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"Some Days We Don't Learn Anything New": A Phenomenological Study of Intellectually Gifted Elementary Students

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“SOME DAYS WE DON’T LEARN ANYTHING NEW”: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY OF INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

With accountability pressures to help all students reach grade-level proficiency, the needs of gifted students may be neglected. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the nature of intellectually gifted students in a suburban elementary setting in the Pacific Northwest. After several close observations with six participants in grades 2-5, semi-structured conversational interviews revealed recurring feelings of frustration, constraint, and missed opportunities in classrooms. Participants claimed that school was not challenging and they did not learn much. When classroom life did not provide intellectual stimulation, gifted students often engaged in reading. The voices of intellectually gifted students show how they experience life in the classroom. Implications of the findings for rethinking professional development, placement and grouping models, and soliciting the voice of gifted students to influence system improvements are discussed.

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I am grateful to George Fox University whose investment in me started 26 years ago as a student teacher. This most recent milestone and dissertation are the culmination of many years of encouragement and support by Dr. Karen Buchanan. We had coffee chats and discussed the transformational nature of a doctoral journey. Dr. Buchanan was correct. The vision she described changed me, and I was lucky to have her as my dissertation co-chair. My sincere appreciation also goes to my co-chair Dr. Gary Sehorn whose extensive background in school administration and heart-led wisdom helped me imagine my "fifth quarter." Thank you to Dr. Susanna Thornhill who corralled my ideas, patiently helped me work through some dreadful drafts, and nurtured my potential as a scholar practitioner.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an introduction for this phenomenological study of six intellectually gifted elementary students in a public school in the Pacific Northwest. The primary methods of data collection were a Mosaic approach that included close observations, semi-structured conversational interviews, and member checks. The subsections within this chapter include the background for the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, delimitations of the study, and organization of the study.

Problem Statement

In the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies, schools, states, and districts target resources and personnel to help all students meet grade-level proficiencies. This means teachers and specialists collaborate to support students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and children impacted by poverty and trauma. Yet students with exceptional academic abilities or intellectual gifts are often left out of this picture. In 2007, NCLB funding was 57% of the federal education budget, followed by children with disabilities at 31%. *Reading First* was 3%, and drug abuse prevention was 2%. Federal gifted education was .03% or three cents for every 100 federal dollars (National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, 2014), suggesting a low priority for dedicated support for intellectually gifted students.

In 2019, federal investment for gifted and talented development through the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) remained at \$12 million, the same level as 2016 (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The Javits Program funds talented and gifted research through grants to specific institutions, not directly to all school districts.

The Office of Civil Rights reported that 3,329,544 students were enrolled in gifted programs in 2013-14 (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.; Office for Civil Rights, n.d.). That means an estimated 6% of America's public-school students have virtually no federal funding for their unique needs. Without targeted support, resources, and teacher training, educators can misunderstand the profile and needs of intellectually gifted students and unknowingly neglect to develop the hearts and minds of these bright young people (Gaesser, 2018; Persson, 2010). Like the aforementioned categories of students under the ESSA and NCLB, gifted learners are also vulnerable to alienation, loneliness, detachment (Gross, 1998), anxiety, depression, emotional frustration (Neihart & Yeo, 2018), behavior issues, self-doubt, and underachievement (Olenchak, 1999).

In public elementary schools, intellectually gifted students generally spend the bulk of their day with teachers in mixed-ability classrooms. Elementary educators attempt to meet the needs of all students, including these bright students whose needs are very different (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015), yet teachers are still in need of insight into what these students experience. This study seeks to illuminate what it is like to be intellectually gifted in an elementary school. Surfacing children's perspectives about what it is like to be intellectually gifted, understanding the ways they perceive and interpret their environments, and ascribing meaning to their giftedness may reveal what matters to them and how best to support them.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the nature of intellectually gifted students' experiences in a suburban elementary school setting in the Pacific Northwest. The literature in this area is rather limited "because many of the accounts of the experience of being gifted are not the lived experience" (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015, p.

359), and rather than the student voice or insider perspective, it is often parents or other adults who ascribe meaning to what students share (Prior, 2011). These researchers also suggest that more studies should “follow children into more narrowly defined educational settings to better understand how context influences the lived experience” (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015, p. 372). Neihart and Yeo (2018) recommend that researchers investigate the context and environment that develop the talent and well-being of gifted students. This is echoed by Rudasill et al. (2009) who, in studying gifted students’ self-concept, assert that research should utilize observations and interviews with participants within the school setting. To that end, this study partnered with gifted students as co-researchers to reveal their first-person experiences in elementary school, both in the classroom and in other school settings that influence their experience.

Research Questions

The key research question that guided this study was: What is the nature of intellectually gifted students’ experiences in elementary school? Two secondary questions were also pertinent:

- What does a close study of intellectually gifted students’ interactions in elementary school reveal about their experience?
- What do their interactions reveal about how an elementary school might best support them?

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this research study:

Academically Talented Students. Children who score at or above the 97th percentile on a test of total reading or a test of total mathematics from a nationally standardized test battery or Smarter Balanced Assessment (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.).

Asynchrony. Being out-of-sync, referring to the uneven development of gifted children with cognitive development outstripping their physical development (Silverman, 1997).

Differentiation. In the context of gifted education, this term refers to accommodation strategies for maximizing school instruction and experiences, often group-based strategies rather than personal individualization (Olenchak, 2001).

Heterogeneous Placements. Mixed-ability classrooms (Cross, 2018), which contrast *homogeneous placements* or ability-grouping students in the same classroom for instruction by achievement level (Slavin, 1987).

Intellectually Gifted Students. Children who score at or above the 97th percentile on a nationally standardized test of mental ability (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.) and/or a child whose intellectual abilities, creativity, and potential for achievement are so outstanding that the student's needs requires individualized support or instruction.

Delimitations

The gifted population of both elementary school sites for this study included students who were identified as *intellectually gifted* and/or *academically talented* in reading or math. This study only considered students who met the district's eligibility requirements for the *intellectual gifted* category. Further, only students in the gifted program at the same school for the past two years were sampled. As much as I wanted to work with more participants, a sample size of four to six students was determined, based on the number of visits needed to conduct a credible phenomenological methodology to understand the nature of intellectually gifted students' experiences. Although the research question(s) could be adapted for a secondary setting, this study focused on elementary schools. The location of the study was limited to a suburban public-school setting in the Pacific Northwest.

Organization of This Study

This chapter provided an introduction to this study and the need for researching the lived experiences of intellectually gifted students in elementary school. The related literature is explored and reviewed in Chapter Two. The research study's design, methodology, data gathering, and analysis are described in Chapter Three. Insights and themes are presented in Chapter Four with first-hand phenomenological descriptions from students. Chapter Five summarizes the study's findings, revisits the research questions, and discusses the implications of the research and its conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research regarding the needs of highly-gifted elementary students, their lived experiences, and what the field presently understands about the possible consequences when their needs are not met. This review outlines common practices and the obstacles elementary teachers face when attempting to meet the needs of intellectually gifted students in the heterogeneous classroom.

Inclusion and Exclusion of Articles

This literature review discusses peer-reviewed articles from the past 30 years, although earlier studies that continue to be foundational to current research are also referenced. For example, a half-century of longitudinal work by Terman et al. (1926) and Terman & Oden (1947) established comparisons of gifted children to their average peers, and Hollingsworth's early exploration into gifted education in public schools and initial categorizations of giftedness (1930) informs gifted literature. The key search terms used to find research related to this review included *gifted*, *elementary*, *lived experience*, *self-concept*, *asynchronous*, *differentiation*, and *challenges*. Research databases included peer reviewed articles from Education Source, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO.

Themes

This literature review is organized around three major themes, beginning with a history of gifted education, the processes for identifying gifted students, and organizational structures designed to support them. The second part of the literature review explores the classroom environment and individualized opportunities teachers use for supporting gifted students. The final theme focuses on the gifted learner and explores the psychological issues that may surface when highly-gifted students' needs are not met.

Gifted Education

The identification process begins with defining giftedness, which goes back nearly 100 years. Yet, “as long as there are differences of opinion among reasonable scholars there will never be a single definition of giftedness, and this is probably the way it should be” (Renzulli, 2000, p. 96). Methods for distinguishing gifted students vary in scope and content, as do the structures and systems for meeting the needs of these learners.

History of Gifted Education

Identifying and understanding gifted children started with the research of Lewis Terman. His longitudinal study, *Genetic Studies of Genius* (1926) followed over 1,500 highly intelligent children who, for the most part, were identified for participation using the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales, an assessment Terman developed directly from the Binet-Simon scale for measuring intelligence quotients (IQ). Using an abbreviated Stanford-Binet test, Terman’s team and volunteer assistants sampled approximately 250,000 California students in grades 1-8. Terman thus developed the colossal longitudinal group of “Termites” his team would follow for 60 years. So dubbed, Termites were children whose IQ was 140 for 11 years old, with a descending scale range to 132 for 14-year-olds (Terman et al., 1926).

In addition to describing the physical and social characteristics of intellectually talented children, Terman sought to prove that gifted youth were better off than their average-IQ peers. By following them into adulthood, Terman’s longitudinal data suggested that the group’s participants were healthier and happier when compared on factors of physical, emotional, marital, vocational, adjustment, and achievement (Neihart & Yeo, 2018). This countered earlier stereotypes that characterized highly intelligent individuals as weak, neurotic, and unhealthy misfits (Hastorf, 1997). For example, from the Termite pool, 70% of men and 67% of women

graduated from college as compared to 8% of the general population in California (Hastorf, 1997). Therefore, Terman concluded it was good to be bright, and helped introduce gifted children as a distinct group to study and to support (Glass, 2004).

A contemporary of Terman, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1899-1989) was more interested in how to educate gifted children. Hollingworth developed her own IQ cut scores for categories of intelligence: *Gifted* (132-144), *Highly-gifted* (145-159), *Exceptionally Gifted* (160-174), and *Profoundly Gifted* (175+). Hollingworth held that children up to about 140 IQ tolerate the ordinary school routine quite well, meaning that school offered them some challenge and allowed them to get good grades without much effort. When grouped and paced with average students, Hollingworth claimed students over 140 IQ experience little intellectual stimulation and are often bored. Therefore, she promoted grade acceleration for gifted students as a solution to counter boredom with intellectual stimulation (Silverman, 1989). In 1936, Hollingworth expanded her Special Opportunity Class at P.S. 165 in New York and established the Speyer School at P.S. 500 for gifted elementary students. Without offering curriculum, Hollingworth developed an independent, interest-based approach that guided for students with IQ scores above 155 (Silverman, 1989). This school would also become a laboratory for her continued research and the publication of *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*, the first textbook on gifted education (Hollingworth, 1930).

During the early years of the Cold War and with the launch of Sputnik, the federal government invested in identifying and educating gifted students (Glass, 2004). In 1958, the National Defense Education Act was passed, and Title V provided funding for testing to find gifted students (National Defense Act of 1958). By linking it to national defense, states were

supported by the federal government's first direct funding of education, and it was for gifted education (Glass, 2004).

Less than a decade later, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and with concerns about equity in education, meeting the needs of at-risk children took priority over gifted education. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) focused schools' attention on remediation and mastery, effectively making gifted students another at-risk population of children who become vulnerable when given instruction designed for the average learners (Gross, 1998; Neihart & Yeo, 2018; Olenchak, 1999; Renzulli, 2000). When ESEA was reauthorized in 1988, Congress included the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act (Glass, 2004), but it did not require states to provide any specific services for gifted children (National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, 2014). Also, compared to funding for children with disabilities, this federal support for gifted education was miniscule and reserved for research or grants for program implementation or to focus on underrepresented populations (National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, 2014).

Passed in 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its successor Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 attempted to meet the needs of all students. Naturally, however, with the testing and accountability pressures associated with at-risk student groups, schools emphasize getting all students to proficiency; much attention goes to supporting those students under a 40% achievement level in reading and math (Beisser, 2008; Grgich, 2009). The challenges of obtaining results for all student groups (underrepresented races/ethnicities, economically disadvantaged, English learners, students with learning disabilities) competes with priorities to educate gifted children (Glass, 2004; Young & Balli, 2014). This can lead teachers to plan and arrange the bulk of their extra instruction to prepare underperforming students for standardized

tests in reading and math. Often, gifted students who already have the skills to meet high-stakes assessments are expected to make it on their own, and creative activities and differentiated assignments are implemented intermittently and less frequently (Beisser, 2008; Young & Balli, 2014). In an egalitarian leaning system designed for the masses (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015), a lens of equity may not always perceive giftedness or serve gifted children.

Identification and Eligibility of Gifted Children

Giftedness is often defined and researched on the basis of intelligence (Renzulli, 2000). The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented confirmed that 99.8% of school district coordinators used intellectual giftedness in their definition (2014). Many states have broadened their definition to include creative/divergent thinking, acuity in visual and performing arts, or leadership, and academic giftedness (National Research Center on Gifted and Talented, 2013). Renzulli breaks the definitions in literature into “creative-productive giftedness” and “school-house giftedness” (2000). The latter is intellectual and valued in the traditional model of education, which emphasizes high IQ, lesson-learning, test taking, and getting good grades (Renzulli, 2000). His creative-productive category aligns with Olenchak’s nontraditional talents such as spatial, inter-personal, or leadership (1999). He likened two of his elementary-aged case studies to Frank Lloyd Wright and Mother Teresa; both of whom would likely not have fit in the school-house definition (Olenchak, 1999).

