

AN INTERVIEW STUDY OF RURAL ELEMENTARY TEACHERS OF THE GIFTED AND
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING
EXPERIENCES

by

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(Under the Direction of TAREK C. GRANTHAM)

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is training for teachers in rural gifted education classrooms and the perceptions of four gifted teachers in rural northeast Georgia schools who were trained through RESA certification. Interviews were conducted at the schools in the classrooms where they taught. Based on the data from the interviews, this study suggests how appropriate training can help rural gifted education teachers better implement gifted education pedagogy in their classrooms for their gifted students.

The findings of this study revealed that the gifted education teachers in the RESA certification program had not received much preparation to work with gifted students and most of the training they had received was through professional reading they had done on their own. The teachers struggled with issues of diversity, social emotional development, professional development and technology. An examination of factors that influence how rural gifted education teachers meet the needs of their gifted students should provide the direction for a certification program. Rural schools need to accept the funding responsibilities for their gifted students, provide more professional training in gifted education, and address issues of diversity and social emotional development of the students. In addition, they need to be held accountable for providing for the technology needs of gifted students to allow them to compete in the larger society.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted Teachers, Rural Gifted Education, Professional Development, Diversity, Social Emotional, Technology, Cultural Competency

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DEDICATION

To my parents, William and Pauline Sutphin, who have supported me in so many ways. No matter what I wanted to try in life, they always expressed their faith in me and gave me unconditional love.

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I would like to remember Dr. Mary M. Frasier, who served as my major professor until her passing. While many of us knew that she was ill and fighting cancer for 5+ years, what gave her the most joy and a sense of pride was fighting for people like you and me to have access to greater opportunities, for taking a stand against systems that marginalize ethnic minorities, low-income students, and rural students, etc. In gifted education, she was one of the leading pioneers to advance scholarship and advocacy for diversity issues. What brings honor to her name and legacy is when we remember the 30+ years that she spent fighting at the University of Georgia for the talents and abilities of culturally and linguistically diverse students to be acknowledged and served.

I thank God for her, and all she shared with me before she left this earthly home. The memory of Dr. Frasier's bright spirit and caring soul will always serve as a reminder of how we should treat others.

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standing strong in his support for me each and every day, and then bending to make life easier for me in any way he could.

As I move forward to the next thing life holds, I will always be thankful for those in both my personal and professional worlds who helped me realize that no matter what my age...I still dream.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As the daughter of a military man, I have attended many school systems in the United States. As a young child, I was placed in a gifted program and received services when they were available. I always wondered how my favorite teachers knew all they did about so many things that interested me or that I had never thought of before. Moreover, I wondered how they made me want to learn and ponder both the past and the future. I grew up, entered college not knowing what I wanted to do, and ended up taking breaks in my educational experiences in order to work.

No matter what job I took, I always became a trainer for others soon after I was hired. I decided I might enjoy teaching others on a regular basis, so I earned an undergraduate degree in Middle School Education. I found a job teaching fifth grade in a local public elementary school in a southeastern state. My students' IQ scores ranged from 70 to 142 that year, and somehow as a first-year teacher, I had to reach all of them. I decided I wanted to continue my quest to be as awe-inspiring a teacher as some of mine had been, and to that end I entered an M.Ed. program in Early Childhood Education at the University of Georgia. My goal was to learn how to help my students achieve their highest potential.

After my second year of teaching, I was given the majority of the fifth graders who were being served in the gifted program by a teacher who split her time between two elementary schools. Our school offered a pull-out program for a total of five hours a week and my principal felt some concern about how the rest of those students' academic

time was being spent. I could hardly believe the honor that had been bestowed upon me. I also could not have anticipated what a challenge it would be to teach so many gifted students mixed in with my average and lower ability students. I spent many hours working on projects and contracts long after my colleagues had gone home. Yet I knew there had to be more to what I was trying to do for my students, so after completing my M.Ed., I decided to continue my training by seeking a gifted endorsement.

Upon completing the endorsement at the University of Georgia, I thought I had a solid foundation to meet the needs of advanced learners. I felt as if I could truly make a difference in the educational process of a gifted student. Once I got in the classroom with these special ability students, however, I spent day after day learning that there was always something else I needed to know about them. Sometimes, I became frustrated and angry with myself, my administration and my students. I was unable to comprehend why my staff development was chosen for me by the school or the county. The staff development offered to me dealt with strategies to help remedial students, yet I did not teach remedial students. Funds were limited and often tied to professional development which directly dealt with students who performed below grade level, so the county chose what would be offered to the teachers in the school system.

I was placed in the role of lead gifted teacher for my school. The only qualifications I held were the fact that I was attending the university to get an advanced degree, and I had completed the classes required to receive the gifted endorsement. The other gifted teacher had completed one class at a local regional educational service agency (RESA), and would finish up the other required classes sometime within the year. My administrator directed me to encourage her and help in anyway possible. I realized

there was much more to teaching gifted students than ideas and strategies. I needed to understand more clearly the complex emotions these students experience in order to help them understand the heightened sensitivity many of them experience in their daily lives. These frustrations brought back my own early years in school, and awakened memories of difficult situations that deeply affected me at that time. It is this observation that stirs my deepest connection with my study.

Because my father was in the military we moved around every two years or so, depending upon the orders my father received. I was allowed to start school early as I had passed some tests and had taken part in an interview with the school principal and the counselor. I was four years old and ready to begin first grade. One day, we were given a worksheet and told, "Circle all the living things." I quickly put my name on the paper and went to the teacher's desk once I had finished the assignment. At that point, I was told to go back and do my work. I walked back and looked at my paper and then got up to give it to her again.

She stood me in front of the class and said, "I am going to show the class what happens to stupid children who won't do their work." I was spanked several times. "You don't belong here, and I am calling your father." I was then put in the corner for the rest of the day. I don't remember much about that time except being afraid of what my daddy would do to me for causing so much trouble. I did not really know my father, as he had just returned from an extended 18-month tour of duty in Vietnam. The ride home from school that day was long, but ended on a good note. I don't remember everything that was said, but he let me explain to him what happened. I told him that we were to circle the living things on the page, but they were just pictures of living things and pictures are

not living things. My dad laughed for a while and let me know that I was right, and the teacher was the one who did not understand. It was the first time I remember him laughing. He took me to school the next day, and we met with the principal, who agreed to place me in another first grade classroom. School was much better for me the rest of the year. I was made to feel welcome, and the teacher spent time with me when I needed it. I hated to see first grade end.

In second grade, we moved to Hawaii for a few years, and as a result of this time I feel I have a better grasp of what it means to be a minority than most white females. Hawaii is quite different for those who make their home there than it appears to tourists. There is a great deal of prejudice against Anglo-Americans due to the mistreatment of native Hawaiians by white Americans both past and present. In second and third grades, I was one of three white children in my class. My fourth grade experience, however, was the one that completely changed my world. My teacher, Ms. Horatio, was 100% Hawaiian, and she immersed us in the ancient culture of her people. We took van trips to parts of the island that are off-limits to most. I became enthralled with archaeology during this time, as she took us to the ancient stones where King Kamehameha made ritual human sacrifices. The moment I ran my fingers over the carved, bowl-shaped boulder used to catch the precious blood I knew I wanted to learn the secret things of the world. This woman, somehow, knew that of me.

I could ask her anything, and she would have a book or some artifact for me to see the next day. Those books inspired me to read more, and my sister would take me to the big public library each Saturday. We spent hours there. I remember walking up and down

the shelves of books, gently touching the leather covers of the older ones, wondering about the people who read them and those who actually penned the words.

We moved back to the mainland for my fifth-grade year. I had to take some placement tests as there was concern that I had spent three years in Hawaii, and I might be behind everyone else if the educational system there was not up to speed with Georgia's. At home, my mother told me not to worry if they asked me to repeat fourth grade; as I was a full year younger than the others, she thought it might be the best thing. As a result of the testing, I was placed in a program in which I had two teachers in the one classroom. It was a class that would cover fifth and sixth grade content in the same year. The 12 students in my class went to Georgia Tech every Saturday for eight weeks. I know now that I was a part of some research on gifted students.

As I was used to being “the new kid” every two or three years, I had grown a callous over my heart and could deal with most everything that cropped up when you have that stigma. However, one event occurred for which I could not have prepared. I moved to rural Virginia for my eighth grade year, and the school had an awards ceremony in which academic and athletic awards were presented. The music teacher came to the podium and began to talk. I tried to tune in as I had the utmost respect for her. I loved to sing, and she was a perfectionist. She loved classical pieces, and we learned Gregorian chants and sonnets. She taught us why they were written and encouraged us to put ourselves in that time as we sang. She gave one choral award that year, and it was awarded to me. I was, of course, elated. I was also beaten up that afternoon by three high school sophomores who did not like the idea of a new kid, much less an eighth grader, receiving the award.

I became involved in chorus, band, drama, student government, political campaigning, sports, speech competitions, and writing for the school newspaper. At the same time, I avidly pursued any and all conspiracy theories known to man. One of my favorites was the theory that the first moon landing was faked. I would spend hours discussing the possibility of it with my teachers. I loved learning, but hated school. I would have flunked out my junior year had it not been for my Drama/English teacher. She was a Ms. Horatio in disguise. I did not realize how fortunate I was to have encountered two people who not only saw me as a person of worth, but who actually saw *inside* of me and valued that hidden and often misunderstood part of me that truly did care about what was going to happen, and who understood that I had a passion for life that often bordered upon recklessness.

I wonder now how teachers of gifted students like those I was privileged to know are able to see within their students and reach them where they are. I did not learn how to do that in the four courses required to earn the gifted endorsement. Even having lived the life I have, it was not enough to help me view students with sufficiently clear vision and insight.

The events outlined above provided me with the understanding that my preparation to teach elementary gifted students was not something that should end with those classes. Those classes provided a scaffold for continuous training in gifted education. I wanted to find out what other teachers felt about their educational experiences in the gifted endorsement classes taken through a regional educational service agency or RESA, and how well that training has served them in the classroom. I wanted to know whether they thought the experiences provided sufficient training and

prepared them well for the challenges of the classroom. Based on my own experience, I believe that teachers often feel they are not doing enough for their students, and those teachers need continued professional developmental support. Not every gifted elementary teacher was a gifted student, so teachers may not be able to draw upon their own experience in seeking to understand gifted students.

Definition of Rural

I also wanted to focus this study specifically on rural schools. My own teaching experience in a rural environment was the first source of my observations, and I became aware of the greater needs faced by teachers and students alike in less populated, more economically depressed areas. To date, there is not a universal definition of rural or rural schools. The many variations that exist are all generalizations and not a clear set of expectations that manifest in every case. For the purpose of this study, the definition of rural will be communities with a population of 2500 or less, which are, for the most part, located in open country (Stern, 1994). While no two are alike and the demographics, industry, and geographic setting vary, the schools involved in this study are located in areas with a population of 2500 or less. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1998), about 50% of public schools are located in small towns and 39% of all public school students live in small towns and rural areas.

The elementary schools where the participants work range from 325-500 students in grades K-5. In most communities, the job base is centered on chicken and cattle farms. Most of those are family farms and not large scale operations. There are few professional job opportunities and most students (according to those teachers interviewed) move away

either before finishing high school or soon after graduation. Some students who ride the bus spend up to 2 hours a day commuting to and from school. The lack of opportunities for cultural enrichment or career advancement in rural areas makes the need for teacher training even more important if rural students, especially gifted students, are going to have a chance to access those opportunities later in life. And yet, as the literature review will show, rural teachers lack professional development in gifted education.

Support from administrators plays a vital role in providing successful training. If teachers are not supported and given positive, productive, and pertinent professional development opportunities in their field of expertise, they cannot be expected to do their best. The process of the teacher-changing paradigms hinges on the availability of effective staff development activities that allow for growth, and a reworking of conventional classroom practices. From those two points come advances in student learning. Only when both staff development opportunities and administrative support are present will the teacher's beliefs and attitudes change (Gusky, 1986). Opportunities for ongoing professional development and continued learning for teachers of the gifted should be funded and made readily available if teachers are to be both comfortable and successful in their job settings. If teachers do not feel as if they have the training and the proper guidance needed to help these high ability students, will they be able to teach these students as they should be taught?

The models for gifted and talented staff development are few in number and often rely for their structure on other areas of education (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998). Five models have been used in creating professional development opportunities to address specific challenges in gifted education. The *Individually Guided Staff Development*

Model (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998) may be manifested either as a mode of self-directed learning in which teachers read articles and Web sites or as a more complex, directed model that uses incentives and grants for exploration. The *Observation/Assessment Model* (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998) includes peer assessment, peer coaching from a master teacher, teacher evaluation, and clinical supervision. This model relies on professional development through the interaction of an experienced teacher of the gifted with a learning teacher.

Involvement in a Development/Improvement Process (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998) is an approach to staff development that incorporates the process of school improvement or curriculum development. The goal of the model is to change teachers' attitudes toward what it means to teach gifted elementary students and transfer those attitudes into the classroom environment. The *Training Model* (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998) is the traditional training framework that is found in other educational areas. This can be self-contained within a school system or use an outside expert in the field. This model can be implemented by one teacher or the entire faculty of a school. Finally, the *Inquiry Model* employs problem-solving groups, school improvement projects, and quality groups to help with the goals of the system (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998). Other training models from the fields of educational leadership and adult education can also be integrated into these training models to help in gifted education training.

Training in teaching gifted students is conducted in several popular modes, such as summer experiences and institutes. These events take place over a period of weeks rather than days and are quite effective in providing a variety of growth opportunities. They are staffed by a sponsoring university or college and may include guest speakers

from the field of study. Such events provide opportunities not only for academic growth, but for enhanced personal understanding as well. Often, partnerships are formed as similar interests and needs surface among participants. Gifted education teachers benefit from these experiences as group members become active learners by working in small groups and having the chance to ask questions (Johnson & Vickers, 2001).

Literature Review

Review of the literature available concerning the training of gifted teachers reveals a notable lack of research concerning the personal perceptions of gifted teachers who teach in rural, elementary schools and how their education allows them to understand and teach diverse gifted students. To gain an understanding of these teachers' needs in relationship to the question, literature from other areas of education was used to build a foundation of understanding. Understanding how to identify gifted students and meeting the needs of those individuals is crucial. Frasier et al. (1995) found several attributes which are key to identifying diverse gifted students: advanced communication skills, imagination/creativity, humor, inquiry, insight, interest, memory, motivation, problem solving, and reasoning skills. Bernal (2002) pointed to the difficulties encountered by gifted and talent students who are linguistically and culturally different from the cultural majority. It is important that teachers understand the challenges that exist in creating a nurturing and positive environment for such students. Ford and Grantham (1996) also called for teachers to become more culturally aware and sensitive. Making teachers aware of cultural differences is essential not only to the training of teachers, but in making that awareness a part of a reflective practice.

A study conducted by Boyer and Bandy (1997) found that teachers in rural areas did not feel prepared to teach students of diverse learning populations. This is in regard to both culture and ability. More than half of those studied thought they were meeting students' emotional needs, but less than half expressed the same confidence when asked about meeting the academic needs of their students. Brophy (1984) concluded that there is a viable correlation between the perceptions of teachers and the achievement of students. If teachers do not believe they are meeting their students' academic needs, the students will not be as academically successful as students whose teachers do believe they are meeting their students' academic needs. Some of the factors teachers identify as contributing to classroom success are group size, structure of the classroom, and active instruction. Teachers who believe their education has prepared them to provide active instruction and a structured and supported learning environment perceive themselves to be able to help diverse learners.

Clark (2002) stated that teachers of gifted students should be creative, intelligent, intuitive, and flexible, and have an understanding of the emotional and social needs of gifted individuals. Whitlock and DuCette (1989) identified some desirable characteristics of teachers of gifted students as high intelligence, diverse cultural interests, an ability to relate well with talented individuals, and broad general knowledge. In a national study, Hultgren and Seeley (1982) found that desirable competencies for teachers of the gifted included knowledge of the gifted and their needs, the ability to create and promote a positive learning environment for those with high intelligence, skill in the identification of the gifted, and an understanding of the social and emotional needs of gifted students.

Teachers of the gifted must understand and be sensitive to the environment of which students are a part in the educational process. Silverman (1993) described the creation of an accepting environment and the promotion of cultural sensitivity as crucial components for the educational experience of teachers. She believed that collaborative environments in accelerated programs can provide a solid learning situation for the gifted and talented student. Similarly, Gould, Thorpe, and Weeks (2001) described the use of accelerated programs to create an environment that facilitates learning. Teachers must have a solid foundation in both designing and implementing accelerated programs if they are to understand and use the environment to create a challenging and supportive climate for these talented students. Hébert and Speirs-Neumeister (2002) also pointed to the need for instructors to create an atmosphere that fosters the emotional development of gifted and talented students.

Professional staff development that addresses aspects of emotional awareness, proper climate, and diversity is essential if bright children are to be nurtured and growth is to occur in rural classrooms. Despite these common elements, however, expectations for staff development in gifted and talented education are difficult to standardize. Dettmer and Landrum (1998) defined staff development “as typically a long term multi-year process targeted at school goals” (p. 9). They also clarified that in-service training is different from staff development in that in-service training or professional development is geared toward specific concepts required to achieve a goal set by a curriculum, district, or state standards. In-service gifted education often includes characteristic identification and strategies to help gifted learners succeed in the classroom.

Staff development should be need-driven (NSDC, 2001; Dettmer & Landrum, 1998). School curricula, mandated tests, improvement programs, and school- or district-wide changes in educational delivery models are all reasons for extensive staff development for all involved if the desired outcome is to become a reality. This echoes the idea that novice teachers need additional training, advocated by Nugent and Shaunessy (2003), Tomlinson and Allan (2000), and many others. Differentiation in the classroom has been used by gifted educators for years. Now rural southern school districts are beginning to understand the value of the premise, and some desire to utilize it school-wide.

Teachers do not fully develop professional understanding of the need for a desired outcome without the enhancement of staff development (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 2001). The first standard to keep in mind as one develops staff for gifted programs is that staff development should be ongoing. The information and research in the area of gifted education are constantly changing, and updating knowledge and development of a gifted education framework should follow the standards of the field of study. Practice and patience are important in this process. Teachers should participate in professional development opportunities on an ongoing basis. When new classes are added by state universities and colleges, teachers input should be considered regarding which classes should become a part of certificate programs or licensure processes. It is essential that teachers who have received certification and training in the field of gifted education be given first priority in filling vacancies for jobs working with gifted students, as they are the most qualified to work with these individuals (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 2001).

It is important that teachers with advanced competency and knowledge be given the responsibility for the teaching of gifted students. A strong understanding of gifted children and their abilities, needs, and differences is crucial if systems are to give them an appropriate education. When teachers of the gifted lack important skills or knowledge required to work effectively with these students, they should be expected to remedy these deficiencies promptly. Issues of diversity and multifaceted learning should be studied by both educators and administrators, and a clear transformation should be made from theory into practice. The staff development for gifted education should be funded adequately by the school system, and integrated in other professional development efforts. Finally, teachers and staff who work with gifted students should be allotted release time or contract pay for time spent in curriculum development (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of elementary gifted teachers concerning the training and professional development they received to prepare them to teach gifted students. Research on gifted teachers' perceptions of training and professional development has not been fully developed in the gifted education literature. The following four research questions will guide the study:

- 1) In what ways have training and professional development experiences influenced elementary teachers of the gifted and their perceptions of instruction for gifted students?
- 2) Are rural elementary teachers of the gifted supported after completing requirements for the teaching endorsement in gifted education? If so, how are they supported?

