudes toward school which contrasts Hansen and Johnston-Toso's (2007) finding that "problems began in elementary school" (p. 37).

Interpretation of findings. On the basis of this research alone, it is impossible to determine whether any singular sub theme of drop out decision, drinking and drugs, regrets, middle school events, depression, socioeconomics, moving, boredom, homework, challenge, learning, attendance, mathematics, extracurricular activities, interest, and interventions played a greater role than others in the students' decision to drop out. Nor can one draw any conclusion from the emergent data that all the candidates were from rural schools and counties, or that they dealt with social rejection, or that they all experienced a significant negative event in middle school. While those anomalies differentiate this research from others', more study is called for to determine whether those may be inconsequential or significant factors in the dropout phenomenon.

What is conclusive from this study is that all of the participants in this study loved learning and welcomed mental challenge and did not find it in either their public school (or in Buck's case home school) environment. What is also conclusive is that all of these individuals thrived on and yearned for deep, meaningful relationships both with friends and with teachers. Their life stories revealed that many times they were abandoned, rejected, or even abused by those they trusted with their emotion and intellect, and that betrayal may have played a part in their withdrawal from the relationship and eventually from school. While this study included no quantitative analysis, a quick review of the interview transcripts showed that the majority of conversation with these gifted dropouts centered around relationships both good and bad. The interviewees placed much less emphasis on academics in the discussions than they did on who delivered the academics, how they delivered it, and why they liked or disliked the person doing so. For example, when they spoke of boredom, they explained who was boring more than what was boring. These gifted dropouts seemed particularly relational beings.

Results and prior research. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written about gifted students; few cover gifted dropouts. The findings in this study show that in keeping with the literature, these gifted students fit the standard research profile, but they also presented some unexpected data results presented in Table 3. The left column lists prior research data characteristic of gifted dropouts. The asterisk in the columns to the right represent the participants in this study (identified by the first letter of their name) as that trait applied to them.

Table 3

Prior research versus current research

Prior Research Dropout Factors	R	M	A	B	D	S	K
1. Low SES	*	*	*	*	*		*
2 Parents lack college education	*	*		*	*	*	*
3. Rural schooling	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
4. Issues with school personnel	*	*	*			*	*
5. Desired challenging curriculum	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
6. No teacher relationship	*		*	*	*		*
7. No intervening counselor	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
8. No extracurricular activities	*	*	*	*		*	
9. Suffered depression		*			*		*
10. Poor attendance	*		*	*			
11. Advanced math skills	*		*		*		*
12. Underachiever	*	*	*	*			
13. Self-critical, perfectionistic	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
14. Anger issues		*	*			*	*
15. Desired new information	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
16. Bored in school	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
17. Preferred independent work		*	*			*	*
18. Desired higher level thinking		*	*		*	*	*

Note. 1. (Altenbaugh, 1998; Seeley, 2004); 2. (Moon, Callahan, Tomlinson, & Miller, 2002); 3. (Cross & Burney, 2005); 4. (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Veitch, 2004); 5. (Carper, 2002; Callahan, 2001; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Dickeson 2001; Hansen and Johnston Toso, 2007; Johnson,

2000; Kanevsky and Kieghley, 2003; Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Tomlinson, 2005); 6. (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006); 7. (Hansen and Johnston Toso, 2007; Renzulli and Park, 2002); 8. (Renzulli and Park, 2002); 9. (Peterson, 2001); 10. (Veitch, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006); 11. (Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright, & Jackson, 2007); 12. (Davis and Rimm, 2004); 13. (Davis and Rimm, 2004; Sondergeld, Schultz, & Glover, 2007); 14. (Davis and Rimm, 2004); 15. (Caruana, 2002; DeLacy, 2002); 16. (Sheehan , 2000; Hansen & Johnson-Toso, 2007; Kanevsky & Kieghley, 2003); 17. (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007; Douglas, 2004; Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004; Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright, & Jackson, 2007; Rice, 2006; Shimabukuro, 2005; Stanley and Baines, 2002); 18. (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Stanley & Baines, 2002, VanTassel-Baska, 1998; VanTassel-Baska, 2004; Villani, 1998)

Carper (2002), Renzulli and Park (2002), and Davis and Rimm's (2004) studies revealed interpersonal or social difficulties among gifted students. Typically those interpersonal conflicts involved peers or school staff. All of the participants discussed some form of peer pressure, isolation, chastisement, or rejection at various times in school. Those conflicts were significant, and at times, traumatic.

Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007), Cross and Burney (2005), Davis and Dupper (2004), Dickeson (2001), and Gallagher (2002) reported that a significant factor influencing the decision to drop out involved student-teacher relationships. Relationship issues in this study ascended above all others as a driving force to drop out. Participants complained that teachers seemed not to care whether they passed, failed, attended, or simply dropped out. The men in this study complained about uncaring teachers more than the women which supports Callahan et. al's (2004) survey showing that while females rely on peers for comfort and caring, gifted males sought the attention of adults for comfort and care.

Recommendations for educators. What went on in the homes of the gifted

students goes beyond the scope of influence for curriculum supervisors and teachers (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Teachers may not be able to prevent a student from being molested at home or from trying drugs on the weekend. Educators cannot prevent marriages from ending in divorce or from families moving every year. Yet these domestic situations had as much influence on the gifted students in this study as did unchallenging curriculums and uncaring teachers. Unfortunately, these gifted dropouts had no one to confide in when issues arose.

According to Cross and Burney (2005), Peterson (2006) and Gentry's (2006) studies, gifted students are the least likely of all student groups to seek help from a school counselor, perhaps because perceptive gifted students sense the lack of training (Peterson, 2006). Counselors could play a vital role in positively advising at-risk groups like these gifted dropouts if properly equipped and trained.

Since all the participants in this study viewed their GED positively, educators and counselors could recommend a GED as a viable option for gifted students. Complimenting the findings of Entwisle, Alexander and Steffel-Olson (2004), several of those interviewed here said they opted for the GED because it was a faster option; they tired of the slow, lock step pace in their high schools. Educators may want to coordinate with the local adult education center to see if an advanced GED is a possibility since several of these gifted students said they could "fly through" the GED process and considered it a "piece of cake."

From the lives and stories of these gifted dropouts, six strategies could be considered that may reduce the number of gifted students dropping out.

- Improve pedagogy. All of these gifted dropouts complained about boring,

monotone teachers. More teacher in service and peer teaching mentoring may be called for. Teaching must be lively and relevant if it is to reach gifted students.

- Eliminate homework. Gifted students in this study all said they learned the material at school or one their own, often the first time simply by paying attention in class. Homework had no bearing on whether they succeeded; few did it anyway.

- Create challenge. (Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009). Gifted students, including those in this study, showed a keen desire for subjects not offered in their school curriculums (Caraisco, 2007). Educators should supplement the standard curriculum with alternatively challenging assignments.

- Develop mentorships. The data showed that some of these participants enjoyed a meaningful relationship with a teacher in lower grades. Instruct teachers to seek out deeper relationships with students who seem to be losing their interest in learning. Studies have shown that dropout rates decline significantly when teachers are taught to care and to focus on the student and not the material (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

- Recognize signs. A number of studies provide information on how to recognize the signs that a student is preparing to drop out (C. Gallagher, 2002; Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Renzulli & Park, 2000; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006.) Underachievement, disinterest, and poor attendance are common signs of this phenomenon. This research revealed other signs, including opting to home school, withdrawing from social connections, and repeated attempts at independent studies.

- Monitor middle school. None of the turning points in the lives of these students were academically related; they were relational or social. Teachers, counselors

and aids should be aware of social activities, family complications, or changes in peer groups particularly in middle school.

Recommendations for administrators. Administrators are in a unique position to affect change. While some of the recommendations below would require singular decision-making power, others would demand some further study and board approval for implementation. The recommendations come from two sources: the participants, and the data**.**

Recommendations from the participants. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the participants to purposefully and specifically address their concerns to school administrators reading this report. The question was phrased this way: if you could say anything to those in authority about your experiences, hopes, understandings, etc., what would you tell them? One could interpret their responses (Riessman, 1993), but the strength of their own words needs no interpretation.

Shelley began: "Let [education] be interactive. Don't let it just be teaching that student. As far as public schools you've got huge classes and everything else, but learn the learning styles of the children and teach the children according to those learning styles."

Randy focused on teachers for his final speech, saying, "If the teacher's just there doing their job then you can't learn anything from it. So I guess I just feel like if teachers were more passionate, you know, making things more interesting then it would've been better."