Identifying a student as gifted using a single measure or IQ score only gives a limited view of a child’s abilities (Renzulli, 2000). Like Terman and Hollingworth nearly 100 years ago, researchers still use IQ as a variable for sampling (Terman, 1926; Hollingworth, 1930). The top three instruments used by the 359 districts surveyed by the National Research Center on Gifted and Talented (2013) were the Cognitive Abilities Test, the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, and

the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test. Like IQ, state or district-determined assessment scores correlate to a percentile ranking that help school committees determine if a student is eligible for talented and gifted programming. Some districts use non-verbal tests, like the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, to help minimize the influence of cultural or linguistic bias on the identification process for minority students (Naglieri & Ford, 2003).

Determining giftedness is more complicated than simply assessing an individual student for an IQ or percentile score. According to the National Research Center on Gifted and Talented (2013), many school districts are moving to a multiple-measures approach for identifying gifted students that may include teacher referral, parent nomination, screening using standardized tests, teacher checklists, or portfolio ratings. This more comprehensive process for identifying giftedness also parallels the pedagogical complexity for addressing a gifted student's individual rate, level, interest, and context. The next section examines some common approaches for meeting the needs of gifted students.

Organizational Structures

There are many strategies that schools employ to meet the needs of gifted children. When a student is identified as gifted, the teacher, coordinators, school administration, and school district work together to execute a plan or plug students into the district's framework for gifted programming. Schools often meet the needs of gifted students through differentiation, enrichment, and acceleration.

The National Research Center on Gifted and Talented surveyed 389 districts by focusing on elementary schools serving students from K-6. While districts may use more than one approach, 169 (43.4%) used Tomlinson's Model for Differentiated Instruction, 125 (32.1%) reported no particular model, 84 (21.6%) used Renzulli's Enrichment Clusters, and 82 (21.1%)

listed Kaplan's Depth and Complexity Model. The part-time pull-out model remains the most common option for districts (51.9%), with cluster grouping of gifted students within a differentiated classroom model coming in second at 18.4% (National Research Center on Gifted and Talented, 2013). Further, only six districts in the sample report using a full-time homogeneous school for gifted students, and only one district served students through grade skipping. In the same survey, participants reported other goals including recruitment of qualified teachers, providing enrichment opportunities, and proportional and equitable identification of historically underrepresented student groups (National Research Center on Gifted and Talented, 2013).

In 2009, Grgich studied the model of homogeneous placements at specialized schools designed exclusively for gifted students in California by examining the progress of 243 fourth and fifth graders. Participants who qualified for gifted programming in second or third grade and were divided into two groups: those who accepted the gifted placement and those on a waiting list (Grgich, 2009). California Achievement Tests, Sixth Edition assessment results showed that students in the homogeneous gifted placement outperformed the heterogeneous class in both math and language arts. Grgich identified possible factors for the gains including accelerated pacing, covering more content, skipping mastered concepts, more time for difficult tasks, peer role models, in-depth discussions, and allowances for creativity, enrichment, and challenge.

Homogeneous gifted placements require resources and capacity. For this reason, districts look to other options. Ability grouping models include regrouping for selected subjects and/or grade levels, special classes for high achievers, and within-class grouping models (e.g., reading groups, differentiated math groupings) (Slavin, 1987). Teachers must make instructional provisions within the grouping model (Delcourt, Cornell & Goldberg, 2007). Based on his

understanding of the literature, Slavin (1987) recommended that students “remain in heterogeneous classes at most times and be regrouped by ability only in subjects (e.g., reading, mathematics) in which reducing heterogeneity is particularly important” (p. 328). He also recommended that placements be flexible and based on continued assessment, which should also influence each teacher’s level and pace (Slavin, 1987).

In addition to grouping strategies, teachers may use academic acceleration to serve gifted students. Grade-based acceleration, often referred to as grade skipping, shortens a students’ K-12 experience (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). Children experience challenging content and may find comfort with intellectual peers who are chronologically older (Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). In addition to assessments that identify academic aptitude, students who are being considered for acceleration or grade-skipping “should be screened for social readiness, emotional maturity, and motivation for acceleration.” (Neihart, 2007, p. 51) For those who aren’t ready for grade-skipping, subject-based acceleration may be considered, which can take the form of early-admission to kindergarten, compacted curriculum, concurrent enrollment subject acceleration, testing out, and advanced placement (Neihart et al., 2002).

The study of approaches to educating gifted children goes back 100 years. With the exception of the Cold War years, support and resources for gifted education has been limited to meet the needs of our brightest children. While the nation is focused on getting all children to proficiency, gifted students need to be recognized as individuals.

The Classroom Teacher

Gifted students, like all learners, benefit when viewed as individuals. This requires significant buy-in and planning on the part of teachers and school districts. Attentive allocation

of resources, using research-based methods, and consulting with the students themselves all contribute to quality individualized instruction.

Seeing Gifted Students as Individuals

No matter the district paradigm or model, teachers must carefully select or design lessons, activities, and units that provide gifted students appropriate academic experiences (Delcourt, Cornell & Goldberg, 2007). With a strengths-based mindset, lessons can be tailored by using assessments or considering the learner's abilities, interests and learning styles (Renzulli, 2000). Teachers who perceive intelligence and instruction through a triarchic lens of analytical, creative, and practical can help gifted students succeed in school and in life (Gubbels, Segers & Verhoeven, 2014). Since differentiation and planning for individualized instruction are time-intensive, institutional structures may also be introduced to support instruction at students' rate and level (e.g., cluster grouping, acceleration, ability-grouping, pullouts, schoolwide enrichment, homogeneous placements).

Renzulli (2000) sees the individual. His School Enrichment Model (SEM) has four principles: learner's uniqueness, enjoyment, context of real problem, and formal instruction to enhance knowledge. The SEM approach puts the learner directly in the center of the lesson design and activities. Gifted learning can be guided by approaches and strategies that create opportunities for independent and active learning (Renzulli, 2000).

The student-centered SEM model reflects the mindset promoted by the National Association for Gifted Children and their *Gifted Children's Bill of Rights*. Authored by past president Dale Siegle, the following is a list of ten educational rights designed to represent the voice of gifted children. It is deliberately written in kid-friendly language:

You have a right to

- know about your giftedness.
- learn something new every day.
- be passionate about your talent area without apologies.
- have an identity beyond your talent area.
- feel good about your accomplishments.
- make mistakes.
- seek guidance in the development of your talent.
- have multiple peer groups and a variety of friends.
- choose which of your talent areas you wish to pursue.
- not to be gifted at everything.

(National Association for Gifted Children, 2007). These guidelines represent an ideal in gifted education. A similar, overlapping list was offered by Cross (2018) that outlined psychosocial needs for gifted students. One of his 20 rights added to “have access to well-trained teachers who will use best practices in pedagogy, including gifted education pedagogy” (Cross, 2018, p. 90), which circles back to Renzulli’s SEM approach (2000). Pedagogy includes academic instruction, but it also includes contextual factors that help students reach their potential (Cross, 2018).

Therefore, while planning for instruction and academics, teachers of gifted children also need to plan for the social needs of high-ability students. In a phenomenological study, Morris (2013) concluded that, more than any pedagogical accommodation, happiness in the classroom hinged on having understanding and accepting classmates. Other studies included a positive peer component in the investigation of grouping models such as homogeneous placements, academic acceleration, and ability grouping (Grgich, 2009; Hoge & Renzulli, 2008; Neihart, 2007; Neihart

& Yeo, 2018). A general education teacher has the daunting responsibility to meet the needs of all students in their classroom. Yet, they need training to develop an individualized environment.

Developing an Individualized Environment

In a 2008 national survey of 900 teachers in Grades 3-12, 73% agreed that “too often, the brightest students are bored and under-challenged in school—we’re not giving them a sufficient chance to thrive” (Farkas & Duffett, 2008, p. 78). Many teachers have the resolve to support their bright students, but do not know how to do it (Beisser, 2008). Farkas and Duffett’s work revealed that 90% of surveyed teachers wanted more training to develop skills in teaching gifted students (2008). Yet of the 39 states polled by the National Association for Gifted Children, five states (12.8%) required general education teachers to receive professional development for gifted instruction (2015). This indicates that states are effectively leaving sound pedagogical practices for gifted students to individual districts’ prerogative or even expecting individual teachers to volunteer for their own gifted training (National Association for Gifted Children, 2015).

Many teachers assume that gifted children are generally similar (Gross, 1999; Olenchak, 2001). Yet, there is a big difference between students in the 95th percentile and those in the 99.5th percentile (Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). Gross (1999) contends that highly-gifted children are extreme outliers (i.e., 3-5 standard deviations above the mean). Such rare gifted students require teachers to plan and individualize to a deeper level, which differs from the structure, pace, and content needed for moderately gifted students.

Even if teachers understand that gifted students need to be viewed as individuals, differentiating lessons, activities, and curriculum is still challenging in a regular classroom setting. Whether through budget cuts that reduce/eliminate programs or coordinator positions (Young & Balli, 2014) or by shifts towards high-stakes testing (Renzulli, 2000), gifted children

and services have been moved into the general education classroom. This means teachers are responsible for students on both ends of the achievement continuum (i.e., differentiation). For expediency, classroom teachers often see differentiation as a tiered process, planning for gifted students as a whole. Seeing the gifted group as separate students with unique learning needs and further differentiating is rare (Olenchak, 2001). In another study, Olenchak reports that only 3% of 100 districts in 20 states differentiate for curriculum or instruction at a personal level (2001).

In a study of four gifted and talented children, Olenchak observed the introduction of a Personalized Talent Development Plan (PTDP) for each case study participant (2001). He developed themes from his regular observations and quarterly interviews of students and adults, as well as analyzed student journals and school records. A fifth grader complained of “working on the same old stuff over and over” (Olenchak, 2001. p. 191). A bilingual, bicultural fourth-grade girl exclaimed, “Get me out of here before I go crazy! I used to love school; now I hate it” (Olenchak, 2001, p. 192). A ninth-grade boy likened his experience in school to wheel alignment on a car. “I think my school has decided that identities are like wheels and must all be aligned just alike...the alignment is the wrong size for me” (Olenchak, 2001, p. 192). These case studies indicated that positive changes happened for these students after individualized PTDPs were implemented for each student. Positive changes were noted. In some cases, the transformations were remarkable (Olenchak, 2001). For instance, through the PTDP process and differentiation, the aforementioned student with alignment concerns was inspired to work before school, take AP courses, and compose a pep band song that was played at a high school game. Adult role models or mentors who took a deliberate interest in gifted students made a difference in their social and

emotional development (Haberlin, 2018; Olenchak, 1999; Persson, 2010). A child's first adult role model is the parent(s).

Supporting the Individual

Keys to successful adjustment in school are positive family relationships and parent-child interactions (Pilarinos & Solomon, 2017). In his mixed-method survey of 287 Mensa members with IQ in the 98th percentile, Persson analyzed the *Degree of Experienced Family Support* (2010). Of the gifted participants surveyed, 50% felt that their family situation was supportive and understanding (Persson, 2010). Although only half, this compares favorably vs. respondents' data about experienced support in schools (i.e., 8% = primary, 23% = secondary, 35% = university). One former student reflected, “[My] parents were inspiring and always helped me.” (Persson, 2010, p. 548) The home and parents can be the main source of encouragement for gifted students (Morris, 2013).

Parents want their gifted child to be happy in school (Morris, 2013). Some teachers may interpret otherwise, seeing a parent's advocacy for their child as over-involvement or wrongly attributing intellectual advancement to competitive, pushy parents (Gross, 1999). When partnering with schools on programming or placement, parents have some difficult choices to make. For example, when faced with a homogeneous placement with gifted peers, parents may have to give up the convenience of the local, neighborhood school, childhood friends, and the opportunity to have diverse social experiences.

Gifted students also need to experience encouragement in their schools. Persson's retroactive mixed-method sampling revealed a different perspective on the *Degree of Experienced Support* in school (2010). At the primary/elementary level, only 8% of the 287 participants felt the school was supportive and understanding, citing lack of support,

indifference, ridicule, and other complex variables (Persson, 2010). In an environment of proficiency, one student of high-ability lamented, “I did not experience myself as gifted. I thought there was something wrong with me.” (Persson, 2010, p. 551)

In a survey of 4,515 identified students, 37% reported receiving no gifted services and 75% weren't provided opportunities for acceleration (Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). These bright students are in 95th percentile or above, and they attend schools where curriculum offers insufficient challenge (Gubbels, Segers & Verhoeven, 2014) and where the larger group is the unit of control (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015).

To support the development of gifted students, districts, schools, and teachers plan for their academic, social and emotional needs. Gifted students are on a continuum and are often one-of-a-kind. The next theme explores how gifted students see themselves and what may happen when their needs are not met.

The Gifted Learner

As educators examine best practices, social-emotional issues of gifted learners should also be considered. These students especially see themselves in the context of their educational and larger environment and note that they are different. They develop strategies to navigate their place in the world and beyond.

Social Adjustment

Contrary to the popular stereotype by teachers and parents, giftedness carries no inherent risk for emotional problems, and most gifted children adjust well socially, emotionally, and academically (Cornell et al., 1995; Norman, Ramsay, Martray & Roberts, 1999; Terman, 1926; Wallace et al., 2017). Other researchers assert, however, that some profoundly gifted outliers experience challenges (Gross, 1999; Hollingworth, 1942; Peterson, Duncan & Canady, 2009;

Terman, 1947). When emotional or social problems do emerge, there could be a mismatch between the child's environment (school, social, family) and their social-emotional needs (Wallace et al., 2017).