- 3) How do elementary teachers of the gifted perceive the training and professional development of those who teach advanced learners in the areas of a) technology, b) social-emotional development, and c) diversity?
- 4) What types of professional development experiences do rural elementary teachers of the gifted view as desirable or appropriate (or, conversely, undesirable or inappropriate)?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teacher Perceptions of Professional Development

Review of the literature on gifted education reveals a lack of information concerning gifted teachers' educational experiences and perceptions that prepared them to teach gifted students. To gain an understanding of the needs of these teachers, literature from other sources was used to build a foundation. Edmonds and Lee (2001) examined the perceptions of teachers about professional development. The research showed that not only do professional development opportunities receive positive responses from the educators, but also that the administrative support surrounding the individual also influences the teachers' perception of professional development. If the development was attended and or supported by administrators, the teachers perceived it as valuable. Inman and Marlow (2004) evaluated several aspects of teacher retention. Those individuals pursuing a career in teaching noted several reasons for their choice. Stability, salary, the love of children, and the idea of effecting change ranked among the top reasons. They also studied those who left the profession, whose reasons for leaving included reality shock, difference in ideology among teachers and administration, lack of professional support, and lack of self esteem and/or self efficacy. The research gives a large view to identify sources of teacher support, which relates to rural gifted teachers' perceptions of support from administration and community. The availability of professional staff development that addresses emotional awareness, proper climate, and diversity is essential if bright children are to be nurtured and growth is to occur in the elementary classroom. In-service gifted education often includes characteristic

identification and strategies to help gifted learners succeed in the classroom. For the novice, teaching the gifted is often daunting, as there may be issues that are often not addressed in educational situations due to time constraints. Joffe (2001) identified the obstacles that novice teachers encounter and the need to continue their education on the job. She mentions that often the teaching job and the appropriate qualifications are not in harmony with the teacher's experience and education.

University of Virginia Study on Gifted Teachers' Awareness

The aspects of organization, curriculum, framework of instruction, and teachers' training for education are crucial to the success of students in gifted programs. A study conducted by the University of Virginia identified several changes needed to help elementary teachers become aware of the needs of gifted children, in particular gifted minority students (Tomlinson et al, 1995). The recommendations centered around pre-service teachers and included helping teachers at every level understand the needs of diverse learners, helping teachers translate beliefs into classroom practice, developing strategies that focus on academic diversity, creating student-centered views of instruction, and addressing the "one size fits all" myth. Finally, workshops should be used to raise teachers' awareness of diverse learners and help them to implement practices that address students' diverse needs.

National Staff Development Council

The National Staff Development Council is a non profit group of educators, committed to ensuring success for all students through the application of high standards for educators' professional learning. The criteria for the standards set forth by The

National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2001) are set in their organizational framework, which is enveloped by process, and then encircled by context. These criteria are recommended for use by individuals, groups, school, districts, and state departments in deciding how to deliver the staff development and what comprises effective staff training in the educational realm. The NSDC (2001) and Dettmer & Landrum (1998), have stressed the need for an understanding of adult education and the fact that staff/professional/educational training should be designed with the characteristics of adult learners in mind. Landrum (2001) pointed out that few models of staff development exist for teachers of the gifted and talented. The models that do exist are borrowed from models used by other fields of educational training, such as educational leadership and elementary education, and adapted to the needs of gifted and talented teachers more specifically.

Dettmer and Landrum (1998) promoted an *Inquiry Model* for the training of gifted and talented personnel to use as a method for developing and engaging problem-solving groups and school improvement projects. *Involvement in a Development/Improvement Process* is a type of staff development that incorporates the actual the process of school improvement or working on the curriculum by teachers and administrators. Johnson and Vickers (2001) pointed to the benefits in gifted and regular education from experiences in which the teachers become members of a group and become active learners by having the chance to ask questions. Nugent and Shaunessy's (2003) data suggested the use of films of different types of students to help teachers acclimate to the specific needs of gifted students. The use of film can relate gifted education to a name, a face, and a personality, enabling teachers to develop a better understanding of gifted students in their classrooms.

Frasier et al. (1995) found that professional development geared toward the identification process of gifted students who are economically disadvantaged can provide a deeper understanding for teachers. It also improves their ability to recognize talents and giftedness among those students.

Dettmer and Landrum (1998), along with the NSDC (2001), stated that a training program should be needs-driven, and that planning for the training should include those who will take part at all levels. Curriculum for the gifted, mandated testing, improvement programs, and school- or district-wide changes in educational delivery models are all reasons for extensive professional development if the desired change outlined by the system is to become a reality. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) argued that there are some important factors to consider when planning and implementing staff development concerning content differentiation. First, use common language or vocabulary when discussing differentiation. Doing so will build a common foundation to draw a central focus. Second, staff development should focus on the level of the teacher's readiness, interest and mode of learning. Following this recommendation will make the teachers more comfortable. Third, staff development should focus on particular grade levels and subject areas. Teachers benefit when the staff development is tailored to their interest. Fourth, staff development should include administrators and decision makers. Leaders cannot defend what they don't understand. Schlichter (1992) found that teachers involved in staff development did not feel as if administration supported gifted and talented education. The research points as well to the need for administrative understanding to develop the support teachers need to succeed.

Decisions about curricula and professional development are most often the responsibility of the school principal. Futrell, Homes, Christie, and Cushman (1995) found that most principals feel that staff development is very important, but time is a limitation in both the areas of initial presentations and follow-up consultations. Nicely, Small, and Furman (1980) found that the Teachers' level of awareness concerning the gifted learner is often low and can be raised by providing staff development concerning gifted programs.

Learning as Adults

Adult education learning principles must be considered while developing the planning process for professional development for teachers of the gifted. Understanding the needs of these teachers as adult learners will enhance the educational experience for all involved. Adult learners are self-directing and given the opportunity will fill in the gaps in the understanding of a subject (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Adult learners also seek solutions (immediate applications) to problems rather than seeking content base (future applications) that are not pertinent to present issues (Knowles, 1984). Caffarella describes the following purposes of training educators:

1. To encourage continued growth and development of individuals.
2. To assist people in responding to practical problems and issues of adult life.
3. To prepare people for current and future work opportunities.
4. To assist organizations in achieving desired results and adapting to change.
5. To provide opportunities for examination of community and societal issues.

(Caffarella, 1994, p. 2)

Continuing Staff Development

Staff development should be an ongoing process if it is to be effective. Landrum, Callahan, and Shaklee (2001) believed that teachers do not develop a professional understanding of their task without the enhancement of staff development. Staff development allows teachers who have received certifications and training in the field of gifted education to be given first priority in filling vacancies for jobs working with gifted students. Concerning diversity and professional development, Ward (2003) stressed that “A teacher fulfills too important of a role in a child’s life not to be an encourager, a respecter of all students, an empowering agent, a cultural mediator, and a holder of high expectations for every student in his/her classroom” (p. 76). Teachers and students in teacher training programs are predominantly Euro-American and come from rural or suburban areas, and staff development is important if both classroom teachers and their students are to reach their potential.

Teachers and Technology

Ertmer et al. (1999) found that many teachers’ views of computers have to do with the level of comfort they personally experience with them. In their study, teachers primarily used computers to reward students who finished other work. For the most part, computers were not used as a source of learning due to time, knowledge, or equipment restraints. Minkel (2004) reported that a survey conducted at the National Educational Computing Conference revealed that 75 percent of teachers surveyed wanted more computers in the classroom. A mere 45 percent felt the software they were expected to use was appropriate for what they were doing in the classroom. Twenty-eight percent reported the need for a great deal more training with technology if they were to be

successful using it in their classroom setting, and 51 percent felt as if they needed “a little more” training to be successful.

Teachers’ Perceptions of Technology

Biggs (1999) focused on teachers’ confidence with technology, implying it can have the greatest influence in the area of classroom management and successfully creating a learning environment. Other influential factors identified were materials used and parents’ and administrators’ attitudes and involvement. The influences that the teachers believe contributed to successful learning were enthusiasm, creativity, flexibility, and an understanding attitude on the part of the teacher. If a teacher values something, it is most likely the students will find value in it as well.

Shaunessy (2005) reviewed the standards set forth by the National Association for Gifted Children concerning technology for gifted learners. She identified the lack of research concerning teachers’ attitudes toward the technology standards for gifted students and noted that support and training must be ongoing if technology is to be used successfully in the classroom. The voices of the teachers should be valued by the school system, and attempts to foster a positive technology learning community within the school should be made by the administration. Russel et al. (2003) stressed teachers should “be allowed to see and experience the positive effects of technology on teaching and learning” (p.308). If a teacher has not been trained or supported in the use of technology, it is unlikely that she will portray it as a valuable tool in her classroom for her students.

Technology with Diverse Learners and Contexts

Hébert and Beardsley (2001), in their research with a gifted African American student referred to as Jermaine, discussed the needs of gifted minority students in rural areas. The researchers highlighted the call for a supportive environment in which students can connect with the world outside of their immediate environment through technology. Elementary teachers and administrators may consider the race and native language of the student, as well as the environment in which the student is reared, when technology is involved. Luhman and Fundis (1989) in their research in the Appalachian Mountains advanced the use of electronic media, computer networks, and telecommunications as a means to enrich curriculum--especially in mathematics, sciences, the performing arts, and foreign languages. Rural educators concerned with gifted students have the chance to help pioneer the use of technology to help all the students in their schools. Begory and Slovinsky (1997) focused their attention on low income populations and teachers' preparation to understand their particular needs. According to Hébert and Beardsley (2001) and Powell, Abey, and Carpenter-Abey (2003), technology in the classroom is an effective way to allow for advancement and support for a wide range of high ability learners.

Teacher Education Technology Competencies

Drawing from data in a study conducted by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Siegle (2004) asserts that technologically educated learners can do the following:

1. Demonstrate a sound conceptual understanding of the nature of technology

- systems and view themselves as proficient users of these systems;
2. Understand and model positive ethical use of technology in both social and personal contexts;
 3. Use technology to identify and solve complex problems in real-world contexts;
 4. Use communication tools to reach out to the world beyond the classroom and communicate ideas in powerful ways;
 5. Use technology effectively to access, evaluate, process, and synthesize information from a variety of sources; and
 6. Use technology to identify and solve complex problems in real-world contexts
- (Siegle, 2004, p. 22).

These competencies align with the expectations for technology and gifted learners. According to Siegle (2004), “Technologically literate students need to be able to collect, integrate, and present content using a variety of different software applications. They should be able to download text and graphic images from the Internet and manipulate them in word processing and graphics programs” (p. 33). Often, disadvantaged children do not have the same abilities with computers that middle class and upper class students do and need to have computer access and receive instruction if they are to become computer savvy and competitive with other learners. Bright young students need to be exposed to real-world events and experiences outside of their immediate environment if they are to be productive and flourish.

Social-Emotional Development and Diversity Training

In order to shape a curriculum for elementary age gifted students, it is imperative to fashion it in a way that it is developmentally appropriate for those learners. All children must feel valued if they are to be successful (Baldwin & Vialle, 1999). Too often, however, the preconceived notions of teachers and other students keep some from reaching their fullest potential. Bernal (2002) pointed to the particular difficulties encountered by regular and gifted and talented students who are linguistically and culturally different. It is important for both pre-service and in-service teachers to understand the challenges that exist in creating a nurturing, positive environment in which culturally diverse students can most effectively learn. Bernal argued for the need to train teachers to be sensitive to the specific needs of these culturally diverse students.

Cultural Education

Exhibiting cultural competence in an educational setting of pre-service teachers requires the sharing of appropriate practice for teaching children in both regular and gifted education. It also calls for teachers to look beyond the present and envision a positive future for the children they teach. This is especially important for those who will work in rural settings. Students who sense that a teacher does not hold them accountable to high standards often perform on a much lower level than they are capable of (Ford and Grantham, 1997). Banks (1996) defined multicultural education as “an educational reform movement whose major goal is to restructure curricula and educational institutions so that students from diverse social-class, racial, and ethnic groups--as well as both gender groups--will experience equal educational opportunities” (p. 102). By

teaching gifted children to value a variety of cultures, the classroom environment will also be positively impacted.

Teacher Attitudes and Expectations

Banks (1996), Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Bernal (2002), and Ford (2000) stressed the importance of teachers' attitudes and their influence on students. Appropriate practice for teaching gifted children calls for teachers to look beyond the now and see the positive future in the children they teach (Ford and Grantham, 1997). According to Bredekamp and Copple (1997), teachers should provide support for and have high expectations of all students. It is necessary in gifted education for students to be allowed to take risks and feel supported in doing so. In the quest for a democratic classroom, students should take part in decision-making and build a safe sense of community. A democratic classroom is one in which all students' rights and feelings are respected and appreciated. This is important for children of all ages. The concept of developing a sense of worth and belonging begins with the teacher and the climate he or she creates for the learners.

Throughout all parts of the gifted learner's experience, the idea of an education *above and beyond* should be a theme that resounds in the minds of parents, teachers, administrators, and the students themselves. In 1992, a report given by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented found that most of the material taught to bright learners was the same as what was taught to regular students. Piirto (1994) stated "If what these studies showed was true, that teachers generally do not have the time, the knowledge, or the will to differentiate content for the academically talented students they

inevitably will have in their classes, the idea that academically talented students do or can receive a special differential education in the regular classroom is false” (p. 71).

Differentiating Instruction

Tomlinson et al. (2001) stressed the need to differentiate instruction in a way that is appropriate for all learners. Even in a gifted class, there are a variety of levels and abilities which must be identified and supported if these learners are to flourish emotionally and socially. Bredekamp and Copple (1997) pointed out that it is not an appropriate practice for a teacher to use the same lesson to teach all learners. Tomlinson proposed the use of several modes and techniques to reach all learners and help them reach the goals at hand.

Young learners must be allowed to interact with their environment and be encouraged to seek new and different possibilities. Tomlinson et al. (2001) stressed that a “curriculum designed to be a catalyst for developing advanced capacity in young people must be flexible enough to provide them with appropriate challenges and support at all points in their evolution as learners”(p. 6). Renzulli and Reis (1997) incorporated the concept of curriculum compacting, “an instructional technique that is specifically designed to make appropriate adjustments for students in any curricular area and at any grade level” (p. 89). This approach allows students to show mastery of material and assures the teacher that the student does indeed know the material and needs no further instruction in that area. By compacting the curriculum, a gifted student is given the time to explore, extend, and enrich the basic educational requirements as dictated by state curricular guidelines (Renzulli & Reis, 1997).

Learning Environments and Styles

Coleman (2003) introduced the term “Gifted-Child Pedagogy” to the organization of the learning environment. Coleman asserted that gifted students differ from other students in learning, thinking, and feeling and implied that these differences provide a justification for a gifted pedagogy, which seeks a different kind of teaching and a different type of instruction for the teachers. This difference should lead to higher levels of questioning and intensity in the curriculum.

When considering the environment needed for gifted students to thrive, Silverman (1997) stressed the need for true collaborative learning in which partnerships are created out of like interests, talents, and needs. “Emotional development is given equal importance with cognitive development; therefore groups are formed for the purpose of dealing with affective and social issues” (p. 24). If students are to learn, they should be able to do so in the manner which is best suited to them. The atmosphere of the classroom permeates all aspects of the educational experience. Learning styles should be fostered and allowances made to embrace them (Gardner, 1983). Children’s individual attributes need to be taken into account by educators and those attributes should guide instruction (Frasier et al., 1995).

Bias and Cultural Diversity

When the term *bias* is used in connection with gifted education, most people think immediately of racial bias because a great deal of discussion has been devoted to this one dimension. Numerous reports and articles support the premise that our educational system displays any number of biases against learners of races other than the traditionally

dominate White (Nieto, 2004). It is my belief, however, that bias touches a variety of learners, not only based on differences of race but also in response to differences of class and geographical location. For example, there is often a bias in favor of those who possess academic or creative promise, but this promise may be overlooked by educators because of stereotypes associated with the student's economic status or region (Howard, 1999). These biases sometimes go hand-in-hand, as variables of race, class, and geography may combine to create a glass ceiling that hinders certain students from being considered for participation in gifted education programs.

Cultural Competency

The accepted curriculum for gifted education does not easily lend itself to meeting the needs of students of non-White middle class students. Nieto (2004) points out, "Most schools are organized to meet the needs of White males; that is, the policy and instruction in schools generally reflect what is most effective for the needs of their male students, not the needs of females or students of color" (p. 40). The lack of cultural diversity in gifted and talented education has been discussed for decades, but no straightforward solutions have been found (Bernal, 2002). For years, a national curriculum for regular education has been proposed, but has failed to be implemented due to the power of state governments.

The majority of students in gifted programs across the nation are white. Diverse students are continually underrepresented in these special educational programs due to the lack of advocacy for these populations of gifted and talented students. The travesty is perpetuated by the lack of pre-service and in-service education in the area of minority

identification for gifted services and culturally aware teaching. Passow and Frasier (1996) identified the ways teachers can help identify talented and gifted students in minority or disadvantaged groups. Training teachers to identify minority students for the gifted and talented programs is important, as many of these gifted students may not be identified as such through conventional means which are biased toward Caucasian students. It is crucial to provide staff development dealing with identification and cultural issues that impact the school system if all children, regardless of race, geographical region, or class are to be given equal consideration and learning opportunities in gifted and talented programs (Frasier et al., 1995 and Ford and Harris, 1999).

Many administrators of gifted and talented programs are unprepared or unwilling to deal with issues of identifying and serving underrepresented students from culturally diverse backgrounds because of the political or philosophical arguments that underlie the problem. Ford and Harris (1999) realized some educators believe that programs will be compromised if efforts are made to include more minority students because their view of gifted is narrow and limited only to standardized test and IQ scores. Teachers of gifted and talented students must strive to develop culturally sensitive curricula and classroom environments to create truly multicultural gifted education programs (Ford, 2000). The question of “what gifted is” should be posed to the students. Sapon-Shevin (1993) stated, “If children are to develop a sense of social justice, a sense of control over their own lives, and a sense of responsibility to others, they must be engaged in this kind of open and far-reaching exploration. What do they think it means for someone to be called ‘gifted’?” (p. 41).

Ford and Grantham (1997) saw the need for teachers to become more culturally aware and sensitive by avoiding biased instructional materials and stereotyping and providing solid learning experiences that take students' various learning styles into consideration. Once diverse students are identified for gifted programs, it is imperative to provide educational experiences that are relevant to their culture and personal interests. If teachers gear lessons toward one learning style or limit choices, there is a good chance some children may become disengaged and disenchanted with the gifted program altogether. If students are to learn, they should be able to do so in the manner which best suits them. The environment of the classroom relates to all aspects of the educational experience.

The students in today's classrooms represent the largest influx of diversity in the U.S. since the early 1900's (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). Howard (1999) pointed out that while the student population grows ever more diverse, the teachers these students encounter continue to be predominantly White, middle-class women. Howard explained,

We cannot fully and fruitfully engage in meaningful dialogue across the differences of race and culture without doing the work of personal transformation. If we as White educators are not deeply moved and transformed, there is little hope that anything else will significantly shift. We must assume that we will be changed in the process of engagement and dialogue. (p. 4)

Educators and administrators need to exhibit cultural competency. The definition of *cultural competency* varies depending upon the setting in which it is being discussed. In this case, the reference point lies within the realm of teacher education and extends into counseling, as much of an educator's job falls into this category. From a counseling

perspective, Grieger and Ponterotto (1995) stressed the importance of understanding the concepts of worldview and acculturation. A *worldview* in this instance consists of an individual's cultural or "group" identity, the aspects which create that person as an individual or how he or she views him or herself as such. This includes one's core beliefs and the values the person holds to be important or true. *Acculturation* may be seen as the interaction with a culture that is not one's own with the result stemming from that interaction. "Acculturation has been defined as a multi-dimensional and psycho-social phenomenon that is reflected in psychological changes that occur in individuals as a result of their interaction with a new culture" (Grieger and Ponterotto, 1995 p. 359).