Diane who wrote from her jail cell did not offer a lengthy explanation of what she wanted to tell school administrators. She said in her speech to administrators she needed

only one thing: "More support."

Buck's sentiments mirrored Diane's, but he focused on home schooling. "I'd want some other support. If you're teaching values, well, you want to teach your kids values. But when it comes to other subjects I would seek some extra support and some extra help."

Arnold did not address curriculum issues, but focused on the mentoring relationship aspect of education which he yearned for, saying, "There definitely needs to be that person that cares. Maybe not somebody so much as a guidance counselor that you get your finger pointed at walking down the hallway, because you just want to go talk to somebody that cares."

Mike approached the question in a straightforward manner. "If you want your gifted and your intelligent and your outgoing and your creative students to succeed in school, listen to them. Listen to their needs. And challenge their needs. Because their needs are not the same as every other kid in the building."

Finally, although Kristie said she wished she had time to think about it, her unrehearsed final thoughts about education resounded with passion. They reverberated Bruner's (1960) theoretical framework of discovery and independence. She addressed the phrase and current educational philosophy of 'redistribution of intellect' used by Bloom (1996) and mentioned during the interview.

> I feel that more attention needs to be paid to allowing students to pace themselves through education. I think it's a big mistake for us to be so intent upon keeping people in with their age cohorts. People have unique gifts. We're all equal as human beings, and that should be enough. We all deserve the same privileges. But

that doesn't mean that we should all be treated the same. Treating everyone the same is a mistake.

Additional recommendations. Combining the needs of the participants in this study with existing data, this study recommends the following to administrators for improving the educational experience of gifted students.

Extra-curricular

- Encourage teachers to recommend that gifted students and gifted underachievers participate in extracurricular activities

- Incorporate challenging extracurricular activities that develops both athletic and academic abilities for gifted students

Counseling

- Create school-wide counseling centers exclusively for gifted students and their guardians

- Include counseling as a mandate in every gifted student's IGP/IEP

- Teach coping strategies for gifted students in grades K-12

- Incorporate gifted counseling issues into reading assignments since 65% of dropouts enjoy reading (Altenbaugh, 1998)

- Promote peer counseling and peer tutoring programs for gifted underachievers

- Develop peer and social relationship counseling for gifted students, particularly in middle school grades

- Provide parent education information of gifted student needs and skills

- Teach conflict resolution strategies to all middle school gifted students

- Teach elementary and middle school gifted students options for coping strategies

- Alert school counselors and teachers to be aware of relational issues and giftedness

- Instruct teachers to notify school counselors when gifted students begin to withdraw

- Develop and require high school counselors to solicit exit interviews from all dropouts who were identified as gifted

Curriculum

- Encourage and allow individualized pacing and independent study for gifted students

- Compact curriculum in all grades and subjects to allow for more independent study for gifted students

- Provide rigorous, individualized curriculum for all gifted students in all grades beyond the standardized material

- Investigate options to implement gifted-only programs and curriculums

- Involve gifted students in school annual evaluations in high school

- Encourage and implement gifted students' recommendations for ancillary curriculum options

- Create special exceptions for gifted students to take SOLs early and independently from peers

Mentorships

- Mentor teachers to see themselves as positive role models, not just

dispensers of information

- Encourage teachers to inquire about the personal lives of their gifted students

- Train teachers to recognize gifted at-risk factors, and the positive and negative characteristics associated with giftedness

- Pair gifted students together as often as possible so they feel part of a peer group

- Develop cross-grade buddying activities, pairing lower grade gifted students with upper grade gifted students

Limitations. Since the purpose of this study was to gain a richer understanding of the motivational factor(s) that led each of the participants to leave school early, multiple sources of data would yield this richness. A limitation may be the lack of face-to-face interviews with one interviewee which would have allowed for richer field notes. Another limitation concerned the author's personal experience raising two gifted children and a risk of losing impartial perspective. Still another limitation concerned the pool of participants deriving from a single university rather than from various sources, however, that limitation seemed less a concern as the participants grew up in different towns.

Theoretical implications. Jerome Bruner's theoretical conclusion that mastery of facts is less important than actual learning, that students should learn when they are ready to do so rather than based on a chronological age, that learning must be intuitive and challenging to be meaningful, and that students learn best when they are interested in the material (Bruner, 1960) supports the findings in this research. In various ways, these gifted dropouts voiced similar sentiments. Much of the reasoning gifted dropouts gave for

leaving school had a direct correlation to Bruner's theories and recommendations; however, Bruner fell short in his solutions to educational problems by ignoring the socioeconomic, peer relational, and home life aspects that also come into play in students' lives. These should be added to his theories for well-rounded learning.