To study social adjustment and behavior of gifted students in elementary school, Cornell et al. compared 675 gifted students with 322 regular education students in 10 states (1995). Participants were in grades 2-4 from 15 different school districts and participated in a variety of gifted service-delivery models (regular classroom, pull out, ability grouping, homogeneous schools for high-ability students). The gifted sample scored about one year above grade level, while the regular students were on par or slightly above. Teachers, parents, and students completed Child Behavior Checklists and Teachers Rating Forms to measure behavior adjustment. The study revealed no significant difference between the two groups. There was also no difference as viewed by parents or teachers. Further, the study tracked gifted students whose ratings indicated substantial behavior problems and found a similar proportion in the comparison group. This study does not support the claim that gifted program status is associated with a higher incidence of behavior challenges (Cornell et al., 1995).

Differentness

Many gifted students recognize their differentness (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015; Gross, 1999; Neihart et al., 2002; Swiatek, 2002). Giftedness often comes with advanced academic development that is not necessarily congruent with social and emotional skills (Olenchak, 1999). Silverman defines *asynchrony* as being out-of-sync (Silverman, 1997). Increased IQ intensifies the gap between mental capabilities and social, emotional, and physical abilities that may be tethered to chronological age (Neihart et al., 2002). In an earlier study, Silverman described an eleven-year-old with an IQ score of 187 carrying a calculus book and a

Curious George stuffed animal (1997), as an example of how this mismatch might be evidenced. Even eighty years earlier, Hollingworth (1930) expressed concern regarding a bright student with older classmates when he “jumps up and down, clapping his hands and shouting, ‘Goody! goody!’” (1930, p. 152) These asynchronous images point to the potential for social and emotional adjustment issues when students work with non-chronological peers or behave outside societal or group norms (Neihart et al., 2002).

Making friends can be a challenge for gifted students who tend to drift from same-age friends toward those with similar capabilities (Gross, 2000). Since elementary schools are organized by chronological age into grade levels, this often means younger gifted students connect with older, intellectually-equivalent peers, leaving them more vulnerable to social isolation (Neihart et al., 2002). In a study of two groups of British children, those with a mean IQ of 147 were compared to a group who scored an average of 134. The gifted students felt different from other children 17 times more often than the comparison group. Eighty-three percent of 147 group reported having few friends as compared to 30% of the 134s. Respectively, 7% reported having no friends vs. 1% (Freeman, 1979).

Morris conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis of six gifted students (2013). Participants were ages ranging from 10 to 18 years old and interviewed individually, where they described the social challenges that come from being different. Students described feeling different than their peers from an early age, and having an insatiable love for learning and challenge. This study indicated that finding peers can be difficult for gifted students, and the need for acceptance competed with students’ motivation for learning. These feelings led to solitude and unhappiness, while some used coping strategies, for example, by playing sports “because you don’t get made fun of if you’re good at sports.” (Morris, 2013, p. 23)

Coping Strategies

In a summer program at the Carnegie Mellon Institute of Talented Elementary Students (C-MITES), Swiatek examined 434 gifted students' coping strategies to manage a sense of differentness (2002). Over two years, Pennsylvania participants in grades 3-7 who scored in the 95th percentile on the EXPLORE assessment were admitted in the C-MITES summer program and, with parent permission as part of admission, were given the Social Coping Questionnaire (SCQ). This 7-point Likert survey was developed and revised by Swiatek and Dorr (1998) to measure students' thoughts and actions on being gifted. The 35 items were grouped into six factors: denying giftedness, minimizing focus on popularity, social interaction, humor, conformity, and denying impact on peer pressure. The SCQ was called "Things I Think and Do," and students were given statements to consider and rate. Examples included: I don't tell people about my academic ability; I don't worry about whether or not I am popular; I prefer doing things alone over doing things with other kids; I try to look very similar to other kids; I would fit in better at school if my academic ability were different (Swiatek, 2002).

Based on C-MITES results, participants' focus on popularity increased during the elementary years and appeared to stabilize by grade 7. Girls were more likely to have high levels of interpersonal interactions, more willing to deny giftedness, and less likely to use humor than boys. Swiatek (2002) noted that coping strategies begin at early ages. Gifted elementary students' strategies are similar to gifted adolescents and are measurable in students as young as third grade (Swiatek, 2002).

Gross (1998) noted Swiatek's earlier 1995 study in conducting a study of 238 gifted adolescents that revealed their coping strategies for minimizing the visibility of their giftedness. Gross used poetry and diary entries from gifted adolescents to illustrate their processes for

identity development and the masks they may wear. She explored whether intellectually gifted students reach self-acceptance in identity formation and in interpersonal relationships. In her earlier work (1989), Gross contrasted the gifted individual's needs for both peer acceptance and academic achievement. For some, the conflict is irreconcilable and may have led to a psychosocial dilemma that forced a choice between intimacy with peers and the drive for performance. Complicating matters, the gifted student's environment, with its majority culture of average intelligence and synchronous development, encouraged conformity. In the absence of a peer group or understanding adults, gifted students' awareness of difference intensified and may have increased a feeling of isolation, frustration, or loneliness (Gross, 1998).

To cope, some students grow towards self-acceptance and interpersonal relationships through experimentation. Some try on different roles or develop an array of masks to discover their true selves or to fit in. Others curate second identities in music, debate, photography or athletics for acceptance (Gross, 1998). This concept of concealing gifts or social adaption is congruent with Swiatek's trend line that illustrates students' need for popularity that increases from grade 3 through high school (2002). Gross' balance of children's reflections and poetry with adult retroactive entries indicate the need for additional research on identity development and social acceptance in gifted students.

Gifted youth can also navigate conflicts with innate drives and interpersonal needs by adapting to their environments. Haberlin's (2018) cross-case study examined how two highly productive fourth grade gifted students successfully navigated public education. The two participants utilized a combination of strategies to cope with school. Both preferred regular breaks for solitude, whether riding a bike, watching TV, reading, tuning people out, being outside, or taking an interest in animals (Haberlin, 2018).

Some children can find comfort in working with others outside of the traditional learning environment. In Olenchak's cross-case study (1999), two students' school experiences were transformed by alternative social activities. One troubled sixth grader, whose leadership and giftedness were recognized by school personnel, was guided away from alienation and toward altruistic service of the poor. A twice exceptional "pain in the neck" third grader with learning disabilities and behavior problems was allowed to have an interest-based pullout to work on environmental issues with a high school vocational teacher (Olenchak, 1999, p. 296). In these cases, adults countered isolation by recognizing student potential in a very personal way and helped broker individualized solutions for students to showcase their gifts.

Concluding Thoughts

This review summarizes some of the research of gifted students in the elementary school setting. Gifted education, which dates back nearly 100 years, attempts to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of bright students. Schools use organizational structures, instructional approaches, and individualization strategies to support gifted students. These children see their differentness and adjust to their environment by using a variety of coping strategies. Through identification and individualization, educators can support gifted students' success in elementary school.

Research on being gifted can be enhanced by incorporating student voice and first-hand experiences (Prior, 2011). Listening to gifted students and understanding their unique lived experiences may help reveal how an elementary school might best support them. Therefore, this phenomenological study partners with intellectually gifted elementary students as co-researchers to surface their first-person experiences in school.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the study's design and approaches are discussed. The setting, co-researchers, data sources, and procedures are addressed. The methods for collecting and analyzing meaning units are described, as well as the assumptions, limitations, trustworthiness, and credibility of the study.

Purpose and Research Questions

The key research question that guided this study was: What is the nature of intellectually gifted students' experiences in elementary school? Two secondary questions were also pertinent:

- What does a close study of intellectually gifted students' interactions in elementary school reveal about their experience?
- What do their interactions reveal about how an elementary school might best support them?

Research Design

This phenomenological study describes the lifeworlds or meaning of everyday experiences of intellectually gifted students in public elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012). The phenomenological approach helped get to the "what-it-is-like-for-me-ness" (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2016, p. 36) for the study's participants. Like Moustakas (1994) and Prior (2011), I called the study's participants co-researchers because they did, in fact, co-investigate. The students themselves were the source of the meaning and essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). This subtle shift in terminology and participant role aligned with my hopes to educe and amplify the voices of children.

Unlike other methodologies use of singularity or certainty, I adapted this project along the way, based on what was revealed throughout the study (van Manen, 2016). Crafting phenomenological research requires human science to rethink allegiance to a recipe or methodological script (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2017) Therefore, this study's approach did not have cemented procedures that ensured insights nor did it attempt to quantify a gifted child's lived experiences through formal observations, surveys, or traditional data measures. This responsive nonmethodical approach for securing data relied exclusively on objects—children (van Manen, 2017). As a phenomenological researcher, I listened, adapted to my young co-researchers, and, above all, remained loyal to them and their true nature (van Manen, 2016)

The Mosaic Approach

The methodology was deliberately and necessarily open-ended to give voice to children and surface the essence of their unique gifted experience in an elementary school setting (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015; van Manen, 2014). Yet, the research design did need a plan for launching the study, and one central tactic for moving passive participants to active co-researchers and engaging them was the Mosaic approach (Clark 2005; 2010). As the name indicates, the framework represented the gathering and assembling of different qualitative data pieces or perspectives to reveal a composite of a child's world (Clark, 2011).

The Mosaic approach included observations, interviews, and member checks, which were coupled with child-centered participatory approaches like cartooning, writing, a show-and-tell activity, and playing games. Student participants became co-researchers, interviewees, artists, documenters, authors, reviewers, evaluators, and editors (Clark, 2010). More than simply developing the much-needed rapport with elementary children, this multimodal strategy served to reorient power, flatten the relationship, and allow the student to co-lead the research process

(Clark, 2005). Further, Clark pointed out that the Mosaic's latitude allows children to express themselves in other forms of communication beyond the typical adult-directed interview, which provided a more inclusive and complete phenomenological picture (2005).

Researcher

As a new qualitative researcher with 25 years in K-5 education as a teacher, principal, and district office administrator, my subjectivity, views, and values as an observer were not absent. Still, my committee and I viewed my experiences as an asset that naturally led me to these research questions. Consequently, I investigated what interested me. Phenomenological research is driven by those who are animated by the question (van Manen, 2016). I genuinely wanted to know what it is like to be a ten- or eleven-year-old intellectually gifted student—an outlier—in a system primarily designed to meet the needs of the bell curve majority and, secondarily, to support a multi-tiered model targeted for those who have yet to reach proficiency.

My own experience is relevant to this investigation. Part of my role as a district administrator is teaching and learning, which includes supporting Talented and Gifted (TAG) students. Preceding this role, I was an elementary principal in two different school districts and a fifth-grade teacher. Thus, I am aware of some of the responsibilities, challenges, and approaches required to meet the needs of these unique individuals. From the first time I entered the elementary school classroom, I was aware of bright kids. Like many new teachers, I was apprehensive. I knew TAG students were different, smart, and often came with exuberant and involved parents—an interpretation I also learned early in life. When I was in elementary school, I did not qualify for gifted programming through the usual screening channels. My parent, however, decided that I should be part of the district's gifted program, and she was also exuberant in her meetings with the school administrators until she earned a gifted label for me.

Finally, I also have a parent lens because one of my own children was identified by her school as intellectually gifted, without parental prompting.

What I perceived as a student, teacher, parent, and administrator is that intellectually gifted students need to be educated (i.e., drawn out). These little humans need to be invited into a compelling environment that nourishes their curiosity. Some require a diet of higher-level thinking, but many also need variance, unpredictability, surprise, change of sequence or routine, a curveball, or an inquiry-based challenge. Intellectually gifted children come to school to get their brains fed. From my various orientations, I often sensed disappointment or frustration when some of their days were filled with activities, skill-development, and concepts they have already learned. Yet, the gifted are often seated in a routine that forces them to stomach what they find monotonous or boring, solidifying their perceived differentness from the majority. Still, many intellectually gifted students choose compliance to fit in and deny their inherent needs or put on a mask (Gross, 1998).

Bracketing

Qualitative research, especially in a phenomenological study, requires my experiences, perspectives, opinions, and judgments to be suspended or set aside as best I could. The goal was to allow rich descriptions of lived experiences and meaning units to emerge from my fourth- or fifth-grade co-researchers. Therefore, reflexivity and bracketing (epoché) were indispensable phenomenological devices that help set aside my preconceived understandings, thoughts, biases, and assumptions (van Manen, 2016). My curiosity and prior experience aside, I recognized my limits to fully grasp the phenomenon in this context, at that time, and for these participants (LeVasseur, 2003).

Bracketing allowed me to open up and better focus on the statements, anecdotes, illustrations, and examples provided by my co-researchers (van Manen, 2014). Further, the extent of my bracketing, openness, and surrender was directly correlated to the likelihood of inception or capturing the elusive meaning when the phenomenon reveals itself (van Manen, 2017). In other words, the more open I was, the more I learned about the lived experiences of these gifted children.

Practically-speaking, bracketing started with the initial conceptualization of this study and in dialogue with other researchers, colleagues, and my dissertation committee. Those conversations surfaced the presence of confirmation bias, certainty, and the mixing of my own lived experiences and values with those of my participants. I received specific feedback and reinforcement that oriented me closer to the unadulterated and genuine perspective of my young co-researchers. Next, I used analytic memos to frequently record my interpretations and reflections regarding the research study's proposed phenomenological questions, methodology, and my relationship to it. Finally, bracketing and reflexivity continued throughout the study. At each step, and to maintain persistent curiosity, I continued the practice of writing analytic memos to consider my co-researchers, reflect on the process and what was emerging, and journal about my own wonderings (LeVasseur, 2003). Ultimately, phenomenological insights, encounters, or discoveries hinged on the strategic creation of sufficient space and time for me to reflect regularly and thoughtfully (van Manen, 2017). Throughout the study, I needed to make time for these moments of meaning.

As a phenomenological researcher, I recognize that I was an instrument in the research. As such, I collected and analyzed anecdotes, incepts, and insights for meaning. The quality of

this study required a project-long commitment to bracketing and a direct and unwavering orientation to my participants.

Setting

The setting for this research was in two elementary schools in a suburban public-school district in the Pacific Northwest. The school district's 7,000 students attended one of ten schools in a city with 40,000 residents whose median household income ranks in the top quartile (US Census Bureau, 2018). Demographically, 73% of the students were white, 10% were Asian, 8% were multi-racial, and 6% were Hispanic (Oregon Department of Education, 2018). The percentage of students with disabilities was 11%, with 45 languages are spoken, and 7% of the students receiving free/reduced price lunch (Oregon Department of Education, 2018). The statistics illustrate that this study's pool of available participants came from a predominantly white and affluent community.

The participants attended two similar elementary schools within the same district. Total enrollment for each was approximately 425 students, with average class sizes within 1.5 students of each other. Both schools' demographics were comparable to the listed district averages. Each school had a half-time Talented and Gifted Coordinator to support identification, gifted programming and services, and coaching support for classroom teachers. During the time of this study, each school's elementary principal was in his or her second year. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state's grade level expectations for English Language Arts and Math were both in the top quartile of schools in the state. These higher-performing schools had performance measures that were within three to four percentage points of each other.

Since the research focused on the lived experiences in elementary schools, all interactions, close observations, conversational interviews, and member checks took place at the

participant's (hereafter co-researcher) school. The specific location for each activity varied based on environmental factors (e.g., space, layout, noise, distractibility, access to a table). The co-researcher's activity preference and his or her perception of the ideal location meant our interactions took place in the classroom, a common space, library, conference room, or principal's office. Since phenomenological studies do not control their participants, I remained open to unanticipated opportunities to extend my understanding and insight into my co-researcher's lived experiences at school. When, where, and how my intellectually gifted co-researcher chose to reveal *what-it-is-like-for-him* or *-her* required me to be adaptive, patient, sometimes silent, respectfully repetitious, and willing to book additional visits.

The setting naturally included other students and adults. Part of the Mosaic approach, for example, includes a game or an activity that attracted other students or teachers, which helped build rapport, familiarity, and provided secondary experiences for further phenomenological reflection or a future discussion with the co-researcher. I sensed that the extra time doing playful and interesting activities together shifted co-research from feeling like school work in a school setting to feeling like an engaging enrichment activity outside the classroom (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010).

Participants

I invited six elementary students to partner in this study. Using purposive sampling, participants or "co-researchers" were selected from a pool of elementary students identified as "intellectually gifted" by the state department of education's eligibility criteria, scoring at or above the 97th percentile on a nationally standardized test of mental ability (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.). Often, gifted students are identified as "academically talented" in reading or math. This study's research sampling, however, exclusively included those identified as

intellectually gifted. To help zero in on their extended, localized experiences, I sought consent from families with intellectually gifted children who have been in the school's gifted program for the past two years.

The district's Talented and Gifted identification process begins by referral from school personnel, a parent, or test data. All second-grade students in each elementary school are given the Cognitive Abilities Screener. A follow-up Otis Lennon School Ability Test or Naglieri Non-verbal Abilities Test is also proctored to complete formal identification. Therefore, with most of the school district's students being identified in second-grade and narrowing the participant pool to those who have been identified for at least two years, the study initially targeted fourth-through fifth-graders. Because of earlier identification, however, there was one second-grader and one third-grader in the pool of eligible participants.

I collaborated with school leadership to pinpoint students who fit the sampling criteria. I also attempted to build a diverse composition of students for the study. The inclusive sample was racially and culturally diverse with a range of elementary grade levels and balance in gender. Once potential participants were identified, I met with parents to build rapport and discuss the purpose of the research. To secure informed consent, parents had to visualize the research's planned activities and routines their child would participate in. I involved them in a discussion that outlined my background, purpose of the study, proposed number of visits, logistics, norms, communication, use of a recording app, confidentiality, and a presentation of the approved Human Science Research Council (HSRC) application. I made sure to answer all parents' and students' questions before obtaining written consent.

These young participants were not subjects to research, objects to observe, or interviewees. This study recognized that these gifted children had perspectives to offer.

“Whoever wants to become acquainted with the world of...children should listen to the language spoken by the things in their lifeworlds, to what things mean in this world” (van Manen, 2016, p. 112). Children are experts on their own lives (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010). And who better than an intellectually gifted child to express what it is like to be an intellectually gifted child? Therefore, the students’ consent was sought as well.

While data came directly from the voice of the participant co-researchers, another source of information came from key informants. During the study, I held conversations with co-researcher’s parents, classroom teacher, Talented and Gifted Coordinator, and principal. Phenomenon presented itself in the co-research, and the perspectives, interpretations, and anecdotes from key informants also provided valuable insight and meaning that influenced the study’s direction. Further, intellectually gifted students were engaged and linked with the world around them—including people. The children’s lived experiences in school also proved to be socially constructed, and exploring the interconnectedness with others provided another layer of understanding (Vagle, 2018).

Collecting Meaning

van Manen (2017) states, “present-day qualitative method uses the language of data collection, data coding, data analysis, data capture, and so forth. However, strictly speaking, phenomenology is ill-served with such usage of the term ‘data’” (p. 814). Since meaning was sought from the unique lived experiences expressed by children, *data* was fittingly called *insights, incepts, anecdotes, or meaning units*. These terms were more appropriate to a phenomenological approach, and this subtle—but significant—distinction supported not only my methodological understanding, but that of my co-researchers, their parents, and the school staff who were involved in the study.

This study utilized a multi-method Mosaic approach, that combined traditional qualitative methods with child-empowering participatory tools (Clark, 2011). At the initial meeting, each participant was given an empty memory cinch sack with instructions inside. At the next meeting, this bag would hold a self-selected portfolio of artifacts from home that represented some meaningful aspect of the child's life (Martin & Merrotsy, 2006). The objects and selectivity served as a launch for sharing, listening, appreciation, and the start of thoughtful anecdotes or narratives that enhanced the composite Mosaic (Ronksley-Pavia, Grootenboer & Pendergast, 2019). Co-researchers brought pictures, stuffed animals, awards, toys, books, a blanket, and games. I also brought a memory cinch sack and shared my own items (lanyard, pictures, mini-basketball, book, favorite snack-sized candy bar). This show-and-tell activity increased discussion and rapport that led to the mutual agreement of additional future, participatory activity. Early on, classroom observations were conducted, which allowed me to better understand the student's environmental context.

The first classroom visit was not the time for the formal interview. Instead, after discussing an item in the memory cinch sack, we shifted to a close observation by co-deciding to play a game, do art, or read together—joining and playing at their level and in their environment (van Manen, 2016). Close observations were also opportunities to grasp meaning and required me to pay attention, observe carefully, and reflect on meaning (van Manen, 2014). Another task in the first meeting was also to allow the student to select his or her own pseudonym, a rapport-building strategy used in another study of gifted students (Ronksley-Pavia, Grootenboer & Pendergast, 2019).

“The best way to enter a person's lifeworld is to participate in it” (van Manen, 2016, p. 69). These less formal, first-visit, close observations allowed me to build rapport, flatten the

power differential, and to gather some initial meaning units that would guide reflexive memo writing and prepare for the first interview (e.g., learn about the participant, refine questions, scout out the environment, ask the participant about the best place to host the interview, or give a reminder about when I am returning for the first interview). This first visit was followed by six more observations/interviews. Table 1 summarizes the purpose and objective of each school visit.

Table 1

School Visits

Visit Number	Purpose	Objective
1	Parent Meeting	Secure informed consent from parent(s) & participant
	Memory Cinch Sack	Present memory cinch sack to participant
2	Observation	Observe student in classroom
	Close Observation	Show-and-tell of cinch sack
	Research Discussion	Discuss co-researcher status and select pseudonym
3	Interview	Semi-structured, conversational interview
	Close Observation	Choice activity #1
4	Member Check	Follow-up to discuss meaning
	Close Observation	Choice activity #2
5	Follow-Up Interview	Collaborate on summary and prepare for wrap-up
	Close Observation	Choice activity #3
6	Final Visit	Presentation summary and final member check
	Close Observation	Choice activity #4
7	Thank You	Celebrate our work as co-researchers

I conducted a semi-structured conversational interview on the third visit. This conversation's dialogue targeted what it is like to be an intellectually gifted elementary student in a public-school setting. The interviews took approximately 25-35 minutes and were pre-arranged to avoid surprises. These interviews were conducted in a specific location within the school building that puts the student at ease. The aim was to gain children's explicit perspectives

through pre-reflective experiential accounts where lived experiences were revealed (van Manen, 2014). After some warm up dialogue or a short activity, an open-ended interview format allowed me to begin with short, simple questions and statements like:

- “Tell me about your best day ever at Westside Elementary?” (pseudonym)
- “What is it like to be a TAG student at Westside Elementary?”
- “Have you ever wished you could skip school?” (“Tell me why.”)
- “If you could change one thing about your school, what would that be?”
- “As someone who really wants to know, I am turning to you for the answers.”

While listening, I remained engaged and appropriately used encouragement, silence, and clarification probes to support the student’s sharing (Green, Camilli & Elmore, 2006).

Predetermined interview questions were prepared with a bank of contingency prompts designed to solicit anecdotes, examples, and the meaning needed for the study (see Appendix).

van Manen (2014) cautions against overestimating the ease of securing the responses a researcher actually wants from a qualitative interview. He also reminds phenomenological researchers to maintain the focus on the intent of the interview, in part, to avoid extraneous volume to sort through (van Manen, 2014). The Mosaic approach counters van Manen’s advice and naturally added a sizeable amount of content to analyze. Yet, that prework carefully informed, shaped, and focused the actual questions of the semi-structured interview, which served as a crescendo for data collection. During the that key conversation, I remained alert, listened for a story to emerge, and helped children to provide an experiential account. These experiences were analyzed to answer the research questions: *What is the nature of intellectually gifted students’ experiences in elementary school? What does a close study of intellectually*

gifted students' interactions in elementary school reveal about their experience? What do their interactions reveal about how an elementary school might best support them?

After each interview, I conducted a member check visit followed to review the phenomenological reflective theme and to solicit any additional responses or refining suggestions. As Clark encourages (2010), these young people were competent communicators, and this study shifted from *researching them* to *including them* in an empowering active role in the research.

Analyzing Meaning Units

I conducted interviews with my co-researchers individually and recorded the audio, using an app to provide an initial transcription, which I finalized by listening to each interview. Participant responses were “rich and thick with qualitative data” (Turner, 2010, p. 756), and the interpretation of phenomenological meaning units looked differently than other qualitative approaches to data analysis, like Saldaña’s more systematic coding and categorizing (Saldaña, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). To that end, I sought guidance from van Manen (2014) on how to handle phenomenological texts as sources of meaning at three levels; whole story, separate paragraph, and sentence level. Thematic analysis and a sorting process moved lived experience descriptions to an anecdote or two. I gave special attention to emphasis, observed emotion, repetition, sequence, and the time or quantity of the student description. Through thematization, reading and re-reading, highlighting key verbatims, and re-listening to audio recordings, I drafted the first-person phenomenological reflective descriptions.

This process of phenomenological reduction was a “kind of cleaning of the raw data” (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015), as I checked subjectivity and maintained epoché (openness) throughout the study. This bracketing was key because, to a significant extent, my interest in this

study was also a culmination of lived experiences as a student, teacher, administrator, and parent. Instead of predicting responses or searching for narratives consistent with prior understanding, I sought to become a conduit for a phenomenological report that re-storied a child's experience based on inceptual meaning and epoché-based insights.

Meaning units and insights did not exclusively come from the transcripts from the interview. Like the process for sustaining bracketing, calendared blocks of time directly before and after each school visit were critical for reflection and writing-capturing observations, verbatims, impressions, sensitivities, and non-verbals while they were still fresh. van Manen (2017) warns that phenomenological clarity is elusive and that "meaning insights must be written or they escape like Kairos moments" (p. 822). Therefore, strategic pauses were built-in for reflection, understanding, and to wonder about what was emerging as significant or meaningful in each stage of the research study.

After I wrote the phenomenological description drafts in first-person, I reviewed them with each co-researcher for accuracy in a follow-up member check (Terrell, 2016). The student was invited into a generative and collaborative conversation that reflected on the original research question(s). The reveal required a discussion about how their descriptions would not summarize everything that was discussed, it was just one key theme, editing was required, and that there were descriptions and much data on the cutting room floor. I read the draft aloud to them, as well as provided to them in written form and inquired into the phenomenon's inceptual meaning was confirmed and checked by asking, "Is this what it's really like to be an intellectually gifted student? Is this 100% you? Did we capture it—the truth of what it is like to be you?" (van Manen, 2016; 2017). All students were very pleased and pleasantly surprised with the descriptions. One said, "Whoa, that's spot-on!" Another said, "That's me!" As anticipated,

there were small revisions needed before we could experience that final and satisfying resolution. For example, Diva Girl said it was nine girls that fainted, not ten. Ricky chose to edit her original description with a softer and more understanding ending, “It’s not the teacher’s fault. She tries to make it quick, and they do have to help the whole class.”

Limitations and Assumptions

There are limits to phenomenological research. With its focus on the meaning from carefully selected experiences, we cannot generalize or theorize. “Phenomenology does not allow for empirical generalizations, the production of law-like statements, or the establishment of functional relationships” (van Manen, 2016, p. 22). Moreover, van Manen (2016) contrasts the tendency to generalize with ability to grasp the meaning of the human experience. Therefore, instead of reaching conclusions, this study attempts to develop a depth perception for an individual’s lifeworld and to offer his or her voice, distinct meaning, and significance to the reader-in other words, to compel an emotional response from the readers (Hogue, 2017).

This phenomenological approach may help a researcher or teacher develop an action-oriented, pedagogic thoughtfulness in a unique setting (van Manen, 2016). Further, the voices of these children may help point researchers toward future investigations using other methodological designs that allow for broader generalization.

This study focused on the uniqueness of the student experience of six elementary children. In addition to the limits of generalizability, this study’ setting also restricts transferability. These students each attend different elementary schools within the same suburban district in the Pacific Northwest. Demographically, each school setting is similar to each other with approximately 425 students, higher socio-economic status, strong parent involvement, sufficient district resources, and a half-time Talented and Gifted Coordinator for direct and

indirect support. The study's sample yielded participants who were not highly mobile nor experienced the challenges of moving schools often. These factors were made further idiosyncratic by the study's unique participants, who were each intellectually gifted and very different from each other.

The sample's participants had the capacity to evaluate the study's proposal and provide assent to the researcher throughout the study (Crocks, 2006). Elementary students who are intellectually gifted 7- or 11-years-olds were able to articulate their own thoughts and feelings about their unique experiences in an elementary school setting (Clark, 2011). With bracketing, meaning units were collected from the co-researchers to collaboratively grasp and describe the pedagogical essence of their experience (van Manen, 2016).

Trustworthiness

To support the credibility of this study, fewer students were deliberately selected so that I could spend a longer period of time with each of them. I conducted six visits with each participant were built in, and, in most cases, a seventh was needed. This "prolonged engagement" (Terrell, 2016, p. 174) allowed me to build rapport and trust with the child, as well as to develop a deeper understanding of his or her school environment from a child-centric lens (Crocks, 2006). The use of a Mosaic approach moved this study beyond the reliance on one exclusive strategy—the semi-structured interview, and it allowed the children multiple means to express themselves, thereby creating a composite picture or mosaic of intellectually gifted students' lives at school (Clark, 2010). Openness and adaptivity were embedded into the methodology, so the additional time and student contact influenced the design of subsequent visits, as well as the draft and refinement of initial and follow-up interview questions.

Gaining interpretive insight of an intellectually gifted student hinged on the collaboration of the intellectually gifted student. It is their singular and unique experience. Credibility in phenomenological meaning-making shifted the student participant interviewee into the role of co-researcher. Leveling the relationship, close observations, and using member checks developed a partnership that yielded the descriptive and interpretive meaning of the lived experience of the student (Merewether & Fleet, 2014; van Manen, 2016).

Ethics

Ethical considerations for this research demand attention to the ways “self and subject became joined” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). My work as a teacher, principal, and district office administrator led me to the investigation of lived experiences of elementary children. Over two decades, I have heard and internalized a range of underserved children’s first-hand descriptions and feelings of not belonging; I decided to focus on one student group on the far end of one side of the bell curve-intellectually gifted children. Subjectivity, bias, and assumptions were factors that required bracketing, epoché, dialogue with other researchers, and the habit of reflection and memo writing.

Ethics are at the core of any research study, and it was absolutely essential in this qualitative phenomenological study. I sensed that “the researcher becomes in a sense the guardian and a defender of the true nature of the object” (van Manen, 2016, p. 20). With 7- to 11- year old children as participants, the stakes of van Manen’s statement intensified. Certainly, what was revealed must stand on its own and truly represent the essence of what the child reveals. That phenomenological insight was a gift from the child, but it also touched on feelings of academic frustration, asynchrony, differentness, and coping strategies. Therefore, in this

study, ethics went beyond making sure I was accurately perceiving students' meaning; I had an obligation to protect a child.

Like all doctoral candidates, I obtained permission to conduct this research from the university's dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Children, families, adult participants, the hosting schools, school district, and the university were protected. Frequent and as-needed communication with the dissertation chairs and methodologist were maintained at every step.

The parents of each participant met with me to sign an informed consent document. Embedded in this phenomenological approach was also securing consent from the young co-researchers. Each child's participation, even as co-researchers, was voluntary, and ongoing consent or "assent" was confirmed throughout the study (Cocks, 2006; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Merewether & Fleet, 2014). Children were respected by providing them opportunities to opt-out, asking for permission to record conversations, and allowing them to choose activities within the Mosaic strengthened the co-researcher relationship, thereby increasing the opportunities to elicit genuine meaning units, anecdotes, or insights.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and the use of pseudonyms, pseudo places, and data were kept in secure file storage—for both analog and password-protected digital files. These protections, as well as a summary of the research's purpose and intent, were presented to the parents, participants, and school personnel at the initial meeting. These young people are a vulnerable population, based on their age and their unique identity as intellectually gifted children whose needs are very different from their peers (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015). I protected each child while attempting to make sense of the unique lifeworld of an intellectually gifted child.

Finally, participants were impacted by the co-researching process (van Manen, 2016). The discussion and engagement in the study revealed experiences that were positive, neutral, and negative. Students may have an increased awareness, sense of liberation, thoughtfulness about school, or understanding of the instructional challenges facing teachers. The school may learn that its practices are insufficient to meet the needs of each and every student in their care. In a researcher-as-learner mindset, this phenomenological study provided me as a researcher with deeper understanding and transformational change (van Manen, 2016). In other words, is the researcher doing something with phenomenology or is it doing something to the researcher? I am glad to report it was the latter.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter presents a summary of the findings from the collected data. This phenomenological study explored the nature of intellectually gifted students' experiences in a suburban elementary school setting in the Pacific Northwest. As a researcher, I partnered with gifted students as co-researchers to reveal their first-person experiences in elementary school, both in the classroom and in other school settings. The key research question guiding this study was: What is the nature of intellectually gifted students' experiences in elementary school? Two other questions were considered. What does a close study of intellectually gifted students' interactions in elementary school reveal about their experience, and what do their interactions reveal about how an elementary school might best support them?

Sample

In collaboration with the principal and TAG Coordinator, I identified elementary students identified as intellectually gifted to participate in this study. Each of the six students met requirements outlined in Chapter 3 and were enrolled in one of two elementary schools in the district. Both schools had half-time Talented and Gifted (TAG) Coordinators who determined eligibility, provided weekly pull-out enrichment services, supported classroom teachers' planning and instruction, coordinated services, and hosted contests and events for students.

Five of the six students were identified as intellectually gifted and found eligible for TAG services within this study's host school district (Athena was identified in another state using identical measures). These students participated in their elementary school's TAG program for at least two years. Both schools had a homeroom model for elementary content and subjects. Two students were accelerated for math and walked to another classroom each day for sixth-grade math, and one fifth-grader (Ricky) traveled to the middle school for seventh-grade math. The

other three students had grade-level math instruction in their homeroom classroom. After demonstrating risk factors for dyslexia, Brady was being evaluated for a learning disability.

Table 2 lists some brief details for the six co-researchers.

Table 2

Brief Description of Co-Researchers

Name	Age	Gender	Grade	Background
Athena	11	F	5	Athena was identified out of state as intellectually gifted, and her family moved to the Pacific NW in third grade. She played soccer year-round.
Brady	9	M	4	Brady was likely twice exceptional; in addition to being intellectually gifted, he struggled with decoding multisyllabic words and writing. He loved building things and playing video games.
Jeff	7	M	2	Jeff was the youngest participant in the study. He loved reading scary chapter books, music class, and challenging math instruction his mother provided him at home.
Ricky	10	F	5	Each day, Ricky traveled to the middle school for 7th-grade math. She was a quiet multi-sport athlete. Her twin brother was also gifted.
Diva Girl	8	F	3	Diva Girl skipped kindergarten, loved to read, and her goal was to get admitted to Brown University. Her parents had her on a waiting list for a private school.
Jakk	10	M	5	Two years ago, Jakk's family returned to the school district from living out of state. He was an athlete who enjoyed reading, art, Legos, and anything fun at school.

Data Collection

I used a mosaic of data collection methods that included observations, interviews, and member checks. These qualitative approaches were combined with child-centered close observations. At each visit, we chose from a medley of participatory activities like playing games, a show-and-tell activity, reading, writing, and cartooning. This Mosaic approach and co-researcher model was successful in flattening the power differential between student and me,

developing rapport, and drawing out authentic phenomenological descriptions of how they view themselves and experience giftedness at school (Clark, 2005). These elementary students were empowered to become co-researchers and also served roles as interviewees, artists, documenters, authors, reviewers, evaluators, and editors (Clark, 2010).

I interviewed each co-researcher twice. Transcriptions provided rich qualitative descriptions to review, organize, and analyze thematically (Turner, 2010; van Manen, 2014). I conducted a sorting process after each interview, and I saw key themes and anecdotes emerge by considering powerful statements, emphasis, repetition, sequence, observed emotion, and the quantity of description. In the first interview, I asked the same questions of each co-researcher, as shown in Appendix D. These first transcriptions informed my follow-up questions, helping me tailor the second interview to each student's individual themes. I sorted and analyzed themes following both interviews, and I developed first-person phenomenological reflective descriptions. I hosted follow-up discussions and member checks to allow co-researchers to review drafts and to collaboratively compare them to the original research questions.

Individual Descriptions and Common Themes

Each of the six descriptions was distinct and served to capture, in part, the essence of his or her unique lived experience as an intellectually gifted elementary student. Common themes did also emerge that included school being too easy, learning more outside of school, inefficient or wasted time in class, feeling controlled or needing choice, and being more stimulated at school by reading books. Individually and collectively, these anecdotes and examples point to the research questions and what this study hoped to describe (van Manen, 2016).

“I don’t learn anything new,” Academic Challenge

The district’s math acceleration was perceived as an asset by those students who participate in it. The walk-to-math model tiers instruction for students whose assessment scores and teacher recommendations indicate mastery of grade level content and aptitude to learn higher-level math content. Two fifth grade co-researchers are in sixth-grade math, and Ricky, who rides-to-math on a school bus to the middle school, is advanced by two grade levels. She describes being known by her middle school teacher and appreciates the individualization that comes with it, “They talk to me individually and say, 'Oh, you can do this add on' or something because I'm finished. They also know how to give me the right hardness or easiness of a worksheet." Being the only fifth-grade girl going to seventh-grade at the middle school makes Ricky feel unique and challenged.

Generally, math acceleration exists for advanced students in grades 3-5. Younger students, like Jeff and Diva Girl, relish opportunities to learn more challenging content, but must wait until they get home. Both expressed that the level of math instruction outside of school was ahead of their classroom instruction. Jeff, a second-grader says,

I don't learn anything new at school. It's all stuff I already know. I don't really know how to explain it. But, like my mom gives me harder math at home. We do multiplication and division at home and my mom tries to trick me. And, I like it because hard math is more exciting. And, here at school it's too easy.

Third-grade Diva Girl agrees with Jeff, and she says there is nothing challenging at school—math included. For Athena, who does feel academically nourished in her sixth-grade accelerated math class, she finds that the rest of her fifth-grade classroom experience too easy.

I want to learn something that I don't already know--and do something where I'm actually going to learn--not just copying off the board. And, I don't want it to be very boring either because I'm just going to read a book while you're talking.

“Reading is the best part of my day,” Books: An Alternative to the School Experience

Athena, Diva Girl, and Jeff are in agreement about how much they enjoy the experience of reading books at school. Diva Girl articulates, in great detail, what it is like for her when she reads.

In the world, there are different authors. They think of different things, and there are so many different choices. When I take a book, I just read it, and I just hop into their world. I'm in the story--watching. I'm invisible in the story, but it feels like I'm really there. They can't see me. They can't feel me, but I'm nearly touching them. I'm walking--not floating--but I'm sort of like a ghost. The characters never really notice me. That's OK. I wouldn't want to scare them. But, if I was a human character, I would want to talk with them. So far, it hasn't happened yet. In reading, it's like I have some sort of power. I can transport to places--amazing places. I've been to fairy tale lands, castles, dungeons, rogue forests, and even a concert. It was a boy band concert, and when they performed at least nine girls fainted. And, I was about to faint too, but I didn't. I never saw anything so amazing! I don't really get to go to concerts, so going to one in a book is actually exciting. Sometimes, I'm so into my book that when people call me, I don't even hear them. One time my class left without me for lunch!

This third-grader's narrative reveals an animated alternative lived experience that happens within the pages of a book. At school, Diva Girl immerses herself into a story—sensing,

feeling, and experiencing things so deeply that she is temporarily lost to reality and unaware of her lifeworld in the classroom.

Jakk reveals that the favorite time of his fifth-grade day is silent reading. He ties that activity to his identity, “It’s when I’m the most like myself at school. There’s always a chapter book or a graphic novel I like, and I imagine it all in my head.” Jeff, who claims he never learns anything new, also feels something when he reads at school. He offers a second-grade perspective.

At school, I am happy in the library because I get to check out creepy books. I’ve read four Goosebumps books and they are at the fourth-grade reading level. Each book has more than 20 chapters. It’s really exciting to be shocked. It just feels good.

Gifted students who do not feel challenged at school, do feel something profound when they read. They are stimulated and engaged in stories.

“She understood me, how I worked,” Being Understood

Brady is also a reader. Yet, his school experience has been hit-and-miss for other reasons. To him, being understood by his teacher means more than academic challenge, accelerated math, or being allowed to withdraw into a book. Brady’s success hinges on teacher placement. Now, in fourth grade, Brady reveals,

I always thought I was different from everybody else, even before I knew about TAG. Well, more strange than different. I guess it’s because I get distracted easily because my brain doesn’t focus. It just goes off and does other stuff. I start reading a book, start talking to my friend, or start playing with a little trinket under my desk. If I’m not interested in a subject or if I already know it, then I just do something else or bounce

around. At school, I really can't sit still. I'm always hippety-hoppetying from here to there, everywhere.

My first year in school was rough. Let's just say my kindergarten teacher wasn't really that nice to me. Thank goodness my first-grade teacher understood me. She let me move around, stay in from recess to help (and make her coffee), and show others how to do things. We had yoga balls and bean bags to sit on, and my teacher allowed me to wear my Healy shoes and swing my feet back and forth. They would just roll, and it helped me stay focused, so I wasn't getting shhh-ed. She understood me, how I worked, and that I couldn't stay focused on one subject for very long.

In person, Brady is thoughtful and gregarious, and his giftedness is accentuated by an undercurrent of engaging dry wit. His part of the one-on-one dialogue remains calm, focused, and on-topic. Brady maintains eye contact and even inserts appropriate parenthetical comments or questions, while he competes in a card game. In the classroom, however, Brady is disoriented and highly distracted, as is his disheveled work area. Giftedness for Brady comes with a need for allowances—for movement, for breaks, for accepting him as a different learner.

“I notice that people talk a lot,” Teacher Talk

While Brady needs latitude and individualization for his uniqueness, other gifted students must be patient and allow time and space for others in the classroom. The first question I asked in the initial interview was *what is it like to be you? What is it like to be gifted?* Ricky, a fifth-grader, responded with the following.

Well, the biggest part of being gifted is I notice that people talk a lot. Teachers just keep explaining and explaining and explaining things. We pretty much know the whole basic concept of the assignment, but they just keep talking. And, kids ask unnecessary questions

that the teacher already explained. Then it's another question about that same thing, and it just keeps on going.

The TAG teacher keeps explaining things too! She says we're gonna work on the project next week for the whole time. But, next time she explains it all over again. I also feel like our TAG group is starting to get bigger, and there's normally one or two people who aren't there. When they return, they don't know what to do so she just explains it again to the whole group.

It's like people keep talking and talking and nobody really cares--except that person who's talking. Sometimes I listen because someone might actually ask a good question. That doesn't happen very often. I think if you have a personal question, then you should just go ask the teacher instead of making the whole class keep hearing it. Or, you could try reading the directions. I just want to start already!

Ricky's passionate response appeared incongruent with her introverted and kind demeanor. In fact, this initial description was the only part of both interviews that seemed to hit a nerve. Within a moment, she pivoted with, "But, it's not the teacher's fault. She tries to make it quick, and they do have to help the whole class. I understand, and I just go with the flow." Still, giftedness for Ricky means a lot of teacher talk in a mixed-ability homeroom.

"Being walked without a leash," Freedom vs. Control

Ricky wants to start already, and that permission to release was also expressed by Jakk and Athena. Both are fifth graders who have felt restricted and controlled at school. Jakk mentions Art Literacy, recess, Friday lunch, and writing. His affinity for these activities seemed linked to the independence and latitude provided for him to think and make decisions for himself.

In the morning I always wish I could skip school. Although most of the time, I'm glad I didn't because I realize there's something awesome we get to do that day. Sometimes, it's Art Literacy, which is cool because there's a different artist every time. They don't repeat things like they do in other classes. I love that we're not forced to do exactly what the artist did. It's fun because we're not just copying a picture off the screen. We still have to do the same style, but we can draw whatever we want--most of the time.

Recess is fun because we get to do whatever we want, with whoever we want, and whenever we want. I like Friday lunch too because we can sit wherever we want, and just talk. Besides recess and Art Literacy, I like writing too because I usually get to write about whatever I want.

Contrasting reading and health activities to STEM and using a more figurative approach, Athena describes gifted life in elementary school like a dog on a leash.

Sometimes, we walk our dog up the hill to our bus stop. My dad lets Lucky go off the leash as long as he comes back. When my mom walks, she always uses the leash. Most days, school is like my mom walking. I don't get my dad a lot, like I'm being walked without a leash.

I mean I usually get stuff that I already know or it's too easy. In reading, we were doing Latin root words, but there was a chart on the screen. So, we just had to copy it. Same with the Health test. It's an 'open book' quiz so you just look it up and match it up. That might help some people, but not me. You don't even have to try that hard. You can literally look and find the direct answer!

Other times, I can be free to learn. Like in STEM class, you're kind of left to your devices and you can do whatever you want as long as you're learning. And, once you finish the

constructed activity, you can just mess around and find an idea and learn about it in ways you wouldn't if you were just following instructions. And, there's so many things that you don't even know about!? There's not really any boundaries or guidelines, and you can feel like your full potential.

I think I'm one of the only kids in my class who's not happy with how we're learning. They might be satisfied being on the leash. I'm not.

While speaking, Athena is animated and emotive as she speaks about STEM with anticipation and wonder. That freedom and breath of fresh air are contrasted with her emphatic jab at the guided, low-level cognitive classroom routines that suffocate bright children.

“I can get away from all the listening,” Talented and Gifted (TAG) Time

Brady also feels free outside the regular classroom. “I’m the happiest in two places—my old first-grade classroom and the TAG Room. TAG is one of the times that I can just get away from all the listening and do something that’s more me and less ‘school-ish.’” For some students, elementary classrooms can feel like hubs for listening and doing, and Brady admitted that the typical routines do not suit the way he learns, which he defined as building things, doing hands-on projects, and crafts. Brady continues, “I just like doing and making stuff.” For some, the TAG room is the place where things are built. Later, he confessed that he also loves TAG because he’s not stuck in his classroom during writing, and he usually tries as hard as he can to get out of writing. Therefore, the TAG time can be an attractant and also a way to avoid non-preferred classroom tasks.

Like Brady, TAG activities were seen as a positive for the gifted sample of students. Jakk looked forward to TAG time on Wednesdays, which would help motivate him and get him to school. Ricky noticed, however, that the size of the TAG group was increasing as the cohort of

students got older, which created challenges for efficiency and continuity. In addition to fun math games, the younger Diva Girl found TAG time to be relaxing. Jeff, who was fond of reading scary books, was in a group of four TAG students. He said, “I like going to TAG time because we get to play games, do crafts, and use the computers.”

Summary

In this chapter, six students each addressed the central question of this study by describing what it is like to be an intellectually gifted elementary student. Phenomenological descriptions emerged from a multi-faceted approach for building rapport and gathering data, thereby producing themes to analyze. The result was a mosaic composed of individual descriptions of unique lived experiences. Intellectually gifted elementary students from second- to fifth-grade in two different schools portrayed school as generally too easy and often tolerated tasks, peers, pacing, size of cohorts in TAG activities, and feeling controlled. When they did not experience learning or cognitive stimulation, students adapted to their environment by withdrawing into a novel, learning higher-level content at home, being patient, and concealing their frustration about the classroom’s inability to meet their needs.

Jakk declares, “It’s OK if something’s boring. I just need at least one fun thing each day to stay alive.” Themes, like fun for Jakk, surfaced from co-researchers’ expressed need for challenge, movement, choice, and individualization. Intellectually gifted elementary students do experience bright spots in their day or in their week. The co-researchers described opportunities for academic challenge (e.g., math acceleration), teachers who understood them, allowances for movement, and engaging and liberating enrichment classes like STEM, TAG, and Art Literacy.

This qualitative study shares reflective phenomenological themes that reveal lived experiences of intellectually gifted students’ in elementary school. These first-hand descriptions

also pointed to how their elementary school and classroom teachers might best support them. In the next chapter, the significance of these findings, implications for how they might impact professional practice, and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the intellectually gifted students' lived experiences in a suburban elementary school setting in the Pacific Northwest. The sample identified six students who served as co-researchers. Observations, close observations, and open-ended conversational interviews were used to collect first-hand accounts that reveal what it is like to be intellectually gifted in an elementary school. The collected data were sorted and analyzed thematically to develop phenomenological reflective descriptions. Chapter Four presented the six co-researchers' individual descriptions and grouped student experiences into five common themes.

Chapter Five summarizes the findings and compares individual and collective themes to the original research questions and previous literature. This chapter also discusses the implications of the results and conclusions of the research. The limitations of the study will also be provided, along with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Elementary educators strive to meet the needs of all students, including intellectually gifted students. By adding student voice and perspective, this study helps teachers and leaders develop a more well-rounded understanding of the challenges facing intellectually gifted students in today's elementary classrooms. The history of gifted education was reviewed, along with literature on organizational structures, classroom teacher practices, and how intellectually gifted students cope with their environment. The methodological approach combined traditional qualitative data collection methods with child-empowering participatory tools (Clark, 2011). Within the context of six visits, co-researcher interview transcripts were analyzed for meaning at whole story, separate paragraph, and at the sentence level. Lived experience descriptions were

collaboratively reduced to an anecdote or phenomenological reflective writing that was checked for accuracy against the research question by each participant.

Discussion

The key research question guiding this qualitative phenomenological study was: What is the nature of intellectually gifted students' experiences in elementary school? Two secondary questions were used to guide the study to answer the key research question.

What does a close study of intellectually gifted students' interactions in elementary school reveal about their experience? In this study, six intellectually gifted elementary participants shared their experiences. Each attended one of two elementary schools with identical structures that provided academic nourishment through accelerated math, STEM, Talented and Gifted (TAG) pull-out, and music. Enrichment opportunities also existed for students with Art Literacy, Lego Robotics, Battle of the Books, and Spelling and Geography Bees. During periods of instructional waiting or boredom, students chose to read silently, sketch, or talk with friends. Parents supplemented their children's school experience with tutoring, additional higher-level math at home, grade skipping.

On the surface these intellectually gifted students acted like their peers in the school. They were compliant, enjoyed the company of many friends, and had a clean disciplinary record. Although participants were at the top end of the gifted range, both elementary schools had an ample number of students in the TAG program to support a culture of understanding and acceptance and a connection to intellectual peers (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012). Contrary to the findings in several studies, participants did not feel their school was socially stigmatizing nor did they describe any behaviors to mask their gifted abilities (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012; Gross 1998). Each

described bright spots in their school life when they were academically nourished. Each co-researcher's overall experience hinged on variables unique to their homeroom placement, teacher practices, and the classroom environment; all of which changed each school year. This aligned with research on gifted students' lived experiences, which differs based on the context and how they are treated as students (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015). When prompted for their phenomenological truth as part of this study, however, other layers emerged.

Students revealed recurring feelings of frustration, missed opportunities, and constraint within a system generally suited for everyone else. These six intellectually gifted students shared a profound hunger to learn, to be understood by their teachers, and to participate in compelling experiences with higher-level thinking. Their elementary descriptions paralleled claims that schools often do not meet the academic needs of intellectually gifted children (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Grgich, 2009; Gubbels, Segers & Verhoeven, 2014; Hollingworth, 1930; Olenchak, 2001; Persson, 2010; Silverman, 1989). Sampled students were given an Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT) by the school district to determine initial eligibility for gifted services. Athena, Ricky, and Brady all scored in the 99th percentile on the OLSAT. Although percentiles cannot be easily cross-walked to Hollingworth's IQ cut scores, students likely fall into either *Moderately Gifted* or *Highly Gifted* categories of intelligence, being two or more standard deviation units above the mean of the instrument (Gross, 2000; Schultz, 2018). According to Hollingworth, students at that level have difficulty in average classrooms and, in the extreme, waste their time at school (Silverman, 1989). This was echoed by Ricky, a fifth-grader who reflected on her six-and-a-half hour school day. "Some days we don't actually learn anything new. If we do learn something new, then it's probably about 15 minutes."

Most participants agreed with Ricky. They indicated that classroom activities were not challenging and they did not learn much at school. Student perceptions may have been accurate if gifted learners were well ahead of their chronological age and already knew 40-60% of the subject matter (Delisle, 2002). Interestingly, claims of boredom, expressed frustration, and demands to learn something new appeared stronger and more intense from participants with the top OLSAT percentile scores. I observed this with Athena who threatened to tune out the boring teacher with a book and later emphatically exclaimed, “Everything is too easy or I don’t want to do it!” Her declaration aligned with Hollingworth’s claim (Silverman, 1989), while Jeff calmly and matter-of-factly said “It’s all stuff I already know.” These similar statements with contrasting emotions may point to a difference in the range of exceptionality (Gross, 1999; Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). Jeff’s acceptance and toleration of the school experience may have been indicative of a small, but noteworthy one-point percentile difference when compared to Athena. Jeff is also three years younger, which raised the question: does academic malnourishment and frustration accumulate over time? In other words, after continuing in the same school for three more years, will Jeff express stronger Athena-like statements in fifth-grade?

The context for the claims of boredom or frustration matter. Ricky appeared to accept some homeroom classroom situations better. Her dominant gift (i.e., math) was supported daily by an organizational structure that provided a subject-based two-grade level acceleration and an advanced placement at the middle school. Ricky was with intellectual peers who were chronologically older (Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). This routine aligned with recommendations for heterogeneous classes with regrouping for selected subjects and/or grade levels (Neihart et al., 2002; Slavin, 1987).

In contrast, Athena's primary gifted area and passion, language arts and reading, may have gone unaddressed by heterogeneous (i.e., mixed-ability) classroom activities and attempts to provide in-class differentiation or structures for intellectually gifted learners. Differentiation for top-end learners is rare (Olenchak, 2001). In this case, tiered literacy instruction or tailored assignments may have been implemented intermittently, less frequently, or unsuccessfully for atypical students (Beisser, 2008; Young & Balli, 2014). Athena, who admitted that she does not handle ordinary school routines very well, might benefit from literacy instruction on an individualized or personal level, which, according to one study, happens in only 3% of districts (Olenchak, 2001). Group differentiation, not personal-level differentiation, was the norm for co-researchers in this study.

When school life did not provide intellectual stimulation, participants often shifted to an engaging alternative—reading a book. Fictional and imaginary lived experiences prevailed over unsatisfying school routines that, as Diva Girl described, are “easy and never challenging.” Halsted (2009) touched on this dilemma and contrasted the down and up times for gifted children. Bright students learned how to stretch the excitement that came from a full engagement of their giftedness, while adapting to long periods of down times (Halsted, 2009). For some participants, like Diva Girl and Jeff, books provided a satisfying “up” in a school environment that did not provide enough stimulation.

Athena admitted she reads most of the time. She used books as an alternative to the Language Arts and Reading activities in the classroom. When asked about her current book, she spiritedly described *Tangerine* in rich detail—characters, setting, plot, subtle details, weather, relationships—and she made connections from the story to her own life. Athena and Diva Girl both described getting required work done quickly so they could have time to simply read by

themselves. For others, books and stories went a bit deeper. Jakk said silent reading was the best part of his fifth-grade day—when he felt the most like himself. Silent reading, in contrast to reading assignments, also provided him the freedom to choose what he read. Further still, Diva Girl and Jeff immersed themselves in stories at a profound level. Both felt and experienced things as the characters do, often getting a rush of emotions from fantasy, horror, and realistic fiction.

In this research, and without prompt, five of the six students described a deep connection with books. Brady also wrestled with the academic challenge, “If I’m not interested in a subject or if I already know it, then I just do something else.” He confessed his difficulty with listening and focusing on the ‘school-ish’ routines in the classroom, often finding himself in a book. For Brady, reading was avoidance and choosing a more compelling activity. For his favorite teacher, working with a distractible student, built-in reading breaks were used as an effective strategy during a long block of work time. This small accommodation created more ideal conditions that can lead to positive changes for a twice-exceptional learner (Winebrenner, 2018).

What do their interactions reveal about how an elementary school might best support them? In the context of this study, effective classroom teachers competed for the attention of gifted students. And, it took some targeted and individualized effort to win. In recounting their experiences, participants agreed that some elementary teachers were successful. Generally, however, these co-researchers admitted that they did not learn much at school. Intellectually gifted children flew under the radar because they consistently performed well, demanded little, and appeared content. Standout teachers possessed an acute awareness and saw these students as outliers with unique needs, and co-researchers were exuberant in their praise of such teachers.

Broadly, the district dedicated resources and had systems in place for Talented and Gifted (TAG) children. Beyond a process for screening, identification, and determining eligibility, gifted students had access to a half-time TAG Coordinator, weekly pull-out TAG activities, math acceleration and placement with advanced peers, enrichment, weekly STEM lab activities, use of technology in the classroom, and a positive school culture. These school structures provided a foundation for supporting gifted students. From an intellectually gifted child's lens, however, stimulating experiences were infrequent and described as gasps of fresh air between long periods of holding their breath.

TAG Coordinators seemed to know their clientele well. Their dynamic role was organizational, provided for pull-out activities, and attempted to build the capacity of teachers to meet the needs of gifted students daily in the classroom. Instead of the gifted experience being a series of intermittent highlights with TAG pull-outs, the STEM lab, and monthly Art Literacy enrichment, these coordinators admitted they wanted TAG to be “the air gifted students breathe” all day long. In other words, they did not want to be viewed solely as interventionists or the exclusive outsourcing destination for gifted students. Rather, TAG Coordinators also wanted to empower classroom teachers to develop lesson plan books that reflected daily differentiation, acceleration, and enrichment.

Despite the intention, an outsourcing mindset was still prevalent in these elementary schools where the TAG Coordinator role still exists. One administrator overheard a classroom teacher responding to a parent's question about the program for gifted students, “TAG is on Thursdays at 10:30 a.m.” This statement may have revealed a school ethos at the root of the participants' classroom experience. That is, was there an underlying disconnect or misunderstanding about gifted students, their atypical needs, and whose responsibility it was to

serve them? Classroom teachers did not absolve themselves from meeting gifted students' needs. Yet, according to the participants' descriptions, teachers taught to the majority and underestimated the depth of classroom individualization required to nourish intellectually gifted students' academic appetites.

Still, students genuinely liked their classroom teachers and conceded that they were "trying to do their job" (Ricky). In a system where classroom teachers are responsible for so much, gifted participants did have some suggestions for meeting the needs of gifted students in the classroom. When prompted about one thing she could change about her school, Athena said,

I know the teacher can't give you each individual assignments based on how you learn stuff. Since I feel like some things aren't challenging me, specialize a little bit of it. Like everyone has a baseline okay. Take a survey. Make it a little different based on what everyone needs, and then you can, like, go at your own pace, a little.

Acknowledging the limitations and challenges, Athena suggests coupling a pre-test with differentiated assignments. Sounding a little like her soccer coach, she saw an opportunity for individualization and tailored independent practice. Her description matched evidenced-based practices outlined in the National Association of Gifted Children's Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards (2010). Standard 3.1.6 recommended educators "use pre-assessments and pace instruction based on learning rates of students with gifts and talents and accelerate and compact learning as appropriate." Standard 3.1.4 directed the use of challenging, complex, and differentiated content with gifted students. Both standards, if applied, could have changed the classroom experience and provided a different learning experience for this study's gifted students.

Implications

In a public-school setting, intellectually gifted students are outliers who wade through a system designed for average intelligence (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015; Gross, 1998). These top percentile participants talked about what it is like to endure common activities. Their lived experience descriptions and themes may influence how intellectually gifted students can be served in elementary schools. These findings have implications for four different stakeholders: (a) District and building administration, (b) Classroom teachers, (c) Families, and (d) Intellectually gifted children.

District and Building Administration

This study's elementary schools intentionally allocated local and district resources to developed school structures to serve intellectually gifted students. Participants benefitted from academic acceleration, ability-grouping, enrichment opportunities, weekly pull-out Talented and Gifted (TAG) activities, access to a STEM lab, in-class technology, contests, clubs, and an option for grade skipping. As a foundation, districts should provide similar school structures. Pull-outs for TAG and STEM allow for weekly opportunities for a break from the usual, and, as Brady said, "[getting] away from all the listening and do something that's more me—less school-ish." If these opportunities are not in place, administrators should advocate on behalf of highly intelligent students and secure resources to deliver these elements of gifted programming. The option to tap into parent volunteers to provide monthly Art Literacy enrichment would cost little but provide high yield for this study's participants. If resources exist, districts should fund a part-time or full-time gifted coordinator. By doing so, students would receive services from an understanding gifted specialist, and classroom teachers could increase their capacity to plan for daily gifted instruction.

While TAG services, structures, and strategies should be reflected in school budgets, the conversation should move beyond the adults and invite voices of gifted students (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015; Delisle, 2012; Prior, 2011). Surveys, interviews, or focus groups of TAG students could yield feedback that shed light on the program's effectiveness, help administrators reflect on classroom practices, guide professional development, and influence changes that better serve gifted children. From the students' lens, principals and directors could see if the district is getting a return on its investments. Finally, if shared, the student data and descriptions may also foster an empathic stance from educators who may inadvertently overlook TAG students because of their strong classroom performance.

Without systemic changes that reflect the needs described by intellectually gifted students, their overall year-long experiences will likely depend on homeroom teacher placement (Coleman, Micko & Cross, 2015). In co-researchers' accounts, classroom teachers skilled in gifted pedagogy were atypical and intermittent throughout participants' school careers. Therefore, elementary principals need to carefully consider classroom rosters and pair gifted students with teachers whose practices provide opportunities for independent, challenging, and active learning (Renzulli, 2000).

Administrators may also consider a cluster grouping model for gifted students in heterogeneous or mixed-ability classrooms (Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011). Grouping creates instructional efficiencies and more consistent attention on gifted learners. Placing a group of gifted students together in the same homeroom provides regular proximity with equivalent peers, the potential for a full-time positive experience, and acceptance by classmates (Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011; Grgich, 2009; Hoge & Renzulli, 2008; Neihart, 2007; Morris, 2013; Neihart & Yeo, 2018). This cluster grouping model is not without its challenges, and there are many

variations. Principals must do their research, carefully consider the range of skills on each roster, anticipate perceptions by stakeholders, maintain the model's momentum schoolwide, and ensure that challenging instruction is, in fact, happening (Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011).

Differentiation and planning for effective individualized instruction are time-intensive for classroom teachers, and a district's strong foundation of TAG services, structures, and strategies may undermine a wholesale embrace of such individualization practices by the classroom teacher. In other words, a teacher may think that gifted services are being handled by a specialist or coordinator (i.e., outside the classroom). Yet, most of a gifted student's time is in the classroom, and they are craving learning experiences that are as unique as they are. Therefore, district and school leaders should provide professional development and expect that in-classroom gifted pedagogical practices become the norm. With that evaluative push and support, elementary teachers can create an inviting homeroom with compelling daily experiences where intellectually gifted students do not feel they must leave the classroom to feel alive, engaged, and free to learn.

Classroom Teachers

While many teachers see gifted students as alike (Gross, 1999; Olenchak, 2001), half the participants in this study identified a specific educator and expressed rich and enthusiastic descriptions of being understood—the time, the feeling, and the meaning of being recognized as a unique individual with distinct strengths, needs, and interests. Although his School Enrichment Model (SEM) was not used by the district, these bright spot teachers' employed practices were congruent with Renzulli's four principles: learner's uniqueness, enjoyment, context of real problem, and formal instruction to enhance knowledge (2000). Celebrated teachers saw participants as individuals and made adjustments to engage them academically.

About her fifth-grade homeroom teacher, Ricky said, “My teacher is amazing! She knows me—my way of learning and how I do things.” About her seventh-grade advanced math teacher she continued, “I like that she talks to me individually and says, ‘Oh, you can add this on’ or something because I’m finished.” Within the district structure of math acceleration, it still took a skilled teacher to individualize the learning experience. These descriptions highlight teachers’ ability to carefully design instruction and positive academic experiences for gifted students (Delcourt, Cornell & Goldberg, 2007).

Athena, who was not part of the half who described having an understanding teacher, did grasp the concept. Instead of identifying a teacher, she perked up and named a soccer coach. “He’s pushing us to do better and he’s always upping the expectations. We always are up to the challenge.” Athena described personal goals, drills, and an individualized report card outlining her skill development and trajectory. She transitioned back to the classroom setting by suggesting her teacher “maybe personalize it a little more and try pushing us up to our full abilities.” An elite soccer player also wanted to be challenged like an elite learner. Athena described the ideal learning environment—the individualization and understanding Ricky experienced in math. Without being thoughtfully and deliberately nourished by a teacher, a highly gifted student, like Athena, may develop intensified feelings of frustration, isolation, or contempt (Gross, 1998).

The district-supported foundation of gifted school services—outside the classroom—was not sufficient to counter students’ frustrating experiences in the heterogeneous, mixed-ability homeroom, which comprised the majority of their time in school. Classroom teachers should listen to students like Athena whose experiences and advice beg teachers to challenge and individualize instruction for them. Delisle (2012) reiterates the call for educators to listen to

students, our “best barometers to tell us what works and what does not” (p. 63). His suggestions, based on three decades of working with gifted children, makes it easy for teachers to remember with his “5 Cs”—control, complexity, common bonds, choice, caring teachers (Delisle, 2012). Of his five, “complexity” in the classroom stands out as a key ingredient to counter co-researchers’ claims of boredom in the classroom environment.

Gifted students also expressed annoyance and found alternatives to inconsequential chatter in the classroom. The concept of teacher talk appeared to link with waiting, and, in a general education classroom setting with a range of abilities, waiting is common. In a 2010 study, Peine analyzed student data about “instructional waiting” that matched well with the co-researchers’ descriptions of wait time. With the exception of accelerated math placements, gifted co-researchers found classroom instruction repetitious, uninspiring, and regularly covering skills or material they already knew. Instructional waiting continued with concept review and classmates asking obvious questions that, as Ricky explained, “keeps making it longer and longer. Then, the teacher gets more into that, to keep talking. It’s another question about that. It just keeps going.” In all settings, gifted students lamented the inefficiency before finally being released to work on the task. Consequently, teachers should pay close attention to gifted students during instruction, releasing them to work when re-teaching runs long or when absent students return (Peine, 2010).