Understanding the needs of the gifted and talented student is crucial to resolving the problem. Frasier et al. (1995) found several attributes to be key in identifying gifted students from diverse populations: communication skills, imagination/creativity, humor, inquiry, insight, interest, memory, motivation, problem solving, and reasoning skills. It is important that rural elementary teachers understand the challenges that exist in creating a nurturing and positive environment for gifted students. Ford and Grantham (1996) also called for teachers to become more culturally aware and sensitive. Making teachers aware of these issues is essential not only to the training of elementary teachers, but in making it a part of a reflective practice.

From an educational standpoint, cultural competency might be seen as the attainment of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that empower educators and administrators with a multicultural understanding of others' values and views. Ford and Harris (1999), stressed the need for self-awareness and understanding in order to provide insight into

how personal bias can impact teaching and relationships with those from diverse backgrounds.

“Culturally competent educators seek to understand the worldviews (i.e., the values and norms) of minority students without negative judgments. Educators do not have to adopt these views, but they respect them as different and legitimate rather than as inferior or otherwise substandard.” (Ford & Harris, 1999, p. 163)

Pre-service teachers who are not familiar with varied learning styles will not be as effective in identifying the strengths of diverse learners as those who have been trained to recognize and understand the impact of learning preferences. Too often, the preconceived notions of teachers and other students keep some from reaching their fullest potential. Students often thrive when they are provided with the correct learning environments. An understanding of diversity will not only be beneficial in school, but will also prepare learners to be productive citizens with a global awareness. This preparation can be done by enveloping pre-service teachers in a climate that promotes freedom and encourages them to take risks without penalty. Providing a safe place to explore one’s own culture and worldview will both encourage and enhance college classroom discussions on diversity.

The environment in which instruction takes place is important to both the gifted teacher and his or her students. It sets the conditions that will influence the teacher’s perception of the students and the students’ perceptions of what their teacher values. (Banks 1996) identified environmental factors that aid teachers in being sensitive to the multicultural needs of the students. Teachers and administrators must set positive

expectations for students and respond to the students in a positive manner. For example, the curriculum should take into account variations in cultural backgrounds and gender, and teachers should teach to a variety of learning styles. The assessment and testing of students should reflect the various cultures present in the classroom and the proportion of gifted students in the population.

The task of preparing pre-service teachers to reach and teach all students moves into all facets of education. Helping them to value the diversity in classrooms is the first step toward a positive classroom atmosphere. It is necessary to provide direct instruction not only concerning the need for acceptance of all gifted learners, but also the need to assess and teach to the individual in order to highlight individual strengths. By highlighting strengths, students will have the confidence to work on those aspects of learning which may need to exhibit more success.

Rural Gifted Education

The literature of several scholars points to the lack of adequate training and professional development of rural gifted teachers. Mosse (2003) discovered that the regular education elementary level teachers had not received much training to work with gifted students. Most of the training they had received was through professional readings explored independently. The lack of training was viewed as contributing to problems of identification and nomination of gifted students in rural areas. McBee (2006) stated the lack of adequate professional training might hinder the recruitment of underrepresented populations. Clark (2002) identified a weakness in many of the in-service workshops offered in rural schools: many times the curriculum is limited to “how to” tips and

teaching strategies, and time is not spent developing the deeper issues of theory and counseling or the social and emotional issues which are prevalent in the personalities of gifted children.

Several researchers discussed the lack of support from administrators in rural schools. Lewis, Cruseiro, and Hall (2007), in their research on rural Ohio schools, found that administrators are influenced by community attitudes. The administrators distribute resources such as time, money, and teaching assignments accordingly. DeLeon, Argus-Calvo, and Medina (1997) identified the importance of administrators' involvement in supporting the identification procedures which are sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences, as well a community ethnic identity. These findings are supported by the participants in my study as well.

Gifted students face many barriers in their education in rural schools. Technology can be used to help students overcome some of the barriers. Lewis (2000) discussed the use of technology to overcome the lack of funding, broaden the worldview of the students, and provide world class instruction to gifted students in rural areas.. While technology has a front end cost, over time it becomes an economically efficient means of providing education to rural schools. Belcastro (2001) supported the use of technology as a tool to overcome the obstacles of quality education to rural gifted students. His research discovered technology can connect the gifted learner to resources which are available to larger schools with the benefit of cultural events. In order to use technology appropriately, the teacher must be confident and well trained. Belcastro (2001) identified the use of technology in the classroom as vital to developing the gifted children in rural areas. He also pointed out the cost effectiveness of technology over time. With

competition for resources in rural areas tight, the use of technology is a front line strategy.

Clark (2002) identified planning as the most important element of a rural gifted program. With adequate planning, the teacher can identify the correct technology to be used in the rural setting. She shared several means of overcoming the many obstructions of the rural setting such as tele-counseling, electronic bulletin boards, and summer institutes. The rural gifted program struggles to acquire funding appropriate to meeting the needs of the students. Colangelo, Baldus, Assouline, and New (2003) discussed the limited funding for educational programs in rural areas. This creates a competition that gifted programs most often lose. Howley, A., Howley, C., & Pendarvis, E. (2003) also detailed the difficulty of procuring funding for gifted education. Jones and Southern (1994) noted the barriers that funding shortfalls cause to gifted programs in rural schools. The researchers suggested using technology to overcome the funding barriers. Purcell and Eckert (2006) identified the need for open planning in the process of budgeting in rural schools. The gifted teachers should be a part of the process and see themselves as advocates for their program.

Remaining Questions

The literature reviewed provides a basic understanding of the challenges teachers of the gifted face on a daily basis. While much has been written about what rural gifted elementary teachers need or should know, there is a lack of material concerning personal perceptions about their training, support, and professional development issues. This study examines personal perceptions of experiences related to training, support, and needs as

they directly impact rural gifted elementary teachers. One of the goals of this study is to examine how those issues are perceived by these rural gifted teachers. While research reaches to answer questions concerning rural gifted education, much more research is needed to understand this multi-layered issue.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of elementary gifted teachers concerning the training and professional development they received to prepare them to teach gifted students. Research on gifted teachers' perceptions of training and professional development has not been fully developed in the gifted education literature. Qualitative research provides the best method of inquiry for this type of research. According to Creswell (1994), qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human procedure, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1-2).

The theoretical perspective that I will use to guide my research is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism understands the distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. Individuals interpret or classify each others actions instead of merely reacting to each others actions. They respond directly to the actions of one another based on the meaning which they attach to the actions. Human interaction is filtered by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by placing meaning on another's actions. The negotiation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior (Blumer, 1969).

Understanding our world and constructing the values that guide us in making meaning of our experiences is developed through the environment and social constructs we encounter. Crotty (1998) writes, "We enter a social milieu in which a 'system of intelligibility'

prevails. We inherit a ‘system of significant symbols’” (p. 54). Meaning is acknowledged through engagement with the world. Individuals use the symbols of the environment that belong to the culture to gain insight. It is through these lenses that we understand and make meaning of a culture and the stories of the world in which we live (Crotty, 1998).

This study investigated gifted teachers’ perspectives as they interact with students, administrators, parents, and colleagues. The symbolic interactionism perspective allowed teachers to describe their gifted training in the “doing” of the job in the social setting of the elementary schools. This study seeks to understand how four gifted teachers make sense of their training and work through an approach rooted in the interaction between these teachers and their world.

Prus (1996) identified three principles of symbolic interactionism. The first is that we act toward things on the basis of the meaning that we give to them. The second is that meaning is derived from our interaction with a community or a fellowship of others. The third is that this derived meaning is handled and modified through an interpretive process used by the person seeking to understand. Symbolic communication brings us together; through such communication human beings come to share a view of reality, and this shared vision makes society possible. Human beings must inform each other as they communicate to achieve common goals through symbols (Charon, 2001).

Fieldwork/Pilot Study

An initial study was conducted to gain insight into the training teachers received to prepare them to teach gifted students. I wanted to know what those teachers thought

about their jobs, their training, and how they fit into the educational system as a whole. I also wanted to explore how they perceived the concept of self-efficacy as teachers of gifted students.

Description of Participants and Context of the Pilot Study

This research was conducted at Lakeview Elementary School, one of four elementary schools in a small rural county in northeast Georgia. The town of Lakeview is located on an interstate near an adjacent state. The town's job base is made up of fast food restaurants, convenience stores, small factories, and some professional offices. The demographics of its population range from poor to middle-class. Lakeview Elementary has a 65% free and reduced lunch base, and is classified as a Title 1 school for government funding purposes.

The method of delivery of gifted services is a bit different here than in most other schools. I taught at this school, and as the lead gifted teacher I had some input into how we served our gifted population. I wrote a proposal that was approved at the state level, giving the school permission to have one gifted teacher for each grade level. This teacher was assigned all the gifted students at that level, and preference for filling the rest of the class was given to students who had been tested for the gifted program but did not qualify. Any remaining spots were given to students who showed academic strength and leadership as noted by former teachers. Students in these classes were thus able to work more efficiently and be challenged in all subject areas. Lessons were differentiated as needed, as students in any given class demonstrated a variety of strengths and weakness.

I chose the third and fourth grade teachers as the focus of my study. The third grade teacher is open-minded, and has actively sought to improve her knowledge and skills as a teacher of the gifted. She is a veteran instructor with 11 years of teaching experience, but this was only her second year teaching gifted students. The fourth grade teacher had no prior experience teaching gifted students and believed she had no skills in working with bright students prior to taking the required endorsement courses.

This study took place over the course of 10 weeks. I conducted two interviews with each individual, and both were videotaped with their consent in order to help me catch nuances, and facial and verbal expressions I might otherwise miss. I wanted to focus fully on what was being said so I could give purposeful prompts throughout the open-ended interview session.

The first interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and began with my reviewing the reasons for the research. I then prompted each participant, “Think back to your training which enabled you to teach gifted students and tell me about that.” I transcribed these first interviews as quickly as possible after they took place. I first watched each tape in its entirety, taking notes as I watched. I then watched it again, listening to and transcribing small portions at a time. Time was limited to two or three hours of transcription a night, so the first two interviews took approximately three weeks to transcribe. I did some initial coding, made notes, and tried to pull out some ideas. Each participant was then asked to review the transcript of her interview and to make corrections if I had misunderstood something. This debriefing exercise provided input for me as a researcher as well as offering reassurance for the interviewees that they would

not be misunderstood or misrepresented. Both parties were in agreement with my early analysis of the work.

After reviewing the transcriptions, I looked for themes that seemed to recur. I found a few that emerged from both interviews, and I used those meaning units to formulate the semi-structured interview questions for the second interviews. In the second interviews, each of which lasted about 45 minutes, I asked:

1. How do you perceive yourself as a teacher of the gifted in an elementary school setting?
2. Share your understanding of your role in the school and the school system.
3. What is the most important aspect of your job?
4. What, if anything, would you change about the training you received which allowed you to teach gifted children?
5. What would help you do your job more effectively?

After transcribing the second interviews, I looked for themes in common with the first interviews. As they became clear, I charted them individually and then compiled a comparative chart for both interviews, based on themes. I had a member of my qualitative methods class review the transcripts and draw some basic conclusions before I showed her my own interpretations. We discussed the data and found our conclusions were very similar.

In both interview analyses I identified themes and concepts indicating that teachers:

1. enjoy working with the students, but did not feel prepared to teach them and felt frustrated.
2. would have liked an internship with an experienced teacher of the gifted before teaching gifted classes to know what it would be like in advance.
3. would have liked more classes with actual lesson plan preparation and practice.
4. would like in-depth training concerning differentiation and compacting, as they did not know what to do for some students and how to address standards.
5. did not feel accepted by other teachers in the school.
6. needed help understanding emotional challenges facing their students.
7. would like staff development training on a regular basis.
8. needed to attend workshops geared to teaching high-level learners, rather than sessions aimed at teaching lower ability students.

The basic analysis of the data set provided an adequate rationale for pursuing this study in greater depth. The participants reviewed copies of the final analyses and affirmed that the interviews accurately captured their perceptions. They also expressed hope that this pilot study would help them improve their situations. This preliminary study offered evidence that more research must be conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of their training and preparation in the area of gifted teaching.

Actual Study

Participants

The participants are four teachers of the gifted from elementary schools located in rural northeast Georgia. While I initially hoped to incorporate some ethnic and racial diversity within this study, it was not possible due to the demographics of the teachers employed in those districts. Therefore, all of my participants are White female teachers. The teachers were purposefully chosen based on criteria set forth by the researcher, which enabled them to provide an abundance of information related to the focus of this study. Criterion sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, is a method that allowed me to select the participants best qualified to respond to the research questions and to provide the most information (Patton, 1990). I chose as the focus of the study the experiences of rural elementary teachers of the gifted, which is where my personal experiences lie.

The predetermined criteria required that the participants had two to six years of experience in teaching gifted elementary students (defined as kindergarten through fifth grade) and that they received their gifted training through a state Regional Educational Service Agency or RESA program. I acquired the e-mail addresses of 15 gifted elementary teachers in rural north Georgia who earned their endorsement to teach gifted students from RESA. This information was gathered with the help of the state's Gifted Education Specialist. After sending out e-mail messages to the 15 teachers asking for participants, I chose the first four respondents who met the criteria and indicated a willingness to participate in my research.

Methods of Data Collection

The main method of data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This type of research design characteristically requires interviews that are founded upon an ultimate, experience-seeking question that can be supported by probes as necessary, based upon the interviewee's responses. I conducted two interviews with each participant in her classroom during her planning time or after school. Each interview included approximately 45 to 90 minutes of dialogue. The participants gave their permission to both audio- and videotape each session. The video provided a backup for the audiotape, and I used it as well to gather additional field notes. The initial interview consisted of questions covering a predefined set of topics. The interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

I opened the initial interview by requesting, "Think back to your training experiences which enabled you to teach gifted students. Tell me about how you received the training you needed in order to teach gifted students." This opened up a flow of discussion, which occasionally needed prompting from statements made within the interview itself, as well as the topics of interest outlined in the interview guide. Great care was taken not to trap the process with closed questions. I was attentive and made sure to leave time for reflection before attempting to prompt the participant (deMarrais, 1998). I also took brief notes but did my best not to interrupt the teacher during her response. My notes were short, often one or two words which provided a reminder of a non-verbal cue.

The second interview was semi-structured and based upon points the respondent mentioned in the first session. Using this method facilitated more focused attention and reflection upon the elements of the initial interview, and allowed for clarification of

particular insights. Specific, planned probes were used to provide support for the first impressions of the initial interview, without limiting the nature of the discussion.

The next phase in the collection process involved observing the teachers with their students. I viewed the participants within the job setting as a way of understanding their professional world, and I made field notes of my observations. I visited the classroom during a teaching session as a participant observer. As soon as the class ended, I took the time to transcribe the notes immediately. I did not videotape the session, as this would have required permission from several sources. It is suggested to keep four types of field notes: short notes written at the time of the experience, an expansion of those short notes promptly following the experience, a journal that allows the researcher to develop ideas and thoughts gained during the experience, and then a running record of analysis (Silverman, 2000). I found this level of accountability to be quite helpful as I began to look at the data and determine themes. My study is not based upon the performance of the individual, so comprehensive field notes were more than sufficient for my purposes.

After the first interview with each participant, I proceeded to transcribe them as quickly as possible. I did this by first watching the tape in its entirety, making field notes as I watched. I compared the notes taken in the actual interview to the notes made during the viewing of the video tape. I began to listen to the audio tape while transcribing small portions at a time. Time was limited to two or three hours of transcription a night, and the first interviews ranged from 80 to 95 minutes. The interviews took approximately two weeks to transcribe. During this time, I did some initial coding and tried to pull out some

ideas and made notes. I did this to help with clarification and the formulation of the second interview.

The questions for the second interview were formed after the teachers had an opportunity to look over the initial information. I wanted to conduct the second interview soon after the first, but did not want to base questions on misunderstandings I may have had from the first interview. Waiting to allow the participants to review the transcriptions from the first interview allowed the questions in the second to be more effective. The second interviews lasted between 40 and 48 minutes, and they were transcribed in the same manner as the first interviews. The teachers were again provided their data and asked for confirmation and clarification.

Control of Researcher Bias

As stated at the beginning of my dissertation, I have a strong personal interest in the area I'm investigating in this study. My research question involves the educational preparation of teachers of the gifted, and I was a teacher of the gifted for eight years at a rural school, where I also served as the lead gifted teacher. I subsequently taught in a teacher education program at a private college. The college where I taught, and the elementary schools that participated in my study, are all located in rural areas.

My experiences necessarily influence my responses to the information in my study. These experiences are the source of my passion about the research topic and have contributed developmentally to who I am both as a person and a researcher. In my mind, the two are one and the same when dealing with this information. I feel a connection to other educators, so I am curious as to how other teachers in a teaching environment

similar to my previous work setting feel about their educational experiences. As a teacher and a former gifted student myself, I want to know whether others share my experiences, or if every situation is truly unique. In order to “systematically seek out” my own subjectivity, I participated in a bracketing interview in which another researcher conducted an interview with me using the same questions I used in this study. This process afforded me an opportunity to face my own biases and preconceived ideas surrounding my research questions. By responding to my own interview questions, I gained greater insight into how I might interpret the material collected (deMarrais, 1998).

Debriefing and member checks are other safeguards used to insure the trustworthiness and rigor of this study. After the teachers were interviewed, and data was transcribed and initially analyzed, I sent the data to participants for review. Participants reviewed the information to clear up any issues of meaning or phrasing which may have been misunderstood. This was to make sure the speakers’ meaning was clear, and the spirit of what was said was represented accurately. This also kept personal bias and assumptions from surfacing in the analysis (Moustakas, 1994). I then went forward with drawing out themes from the information.

The researcher should be viewed as having a high level of credibility. Wolcott (1994) made several suggestions to help researchers achieve credibility. He pointed out that it is important to refrain from too much speaking, and to focus primarily on listening to what the participant is saying. The researcher should transcribe exact words and be clear and accurate in the recording process. This accounting should be done while the conversation is happening or immediately afterwards. Writing or transcription should take place as soon as possible, and the documents should be shared with others who are

aware of the particular setting or situation being researched. These suggestions became an important part of my research process as I incorporated each one into my study.

While analyzing and reviewing the data, Silverman (2000) argued, the researcher should allow participants to review the data as well as the analysis of that information, both to help control bias and to minimize or eliminate misinterpretations of the data set. The researcher's subjectivities should be identified and acknowledged in the research process, but viewed as a strength that contributes to rather than hinders the study. The interviewer should return to the actual physical site or the initial field notes throughout the process in order to retain perspective. Silverman also emphasized the need for accuracy in writing up the data. Care should be taken to have internal consistency with regard to any generalizations concerning what is seen or heard.

I wanted to take great care as a researcher to represent accurately the teachers' experiences in their work, training, and interaction with gifted children and other educators. One participant did voice a concern about the possibility of an administrator in her school reading the information. I assured her that she was protected by a pseudonym, and that I would not discuss her interview with anyone but her. I also offered her the opportunity to discontinue her participation in the study, but she chose not to do this after reading the section of this study written about her experiences.

Methods of Data Analysis

After the data has been reviewed through the debriefing process and efforts have been made to minimize bias and ensure researcher credibility, the amount of information collected must be reduced so that the researcher can manage it. In order to do this, the

data must be arranged into some type of visible display to allow for the emergence of patterns or themes. Grigori (1985) suggested the researcher must gain an understanding of the statement by reading it many times, looking for units of meaning and the key data held within the statements.

According to Grigori (1985), the first step, to “gain a sense of the sole statement by reading the document again” is simple and straightforward. The document must be read and reread until an understanding of the information is gained in the context of all that is said. The researcher will be the barometer to gauge how much is needed.