Future research. Further study should be done to determine whether traumatic events in middle school may generate decisions to drop out of school. Also, one should research the relational aspect in gifted students to determine the strength of need, and whether lack of relationships or rejection of established ones has any bearing on dropping out. Research is recommended to determine whether attending school in a rural district contributes to drop out decisions. Finally, more research is needed to determine if current interventions for gifted dropouts meets the needs and expectations of those represented in this study.

Epilogue

As the study concluded and the findings and analysis complete, I found myself in an awkward position. I understood what these seven gifted dropouts experienced; I was in their skin. I felt their pain; I understood their anguish and their fears. I related to their obsessions, and more than anything else, I wanted to help them.

The clock continued moving forward, as did they. I came to realize that while I know these people (perhaps better than they know themselves), I am not them. I cannot change their past, but I can affect the future of others following their path. It is my hope that through this qualitative research study on gifted dropouts, and through the telling of their stories, lives and policies will be changed.

I have been blessed to become friends with several of the participants because of

this research. Even if I never see them again, I am privileged to call them my friends. I wish them the best wherever life leads them. Godspeed.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Analysis of Literature

Appendix A

Analysis of Literature

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Appendix B

FERPA Release

Appendix B

FERPA Release

According to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), unless a student has consented to disclosure, directory information such as name and address may be disclosed to the public. However, private information, such as grades, class schedules, attendance, student accounts, and personal information may not be released without express consent from the student. Signing this form provides such consent, according to the information designated for release and to whom it is to be released.

I, _____, (participant), authorize

_____ elementary school in (city/state) _____

_____ middle school in (city/state)   _____

_____ high school school in (city/state) _____

and/or _____ county school system to release the following educational records, upon request to the person listed below for the purpose of educational research. _____ All school records and related files

Person to whom information may be released: James Zabloski, Ed.D. (ABD)

I acknowledge by my signature that I understand that, although I am not required to release my records, I am giving my consent to release the designated information to the above named person. I understand that this release will remain in effect for a period of 15 months from the date of signing below, unless I revoke such consent in writing and the revocation is sent by me.

Signature _____ Date_____

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Gifted Dropouts: A Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: James Zabloski
Liberty University
Education Department
Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the
study.
     I, _____, agree to participate in a research study of
gifted students who did not finish high school in the traditional way. I understand that I
was selected as a possible participant because I had been a participant in a gifted
program, and left high school without graduating with my senior class. This study is
being conducted by James Zabloski and is authorized by the Education Department of
Liberty University.

Purpose
     The purpose of this study is to examine the stories of gifted individuals who felt
the need leave the traditional high school setting prior to graduating with their class, and
to hear their life experiences to see what led to the decision. The study will compare the
stories of individuals with similar backgrounds to compare and contrast them.
Procedures
     By agreeing to be in this study, I understand that I will be interviewed as many as
three times: once on audio tape to respond to some open ended questions about my life
experiences, once again on audio tape as a possible follow up to the first interview, and a
third time in writing to focus on different topics dealing with school life. The latter
interview will be questionnaire based and will require that I complete the questionnaire. I
understand that I am encouraged to write comments following the questionnaire. The
first interview should take one or two hours each. Though the interviews and
questionnaire will take no more than 6 hours of my time total, I understand that the study
will span a five to six month period to completion.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study
     The study has several risks, none of which involve anything beyond what I would
experience in everyday life. First, although my name and identity will be completely
hidden, there is the possibility that despite all precautions taken and pseudonyms used,
someone reading the final product may recognize the details of my story. Second,
revisiting that time in my life may cause some of emotions to resurface. The benefits to
participation are that many individuals find that telling their stories has a cathartic or
healing benefit by knowing their story is heard, acknowledged, and valued. Also, my
story may help other students currently in a similar situation. Third, my story may help
those in leadership understand the phenomenon better and may help them take
appropriate action for students considering similar decisions.
Confidentiality

       The records of this study will be kept confidential. In the final presentation of this study, no information included will make it evident that I was one of the participants. Any references to me will be in pseudonym to protect my identity. The code sheet linking my personal identity with my data will be securely kept in locked files separated from all other data. Research records in print format will be stored securely in locked file cabinets, or in data files with password protection. Only Jim Zabloski and his advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci, will have access to the audio files. Audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed word for word, and both will be securely kept in a locked file, and will be destroyed 12 months after the end of the study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

       I understand that participation in this study is voluntary. I know I may refuse to continue participating in the study at any time. I also may refuse to answer questions posed during the interviews. My decision whether or not to participate will not affect my current or future relations with the Liberty University.