One way teachers demonstrated their understanding of Brady was by providing accommodations for him. He learned the same material, but he got built-in reading breaks. In great detail, he specifically described two teachers who recognized his uniqueness, discovered how he worked, and made individualized allowances for him to maintain momentum, focus, and complete his work. Brady shared self-aware statements like, “My brain doesn’t focus. My brain

just goes off and does other stuff.” To be understood by an adult may have kindled a partnership with a teacher that lasted a whole school year, as affirmed by follow-up anecdotes (e.g., “She was so nice,” “She understood me,” and “I wasn’t getting shhh-ed!”). Teachers can make adjustments for gifted students and those who are twice-exceptional—or 2e—by creating personalized flexible agreements that integrate subtle supports tailored for specific challenges and strengths (Coleman & Gallagher, 2015). Brady’s descriptions revealed the significance of both the relationship and the negotiated accommodations. These could be kindled by any educator who simply asks, “how am I doing as your teacher? Is there anything I can do to make school better for you?” The responses and views of gifted children may intensify teacher empathy, influence classroom practices, and show an individualized interest in them.

Families

This study offers several considerations for parents and families of gifted children. Families can host conversations with their children and the school about academic options. For example, knowing she was a bright five-year old, Diva Girl’s parents consulted with the preschool teacher and the school and enrolled her directly into first grade. Skipping kindergarten accelerated her academics and may have shortened her K-12 experience (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). Her current performance, maturity, and expressed lived experience in elementary school confirmed the decision to skip kindergarten and to enroll in first grade was a wise one for her. Even now, while being the youngest student in the classroom, Diva Girl may benefit from another year of academic acceleration. Diva Girl confessed she passes notes in class “telling my friend how easy this stuff is.” With few intellectual peers and little academic engagement in the public school, her parents put her on a waiting list for a private school as an option to nourish her academic aptitude—another choice within their control.

Families should be empowered to understand that there are no off-limits topics when it comes to discussing their child's experience with their classroom teachers. This includes if the child is disillusioned with school, complains that assignments are too easy, or asks for acceleration or to skip a grade. School/home collaboration can help improve the situation or make it clear whether dynamic solutions should be considered (e.g., grade skipping or a placement change). If parents of a gifted child believe their child's academic needs are being neglected and no common ground can be reached with the classroom teacher or TAG Coordinator, then parents should contact the principal.

Great resources are available for parents at the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), including tips on how to work with schools (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). That NAGC page begins by recommending that parents of gifted students "talk with your child about exactly what happens in the classroom and what she might like to see change," and then the site describes a sequence of steps for advocacy (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.).

Intellectually Gifted Students

The participants of this study were generally perceived by teachers and peers as being positive, friendly, and smart. The climate for intellectually gifted students was promoted and normalized by two things: plenty of Talented and Gifted (TAG) students and school structures that supported them. Students enjoyed the pull-outs, clubs, activities, and contests that were associated with being in the program. Math acceleration, enrichment, Art Literacy, and the STEM lab also helped students feel intellectually stimulated. Lived experience descriptions, however, also revealed frustration with the lack of academic challenge and instructional waiting.

This study also points to the ways intellectually gifted students concealed their feelings and adapted within elementary homerooms. The participants described blending in and waiting. Ricky described the habit of remaining patient and dismissed the idea of saying something to the teacher because it would have been awkward. She followed with, “it’s not that big of a deal.” Athena would disagree. Yet, both remained silent and kept their frustrations inside. Most adapted to the situation by reading books. Diva Girl, who often plunged into books said, “sometimes, I’m so into my book that when people call me, I don’t even hear them. One time my class left without me for lunch!”

In the safety of the study, participants described how they tolerated instruction and revealed strong opinions about their elementary classroom environments. The next step is self-advocacy. Standing up for oneself is not easy for elementary students, so an alternative may be to talk with a parent, TAG Coordinator, teacher, or a former teacher and have them advocate on their behalf. That still might not happen because these students were compliant and agreeable. When pressed if she would reveal how frustrated or annoyed she was, Ricky said with a giggle, “Probably not. I don’t get that annoyed!”

Delimitations

The setting of this study was limited to a suburban public school in the Pacific Northwest. The sample was focused to two elementary schools within the same district. Therefore, no middle or high schoolers participated. This phenomenological study’s sample included six students who met the district’s eligibility requirements for the category of *intellectually gifted* (i.e., not *academically talented* in reading or math). Therefore, these students do not represent all elementary students identified as Talented and Gifted (TAG) in the district. Purposeful sampling further reduced intellectually gifted participants to those who had been in the school’s TAG

program for at least two years, which naturally excluded kindergarten and first-grade students. The sample ranged from second-grade to fifth-grade. The researcher deliberately secured a balance of girls and boys, as well as a diverse composition that represented the school district's demographics.

Recommendations for Future Research

As Coleman, Micko & Cross state, gifted students' lived experience needs more attention (2015). A longitudinal exploration of the cumulative effect of academic malnourishment or frustration over time would be useful in offering further insight into what intellectually gifted kids experience. In other words, after marinating in the same school setting for three more years, might second-grade Jeff express stronger Athena-like statements when he is in fifth-grade? Also, researchers could measure the intensity of such student frustration and compare it to percentile ranking to see if it also parallels. This could help offer insight into whether *highly gifted* students' descriptions of lived experiences are the same or different than *moderately gifted* students.

This study also leads me to wonder whether deeply-held academic frustration and misunderstandings by intellectually gifted students can be discovered and addressed to such an extent that their full potential is restored. Of the vast number of strategies and approaches available to classroom teachers, research should help determine which are most successful at addressing a gifted student's feelings about school and redeeming their classroom experience. Finally, teachers are overwhelmed with the range of needs they must support. A future study could examine the effectiveness of short, individual conversations with TAG students that provide acknowledgement of giftedness, develop empathy for the gifted child, and draw out the

voice of children; all small steps that may change the culture of the classroom and support bright students.

Summary

The researcher and co-researchers surfaced and presented descriptions of what it was like to be them. Talented and Gifted (TAG) pullouts, STEM lab activities, enrichment, and math advancement provided opportunities for academic challenge. The bulk of general homeroom classroom instruction, however, was characterized as boring, not challenging, and marked by instructional waiting. Participants admitted to completing tasks quickly to shift to silent reading, which, for some, provided a more compelling experience than classroom activities designed for the majority. Intellectually gifted students perceived differentiation in the classroom as inconsequential, and sensed that teachers did not likely comprehend the extent of their gifts nor their frustration with homeroom academic instruction. Most students, however, felt understood at some point in their elementary years. All had positive social interactions and found no social stigma in being gifted. The voices of these gifted children should help influence system improvements, guide professional development, and foster an empathic stance from educators who may inadvertently overlook TAG students because of their strong classroom performance. Intellectually gifted students are eager to tell how they are doing and what educators could do to serve them better.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Page 7

Title: A Phenomenological Study of Gifted Elementary

Principal Researcher(s): Frank Luzaich

Date application completed: November 11, 2019

(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)

COMMITTEE FINDING:

For Committee Use Only

(1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.

(2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the HSRC on a _____ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.

(3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:

(4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.



Chair or designated member

11/27/19

Date

APPENDIX B: Consent Form

Letter of Consent for Student Participation in Study

Dear Families,

My name is Frank Luzaich and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. As a requirement of the program, I will be conducting research and have chosen to describe the life experiences of intellectually gifted elementary students—each from two different schools. Your student is invited to become a co-researcher in this study by sharing his or her experiences with me through an interview and a series of participatory activities. In total, I will visit the school approximately six times to observe and meet with your child.

Details of the Study

This study will include a classroom observation, four close observations (e.g., game play, art, drawing, photography, memory box artifact discussion), a 30-minute conversational interview, and follow-up member checks to confirm the accuracy of themes and descriptions that emerge from our discussions. As a co-researcher, draft research findings and writing will be shared with your child with a focus on the question: “Is this what it’s really like to be an intellectually gifted student?”

Benefits

This study seeks to illuminate what it is like to be intellectually gifted in an elementary school. Surfacing children’s perspectives, understanding the ways they perceive and interpret their environments, and ascribing meaning to their giftedness may reveal what matters to them and how best to support them. The literature and research in this area is rather limited because many of the accounts of being gifted are told by adults or are not rooted in a first-hand expression of the child’s lifeworld. While your child’s identity will remain anonymous, the essence of a participant’s experiences will be told with honesty. This is a chance for educational researchers and leaders to hear a unique perspective and to learn from a child’s experiences as a gifted elementary student.

Compensation

Your child will not receive any compensation for participation in this study. However, at the end of the study, I would like to present each co-researcher with a small token of appreciation for their participation and partnership in this study.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study. Your child’s identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (fake names), pseudo places, and sufficiently generic descriptions of the location and demographics (e.g., suburban public school district in the Pacific Northwest). Interview transcripts, my writing, and any collected data will be kept protected in locked file storage—for both analog and password-protected digital files. This information, as well as all audio recordings, will be destroyed within two years of the end of the study.

Risks

The risks associated with a child participating in this qualitative research study are minimal. Students will be asked a variety of questions to understand what it is like to be intellectually gifted. Some of the open-ended questions could stir up uncomfortable memories or feelings about their school experience or fitting in within it (e.g., "Have you ever wished you could skip school?" "If you could change one thing about your school, what would that be?") There could also be some inconvenience if my research visits require a student to complete or make-up missed assignments. Please be aware that your child's participation is completely voluntary and he or she may decline to answer any question, withdraw assent, or discontinue participation in this study at any time without.

Use of Study

The results of this study will be used for dissertation and research purposes. If you are interested in seeing the final results, I would be happy to provide you an electronic copy of the study upon completion.

Other Information

The matters relating to this study can be directed to Frank Luzaich at fluzach@gmail.com or my Dissertation Co-Chairs, Gary Sehorn at gsehorn@georgefox.edu or Karen Buchanan at kbuchana@georgefox.edu

Consent

If you grant permission for your child to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Parent Name: _____

Parent Signature: _____

Date: _____

I agree that my child can be digitally recorded:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Student Name: _____

Student Signature: _____

Date: _____

I agree to be digitally recorded:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C: Key Informant Confidentiality Agreement

Key Informant Confidentiality Agreement

Researcher: Frank Luzaich

Key Informant: _____

Thank you for agreeing to be a key informant of my study. As a key informant of this study you may have access to confidential information about study sites and possible participants. It will be important that you hold any information you offer me in confidence, in order to comply with IRB requirements to assure participants' confidentiality.

By signing this statement, you are indicating your understanding of your responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

*The names and any other identifying information about study sites and teachers are completely confidential.

*Agree not to divulge, publish, or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the course of this study.

*Understand that you should not read information about study sites or possible participants, nor ask questions of teachers for your own personal information.

*Agree to notify the researcher immediately should you become aware of an actual breach of confidentiality or a situation which could potentially result in a breach, whether this be on your part or on the part of another person.

Consent

If you understand and agree to participate in this study, please sign your name next to the following item:

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D: Interview Questions

The following introduction and open-ended questions are listed. Follow-up prompts are meant to continue the conversation, encourage storytelling, and discover the lifeworld of the student. During the introduction, I will wait for consent for the four initial questions (consent to record, assent to continue, request for clarifying questions).

Introduction

Today, we're going to take about 30 minutes to talk about what it's like to be you. I will use my phone and this device to record our conversation. Is that OK with you? (pause) As we discussed before, each time we get together, I want to ask your permission to continue as co-researcher in this study. Do you still want to continue with this project? (pause) I also want you to know that you have the option of not answering a question. Do you understand that you can decline to answer or skip questions? (pause) Do you have any questions before we begin? (pause) As we talk, I will be doing a lot of listening and I may be making a few notes in my journal.

Questions, Starters

What is it like to be you?

As a unique and special person, where are you most like yourself?

At school, when have you been most like yourself?

Tell me about your best day ever at Westside Elementary? (pseudonym)

What is it like to be a TAG student at Westside Elementary? (pseudonym)

Have you ever wished you could skip school?

If you could change one thing about your school, what would that be?

If you could say something about school that you've kept to yourself, what would that be?

Tell me about a time you felt supported as a TAG student at school?

Tell me about a time you didn't feel supported as a TAG student at school?

What is something you like about being really smart?

What is something you don't like about being really smart?

Follow-Up Prompts, Transitions

As someone who really wants to know, I am turning to you for the answers.

Tell me more.

Why?

Can you give an example?

What was that like?

How did that feel?

Objectives, Reminder to the Researcher

Assume a beginner's mindset, create comfort, honor the interviewee, use humility, do not suggest answers, and be neutral. Try to get the co-researcher to describe things from the inside out, as it were, a state-of-mind: the feelings, the mood, the emotions. Focus on an example or an anecdote that stands out for its vividness. Follow up to develop the experience (e.g., *how it felt, things smelled, how it sounded that day*). Going back a prior statement could help re-start a conversation that may be stalling (van Manen, 2016).

Silence is OK. "Out of this space of silence a more reflective response often may ensue than if we try to fill the awkwardness of the silence with comments or questions that amount to little more than chatter" (van Manen, 2016, p. 112).