The second step, “discrimination [of] the meaning units within a psychological perspective and a focus on the phenomenon that is being researched,” begins the process of breaking the material into understandable parts. A researcher cannot analyze the text as a whole, so he or she must break it down into manageable parts. Since this process is for psychological evaluation, it is sensible to do so from a psychological perspective.

The third step breaks the elements down further for the researcher to understand. This step, “transforming the subject’s everyday experience into psychological language with an emphasis on what is being researched” aids in understanding units of study that are important to the researcher. These units are designed and clarified by the researcher and are not static (p.15). Rather, the researcher will determine the importance of the units according to the research. The fourth and final step is to “place the data into a statement about the participant's experience,” allowing the researcher to pull together responses from the various participants.

After transcribing all the interviews verbatim, I began with a few preset codes which helped in sorting the data, by reading the information as a part of the inductive

analysis process. It is here that the researcher codes and sorts the data looking for themes and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As suggested by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), information coding helps to manage data by organizing, compartmentalizing, and recalling helpful components. I continued to process the information in this way until clear themes, as well as underlying concepts, began to surface.

I began with my first interview and proceeded to the second and last one. I would lay the information out and read through each one. I highlighted the themes I found throughout the interviews. I coded the sections I highlighted in the interviews; these sections served to identify the information as they related to larger themes. I also used Microsoft Word to locate common themes using the “Find” function. I would then color code the information and write code notes to the side of my information. I sought information that opened patterns in relationship to my research questions and the overall research focus. Using this method, I was able to organize the data into manageable units. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) identified the importance of coding, observing, “Coding generally is used to break up and segment the data into simpler, general categories and is used to expand and tease out the data, in order to formulate new questions and levels of interpretations” (p. 30).

I began piecing the information together by writing out phrases that identified the patterns. The strategy is suggested by Bogden and Biklen (1998) as a means to examine the information and develop broad themes that emerge from it. I was seeking to identify recurring phenomena and relationships that formed the basis for the phenomena, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). I found common expressions from the four participants that I distinguished in my data. I also noted the areas of divergence and

disagreement among participants. I wanted to identify these disagreements and accurately capture and convey each individual's experience. As stated previously, I followed up with the participants to make sure I understood what they were communicating. When the information was truly an outlier and not a misunderstanding, I identified it as such. The inductive analysis approach gave me the appropriate tools to identify and organize the information into manageable data, enabling me to identify the themes present in the data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of elementary gifted teachers concerning the training and professional development they received to prepare them to teach gifted students. Research on gifted teachers' perceptions of training and professional development has not been fully developed in the gifted education literature. This chapter describes the participants in this research study to present a context for understanding their interpretation of their professional training experiences. This chapter explores each participant's professional training and job experiences through their responses to the research questions. The research questions guided me in the process of making appropriate comparisons among individuals' experiences. The participants discussed their jobs in terms of relationships with their colleagues, administrators, parents, the community, and their students. Their reflections are based in the larger context of their training as gifted elementary teachers working in rural areas.

Table 1. Participant Descriptions.

	Joyce	Sara	Claire	Susan
Years Teaching	5	9	6	28
Years Teaching Gifted	5	4	2	4
Education level	Educational Specialist in Instruction	Educational Specialist in Education	Bachelors in Middle Grades Education	Master of Education

Age	Late 30's	Mid 50's	Mid 30's	Mid 50's
Service delivery method	Pull out serving only gifted students all day. Total of 28 students grades 1-5	1 st Grade Cluster group of 6 gifted with 13 regular education students	4 th Grade Cluster group of 9 gifted with 12 regular education students	2 nd Grade Cluster group of 7 gifted with 12 regular education students

Joyce

Joyce teaches gifted education for students in grades two through five. At the time of the interviews, there were no first graders identified for the gifted program at Joyce's school. Joyce has been teaching on the elementary school level for five years, all of them with gifted students, and has an Educational Specialist degree in Instruction. When asked how she came to teach gifted students, she replied,

I fell into this job. Because at this school they needed a part-time teacher (then) and I was a stay-at-home mom at the time. I had taught school but had been a stay-at-home mom for five years, and I was actually in the parent line picking up my son from school. The principal said, "We need a part-time teacher, and we need your help. We can't find a part-time teacher, and all you have to do is go back and take a class or two over the summer, and that is all you have to do." I really wanted to do this because I went to school here, and I felt like I could relate to them as someone who grew up in this small town.

I visited Joyce's classroom during the afternoon while she met with her fifth grade students. The schedule was a little off of the regular format, as the school was gearing up for the annual spring CRCT testing the next week. Joyce had indicated to me that there would be third graders in the room at that time, but because the schedule was off, the fifth graders were present instead. Eight students entered the room in an excited fashion. It was not long before they saw me, and some settled down quickly, but two of the girls came up to me and asked why I was there. I smiled and explained that I was working on a project and that their teacher was helping me out with it. Joyce had her planning period right after the class, so I was able to say that I was waiting on her so I could speak to her a little more. They grinned and took a seat. Joyce then went on to settle them down as it was time to start. It was clear the students were tired and on edge. She started to explain this to me, but stopped. "You know what all this is like, so I am not worried about you thinking I am a bad teacher." This put me at ease, and I knew Joyce felt comfortable with me as an observer.

After Joyce introduced me to the class, the students were given a few minutes to vent their frustrations about the practice test booklets they had been working on for the past few weeks. As it turns out, this class had only met three times out of the previous two weeks due to field trips, testing practice, and a variety of other unusual circumstances. While this is a pull-out class, they do have a content area to learn during this time. Joyce expressed some frustration because gifted is the last area to be scheduled. "I am the last slot to be filled. I teach whatever subject I can fit in...in that slot. Scheduling has been good this year, but it is not because they were thinking of gifted education. They were thinking of another program...Reading First." Joyce's official

classroom schedule has intervention and acceleration listed as well as social studies for the fourth and fifth grade students. Second and third graders are served under intervention and acceleration.

The classroom itself is an older, single-wide trailer, one of several at the school. The trailer and one other single-wide are located between one of the main wings of the school and the lane where the buses park to pick up and unload students. There is no overhead protection between the building and the trailer, so on rainy days the students get wet getting to and from Joyce's class. Joyce explained that the trailer next to hers houses a special education class. Joyce stated that one of the problems her students encounter is that when they leave the regular classroom they are often teased that they are going to "special ed." Some of them tell her they don't like leaving the classroom to go out to the trailer because it makes them feel uncomfortable.

Inside, there are two older computers separated by a small black-and-white printer. These are located along a wall directly across from one of the doors. There is a very small, outdated television on a rolling cart pushed into the corner of the room. Near the middle of the trailer, two round tables with chairs surrounding them are provided for the students. There are also a few desks placed alongside some bookcases. Supplies and books spill out from the bookshelves. While the mobile classroom is old, it is obvious that the teacher takes pride in her teaching/learning space. Creative solutions to storage issues help hide the lack of shelving and cabinetry. Curtains hide some of the contents of crates and makeshift shelving. There are colorful curtains on the windows and a few area rugs to allow students to read and work on the floor. The teacher's desk is located across from the other door in the trailer. On her desk is a newer computer that was assigned to

her by the school. All records are kept there and are part of the school network. Nearby is a bookshelf for her teaching supplies.

Perceptions of Professional Development and Training in Gifted Education

Joyce, who is in her late thirties, has a strong educational background, as she holds one Educational Specialist degree, and is working on her second. She is self-motivated and feels hard work is important in her job. Her training in gifted education was undertaken at the same time she began teaching gifted students. She had not yet attended the first course in her training when she was faced with her first classroom of gifted students. The situation was very stressful for her, and the courses required of those who teach gifted students did not meet her expectations. She stated,

The same instructor taught all four of the required classes, and this was a point of frustration for me. I was not happy with my gifted training because it was more of a staff development unit type class instead of a college setting. That is how I felt. I had a teacher who was very young and I know that you can be young and have experience. But she had no experience in a classroom setting except for her doctoral studies [student teaching].

We would ask lots of questions that she could not answer. And she would give us scenarios and we would say, “What about in this situation?” [referring to some event that may take place in a classroom] and she would say, “Oh I am referring to the ideal situation. And I know none of you are in the ideal situation, but I am talking about the ideal situation.”

The time frame in which the classes were offered also presented a challenge. One class was offered in the fall, one in the spring, and the remaining two during the summer of the next year. The class covering test and measures was one of those offered in the summer. This was a problem for Joyce, as she had to screen and test students for possible gifted qualification in the spring before she took the class in the summer. This was all new to her and interpreting the results proved to be quite a challenge. She says, “I taught gifted education for one year and gave the tests before I had the assessment class. I pretty much learned everything about gifted education as I went.”

Joyce related that the county did pay for the classes she needed to teach gifted students. Beyond that, she has had few opportunities for professional development geared toward the needs of her students. She pointed out that money and opportunities to undertake such training are often limited because she works in such a rural area. She is allowed to take days off to attend the Georgia Association for Gifted Children conference, but the money must come out her gifted budget and not from the school’s staff development monies. In that respect, Joyce feels this the school is not truly supportive of her professional development. “I can take days to go to the Georgia Gifted Conference; however, that money can not come out of staff development money. It has to come out of gifted money if I go. So in that way, I feel like I am not supported or provided professional development.”

When staff or professional development opportunities are available at her school, they are not necessarily appropriate for Joyce’s students:

I see a lot of our staff development geared toward the students who are slower learners that need to catch up. My kids are not slow learners and don’t need

catching up. So a lot of our staff development is based upon the fact that we are a high at-risk school and there is a fear of failing... But I have to find reasons to get something out of it. There is nothing geared toward high achievers. There is nothing for gifted students.

Joyce shared her conviction that there is a growing concern among schools to get test scores up across the board in response to the No Child Left Behind legislation. Joyce clearly understood the political pressure the school is under to bring all students up to grade-level achievement. Gifted children, however, are left on their own because the perception by some is that they can take care of themselves educationally, due to the fact that they are on or above grade level. The literature concerning professional development offerings in schools also indicates administrators place the highest priority on bringing low-achieving students up to grade level and consider gifted students to be a low priority when planning professional development and allocating funds.

Joyce feels that she is respected as a teacher first, and that gains her acceptance as a teacher of the gifted. While some of her peers comment on how easy her job must be, she thinks they do see the value of her job. "I know a lot of these teachers here, and I think that makes a difference for me. If they did not know me, I don't think I would have the respect." The respect stems from knowing her and not from the fact she is a teacher of the gifted. When asked about the perception she has of herself as a teacher of the gifted, Joyce says she struggles with her self-perception as a teacher of the gifted, and is learning her job from day to day. Her personality drives her to be in control of situations, but this has not been the case in her job setting. She says, "Helping the students is not the problem. It is the other things that go along with teaching the gifted that cause me to

struggle constantly.” At the same time, Joyce expresses a deep sense of fulfillment as a result of teaching these students.

Technology Training

Teachers in the state of Georgia are required to take a course in technology to become certified initially or to renew their existing certificate, which must be done every five years. According to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, teachers may complete an approved college technology class or pass “In Tech training,” which is training geared toward using technology in the classroom for both teaching and basic record-keeping.

When asked about the technology needs of her gifted students, Joyce responded, “They need a lot more than what we have been giving them. We [the gifted class] get the leftover computer, the leftover TV, and the leftover VCR. But they need the latest technology, they need it.” Joyce explains that students are working on papers at home because the gifted classroom only has two classroom computers, both with old software:

You need to be creative and you need to be able to think on your own before you have a computer that tells you how to do the problem. So in a way [technology], bothers me. I had a teacher, a professor that was a gifted teacher for 30 years. Now he was *not* teaching me gifted education, he was teaching Psychology of Education in my instruction, my six-year degree. And he talked about that a lot and we talked about it and he made a good point. In his 30 years he did like some technology, but he did not do like some of the other gifted teachers that absorbed good and bad technology. He said because the kids really need to be thinking on

their own, they need to do hands-on things. They need to do projects before they get into technology. And that made sense to me. Also that helped me to realize that and they do need to think on their own. They're going to get the technology; they're going to get that. Just by all the latest advances and what we can have at home. And I'm not saying that they don't need it at school. They do need more than what we provide for them. But I think there needs to be a balance.

Joyce reported that the courses she took to earn the gifted endorsement did not address any aspect of technology. There was no discussion concerning how to incorporate technology into the gifted curriculum or how students could use it as a stepping-stone in the learning process. Joyce found this frustrating, as it seemed technology would be an important contributor to gifted education. Even though her classroom has limited computer resources, having information about useful programs and ideas would enable her to request particular items for her students. When asked in what ways her training for teaching gifted students prepared her to use technology with her students or address their technology needs, Joyce responded, "I know these answers are probably not going to help you, because we learned nothing about the technology available and how to use it with gifted students during my gifted training. Nothing. It was not even discussed."

Training in Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students

Joyce described the needs of rural gifted students with a particular sense of understanding, as they mirror her own needs when she was in school:

Since this is a rural setting, I have a lot of students who just do not feel they are going anywhere. They feel as if they have no chance to make something of themselves unless they get away from here. It is important to help them understand that they can make it out of here if they want to or they can stay and make something of themselves. This is a real issue for the students, and it stems from the fact that many of their parents were born here and never left. Many want to be something more than farmers, but they feel they don't have the tools to do something else.

She also notes that the girls in her class already tend to be aware that they are smart and that boys may not like that about them. Joyce teaches several grades of gifted students and therefore has the benefit of watching the students grow from year to year. She says, "The girls don't want to be marked as smart because their friends pick on them. They want to be cute and ditzy because that is what they think boys like." Joyce also recognizes that having the students over a period of years allows her to see changes in attitude as a result of peer pressure that may result in negative behavior. These are all vital issues that may affect many learners, but are often magnified in the gifted. Joyce feels her understanding of such issues comes primarily from a child development class, as she recalls her gifted classes did not address such issues beyond the differences between gifted girls and boys. Joyce shared, "I learned most of what I know from my child development class from my undergraduate degree. However, my gifted training did not prepare me for it at all. I do not see any staff development out there dealing with emotional and social issues of gifted children. I have read some publications and stuff, you know and from the Internet some and from *Gifted Child Quarterly*." She is also the

mother of three gifted children and is able to draw from her home life to help her deal with many issues she confronts in the classroom.

Diversity Training

Joyce has been teaching gifted education at the same school for five years. In that time she has had only two African American students. Her gifted endorsement classes did not address such things as understanding the learning styles of students who are from different cultures, testing issues that effect those students, and how diverse students are often not even considered for nomination into gifted education opportunities. The concept of diversity was covered by discussing the differences between boys and girls and how they learn. Racial issues and differences were not a part of the class. Joyce wonders if this was a result of the rural area in which her college was located. “I am not sure, but it may be because of the area we are in, and we don’t have a big diverse population, so maybe that is why we really did not talk much about diversity.”

Joyce noted that a colleague attended the endorsement classes at another RESA site and had a great experience relative to diversity in gifted education. In contrast, in Joyce’s training program, “Our professor did not know what types of IQ tests were used or what was acceptable for creativity qualification. There was no discussion of what cutoffs were for test scores, screening, of what test was good for what group.”

The colleague who attended the classes at another RESA site had a richer learning experience that covered much of what Joyce’s did not:

You did not have to take [the endorsement classes] in an order. I felt the classes should have been taught in a sequence. One of the ladies who was with us [in the

class] actually found someplace else to go, so I can't say everybody's gifted education in this area is bad. I may have just got into one of *those* classes...with the same teacher for all of them, and it was just not a good situation. She did find another place to take the classes, in Brookstone at another RESA in a much larger city. And she was happier with the training she received, but not completely satisfied. I think all of us need to be taught more of "these are the procedures in our state."

Joyce believes there may be students at her school who are overlooked when recommendations are made for the gifted program. Joyce realizes that the ratio of students in the gifted program does not reflect overall racial makeup of the school, but she does not know how to address this problem because the screening process for the gifted program often starts with teacher recommendations. She also mentioned that the school has an ESOL teacher whose students may represent another untapped population of potential gifted students. Joyce noted,

I have had two Black students, and I know we have a low ratio, but I think there should be more. And I just do not think that the testing is reaching them. I don't think our teacher recommendation reaches them, and a lot of our screening begins with teacher recommendations. I just don't think they are all getting reached. We are just now getting a Hispanic population, and we got an ESOL teacher. We did not have to have an ESOL teacher until this year. I am not sure if she is part-time or what. This is a big change for this small rural school.

Professional Development Needs of Rural Elementary Gifted Teachers

The issue of rural schools continued to present itself in the discussion, and Joyce has strong feelings concerning what needs to be done to help them. She stressed the need for more staff development options and mandatory training for teachers of the gifted, not only in her area but statewide. The fact that she herself is from the rural area in which she teaches fuels her desire to know what is going on in gifted programs around her. “All I know is these kids, so I need training on where everyone else is and where my students should be [academically].”

As a teacher of the gifted in a small rural elementary school, Joyce does not feel that her students are competitive with students from larger areas. This is not because they are less intelligent, but because environment plays a significant role in education. Joyce stressed, “I come across things all the time that I feel that my students should have been exposed to at this point and I am having to sit and explain things to them. It may be something I feel they should know at least what I am talking about, but they don’t. It is because they have never seen it or been there. A lot of the parents are good parents, but are not necessarily highly educated parents.” In addition, because the school is far from any big city, student field trips are limited. Joyce urged, “Rural gifted teachers need to network with each other and be allowed to take the time to visit each other and other [larger] systems to see ideas in action. Our administrators have not inquired as to what we need.”

Training and professional development should be continuous, in Joyce’s opinion. “We need more hands-on opportunities and ongoing staff development. We [small, rural schools] are like little islands out here by ourselves and we need support.” Joyce

discussed at length the need to network with other small schools and pool resources. During our discussion, the concept of a website for her rural area came up, and this generated much excitement for her, as possibilities were shared about a place where teachers could collaborate and students could meet each other and work on projects on the site. She mentioned that she would like to speak to the county technology person to see what it would take to make this idea a reality.

Administrative Support

Joyce feels strongly supported by her principal and overall has a good relationship with her administration. Like all teachers, she struggles to keep administrators, parents, colleagues, and students happy, sometimes at the expense of doing what she feels is needed. Joyce said, “I feel like I am supported as long as I am doing my job and I’m not in trouble with a parent...then I am left to do whatever. And I am forgotten about. And sometimes that is hard.” Joyce does not always feel she is kept current on county policy. For example, she was not aware that the county had a formal policy for gifted education and asked to have a copy after she was informed that there was one by a former teacher. She was told by the Curriculum Director that there was not one. After a few more inquiries to the School Superintendent, the district office sent her a copy of a document that had the state rules on it, but very little pertaining to actual county policy. Joyce was informed by the Curriculum Director that this copy was outdated and that they were in the process of making the updates at that point.

Parental Issues

Parental issues are present in all aspects of education. Joyce has a firsthand understanding of these issues not only as a teacher, but also as the parent of three children identified as gifted. This school does not have a true enrichment type of program where a checklist for progress might suffice as an appropriate evaluation. Joyce teaches content and is responsible for assignment grades and other types of evaluation that must also be completed by regular classroom teachers. She summarized the attitude of some of her students' parents, who feel, "Well, I want them to be in gifted, but I don't want it to be harder or for them to have extra work. I want them to have fun, but I want them to be challenged. But if they are not making straight A's then I will pull them out [of the gifted program]."

Joyce said that often these parents expect their children to take home all of the awards at the end of the year and make straight A's, and that will not happen in every case. Parents have pulled students out of the gifted program at Joyce's school for some of those reasons and she reported that she often takes such actions personally, although she realizes they are not her fault. "There are several elementary schools in our system and none of them are doing gifted the same way. Some give grades and others have a true pullout with no grades. It should be the same in the system."