Contacts and Questions

       The researcher conducting this study is Jim Zabloski. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at Liberty University, 1971 University Blvd, Lynchburg, VA, 24502. Phone is 434-592-3478 and email is jlzabloski@liberty.edu.

       If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 2400, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

       You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

       I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

       Participant Signature: _____Date: _____

       I have discussed this form with the participant and have answered any questions posed to me.

       Signature of Investigator: _____Date: _____

Appendix D

IRB

Appendix D

IRB

11/06   Ref. # _____

APPLICATION TO USE HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECTS

Liberty University
Committee On The Use of Human Research Subjects

1. Project Title: Gifted Dropouts: A Phenomenological Study
2. Full Review ☐   Expedited Review ☒

3. Anticipated Funding Source: Self-funded

4. Principal Investigator:
    James L. Zabloski (no title)   434-946-7499 /
    zabloski1@nelsoncable.com

                                                    145 Sweet Hills Dr, Amherst,
    VA 24521
    Name and Title   Phone, E-mail,
    correspondence address

5. Faculty Sponsor (if student is PI), also list co-investigators below Faculty Sponsor, and
    key personnel:
    Dr. Fred Milacci   fmilacci@liberty.edu
    Dean of Graduate Studies

6. Non-key personnel:

    Name and Title   Dept, Phone, E-mail address

7. Consultants:
    Dr. Beth Ackerman   Education, 434-582-2709
    Assoc. Dean, Education   mackerman@liberty.edu

    Dr. Brian Ratliff   434-946-9346
    Superintendent of Schools   bratliff@amherst.k12.va.us

8. The principal investigator agrees to carry out the proposed project as stated in the
    application and to promptly report to the Human Subjects Committee any proposed
    changes and/or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others participating

in approved project in accordance with the Liberty Way and the Confidentiality Statement. The principal investigator has access to copies of 45 CFR 46 and the Belmont Report. The principal investigator agrees to inform the Human Subjects Committee and complete all necessary reports should the principal investigator terminate University association. Additionally s/he agrees to maintain records and keep informed consent documents for three years after completion of the project even if the principal investigator terminates association with the University.

_____
Principal Investigator Signature   Date

_____
Faculty Sponsor (If applicable)   Date

Submit the original request to: Human Subjects Office, Liberty University, 1971 University Blvd., IRB Chair, Suite 2400 CN, Lynchburg, VA 24502

APPLICATION TO USE HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECTS

10.   This project will be conducted at the following location(s): (please indicate city & state)
- ☒ Liberty University Campus
- ☒ Other (Specify): Homes of participants if requested for interview _____

11.   This project will involve the following subject types: (check-mark types to be studied)

☒	Normal Volunteers (Age 18-65)	☐	Subjects Incapable Of Giving Consent
☐	In Patients	☐	Prisoners Or Institutionalized Individuals
☐	Out Patients	☐	Minors (Under Age 18)
☐	Patient Controls	☐	Over Age 65
☐	Fetuses	☒	University Students (PSYC Dept. subject pool ___)
☐	Cognitively Disabled	☐	Other Potentially Elevated Risk Populations_____
☐	Physically Disabled		

_____
☐ Pregnant Women

12.   Estimated number of subjects to be enrolled in this protocol: _____10_____

13.   Does this project call for: (check-mark all that apply to this study)
    ☒   Use of Voice, Video, Digital, or Image Recordings?
    ☒   Subject Compensation? Patients $_____   Volunteers $_____
       Participant Payment Disclosure Form
    ☒   Advertising For Subjects?   ☐   More Than Minimal Risk?
    ☐   More Than Minimal Psychological Stress?   ☐   Alcohol Consumption?
    ☒   Confidential Material (questionnaires, photos, etc.)?   ☐   Waiver of Informed Consent?
    ☐   Extra Costs To The Subjects (tests, hospitalization, etc.)?   ☐   VO2 Max Exercise?
    ☐   The Exclusion of Pregnant Women?
    ☐   The Use of Blood?   Total Amount of Blood _____
                             Over Time Period (days) _____

    ☐   The Use of rDNA or Biohazardous materials?
    ☐   The Use of Human Tissue or Cell Lines?
    ☐   The Use of Other Fluids that Could Mask the Presence of Blood (Including Urine and Feces)?
    ☐   The Use of Protected Health Information (Obtained from Healthcare Practitioners or Institutions)?

