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# An examination of the expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF  
BEGINNING TEACHERS OF THE GIFTED

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice

By

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation has reached its completion due to the gifts bestowed upon me by my Creator- for he has provided me with a deeper sense of commitment and dedication than I could have possibly mustered on my own.

It is also dedicated to my family: my husband, parents, siblings, grandmother, and little one. I must acknowledge and thank my father, Victor McGlenn, for he gave me the courage to dream. Thank you, Daddy. I must also recognize my husband, for without him, my dreams would have never come true. Mommy- I stand on your shoulders. Thank you for believing. Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my sister, Sandy, for she has shown me the power of perseverance and selflessness. You have surely been among my role models.

This dissertation is an example of the power of extended kinship and the special bond held between members of a sisterhood. My closest friends, Jessica and Karen, have inspired my work- for they have been among my greatest sources of encouragement and support.

Finally, this effort is dedicated to the precious memories of my departed loved ones- my beloved Uncle Robert, beautiful cousin Robin Smith, and Grandma Johnnie Mae. May they always know how much they were loved and how dearly they are missed. Each of their lives affected that of my own, and they will never be forgotten.

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers in the field of gifted education have pointed to the need for deeper understanding of the complex expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted (Pollak, 1996; Hanninen, 1988), that is, teachers of the gifted who have less than three years' experience teaching gifted learners. Further, several important questions remain unanswered regarding the structure/content of preparation for pre-service teachers of the gifted (Joffe, 2001; Chan, 2001; Mills, 2003; Hansen and Feldhusen, 1994; Johnsen, 2004). Finally, the field of gifted education would benefit from insight into the experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted, particularly insight from a first-hand perspective.

The purpose of this qualitative research effort was to shed light on the expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted. This was done through the utilization of the case study approach, whereby seven beginning teachers of the gifted were invited to participate. The research aimed to provide school districts, both locally and nationally, with insight into what can be done to assist in the preparation, support and retention of beginning teachers of the gifted. The final purpose of this study was to give voice to the experiences of this population of educators.

The findings of the study center on the notion that the needs of beginning teachers of the gifted are different from the needs of other beginning teachers. Namely, all seven participants felt that their undergraduate courses in education, and to some extent their graduate courses, did not adequately cover the needs of the gifted. Participant insight revealed a calling for curriculum training on differentiating instruction and acceleration. Beginning teachers of the gifted reported a desire to receive training on the social and emotional needs of the gifted, and the IEP. More specifically they felt unable to address the social and emotional needs of this population, particularly underachievement and depression. Finally, these beginning teachers of the gifted expressed a need for other kinds of supports such as mentors and opportunities to network with other teachers of the gifted.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Recent research findings conclude that we lack a sufficient understanding of the complex expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted (Pollak, 1996; Hanninen, 1988). We know little about what they expect from the professionals with whom they work, or what they experience as novice teachers of the gifted. Further, one important question still remains unanswered regarding the structure/content of education for pre-service teachers of the gifted, in terms of the information they are given prior to entering the gifted classroom (Joffe, 2001; Chan, 2001; Mills, 2003; Hansen and Feldhusen, 1994; Johnsen, 2004). More specifically, little is known as to how successful university coursework is in terms of providing adequate preparation for teachers who will be entering the gifted classroom. The field of gifted education would benefit greatly from insight into the experiences of teachers new to the gifted setting--particularly first-hand perspective. Finally, an absence of literature also suggests that researchers and practitioners alike need to have a better understanding of the supports in place for such teachers, and of the professional development opportunities in which they are able to participate.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to shed light and to give voice to the expectations and experiences of experienced teachers who are placed in the gifted setting. The research also aimed to provide school districts, both locally and nationally, with insight into what can be done to assist in the preparation, support and retention of teachers of the gifted. This being said, districts may be making poor hiring decisions, more specifically they may be hiring teachers to work with the gifted who are ill prepared to do so. These same districts may be doing further disservice to beginning teachers of the gifted by providing inadequate in-service support.

In order to ensure the success of these teachers and the students with whom they work, stakeholders in the field of education must be better informed as to what is experienced by this population of educators. Moreover, this research sets out to discover what additional assistance, if any, needed to be provided to these novice educators of the gifted. A review of studies which focus on beginning teachers of the gifted, reveals an absence of research on these topics (Joffe, 2001; Pollak, 1996), which suggests that each have to date been wholly overlooked. In order for

the field of gifted education to move forward, such an examination must be conducted.

In completing this study I am able to reflect upon my own experiences as a beginning teacher of the gifted: the isolation, the issues of esteem, the desire to know more than my academically talented middle schoolers. I came to know much about this population through trial and error, but in looking back I know that my experience could have been more positive had it been characterized by stronger communication with and greater support from my mentor, guidance counselor, and gifted coordinator. Furthermore, I am convinced that the struggles I faced could have been overcome more easily had I been provided with a broader course of study in graduate school and assistance with the development of a deeper sense of collaboration amongst my colleagues.

However the question remains, am I right in my assumption that my experiences speak to a reality in this field? Or were they an outcome of a very specific time and place? I came to understand that there was only one way to discover the answers to these questions and that was to locate and listen to the stories of teachers who while experienced in the regular education setting, were just beginning their careers as educators of the gifted.

## **Significance**

If we are to understand the effectiveness of the preparation of teachers of the gifted, it is essential that we talk to teachers. Their first-person insight is crucial in the development of a fuller understanding of their positioning as teachers in transition. Consequently, this research was dedicated to exploring the nature of academic preparation programs from the perspective of those teachers. Such insight, that which makes the educational and professional experiences of beginning educators tangible, can make a contribution by providing us access to their unique stories. A review of research has revealed a gap in this regard and this study attempts to fill it. The study will undoubtedly benefit local school districts, state departments of education, university professors and their respective colleges of education as well as policymakers. Moreover, it aims to assist in reshaping, where necessary, pre-service preparation programs and in-service support services. Information collected from this study will strengthen the pool of information that is available on the preparation of teachers of the gifted from the perspective of teachers who after some years of teaching in the regular education setting, are placed into the gifted setting.

## Research Questions

The following questions guided the researcher:

1. What is/was the nature of the expectations that beginning teachers of the gifted have of their:
  - a. colleagues
  - b. principals
  - c. mentors
  - d. on-site gifted coordinator
  - e. students
  - f. parents
  
2. What is the nature of the experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted:
  - a. with their colleagues
  - b. with their principals
  - c. with their mentors
  - d. with their on-site coordinator
  - e. with their students
  - f. with the parents of their students
  
3. How satisfied/dissatisfied are beginning teachers of the gifted with their gifted teacher education programs in terms of level of preparedness provided? How satisfied/dissatisfied are beginning teachers of the gifted with their regular education teacher preparation programs in terms of level of preparedness provided for work with gifted learners?
  
4. How satisfied/dissatisfied are beginning teachers of the gifted with the nature and number of in-service support options that have been made available to them?

## Definition of Terms

- a. Accelerated Learning/Acceleration:  
A strategy of processing through education at rates faster or ages younger than the norm
  
- b. Beginning/New Teacher:  
Teacher(s) with less than 3 years of full-time classroom teaching experience (may be used to describe any teacher new to a given setting).

c. Comprehensive Curriculum:

The purpose of the Comprehensive Curriculum is to align content, instruction and assessment and to provide uniformity in content taught across the four core subject areas of English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Its intention is to increase the academic achievement of students.

d. Differentiation:

Modifying curriculum and instruction according to content, pacing and/or product to meet unique student needs in the classroom.

e. Gifted:

The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines gifted students as "Students, children or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (Title IX, Part A, Definition 22). The state of Louisiana defines gifted as "exceptional students who demonstrate abilities that give evidence of high performance in academic and intellectual aptitude" ([www.doe.state.la.us/edu](http://www.doe.state.la.us/edu))

f. Grade-Level Expectation (GLE):

A GLE is a statement that defines what all students should know or be able to do at the end of a given grade level. Statements of expectations were developed by Louisiana educators for the four core areas of English, Math, Science and Social Studies and are defined for grade levels Pre-Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup>.

g. Individual Education Plan (IEP)

An IEP is a document that delineates special education services for special-needs students. The IEP includes any modifications that are required in the regular classroom and any additional special programs or services. Federal law does not require IEPs for gifted learners, but IEPs are required by some states.

h. In-Service Training

This is training received by teachers once they have been placed within the classroom setting. Conducted/presented by local schools, through independent trainings, or attendance at conferences/conventions

i. Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LTAAP)

A three-semester program that provides participating new teachers with a planned program of support while also providing a statewide measure of teacher competency for certification. The inclusion of a mentoring component in the program was specifically designed to provide assistance to new teachers through classroom visits and conferences in a formative measure of evaluation.

j. Magnet School

A magnet school is a public school site/program that focuses on a specific learning area or domain. This definition may also be used to describe those schools, which have been established to meet the specific learning needs of the gifted

k. Mentor

In most fields mentors are community members (professional or other) who share their expertise with a student or teacher in a similar career or field of study.

l. Pre-service Education

This education or training is received by teachers (either in an undergraduate or a graduate educational setting) in order to prepare them for classroom teaching. It must be received prior to entering the classroom.

m. Regular education

The traditional classroom setting is largely heterogeneous and is dedicated to serving those students who do not have IEPs, though students with IEPs may be placed there.

n. Secondary setting

This phrasing is typically used to describe middle and/or high school sites where the level of student grade placement ranges from 6-12.

o. Self-contained

In the secondary setting, this describes a classroom setting, which is dedicated to students who are identified as belonging to a special education population (i.e. gifted). It also typically describes a classroom which houses students who have IEPs. Although variations between students exist in self-contained classrooms, the intent of this grouping pattern is to restrict the range of student readiness or needs that a teacher must address.

p. Social/Emotional Needs:

Gifted students may have affective needs that include heightened or unusual sensitivity to self-awareness, emotions and expectations of themselves or others, and a sense of justice, moral judgment or altruism. Counselors may address issues such as perfectionism, depression, underachievement or career planning

q. Training

Any support/exposure given to classroom teachers that is designed to improve the quality of the services they provide to students.

r. Underachievement

A term used to describe the discrepancy between a student's performance and their potential, or ability to perform at a much higher level.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **A History of Traditional Teacher Education**

In examining the history of teacher education in America, one must first examine the history of the profession itself. Upon doing so, one almost immediately notices that its foundation is very much rooted in the home, the place where young children were expected to learn their letters through bible study and prayer (Nasaw, 1979). Mothers therefore were the primary educators. However, as villages grew into towns and towns grew into cities this slowly changed. In 1647, Massachusetts became the first state to establish a basic pattern for compulsory education in the country. In attempting to meet the requirements of the new legislation, the common or "dame" school was opened. The dame school was open to both boys and girls and operated by women who charged a small fee to hear children "doing lessons", namely that of spelling and reading (Morrison, 1997). Later on, the common school emerged as the cure to social, economic and political problems in a country that was rapidly becoming urban and industrialized. As the schools grew, both in the number of students served and the length of service offered, male faculty (who were seen as disciplinarians) came to teach in the high schools whereas women (who were thought to be nurturers) were typically

assigned to teach in the lower grades (Morrison, 1997).

Nasaw suggests "the common schools were designed to control and contain the poor, white, Protestant, male population." (Nasaw, 1979, pg.82).

By the 1820s reformers such as Horace Mann emerged who argued the major problem facing the American common schools was the plethora of incompetent teachers. According to Mann, children learned best by imitating the ideal elder: white gentlemen (Morrison, 1997). Instead of attempting to reform the common school, Mann and his contemporaries set out to create an American variation of the Prussian teacher training institutes and named them "normal schools". Funding for these training centers was limited and it was not until close to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the number of them peaked.

Like most other societal changes, economics dominated the shift in the kinds of people recruited to teach. As funding for teacher salary became scarcer, administrators of common schools were forced to turn to a segment of the population willing to work for less- women. Consequently, women were hired in droves to meet the growing demand for teachers (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005). Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women, most of who largely considered teaching to be a stop on the railroad to marriage (Clifford

and Guthrie, 1988), began to enter the profession. It should be noted that, "there was considerable resistance to allowing women to teach, for it meant they were members of the American workforce" (Pushkin, 2001, pg. 78).

Regardless of the hardships these early women educators faced, they were willing to gain training. The curriculum of the normal schools was inspired by the notion that teachers could be taught the craftsmanship of classroom management (Borrowman, 1965). During this period, teacher training typically lasted between 6 months and 2 years (Borrowman, 1965).

After the Civil War, the normal school became a serious force in the preparation of common school teachers. NEA reports that by 1898 there were 166 state and 165 privately run normal schools in operation, enrolling about 70,000 students (Clifford and Guthrie, 1988). Although many teachers had no pre-service training, by about 1900 normal schools accounted for so much of formal teacher training that colleges and universities enrolled less than 8 percent of identified teachers in training (Clifford and Guthrie, 1988). Soon, however, the appropriateness of normal schools was criticized as professors in the humanities began to call into question the scholarly ability of professors in the field of education

("educationists") (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005). As a result of this, there was a strong push to improve the profession through research, which resulted in the creation of more rigorous programming, an increase in the length of programming, the requirement of more intense academic study and additional classroom practice.

In summary, formal teacher education began in 1867 with the first Department of Education in federal government and the first standard teaching program in 1896 (Morrison, 1997). At that time, teacher education programs lasted for less than 2 years and courses consisted largely of teaching teachers how to teach. To date, the customary pattern of teacher education has been 2 years of broad academic training and 2 years of professional study. These first 2 years are typically spent in courses, which are to form the basis of a teacher's subject matter knowledge. However, this pattern has been rapidly changing.

In the past 20 years there has been a distinct reform movement in the area of teacher preparation, which has been attributed to the findings of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The document produced by this commission, was "A Nation at Risk" (1983), and was effective in contributing to a level of change that extended across the field of education. Among the concerns

raised in the report was the assertion that a disproportionate amount of teacher education programming was wasted with vague "methods courses", more specifically courses in which the goal of the curriculum was broad exposure (Evans, Dumas, and Weible, 1982). This document, which was met with both applause and disgust, sparked a widespread critique of the professional training and development of teachers (Evans, Dumans, and Weible, 1984; NCES, 2000) at both the elementary and secondary levels.

Consequently, the questions raised after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) contributed to a change in both undergraduate and graduate teacher education programming. Moreover, it resulted in an intense discussion that is still being played out today. At the heart of this current debate is the issue of negotiating when, where and how teachers can/should be properly educated. Most recently, the central overarching goal has been to push the public image of teachers onto a higher tier. It has been said that many teacher education programs, "fail to prepare teachers to meet the new challenges presented by contemporary society" (Hallinan and Khmelkov, 2001, pg. 177). Hallinan and Khmelkov (2001) argue that in some programs students are exposed to weak courses focusing on pedagogy and student discipline rather than on subject

matter and educational research whereas others focus too heavily on a liberal arts curriculum. Thus the goal has become to increase competency and thereby improve the public image of teachers. To this end, a clear effort has been made on both the state and national levels to simply professionalize the field by providing pre-service educators with a well-balanced preparation program and adequate in-service supports.

As a result, two models have recently emerged in an attempt to correct previous shortcomings. The first is more traditional in structure; it supports the notion that a teacher's education should be centered in a university-based environment. In this model, students spend the majority of their preparation studying the liberal arts and a relatively short time working in the field. The other model asserts that a teacher's preparation should be centered in a field-based environment (Reven, Cartwright, and Munday, 1997) with a significant amount of training occurring in a school setting.

One example of the first model is illustrated in the traditionally structured teacher education program. Here, students gain admission into the university and after completing two years of broad subject area exposure are ushered into colleges of education for professional

training. Such study would result in both an undergraduate degree in education, and state teaching certification. Prior to graduating, said teachers are required to spend their final semester of the undergraduate program as a student teacher working under the supervision of a full-time classroom teacher.

Following the emergence of research criticizing the traditional teaching model outlined above (Andrew and Schwab, 1995; Liston and Zeichner, 1990; Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Holmes Group, 1986), colleges of education were forced to rethink the structure of their teacher education programs. Of the new models that emerged, the model proposed by the Holmes Group gained rapid acceptance. This model was inspired by the findings of a consortium of deans of colleges and schools of education at leading American universities which was released in the report, "Tomorrow's Teachers" (1986). It argued that in order to improve the quality of schooling in America it was necessary to transform teaching into a respected profession of well-educated educators. To this end, it proposed the elimination of undergraduate teacher certification programs, and in their place, the creation of graduate level training programs. Moreover, future teachers, particularly at the secondary level, would be required to

take undergraduate courses in a specific subject area (e.g. mathematics or English) prior to applying for admission into a graduate program in education. Once admitted, pre-service teachers would enroll in graduate education courses in teacher education (to be completed in a fifth year of study), and complete a clinical internship in a secondary school setting. This fifth year of study would culminate in a master's degree. Ten years after publishing its initial report, the Holmes Group (1990) issued a follow-up report which went on to suggest that the ideal schools for the clinical internship would be professional development schools (PDS) that would link university schools of education with school systems. According to "Tomorrow's Schools" (1990), the Holmes document outlining the group's philosophy, there should be six principles that guide the evolution of a PDS:

Principle One: Teaching and learning should be for understanding.

Principle 2: Schools should create a learning community.

Principle Three: Teaching and learning should provide understanding to everybody's children.

Principle Four: There should be continuing learning by teachers, teacher educators and administrators.

Principle Five: There should be thoughtful long-term inquiry into teaching and learning.

Principle Six: New institutions will need to be invented.

To date the number of PDSs in the USA has exceeded 600 (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). Clearly, teacher training has undergone a number of significant changes in America in the past century. Moreover, it appears that the Holmes model to some extent has set the tone for future teacher education program design.

Over time, teacher education programs across the country have attempted to adopt this model. Howey (1999) speculates that regardless of its widespread appeal, "most individuals who engage in this important work would acknowledge that PDS development remains largely in a pioneer stage fraught with difficulties and setbacks" (Howey, 1999, pg. 324). Perhaps in an attempt to deal with those difficulties, there has been recent effort made to move away from the suggestions proposed by the Holmes Group. The inclination to permit (and at times even encourage) individuals interested in teaching to pursue alternative forms of certification. Evidently, Holmes is not the sole model for teacher education in America despite the fact that it remains a well utilized one.

As a matter of fact, since Holmes several new models have emerged in response to the clear reform movement that has occurred within the area of teacher preparation. Few

would disagree with the fact that this reform has arisen in the same fashion as reforms before it, namely in response to a lack of adequate preparation for beginning teachers (Reven, Cartwright, and Munday, 1997; Kent, 2005; Thomas and Loadman, 2001). Two opposing factions are dominating the current debate-- those who seek to deregulate teaching, and those who seek to professionalize it (Berry, 2005). Those who seek deregulation believe that student learning and quality teaching should be measured only by standardized tests, and that extensive preparation is costly and unnecessary. This faction would rather that traditional teacher preparation programs (e.g. college/university training) be replaced with an array of alternative programming, whereas advocates of professionalism believe that teaching is as much about social justice and action as academic success. An example of the latter can be found at a university in the southeastern part of the United States, where it has been decided that individuals in teacher preparation programs need an increase in the amount of field experiences in low socio-economic schools, strong mentorship teams, stricter admission standards and partnerships with local schools (Kent, 2005). This particular program, like a number of programs across the country since Holmes, is attempting to

make teacher preparation reflective of the real world-- not only in terms of issues of management and lesson design, but also in terms of culture.

In looking back, traditionally teachers were certified after completing training on a university/college campus. However, given the increase in need for teachers, "many states have changed requirements for licensing teachers and have authorized a range of agents-local districts, private vendors and intermediate education agencies- to create alternative training and certification programs" (Johnson, 2004; pg. 26). To this end, people have increasingly turned away from traditional routes, opting for these alternative certification programs. These professionals, some of whom are entering the field mid-career, prepare for their positions by enrolling in alternative programs. One such program is offered by the school district used in this study. Through the Eastern Parish program, participants are employed as classroom teachers after completing an intense summer training institute. They are offered abbreviated pre-service preparation and on-the-job support. Other such programs grant certification through coursework offered by accredited universities online.

Presently, the standard in teacher education is largely being determined by the publication of updated

standards by National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 2002. These standards outline what teacher education programs should look like and what they need to do in order to qualify for national accreditation. This revised set of standards outlines a number of things from what a teacher candidate should know and what skills they should have, to what dispositions they should possess. Clearly, NCATE's attempt to standardize teacher training has been the most widely implemented and broadly accepted programming.

#### **A History of Gifted Teacher Preparation**

The earliest scholarship on teacher training in gifted education dates back to research conducted during the 1950s by Wilson. Wilson examined a 1951 Hunter College survey of colleges and universities on the preparation for teachers of gifted students in America. Not surprisingly, his findings tell the story of only a small number of courses tailored toward preparing teachers for the gifted setting (Wilson, 1953). Wilson then conducted a follow-up study in 1955, in which he surveyed 27 institutions of higher learning. Although he discovered that universities had taken little action within the 2-year period that had elapsed, he did note that the schools surveyed were at least expressing a desire to implement change. More

specifically, he noticed that a number of them were participating in professional meetings to address issues related to gifted education. Despite the improvements he observed, Wilson (Wilson, 1955) concluded that further efforts were needed in order to properly prepare teachers for work with gifted learners.

Laird and Kowalski (1972) addressed teacher training in the field of gifted education in the 1970s through the use of a questionnaire sent to more than 1500 institutions (Laird and Kowalski, 1972). Of the 1,564 schools they contacted, 1,241 responded. Among them, 151 of these colleges and universities replied that they offered courses that dealt specifically with the education of gifted learners. The most promising conclusion of their research was that approximately 32 percent of the institutions surveyed were interested in expanding their course offerings in their teacher education programs to include courses on gifted education (Laird and Kowalski, 1972).

By the late-1980s colleges and universities were beginning to implement programs that addressed the needs of gifted students. Parker and Karnes were first to publish a directory of degree programs in the United States which offered a major or a curriculum with an emphasis in the education of the gifted (Parker and Karnes, 1987a). The

publication of this directory was followed by the administration of a questionnaire, which was sent to each state consultant responsible for gifted programs in order to determine precisely which colleges and universities offered what degrees. Of the 160 institutions contacted, 129 responded with 101 of them indicating that they did offer such programs at the master's level (Parker and Karnes, 1987a). The literature (Parker and Karnes, 1987b) suggests that by this point in gifted education history an obvious trend existed which suggested universities who elected to offer courses in gifted education were doing so primarily at the graduate level. The trend to offer gifted education courses at the graduate level has continued, as a recent estimation reports that "only Nevada, West Virginia, and Iowa currently report an undergraduate endorsement in gifted education" (Croft, 2003, p.566).

#### **Graduate Degree Program Admissions and Course Requirements**

With the creation of gifted education programs, admissions policies had to be established. As could be expected, admission policies to gifted education programs varied greatly between institutions (Parker and Karnes, 1987a). Although most institutions surveyed in their 1987 study required that students take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the test scores required for admittance varied from

state to state and from school to school. Universities reported that undergraduate grade point averages were factored into admissions decisions with the majority of the schools (35) requiring a 3.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale (Parker and Karnes, 1987a). According to their findings, "other admission requirements vary widely and include the Miller Analogies Test, the National Teachers Examination, and multiple-criterion formulas using both test scores and grade point average" (Parker and Karnes, 1987a, p. 172).

As the level at which student were being admitted into gifted education programs remained largely consistent across the country, so did the contents of the programs. In 1983, Parker and Karnes reported the results of the 3-year study conducted by the teacher certification subcommittee of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Professional Development Committee (Karnes and Parker, 1983). In it the committee recommended not only that teachers of the gifted complete an approved program in gifted education (culminating in at least a master's degree) but that their program of study includes at least the following components:

1. A minimum of 12 semester hours of credit involving the following course contents:  
Nature and needs/psychology of the gifted;  
Assessment of gifted students;

- Counseling gifted students;
  - Curriculum development for the gifted;
  - Strategies and materials for teaching the gifted;
  - Creative studies;
  - Program development and evaluation;
  - Parent education and advocacy training;
  - Special populations/problems of gifted students;
  - Cognitive and affective processing.
2. At least one graduate course in research procedures
  3. A minimum of 9 semester hours of credit in an approved content area designed to develop a specialization appropriate to the level of teaching or the anticipated professional role of the individual
  4. A practicum involving university-supervised instruction of gifted students geared to the anticipated future teaching role

Karnes and Parker employed the use of a questionnaire in 1984 in order to gather information on gifted education programs and services. Of the 160 schools surveyed, 129 responded with 28 indicating that their institutions did not offer graduate degree programs in gifted education. Of the 101 schools in 38 states that did offer such programs, all reported offering one or more master's degree programs. Moreover, 37 institutions in 24 states granted the doctorate with gifted education as a recognized area of emphasis. The most common courses required by these programs were nature and needs/psychology of the gifted (66.3 percent), strategies/methods for teaching the gifted (32.7 percent), introduction to exceptional children (25.7 percent), and a combined course in curriculum and methods for teaching the gifted (24.8 percent) (Karnes and Parker,

1984). A later study revealed that by 1987, the number of programs offering graduate courses in gifted education increased by 33 percent, with Master's degree programs available in 134 institutions in 42 states and the District of Columbia (Parker and Karnes, 1987a).

In 1995, the NAGC Standards for Graduate Programs in Gifted Education was proposed and outlined a set of concepts, skills and other professional competencies that leaders in the field (e.g. Alexinia Baldwin, Barbara Clark, James Gallagher) identified as being essential for successful work with the gifted (Parker, 1996). The document was quite specific, providing educators everything from a conceptual framework for understanding the standards to a detailed discussion of what elements a graduate curriculum should include. However, since 1995 when NAGC formally adopted standards for graduate programs in gifted education, no research has been done that attempts to discover what progress universities and colleges nationwide have made in following NAGC's suggestions.

In her widely read text, Growing Up Gifted, Barbara Clark suggests, "most commonly offered is a course that explores the education and psychology of the gifted individual; introduces the concept of giftedness; and includes definition, identification, characteristics,

etiology, and nurture" (Clark, 2002, p. 226). Here she provides an extensive list of the forms that gifted education courses may take, most of which have been somehow worked into university course offerings. This effort has been furthered by the work of NAGC and The Association for the Gifted (TAG) (a division of the Council for Exceptional Children), who in May of 2004 invited institutions of higher learning to participate in a dialogue centered on national teacher standards in gifted education. Of 78 American universities offering teacher education programs, more than half participated (Johnsen, 2004). Their collaboration resulted in the creation of a list of 10 basic areas that future teachers of gifted students need to become competent in: foundations, development and characteristics of learners, individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environments and social interactions, language, instructional planning, assessment, professional and ethical practice and collaboration. Research supported each of the 10 overarching standards, the 32 knowledge standards, and the 37 skill standards. Three types of research were used in revalidating the standards: literature/theory-based, research-based, and practice-based (Johnsen, 2004). This list has been established as a set

of initial standards for entry-level practice in gifted education, and implementation is being encouraged at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Johnsen, 2004). Clearly, an attempt has been made to not only legitimize the work that gifted educators do but to provide gifted learners with the services to which they are entitled.

### **Availability of Pre-Service Educational Programs in Gifted Education**

In late 2006, NCATE approved new Teacher Preparation Standards in Gifted Education that were developed by NAGC and the Council for Exceptional Students. College and university teacher preparation programs in gifted education will use the new standards. This is significant progress and will only work to improve the quality and consistency of teacher preparation programs, particularly in light of the fact that as of 1984, there more than 100 institutions that offered master's degree programs in 42 states (Parker and Karnes, 1987). Current trends reported by The Council of State Director's Program for the Gifted (1999) suggest that 125 colleges and universities in 30 states offer programs that culminate in one or more graduate degrees in the education of gifted learners, and 18 have doctoral programs with majors or concentrations in gifted education. In recognition of the growth in gifted education programming, NCATE in coordination with CEC has begun to

evaluate institutions in each state for professional development in gifted education. Hence, both the number of programming options and their quality are on the rise. The increase recently observed suggests a growth of both awareness and interest in meeting the needs of gifted learners, something that professionals in the field of gifted education should be thrilled about.

### **The Local State of Affairs**

Despite its consistent low rankings in national assessments of state education performance, Louisiana has gained widespread recognition for the quality of its gifted education services. As a matter of fact, in 1972 Louisiana became one of only three states with a legal mandate to identify and serve gifted students. Consequently, Louisiana mandates gifted education and requires an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for each identified gifted learner and now has gifted programs in all 66 schools districts in the state. Additionally, the state of Louisiana is one of only four states to provide services to gifted learners similar to those required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 for children with disabilities (Shaunessy, 2003). In Louisiana documentation is required that shows how the districts engage in an ongoing effort to identify and locate students

under their jurisdiction who may be gifted and who need specialized educational services. Louisiana therefore provides gifted students with most of the other procedural supports offered to students with disabilities. Moreover, if a K-12 student's IEP indicates concurrent enrollment in college courses, then the state will fund the child's collegiate education until the student graduates from high school through the use of available support from state, local, federal and private sources (Louisiana Department of Education, 2000). Finally, the state of Louisiana has also used legislation to mandate specialized training in gifted education for teachers of gifted students. Each teacher charged with educating gifted students must meet state requirements, which include certification, a Master's degree, and the completion of graduate courses as established by the Louisiana Department of Education. More specifically, as of March 2005 (Louisiana Department of Education, 2005) teachers seeking certification must complete 15 hours of prescribed coursework from the following list either within a master's degree program or in addition to an existing master's:

1. Characteristics/study of gifted individuals
2. Methods of teaching the gifted
3. Social and emotional needs of the gifted
4. Creative thinking and problem solving or curriculum development for the gifted
5. Educational technology

Moreover, teachers must also complete 3 hours in a practicum for academically gifted, an internship for college credit in academically gifted, or successfully teach for 3 years in academically gifted setting (Louisiana Department of Education, 2005).

## **Experiences of Beginning Teachers**

### **Regular Education Setting**

To date, extensive research has been conducted in order to explore the experiences of beginning teachers (Lortie, 1975; Bondy and McKenzie, 1999; Bullough, 1989; Dollase, 1992; Johnson, 2004; Veenman, 1994). The vast majority of this research concludes that beginning teachers, regardless of their placement, struggle with the various aspects of teaching from classroom discipline to establishing relationships with colleagues. They are said to experience an emotional rollercoaster that begins in anxious anticipation and cycles through survival and disillusionment (Davis and Bloom, 1998). Johnson (2004) reports the new teachers her team interviewed were often "overwhelmed by the responsibility and demands of designing curriculum and planning daily lessons. They entered the classroom expecting to find a curriculum, yet many found little guidance about what to teach or how to teach it" (Johnson, 2004, pg. 136). Many new teachers also struggle

with social isolation (Brock and Grady, 1997); they find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings with little structured time to establish personal relationships. Presently, many school districts and state departments of education are attempting to support beginning teachers by developing mentoring and induction programs (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

The practice of mentoring spread to the field of education from the business community beginning in the early 1980s and has since spread rapidly across the country (Dollase, 1992). In teaching, like in business, the novice assumes the same job responsibilities as the veteran, but on the first day of work. Mentoring has therefore been used to help counter the isolation and frustration commonly felt by beginning teachers. A variety of helping relationships between individuals or groups may be termed "mentoring" and there are numerous interpretations of the mentoring process. In all of these definitions one thing is constant: one participant is positioned as an expert who provides counsel and guidance to the novice (Bauer and LeBlanc, 1992). Mentors, when effective, offer counsel, provide information, interpret school culture and practices and act as advocate. Locally, the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LTAAP) is in place to

assist beginning teachers (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002). Teachers designated as mentors are typically experienced teachers who are expected to work with their new teacher for an entire school year. As mandated by the state of Louisiana, a mentor's job is to guide the first-year teacher mainly through the first semester and to provide support during the second semester. The effectiveness of such programming is currently being explored (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002).

### **Gifted Education Setting**

Beginning teachers of the gifted undoubtedly face unique challenges, few of which have been explored in the research. Scholars conclude these teachers frequently struggle with their image, or sense of self and professional accomplishment (Pollak, 1996). Why are so many new entrants to the field of education calling it quits? One contributing factor may be beginning teachers of the gifted are often hired as a result of the potential they demonstrate (Pollak, 1996), and not the knowledge that they have acquired about giftedness. Moreover, often teachers hired to teach the gifted have not completed certification in gifted education. Regardless of the reasons why they are offered positions, they have unique experiences and should be entitled to unique supports (Tomlinson, 1997).

More specifically, Joffe's (2001) examination of a beginning teacher of the gifted concluded these teachers need more structured guidance and instruction on how to effectively design and develop curriculum for gifted learners, particularly in the absence of solid undergraduate and graduate preparation. To date, research has been done which works to examine the perspective of beginning teachers of the gifted (single case studies) (Megay-Nespoli, 2001; Pollak, 1996; Joffe, 2001), but none has been so extensive that it provides first-person insight through the use of multiple case studies and focus group interviews. Several of these studies (Joffe, 2001; Pollak, 1996) have concluded that further studies are necessary to best understand how beginning teachers of the gifted can be prepared and supported.

**In-Service Support for Beginning Teachers: Are State Departments and Local Districts Fulfilling Their Obligations?**

A number of models have historically been employed in an attempt to provide in-service teachers with continued professional development. One of the more readily accessed options include offering on-campus/in-house in-services (often lead by building teachers, administrators, or guest speakers), which are offered after-school or on teacher work days or orientations. This

is often the most widely used method by districts as it is usually the most cost effective and has the potential for including the highest number of teacher participants because they can be made mandatory. Research however suggests that options of this nature fall short of what is needed in order to improve teacher practice (Boyle & Boyle, 2004). Moreover, a review of the literature suggests that these "staff development efforts have been found ineffective due to short duration, low intellectual level, poor focus, and little substantive research-based content" (Boyle & Boyle, 2004).

Another option for in-service support includes approving teacher initiatives to attend district and state sponsored conferences and workshops. These events, often held on a small scale, model themselves after larger national conferences. To this end, they offer participants small "break-out" sessions (customarily presented by locals), daylong workshops and an impressive guest (keynote) speaker. There exists, however, a more expensive and therefore less popular option for school districts: to offer financial support to beginning teachers who are interested in attending national conventions. These conventions, such as the National Council for Teachers of English, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum

Development, all work toward the same goal. They, like the smaller, local conferences, offer exhaustive lists of breakout sessions conducted by local teachers, parents, graduate students and international scholars in the field. Additionally, they offer large exhibit halls with a plethora of teaching tools and global networking opportunities. According to Lauro, "conferences are a great resource as attendees can obtain massive amounts of information in a conservative amount of time...conference attendees have the opportunity to learn, in one location, about various methods, practices and new ideas for improvements and change in education" (Lauro, 1995).

For teachers of the gifted, the importance of such support is sustained by Gallagher's conclusion, "it seems highly unlikely that teachers with master's degrees in content fields will wish to return to higher education for a further degree in gifted education" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 135). Gallagher suggests that teachers who possess graduate degrees in their content areas are unlikely to desire a return to the graduate classroom for further education. Perhaps this is why teachers in this field are offered other options by way of conventions, such as those offered by NAGC, Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted, and the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children,

each of which caters to teachers of the gifted in the K-12 setting.

In addition to sending teachers to local conferences, school districts often supply in-service teachers of the gifted access to distance education courses. The development of the necessary technologies (through the use of television or the internet) has made this option an ever-increasing one. In fact, research suggests, "the combination of the geographic spread of teachers needing special instruction in coping with gifted students and the limited number of qualified training centers has led a number of people to think about distance learning, where a single qualified person can deliver knowledge to a widespread audience" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 136). In this way, teachers nationwide are gaining the answers to their questions on the best practices in the field of gifted education. They study independently, post questions via the World Wide Web and come to understand the needs of gifted learners through dialogues conducted on discussion boards. While for some teachers this may be a feasible option for professional development, research has shown that the effectiveness of this type of support can be limited by the degree to which a teacher has knowledge of technology (Broady-Ortmann, 2002).

Another format for in-service that teachers of the gifted often come across is summer institutes. These institutes offer intense seminars on various topics in the field. The Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary, for example, is internationally known for its commitment to improving the quality of gifted education services and accordingly hosts a Professional Institute each summer. Last summer, the focus was, "Curriculum and Instruction for High Ability Learners". According to the institute's web site, the purpose of this institute was to provide teachers and administrators with the knowledge and skills to design and utilize high quality curriculum within effective programs for advanced learners. Institute participants chose from one of eight strands, which relate to the frameworks and models used at the College of William and Mary to develop nationally acclaimed curriculum, or that draw on existing research and evidence of effective practices. Another well-known summer institute option available to in-service teachers is offered at the University of Connecticut -Storrs. This particular program, held under the direction of Dr. Joseph Renzulli, is similar to the institute at the College of William and Mary, is broken into different "strands". It features lectures presented by well recognized experts in the field, a strong

emphasis on the development of personal relationships and state of the art techniques for enriching the quality of education offered to gifted learners.

The existence of these options offers evidence leaders in the field (both locally and nationally) are devoted to providing current teachers of the gifted with the equipment necessary for improving their craft. Clark posits, "one important outcome of well-planned and well-implemented in-service programs is the increase in the teacher's perception of competence." (Clark, 2002, p. 230) If this is in fact the case, nothing could be more important to the success of teachers of the gifted. Each of the aforementioned methods are vehicles for staff development and are designed to improve the competencies of teachers of the gifted, not to provide the vital baseline preparation that such teachers need in order to be successful. As understanding of gifted learners expands, so must the national commitment to finding continued support for the professional development of the educators who serve them.

### **Summary**

A review of the literature reveals schooling in America began in the home with mothers taking on the role of teacher. As the country became more and more industrialized, the common school was established and as

the need for teachers grew, the normal school was founded. The latter was opened to serve as a short-lived training center for teacher preparation and ultimately provided the foundation for the current structure of teacher education. Since the establishment of the normal school, there have been countless models in teacher education. Most recently, these models lean either toward a university-based learning environment ("traditional"), or a field-based learning environment. Of late, two reform movements have dominated teacher education: deregulation and professionalization. Undoubtedly, each of these models and reforms informed the field of gifted education.

Research on teacher preparation in the field of gifted education dates back to the work of F.T. Wilson (1953, 1955), who set out to discover the quality of preparation being provided to teachers of the gifted. Recently, the Professional Development Committee subcommittee of NAGC has set forth a solid set of guidelines for graduate programs in gifted education.

Literature reviews suggest traditional teacher preparation programs are lacking in the quality of education they are able to provide pre-service educators. As a result of this inadequate preparation, beginning teachers frequently report that they are overwhelmed by

their new professional roles. A review of the literature also reveals the usefulness of qualitative research, more specifically case study methodology, in attempts to gain valuable first person insight on particular experiences.

In order for the field of gifted education to gain widespread public respect and to also move forward, the experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted must be examined and understood; one way that this can be accomplished is through qualitative research. Additionally, colleges of education and state departments of education must listen to their voices. Until this occurs, stakeholders in the field of gifted education can never fully know whether or not these teachers are receiving adequate pre-service exposure or in-service supports.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study used qualitative methods to shed light on the expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted. Its function was largely exploratory in that it worked to provide insight into specific cases from a population currently under-analyzed. Moreover, its aim was to provide a foundation for the direction of future studies and to inform the development of both state and national trends in the pre-service training and in-service support of beginning teachers of the gifted. This was done through the use of case study methodology, more specifically the use of a questionnaire, individual interviews, focus group interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

#### **Qualitative Research Methodology Defined**

Qualitative research, commonly thought of as being opposite to quantitative research, has come to encompass a broad definition and to serve a broad variety of purposes. As a researcher who finds qualitative methodologies to be the most useful, I am not hesitant to examine the word directly as much is revealed within it. According to the word's root, "quality", it is implied that qualitative research works to ultimately provide a full examination of an essence. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), that full examination may come in a wealth of forms,

"qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials-- case study; personal experiences; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional and visual texts-- that describe outline and problematic moments and meanings and individuals' lives" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Creswell (1998) proposes in his definition that qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. In moving past all of these widely accepted definitions, one sees that qualitative research methodologies take many forms and faces, and the freedom provided therefore makes the use of such methodologies ideal for many researchers curious about the human experience. To this end, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) conclude we have come to use qualitative research as an umbrella term to refer to several research strategies that share certain blurred characteristics. Loosely, the staple characteristics of qualitative research suggest it is rooted in thorough description, a well-devised process/design and a sincere desire to find/make meaning. These characteristics are not, however, a rigid set of guidelines for what does and does not fit into some narrow

category. Rather, they work as an open, and to some extent endless, means of examining a wide variety of phenomena. Ultimately, all of these means work toward one end: teasing apart, understanding and explaining the threads that constitute the social fabric of meaning (Morse, 1994). Despite the route taken, essentially qualitative research methodologies function as a flexible lens for getting "up-close and personal" with the lived experience. Qualitative research attempts to provide researchers with a tool for hands-on analysis of complex social situations, and for those who choose to employ its methods, it allows for genuine human contact and collaboration.

This particular study utilized the case study approach, or the "exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information in rich context." (Creswell, 1998, p. 61) In using the term "bounded", Creswell implies that a case study's design and data collection are specific to the time and place the data are retrieved. In Creswell's thinking, the context of a "case" can include a combination of variables such as number of sites or sources of information. Other things to be considered when situating a case within a particular context: physical, social,

historical, cultural and/or economic settings.

Essentially, case study research "allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries." (Yin, 2003, p. 2) Clearly, case study research aims to examine specific phenomena, attempting to understand it in context. From Yin's perspective, case study methodology differs from other traditions in three distinct ways: (1) case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, (2) Case study inquiry relies on multiple sources of evidence with data converging in a triangulating fashion, (3) This inquiry openly benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. He goes on to argue the "case study is not either a data collection tactic or merely a design feature alone but a comprehensive research strategy" (Yin, 2003, p. 14). This method of inquiry examines previous research/theory and uses it to better understand the phenomenon being studied within the case(s). A final and important aspect of case study research, one that perhaps separates it from the other traditions, is the

flexibility in data collection (something yet to be fully explored). As Merriam (1988) observes, "unlike experimental, survey or historical research, case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or analysis" (Merriam, 1988, p. 10).

This study was designed to employ the use of three primary techniques for data collection: interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (written reflection and a questionnaire). The interview in case study research is unlike a typical conversation where more than one party contributes to the topic under discussion. During a properly conducted individual interview, only one perspective is openly given value. Therefore, interviewing in qualitative tradition works to isolate the interviewee's version of what is occurring. It seeks to gain insight into an individual's or group's experience through asking well-constructed questions. Interviewers can ask any number of questions, causing the individual interviews to vary in length. They may involve only one participant or may seek insight from a group of individuals. Fontana and Frey remind us "the most common form of interviewing involves individual, face-to-face verbal interchange, but interviewing can also take on the form of face-to-face group interchange, mailed, or self-administered

questionnaires, and telephone surveys. It can be structured, semi structured, or unstructured." (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 645)

To this end, the interview that includes the simultaneous interviewing of several participants has been termed a "focus group" interview and is typically conducted when multiple perspectives are sought. Additionally, when a researcher is preparing to conduct a structured interview, he or she typically sets out to design a list of pre-established questions and upon deciding who the participants will be, prepares to ask each participant the same set of questions. By design, the structured interview allows for very little flexibility or improvisation. The researcher working to conduct a structured interview hopes to isolate specific results, leaving as little to chance as possible. In contrast, during an unstructured interview, the researcher works to keep the scope of possibilities for response open. The researcher may enter the interview with a direction in mind for it, but is willing to take a risk on the natural development/expression of perspective.

In addition to conducting interviews, qualitative researchers often rely on observations. The goal of observation is to provide a "...complete description of a behavior in a specific natural setting rather than a

numeric system of occurrence or duration of observed behaviors." (Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh, 2002). Observations therefore offer researchers an opportunity to become an insider to the phenomena being studied. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will participate as a non-participant observer ("participant observer"). To this end, the goal of the researcher is not to become involved in the activities being observed, but to instead act as a voyeur-- a complete observer. Therefore, the researcher's presence will be announced and known to each of the participants. In other words, the researcher's objective is to interact with the participants for the purposes of strengthening rapport and of becoming more familiar with their practices as beginning teachers of the gifted--not to evaluate or make judgments.

Finally, qualitative researchers also utilize document reviews to gain insight into the worlds of their participants. The term "documents" refers to a plethora of materials including but not limited to written products such as journals, memos, letters, and clinical/criminal case records. However, the term "documents" has also come to include photographs, videos, films, and items found through the Internet. Furthermore, they may come from variety of collections ranging from personal assemblages,

official records, or popular culture compilations. Bogdan and Biklen propose, "while their use as an auxiliary is most common, increasingly, qualitative researchers are turning to documents as their primary source of data," hence the justification for their brief discussion in this review (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003, p. 57).

Over time, the case study has gained widespread appeal because it successfully sheds light on the kind of information an analysis of numbers cannot provide. In turn, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon (Merriam, 1988). It is understandably well suited for research in education in that it allows for an exploration into complex and layered research designs. It is therefore ideal for any work requiring the use of human participants, whereas subjects are treated with particular care. Finally, Merriam's declaration that through the use of case study educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding which in turn can affect and even improve practice is especially telling.

In addition to contributing "thick description" to research, the qualitative tradition, and more specifically case study methodology, provides room for participants to tell their own story. By relying on such methodologies, "the evaluation researcher gains a valuable peek into the

"world" of the key stakeholder ... " (Dereshiwsky and Packard, 1992, p. 6). Often, as qualitative researchers would claim, insight of this nature is quite personal and therefore, quite unquantifiable. Qualitative research functions as a means of both gathering and presenting the *full* lived experience-- successes, failures, disappointments and surprises. It is essentially grounded in allowing human subjects to investigate their own perspective, and then working to assist them in sharing their narratives with the world. It is thereby important to note that case study research is not sampling research (Stake, 1995). The goal therefore is not to understand other cases (i.e. create generalizations), but to instead understand a particular case. Hence, the rationale for use of the case study method has been selected for use in this dissertation study.

The final method of data collection used in this study included the use of a questionnaire. A questionnaire can be used to meet a variety of goals in qualitative research, and have proven to be a successful method of data collection for several reasons. One such reason is questionnaires serve as a means of collecting information unobtrusively, while also yielding high participant response (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Participants are

allowed to provide information within relatively little time and minimal intrapersonal communication. An open-form questionnaire (Slavin, 2007) was employed in this study, in that the questionnaire design did not place any restrictions on participant response.

## **Participants**

### **Selection of Setting: School District and Sites**

In order to determine the nature of the expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted, I conducted research in southeastern Louisiana. Eastern Parish (a pseudonym), where the study was conducted has more than 150 schools, including public, parochial and private schools. More than one hundred of them are public, with district total enrollment at approximately 54,000 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. It is currently the largest public school district in the state, in terms of the number of functioning schools and number of students served. Additionally, it is among the top 65 districts nationally in student enrollment. There are approximately 7,500 full-time employees working for Eastern Parish with more than 4,000 of these employees being teachers. Of these teachers, approximately 25 percent of them hold advanced degrees. Finally, the Eastern Parish School System has made a unique commitment to gifted

learners, in that it has deemed several schools within the parish to be "gifted magnet sites". These 12 school sites serve two distinct populations-- that of regular education students, and that of identified gifted learners. In these buildings gifted learners are provided with specialized curriculum typically instructed by gifted certified teachers in a self-contained setting. My research was conducted on two different campuses: that of Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School (pseudonyms).

Lincoln Middle School was built in 1955 in an area that was formerly considered the suburbs of a major city. The area surrounding the school was primarily pasture land (which to some extent still remains). Lincoln Middle School is now in the center of a residential district near the interstate highway system and local universities. This particular school site started as a school housing grades 1-9. Four years later, in 1959, it became an elementary school serving grades 1-6 and then, during the 1963-1964 school year, grade seven was added. The school then changed again in 1965 to a Junior High, with only 7th and 8th grades.

Beginning with the 1997-1998 school year, a program serving the academically gifted in grades 6-8 was added to the existing 6-8 regular education program. More

specifically, the school was designated by Eastern Parish as a magnet site where gifted self-contained classes would be offered to half of the school population, and a regular education would be offered to the other half. Students qualifying for the gifted program are expected to excel in advanced courses designed to motivate, stimulate and prepare them for the future. Teachers within the program are certified in gifted education and teach in classrooms where class sizes are reduced to better individualize each student's educational program. Students have the opportunity to complete courses for high school credit in algebra, geometry, computer science, science and foreign languages.

Lincoln is an ethnically diverse school, enrolling students from all around the world. The school's regular education program is predominantly African-American (close to 97 percent), whereas the gifted program is predominantly "other", being mainly composed of Caucasian and Asian (close to 70 percent). Lincoln Middle has a population of around 530 students with an average class size of less than 20 students. Lincoln is currently the highest scoring middle school in Eastern Parish, according to student performance on standardized test measures.

Like Lincoln Middle, Washington High School is located in central Eastern Parish, in close proximity to the city's downtown. Three core administrators serve the high school. These administrators lead a faculty of 17 general education teachers and 23 special education teachers. There are currently 734 students enrolled at the high school with 251 of them being identified gifted learners. The student body is 66.1 percent African-American, 18.3 percent Caucasian and 7.1 percent of Asian descent. Traditional high school courses are offered in addition to a curriculum for the academically gifted. There are three feeder schools to Washington High School, 2 of which are magnet sites for the gifted.

The particular school sites selected were chosen as potential sites where potential participants could be identified because they are gifted magnet secondary school sites. They therefore have a significant number of gifted learners and teachers of the gifted. These school sites were therefore ideal for data collection. Following an application for exemption from oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university, a letter requesting permission to conduct the study at the school sites was provided to both the school district

central office and to the principals of the Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School (Appendix B and C).

Once permission was granted from both district administration and each building level principal, I then consulted with the building principals in order to determine which teachers were eligible for participation. Next, all qualifying teachers were invited to participate in the study. Once chosen, each individual was provided with an informed letter of consent (Appendix A). Finally, both the informed letters of consent and IRB forms were gathered and kept on file.

#### **Selection of Participants**

The participant pool included all of the teachers currently teaching gifted learners at both Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School. Using a purposeful sampling method (non-random technique), the researcher specified the set qualifiers for participation. The first required that participants be reflective of most gifted education teachers nationally in that they had some teaching experience prior to working in the gifted setting. The next required that participants met the definition of beginning teacher of the gifted (less than 3 years experience in the gifted setting). The final qualifier was that teachers serve in the secondary setting. As both the

setting and education received by teachers are strikingly different at elementary and secondary levels, and as the training received by elementary and secondary teachers differs greatly, this research will focus solely on one group in order to create a higher degree of homogeneity among participants.

Once these 3 criteria were met, the true potential pool of participants was revealed. More specifically, seven teachers were identified and invited to participate, with 5 being from Washington High School and 2 from Lincoln Middle School. At this junction, each individual was informed of the goals and timelines of the study, and each expressed a desire to participate. Once their interest was confirmed, a questionnaire was administered to each of the seven individuals. The ultimate goal of the researcher was to use a diverse sample of individuals in terms of ethnicity, age, and gender in an attempt to fully explore the expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted. To this end, every teacher identified as being eligible to participate was invited to do so.

## **Research Design**

### **Phase 1: Screening Process**

As stated earlier, in order to determine the participant pool, participants meeting the established

criteria were given a questionnaire (Appendix D) to assess 3 things: personal background, academic training, and professional experience. The first section of this questionnaire was provided to each potential participant in person, whereby they were asked to provide information regarding their ethnicity and gender. The second portion of the questionnaire asked potential participants to provide insight into their academic training, specifically, the level of education they had and the nature of the institutions where that education was received. The final portion of the questionnaire asked potential participants to share information regarding their professional experience, such as the nature of their teaching experience (if any), and their history of work with gifted learners (if any). The questionnaire was used in an attempt to include participants from a variety of perspectives, mirroring the diversity typically seen in teachers.

### **Phase 2: First Individual Interview**

After the seven individuals had been selected and formally invited to participate in the study, they were each provided with an interview schedule and outline of what study participation would involve. The first interview they participated in worked to provide the researcher with insight into their expectations and experiences as a pre-

service teacher (See Appendix E). The first individual interview also allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on the nature and quality of their teacher training through responding to open-ended, guiding questions (Appendix F). The goal was to allow teacher insight to emerge as the conversation progressed, as well as to allow the direction of the interview to be determined organically (e.g.. as a result of what is produced through the dialogue). The first interview took place the day after the questionnaire was administered, during week one of data collection. During each interview, respondent's accounts were recorded and probed for further detail and description as necessary.

### **Phase 3: Focus Group Interview**

At this phase in the research, each of the beginning teachers participating in the study was invited to collectively share insight into their expectations as beginning teachers of the gifted (Appendix F). This occurred six weeks after the first individual interview. Specifically, the teachers were solicited to share specific information as to the nature of their expectations of various members of their school community (administrators, on-site counselors, on-site coordinators, mentors, colleagues, students). 2 focus group interviews were

conducted, one at Lincoln Middle and one at Washington High. The decision was made to conduct 2 separate interviews in an attempt to discover similarities and differences between school sites, and to ease the burden of travel on participants.

During the focus groups, the researcher posed questions and each participant was provided with the opportunity to respond. Shank (2002) credits D.L. Morgan as pioneering much of the current thinking on the value of focus group interviewing. According to Shank (2002), this particular method is most useful for determining underlying notions in a setting where the experiences of others can work to inform co-participants to greater levels of understanding and awareness. An additional strength of the focus group interview is it places the participants in a position to lead and guide discussion (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996), which allows for a unique kind of ownership and honesty.

Prior to the beginning of the discussion, simple guidelines for the discussion were introduced verbally. At this point, participants were informed that at any point during the interview they were able to respond to the question being posed, and to comment on the responses given by other participants. They were also informed that at the

end of the interview session they would be given the opportunity to share concluding thoughts. The researcher provided lunch in an attempt to create a more relaxed and congenial environment.

#### **Phase 4: Classroom Observations**

After the completion of the focus group interview, the participants were asked by the researcher for permission to be observed during a regularly scheduled class period. The observations lasted for approximately 50 minutes and each participant was observed. Observations were conducted during week nine of the study. A chart was created as a tool to monitor observations and impressions (Appendix J). During the observations, descriptive and reflective notes were taken which served as a place to record information regarding the physical arrangement of students and furniture in the classroom, and teacher and student behavior. The purpose of the observations was to become better familiar with participant teaching materials, curriculum, lesson design and style. They were also done in an effort to strengthen the rapport between the researcher and the participants. Finally, observations were conducted in order to catalog aspects of the participants teaching experience that might otherwise be overlooked (e.g. classroom space, nature of interactions with students). The

findings of the classroom observations were incorporated into the guiding interview questions for the final individual interview.

#### **Phase 5: Final Written Reflection**

At the conclusion of the classroom observations, participants were provided with an opportunity to complete a written reflection in which they were asked to express their thoughts/reflections on their expectations and experiences as beginning teachers of the gifted (See Appendix H). The request to write the final reflection was done both in person and via an email. This included a discussion of their most memorable moment of success, as well as their biggest challenges as beginning teachers of the gifted. To this end, they were to either bring their written reflection to the final interview, or to submit it electronically. Most participants opted to submit it in person on the day of their second interview.

#### **Phase 6: Second Series of Individual Interview**

At this phase of the research study, participants were interviewed individually again. During this last conversation, which took place during week 9, participants were asked to reflect on their beginning years as a teacher of the gifted and to comment on the effectiveness of their pre-service training and in-service supports. The interview

guide that was utilized (See Appendix G) asked participants to comment on the nature of their experiences with their administrators (principals), site coordinators, school counselors, mentors, colleagues, and students, as well as with the parents of their students. At the closure of this final interview each participant was thanked for their participation.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data for this study was collected over the course of the spring semester during the 2006-2007 school year. Data analysis was conducted concurrently in order to determine when interview-guiding questions needed to be modified. During phase 1, data collected through the questionnaires was catalogued and analyzed. Following phases 2, 3, and 4 of the data collection, the audiotaped individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed, and subjected to inductive analysis in order to generate findings. Additionally, upon submission, each individual written reflection was analyzed and subjected to inductive analysis in order to identify whether or not relevant findings emerged from them. To this end, the findings from this analysis were used to inform future participant interviews. The data collected was first examined per each case for potential insight (i.e. phase

one, participant one) and then per question. Finally, each series of items was examined collectively whereby the researcher was able to uncover the ways in which participant responses worked to answer the original research questions. Additionally, every attempt to gain assurances that participant perspectives were not being oversimplified or overanalyzed was made. This was done through the processes of triangulation and cross-case analysis. Using the work of Stake (2006) as a guiding text, the researcher sought out no less than three confirmations that key meanings were not being overlooked. According to Stake, "triangulation has been generally considered the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, but it is also verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2006, p. 37). With that being said, more evidence than a single quotation or correlation was needed in order to report a conclusion as an assertion. Triangulation therefore occurred here through the use of more than one research method, as well as the use of more than one participant. Cross-case analysis was also conducted once individual case reports were created and reviewed, as a means of generating study findings. Again, this was done in accordance with the recommendation of Stake (2006), "That the main activity of

cross-case analysis is reading the case reports and applying their findings of situated experience to the research questions of the Quintain (study)" (Stake, 2006, p. 47).

Furthermore, all participant responses were analyzed with an acceptance of the notion they had been gathered in the attempt to produce a "thick description" of the participants' perspectives. Gerdes and Conn define insight of this nature as allowing for "the reader to determine how meaningful and/or how relevant or "generalize-able" the research is to them by allowing them to "see" more of the context in which the investigation occurred" (Gerdes and Conn, 2001, p. 185).

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with any research, this study faced a number of limitations: four in particular. The first of these limitations is that the researcher was only working with teachers in one district versus working with teachers across districts. This may serve as a potential limitation because in-service supports offered to the participants of the study are limited to the manner by which that one district prioritizes and structures its programming, as well as the policies that have been established. This will definitely inform, if not limit, the participant's

perspectives. One way in which the researcher attempted to work around this potential limitation was to interview participants from more than one school site within the district. Nevertheless, the limit the generalizability of the study's findings may be limited to teachers who are from Eastern Parish in Louisiana.

A second limitation of the study is one of scope in that participants in the study were limited to teachers in a secondary setting, which excluded the experiences of elementary teachers. This may have limited the range of teacher responses. However, the design of the study did not allow for the avoidance of this limitation.

A third limitation of this study is that it employed the interview method, which even with a guide was difficult to standardize. This was due largely to differences in participant responses—namely what they said or in some cases did not say. Consequently, there were instances when questions needed to be modified or deleted as a result of participant reaction. This did create for minor differences in participant responses.

A final limitation is that the methods employed forced each participant to reveal their identity (particularly when participating in the focus group interview), which may have worked to limit the honesty of their responses. In

order to counter this effect, the research attempted to establish rapport with each participant and to clarify the aims of the study (to gain insight and not to evaluate).

### **Study Participants**

The teachers who participated in this study were from two school sites in Eastern Parish- Washington High School and Lincoln Middle School. Five participants were from the former: Michael Smith, Laura Stevens, Mitchell Frommer, Michelle Brody, and Jason Highland, while two were from the latter: Adam Douglass, Beverly Lawson. The names of participants and school sites are all pseudonyms. Of these participants, three teachers taught mathematics, one teacher taught English, one teacher taught science, and two teachers taught history. Furthermore, two had completed the requirements for gifted certification, while the other five had not. Of these five, the number of gifted education courses they had completed ranged in number from zero to three.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Expectations and Experiences of Beginning Teachers of the Gifted**

I began this examination with seven beginning teachers of the academically gifted in December 2006 and completed the study in March 2007. With the use of a questionnaire, interviews, classroom observations, and participant written reflections, I had a rich source of data for this qualitative study. To analyze the data collected I used constant triangulation (Stake, 2006), comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) and cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). As I worked through the data, I was careful to keep in mind the findings of prior studies with beginning teachers of the academically gifted which illustrated a national lack of structured mentoring for beginning teachers of the gifted (Joffe, 2001), a lack of solid teaching strategies for working with the academically gifted (Joffe, 2001), feelings of isolation (Pollak, 1996), and reliance on previous teaching experiences (Pollak, 1996). I was able to form themes using the methods of analysis that appeared to be central to each of the seven beginning teachers of the gifted. I also kept the initial research questions in mind:

1. What is/was the nature of the expectations that beginning teachers of the gifted have of their:

- a. colleagues
  - b. principals
  - c. mentors
  - d. on-site gifted coordinator
  - e. students
  - f. students' families?
2. What is the nature of the experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted:
- a. with their colleagues
  - b. with their principals
  - c. with their mentors
  - d. with their on-site coordinator
  - e. with their students
  - f. with their students' families?
3. What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction that beginning teachers of the gifted have of their gifted teacher training programs in terms of level of preparedness provided? What level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction do they have of their regular education teacher training program in terms of the level of preparedness it provided them to teach the gifted?
4. What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction that beginning teachers of the gifted have of the in-service support options made available to them?

In reporting the seven case studies, I use the following sections to focus the findings: pre-service training, relationships with students and their families, challenges with curriculum and instruction, professional relationships. Professional relationships include four sub-categories: relationships with principals, relationships with mentors, relationships with guidance counselors, and relationships with on-site gifted coordinators. Each case examined here will begin with a description of the

participants' personal backgrounds and physical classroom space as grounding of this nature is helpful in understanding the participants as individuals. This will be followed by a discussion of the findings within four broad themes.

### **Case Study #1: Michael Smith**

Michael Smith's first years working with the gifted have taken place at Washington High School, where he teaches gifted advanced mathematics (a combination of trigonometry, college level algebra, and pre-calculus). A married, 30-year-old Caucasian male, Michael was born and raised in Georgia. To date has a bachelor's degree in Math as well as a master's degree in Mathematics Education. He received his certification to teach regular education students through graduate study. Upon the completion of his first graduate degree he immediately began a 1-year student teaching internship. Prior to accepting a position working with the gifted in Louisiana, Michael taught for three years in the state of Georgia. Over the course of his career, Michael has taught a number of grades and courses. While not currently certified to teach the gifted (he plans to begin taking the required coursework in the spring of 2007), Michael is certified to teach math in grades 7-12 in the state of Louisiana.

### Pre-Service Education

In choosing to pursue a career in education, Michael revealed that he had no clear expectations of what he was to gain from graduate study (Interview 1: p.3). He was hoping, at least, that his graduate program would prepare him to be a good teacher. Over the course of his studies, he took two methods courses, one of which focused on teaching strategies, understanding student learning styles, and curriculum design. The other methods course he remembered focused on content specific situations. In addition to these courses, Michael enrolled in one course (a requirement) in exceptionalities, which focused on severe disabilities, offering little insight into the needs of gifted learners (Interview 1: p. 5). He also stated he found his professors to be lacking, particularly one instructor who was a poor teacher-- lecturing from notes and talking to the board (Interview 1: p. 6). Upon completion of this coursework, he began a teaching internship, which he found to be challenging, largely because his supervising professor had high expectations while giving a lot of discouraging feedback. While he found his internship to be a helpful addition to his preparation for entering the classroom, he did not perceive his coursework to have been helpful. Looking back, Michael

shared he wasn't expecting much from his graduate education and in the end did not get much.

### **Description of Classroom**

Michael's classroom is a sizeable space, filled with rectangular tables and chairs for student use. While dimly lit (due to limited access to natural light), the room is designed in such a way that students are forced to work in tandem with each other. To this end, his decision to place students in such close physical proximity to one another works to add a degree of warmth to the area. The room is sparsely decorated with only a few inspirational posters breaking the monotony of the drab, white walls. Many parts of the room are in disrepair including the ceiling (which is close to disintegration in places), windows and door.

### **Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction**

While transitioning from the regular setting to the gifted education setting, Michael admitted he has struggled at times with the comprehensive curriculum on a conceptual level. He found the mandates to provide all students with a narrowly dictated curriculum to be in direct conflict with effective instruction for the gifted. Additionally, he revealed he has struggled to plan around the state curriculum to the extent that he has made curricular choices, which at times are in contrast with what the state

suggests his lesson plans should be. However, Michael is comfortable with his decisions saying, "You know, if someone comes down on me, then that's what I've got to accept. But you know, those are decisions that I make as a teacher." (Interview 2: p. 3) In his written final reflection, Michael poignantly shared his frustration:

It is often difficult to plan interesting and motivating activities that relate to the real world and have their place in the state curriculum. Trying to balance the state standards with what I know is right for the students is challenging. I would rather spend time planning instruction that will lead to great mathematics than following a state mandated curriculum for every child in the state that does not allow for individuality. (Written Entry)

#### **Relationships with Students and Their Families**

Generally, Michael has been satisfied with his time in the gifted classroom. In working with gifted learners, he discovered:

I think the misconception is that gifted students are better behaved than traditional...but they still misbehave. They're still teenagers...the rule is that they are average behaving, and there are some differences, but I think that if you didn't look at anything else, if you just walked into a classroom, you might not be able to tell by their behavior who is traditional and who is gifted. (Interview 2: p. 4)

On another note, he seemed to struggle most with the prevalence of gifted underachievement. In working with the parents of the gifted, Michael has concluded the majority of the time the parents of the gifted are like any other parents. One observation he has made regarding this

community of parents is that they are overly concerned with grades rather than effort. Another challenge for him is assisting parents in becoming, "appropriately involved" (Interview 2: p. 8). He thought that the creation of a local parent organization geared to parents of the gifted would be helpful in the development of a stronger relationship between parents and teachers.

### **Professional Relationships**

Upon reflecting on his relationships with the professional staff of Washington High, Michael disclosed that he feels generally supported by his building principal, in that he (Michael) feels as though he has been treated with respect and integrity. He was especially pleased with the principal's willingness to provide funding for students to compete in a mathematics competition--this showing of generosity and commitment strengthened Michael. He was also quite pleased that his principal assigned him a mentor who had not only mathematics education experience, but also gifted education experience. It should be noted that Michael, like the other participants given mentors, was given a mentor because he was a beginning teacher in Louisiana and not because he was "new" to the self-contained gifted setting. The assignment of a mentor was done in accordance with the Louisiana Teacher Assistance

and Assessment Program (LTAAP). Michael has found his relationship with his mentor to be helpful and more importantly unique when compared to the experiences of other beginning teachers (who are often assigned mentors from other content areas):

Well, for other teachers I know you have to choose one or 2 teachers out of the whole faculty that are certified to do this LATAAP mentor training. So I was lucky to have a math teacher that was certified to do LATAAP, but I just think, "What if I wasn't?" Then I'd have to have one person to ask LATAAP questions to and you'd have to ask someone else for curriculum questions-- if there was someone else. (Interview 2: p. 8)

However, in his final written reflection, Michael noted that one of the moments when he felt least supported occurred when a parent of a gifted child came in for a conference. There was no administrative presence to mediate or provide assistance. He said, "sitting alone in that room with the child and the parent, I was outnumbered and I felt like I was on trial. I felt like the principal or the guidance counselors should be willing to sit in the room with me...I felt as though the school should have a representative sit in on some parent conferences ... "

(Written Entry). This was obviously an experience, which has affected his impressions of the administrators with whom he works, though generally speaking their professional relationship has been marked with both highs and lows.

When asked to examine his relationship with the school's guidance counselors, Michael shared that he generally thought them to be uninformed as to the needs of the gifted. He said, "well, I have a big issue with our counselors...they should consider 'this is a gifted student' because there should be differences in how we approach scheduling" (Interview 2: p. 6). When asked to discuss his relationship with the gifted coordinator, he divulged that her presence makes him feel supported. Moreover, he found her to be approachable and accessible:

The gifted office...that's kind of where the center is for us. It's hard to say if that wasn't there, how we would act... We can always go there to work on an IEP and we can get some assistance, but the support doesn't stop there you know, it goes past, 'Well I'm just here to get help with IEPs' and they could be like, 'There". But all the gifted coordinators, they were teachers... She knows the issues and sort of facilitates issues. (Interview 2: p. 6)

### **Case Study #2: Laura Stevens**

Like Michael, Laura Stevens also began her career working with the academically gifted at Washington High School. Prior to joining the faculty of Washington High, she taught mathematics at the college level. A 26-year-old, Caucasian female, Laura was raised in a small town in upstate New York. She attended public schools there and upon graduating from high school moved to South Carolina to attend the College of Charleston. After two years there she

transferred to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, where she received an undergraduate degree in Math and Statistics. Laura then went on to earn two master's degrees from Louisiana State University--one in Mathematics and one in Mathematics Education. Thus, Laura earned her teaching certification through university study at the graduate level. Currently, she is certified to teach math in grades 6-12 and she has completed the coursework required for gifted certification. She has not however completed the required practicum and is instead opting to waive this certification requirement by teaching for three years. Over the course of her career Laura has taught trigonometry, college algebra, and calculus. This is her first year of teaching at the high school level and she has been asked to teach gifted geometry and advanced mathematics.

### **Pre-Service Education**

Laura completed her teacher education program as a member of a Holmes cohort. The Holmes program is structured such that students complete a full year of graduate coursework while simultaneously teaching full time during the day under the supervision of an experienced teacher. Since she had prior teaching experience, Laura stated she found completion of both the coursework and the internship

to be unhelpful. Her exact words were that it was a "waste of time" (Interview 1: p. 4). She found the structure of her study to be "too touchy-feely" (Interview 1: p. 4), namely as a result of its reflective nature. Her goal, however, was to do whatever it took to get certified, and to this end, the Holmes program was beneficial to her. On another note, she shared she found the texts used to be unimpressive and like Michael found the majority of her professors to be poor teachers. Ironically, Laura opted to focus her electives on gifted education, placing her in an optimal position for work within the field.

#### **Description of Classroom**

Laura's classroom, which is located on the second floor of Washington High School, is a diminutive space, particularly when compared to some of the other nearby classrooms. It is however a well illuminated room, with windows lining one side of it. Her desk is placed at the very front of the room, with all students' desks aligned in a traditional configuration--in that each of them is organized into orderly rows that face the front of the room. Directly to the left of her desk is a small wooden table, on which sits a relatively new computer and printer. On the top of her desk rest a few personal pictures of Laura and her fiancée.

### **Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction**

Over the course of our conversations, Laura revealed a few things regarding her transition to the self-contained gifted classroom. Among the most startling was her open disclosure of the fact she had never learned how to design curriculum for the gifted (Interview 2: p. 1). She shared the needs of the gifted were never covered in any of the education courses she took prior to working on her gifted certification and even then she could not remember receiving explicit instruction on effective curriculum design.

### **Relationships with Students and Their Families**

Regarding the students she serves, Laura was able to share with great enthusiasm her positive impressions of them. "I really kind of work with the best kids in the school that are really pretty motivated and good." (Interview 2: p.2) Moreover, she finds their behavior to be on par with other students their age, though she thinks her students to be more respectful than most other students. Nevertheless, she did note that at times their "laziness" is frustrating. She often expects them to be more committed and consistent students than they can be. Her impressions of the parents of the gifted, however, were not quite so glowing:

These parents are horrible! I mean, how else can you describe them? I mean, truly they are cruel. They think, I mean every gifted parent that I have come across thinks that their kid is a perfect angel, brilliant, and I have to be an idiot not to see how brilliant they are! I mean truly! It's insane... but I mean the majority of these parents are disillusioned. (Interview 2: p. 5)

In her opinion, too many parents of the gifted are misinformed regarding the purpose of gifted education which Laura views as being to enrich and challenge. A number of negative experiences with parents have clearly jaded her view of them.

### **Professional Relationships**

Generally, Laura has been made to feel supported by the administrative staff at Washington High School, though she was never assigned an official mentor. Showings of their support are evidenced, in her estimation, by the district office's offer to fund her travel to the NAGC Annual Convention (though as of April 2007 she had still not been fully reimbursed for the convention she attended in November of 2006). At one point, Laura stated she feels, "like I've been given a lot of support. Like last year, I came here and a lot of parents were calling and saying that the class was too hard, but they (the administrative staff) were really supportive. And now they are even more supportive this year." (Focus Group Interview: p. 4) She also perceived the principal's willingness to fund the

purchasing of new textbooks as being supportive (though she also revealed the frustration she felt when it took three months of calling the school board, bothering the building principal and assistant principal in order to get the books). In her own words, "As far as the gifted goes, he's [the principal is] ok." (Interview 2: p. 3) However, she did not feel so well supported in her first year, asserting:

It was my first year last year, and I thought they kind of throw a lot at you. And you know, for me it was the classes and the planning, and then having to do the IEPs. I mean, it was a lot to begin with and then you've got the IEPs and all the giftedness to deal with. Maybe just cut me some slack and maybe give me an IEP or 2 less, you know, on top of all the stuff to do." (Focus Group Interview: p. 11)

Without a doubt, during her first year as a teacher of the gifted, Laura felt like many of the other participants-- overworked and overwhelmed.

As far as the guidance counselors go, Laura was direct with her sentiment-- "They're idiots." (Interview 2: p. 4) She found the counselors to do a poor job of scheduling students, and a poor job of helping students in their preparation for college. Finally, Laura made it clear she perceives one role of the counselor to be a provider of emotional support-- a role in which she thinks the counselors currently fail. She recognizes gifted students at Washington High are typical of many gifted students in

that "... they deal with typical gifted stuff and I think that they can be isolated-- all those things that you learn about." (Interview 2: p. 4) And while Laura has found the gifted coordinator to be helpful (particularly with the writing of IEPs), the coordinator is also too overwhelmed with responsibilities to adequately address the issues that students face. Laura suggested the school administration address these dilemmas by hiring a counselor whose job would be to tend solely to the needs of the gifted population at Washington, an idea the administrative staff is currently exploring.

### **Case Study #3: Michelle Brody**

Michelle Brody is a native of New Orleans and a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. A 59-year-old Caucasian female, Michelle is married and the mother of 2 boys. After graduating from a Catholic high school in New Orleans, Michelle attended the University of New Orleans where she received a bachelor's degree in English Literature. After graduation, she taught for a number of years on a temporary certificate before going on to earn a Master's degree in Education from Ursuline College. Thus, university training was her path to 7-12 English certification, though she was able to waive the student teaching requirement as she had already had full-time

teaching experience. In total, Michelle has 27 years of teaching experience having taught for a number of years in both private and public schools in New Orleans. Over the course of her career she has taught English in grades 6-12 including Advanced Placement English. She has been teaching the academically gifted English for one full year and while not currently certified to do so, she plans to begin the necessary coursework on-line in the spring of 2007.

### **Pre-Service Education**

Michelle had a good deal of difficulty in recalling her pre-service education as she has been working as a classroom teacher for a considerable length of time. She did remember having had taken a number of general methodology courses of which none addressed the needs of the academically gifted. Her first education professors focused on "practical knowledge" (Interview 1: p. 2), specifically on discipline and motivation. She shared that her professors were like professors anywhere: some were good while others made you wonder whether or not they had ever taught at all (Interview 1: p. 2).

### **Description of Classroom**

Michelle's classroom is a cramped, warm space with limited airflow and a generous amount of natural light (which floods in through a wall of windows). Her desk is

placed at the front of the room in the right hand corner while the desks used for students are placed in rows facing the front of the room. Michelle has access to one closet and a thin, wooden podium (which is placed in the center of the room at the front). Behind the podium is a traditional chalkboard and white projector screen. To the left of the podium is a dusty overhead projector. Due to the limited physical space, students sit in close proximity to one another and their school bags and personal possessions litter the floor. On the walls, above the heads of her students, are examples of their work.

### **Professional Relationships**

In most regards, Michelle is satisfied with the level of support she has received from the administrative staff at Washington High School. She disclosed a particular instance where she had forgotten to adhere strictly to the state mandated curriculum and testing schedule and news had gotten back to her building principal. She admitted to being largely unconcerned with explicit test preparation for her gifted students and that she should have been doing a more efficient job of grading and returning their assessments. However, when called in to speak with the principal, the principal responded calmly and provided her with comfort. She credits this experience positively,

noting her relationship with her building principal as being especially helpful.

Despite her satisfaction with the handling of this incident, Michelle was disappointed that she did not receive a mentor as she felt she would have benefited greatly from receiving on-going assistance from a teacher with experience in the self-contained gifted setting. At one point, Michelle admitted, "I think I wasn't given one because I'm so old. And they probably just assumed that I didn't need anybody." (Focus Group Interview: p.6) She was disappointed there was no mentor provided in that she wanted "someone to hold my hand" (Interview 2: p. 4). Additionally, she felt disconnected from the school counselors in that both she and the students had little interaction with them. In her opinion the counselors did not provide her with any insight and they also failed to assist the gifted students with planning for graduation and college.

Michelle was also displeased with the work of the gifted coordinator as she failed to offer enough one-on-one support. The IEP was a particularly difficult thing for Michelle to conquer. According to her, "it took me a while to understand just the whole process of why you are doing and when. And when this thing was due, and when that thing

was due. To me she didn't do a good job of explaining it and I became a burden because I had to ask questions too frequently."(Interview 2: p. 5) Consequently, the IEP process overwhelmed Michelle, and her feelings of isolation worked to fuel her frustration. She attributed her struggle with this document to 2 things: the absence of a mentor and a lack of support from the gifted coordinator.

### **Relationships with Students and Their Families**

Only in her second year of working with the gifted, Michelle was open in her discussion of the challenges she's faced. One such challenge is adapting to the nature of the gifted learner. Michelle informed me that she has struggled with capturing the interest of gifted students. She has also struggled with underachievement, saying, "I have some that are supposedly off the charts with brain power, but don't want to do anything—nothing ... The biggest, the biggest thing is getting the ones involved that are...lazy and accustomed to not doing."(Interview 2: p. 3) She attributed their "laziness" to the curriculum in the lower grades largely.

On another note, Michelle found the parents of the gifted students in her charge to be supportive and interested in the lives of their children. Moreover, she found them to be involved and curious to know what was

going on in the classroom. In her opinion the parents of the gifted look to receive regular updates from teachers-- a request she finds to be reasonable.

### Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction

Michelle revealed she received little by way of instruction in effective curriculum and instruction for the gifted:

When they hired me they said 'take them from where they are and just go'. That was the directive ... I guess because I taught for 27 years they just expected that I was going to be able to interpret everything. I wish that we would have had a small meeting, even if it would have been one on one... And that would have been the gifted people talking to me and saying, 'Hey, we know you're new at this and you haven't gotten your certification yet, here's some projects or things that we do that are legitimate and that work.' But I didn't-- I've had to come up with my own (Interview 2: p. 2).

Michelle shared the only experience she had previously with students of above average performance was when she was teaching an AP English course, and she has concluded the administrative staff and faculty at Washington High School assumed that because she had such extensive experience as a regular education teacher, that the transition to the gifted classroom would be without incident. This was not the case in that Michelle felt the challenges she has faced in her second year as a beginning teacher of the gifted are the same challenges she faced in her first year as a teacher of the gifted.

#### **Case Study #4: Jason Highland**

Jason, a 41-year-old, Caucasian male, is originally from a suburb of Chicago. Married for 3 years, he is the father of one son. After graduating from public schools, he attended Illinois State University where he earned a bachelor's degree in History and Social Science Education, a Master's degree in American History, and gifted certification as a part of an Educational Specialist degree. He decided to relocate to Louisiana as a result of a job offer, and after moving completed a second Master's degree in Library and Information Sciences at Louisiana State University. In total, he has 16 years of experience teaching regular education students, and one full year of experience working with the academically gifted. Over the course of his career he has taught a number of courses, including AP history, civics, free enterprise, AP psychology, and sociology. He is currently certified to teach both secondary social studies and the academically gifted. He fulfilled the requirements for regular education certification through university study and unlike the other participants, was certified to teach the academically gifted prior to being placed in the gifted classroom. He currently teaches gifted world geography to 9<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### Pre-Service Education

Jason, a man inspired to enter the field of education by one of his 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, is the first person in his family to go to college. In deciding to study education, he admitted he was not expecting much, and that was precisely what he feels he received (Interview 1: p. 2). Generally, however, he is pleased with his graduate programming. He had no specific expectations of his textbooks and in fact found them to be sufficient. As to his professors, he found them to be both bright and caring while not being too involved. As he confirmed, this particular blend was exactly to his liking (Interview 1: p. 3).

### Description of Classroom

Jason's classroom is a dark, clammy place located on the first floor of Washington High. Even when all the overhead lights are on, the room still appears dimly lit. There are two chalkboards in the room; one is located along the side of the rather long room. In front of this chalkboard is Jason's desk, which has been placed rather inconspicuously out of the line of vision of the students. Its placement reveals it functions primarily as a piece of furniture and not a resting spot for a weary teacher. The desk is wooden, of average size and is further reduced by the piles of papers and books that cover it. To the left of

his desk are two filing cabinets and a bookshelf. The other chalkboard is located at the front of the room and is covered in chalk dust. In front of this second chalkboard are a projector screen, a transparency machine and a cart. The room itself is quite spacious with a good bit of room available for students. Additionally, there are two well-used, oversized chairs in the room which students are welcome to use. Finally, there are also a number of traditional desks (somewhere near 25), placed in rows, facing the projector screen and primary chalkboard.

### **Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction**

Jason reported feeling a sufficient level of comfort in providing effective curriculum and instruction to gifted learners. He attributed this in large part to the university study he pursued prior to being assigned gifted World Geography classes at Washington High School. In reflecting on his placement, Jason shared, "I had studied [the gifted], knew a little about what they were like.. and so I was curious to see what they were really like. I felt prepared" (Interview 1: p. 4). The choice to complete his certification prior to being placed in the gifted self-contained setting clearly worked to the advantage of both Jason and his students. That said, Jason has found the greatest challenge of being a beginning teacher of the

gifted as, "following the comprehensive curriculum" (Written Entry). While he did not elaborate, he did go on to say the gifted should be allowed to "do gifted" (Written Entry).

### **Relationships With Students and Their Families**

In reflecting upon his relationships with the students and families he teaches, Jason shared he found the children he teaches and their parents to be a diverse group. When discussing the students in particular, Jason disclosed he often found them to generally struggle with accountability for their grades and performance. However, he attributed this more to their developmental age (emotionally and physiologically) than to their gifted identification. Jason also shared his thoughts on the heightened sense of security the students with whom he works feel. More specifically, he noted that in comparison with the traditional population, the gifted students at Washington High, "... kind of know the system-- they know somebody's got their back. Usually there are parents or they know that there's an escape hatch" (Interview 2: p.7). He described this sensation of an ever-present security blanket as a hindrance to the development of their sense of social, emotional, and academic independence. Finally, he divulged that many of the parents with whom he works are, "...still

caught up in that old system. And they say, 'Well, that's not really what gifted is about' (Interview 2: p. 8). The "old system" that Jason is referring to is the system of focusing on grades rather than progress and product. In Jason's view, gifted education is about, "taking you where you want to go ... they just think their kids will be doing a few more projects. But I'm like, 'I don't want a crappy poster'" (Interview 2: p. 8). In his view, he wants to see evidence of substantial thought--the abstract--a concept he feels too many parents struggle with due to a lack of knowledge regarding the nature of their children and the workings of meaningful gifted education.

### **Professional Relationships**

Jason has concluded that there exists a sizeable disconnect between the building principals, counselors and teachers of the gifted at the high school. There are a number of factors that have contributed to his finding. Among these factors is that he finds no one willing to accept accountability for miscommunications or areas that need improvement. Additionally, Jason thinks his principals to be largely uninformed of the needs of the gifted. Moreover, he shared he never goes to them for insight into the gifted students he teaches, instead relying only on himself and the research he can conduct for information. He

attributes his desire to be a seeker of knowledge rather than a passive receiver as part of personality. This insight explains why Jason enjoys not having been provided a mentor, though he thinks mentors might be meaningful for individuals who request them.

On another yet related note, Jason finds the school counselors at Washington High School to be largely inaccessible and therefore unable and uninterested in meeting the needs of the gifted population. Jason was firm when suggesting there should be a gifted counselor at the high school whose dedicated role would be to meet the needs of teachers of the gifted, gifted students, and the families of gifted students. This person would work in collaboration with the current gifted coordinator who Jason finds to be willing to fight for the causes that most closely affect the lives of gifted teachers. He found his current coordinator to be both accountable and accessible--two traits Jason obviously finds invaluable in staff who work as resources and supports. Finally, during the focus group interview, Jason was sure to highlight what he perceived as an inaccuracy in his colleagues' impressions of administration, "I think you guys may be mistaking support for just staying out of the way" (Focus Group

Interview: p. 5), a pattern that has caused him to feel disgruntled.

### **Case Study #5: Adam Douglass**

Adam, a 43-year-old Caucasian male, is English by descent, though he is both Irish and American by citizenship. Born in Greece, he was raised in a number of countries--from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Nairobi, Kenya. Adam spent most of his school age years in England, attending either English public schools. He received a bachelor's degree in Accounting from a British university and then worked for a few years as a consultant and business trainer. Soon after, he left the private sector to begin a Master's degree program in Education at the University of Anglia in Norwich, England. To date, he has 13 years of teaching experience having taught in England, Austria, France, and America in both private and public schools. While certified to teach social studies in England, Adam is currently working to complete Louisiana certifications in social studies and French (which means passing the Praxis tests). Additionally, he has just completed his first semester of gifted education coursework at Louisiana State University in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice. Professionally, he is in his first year of

work with the academically gifted where he has been asked to teach gifted 7<sup>th</sup> grade World Geography.

### **Pre-Service Education**

In deciding to pursue a master's degree in Education, Adam was hoping for a reasonable amount of practical knowledge and a minimal amount of theory, which is exactly what he received. Ideally, he was hoping to learn how to establish control in his regular education classroom and then how to teach. In retrospect, he seemed pleased with his graduate experience. He found his professors to be of mixed ability with some being strong teachers and others who were not so good. In his opinion, one strength of the British education system is that the students are heterogeneously grouped. As a result, most professors aim to prepare beginning teachers to work with the wide spectrum of students who may be put under their charge. To this end, he did recall some discussion as to the needs of academically advanced learners. Upon arriving in America he sought additional training and hoped his professors at Louisiana State University would provide him with more practical strategies for the classroom. However, this desire went unfulfilled. While they were solid teachers (they were able to assist him in becoming familiar with the

American structure for service delivery), the texts selected for use were "dry".

### **Description of Classroom**

Adam's classroom, while equipped with its own water fountain and bathroom, is separated from other classrooms at Lincoln Middle--primarily because it is located in a trailer. He shares the space with another teacher though a flimsy wall separates their rooms. Adam's room is actually quite bright as each wall is one of windows. The white, vinyl walls are without decoration for the most part, but the space is put to good use. Student desks face the front of the room providing each student with an unobstructed view of the white board and projector screen. Along one wall of the space are five newer computers, all of which are available for student use. In the back corner of the room is Adam's desk where his computer and printer are located.

### **Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction**

Having recently moved to the United States, Adam was largely unfamiliar with gifted education, as England had not yet adopted the gifted designation when he left. Despite this, however, he thought his transition to the self-contained gifted setting was smooth, largely because he felt his education and experience in the United Kingdom

included a solid sampling of student abilities. That said, he was excited to discover he would be working with the gifted as he finds the curriculum to have the potential to be much more open-ended than traditional curriculums. However, he has come to discover, "... the curriculum guide does make it difficult to teach the gifted what they need to know. The idea of having to all be on the same page at the same time is quite problematic for them, in terms of meeting their needs"(Interview 1:p. 7). He wanted to discuss this further in subsequent interviews, sharing that his lessons for the gifted have been:

"... constricted a little... it means we spend more time on the test and less on higher skills because they know they aren't going to be tested on the higher skills on this test, they'll be tested on whether they remember" (Interview 2: p. 1).

Interestingly, figuring out how to solve the perceived conflict of teaching to the comprehensive curriculum and meeting the needs of his gifted students has been one of the greatest challenges Adam has faced as a beginning teacher of the gifted. He went on to share, "what's disturbing about it is that the level is too high for the average child, and yet insufficiently challenging for the gifted" (Interview 2: p. 3). Additionally, Adam has also had difficulty justifying the number of tests his students are forced to take as a result of the comprehensive

curriculum disclosing, "Our kids had 60 tests before their LEAP. Which may assist the traditional, but I can't think of anyone on the theoretical side of gifted education who would support this and yet they had to do it because there is no fight"(Interview 2: p. 6). In asserting that "there is no fight", Adam was revealing he feels unsupported and powerless as a teacher of the gifted on the state level. He made it clear that ideally the needs of the gifted need to be clearly delineated from the needs of the traditional population:

So rather than a directive coming out saying that all GLEs should be up on the board, maybe for gifted teachers there could be a higher level thinking skill involved in every class. That would be appropriate (Interview 2: p. 7).

In summary, he has found state mandates on education, particularly those affecting curriculum and instruction to be entirely too restrictive on both his teaching style and curriculum design. Clearly, Adam was not prepared to confront an obstacle of this nature as a beginning teacher of the gifted.

### **Relationships with Students and Their Families**

Adam has not had to overcome any significant challenges in building and maintaining relationships with the students he teaches. He prides himself on his commitment to being honest with them and on recognizing,

"they need to be the experts too" (Interview 2: p. 3). Clearly, Adam was able to enter the classroom with the level of humility and flexibility necessary to meet the nature and needs of gifted learners. For the most part he has seen these same traits, those of flexibility and humility in the parents of the gifted with whom he works—though he has found a small minority of parents to be, "very concerned about grades and achievement and on making sure that all the blame was somewhere else, but not on their little darlings" (Focus Group Interview: p. 9).

### **Professional Relationships**

One benefit to being a teacher at Lincoln Middle in Adam's view is the support he has been given by his colleagues. In addition to having been provided a mentor through LTAAP (his mentor is a teacher who has experience teaching both history and the gifted), Adam has found the faculty to be open and welcoming. In his final written reflection, he shared he felt especially supported as a result of the gracious nature of fellow teachers of the gifted saying he was glad he arrived to find several assignments that were tried and tested that he could use (Written Entry). He has also found the administrative staff to be helpful and hard working. In reflecting on the gifted coordinator in particular, Adam said, "she takes

problems away from other people and deals with them” (Interview 2: p. 4). He was satisfied with the level of supervision and guidance he receives from her. Moreover, he has found her to be willing to give both assistance and guidance, especially regarding the IEP process.

Despite the support he has found in curriculum design and IEP writing, Adam did express a desire to be provided more time for lesson planning from his building principal (Written Entry). In fact, he has found the amount of paperwork he is responsible for to interfere with his ability to complete his lesson planning saying, “the idea of teachers doing IEPs-- administrators should be doing that, because for me to write science objectives ... I’m writing objectives for a subject that I don’t understand, for a kid that’s going to be taught by somebody else” (Focus Group Interview: p. 7). Adam has struggled to not only adjust to the mandate to write IEPs for students on his caseload, but also to accept responsibility for matters (such as curriculum) of which he is unaware.

Finally, Adam, while largely pleased with the support provided by the other members of the faculty, was vocal about his desire to work in closer collaboration with his mentor. In describing his ideal, he expressed a desire to

have dedicated time to work in collaboration with his assigned mentor:

"I'd want one period, um ... if you're given one extra period, say every 2 days, where you are observed by a mentor, or observe a mentor, and if you could just time the thing where you share a common period and can work together with flexibility-- where let's say you could say, 'Let's not meet today' or 'Come and observe me tomorrow'" (Focus Group Interview: p. 6).

He had obviously given some thought to how the current system could be improved.

#### **Case Study #6: Beverly Lawson**

Beverly is a 49-year-old, Caucasian female, from a small town just outside the city of New Orleans. Married for 29 years and the mother of three children, Beverly is the first person in her family to graduate from college. After attending public schools, Beverly went on to attend Louisiana State University, receiving an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education, and a Master's degree in Educational Administration. She has 25 years of teaching experience, having taught in both private and public schools. She is currently in her first year of work with the academically gifted, teaching sixth grade gifted science. While certified to teach in grades K-6, Beverly is not certified to teach the gifted. However, she is working on beginning her coursework for certification in

the spring of 2007. She is also simultaneously seeking employment as a school administrator.

### **Pre-Service Education**

Beverly distinctly remembered always wanting to be a teacher. Like Michelle, however, she had a bit of difficulty recalling her undergraduate courses in education. While she could not recall with any great detail the classes she completed, she did remember enjoying her professors on a personal level. Beverly also reflected fondly on the materials she was provided and the methods she was taught. Despite this, she did not recall any mention of gifted education during her study (Interview 1: p. 5). Instead, the buzzword during that period in education was "mainstreaming", a notion, which in her recollection, discouraged the acknowledgement of difference. Upon entering her program in elementary education, she was hoping to gain knowledge of specific techniques and strategies that could be practically applied. Beverly was also "seeking content specific ideas" (Interview 1: p. 4). In her opinion, she received a great introduction to the field of education and consequently her needs were met. However, she added, "nothing prepares a teacher for teaching but teaching-not even student teaching", a statement with even more relevance in her

opinion, when used to describe the instruction of the academically gifted.

### **Description of Classroom**

Beverly's classroom is located at the end of a long hallway on the first floor of Lincoln Middle. Her room, a spacious lab, is placed in close proximity to other members of her grade level team. The room has two spaces for student use, one dedicated to student desks and another, dedicated to lab exploration. The walls of Beverly's room are covered with a number of items-- scientific charts, student work and even Bloom's Taxonomy. The room appears to have been designed by a person who is both a teacher and a student, a duality of roles that clearly reflects the individual who decorated it.

### **Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction**

As an experienced educator, Beverly felt comfortable transitioning to the self-contained gifted classroom. In fact, she was ecstatic, recalling:

"I felt good about it [accepting a position to teach the gifted]. Because I felt that the last 16 years had prepared me for it, working with kids that were average and above average ... I felt confident about doing it. I knew that it would be a challenge, you know, because it was a special program in itself" (Interview 1: p. 5).

When designing curriculum for her gifted classes, she frequently consults the comprehensive curriculum as she

finds it sufficiently covers the needs of all. In fact, she did not find it to negatively affect what she did with her gifted students at all (Interview 2: p. 1). The comprehensive curriculum is of particular importance to Beverly since prior to accepting the position at Lincoln Middle, she had received very little consultation on how to meet the needs of the gifted, humbly admitting, "nobody taught me that" (Interview 2: p. 2). She is therefore able to use the comprehensive curriculum as a guide for her curriculum design. She specifically mentioned an inability to differentiate instruction for the gifted as being of concern. Despite the structure the document provides her, she has had difficulty finding, "how to make it fit ... You know, it's a balancing act because I cover one textbook and half of another, and so staying within those guidelines and the needs and requirements of the comprehensive curriculum make it hard. It's hard" (Interview 2:p. 3). The main reason why Beverly feels pressure regarding implementation of the comprehensive curriculum is because Lincoln Middle School has modified the course curriculums in gifted classes to allow for acceleration. This choice has made it so that comprehensive curriculums for more than one grade are covered within one academic year. As was the case with

Adam, these challenges are trying for a beginning teacher of the gifted.

### **Relationships with Students and Their Families**

While Beverly has thoroughly enjoyed this first year of work with gifted learners, she has not found the children to be without their idiosyncrasies. One observation Beverly has made regarding their academic style is that, "they [the students] get the big picture, but they hyper-analyze everything" (Interview 2: p. 3). As to their social and emotional needs, Beverly expressed some concern regarding the ways in which students interact with one another, "You know, they've missed the social norms, some of them ... But it's not that they're really quite rude, they just haven't been shown how to consider [manners] as being important. It's as if that's secondary to what really needs to be done" (Interview 2: p. 4). In her brief experience, Beverly has concluded their lack of knowledge regarding etiquette does affect how they interact with others:

Not to say that gifted kids are perfect. It's not to say that, but they are so focused and motivated on learning that the socializing is kind of secondary to them. You know? So they tend to follow along and do whatever (Interview 2: p. 4).

At times, she has found their desire to fit in with others to be a contributing factor to misbehavior, an issue that is to be expected considering their unique position in

relation to their traditional peers. She has found that in other cases, students misbehave because they have not been assigned to courses appropriate for their skill level-- a problem that in her view could be curbed with more careful placement of students.

On a related note, Beverly has thankfully been able to establish a positive rapport with the parents of her students. Likewise, she has found them to be supportive and interested in the lives of their children sharing, "our parents have been pretty wonderful. They, well, I have found, that as long as you give them lots of information, in whatever form-- they leave you alone" (Interview 2: p.8). While Beverly is not necessarily looking to have complete autonomy, she is looking to develop healthy partnerships by which her expertise is respected. Furthermore, she has concluded that while parents of the gifted typically demand much, they also tend to be flexible and agreeable.

### **Professional Relationships**

Beverly's most significant resource for gifted education are her colleagues in the science department. In the event she has a question or concern, she consults with them first. More specifically, she feels very well supported by her administrators, "they've been wonderful to

me. They have accepted me... they just dropped me off right here and said, 'You just do your thing. We support you'" (Interview 2: p.5). Despite this, Beverly did discuss a need for more opportunities to establish connections with other educators and to gain expertise. An obviously dedicated professional, she said:

Um, I would love to actually improve myself beyond just taking this class on-line. I'd like to go to conventions where I and other gifted teachers are there, so I could network and go to workshops, so I could attend content area stuff, like a workshop on gifted physical science." (Interview 2: p.5)

Full of ideas, Beverly went on to reveal she would benefit from receiving regular support regarding the gifted classes she teaches, "I wish I could meet once a month. We're supposed to be meeting with other gifted teachers at our level- but it never happens" (Interview 2: p. 5). Perhaps her desire for established meetings would be non-existent had she been provided a formal mentor; however, due to her teaching experience, Beverly was never given one. Instead, she was assigned to be a mentor to a first year teacher-- a novice teacher who just received her undergraduate degree and has no prior teaching experience.

Despite the support she has been given, Beverly is still adjusting to the task of IEP writing. In fact, in her final written reflection, she revealed the preparation of this document was the most significant challenge. "The most

difficult aspect of being a beginning teacher of the gifted is the arduous IEP writing process ... I don't feel as though I do a very good job of writing a IEP" (Written Entry). Perhaps her struggle can be attributed to the fact that she was left to her own devices to figure out its importance and design:

I guess it was just thrown at me like, 'Do this, do this, do this.' Nobody really sat me down and said, 'This is how you do this' and 'This is the reason to do it' and 'This is a good way to do it' ... I mean I really was kind of left on my own and that's okay, because I can learn that way, too. But I don't think they did a very good job of explaining in the very beginning as far as the IEP [is concerned] (Interview 2: p. 6).

Consequently, Beverly is convinced she does not write the document correctly and nor do many of the other teachers in the building. In fact, she has concluded that the beginning teacher of the gifted that she mentors is struggling as well:

Because I know that I am not alone in it, because my little partner next door-- and I'm mentoring her and she's younger, smarter and she's caught on quicker thank goodness-- but she was in the same boat that I was in. Neither of us had written IEPs before (Interview 2: p. 6).

While the gifted coordinator was committed to assisting when able, Beverly was still expecting to receive yet more intense guidance, "maybe she could hold our hands more--the brand new people to the gifted program" (Interview 2: p. 7). Moreover, she has felt more or less abandoned, "I

mean, she'll say that she'll help you out, but she's not available ... you can't find her" (Focus Group Interview: p. 8). In fact, Beverly was frank in sharing that she does not think that writing the IEP should be the responsibility of the beginning teacher of the gifted:

We shouldn't be doing them. I would like to have input. I would like to contribute to them, but I don't think that I should be the author of them ... It's too important, and it's too much of a legal document, and too legally important for me to be the author of it. I should have input, but I should not be the author especially because me being a new gifted teacher. That's putting a lot of responsibility in my hands (Focus Group Interview: p. 10).

Her difficulties with the IEP process have truly had a negative impact on her experience as a beginning teacher.

Beverly was also hoping to see the gifted students receive more support from the gifted coordinator and counselors as they are currently largely without anyone who can sufficiently address their social and emotional needs, noting, "our kids, their needs are emotional. I would like her to try to work with the kids more" (Interview 2: p. 7).

#### **Case study #7: Mitchell Frommer**

Mitchell, at 48 years old, is a native of the country Libya and considers himself an Arab. Born in Tripoli, he attended private English schools in the nation's capitol. In the late 1970s Mitchell immigrated to the United States in search of higher education (Interview 1: p.2). He found

himself at Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge, where he pursued degrees in mathematics. The first of them was a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics. From there, he went on to earn a master's in Public Administration, and then a second master's in Mathematics.

Father of one daughter, Mitchell has been married for 27 years and working as a teacher for 7. He began his career in education whilst working in the private school setting-- first in East Baton Rouge Parish and then in St. James Parish. In those 7 years, he has gained experience with teaching math at all grades and levels 7-12. Mitchell has taught everything from algebra I to statistics, business calculus to AP calculus. Mathematics (grades 7-12) is currently his only area of certification.

#### **Pre-Service Training**

In opting to pursue teaching as a career, Mitchell enrolled in the LSU Holmes Program, but decided to withdraw upon concluding he would need more knowledge of mathematics to confidently teach secondary mathematics. He found the Holmes program to cater more toward elementary mathematics and therefore misaligned with his interests (Interview 1: p. 4). Upon his withdrawal, Mitchell entered into the Master's of Mathematics program at the university. After graduating, he pursued an alternate certification program,

which required him to enroll in graduate level education courses. The final fulfillment of his certification requirements was the completion of a yearlong internship inside the classroom.

In reflecting back on his pre-service training, Mitchell disclosed that he was satisfied with his mathematics courses (Interview 1: p. 4). However, he was disappointed in his education courses as he found them to focus too heavily on persuading students to accept the viewpoints of theorists. One other concern of his training was that he was never exposed to the field of gifted education, as it was never mentioned in any of his courses. He was not exposed to the field until he entered the self-contained gifted classroom in the fall of 2006 (Interview 1: p.5). Currently, Mitchell is pursuing certification in gifted education from Louisiana State University. To date, he has completed 2 courses, "Nature and Needs of the Gifted" and "Counseling the Gifted".

### **Description of Classroom**

An important aspect of Mitchell's room design and décor is the music that is always being played. This small touch sets a distinct academic tone within his space, one that encourages creativity. The large classroom is a mix of student desks and tables, aged resources and modern

technological innovations. Mitchell prides himself on the integration of technology and this is obvious as his room is brimming with devices used in the instruction of mathematics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as scanners and 3-D projectors. At the front of the classroom are examples of such technologies: namely a projector and a screen. Toward the back of his room, is his desk. Also, at the back of the room are a number of bookcases for his texts and student books. The classroom is wide and cool and students have the physical space necessary to be able to focus on their studies.

### **Challenges with Curriculum and Instruction**

While excited to learn he would be working in the gifted setting, Mitchell admitted he was largely ignorant about what exactly he was in for, "I didn't know where they were at. Gifted could be anything. I really didn't know exactly what I would be dealing with" (Interview 2: p.7). He found one of the greatest sources of information regarding the gifted to be his colleagues and his graduate coursework in gifted education. When asked to describe the benefits of the coursework, Mitchell said, "well, it helped me most to get to meet other gifted teachers. Yeah, to hear them talk ... Some of them [experiences] are the same, some of them are different" (Interview 1: p. 8). Mitchell

clearly enjoyed being able to feel a sense of fellowship with other teachers of the gifted-- both those who were just beginning as well as those who were experienced. Finally, it should be noted Mitchell has used technology widely in his attempt to make his curriculum and instruction appropriate for the gifted students in his charge. In fact, when asked to discuss his approach to lesson design for his gifted math students, Mitchell shared confidently, "I enrich ... I have to keep them more engaged. We work with calculators, graphic calculators. We have laptops, a laptop lab. We work on that"(Interview 2: p. 9). In his estimation, curriculum and instruction have not posed any significant challenges for him.

### **Relationships with Students and Their Families**

Consistently over the course of the study, Mitchell expressed the satisfaction he finds in his work with the gifted. He has been most discouraged by the underachievement he frequently sees,

I think that underachievement is the hardest (thing) the heartbreaker, the heart wrencher. Yeah. When you know that they're capable. I have a hard time accepting somebody as being gifted, and give them an excuse why they're not performing. If they're not performing, they're not gifted (Interview 1: p.8).

His frustration was also plainly stated in his final written reflection when Mitchell expressed one event that made him feel most frustrated or discouraged was when he

was asked to "water down" the IEP of an underachieving gifted student. Plainly stated, he "had no idea that so many would be underachieving" (Focus Group Interview: p. 2). Clearly, Mitchell's frustration reflects a mixture of mis-education regarding the needs of the gifted and the absence of effective supports (for both him and students alike in this case).

Furthermore, Mitchell found the experiences with parents of the students he serves as unbalanced. On one hand, he found many of them to "baby their children" (Interview 2: p. 5), while others forced their children to make scheduling decisions which led them to being overextended. When this mixed approach to schooling results in unsatisfactory grades (in the eyes of parents), he finds himself too often placed at blame. He shared that in his brief experience, the parents of the gifted hold teachers responsible for the poor performance of students instead of the students themselves. He attributes this trend to a general lack of knowledge on the part of parents as to the nature of gifted students (Interview 2:p. 6).

### **Professional Relationships**

Mitchell reported that he had been given a great sense of autonomy by the administrative staff, for as in his view, "I couldn't ask for more. They leave me alone."

(Interview 2: p. 1) While provided a mentor by his building principal (required as a part of LTAAP), he did not find the presence of this additional support as helpful as his gifted education graduate classes at the university. Additionally, while Washington High is equipped with counselors, he did not know them, nor had they been able to provide him with assistance-- "Frankly, they have done nothing" (Interview 2: p. 2). Finally, Mitchell expressed satisfaction with the competence of the on-site gifted coordinator, though he found the coordinator to be overwhelmed with assigned job duties unrelated to the issues faced by beginning teachers of the gifted.

### **Conclusions**

As the preceding pages show, all seven beginning teachers of the gifted, despite their frustrations, were dedicated educators. They were willing to stay late, to struggle to become independent professionals and were open to establishing relationships with their colleagues. They each attempted to persevere through the challenges provided by the IEP process and the state mandated comprehensive curriculum. Each participant was also interested in becoming more familiar with effective instruction of the gifted. Finally, each of the seven was constantly working

to become better able to design a curriculum for the students with whom they work.

These cases demonstrate the importance of undergraduate and graduate preparation and the receipt of in-service supports for beginning teachers of the gifted such as mentors and assistance with lesson planning and the writing of IEPs. Each of these things are essential to the success of teachers of the gifted in their first few years, regardless of how many years of experience they have teaching in the regular education setting. Moreover, the contribution that certification in gifted education makes to the skill level and ultimately the success of beginning teachers of the gifted can not be overlooked, particularly given the experiences of those participants who completed it. This coursework strengthened not only their confidence, but also their ability to effectively design curriculum and plan instruction. The effects of an education in the nature and needs of the gifted, surely has vital implications for what districts must consider when hiring teachers of the gifted.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE CASES

The seven case studies reported in chapter four are independent accounts of the lives of beginning teachers of the gifted from an urban parish in Louisiana. The purpose of the fifth and final chapter is to explore the similarities and differences between the seven cases examined, focusing on their pre-service education, their experiences with curriculum and instruction, and their in-service experiences with administrators, mentors, school counselors, gifted coordinators, and students and their families. The following discussion is organized with respect to the four guiding research questions for this study. My conclusion, which follows the discussion of the research findings, puts forth the contribution to the field of gifted education that is made by this dissertation.

The first question that guided the study was: *What is/was the nature of the expectations that beginning teachers of the gifted have of their:*

- a. *colleagues?*
- b. *principals?*
- c. *mentors?*
- d. *on-site gifted coordinator?*
- e. *students?*
- f. *students' families?*

All seven beginning teachers of the gifted had clear opinions as to what they expected to receive from the majority of the school's primary players, with the

exception of the principal, of whom little was expected by most. They understood the role of the principal to be broad and were, at best, looking to receive financial support for professional development, especially Laura, Mitchell, and Beverly. However, they expected much from other school personnel, namely their gifted coordinator and school counselors. Specifically, they expected the former to assist them in negotiating the IEP process (from opening the document to conducting the meeting). This was seen most clearly in the responses of Beverly, Alex, Michael, and Michelle. Eventually, each participant expressed an expectation for the counselor to provide guidance to gifted students on scheduling, college admissions, and information on the emotional resources available to them.

When reflecting upon their expectations of gifted students and their families, the participants repeatedly confirmed their high expectations regarding the academic performance of gifted learners. They expected their students to be motivated and consistent, creative and independent-- an expectation that often left them disappointed. Furthermore, they expected their gifted students to be engaged, enthusiastic, and respectful. A similar kind of enthusiasm was expected by many of the participants of the parents of the gifted. However Laura,

Jason, and Michael were often shocked by what they perceived as an "over-involvement" of parents, particularly concerning the counting of points and the calculation of grades. This pattern was distressing for them.

The second question that guided this study was: *What is the nature of the experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted:*

- a. with their colleagues?*
- b. with their principals?*
- c. with their mentors?*
- d. with their on-site gifted coordinator?*
- e. with their students?*
- f. with their students' families?*

The most consistently positive feedback from participants came from discussions of their relationships with their colleagues. With the exception of Michelle, they found these relationships to be helpful and valuable. For a number of the participants, namely Mitchell, Laura, Beverly, Michael, and Adam, these relationships assisted them immensely in being successful and well-adjusted beginning teachers of the gifted. They greatly appreciated the lesson planning assistance they were given, as well as the emotional support that working closely with other teachers of the gifted provided. This was particularly true for Mitchell who was most appreciative of the opportunity to interact with other teachers of the gifted that enrollment in gifted education courses provided.

When called upon to discuss their relationships with their building administrators, several of the participants (Laura and Bobby) were grateful for the support they received from them. They were most thankful for the financial resources they were provided, such as money to attend conferences and to buy needed supplies. Jason and Beverly, on the other hand, were most appreciative of the sense of autonomy their leaders allowed them. Clearly, both of these things are important in the fostering of independent professionals.

The participants had mixed feelings on the assignment of mentors, as a number (Jason, Mitchell, and Adam) felt the presence of one unnecessary. While each of them thought the mentor experience could be positive and meaningful, they felt either self-sufficient or that they had been provided enough other supports to be successful without the presence of a formalized mentor. Beverly, Michael, and Michelle, however, were expressive of their need for a mentor--a contact person who was familiar with both the needs of the gifted and their subject area. Michelle, in particular, felt her teaching suffered as a result of not being provided someone who she could comfortably approach with questions and concerns. Consequently, she felt overlooked and isolated.

The role of gifted coordinator in each of the school sites included in this study is to oversee the IEP process, to ensure state law is being upheld, and to conduct evaluations of students being considered for the gifted program--duties that may be buried under other principal assignments. This was the case at both Lincoln Middle and Washington High as the participants consistently found their on-site gifted coordinator to be accommodating, but also busy. They saw in their gifted coordinator someone willing to lend a hand, but also someone with much to accomplish. In conclusion, the participants generally had positive experiences with their coordinators, though Michelle, Beverly, Laura, and Adam thought the coordinator should accept more responsibility and play a more active role in the IEP process--largely because they were beginning teachers and needed more extensive support.

Additionally, while they each found the support of their peers (in terms of providing ideas and giving feedback) helpful, it was not something they expected to receive. Nor did they expect to receive a mentor, namely because they had each had prior teaching experience and understood that in Eastern Parish, mentors are typically assigned to teachers in their first two years of teaching--a category in which none of them fit.

Each of the seven participants repeatedly expressed their satisfaction with teaching the gifted. They had positive encounters with gifted learners and appreciated their sense of wonder and desire for knowledge. At the same time, none of them felt prepared to handle the underachievement they witnessed. They were all familiar with its manifestations and not at all familiar with techniques to overcome its challenges. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact that they felt as if they had no one to turn to as a resource to support them or to support the gifted children struggling to perform at a level commensurate with teacher expectation.

While each was an experienced teacher, the participants found the parents of their students to be difficult at times. More specifically, they were displeased at the blame they felt forced to accept for student performance, and the battles they felt they at times had to wage in defending student grades. This was particularly seen in the reflections of Jason, Mitchell, Michael, and Laura. On the other hand, Beverly and Adam could not have been more satisfied with the level of support they received from the parents of their students. Regardless of whether they felt supported or overwhelmed by parental presence, when asked to outline their experiences with parents of the

gifted, participants shared that this particular group of parents needs to be informed as to the needs of their students—even more so than parents of traditional students. This was not something of which they were aware of prior to entering the gifted classroom. Finally, many of the participants felt parents of the gifted are uneducated as to the needs of their children. The five participants, Adam, Mitchell, Jason, Michael, and Laura also thought them unaware as to what the purpose of gifted education is in terms of curriculum and instruction. They reported that this lack of awareness made working with parents trying.

The third question that guided this study was: *What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction that beginning teachers of the gifted have of their gifted teacher training programs in terms of level of preparedness provided to teach the gifted? What level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction do they have of their regular education teacher preparation program in terms of the level of preparedness it provided them to teach the gifted?*

None of the participants in this study thought their general teacher education program sufficiently prepared them to teach the gifted. Only those participants who had begun their gifted certification (regardless of what university it was through) felt their graduate education

program to be relevant to their classroom experiences, though none more so than the 2 participants who had actually completed their gifted certification prior to accepting gifted teaching positions. These 2 teachers (Laura and Jason) were best able to articulate the nature of gifted learners. Moreover, they felt most comfortable working without a mentor, as they undoubtedly had already been given access to many of the informational sources that a mentor would provide. Additionally, the participants who were enrolled in graduate level coursework or who had recently completed a graduate level course in gifted education (Laura, Jason, Michael, Mitchell, and Adam) felt more successful, informed, and competent as educators of the gifted. They were most familiar with the commonly used terms in the field and felt able to articulate the needs of gifted students. These participants also reported the least amount of intimidation by the IEP process.

The participants who completed their education degrees prior to the 1980s remembered their coursework was useful in teaching regular education students, but that their courses did not address the concept of "gifted". They were uninformed as to the nature and needs of the gifted until entering the self-contained gifted classroom and making their own observations. The participants who entered

a teacher education program in the 1990s or later, however, recalled learning the term "gifted education" in their education coursework, but only being vaguely introduced to the field. They, too, were forced to settle for their own amateur conclusions as a basis for information regarding this population.

The final question that guided this study was: *What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction that beginning teachers of the gifted have of the in-service support options made available to them?*

Answers to this question varied greatly by participant. Adam for example, was largely satisfied with the in-service supports made available to him. He was provided a mentor in his content area, and while they rarely communicated, he did not feel as though he suffered as a result. He did, however, express a desire to meet with his mentor more regularly in order to be provided an opportunity to observe and to be observed by his mentor. Adam found the principals, coordinators, and counselors to be helpful and accessible--though not necessarily shouldering enough of the responsibility of the IEP process. This caused him to feel slightly confused and frustrated.

Beverly expected very little and received just that. Perhaps this explains why she reported a high level of satisfaction with the in-service supports provided to her. She, a teacher looking to transition to administration, had not expected to receive direct help from the building principal, but she was nevertheless disappointed in the lack of assistance she received from the gifted coordinator. As a beginning teacher, she was looking to receive more one-on-one help, more supervision and guidance, and more structured education on the role of the teacher of the gifted (particularly as it applied to legal responsibilities).

Michelle was perhaps the most dissatisfied with the level and quality of the in-service supports she received. While she found her principal willing to support her in a time of need, she felt abandoned by her colleagues. As she had no experience with the gifted prior to receiving her teaching assignment, she was at a loss. Specifically, she was unable to write the IEP document independently and felt as though she had no one to turn to for help. She shared that she would have greatly benefited from more in-services from the gifted coordinator, as well as from attending formal trainings on how to meet the needs of the gifted. The assumption that her prior experience as an educator was

sufficient background for work with the gifted was most definitely detrimental. While Michelle was the most experienced teacher in terms of years, she was also arguably the neediest and most neglected.

Laura was able to work without much in-service support (i.e. no mentor), which was in her view because she had completed her gifted education certification prior to being hired to teach the gifted. This pre-education allowed her to confidently design curriculum. When she did seek support, she was most interested in funding to attend conferences, as she found this most helpful to her development as a beginning teacher of the gifted.

Michael, too, did not expect or receive much from building administration. His number one resource was Laura, largely because she had already completed her gifted certification. In addition to Laura, Michael also received a lot of support from his department chair, a colleague who not only taught mathematics, but also the gifted. Finally, Michael was able to establish a solid rapport with the gifted coordinator (as their offices are located in close proximity to one another). This rapport worked to Michael's advantage, as the coordinator was quick to provide him with help writing his IEPs and with designing curriculum. Despite these aides, he still thought that his training,

particularly in handling the IEP process had been insufficient.

Jason had been placed at some great distance from Washington's "central nervous system", and this was where he was most comfortable. He is an independent person and prefers to become self-sufficient. For this reason, he came to rely on no one, largely because he found no one else to be knowledgeable. He found all of his in-service supports-- the principal, gifted coordinator, and counselors-- to be inaccessible and/or uninformed as to the needs of the gifted.

Mitchell on the other hand, found his colleagues to be knowledgeable and willing to share. Additionally, he was quite pleased with his principal, as he was willing to provide him with technological supplies. He did, however, take issue when his administrators encouraged him to compromise his ethics in the writing of legal documents (e.g. IEPs), in that he was asked to make suggestions for content areas of which he was unfamiliar.

Clearly, the experiences of the study participants varied, though there were a number of challenges that they all struggled with. Many of these obstacles could have been eliminated with careful planning and regular monitoring by district and building administration.

### **Contributions of the Study**

While working on this study, I have been repeatedly asked two questions: "Why a qualitative design?" and "Why beginning teachers of the gifted?" My answers have developed into a defense of the human experience and a recap of my own experience as a beginning teacher of the gifted. The contribution of this effort to the field of gifted education is that it works to give voice to the experiences of teachers typically overwhelmed and overlooked. Veteran teachers, while up for a change and a challenge, underestimated the difficulty of the transition they were about to undergo. The participants of this study closely resembled most beginning teachers of the gifted nationally (Joffe, 2001) in that they had prior teaching experience and limited exposure to the nature and needs of the gifted. It is my hope that this study has shed light on not only the expectations and experiences of the study participants, but also on what school districts across the country can implement to further support individuals who have been called upon to do this work.

Regardless of when and where these experienced teachers enter the gifted setting, each of the seven participants in this study faced similar hurdles. Furthermore, each of these teachers was aware of their

deficiencies in knowledge and what was being asked of them. Clearly, they were ill prepared to handle those tasks and more importantly not provided the support necessary for substantial improvement.

Each of the seven participants felt that their undergraduate courses in education, and to some extent their graduate courses, did not fully cover the needs of the gifted, and most had not completed certification in gifted education. In moving forward, school districts in particular must not waste valuable time investigating ways and reasons to place fault. An oversight has occurred and districts must work more diligently to fill the gaps in knowledge and understanding. They must work harder to exceed state requirements and to create standardized district policies that reflect emerging local trends in the needs of teachers of the gifted--nothing less is acceptable.

It is widely accepted that industries in corporate America accept responsibility for educating newly hired personnel, so, too must this be a responsibility of the school district-- particularly when it comes to beginning teachers of the gifted. The needs of beginning teachers of the gifted are different from the needs of other beginning teachers. They must receive curriculum training on differentiating instruction and acceleration. They must

receive training on the social and emotional needs of the gifted and they must become familiar with the IEP. These conclusions raise the question that must be asked of districts: Would they dare hire teachers to teach in content areas for which they had received no preparation? Would they think it appropriate to place a mathematics teacher in an advanced French course with no knowledge of the language? Why then has this become an acceptable trend for the gifted education setting? The findings of this study suggest these several central areas of work with the gifted have been overlooked in the preparation of teachers for the gifted setting, though none so grossly as the IEP. Not one of the seven participants felt comfortable writing this document, and this was largely due to their perceptions of its legal importance. They felt overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork that it required and the amount of time it consumed. Beginning teachers of the gifted need to be formally educated as to the purpose (legal significance), structure (documents, meetings), and timelines of this document. Due to the legal magnitude of the IEP, formal training and regularly scheduled support should be provided.

Moreover, participant narrative reveals a need for the gradual hand over of IEP document writing, with the first

year of service for beginning teachers of the gifted being dedicated to becoming familiar with the document. Ideally, no caseload would be assigned to beginning teachers of the gifted in their first year. In the event that resources do not allow for such intense study, beginning teachers should at least be given a significantly reduced caseload.

Regardless, beginning teachers of the gifted need to be supported through this process not only by the gifted coordinator, but also the building principal. These individuals should not only be accessible, but also modeling a life-long commitment to this population through the pursuit of continued training in gifted education.

Additionally, these beginning teachers of the gifted expressed a need for other kinds of supports, regardless of the support's manifestations. Laura was seeking financial assistance, Michael a mentor, Michelle encouragement and information. Moreover, their reflections consistently displayed a need to at least be offered the option of receiving a mentor. Ideally, designated mentors should be both experienced teachers of the gifted as well as teachers of the subject the beginning teacher is certified to teach. Mentors and mentees should also be provided release time to converse, so that the beginning teacher can express questions and concerns. Moreover, mentors and mentees

should also be provided release time to observe one another teach, as this is a valuable tool for learning. Three study participants revealed the presence of a mentor as helpful, particularly in terms of assisting with the curriculum design (i.e. navigating the comprehensive curriculum; a document which due to its restrictive nature many thought to conflict with the very nature of gifted education), the IEP process, and meeting the demands of parents (i.e. communication).

Finally, findings of this study expose a need for beginning teachers of the gifted to receive additional support and insight into meeting the social and emotional needs of gifted learners. This, too, must be the realized focus of both initial preparation and in-service training. They felt unable to address needs of this nature, particularly underachievement and depression. At the very least they should be familiar with the resources available to students and their families both on- and off-campus. The quality of service provided as it pertains to the social and emotional domain could be greatly improved through the presence of a guidance counselor dedicated to serving solely this population. The presence of this person is particularly important in schools with self-contained

gifted classes, as the number of identified gifted students would be considerably higher.

Prior studies have explored the experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted though on a much smaller scale. For instance, the findings of Joffe's study (2001) illustrated a national lack of structured mentoring for beginning teachers of the gifted and a lack of solid teaching strategies for working with the academically gifted. His qualitative study focused on students' characteristics, instructional strategies, and decision-making. Pollak's (1996) work focused on a teacher's self-image during his transition from regular education teacher to gifted education teacher. It revealed that beginning teachers of the gifted feel isolated at times and they are forced to rely on previous teaching experiences. These studies, while also focusing on novice teachers of the gifted, only featured a singular participant. The present study had a broader scope in that it included more participants, in more subject areas/grades and two different school sites. It also focused more heavily on pre-service experiences and the nature of their relationships with other professionals. The findings of this study reveal clear commonalities between different

school sites in one district, and are surely reflective of a national need for change.

The seven teachers who participated here gave of their time to the research effort happily, as they had never considered that their voices actually mattered. They were anxious to discuss their experiences and thankful that someone cared enough to make inquiries into it. Moreover, a number of them were hoping to make a unique contribution to the field of gifted education, and they did.

Few studies have been done that explore the perspectives of beginning teachers of the gifted--none in dedicated gifted schools ("magnets"). Despite the fact that this study only focused on secondary schools in one district, in one state, the state of Louisiana was purposefully selected as the study setting due to the fact that it is consistently considered to be one of the nation's strongest in terms of the depth and breadth of gifted education services it provides. This fact, in conjunction with the findings of this study, are particularly telling of the potential that both state departments and local school districts possess if they only choose to adopt more consistent policies in regards to the supports that they provide to not only their gifted students, but to their beginning teachers of the gifted as

well. Louisiana is clearly leading the pack, but the findings here suggest that each state has yet quite a way to go.

This study asserts in specific terms, what local districts can do to improve the transition of experienced regular education teachers into the self-contained gifted setting. However, there are other areas affecting these teachers, which are worthy of further study, for instance, the expectations and experiences of the professionals who work with teachers new to the gifted setting. It would undoubtedly be just as valuable to hear their voices as that insight might lessen the communication gap. Additionally, research investigating the relationships between mentors and beginning teachers of the gifted should continue, as this study reaffirmed their value. Finally, future research might also consider taking a quantitative approach to the study of what districts are doing on a national level to support beginning teachers of the gifted.

Beginning teachers of the gifted have much to overcome--from modifying curriculum for our brightest children, writing and implementing IEPs, to being able to identify and assist families with conquering social and emotional issues. Through this study, I was able to look back upon my own experience as a beginning teacher of the

gifted and better see the challenges and the triumphs for what they were. While much has been accomplished in the field of gifted education, there is surely still room for growth.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**SAMPLE LETTERS TO TEACHERS**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ :

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I will be conducting a study at both Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School, which focuses on the experiences of four beginning teachers. The intent of my study is not to evaluate the beginning teachers but simply to learn the nature of the pre-service experiences and expectations they have of teaching gifted learners, as well as what in-service experiences and expectations they have of the schools that they serve. Finally, I will be interested in exploring how those expectations relate to the experiences that they have in their respective school settings. Professor Rita Culross will supervise the study, which will provide data for my dissertation for my doctoral degree from Louisiana State University. She can be reached at (225) 578-1264 in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice.

I am writing to ask you to be one of the 7 beginning teachers of the gifted participating in the study, which will be conducted during the 2006-2007 school year. This would involve my conducting 3 interviews with you over the course of the study (2 individually and one in a group setting). You may read copies of these interview transcripts and add corrections if you see changes that should be made. In addition, I also ask that you give me permission to observe you teaching. Also, it is quite possible that I might ask you to let me look at school-related documents, such as your lesson plans, and I request your consent for that as well. Finally, I am asking you to write a written reflection of your experiences.

For the study, I will protect your identity as well as the identity of all the other participants by using a pseudonym for you and pseudonyms for other persons and for the school in all write-ups of the study including my dissertation. If I quote excerpts from my interviews with you or from my observations, I will use your pseudonym. At any point in the study, which poses no potential risks to participants, you may withdraw from participation.

At the conclusion of the study, I would be happy to meet with you to go over my findings, and I would like to give you the opportunity to read the dissertation that you have contributed to. I believe that this can be a learning experience for both of us.

Please contact me (773-6247) if you need any more information about the study or if you have specific questions about your participation. I hope that you will agree to participate, and I look forward to working with you. Sincerely,

Kimberly McGlonn-Nelson

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Through the above letter, I have been fully informed about the purposes of the study Kimberly McGlonn- Nelson plans to conduct and about the potential benefits and risks of the procedures she will use. I agree to participate in the study in the way that she has described.

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Signature

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Date

**APPENDIX B**  
**SAMPLE LETTER TO PRINCIPAL**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ :

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I would like to conduct a study at Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School which focuses on the experiences of 7 beginning teachers of the gifted. The intent of my study is not to evaluate the beginning teachers, but simply to learn what pre-service experiences and expectations they have of the gifted setting, as well as what in-service experiences and expectations that they have of the schools they serve. Professor Rita Culross will supervise the study, which will provide data for my dissertation for my doctoral degree from Louisiana State University. She can be reached at (225) 578-1264 in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice.

I am writing to ask you to allow your staff to participate in this study, which poses no potential risks to participants, and that you allow us to use your facilities for our interviews. Each participant will be asked to participate in three interviews and each interview should last no more than an hour. I will also be observing each participant teaching. All data will be collected during the fall 2006 semester, and all interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. Finally, participants will be asked to write a written reflection of their experiences as a beginning teacher of the gifted.

For the study, I will protect the school's identity as well as the identity of all the participants by using pseudonyms for the names of persons, as well as using pseudonyms for the names of schools in all write-ups of the study. If I use excerpts from my interviews with them, I will identify them with a pseudonym, not their name.

At the conclusion of the study, I would be happy to meet with you to go over my findings, and I would like to give you the opportunity to read parts of the dissertation to which your school has contributed.

Please contact me (773-6247) if you need any more information about the study or if you have specific questions about your participation. I shall be most appreciative of your assistance in the completion of this project, and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Kimberly McGlenn-Nelson

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Through the above letter, I have been fully informed about the purposes of the study Kimberly McGlenn-Nelson plans to conduct and about the potential benefits and risks of the procedures she will use. I agree to participate in the study in the way that she has described.

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Signature

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Date

**APPENDIX C**  
**SAMPLE LETTER TO SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ :

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I would like to conduct a study at Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School that focuses on the experiences of 7 beginning teachers. The intent of my study is not to evaluate the beginning teachers, but simply to learn what pre-service experiences and expectations they have of the gifted setting, as well as what in-service experiences and expectations that they have of schools that they serve. Professor Rita Culross will supervise the study, which will provide data for my dissertation for my doctoral degree from Louisiana State University. She can be reached at (225) 578-1264 in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice.

I am writing to ask you to allow your staff to participate in this study, which poses no potential risks to participants, and that you allow us to use your facilities for our interviews. Each participant is to be interviewed on three occasions and each interview should last no more than an hour. All data will be collected during the fall 2006 semester, and they will be all audio taped and transcribed. I will also be asking participants to allow me to observe them in their classrooms. Finally, participants will be asked to write a written reflection of their experiences as a beginning teacher of the gifted.

For the study, I will protect the individual school's identity, as well as the identity of all the participants by using pseudonyms for the names of persons, as well as using pseudonyms for the names of schools in all write-ups of the study. If I use excerpts from my interviews with them, I will identify them with a pseudonym, not their name.

At the conclusion of the study, I would be happy to meet with representatives from the district office to go over my findings, and I would like to give you the opportunity to read the dissertation to which your district has contributed.

Please contact me (773-6247) if you need any more information about the study or if you have specific questions about your participation. I shall be most appreciative of your assistance in the completion of this project, and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Kimberly McGlonn-Nelson

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Through the above letter, I have been fully informed about the purposes of the study Kimberly McGlonn-Nelson plans to conduct and about the potential benefits and risks of the procedures she will use. I agree to participate in the study in the way that she has described.

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Signature

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Date

**APPENDIX D**  
**TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE**

I am interested in getting to know who you are, both as a person and a professional. To this end, it would be helpful to know the following information:

1. What is your gender?
2. Describe your racial/ethnic background:
3. Please provide your age:
4. Where are you from?
5. What is your marital status?
6. Please describe your educational background by providing (from most recent to least recent), the degrees (with majors) that you possess:
7. Please list (from most recent to least recent), the schools that you attended after the completion of high school:
8. How many years have you taught full-time?
9. Please list (from most recent to list recent), the names and locations of the schools in which you have taught in the last three years:
10. Please list the grades/courses you have experience teaching:
11. Please list the grades/courses that you are certified to teach:
12. Describe your educational path to certification(s):
13. Are you certified to teach the gifted? If not, are you currently enrolled in a gifted certification program?
14. Please describe (listing as many as you'd like) the sources of your gifted education knowledge.

**APPENDIX E**  
**1<sup>st</sup> INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Can we begin by reviewing your responses to the questionnaire you submitted? (questions #3-14)
  
2. Would you please reflect on your regular education pre-service preparation?
  
3. A similar question, would you please reflect on your gifted education pre-service preparation?
  
4. When you first decided to begin preparation as a teacher, what did you expect to receive from:
  - a. Coursework
  - b. Topics
  - c. Texts
  - d. Activities
  - e. Professors
  
5. What exactly did you experience in terms of these things?
  - a. Coursework
  - b. Topics
  - c. Texts
  - d. Activities
  - e. Professors

**APPENDIX F**  
**FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**A. Would you please describe your expectations for the year in terms of your gifted students?**

**B. What about your professional experiences? What do you expect from the people that you work with?**

- A. School administrators
- B. Mentor
- C. School counselors
- D. Gifted coordinator
- E. Parents

APPENDIX G  
2<sup>nd</sup> INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Now that the school year is underway, let's begin by reflecting on your experiences thus far.

1. Let's discuss my observations of your instruction. There were a few things that stood out for me that I would like to get your insight into:

2. Let's talk about how your experiences match up with your expectations. More specifically, let's explore your experiences:

- a. In the classroom
  - i. Your curriculum and instruction  
What have been some of the challenges that you've had to overcome?
  - ii. Relationships with students  
What have been some of the challenges that you've had to overcome?
  - iii. Behaviors of students  
What have been some of the challenges that you've had to overcome?

3. Can you describe your professional relationships with your colleagues? More specifically, your:

- a. Administrators
- b. Mentors
- c. Counselors
- d. Gifted coordinators
- e. Parents

What have been some of the challenges that you've had to overcome in working with them in this capacity?

4. How could your professional relationships with these individuals be improved?

- a. Administrators
- b. Mentors
- c. Counselors
- d. Gifted coordinators
- e. Parents

**APPENDIX H**  
**PROFESSIONAL REFLECTION WRITING GUIDELINES**

**Dear participant:**

In an effort to best understand your experiences as a beginning teacher of the gifted, I'd like to hear your reflections on the past and hopes for the future. To this end, please carefully respond to the following questions. Complete sentences are not necessary, though complete thoughts are greatly appreciated. Once you are finished recording your thoughts, please submit your responses via an email with an attached Word document file.

**Please use the following heading for your entry:**

**Full Name:**  
**School Site:**

**Please respond to each of the following questions:**

1. Recall a specific event that made you feel supported as a teacher of the gifted. Please describe that event in full detail.
  
2. Recall a specific event that made you feel frustrated or discouraged as a teacher of the gifted. Please describe that event in full detail.
  
3. Discuss what you enjoy most about working with the gifted.
  
4. Summarize the most difficult aspect of being a beginning teacher of the gifted.
  
5. Imagine that your principal has approached you, requesting that you outline precisely what you need to feel better supported as a teacher of the gifted and what would place you in a position to better meet the needs of your students. Having been told that money is no object- what would you request? Please consider your curricular, instructional, and professional development needs.

**APPENDIX I**  
**STUDY INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

1. Study Title: Experiences and Expectations of Beginning Teachers of the Gifted
2. Performance Site: Lincoln Middle School and Washington High School
3. Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions about this study, M-F,  
8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.  
Kimberly McGlonn-Nelson: (225) 773-6247  
Dr. Rita Culross: (225) 578-1264
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research effort is to shed light onto the expectations and experiences of beginning teachers of the gifted. The research also aims to provide school districts, both locally and nationally with insight into what can be done to assist in the preparation, support and retention of teachers of the gifted. The final purpose of this study is to give voice to the experiences of this population of educators.
5. Subject Inclusion: Beginning teachers of the gifted
6. Number of subjects: 7
7. Study Procedures: The study will be conducted in four phases. In the first phase, subjects will spend approximately 20 minutes completing a questionnaire about their personal background, academic training, and professional experience. In the second phase, subjects will spend approximately one hour participating in an individual interview. During the third phase, subjects will participate in a focus group interview, as well as to write a written reflection of their experiences as a beginning teacher of the gifted. During the fourth phase they will be observed will teaching a gifted course. During the fifth phase they will be asked to participate in a final individual interview.
8. Benefits: The study may yield valuable information about the pre-service and in-service experiences of beginning teachers.
9. Risks: There are no risks associated with this study. Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. Files will be kept in secure cabinets to which only the investigator has access.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I am aware that I can contact Dr. Robert C. Mathews of the Institutional Review Board, at (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX J  
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Descriptive  
Notes

Reflective Notes

Misc. Notes

## VITA

The daughter of Victor L. McGlonn and Shahadah Lucas, Kimberly Nicole McGlonn-Nelson attended public elementary, middle and high school in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 2001, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and in 2002 received her Master of Education degree with a major in secondary English education from Louisiana State University. In 2003, Kimberly received her Education Specialist degree in curriculum theory under the study of Dr. William Pinar. Her Ph.D., awarded December 2007 from the Department of Educational Policy, Practice, and Theory, is in curriculum and instruction and is also from Louisiana State University.

For two years, from 2002-2004, she was a teacher of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade gifted English in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System. In 2004, she relocated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she accepted a position teaching English in the Lower Moreland Township School District. From 2005-2008, Kimberly served as English Department Chair at Lower Moreland High School, as well as Lead Teacher for gifted education, grades K-12. While serving in those capacities, she led curriculum assessments and professional development initiatives.