Sara

Sara teaches first-grade gifted students. Her school uses an augmented type of cluster grouping/advanced content model for accommodating the gifted. She has six students identified as gifted; the rest are students who were recommended by their

kindergarten teachers to be in this class. It is considered a high ability class, though some of the students do leave to visit other teachers for reading groups. Sara was a regular education teacher for 9 years before she began officially working in gifted education. She has been a teacher of the gifted for four years. Sara has an Educational Specialist degree in education and is in her mid-fifties, with a long history of teaching excellence. She has spent most of her career teaching in the same county.

When asked how she began teaching gifted students, Sara shared that she had come across a few students in her years of teaching who really seemed to stand out academically. Some were exceptional in many subjects while others had strengths that were years beyond what the other children could do in a specific area. Still others just seemed to possess more maturity than the rest of the first graders she taught. Sara recalled what made her decide to start being proactive and become an advocate for these children:

A few years ago, I had a child who came to me reading on the fourth-grade level. I began to watch her and work with her and she continued to grow. I talked to the teacher of the gifted about her. At that time, we had a part-time teacher who was here twice a week. I recommended her to be tested. This was not done for first graders. This was unheard of at the time. They just did not test them for gifted at that age. She tested her and she scored high enough for the gifted program. It was after this experience that Sara began to look for those children and recommend testing for them. She had never been asked to do this; rather, she now felt like she had a mission to help find those children who had not been tested because giftedness was not considered to be identifiable at such a young age.

The classroom setting for Sara's students consists of desks arranged in pods of four; two small, kidney-shaped tables with chairs around them; and large area rugs designating meeting spaces for the students. The floor is carpeted, so the rugs are a nice added touch for the students. Bookshelves line one wall of the classroom and there are large open racks holding a healthy collection of oversized books. One part of the room is sectioned off by low shelves to make a reading nook for the young students. The white marker board is lined with information for the students identifying the current line leader, teacher's helper, and a variety of other jobs that are sought after in an elementary school classroom.

Samples of the students' work are on display all over the walls. Five computers line the back wall near the sink and bathroom area. Four of them are newer iMacs and one of them, according to Sara, is the computer she had before she was provided with a new iBook. The school has now given each teacher a laptop that can be taken to meetings, conferences, and home when needed.

There is one black-and-white and one color printer alongside the computers. Some of the work on display is typewritten with color pictures at the top or bottom of the piece. During my classroom visit some students worked on the computers, practicing their spelling words and writing stories, while others read books silently. The teacher was also talking with some students in a small group about a book they had just finished. The rest of the first graders were working at centers. All of this occurred with very little noise, and almost all of the students were on task.

There is also a large TV mounted in one of the room's corners with both a VCR and a DVD player underneath it. The teacher's desk is near the TV and beside one of the

room's two large windows. The filing cabinets are covered with photos of students from past years, as well as the present one. The room is full of cheerful images and posters, and pictures all around display positive messages.

The room seems to hold all the items needed to help young children maximally develop their abilities. My conversations with Sara revealed her to be an educator who sees the needs of the child and seeks to meet those needs. The inviting and comforting atmosphere of the room reflects an understanding of how students achieve success in a positive environment. My personal observation of the class in action provided insight into what seems to be a meaningful bond between a teacher and her talented young students.

Professional Development and Perceptions

Sara received RESA training to prepare her to teach gifted students. Concerning the RESA courses, Sara said, "I enjoyed all the courses and really liked the Characteristics of the Gifted. I also enjoyed learning how to do the assessments. The one course I really did not like and didn't feel it benefited me had to do with curriculum and needs." Overall, Sara feels her training was helpful and is pleased with her personal growth in the classroom:

I see myself as continually learning. I think I am better prepared after taking the courses. I feel pleased with how I teach the gifted children...I love it and I feel good about it, but I also think you can always do better, you know? I would like to see some more courses offered to gifted teachers to enhance their teaching ability...especially for elementary teachers.

Technology

When asked about the technology needs of gifted students, Sara responded that this is an important issue. She noted, “As a first-grade teacher I feel like they really need the ability to do research with technology. We have an administrator who is good about this, and right now we have lots of games and technology programs they can use. We do a lot on the computer.” At this time, her classroom uses learning software such as Reading Rabbit, STAR math and reading (which are diagnostic types of software), Accelerated Reader, and some math and phonics support programs.

During the interview, I asked Sarah in what ways the training she received for the gifted endorsement did or did not prepare her to address technology needs for her advanced students. Sara responded, “It didn’t.” I then asked if she received any instruction concerning technology during the gifted training and she said she did not. Sara did say that she feels good about what she is doing with her students by using the programs she has available to her at this point, but “would like to see more computers in the gifted classrooms and more training on how to use them .”

Social/Emotional Training

Sara knows that gifted children are different from other children and often have special needs related to social/emotional issues. Working with both gifted and regular education students, Sara has experienced several types of children:

Well, they really are different from what I generally see in the regular education first-grade classroom. They can be so loving and so inquisitive...just wonderful, wonderful students...and then some of them can be a real challenge about things

and can need counseling. They tend to take things to a different, uh deeper level than most students. I had one that had some serious emotional problems...beyond anything I had ever seen.

When asked if she had any training during her gifted education classes that helped her assist students with these needs, Sara responded:

No, No, all I could do is request a meeting with the parents and I told them what was going on in the classroom. I was only able to tell them that they may want to talk to someone who knows more about gifted issues. They were having some problems with their gifted child at home and I was seeing [problems] in the classroom, but did not have any idea what to do to help. I just told them that I was not prepared to help this child, but he needed help.

Sara remarked that her classroom experience helps her with some students in some situations, but she does not feel that she had enough training concerning the social/emotional needs of gifted learners. "We talked about some [social/emotional needs], but there was never any training as to how to deal with it or what to do when the situations surfaced. You know, I can't remember there being any psychology in the classes."

Diversity Training

When asked, "What are some of the critical diversity issues surrounding gifted education in your area?" Sara replied, "We don't really have those situations here...you don't see much [diversity] here." Sara did confirm that there was both an African American (21%) and Hispanic population (3 %) at the school. The discussion continued

with the researcher asking, “Are you aware of the characteristics of African American and Hispanic gifted learners?” Sara replied, “Yes, well...I think so.”

Based upon her hesitant response the question was restated as follows: “Did the gifted training you received help you to recognize and or make you aware of the characteristics of minority children that would put them in the screening pool for the gifted program?” She contemplated this question and replied, “No. You know I am sure that is really stressed in larger areas, cities where you have different nationalities I think, but not here in rural Georgia. We really weren’t offered much information there. No.” Sara noted that there was an ESOL teacher at her school but said she had not had any Hispanic or African American children in her class who qualified for the gifted program. “I have had bright non-white children, but none of them qualified as gifted.”

Professional Development Needs of Rural Elementary Gifted Teachers

Sara has been nominated by her colleagues to be her school’s Teacher of the Year several times, and has a strong connection with the community. She feels it is important for teachers to be exposed to new information and ideas if they are to continue to provide foundational and exploratory experiences for students:

It would be helpful for teachers to understand that we need to allow our students to explore and find out what they can and want to do. I feel a class that deals with the psychology and the social/emotional needs of these gifted students would be a good course, it really would. Some of those gifted students are not always accepted by other students, and really have some emotional needs which are often more complex than what we see on a regular basis.

When asked, “What would help you do your job more effectively?” Sara responded:

I would love to see more classes directed toward teaching the gifted. This would be great through RESA or the University of Georgia. Also, you made me start thinking about diversity in the [gifted] classroom and there should be something more there as well. I just want to know that I am up-to-date on everything that is offered for the gifted children. That is very important. You know, the summer classes they can take, what technology items are considered to be helpful for them. Everything...all that we have talked about. I would really like to see more things offered for the gifted. There is a lot offered for Reading First and remedial. They [school system and off-campus events] are offering that for us all the time. But you don't ever hear about gifted courses or workshops...you really don't.

Administrative Support

Sara feels good about where she stands with her school administrators. When asked if she thought her administrators would provide the needed support for technology and professional development, she replied, “Yes, I feel as if our administrator would... [technology] is one of her strengths and she does support the gifted teachers as much as she can.” When asked, “But support has not been offered yet?” Sara responded, “No, it has not been offered to us yet, but now I will ask.” She continued:

As a whole, I feel like I am a strong teacher and I think my administrator thinks I am a strong teacher. I think my love of teaching has helped me to be a good teacher, you know? Some of the teachers are really so negative, you know...have

negative attitudes toward their children [students] and, um, I am not that way. I think that I am perceived as a good teacher... a kind teacher.

Concerns for Her School and Recommendations

Sara reflected, "It would be nice if our county had a real gifted coordinator like other systems have. I know we are rural, but I feel it would really make a difference." When asked what she felt were the benefits and disadvantages of teaching gifted students in a rural setting, she said:

I think the benefits are that in the rural setting, teachers have a smaller population of gifted students so they may be able to put more effort into their teaching of gifted children. They can get more involved with the students because there are less of them. I think maybe your larger cities may not have the opportunity to get involved with them as much. It is more one-on-one in a rural school. As far as the disadvantages go, we don't have all the outside activities that can be offered to the gifted...like the science fairs and all the technology things they have in the larger cities. I think that is a big disadvantage...we don't get to take many field trips at all. We can go to one inside the county and one outside the county. Field trips are not promoted at all.

Sara wondered if her students meet the same standards as children from city schools:

My initial instinct would be to say that they [students from rural schools] would come a little bit short of stacking up against kids from counties like Clarke or Gwinnett. There is so much more opportunity in your larger cities, larger counties

for the children to be exposed to learning. I can give you one example: I had a student who came from a large town in Virginia and when she came into my classroom she was really sharp, much more advanced in her skills than anyone I have ever had...especially her language arts skills and writing ability. She was a first grader writing really good poetry.

I mentioned that it may have been that the individual child who was very talented. Sara responded, "True... it could have been [laughing]. But she came from a really big school from a really big city...up north [still laughing]."

Sara pointed out that many of the teachers in her school grew up in this area, went to college locally, and then began teaching. She notes, "Teaching has a lot to do with what can be brought to the classroom to help the students experience a richer environment. I worry that some teachers may not have developed a world view to share with these rural students." She continued, "This is something to think about as we try to do our best for the students. This is why we really need more finances for trips to art museums and science labs...things we can do to help expose our rural children to the world." Sara added:

We don't even have a gifted education budget. I know there is money, but we don't get to decide what it is spent on. I am not sure what it goes to. We could spend it on materials in the past, but the past two years we have not seen any of it for the classroom. I know I said this before, but the gifted teachers in these [rural] schools need to have lots of professional growth opportunities. We need to be in the loop and up-to-date. I really want to be up-to-date with all the gifted standards

and changes. More professional growth geared toward rural gifted teachers and learners. I would love to see that.

Parental Issues

Sara feels pressure from parents who want to pull their children from the gifted program for a variety of reasons:

Parents are so uptight about their children making A's...even in first or second grade. They don't want their children to have challenging work. I had a student last year who was excellent...really bright, but her mother pulled her out the gifted class because she did not want her daughter to participate in all of the projects and outside work that is required in second grade. She did not want that...she said that the bottom line was that it would not be her child doing the work...it would be *her* doing the work and she did not have time for that.

Parents often feel their children will make better grades in a regular education classroom setting. They are afraid the appropriate level of learning may result in lower grades, and keep their children from Honor Rolls and even scholarships. Also, there is a high level of pressure for children to perform and often parents do the work for them.

Claire

Claire teaches fourth-grade gifted students. She has been teaching for a total of six years and working with gifted students for two years. She is the mother of three and one of her children is in gifted education. She wanted to work with gifted students because of some of the opportunities that are available in a gifted classroom. For example, she noted,

“I like to do group work, and I like for the students to really work with each other. And I like the independence that gifted kids have when you give them the ideas and the projects they are able to do themselves. I just really wanted to do it.”

Claire’s classroom is located in a double-wide trailer behind the school cafeteria and the first-grade/kindergarten wing. The trailer also houses a fifth-grade regular education classroom. A wooded ramp leads to the door of the classroom, but there is no awning or cover to protect the entrance from inclement weather. There are two other trailers alongside Claire’s classroom. They are filled with the rest of the fifth grade and the English Language Learner room. The other fourth-grade classes are on the other side of the school on the third-grade hall.

The two walls of the classroom are lined with two four-drawer filing cabinets and four bookshelves. Three of the shelves are filled with books and the fourth houses teacher items. There is one door leading to the outside and two small windows. A call button is located by the door. This is the only connection with the main part of the school, and if used, it contacts the office secretary. Another door leads to the other side of the trailer, which holds a fifth-grade class. There is a small bathroom, but it is used as a storage area. Students are not allowed in that space. A small, portable marker board has the essential learning question of the day displayed, and there is another stationary whiteboard alongside one of the walls. A pull-down map of the United States is attached to the whiteboard. On the ceiling is a huge chart of the human body. In response an inquiry about this, Claire stated there just was not enough space in the classroom to do all the things she wanted, so she had to be creative in that respect. There are three iMac computer stations for the students and a laptop on the teacher’s desk. The laptop is new,

but Claire stressed that many programs won't run on the classroom computers due to the age of the systems. There is one black-and-white printer for all of the computers. A midsize TV is stationed on a rolling cart in the far corner of the room and there is a VCR underneath the TV.

My visit to Claire's classroom occurred during the week when the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was being administered. The tests were given in the morning, and it was now after lunch. Due to the testing, the desks were pulled away from each other and would remain that way for the next two days as testing continued. Above the bookshelves, student work was displayed and a field trip fundraising chart was placed in the center of the work. It was clear the teacher wants to make the classroom atmosphere comfortable, with print curtains on the windows and whimsical items through out the room.

The students were working on World War II projects from a menu of choices. They seemed to be enjoying what they were doing as they were all on task, and the teacher was circulating among them viewing what they are doing. The working supplies were out and available for easy access; there were trays of markers, paper, tape, crayons, and several other common classroom items. The students were stepping over book bags and backpacks as they moved from place to place in the room. Claire saw me watching this and explained that there is always a clutter problem with the students' items, but it was worse than usual due to the testing arrangement. The children did not seem bothered by the items and were mindful of them as they moved around. As the afternoon progressed, the noise level rose, but the learners were all still on task.

After my interviews with Claire, it is clear that the room set up holds true with her understanding of what young gifted children should be exposed to in the classroom

setting. She would love to have more room for them to experience centers and group activities. She tries to give them the space they need, but is limited by the physical constraints of the structure. She shared that the lack of newer computers bothers her, as she is an advocate for the use of technology in the classroom. Claire said she used to do PowerPoint presentations both for and with her students, but has lost the motivation to continue these projects since her equipment has not been updated in several years.

Professional Development and Perceptions

Claire recalled that in her training for teaching the gifted, out of the four required classes the first two were very informative and captured her attention. She did not feel that last two helped her as much:

I got the training through RESA. We attended . . . about six hours a day for a week, and then we met about once a week for the rest of the summer. And then we met once a week through the rest of the school year. So it ended up taking about a year to get in the four classes. The first two classes were very interesting. The first class was Characteristics of th Gifted. We did a case study. And the next class I think was assessment and that was very interesting because I came through college when we weren't required to have any kind of class on assessment. So I thought it was real interesting and we had a lot of practice on a lot of different kinds of kids.

The other two classes, curriculum and the materials one...that stuff was kind of boring. I didn't get a lot out of those. One class was a debate, almost the whole class was centered around a debate and we were in groups and we had to

debate a topic and I just didn't enjoy that. Almost the whole class was built around getting ready for the debate. And you had to research your side of the debate and you know give your arguments and you had to work with your group and everything. I just didn't enjoy it. Our topic was early admission to kindergarten with bright students. You know for gifted students. The early admission to kindergarten was what most of the class time was spent on . . . and that was our class. You know I really wanted more. I wanted more of what can I do with the kids that I have in my classroom now.

When asked if her instructor for the classes had teaching experience, Claire said she did. "She had teaching experience and then she was the [gifted] coordinator in a larger county for a year. So she had experience, she knew a lot about gifted education and she knew a lot about the law, she knew a lot of technical things." Claire seemed pleased with this and was glad to have someone with practical experience in the gifted field.

Claire perceives herself as someone who is learning, but still has a long way to go as a teacher of the gifted in the elementary setting. "I think I have a lot to learn. I think I did better job this year than I did last year." She continued to reflect, saying, "And I think if I did it next year I would do a better job, and if I did it next year I would do an even better job. I really think that I had really big shoes to fill [referring to the teacher whose place she took] but I think I did an OK job. There are things I know I could work on to do better." When asked, "How do you feel others perceive the job of teacher of the gifted?,"

Claire says:

I told you there is a stigma that you as a gifted teacher have all the good kids,

you've got it easy; you don't have any behavior problems and you know it shouldn't be any big deal. You know, everything is honky dory for me and they have all the problem kids and they have all the hard-to-teach kids and theirs is always much harder. They're not exactly mean but they are kind of quick to roll their eyes if you complain. Like, What are you complaining for? You have all the gifted kids. And it's hard, I mean it's not easy teaching these kids. It is, it is much harder than anybody thinks.

The county paid for the classes Claire needed to teach gifted students, but otherwise there have been few opportunities for professional development geared toward meeting the needs of her students. Claire does not feel that she is supported by her school. "They paid for my initial training, but nothing beyond that." Concerning the classroom setting, Claire said:

I really don't think I have a lot of support. I didn't even get extra money to buy anything. All the classroom sets of books that I use I bought myself. I know in the past gifted was given extra money. Our class wasn't given any extra money to buy any kind of gifted supplies. We only got a supplement for the regular classroom students who are in here with the gifted. I got \$200 to buy materials for 23 students. There really hasn't been a lot of support. There are really no comments made to me whatsoever. I mean, I think everybody is so concerned with the No Child Left Behind Act that there are these [gifted] children getting left behind and they don't even realize it.

Technology Training

Claire feels that technology is very important in her classroom and wants to make it more available for all of her students. She does not feel her training addressed technology issues adequately. When asked if she received any training concerning technology for the gifted, Claire said, “No. I mean I think the only thing I can remember is maybe [the instructor] shared a lot of what things the students could participate in with websites and that kind of stuff. But no, there really wasn’t anything about technology.” Because her classroom technology resources are limited, Claire has had to find other ways to meet her students’ needs:

Well, we have the computer lab and the lab attendant. She’s been very receptive to working with me. Because in the classroom we have three computers, and armed with three computers, well, there’s not a lot you can do with three computers and 23 students. So she has been really good about allowing me to let them research in there, you know, giving them a topic and letting them do their research in there. Or giving them websites that I would like them all to go to and observe, look or read or find information on. And she’s been really good about that. And that’s really the only contact we have with technology. I do allow them to use the computers when they do their spelling, vocabulary. They can do some activities on the computer, but we don’t really have a lot other than the research. They need so much more. If I had the space and equipment, we could do films and documentaries. The teacher before me was doing newscasts for the school and I would like to know how to do that with software.

Social/Emotional Training

Claire grew thoughtful when asked about the social and emotional needs of gifted children and whether she received training in her gifted endorsement classes to help with those needs:

Social and emotional needs of gifted children are not the same as regular education; they have strong opinions and they like to be heard. They like to have a voice in what they are doing...learning. I have found they like a lot of independence, you know, they like for them to make choices about what we're going to do and what they're going to do and what they're going to learn. I don't find them needy, not like when I taught regular education students. I want to make sure I do this right for these students. You have a few who have the need to be right all the time in every situation and I don't know what to do with that type of issue.

Claire shared some observations about the cluster group of gifted students, as they interact with the high achievers in her classroom. Claire feels as if this mix of students provides a safe environment for her high-level learners:

I like the way this class is made up, because I think socially they are interacting with the people that they would be with, even if they weren't in this class. My identified gifted would want to work with the same two or three bright students or gifted students in our class. If we were set up in a regular classroom, they would miss out on that type of opportunity. And so I think it's a relaxed atmosphere that they don't feel like they're having to help lower kids. They can work with people on the same level and go on. Emotional needs . . . I don't know anything about

their special emotional needs. We really did not talk about that very much in the classes. We did a lot with characteristics, but not with emotional things. I would not know where to start. What I do understand about it is based on what I experience with my child, but that is one child's situation, and not real research!

Diversity Training

Claire acknowledges that she did get training about the characteristics of some groups of diverse learners. "In my Characteristics class it was really just interesting to learn the differences between gifted children, between White and Black children. I mean you know most of these children are White, middle-class students. And there's not a lot of diversity in here, not in this rural area. I mean I had one Black student last year and I have two Black students this year." She noted that these two African American students did not qualify for gifted services, but were placed in her classroom because they are considered high-achieving students.

Upon further discussion, Claire noted that there is a growing Hispanic population in her school and that Hispanic and African American students combined make up close to thirty percent of the student body. When asked whether the gifted program reflected the overall student population, Claire replied:

No, but I don't think we have any diverse gifted students. I think, I mean we look at test scores and we look at teachers' recommendations and we take those into account; they're just not there. The teachers don't send any recommendations for diverse students. I mean it's just not there. Either way, even if we get the

recommendation forms from a teacher we test them. We look at test scores to see if there are any automatic referrals that we can test and it never works out.

Claire did mention a Hispanic girl who seems very bright and whom the school is attempting to help:

This is her second year in America and we need a different test and we are asking the county office to get us something to give her, because she needs to be tested. Her English is limited, so we need to find a way to test her. And we have two very, very intelligent... possibly gifted students next door [in the fifth-grade class]. From what I understand they've never been tested. I'm not sure when they came in and you know just the process of identifying with the test scores to get the younger girl that we're trying to test this year you know she scored an 8 on her composite ITBS... an 8! So, of course she would never be considered by just her test scores. Well she had a teacher recommendation and so we are listening to what the teachers are telling us about her and you know trying to find something to help identify her. And then the challenge will be you know how to serve her once we get her in there. I also feel very strongly that students with disabilities aren't represented.

Professional Development Needs for Rural Schools/Administrative Support

When asked what type of professional development could be provided in her school that would most benefit her students, Claire replied, "I would like to see real practical things I could use right away. I mean some of the activities that she [the class instructor] gave us are really good but not really practical for this rural school and these

children.” She feels it is important to be able to meet the needs of her bright students. “I think it’s just to make sure that whatever level my students start on that you know I make advancements with them and that they improve and grow no matter where they start.”

When asked what additional support she would like to receive from her administration, Claire replied:

I think I would like to have more training. I would love to have more training with more strategies teaching different students and more with diversity issues. It would be nice to be able to go to the gifted conferences, get information there and just have them [conference presenters] teach classes and those kinds of things. I would love to have gifted staff development because there are really no staff development opportunities for gifted. I mean I got my gifted endorsement, and now there are no courses to go to brush up and there's no courses with “Oh this is new in the field and here are some new ideas.” We really need help keeping up with bigger cities and what is going on in the world.

Claire feels that some of her students could compete with students from larger cities, but realizes there are advantages to being in a city:

I think there are a few that would stack up even. When I think of gifted students in larger cities, I think about the University and all the diversity there is: the professors and all the different ethnic groups and all these different people coming together and all the experiences that there are. The museums and the theaters, the things to do in bigger cities, they're just not around here. Those kids probably have more exposure to things than these children do. So I don't know how much, I don't know, I think that maybe they have a social advantage. I don't know about

mental ability. I think there are so many ethnic groups that are in bigger cities. All the professors from all the different countries are there, and all that stuff makes a rich environment.

She also believes there should be more field trips for her students. Claire was told by the county office that she could take her class on a field trip by themselves, but then they could not go with the rest of the fifth grade when they went on the one out-of-county trip they were allowed for the year:

I think one thing that would help is more support from the administration to do different things because, for an example, last year my class worked really hard. I found out about a trip to Atlanta to the Sci-Trek . . . it was a simulated space mission and it cost \$500. And so my class worked and saved and raised \$500 to go on this trip, and then we were told if you go on that trip we can't allow you to go on any trips with the other fifth graders. So my students had to choose between going on that trip that was so special that they worked so hard on, that the average fifth graders couldn't go on because these students had to be trained in what job they would do and learn all kinds of terminology. They had to go into this simulated space mission where some were in mission control and some were in the spaceship, and they had to build a satellite that they were going to ship out into space. And you know it was such a good experience for them, and then they had to choose between doing that or participating with the rest of the kids or going to Sci-Trek. And it was like what I tried to do in Richmond [Claire was working on a fifth-grade class trip to Richmond, Virginia which was cancelled because it exceeded the one trip out of the county rule]. You know you try to do

something extra. Try to do something special; it gets squashed. And then when you do things like that it's not acknowledged, and no one ever comes out and says, "I am so proud of you all, you did such a great job."

Parental Issues

While issues with parents are not limited to gifted education, the pressure for a teacher to be perfect when teaching gifted students can be overwhelming. Claire said, "Parents of gifted children can be very demanding . . . much more so than the students themselves. You just never know what someone is going to be upset about from one day to the next . . . if you are going to get a sharp note from home or a call from a parent out of the blue." On the issue of grades, Claire observed:

I think that all goes back to parents have to have a grade. They want to see on paper A's. They don't really care what the student knows, what the student can do or what they've accomplished, or even their ability; they want to see an A. I don't know if it's pressure as much as it is stress. Just because, you know, I don't like dealing with irate parents, I don't like dealing with that and you know these parents do want A's for their children's grade and they do go over everything with a fine tooth comb and they come and question just about everything. "Well, why didn't you do a spelling test this week, because you did last week?" There's always stress about that, about what the parents are doing. You know, what they think or like I said earlier about the projects. We do so many projects in here, you know how they are going to feel about the projects. And if they come in and question a grade . . . will I be able to justify that to their satisfaction and say,

“Well, I gave your child this grade because . . .” and [will] they be satisfied with that?

Susan

Susan teaches gifted education to second graders. She taught regular education for 19 years before she took the endorsement classes to allow her to teach gifted education. This is her third year teaching gifted students. Her classroom is arranged very much like a small apartment. There are desks situated in a U-shape near the front of the class and the walls are lined with bookshelves and displays. The teacher’s desk is off to the side relative to the student desk formation and there is a podium at the head of the U near the front of the room. The white boards are filled with posters and reminders, leaving a small space for writing and work. There is also a space on the white board for items on the overhead projector to be seen by all the students.

The classroom is located in a new wing of the school and it has several storage cabinets, a sink and water fountain area, and lots of large windows. There is a couch, story chair, and lots of rug areas that are used for reading, centers, and group work. Student work is displayed on the walls inside the room, as well as in the halls leading up to the room. The teacher has a small area with a microwave resting on top of a compact refrigerator. Colorful fabric covers the bulletin boards, and it coordinates with the couch, rugs, and curtains. There is a large TV mounted in the right corner of the room with a VCR located just below it on a shelf. The back of the room houses four computers and two printers. One of those printers has color capabilities.

On the day of my visit, the students were populating all areas of the room in an appropriate manner. They seemed right at home in the enriched classroom setting. Some were working on individual activities at the four new iMac computers along the back of the room, while others read or worked on spelling activities. The teacher called for the students' attention and announced that they would finish up the project presentations at that time. A parent had entered the room and nodded to one of the children, who was getting ready to share a project. The students were asked to take the chapter book they liked best and create a scene from that book. They seemed to enjoy the activity and the rest of the students crowded around the one sharing. This seemed to be perfectly natural as the student's presentation was centered around a small display.

Susan stressed her desire to teach gifted students as she shared her excitement about how she got involved in the process:

Our principal at the time was interested in developing a program to have a more advanced content model in each grade level to serve the gifted. I had always wanted to do that [teach gifted education], but did not want to give up my actual classroom. For all the many years I have taught regular education, the gifted teacher was someone who came and left, you know . . . she was here for a few hours on two days of the week, and she was gone. But those children [gifted students] never saw her until the next week, and there was no ongoing contact. I liked the idea of having an advanced content model or something close to it instead of just having a pull-out program. I think those children need to really belong somewhere too; they need a home.

Professional Development and Perceptions

In order to teach gifted students, Susan attended four classes sponsored by RESA to earn her gifted endorsement. Two classes were taught by one professor and the remaining two were taught by another. Susan noted,

The professor who did our first two classes had been in the classroom and related well to most of us. The second professor only had preschool experience, and this did not really help her to relate to us [classroom teachers] and share examples. I really learned a lot from the first two classes. The Characteristics class was my favorite and the one with learning to teach them was also good. I did not get as much out of the last two. I am sure it had something to do with the content and the way the classes were taught. I do feel as if I had the best of both worlds due to the fact that one [instructor] had practical experience and the other went to a major university. We took one in the fall, one in the spring and then the last two over that summer following. I was a little worried about not having any actual training before I got the students, but I have taught many years, so I did not let this really get to me.

As a classroom teacher, Susan has confidence that she is meeting the needs of her students and she perceives herself as a motivator. When asked how other teachers viewed her job working with the gifted, Susan indicated that some felt she had it easier than the other teachers:

I feel as if I am no different than anybody else, but I do have the desire to motivate. I have the desire to get as much out of them as possible even at seven or eight years old. I feel that if they start developing those learning habits and if they

start thinking through things and working toward reasoning and logic . . . that will stay with them. This is something I had with me to start with, and the gifted classes helped me focus this even more. I think the other regular education teachers feel as if I teach the gifted kids and my life is a bed of roses. They think I have no problems and that I don't have to do anything but come to work and that everything else happens by itself. It took a while, but now some of them come to me and tell me, "I would not do your job. I could not have all those complicated questions coming at me all the time. I could not handle that kind of pressure and the levels in your room." There are a few teachers who seem to understand. There are a lot more that don't!

When asked about professional development beyond the four classes she took to earn her certification, Susan stated there have been no professional development opportunities geared toward gifted students other than the state conference they can attend:

[The gifted teachers] can go to the state gifted conference . . . that is not the issue. Sometimes, the money is not there, and we have to pay for it if we go. I do try to go to the state literature conference. I have a master's in reading, so I feel good about taking those ideas and making them work for gifted students. Our system is more interested in remediation than acceleration. So, you know, sometimes I think these [gifted] students are perceived as those who will learn in spite of whatever happens to them. It even extends to those who teach those students . . . they will teach them to learn no matter what they are given as far as tools go. Well, we all need help and encouragement. We all need to know more and the more I know,

the better I am able to help them. I feel as if my administrators support me, but they are limited in what they can do. I just wish we could move away from so much stress on the Reading First program, but with the No Child Left Behind fears, the gifted are really having their creativity squelched.

Technology Training

Susan feels it is important that gifted students learn to use and understand the computer very early in their academic career. When asked whether her gifted endorsement classes had addressed technology or how to use it with her students, Susan said, “We didn’t talk about that. I honestly don’t remember seeing anything about it.” Susan offered insight into her classroom computer use:

It is important that they learn the function of the computer and the keyboard. Many of the school-wide programs require the computer, like Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Math. We get some help with this from the one week out of the month they go to the computer lab for their activity time. The computer teacher is great about training them. I think they need access to programs and web sites at this age [second grade], but to a limited degree. We have done several web searches this year and that’s been fine, because they had specific sites to go to that I knew were OK. Monitoring is a problem because sometimes they just click before realizing what they are doing. This can take you way off task and take up a good bit of time to refocus. We have a good filter in place, but it seems something gets through now and then. When they work on the computer here, they have a direct path they follow. I try to be back there at all times with them. I am not sure

if it is appropriate to let them go back to the computer with a program and let them go. I don't think that is good for them. They need to use the computer as a tool.

Social and Emotional Training

Susan reported that some of her students have the attitude that they are better than other students.

Because they are gifted, because they know they're different, sometimes I deal with things like "I'm better than you are." That little attitude of I'm better than you are really bothers me. While they may score higher on a test or while they may have higher order thinking skills or while they maybe able to think critically in a more advanced way, does not make them perfect. They're not really any better than the other children. Now they may have an advantage where another child has a disadvantage. But they're all children, they're all people, they're all learning and I don't want them to feel like just because they have the advantage of those cognitive strengths that they are actually a better person than those other children with whom they come in contact. Because no matter how intelligent they are they'll have to deal with all different kinds of people on all different kinds of levels.

So I think that's one of the most difficult things is to kind of keep your thumb on them and help them to understand that yes, they do have all of these advantages and yes, learning does come more easily for them in most things and

in most areas. I am just not sure how to deal with that in the classroom like this.

You do character training, but is that enough...?

Susan stressed that there are several kinds of situations that arise with gifted students. She said, "I am not saying these children have more social and emotional issues. They seem to have *different* types and *degrees* of those issues. When asked how they compare with her other classroom experience, she commented, "I have taught a long time and have seen just about everything in the regular classroom, but the gifted can take it to a new level, and sometimes you just don't know what to do with it."

Susan elaborated by saying:

They demand a lot of attention, they, um, they are sometimes very self-critical, it's not good enough, you know even if they make a 100 on something it's not good enough. Because there's something wrong . . . the perfectionism, I guess. You know some of them are extremely slow because they strive for perfectionism in everything they do and they'll start over and over and over. So it's going back and trying to help them understand that it's okay to make a mistake. That nobody's perfect that, you know, we learn through those mistakes and sometimes it's okay to have a place that's erased on the piece of paper.

They sometimes are so competitive that they will hurt each other's feelings in the process. And sometimes they are so competitive that there is a jealousy that thrives within some of them. And then they can turn right back around and they can work in a small group and they can share and they can give. And you know it just works out perfectly. But I noticed that if I assign the groups then I will look for certain characteristics. If they assign the groups, if they do like

a self-assignment, then they want to work with their buddies. I can turn it around and say okay, we are going to work in groups of three but you can't work with your two best friends and that alleviates some of that.

During the interview, I asked Susan to think back to the training she received to teach gifted students and share how it did or did not prepare her to address the particular social and emotional needs of gifted children. She replied, "The identification class was where we actually talked about identifying and then we actually looked at the different groups and talked some about perfectionism. It would have been helpful to have zeroed in on some actual situations. We did nothing with counseling or guidance for them."

Diversity Training

Susan has a master's degree in reading and has been a teacher for 20 years. The last four years have been spent working with gifted and high-achieving students. During the interview, she was asked about the critical diversity issues that impact gifted education in her area. Susan said:

As far as here, I mean I don't think there's really an issue looking at scores and things like that. I mean if a child fits in that pool of qualifying scores on the given tests then I think, you know, I mean I don't think there's an issue about testing or referral or whatever. We just don't have anybody who is not White to qualify with the test scores. But I do think that we have had a child that probably should have been in here this year and until the end of the year she was not in the class. It would have been interesting to have seen what she would have done if she had been here all year. The discussion to move her here actually came from one of her

student teachers not from the actual teacher. And the first-year teacher came to me and she said this child doesn't need to be in my reading class and she has the class level right under me. She said she doesn't need to be here. She's reading everything I have, she's finished with her work, it's right and she needs more. And we had done projects for different things all year and so she was here for the last project. And she did just a wonderful job, outstanding job. But it was almost like the other teacher didn't want to give her up because she was that good of a student. She has Hispanic heritage, her daddy is Hispanic and her mother is American.

Susan felt that her training did help her understand the characteristics of diverse children to some degree. She noted, "We were made aware of the characteristics Hispanic children may have and some ideas about how to help them in the gifted program." Susan began to think about this and added, "We really don't have minority students who qualify as gifted here, at least not that we have found." I raised the question about training concerning testing measures for diverse children and Susan responded:

We did talk about the Nagliari [a non-verbal intelligence test that is often given to students who have limited English skills] but we did not really spend much time there. At that point in time we didn't have any children that we [teachers in the endorsement class] were actually teaching that were of other nationalities. So we've not used that test, but we did look at it and talk about it. We did talk about some of the, like, for the Asian children sometimes they feel differently than the other children. The African American children sometimes feel differently. We talked about that, we talked about looking at those different characteristics before

we did any testing per se. But again I mean it is all fuzzy now. There was not a lot of stress placed on those details, I guess. For a lot of that we would actually just go through and pull articles and read for ourselves to find out about the different children that we were in encountering on a personal basis. There was not much material covering that as far as there being a lot to pick from.

The diversity concepts discussed at length in her program dealt not with ethnicity, but with gender differences in some common learning situations in gifted classrooms.

Susan continued:

We did spend a lot of time when we looked at girls and how gifted girls view themselves. We looked at the underachievers and how they view themselves. We also looked at the overachievers, teacher pleasers, and basically what those kids did and how they felt. So we talked a little bit about that, but there again we pretty much looked at the categories that we needed to cover based on what we thought was important to the class. We had to ask “Do we actually have enough class time to cover it at that point in time?”

Susan thought about this for a moment and confirmed that this was how the class decided which material would be covered in the last few class sessions.

Professional Development Needs of Rural Elementary Gifted Teachers

The next part of the interview centered upon types of professional development Susan felt were important in helping her as a teacher of rural elementary students and her suggestions for making the training she received more effective. Concerning the Characteristics of Gifted Learners class, Susan said, “I think identification is pretty well

cut and dry. I mean those characteristics . . . even though there may be a few gray areas . . . I think they are accepted as what is or is not [gifted].” She continued:

But I think going back to the social and emotional issues of those children, I think that whoever that teacher is needs to be more prepared at handling some of those issues. Because the first time that I ran into the problems of the attitude of you know, *I'm better than you*, really caught me. These kids are really intelligent, and I ended up talking to them as adults which was a mistake on my part, basically. I think there needs to be some more training there. Teachers sometimes forget they are children, and that is a big mistake. This just adds to some of the stressors they have already in place.

The next question in the interview was whether it would be helpful to have some basic counseling information about how to help teachers, students, and parents to work through some of the issues she mentioned. Susan responded, “I do, I do, it would have helped me . . . Yes, I think it important.” Susan went on to explain that the testing part of the training was fairly straightforward:

The testing and measurement, I mean, that is pretty well established and you have things you can achieve and work toward with them, but I think you actually have to get to know that child and you have to get, it almost has to be people to people. That's another human being, no matter what age and that's a human being that may have an IQ of 180 but that child is still a person, too. It is good we have more than just IQ to look at with these kids.

Susan also mentioned that it would be helpful to have professional development that was directed toward her actual job. She indicated that she is required to attend staff

development that either has nothing to do with what she does or it is a repeat of what she took in college. “Staff development here is directed toward remediation and low-level readers. There is nothing offered or brought here to work with above average or gifted children.” Upon further reflection, Susan shared,

I have a master’s in reading education and all the Reading First [school-wide program to bring students up to grade level in reading] things that are coming into focus that everybody else is just beginning to use I came through school using. So that’s been a little more difficult, too. Because I would sit there, and I would know, you know, but then I would sit through like double training sometimes. But I mean that was just part of it, but I really don’t need much, if any, of it with the students in my classroom... it is leveled! So rather than it being something that you needed that would help professionally, I was going back to the very basics of something that I already had a master’s in.