14.   This project involves the use of an **Investigational New Drug** (IND) or an **Approved Drug For An Unapproved Use**.
    ☐ YES   ☒ NO
    Drug name, IND number and company: _____

15.   This project involves the use of an **Investigational Medical Device** or an **Approved Medical Device For An Unapproved Use**.
    ☐ YES   ☒ NO
    Device name, IDE number and company: _____

16.   The project involves the use of **Radiation or Radioisotopes**:
    ☐ YES   ☒ NO

17.   Does investigator or key personnel have a potential conflict of interest in this study?
    ☐ YES   ☒ NO

EXPEDITED/FULL REVIEW APPLICATION NARRATIVE

A.   PROPOSED RESEARCH RATIONALE
   The purpose of this research project is to examine the lives of at least ten gifted adults between ages 18 and 40 who made the decision to drop out of school. Information regarding their upbringing, attitudes about their giftedness and about school life, and an exploration into the factors that led to their leaving school are all critical to understanding this phenomenon. These dropouts may share commonalities which might generate further research or for development of dropout intervention programs.

B.   SPECIFIC PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED
   Potential participants will be informally interviewed in person to determine if they fit the gifted dropout profile. Each candidate will be asked to sign a FERPA release form allowing the researcher to authenticate their claim to have been in a gifted program and to verify from their high school records that they dropped out. Once the gifted dropouts have met the criteria, they will also sign an Informed Consent form to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher will schedule the first interview appointment with each participant.
   The researcher will interview all the participants for one to two hours using audio recordings. If necessary, a second recorded interview will be scheduled with each participant by phone or email. If distance is an issue, the interview will take place by telephone. Where possible, the interview will be face-to-face.
   I will email a school life questionnaire to all participants who will rate these constructs according to how they feel about them from no emotional response (1) to having a strong emotional response (10). Participants will email the completed questionnaire back to me.

C.   SUBJECTS TO BE INCLUDED

   Qualified participants for this study will be those who are not currently attending high school, and either did not graduate with his or her class, earned a GED or other nontraditional diploma, or did not complete their high school education. In addition, they were identified as gifted through school, county or district testing where the student previously attended. Verification of this will be in the student's permanent school record. Students currently enrolled at Liberty University who entered through a GED instead of a diploma will be targeted because research show many gifted dropouts get their GED as a means of finishing school.
   There will be no other specificity in sampling. Participants may be of any gender, ethnic, religious or racial background. They will be between 18 and 40 years of age. These parameters are chosen because they must be a gifted dropout by definition provided in this study, and the age parameter allows for freshness of memory.
   The minimum number of participants preferred would be 7 and the maximum 15. It would be challenging to secure broad data from fewer than 7 participants, and

saturation is likely to occur before 15 are interviewed according to other researchers. Ten participants are optimal (Creswell, 1998).

D.   RECRUITMENT OF SUBJECTS AND OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT

After receiving written permission from the registrar to run a query, resident students currently enrolled in Liberty University who entered admission through the completion of a GED will be sent an email asking if they would like to participate in a study on giftedness. Using current resident students will allow for optimal face to face interviews. If the replies are insufficient, then the query of potential candidates will expand to include currently enrolled DLP students entered as GED completers. If that query results in too few candidates, then the query will widen a third time to include students who were admitted to the university within the previous 5 years through GED completion. In addition, I will use snowball sampling as a parallel method of recruitment by asking those who show interest if they know of other potential candidates I can contact. Those individuals will be contacted initially either by email and/or by telephone to encourage participation in the study.

All individuals who initially qualify will be interviewed either by phone or in person to determine their interest in and qualifications for the study. This initial interview will serve as a screening process. As outlined in the methodology, in a later stage up to twenty of these individuals may have their permanent school records searched to determine whether they fit the criteria. To achieve this screening process, each will be asked to sign a FERPA release form allowing the researcher to authenticate their claim to have been in a gifted program. This form will be explained at the time of signing. Potential participants will also sign at that time an Informed Consent form to indicate their willingness to voluntarily participate in the study. It will clearly state that no renumeration will be given for their participation. This too will be explained verbally to each participant.

E.   PROCEDURES FOR PAYMENT OF SUBJECTS

None of the participants will be compensated financially, nor will they receive gifts.

F.   CONFIDENTIALITY

Each participant will sign a consent form which will be kept in a separate file from any data files, and will be kept in a locked file cabinet. I will interview all the qualified participants using audio recordings. Two recording devices will be used during each interview to insure no data is lost. Once the interviews have been transcribed by a paid transcriptionist into Atlas.ti program for analysis, the audio recordings will downloaded to a flash drive and kept in a locked file for a period of one year after the dissertation is bound. After one year, the audio files will be erased. Each audio file will be coded using a pseudonym followed by the interview number of 1,2 or 3 depending on which interview it represents. Each student will be given a pseudonym beginning with a unique letter of the alphabet which will aid in transcription. Any identifiable information of either the participant or participant's relationships on audio will be given pseudonames in the transcription to ensure security and confidentiality. The pseudonomy and the

participants' true identities will be entered into a notebook which will be kept in a locked drawer separate from the audio file and transcription file. All transcripts and field notes will be printed out, labeled according to the participant pseudonym, dated and locked in a file cabinet. All computerized data files will use password protection; the password will be accessible only to me and my chair. Students will be sent via email a copy of the transcripted interview for review.

A questionnaire will be emailed to each participant as part of the study. The questionnaire will address confidentiality issues by informing students that once questionnaires are returned, the emailed attachments will be coded according to the participant's pseudonym, saved to a separate flash drive for a period of one year after the dissertation is bound, after which it will be deleted from the researcher's records. The questionnaire will include a statement from the researcher that no identification or email information will be given out, sold or distributed in any form or fashion. Because the questionnaire will invite additional comments, these comments will be tagged as an addendum to the interview by that participant using the pseudonym, and will be added to the student's transcription. The completed questionnaire and comments will be printed out and stored in the participant's pseudonymic file to be destroyed one year after binding of the dissertation.

Since all data will be destroyed after 12 months, and since the informed consent specifies that the participant is involved in this study only, none of the data used in this study will be given for future research purposes.

G.   POTENTIAL RISKS TO SUBJECTS

This research has minimal risk to the participant. However, if the participant feels that the exploration of the phenomenon exposes emotional feelings requiring counseling, then I will remind the participant that the study is entirely voluntary and they may withdraw at any time. I will also make available to the participant the name of a local clergy or professional counselor if requested. If the participant is enrolled as a current student at Liberty University, I will recommend seeking counsel from one of the campus pastors should the participant request further counseling.

H.   BENEFITS TO BE GAINED BY THE INDIVIDUAL AND/OR SOCIETY

Two benefits may result from this study. First, the participants will be given the chance to have their stories told and reported. Their action of dropping out of school may have been a private one, and may have been difficult. This study could be cathartic for them. It will encourage them to know that though they were gifted and dropped out, there are others like them and they may find comfort in knowing that others have made similar decisions. Second, society and the educational field will benefit from reading the completed work. Participants in this study will come from different school systems and thus will not implicate any single school or district, therefore educators and administrators may make applications or interventions as needed.

I.   INVESTIGATOR'S EVALUATION OF THE RISK-BENEFIT RATIO

In my view the benefits outweigh the risks. Actions, plans, programs and intervention strategies by administrators and policy makers may become more intentional

as a result of this study. In addition, the benefit to the participants outweighs the risk as this study will give value and meaning to their decision to drop out of school.