Administrative Support

Susan feels quite supported by her school principal, noting, “I feel as if the principal here is pro-gifted, if that makes any sense. I have always received all kinds of support and even encouragement.” However, she does not feel that way about the district office as a result of the restrictions they have put on the gifted program at her school. Due to the school and district-wide remediation programs that have been put into place, the gifted program at Susan’s school has lost some of the freedom it once had. In discussing this situation, Susan shared what she would like to be allowed to do once again:

I would like the ability to be able to teach those things they really need . . . like more computer skills, more exposure to actual books and not short readers. We need to let them work with those things and not having somebody saying well you have to teach this child this, this, and this . . . when that child doesn't need those things because they already know it! I don't know if a whole new set of standards for the gifted kids would help or if you could make the district follow them.

There was also some discussion about field trips and how many each grade level may take in a year. Susan said, "I mean I'd like to be able to take just the gifted second graders to different places. Not all the time on their own, but sometimes there are things these kids are ready to see and can understand that the rest of the second grade would appreciate more when they are older." She went on to explain, "We can only take one trip out of the county each year. If I take just my class to Atlanta for an exhibit or event, we can't go anywhere else out of the county that year . . . even if we raise the money." She said that is one of the few things she dislikes about how her school does gifted education. "You are not the same, but when it is not an easy thing or someone may get upset because their child is not going with the 'other second grade class,' then it is just easy for them to say 'No, you can't go.'"

Concerns for Her School and Recommendations

Susan was asked if she thought her school's rural location had any impact on her gifted students. She stated,

I think it plays a major role. We do have parents who look for things, you know they look for activities, they look for resources, they take their children to

different places. They allow for a lot of enrichment. However, this is not always the case for gifted students and some parents are not able to provide extra activities after school. But then we have some parents who are just doing everything they can do to go to work every day and come home at night. So I think that sometimes that hampers their [children's] education, and yes, I feel like even though we are in a rural setting that we as a school system need to offer our children, our gifted children, anything that anybody else offers to make it fair for all gifted learners no matter where they live in the state.

The discussion of a rural setting continued, and I raised the question of student ability. When asked how she thought her students would fare compared to gifted students from a larger city, Susan replied:

Well, I feel that probably the majority would not be on the same level but I think there again it goes back to all those activities, all those enrichments and opportunities that children in the larger city might have more of an opportunity to participate in than our children here. Well, I think it is because we are so far away. I mean I think distance is a problem. And right now if we left--I mean we've been to Cherokee, to the Indian Village, which was wonderful because we talked and we studied the Cherokee culture. That was wonderful, but because of money and policy we can't leave here before 8:30 in the morning and then we have to be back here by 3:00 because we are short bus drivers and buses. So it's two hours there, two-and-a-half back, and it's not enough time to go through the village and see all the exhibits, listen to the guides and then get back on the bus and get back here by 3:00.

Susan believes there is something that can be done to offset the constraints on students in a rural setting and to compensate for the lack of resources available to them:

And that all goes back to environment, and I think it goes back to parents. The willingness of parents to give up their time to be able to support those children, and I think a lot of them do that. But I think we can go back to finances, you know, once again we need to provide for those high [achieving] kids who need their environment enriched as much as much as we provide for the lower children. And I understand that we spend lots and lots of money on the lower children, but we need to really, really, really work on the understanding of the gifted kids and present that program better . . . and promote that program, too. I mean that's an important program.

Susan was asked to reflect upon what she thought could be done both locally and statewide to bridge the gap in gifted education she thought existed between urban, suburban, and rural areas. Her response revolved around funding and the distribution of funds that are shared among schools; she addressed as well the various programs systems are expected to fund and what the community can do to support the school:

Well, I know that the FTE for gifted services fund takes care care of some of the gifted program situations as far as paying a dollar amount, but it is unknown to some of the gifted teachers as to how that money is used once it reaches the system. We think we are getting a certain amount of dollars, but there is a lot of coding that is done to move the funds around. I know there are lots of programs competing for the money like athletics, but we really need to try to put our money where it will do the most good.

And maybe that's not all finances, you know, that might be resources coming in and that might be nurturing situations with lawyers and doctors and nurses and different people in the community so that our children could see that there is that opportunity and not just sit back and say I can't do it because we are a small town . . . you know that kind of thing, a defeatist attitude. I mean be the best you can do at whatever you do. Whether it's the trash collector or whether it's a physicist. But um, I think it's really important, and I think that's our responsibility to instill in them that they can be whatever they want to be, but they might have to work hard to do it.

Susan identified several problems with her school's model for serving gifted students. She said one of the problems did not begin until the system switched to the Reading First program, but there is a situation concerning grades that does hinder the experience. The model allows for some free exploration, but not like a pull-out model:

Because we use the model we use I have no choice except to work with grades. I would love not to be able to give grades. I would love to be able to do just a lot of problem solving, and I know that I still have to continue to meet the second grade standards for the children in my class. Besides that, parents expect grades. If the grades are not what the parent deems fair, then the gifted program is blamed for the "extra work" and "added stress" it puts on the students.

But I would also like to be able to do more with those children than I can really do because my hands are tied. And although Reading First is wonderful, it is not a grant for gifted children. Reading First is a grant for struggling readers or those who are not on grade level. They do offer support for on-grade level readers, but

it really focuses upon those who are below grade level. But because our school receives that, because our campus receives that, then my hands are tied again.

So I have fought that battle all year. I feel like these children need more work with problem solving. They more need more critical thinking opportunities. They need more work with analogies and things like that, and we haven't been able to do that. Because we have to meet certain criteria for the Reading First grant. And once again it's wonderful, wonderful for those who need it, but like I have mentioned before, the gifted and high-ability students need something else.

Parental Issues

Susan realizes that parents have some anxiety about their children being in a gifted program, but wonders if there may be other reasons for some parents not wanting their children to participate in gifted programs. She shared one particular situation as an example:

We had a child coming from first grade to second grade and her mother decided that she should not be in the program. According to the mother, the child put more pressure on herself than she should. I have seen her in another class room, and I have not seen that pressure. So she has been in a regular classroom this year, in a regular heterogeneous classroom . . . where of course she is the top child in that classroom, whereas if she had been in a gifted classroom, she might not have been the top, but she would have been among the top.

So I kind of wonder if that doesn't have something to do with the motivation behind moving the child. And I think a lot of times I think they're fearful, I think a lot of times the parents are fearful of that. Because all of a

sudden that one particular child is not always the top, and there is somebody over here that can compete on an equal level. And that's wonderful because those kids need that competition, that healthy competition, and they brainstorm, you know, and they work from each other, and their ideas help create other ideas. It is a shame parents don't always see this side of gifted education.

Summary

The following themes were developed from the interviews with the four rural elementary gifted teachers. Professional development for the schools was targeted toward the needs of academically at risk students, and did not encompass the needs of the gifted learners these teachers serve. The rural gifted teachers also struggled with lack of funding and competed for limited funds. All of the teachers felt the need for using technology in their gifted classrooms, but did not receive any training for the use of technology during their gifted endorsement classes. The availability of both technology and support varied from classroom to classroom. The theme that administrators were supportive surfaced, but often they had to consider the “greater good” of the school, and that determined where they allocated the money. Administrators seemed to feel that the gifted students “will make it” with less help than the other students.

The teachers struggled with diversity issues other than those surrounding male and female learning preferences. It was the teachers' perception that they did not spend much time on diversity issues in their gifted classes. They felt that the lack of diversity in their gifted programs was due to fact that the minority students did not meet the criteria. One participant stated, “We really don't have minority students who qualify as gifted

here, at least not that we have found.” The teachers stated they did not have much training in their gifted endorsement courses concerning the social and emotional needs of young gifted students, and expressed the desire for this information.

Concerns for rural schools to have more funds for fieldtrips also came to light. Sporting events were funded, but general fieldtrips were limited. The need to connect and be supported by the community was viewed as a key to reaching the gifted in the rural setting. The teachers felt that parents did not fully understand the components of the gifted program and struggled with the teachers about grades and requirements. The theme of self-efficacy surfaced, and while they all felt good about themselves as teachers, they felt that others often viewed them as “having it easy” teaching gifted students.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of elementary gifted teachers concerning the training and professional development they received to prepare them to teach gifted students. Research on gifted teachers' perceptions of training and professional development has not been fully developed in the gifted education literature. This chapter will review the pertinent literature concerning the question. The following four questions guided the study:

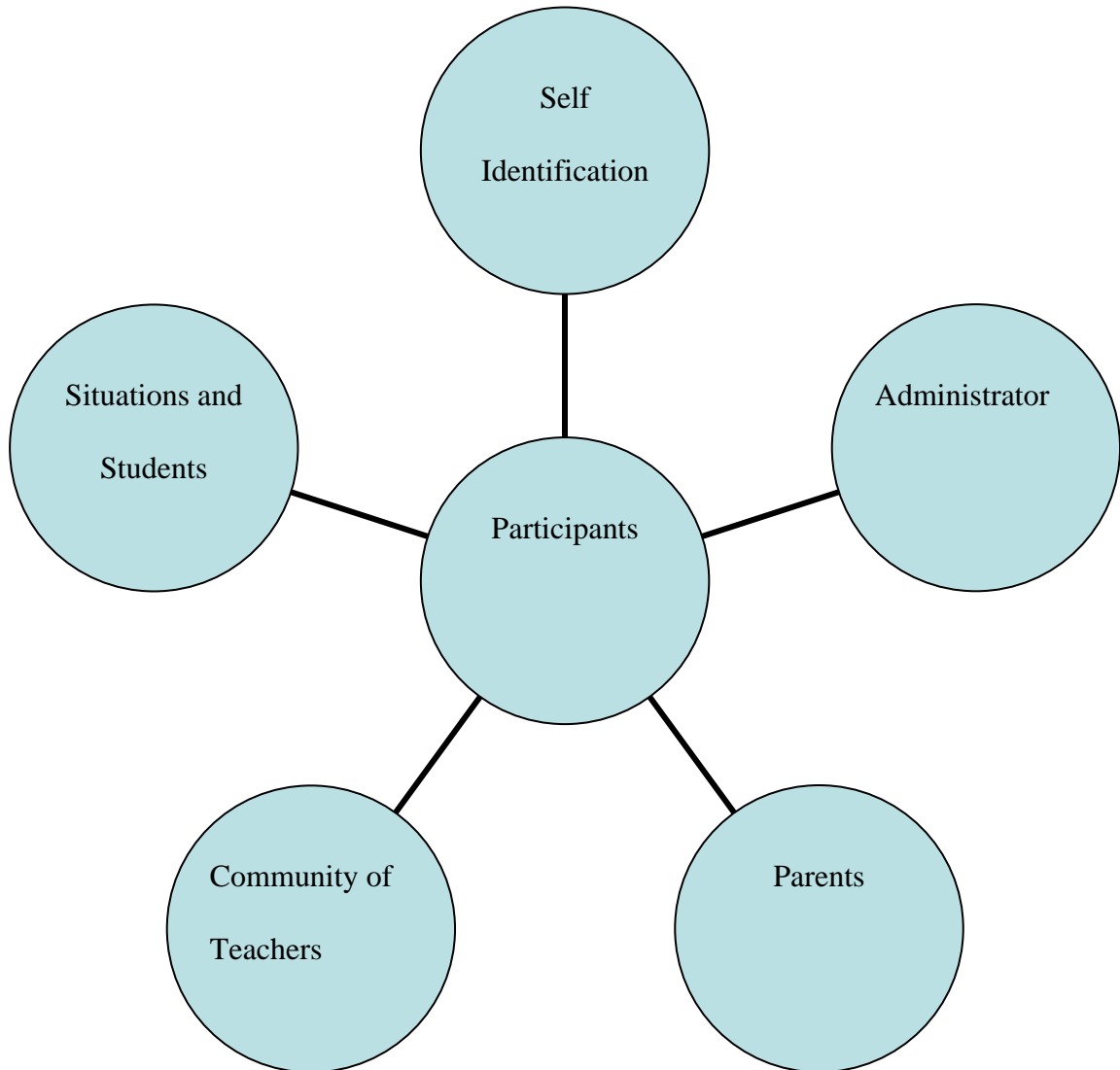
- 1) In what ways have training and professional development experiences influenced elementary teachers of the gifted and their perceptions of instruction for gifted students?
- 2) How are elementary teachers of the gifted supported after completing the requirements for the teaching endorsement in gifted education?
- 3) How do elementary teachers of the gifted perceive their training and professional development in the areas of: a) technology, b) social-emotional development, and c) diversity?
- 4) What types of professional development experiences do rural elementary teachers of the gifted view as desirable or appropriate (likewise undesirable or inappropriate)?

The themes discovered in this study show several experiences which are shared among the participants concerning training, support, and the rural location of their

schools. The goal of this study is to understand these elementary level teachers of the gifted, and their perceptions of the training, support, and development needed to reach their students. The themes support the research questions of the study. The questions are used as a means of formatting the information and serves as a means of organizing the themes of the research (Prus, 1996). The participants' narratives supported much of the literature in gifted education used in the literature review of the study. The section will be organized around four headings: training and professional development; supporting the gifted teacher; training in the areas of technology, social emotional development, and diversity; and finally the rural setting and the development of the gifted teacher. I will conclude the chapter by detailing implications of the study and future research ideas that were developed from the themes.

I was surprised by a few of the ideas I discovered which I had not anticipated. Figure 1 gives a visual concept of the connections developed by the participants' interviews. There are five direct points of identification that each show a facet of who the participants are as teachers of rural gifted elementary students. All of the teachers made connections to these points as they engaged in the interview process. While some emerged through questions in the interview guide included in the Appendix, unexpected connections also surfaced over the course of the discussions. Those connections are woven into the themes that are discussed below and more specifically under the Gifted and Self-Identity section.

Figure 1. Data display: Participants' Understanding of Themselves in the Job Setting



Training and Professional Development

Professional development and continual professional training are important components for the teacher of the gifted in elementary education. Appropriate development gives teachers of the gifted perspective and a positive identity as teachers, which aids in the retention of good teachers (Innman & Marlow, 2004). Well-trained gifted teachers are rare, particularly in rural settings where resources are scarce and gifted education has a lower priority than the needs of regular education and special education. Joyce said, "There is nothing geared toward high achievers. There is nothing for gifted learners." Sara never receives information of workshops to develop high learners, and Claire and Susan stressed that the gifted learners and teachers are not receiving with the same level of support as other groups. The participants of the study echoed the issues of the importance of appropriate professional development. A study conducted by VanTassel-Baska (2006) found professional development opportunities for gifted teachers are extremely limited and not perceived to be adequate to meet the needs of those teachers. Staff development is not driven by teacher enhancement or connected to local or general gifted standards. Joyce, Sara, Claire, and Susan each expressed that they were required to attend professional development geared toward students who are considered below grade level, and not the students in their classrooms. For novice gifted teachers, the reality as related to their identity as a gifted teacher and the shock of expectations can be daunting (Joffe, 2001). Joyce, Sara, and Susan did not have any instruction for teaching the gifted until several weeks after they were given classrooms full of gifted learners. Claire did have one class completed when school began. Joyce and Susan both expressed that this was very stressful to them and worried

that they would not know what to do. Claire indicated that she needed more of the practical types of things to help her get her class going. She said, “I wanted more of what I can do with the kids I have in my classroom right now.” These findings are similar to those of VanTassel-Baska (2006), Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee (2001), and Minkel (2004), who found that teachers of the gifted must receive proper training, ongoing support, and appropriate funding if they are to be effective and competitive in their settings.

The aspects of organization, curriculum, framework of instruction, and teachers’ training for education are crucial for the success of students in gifted programs. Studies have shown the need for professional development and training to help teachers understand the dimensions of the gifted student (Tomlinson, et al., 1995).

Recommendations are concentrated around the development of teachers in pre-service training, but should be provided for all. Teachers at every level should be trained in understanding the needs of diverse learners, utilizing strategies that focus on academic diversity and student-centered views of instruction. Elementary teachers of the gifted need to be given the support to translate beliefs into classroom practice and avoid the “one size fits all” concept of teaching their high ability learners.

The participants in this study indicated their pre-service experiences were limited concerning gifted education, and focused upon techniques to reach at-risk and average level learners. Claire recalled reading some information in a text about high level students in an educational psychology class, but it was only a subtopic within the chapter.

Workshops can be used to raise teachers’ awareness for diverse learning strategies. Such modes of training aid the teachers’ ability to implement practices that

address students' needs. There is an expressed desire to have these types of experiences available to elementary gifted educators, but this has not been the case for any of the individuals involved, as in Sara's case. Often in rural schools, the training is not concentrated in a specific area such as gifted education. Resources or the lack thereof, may prohibit consultants' contributing to pre-service learning at small or rural colleges. Schools may face a situation where the commitment on behalf of the administration is not there.

Dettmer and Landrum (1998) promoted an *Inquiry Model* in the training of gifted and talented personnel to use as a method for problem solving groups, and school improvement projects. The *Involvement in a Development/Improvement* process is a type of staff development that includes the process of school improvement or working on the curriculum. Adult learning practices are not often found in professional development training. Johnson and Vickers (2001) pointed to the benefit in gifted and regular education from experiences in which the members of a group become active learners by working in groups and having the chance to ask questions. Frasier et al (1995) found that when teachers experience professional development geared toward the identification and teaching of gifted economically disadvantaged students, they have greater ability to see talents and gifted among those students. Schlichter (1992) found that teachers involved in staff development did not feel as if administration supported the gifted and talented education. Upon further discussion with my participants, three of the four felt as if those in charge did not have a complete understanding of gifted training due to their lack of exposure to the subject.

Professional development for teachers of the gifted should be an ongoing process if it is to be effective. Landrum, Callahan, and Shaklee (2001) believe the teachers do not develop a professional understanding without the enhancement of staff development. Teachers must be encouraged to stay current in the area of gifted research and best practices. The concepts of being left alone and lacking verbal support surfaced during the interviews. Concerning diversity and professional development, Ward, (2003) stressed that “a teacher fulfills too important of a role in a child’s life not to be an encourager, a respecter of all students, an empowering agent, a cultural mediator, and a holder of high expectations for every student in his/her classroom” (p. 76). Teachers and students in teacher training programs are predominantly White and come from rural or suburban areas, and development is important if both teachers and students are to reach their potential. Formal education can give the teacher exposure to multi-cultural issues, but ongoing training gives the teacher the opportunity to reflect on specific issues within their classrooms. Often, educators who are new to a teaching situation like learning teaching gifted students have a hard time moving beyond the basics. If the elementary teacher of the gifted is to improve and grow, then it is necessary to provide support in a variety of ways.

Support for the Gifted Teacher: Post Endorsement Training

As stated in the last section, school administrators are asked to make decisions concerning educational priorities. Often, the administrators use a utilitarian approach, that is, what is good for the most students (Inman and Marlow, 2004). The approach

marginalizes gifted students because the gifted population is identified by strict parameters that a large population will not obtain. The professional literature on support of gifted programs is thin. The support and interaction of administrators was noted as an important factor by new teachers developing gifted programs in rural areas. The researchers (Johnsen, Haensley, Ryser, & Ford, 2002) discussed the effect on the programs in schools where new administrators came into the system and were not supportive. The teachers of the gifted noted the lack of direction and success. Joyce felt supported by the administration, but was frustrated by the expectations of the parents. Claire also felt overall support, but wanted more training resource for trips from the central office. Teachers feel more connected and are successful with the support of the administration (Gusky, 1986).

Training in Technology, Social Emotional Development, and Diversity

Training for gifted teachers is crucial for developing the skills and strategies needed in the gifted elementary classroom. Technology, social emotional development, and diversity are three areas designated as essential for a successful gifted program (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). Silverman (1997) stressed that there is a need for true collaborative learning where likely partnerships are created out of like interests, talents, and needs. “Emotional development is given equal importance with cognitive development; therefore groups are formed for the purpose of dealing with affective and social issues.” Ford and Grantham (1996) also stated the need for teachers to become more culturally aware and sensitive to their students. Making teachers aware of these social and emotional issues is essential not only to the training of elementary gifted

teachers, but in making it a part of a reflective practice. This training is often overlooked in rural areas, due to the idea that there is not diversity in the schools (Innman & Marlow, 2004).

Luhman and Fundis (1989) and Begory and Slovinsky (1997), in their research in the Appalachian Mountains, focused their attention on low income populations and the preparation of teachers to understand their particular needs. Hébert and Beardsley (2001) and Powell, Abey, and Carpenter-Abey (2003) stated that technology in the classroom is a working solution to allow for advancement and support at all levels.

According to the participants, technology and social/emotional needs for the gifted were not addressed at length during their training for the gifted endorsement. The concepts of ‘being different’ and how to accept those who are “not as able” were the focus of the social and emotional discussions during classes. When asked to share critical diversity issues in gifted education, none of the teachers could respond directly to the question. Upon further clarification, all four indicated that diversity was not really an issue for their schools. The minority rates for the schools in the study range from fifteen to twenty-one percent. While all of the participants’ schools have diverse populations, the students in their gifted classes are Caucasian. When asked if they learned how to identify diverse students who are gifted and the characteristics of those particular students, the response was, for the most part, negative.

Other than the learning differences between males and females, three of the four could not recall any other discussions about the characteristics of diverse students who are gifted. One mentioned a discussion about Asian students. The overall perception was that diversity is not an issue for rural areas even though the areas themselves are indeed

becoming more and more diverse. The implications here focus upon the idea that teachers may not feel as if they are doing enough for their students, and those teachers may need continued developmental support. An important factor to remember is that training should be ongoing and meaningful. Support of administrators is crucial. If teachers are not being supported and given positive, productive, and pertinent staff development in their field of expertise, then they cannot be expected to do the best job possible.

Technology

Technology is viewed as an integral part of the education of gifted learners. Technology has allowed gifted students from the most rural area of the country to interact with professionals and educators. Students study interesting subjects from scientists conducting the latest research in the world of discovery, present information to other gifted students, and develop new uses of technology. A growing number of gifted students are choosing computer science and other fields of technology for a future career. Gifted program specialists were probably among the first to recognize this area as one that our students would know more about than their teachers; the opportunity to learn from our pupils has been most gratifying (Imbeau, 1999). For rural students, the internet opens up the world. Information is accessible to all gifted programs and allows rural teachers the opportunity to facilitate a first class education to their students.

Nugent (2001) refers to the “gifted at risk” and the power of technology to level the playing field for all students. Students in rural areas are categorized as “gifted at risk.” The term describes students who are not allowed to learn to their potential. Professional development in gifted education and technology training are both facilitated

by technology. Gifted education professional development is available through distance learning techniques and has been successful (Lewis, 2000). Teachers must feel comfortable with technology and understand its use to integrate technology into the classroom. Teachers must spend time on acquiring the necessary skills and practicing the techniques before effectively implementing the strategies in the classroom. Riley and Brown (1998) stated the key to the effective use of technology is combining successful teaching practices and technological tools.

Social Emotional Development

Teachers must be trained to understand the social and emotional development needs of gifted students. When teachers are placed in gifted classrooms by administrators as a reward or to simply fill a position, like Joyce and Susan in this study, the gifted students can suffer both educationally and personally. Hébert and Neumeister (2002) pointed out that the intellectual and creative abilities of many gifted children make them feel isolated from other students. The gifted student can feel alienated in a classroom of peers with different interests. Adults, particularly those who are not gifted, misunderstand the developmental needs of gifted children. Gifted females may abandon their potential and independence to conform to norms or seek the perceived acceptance of male students (Callahan, Cunningham, and Plucker, 1994). Gifted children encounter their world in unique ways. Gifted students often require counseling to help them resolve the perceived disconnect with other students (Milne and Reis, 2000). Teachers' perceptions and actions can cause difficulties for the development of the gifted student (Callahan, Cunningham, and Plucker, 1994).

The participants voiced a lack of training and education in the area social and emotional development as it pertained to gifted students. Joyce stated her training came in her undergraduate degree and not in the RESA training. She stated, “I learned most of what I know from my child development class from my undergraduate degree. However, my gifted training did not prepare me at all.” Sara also related she was lacking training that focused on the needs of the gifted teacher. The conclusion of these findings from the participants is that the training of gifted teachers in the area of the social and emotional needs students is lacking. The education they received from RESA in the area of social and emotional development was general and not specific. Any training of gifted teachers must include preparing teachers for the unique students they will encounter.

Diversity

Upon review of the literature, there seems to be little information concerning the perceptions of gifted teachers regarding the educational experiences which allowed them to identify and teach diverse gifted students. This finding echoes the sentiments of researchers in the field such as Bernal (2002), Ford and Grantham (1997), and Frasier et al (1995). In order to gain an understanding of the needs of these teachers in relationship to the problem, literature from other sources is used to build a foundation. Understanding the needs of the gifted and talented student is crucial to the problem. Frasier, et al. (1995) found that there are several attributes which are key to identifying diverse students: communication skills, imagination/creativity, humor, inquiry, insight, interest, memory, motivation, problem solving, and reasoning skills. Passow and Frasier (1996) identified the ways in which teachers can help identify talented and gifted students in minority Each

state approves an educational curriculum taking into consideration the suggestions of several national agencies which provide research surrounding what should be taught in school. How the material is taught is not regulated. This is true for both the regular and gifted educational curricula.

Diversity training was a confusing subject for the participants. While at first, the teachers expressed a sense of competency from their training, follow up questions revealed they were unsure of what diversity encompassed. Sara was unsure if she understood the characteristics of the minority gifted student, and she could only reply “I think so.” She felt diversity was more common in larger cities where there were different nationalities, and did not reach her rural elementary school. She commented, “I have several bright non-white students, but none qualified for the gifted program.” Susan also stated that minority students do not qualify for the program. Without proper training, teachers are not able to recognize the strengths of these students (Ford and Harris, 1999), (Frasier et al., 1995), and (Passow and Frasier, 1996). This lack of training leads to the statement, “We don’t have any qualified minority students.” The follow up questions to these teachers were important. Clearly, each one struggled with diversity and the specific needs of minority gifted children. Training must target the characteristics of minority gifted students, and specify the needs of these populations.

Rural setting and the Gifted Teacher

Frequently, there is a lack of funding for the local schools in rural areas, as the economic situation may be depressed due to a decrease in farming. Rural areas, like inner

cities have lower paying jobs and less managerial or professional opportunities. In many cases, there are limited gifted services due to lack of interest or participation (Colangelo, Baldus, Assouline, and New, 2003). Often, academic expectations may vary among smaller school systems, which can send mixed messages to students, parents, and teachers (Stanley, 1986). On a more positive note, the teacher/student ratio is usually smaller and teachers often live in the areas in which they teach. They also tend to know the parents of the children in their classrooms (Colangelo, Baldus, Assouline, and New, 2003). Rural schools are often the center of the community and are the buildings where many of the town meetings are held (Lewis, 2000).

In order to combat some of the adversities smaller schools face, communities should be encouraged to build partnerships with their local schools in order to bring about a firm support for the education of their future. Lewis (2000) discussed the need for the youth of the community to have a sense of value for the qualities and challenges for their rural area. The members of the neighborhood should display a sense of pride in their school. Schools need to provide a curriculum which includes a variety of projects and units on several levels to educate students about the history and resources of the town. If the youth can be drawn in to the inner workings of the area, they may become a part of the community's future.

Rural settings have a profound effect on gifted education and the teachers of gifted children. Lewis (2000) notes the pattern of out-migration and under education. Many rural settings watch their talented citizens move to suburban and urban areas after high school. Rural settings produce an image for some in the community of elitism, in that a small number of students given preferential treatment. Rural communities may

serve a small number of students in a large area or a large number of students in a smaller radius (Obi & Obiakor, 2000). Administrators report problems such as limited access for gifted education and support. High attrition, poor recruitment, and difficulty with training are also reported as hampering gifted education in rural settings (Helge, 1984).

Training for professionals in rural settings is crucial for appropriate gifted education. Often the teachers for the gifted are teachers recruited from traditional classrooms. Teachers may not have access to graduate programs and rely on certificate programs or professional training at district levels (Obi & Obiakor, 2000). Collaborative learning and supportive attitudes must prevail for successful gifted programs and teachers to prevail.

RESA provided training for the 4 teachers. While the teachers could have chosen a local university to receive training, the convenience of RESA drew the teachers. The teachers varied in the extent to which they believed the training was adequate in preparing them for the gifted classroom. They had hoped they would receive practical information that could be applied to their classes immediately. As Claire stated, “I would like to see real practical things I could use right away.” While the RESA provided the convenience of a local training site for the four teachers, their perceptions revealed they were not confident in their knowledge of the gifted students and the students’ specific needs.

The Gifted Teacher and Self-identity

The gifted teacher forms identity from several sources. The views of the administration and fellow teachers, the community, and education and professional development all inform the gifted teacher's identity. The teachers are often attracted to gifted education because of personal attributes (Mills, 2003). Joffe (2001) described the need of teachers to learn independence as teachers and become confident in their competence. Education in universities teaches the attributes of successful gifted teachers, but the true skills are learned in action. Developing the skill of a gifted teacher is encouraged when mentors and others are used to build confidence and a sense of importance (Lindsey, 1980). Reflective practice also gives the teachers the ability to understand what they learn in action and give language to the skills they acquire and connect them to practice (Pullorak, 1993).

A study conducted by Boyer and Bandy (1997) found that teachers in rural areas did not feel as if they were prepared to teach students of diverse learning populations. More than half of those studied thought they were meeting the students' emotional needs, but less than half stated the same confidence when asked about meeting their academic needs. Brophy and Good (1986) concluded that there is a viable correlation between the perceptions of teachers and the achievement of students. Teachers feel some of the factors which contribute to classroom success are group size, structure of classroom, and active instruction. Teachers that believe their education has prepared them to be active and structured perceive themselves to be ready in that respect. Clark (2002) stated that teachers of gifted students should be creative, intelligent, intuitive, flexible, and have an understanding of the emotional and social needs of gifted individuals.

Whitlock and DuCette (1989) acknowledged some desirable characteristics of teachers who work with the gifted as high intelligence, diverse cultural interests, the ability to relate well to talented individuals, and broad general knowledge. According to the reported results of a national study, Hultgren and Seeley (1982) found desired competencies for teachers of the gifted included knowledge of the gifted and the needs of those individuals, the ability to create and promote a positive learning environment for those with high levels of intelligence, skill in the identification of the gifted, and an understanding of the social and emotional needs of those students.

When gifted teachers are not given the appropriate training and encouragement, they become discouraged and ineffective in their work (Maker & Nielson, 1995). Often, the teachers develop an identity as a gifted teacher from action as well. When programs are under-funded and training programs neglect the gifted population while focusing on other programs, the teachers feel devalued (Joffe, 2001). All of the participants felt that the gifted program was not well funded, and Susan stated, “I know there are lots of programs competing for the money like athletics, but we really need to try to put our money where it will do the most good.” In rural schools where resources are limited and gifted populations are smaller, gifted education becomes a luxury in the mind of the education community (Joffe, 2001). The participants discussed their self image as it related to themselves and the classroom. The teachers related their experiences with administration, budgeting, and their status in the educational community projected by other teachers.

The teachers were motivated and perceived their assignment to gifted education as important. The teachers expressed a sense of motivation and pleasure in teaching students of this caliber while dealing with the view of other teachers that gifted students are easy to teach. As a classroom teacher, Susan has confidence that she is meeting the needs of her students, and she perceives herself as a motivator. When asked how other teachers viewed her job working with the gifted, Susan indicated that some felt she had it easier than the other teachers:

I feel as if I am no different than anybody else, but I do have the desire to motivate. I have the desire to get as much out of them as possible even at seven or eight years old. I feel that if they start developing those learning habits and if they start thinking through things and working toward reasoning and logic . . . that will stay with them. This is something I had with me to start with, and the gifted classes helped me focus this even more. I think the other regular education teachers feel as if I teach the gifted kids and my life is a bed of roses. They think I have no problems and that I don't have to do anything but come to work and that everything else happens by itself.

While confident in the purpose and goals of gifted education the teachers struggled with the view other teachers had of their classrooms. The perception of gifted students as easier to teach and not needing of motivation to learn are long held beliefs. The teachers' confidence in their gifted preparation was not very strong. Most depended on their previous experience and education to get them through.

Conclusion

The findings in the study, drawn from the literature and the interviews of four gifted elementary teachers suggest that gifted teachers' perceptions are influenced by internal motivations for teaching gifted students and the perceptions of the environment around them. Gifted teachers are not sufficiently taught the important subjects of diversity, social emotional development, and technology through gifted certificate programs and professional development training. Teachers must draw on their early experience and education to understand problems and resolve them.

Rural gifted education teachers are supported, but misunderstood. While the administration may offer support to the teachers, the competition for funds is intense. The perception of gifted students by those not trained in gifted education appears to be "they will make it." Training for the specific needs of gifted teachers is set aside with the utilitarian view of the greater good for the majority. A commitment to rural gifted teachers' training and education is needed to appropriately meet the needs of these valuable resources

Recommendations

In light of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1) The state should review the curriculum required for the gifted endorsement with consideration to diversity, technology and social emotional needs. It would appear that there is both a need and a desire for deeper understanding of the needs of gifted learners. The requirements for receiving the gifted endorsement vary from state to state. A survey of these requirements would be beneficial in a review, as would any reevaluation

procedures which may develop as a result of the review. The lack of training to facilitate an understanding of the social and emotional needs of gifted students is evident in this study, and the existing literature on the subject supports those findings. The same is true concerning issues of diversity and cultural awareness. The subject of technology is one that also must be given consideration when evaluating the needs for teachers of the gifted. There is a call for the use of technology, but an actual hands-on training is not included in the present requirements. The literature and the findings in this study support the necessity for this type of instruction.

2). There should be more uniformity in the way the required material for the gifted endorsement is delivered. Training experiences for the four participants in the present study seemed to differ in content even though they all attended a local RESA for their endorsements. There were clear indications that there were some gaps in what these individuals experienced, as opposed to what is prescribed by the Professional Standards Committee (the state organization which decides course content for endorsement classes).

3) Funding should be made available for rural schools in order to provide appropriate learning experiences for gifted students. Money for technology and educational trips is essential. The competition for funds is fierce in rural school systems, and often it is the the gifted program that goes under funded or not funded at all. This is common among small school systems, and the schools represented in this study are no exception. If these teachers are expected to give their gifted learners an appropriate education, provisions must be made to support them financially. Research shows that technology and educational trips can help rural gifted students in their quest for advanced understanding and knowledge. The concept of investing for the future should include these students as

important funding decisions are made. More often than not, athletic programs are fully funded before enrichment programs are even considered in some rural areas.

4) School systems should provide appropriate professional development experiences for gifted teachers in rural settings. The participants in the study recognize that they need to be kept up to date on what is happening in their field. They also think that there may have been gaps in the education they received during their gifted endorsement training from RESA. It is neither appropriate nor beneficial for teachers of the gifted to attend professional development experiences that are not helpful to them in their job setting. If they do not have remedial students, there is no purpose in putting them through training geared toward remedial education. Such inappropriate training does not allow the teacher to develop the skills needed in his or her job teaching advanced learners.

5) Gifted teachers and school administrators need to develop cultural competency if they are to identify and successfully serve diverse, gifted learners within their schools. The literature shows that schools are centering their practice on the learning preferences of white males and that those practices extend into gifted program services (Bernal, 2002, Nieto, 2004, and Sapon-Shevin, 1993). Gifted teachers and administrators should be aware of this and work toward providing multiple methods of identifying and serving a variety of learning styles. By doing so, more gifted students of underrepresented populations could be included in an appropriate academic setting and possibly become more successful in their academic pursuits.

6) School faculty and administration need to develop greater understanding of all gifted learners to provide help in both identifying and supporting those learners. If all certified

school personnel are trained to recognize the characteristics of gifted learners and their specific needs, a wider net can be cast in the search for students who need gifted education services. Faculty, school counselors, and administrators should understand the social emotional needs of gifted students and put into place strategies to meet those needs (Slilverman, 1993). This study provided insight into the training experiences of rural gifted education teachers. They shared that their training did not sufficiently prepare them to help their gifted learners cope with their everyday needs, which are often more acute than those of regular education students, and which are more compounded for diverse learners (Bernal, 2002, and Ford and Grantham, 1997).

7) The research community needs to do further study to identify a better understanding of the diversity training needs in rural areas. There was not a clear understanding of what the term diversity meant among the participants of this study, and this was made clear during the interviews. Even after the researcher offered clarification, there was not a common understanding of what was being discussed. This was an uncomfortable subject for all the participants, and this may stem from either the subject matter itself or the fact that they were not sure about the terminology even after clarification or a combination of both. The statements made concerning the schools not having any minority students who qualify for gifted programs were disheartening, frightening, and most likely, untrue. It is the researcher's opinion that the individuals believe this is the case, but if proper training were received in the areas of recognizing and developing talent among diverse learners, the teachers would realize they do indeed have gifted minority students in their schools.

Limitations

I will note three limitations to this study. The first is that it was limited to a small number of participants. While the information was valid and important, the sample size was limited to four.

The second limitation deals with the lack of diversity among my participants. All four were white females, as this is a true representation of the gifted teachers in the rural area studied. I am aware that my connection with my participants as both a white female and a former elementary gifted education teacher who taught in a rural setting impacted my work, and I had to be very careful in my attempt to control bias during both the interview and data interpretation process. I feel this also put me in a position that limited my ability to probe deeper into some of the responses made concerning their understanding of their job and the issues that impact it. As a former gifted teacher with similar teaching experiences, I felt I had to limit my questions so that I would not make the participants feel uncomfortable. My formal training was not the same as theirs, so I also wanted to be careful not to hinder the responses by giving verbal or nonverbal cues that I was making judgments.

The third limitation was the inability to establish a clearer understanding of diversity, as it is a sensitive topic. As the interviewer, I was not able to create a level of comfort or understanding to elicit that information from the participants. Banks (1996) shared that most teachers' understanding of diversity is considered to be limited to the surface of the subject. Again, not wanting to allow my own viewpoints and knowledge to interfere with the interviews, I had to keep silent while listening to teachers of gifted

students share information that was not correct concerning diverse students. I do not blame them, but rather the educational process they completed that left them with the impression that rural areas do not have minority students who qualify as gifted learners. It is almost as if the very tools created to help teachers embrace all gifted learners are keeping us from that very task. Without more information about what my participants know and where they are in understanding their own diversity, it is hard to delve into the topic with a clear path. Howard (1999) summed up this limitation with the following observation:

We cannot fully and fruitfully engage in meaningful dialogue across the differences of race and culture without doing the work of personal transformation. If we as White educators are not deeply moved and transformed, there is little hope that anything else will significantly shift. We must assume that we will be changed in the process of engagement and dialogue (p. 4).

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1) Tell me about your training in gifted education.

Probes: What made you decide to become a teacher of the gifted?

How do you perceive yourself as a teacher of the gifted in a rural elementary setting?

What are some of the challenges and experiences you have faced in teaching the gifted?

2) In what ways have you been supported in your professional development as teacher of the gifted (before, during, and after receiving your endorsement)?

3) Describe the social and emotional needs of the children you teach. In what ways has the training you received prepared (or not prepared) you to address these needs?

4) Tell me about technology instructional needs for gifted children in your setting. In what ways has the training you received prepared (or not prepared) you to address these needs?

5) What are some of the critical diversity issues in gifted education and how do they impact your setting? In what ways has the training you received prepared (or not prepared you) to address these issues?

5) In what ways would you change the training in gifted education that you received?

6) What is the most important aspect of your job and what would help you do your job more effectively?