J.   WRITTEN INFORMED CONSENT FORM *(to be attached to the Application Narrative. See Informed Consent IRB materials for assistance in developing an appropriate form. See K below if considering waiving signed consent or informed consent)*

K.   WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT OR SIGNED CONSENT
Waiver of consent is sometimes used in research involving a deception element. Waiver of signed consent is sometimes used in anonymous surveys or research involving secondary data. See Waiver of Informed Consent information on the IRB website. If requesting either a waiver of consent or a waiver of signed consent, please address the following:

1. For a Waiver of Consent Request, address the following:
    a. Does the research pose greater than minimal risk to subjects (greater than everyday activities)?
    b. Will the waiver adversely affect subjects' rights and welfare? Please justify?
    c. Why would the research be impracticable without the waiver?
    d. How will subject debriefing occur (i.e., how will pertinent information about the real purposes of the study be reported to subjects, if appropriate, at a later date?)

2. For a Waiver of Signed Consent, address the following:
    a. Does the research pose greater than minimal risk to subjects (greater than everyday activities)?
    b. Does a breech of confidentiality constitute the principal risk to subjects?
    c. Would the signed consent form be the only record linking the subject and the research?
    d. Does the research include any activities that would require signed consent in a non-research context?
    e. Will you provide the subjects with a written statement about the research (an information sheet that contains all the elements of the consent form but without the signature lines)?

L.   SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS *(to be attached to the Application Narrative)*

M.   COPIES:
For investigators requesting **Expedited Review**, submit the original application (Application Form plus Application Narrative with all supporting documents). An investigator requesting **Full Review** should submit the original application **PLUS** four (4) complete copies.

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Appendix E

Interview Guide

The following questions used in the interview came from a dissertation published by North Carolina State University (Carper, 2002). What was school like for you? Why were you not able to achieve your potential? What was important to you as a student? What worked and what didn't work about school? How did family and social culture affect your school performance? What factors influenced you do drop out?

Other questions used included:

1. Tell me about yourself. (Prompts: family background, relationships, friendships, locations, likes and dislikes, current situation)

2. Tell me about your schooling. (Prompts: elementary, middle, high school memories; most and least favorite teachers in those grades; programs or extra-curricular involvement, awards)

3. Tell me about when you were first identified as gifted.

4. What was school like for you?

5. What was important to you as a student?

6. Did you ever feel pressure/different because you were gifted? Explain.

7. How did family and social culture affect your school performance?

8. In your view, what worked for you and what didn't in school?

9. Tell me how you feel about learning.

10. Tell me about your experiences in high school. (Prompts: boredom, homework, attendance, peer pressure, acceptance, rules, support, risk, bully, depression, choice, independence, caring, state tests, counseling, potential, grades, guidance,

challenge, excellence, imagination, perfection, social events, disappointments, advanced

programs, administrators, mentors, coaches.)

      11. What was important to you as a student in high school?

      12. What factor(s) influenced you do drop out?

      13. What would have prevented your dropping out?

Appendix F

School Life Questionnaire

Appendix F

School Life Questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire is to determine how strongly you feel about certain things related to school life. Remember that once your questionnaire is returned, the email response and any attachments will be saved to a separate external hard drive for a period of one year, after which it will be deleted from the researcher's computer. No identification or email information will be given out, sold or distributed in any form or fashion.

Please rate the items below based on your initial emotional response. Think about your time in high school. Reflect on how this word influenced your decision to leave school. If it evokes a strong positive or negative emotional response (or if it did when you were in high school), please mark the #10 bubble. If, on the other hand, the word evokes no response positively or negatively, then indicate that on bubble #1. If your emotional response to a word fits somewhere in between, note that. Please only mark one bubble per word or phrase. You are invited to add additional comments on any of the topics at the end of the questionnaire, but especially those you rated 6 or higher.

Boredom

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Homework

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Gifted

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Teachers

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Attendance

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Extracurricular

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Peer pressure

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Acceptance

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Rules

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Support

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Risk

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Bully

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Depression

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Choice

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Independence

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Caring

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

SOL

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Counseling

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Dropout

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Potential

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Grades

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Learning

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Guidance

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Challenge

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Advanced

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Excellence

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

Imagination

❍ 1   ❍ 2   ❍ 3   ❍ 4   ❍ 5   ❍ 6   ❍ 7   ❍ 8   ❍ 9   ❍ 10

Perfection

❍ 1   ❍ 2   ❍ 3   ❍ 4   ❍ 5   ❍ 6   ❍ 7   ❍ 8   ❍ 9   ❍ 10

Scholarship

❍ 1   ❍ 2   ❍ 3   ❍ 4   ❍ 5   ❍ 6   ❍ 7   ❍ 8   ❍ 9   ❍ 10

Additional Comments: