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Pursuit of high academic growth for gifted middle level learners

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

THE PURSUIT OF HIGH ACADEMIC GROWTH
FOR GIFTED MIDDLE LEVEL LEARNERS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Linda Elizabeth Pfeiffer

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
School of Special Education
Special Education

December 2013

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This Dissertation by: Linda Elizabeth Pfeiffer

Entitled: *The Pursuit of High Academic Growth for Middle Level Learners*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in
College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the School of Special Education,
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ABSTRACT

Pfeiffer, Linda Elizabeth. *The Pursuit of Academic Growth for Gifted Middle Level Learners*. Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2013.

The purpose of this study was to build an understanding of what should be present in schools to meet the academic growth needs of gifted middle-level learners. In times of financial difficulty it is important that educators find ways to meet the needs of all students while afforded little resources to do so. While understandable that finances be provided for struggling students, it should not be at the expense of those who come to school with content mastery already achieved but still eager to learn new material.

The results of this study indicate that meeting the academic, high growth needs of gifted learners (and others) is basically a cost neutral focus on five, non-prioritized areas. First, programming that puts core content at the forefront, with high expectations for academics and behaviors, carried out with excellent differentiated instruction by content teachers who have autonomy in what they teach and how they teach it. A second area is leadership that follows a coaching model and trusts in the professional ability of the teachers. Third is school culture, as results indicate that positivity and happiness is contagious and sets the stage for student growth. The final two areas are small schools and the teachers themselves. Small schools foster trust and relationships among the greater community, while teachers in these high growth schools are dedicated and passionate people who will do whatever it takes to ensure that *all* students are successful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Reaching this milestone is a result of more than the hours and work put into it. It is collaborative and the influences of people who touch our lives all work together to make us who we are and build in us the ability to achieve great things. Each plays an equal but different role and thus I will not attempt to place an hierarchy on the list of people to which I own a debt of gratitude thus the following is not ordered by importance but is instead organized as best fits the format.

First I will acknowledge my amazing committee. As a whole, my committee was tough but I would have wanted them to be no other way. I appreciate that they pushed me to the level of high expectation that I now know is consistent with what must exist to achieve high growth. Dr. Omdal – Stuart, my friend since the days of my Master’s degree who picked me up countless times as I doubted myself and my ability to finish. Even picking up after taking a hiatus from the project can be, at least partially, attributed to Dr. Omdal who encouraged me to get back on the horse and finish the ride.

Dr. Harvey Rude, who has been a friend and advocate for me, has always had a smile that encouraged me to get through the tough times, and I will always remember how he put me at ease as I came back and sought his blessing to return to my doctoral pursuit. Dr. Sandy Bowen was the committee member that I knew least going into the final stages of this process but whom I feel a kinship with knowing that she too is a parent fighting the good fight for her gifted child. I hope the results of this research

provide what you need to make good decisions for your beautiful daughter. Last but not least, Dr. Linda Vogel. As director of the Educational Leadership department, I appreciate your willingness to work with me to achieve this goal. I know you are overbooked most of the time and the fact that you were willing to honor my request to serve on my committee spoke to me of your belief in me. Believing in ones students is again an element that leads to success for students, as indicated in this study. To each of you; I am forever in your debt and hope that the relationships begun through this journey will carry us to future opportunities and collaborations.

Next I must acknowledge my phenomenal family. Not just my immediate family but my extended family as well. My mom made this a bigger deal than it is but that's what moms are for. My sister showed excitement for this even if she had no real idea what I was talking about and then volunteered to be an editor as I threw things together for my proposal. My in-laws supported and were cheerleaders for me, giving me time, space, and meals to get through the process. You are so appreciated...words cannot express.

Next, in acknowledgement of immediate family is a paragraph that could last pages. The words on the paper cannot hope to express the pride and gratitude I have for my three sons; Karl, Glen and Ryan. These three were the catalyst for this journey as it was so very important to me as a young parent to provide the very best possible education for my children. Through the likes of my mentor Shadi Letson (to whom I owe so much!), I was able to make sure that my boys did get a good education but it became my motivation to get my degrees to help other parents to find the best educational opportunities for their children as well. Finally, my husband. As I complete this

Dissertation, I have just completed 27 years of marriage to this man who has provided me the opportunity to follow my dreams. I cannot count the number of nights he's made supper or the number of times he has been the recipient of short replies when my head is in a paper and not tolerating 'irrelevant' conversation. You are appreciated and loved.

In summary, this milestone is a result of the love of family and friends who have believed in me and my ability to climb the wall. It is the love and support of my dad that passed before this plan was even conceived but has been with me throughout the process – I have felt you pushing and thank you for that - and the love and support of my grandmother who passed during the process of this project, having shared with me her quest for a doctoral degree that she never completed. Her mention of not completing her degree became my challenge and sometimes it is challenges that motivate. I also appreciate the dedication of all of those people who have touched my life over the last (almost) decade and who have supported me in the quest for understanding. These are the friends whom I started this journey with in my Master's Degree process and the colleagues and students that have reminded me daily of the need to always advocate for gifted learners' needs. Big things are never accomplished in isolation and I can never adequately repay those who were my arms and legs – the arms that stayed beside me and the legs that supported me – when I doubted my ability to finish. I am forever grateful to all.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 20th century and thus far into the 21st, attention to the needs of the gifted and talented learner in the United States public school system has ebbed and flowed. Unfortunately, gifted education is currently experiencing a severe drought of attention as the expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) continue to pull resources and attention from the needs of the gifted learner. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched the satellite Sputnik, which caused the U.S. to question the quality of education, especially in the areas of math and science. In effect, we are in a similar place in 2013 as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) focus schools are popping up in many school districts. These schools are not designed for gifted learners however, and although the desired effect of making the U.S. more competitive in these fields is laudable, they do not directly serve to meet the academic or social and emotional needs of the gifted population, nor do they serve the non-academic gifted learner, those identified in the arts, leadership, or creative arenas. Although the demands of NCLB have focused attention on students needing to meet proficiency, they have brought forth accountability for all children and the tools that have the potential to help us determine what is truly working for all students, including gifted learners.

The first federal involvement in gifted education came about in 1958 with the passing of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), a year after the launch of Sputnik. Section 101 of the act stated, in part:

The Congress hereby finds and declares that the security of the nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women. The present emergency demands that additional and more adequate opportunities be made available (National Defense Education Act (NDEA), Public Law No. 85-864, Section 101, 1958).

The 85th Congress was dealing with a perceived threat, perhaps no different than the threat apparent through the proliferation of nuclear weapons being acquired and readied by the North Koreans in 2013, yet the federal government does not appear to feel that providing resources for gifted and high ability learners is in any way a short- nor long-term solution as, some 55 years later, all funding for gifted education, from the federal government has been eliminated.

The 85th Congress also went on to indicate support for the need to

“increase our efforts to identify and educate more of the talent of our Nation. This requires programs that will give assurance that no student of ability will be denied an opportunity for higher education because of financial need; will correct as rapidly as possible the existing imbalance in our education programs...” (NDEA, Public Law No. 85-864, Section 101, 1958, p. 1581).

While today we still struggle to find ways to increase the numbers of students from under-represented populations identified for programming within gifted education, we also mold our schools and teachers to the idea of a “one-size-fits-all” attitude of preparing all students for college. Meanwhile, the programs for high ability learners are eliminated from our schools, costs of college tuition are becoming out of reach for many Americans, and financial aid is more and more difficult to come by.

Although some ideological tenets remain in place within the gifted community, (i.e. the need to support the needs of the high ability learner and the need to identify and

support all high ability learners, including those from under-represented populations), it is clear that federal desire for control has changed. Federal control, or at the least federal influence, is an area that has changed a great deal since the National Defense Education Act of 1958 was passed. NDEA stated,

“The Congress reaffirms the principal and declares that the States and local communities have and must retain control over and primary responsibility for public education. The national interest requires, however, that the Federal Government give assistance to education for programs which are important to our defense” (NDEA P.L. 85-864, 1958, p. 1581)

yet, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal government is at a pinnacle of its involvement with public education. The penalties imposed for schools and districts not reaching proficiency have forced state and local decision makers to change policy in order to meet federal requirements. This does not sound like what the 85th Congress had in mind in 1958.

Fourteen years after the passage of the National Defense Education Act, the *Marland Report* was presented to Congress (1972). This was the first time that a formalized definition of giftedness was recognized as it related to the education of U.S. school children. Not only did it identify students of intellectual ability, it recognized students for leadership, visual and performing arts, creative or productive thinking, and psychomotor abilities (Marland, 1972). The definition has remained largely unchanged over the years, with the biggest modification being the removal of “psychomotor ability” in 1978. This federal definition has provided the foundation for the definition adopted by many states including the following definition used in the state where this research study took place:

"Gifted and talented children" means those persons between the ages of five and twenty-one whose abilities, talents, and potential for accomplishment are so exceptional or developmentally advanced that they require special provisions to

meet their educational programming needs. Children under five who are gifted may also be provided with early childhood special educational services. Gifted students include gifted students with disabilities (i.e. twice exceptional) and students with exceptional abilities or potential from all socio-economic and ethnic, cultural populations. Gifted students are capable of high performance, exceptional production, or exceptional learning behavior by virtue of any or a combination of these areas of giftedness:

- General or specific intellectual ability.
- Specific academic aptitude.
- Creative or productive thinking.
- Leadership abilities.
- Visual arts, performing arts, musical or psychomotor abilities (CDE, 2004).

By 1983, a cry for education reform was made. The National Commission on Excellence in Education had been created in 1981 by then Secretary of Education, T. H. Bell. “The Commission was created as a result of the Secretary’s concern about the ‘widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system’” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), 1983, Introduction, ¶ 2). From this Commission resulted the report, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, that cited a need among others, for appropriate curriculum for gifted learners (NCEE, 1983). The report further indicated that the nation’s best and brightest students were not being educated adequately enough to compete internationally (NCEE, 1983), however it would be another five years before the Jacob K. Javits Education Act would pass as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1988. The passage of the Javits Act did not mean direct funding for schools but did allow for the creation of the National Research Center and the funding of research designed to help with the identification of under-represented populations and with the closing of the achievement gap within the identified student populations (Jacob K. Javits Act, 1988).

By 1993, Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, indicated in his foreword to the report titled, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent*, that the report

“describes the ‘quiet crisis’ that continues in how we educate top students. Youngsters...are still not challenged to work to their full potential. Our neglect of these students makes it impossible for Americans to compete in a global economy demanding their skills” (p. 1).

Although the report showed that some gains had been made, the reality was that little had changed.

The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, most commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act, was passed in 2001, and signed into law in January 2002. Although the Act did not directly impact gifted learners, it put in place the element of accountability which had been lacking in previous legislation. An outgrowth of NCLB was the formation of growth accountability through states' implementation of “growth models” to measure progress toward the goal of having all children reach ‘proficiency’ in reading and math by 2014 (2001). Many states did not have longitudinal data with which to measure growth, but NCLB only required the yearly reporting of the percentage of students meeting proficiency. As a result, local school districts focused on those students closest to the proficiency mark, students labeled “bubble students” who were so very close to the proficiency cut score that they were seen as the most viable group to target with the idea of raising their scores, have them reach proficient, and thus the annual yearly progress (AYP) reported would show gains toward the mandate (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010; Ho, Lewis, & MacGregor Farris, 2009; Jhoff, 2007; McCall, Kingsbury, & Olson, 2004; Sokola, Weinberg, Andrzejewski, & Doorey, 2008).

This focus on “bubble students” impacted the gifted population negatively as indicated by research that has illustrated scores for gifted learners to be, at best, flat and often negatively trending (Duffett, Farkas, and Loveless, 2008). Within schools serving students of the middle level age (roughly grades six, seven and eight), there is the added burden of dealing with youth that are entering adolescence and are contending with social and emotional issues that compound the issues presented by the physical changes that their bodies are undergoing. Often students in this age group want only to ‘fit in’ with their peers and don’t want to initiate changes that could further tip the delicate balance necessary to fit in. Therefore, advocacy for additional academic challenge is perceived as threatening to the status quo and often complacency and boredom are the result. There are, however, schools that are showing high growth for gifted learners, as indicated in the pilot study conducted in the spring of 2012, by the author of this study. The focus of this study was an attempt at identifying what is being done that is providing an environment where gifted learners are able to thrive in what are seen as difficult academic years.

Statement of the Problem

Although the unique needs of the gifted have been documented for over a century, there remains an ongoing battle in the field of education to have those needs addressed. The United States has come a long way in the fight, but there is still work to be done. As such, it is incumbent upon advocates for the gifted to continue to speak up for these children, to work to provide educators with the tools necessary to exceed what has been done thus far, and to create learning environments that will challenge the gifted intellect while respecting and understanding their social and emotional differences.

Preadolescent and early adolescent students also have their share of issues to deal with. As they enter puberty, their minds are often drawn to the social aspect of who they are and, without a diligent effort to provide gifted learners with opportunities to engage their passions and intellectual strengths, they are more apt to lose momentum during what should be formative years in preparation for high school, college, and life beyond that. The good news is that evidence produced in the pilot study conducted in the spring of 2012 by the author of this project, indicated that there *are* middle level environments that are meeting the academic needs of these learners.

This study required a return to the essence of the experience of academic growth in a middle level learning environment in order to discover what works in these school settings that honors the gifted learner enough to allow them to gain confidence in their ability and to believe in themselves and show academic growth at the high levels they are achieving. Although we cannot change the societal belief system that sees the provision of resources to help the gifted as elitist, we can work to affect those things we can control and influence in order to make a difference in our schools. In sum, the task was to identify the elements that make for successful middle level learning experiences for gifted learners, in order that these high-ability young people can prepare for their future, with the hope that we be able to provide similar opportunities for *all* gifted learners.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to build an understanding of what is present in schools to meet the academic growth needs of gifted middle-level learners. Due to the fact that early adolescence is a time of growth and change there are a variety of factors that can impact children in this age range within a school environment, some of which are

outside the control of school personnel. These factors include but aren't limited to personalities and philosophies of school personnel, programming practices, curriculum, supplemental materials introduced by teachers and others, the physical environment, and social and emotional supports. Due to the highly sensitive nature of many gifted learners, these factors can impact this special population of learner more intensely than it might affect other children. As any and all of these can affect the potential for growth and success it was important to identify which of these are most profound as potential facilitators of high growth as well as those that can affect their growth in a negative fashion. With the knowledge gleaned, wider use of these findings may help to produce high growth patterns for more than the few that are currently experiencing the desired outcome.

Rationale

The demands placed on educators are many and varied. In tough economic times the demands are even greater as educators are required to do more with less and teach greater numbers of students in overcrowded classrooms. Government mandates for documentation of services and the focus on individualization of instructive practices for fulfillment of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Advanced Learning Plans (ALPs) has meant more and more hours for teachers being spent on paperwork. Due to these demands, it is more necessary than ever for education professionals to know what works in meeting the needs of the gifted students that attend their schools, in order to best focus their efforts and get the most from the limited time they have for planning and resource development.

Each year, school districts introduce new reforms intended to help classroom teachers better serve the students in their communities. Educators must always strive to do what is best to reach all children while juggling the changes required by district administration as well as those occurring in the world outside the classroom setting. Their hands are full and therefore the need exists to provide aid to educators in meeting the academic growth needs of the gifted learner during this time where the greatest focus is placed on the needs of the struggling learner due to legislative mandates. The rationale for this research study was to uncover from successful sources what is working in order that it is implemented on a wider scale for the benefit of greater numbers of gifted learners.

Research Question

With guidance from the rationale and purpose, the following research question, was used to guide this study:

What conditions support today's middle level learning environment that fosters sustained 'high growth,' as defined by growth model data, for its gifted populations?

Through personal interviews with individuals that live the experience of educating children in high-performing schools it was hoped that an essence of understanding would develop on which future gains could be made for larger numbers of gifted and high-ability learners.

Assumptions

As with most research projects there were assumptions that went into the design of the project. For this project, assumptions included:

1. Participants had the greater good in mind and willingly provided insights to allow broader application of their success to other school sites and gifted learners.

2. Participants openly and honestly shared their experiences without reservation.
3. Participants recognized that what they do is outside the realm of 'normalcy' and embraced and shared what makes that work.
4. Participants, if not trained to understand the needs of the gifted learner, may recognize or describe the more subtle nuances that could affect the academic growth performance of the gifted learner.

Delimitations

The nature of this project required that only schools that are effectively meeting the academic growth needs of gifted learners at a level of approximately 70% or greater growth, as measured by the annual state assessment test, be included, although when considering schools for this study, it was desired that the schools be showing high growth percentiles for all of the students in the school. It was not the desire of this project to place gifted learners at a level of priority over all other learners but to assure that gifted learners' needs were also being considered. In order to identify the schools that have shown success in this realm, data from the Colorado Department of Education web site were utilized. It was understood that there are most likely other schools that are experiencing similar high growth for gifted learners that were not considered due to privacy concerns that limit the release of performance data for small numbers of identified populace. Specifically, schools with a general population less than 20 students and those with populations within the disaggregated categories (of which gifted and talented student populations fall) with populations less than 20 students, percentiles are not reported.

Although it would be insightful to include schools with small populations both generally and within gifted and talented populations, the privacy of the data for students attending these smaller schools, which could be uncovered, is of foremost importance and the hope is that through the conclusions of the study, the reader will be able to infer that similar settings may be present for unidentified school sites as well. As the reader has the opportunity to read the rich structural and textural descriptions that follow, the hope is that they will be able to develop a corroborative connection with other smaller sites to determine if applicability is viable given similar opportunities, settings, and environments.

The delimitation noted for this study was that the schools chosen had to meet the requirement of high-growth percentiles as indicated through SchoolView, a data file maintained by the Colorado Department of Education for public transparency regarding school performance. In addition, the schools had to have a disaggregated population of greater than 20 identified gifted learners. Finally, the schools had to also show high-growth for the general population in order to indicate that these schools were not focused only on the gifted learner.

Summary

Education reform concerns require the development of cost effective ways to educate all of America's children. In doing this, educators must consider the needs of all learners, including the gifted. Because there is a natural tendency to help those that struggle and due to the recognition that society and the individual are better served by an educated populace, it is natural that schools will desire to help those who struggle to meet proficiency in order that they can reach their greatest potential for success in adulthood.

This achievement and growth movement for struggling students cannot be gained through the elimination of resources for the gifted and talented who have the potential to be the change agents that our world needs today and in the future.

Because the public perception of the gifted is that they come from the upper strata of the economic ladder, giftedness and opportunities for the gifted are often seen as 'elitist' and it is believed that those that are identified in this population will 'make it' without any additional resources that could be provided in school because of the economic advantages that many are thought to have outside of the school setting. Although there are individuals that fit this classification, it is not a rule and there are many examples of others for which there is evidence of the requisite perseverance and tenacity that were required of them to reach their individual levels of success. Within the field of education exist educators who also believe that their focus must be on those that are considered least likely to be academically successful due to the fact that the highest ability learners have what they need to be successful without additional supports.

Resources must be provided that will help our gifted learners to be all that they can be. Often high ability learners begin to experience holes in their learning and their understanding by high school or college due to many reasons, not the least of which is that they lose focus when they are not challenged. Few, if any, children are born with the skills and knowledge to work hard, persevere, and learn new things. Gifted learners may have the gift of the ability to learn new material more quickly but they still have to learn it. This requires modifications to things such as structure, pacing, support for their social and emotional needs, and a learning environment that understands their unique differences. Society has no qualms about separating athletes by ability level but when

attempts are made to provide the best possible conditions and resources for our most academically capable it is seen as elitist.

Fortunately, there are school environments that recognize the need to provide educational opportunities for all ability levels. Through research and advocacy it is possible to share practices that are working in the schools that serve our middle level learners, even during tough economic times, indicating that the solutions may not be costly or difficult. There is a need to figure out what works for each population and to implement the changes that will allow the U.S. to regain its standing as the best educated country in the world.

Chapter II reviews what has been done in the ongoing battle to provide equitable learning opportunities for the gifted and high ability learners in middle level learning environments. Specifically addressed will be what one western state has done to stay on top of the work that was begun in 1958 when the 85th Congress deemed it of utmost importance to educate our best and brightest young people to be able to keep the United States defended from our enemies and protected from the threats of the future. This chronology will also discuss what changes have come about as a result of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act that was passed in 2001. It will be the intention of the Literature Review to lay out the work that has been done and present what still needs to be addressed to provide equitable learning for gifted learners.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the signing into law of Public Law 107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in 2002, the priority of K-12 public education has focused heavily on student achievement and the test scores that measure that achievement. As a result, states and school districts have allocated manpower and funding toward the struggling students who must reach ‘grade level proficiency’ by 2014. A driving premise of NCLB is to “improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” (P.L. 107-110, 2001, p. 1). To do this, one sub-section of NCLB specifies:

(3) closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers; (NCLB, P.L. 107-110, 2001, p. 16).

Thus, it is clear that a focus of the legislation is on the observable disparity that exists between the standardized test scores of the majority population to the scores of minority populations. The minority populations considered within the ‘achievement gap’ can be categorized by socio-economic level (poverty), ethnicity, or gender, most commonly. As a result, academic growth for gifted learners has, at best, shown small gains while gains of low achieving students have shown notable increases (Duffett, et al., 2008). Although a positive indicator for struggling students, the findings for high ability students is an outcome that is neither good for this population of learners or the nation. Additionally,

students in the middle level years, notably attending schools that subscribe to the middle school model, are caught up in a philosophy that focuses on self-exploration and social concerns with a de-emphasis on academics (Yecke, 2005). While it is important and commendable that there exists a desire to bring all children to academic proficiency and to consider their need to discover their own learning styles, personalities, social relationship preferences, as well as how they fit into the global world (the world beyond themselves that they must be prepared to work and engage in upon graduation from high school or college), it cannot continue to be at the expense of the need for rigorous, enriching, and extended opportunities for our brightest students. Finally, as a result of the recent economic shortfalls, funding for gifted education has been cut at all levels, including the miniscule federal monies that had been budgeted through the Jacob K. Javits Gifted Students Education Act (1988), thus leaving gifted children with paltry resources to aid in their growth and development. How is it therefore, taking the above into consideration, that there are schools serving the middle level learner that are achieving high growth for their gifted learners while other schools are at best making mediocre gains?

The Gifted Learner

Since publication of the *Marland Report* (1972), the federal government has recognized a definition of gifted learners that has allowed states and school districts to define and support the needs of this special population. Support has fluctuated across the decades, dependent upon the societal concerns of the times. Prior to publication of the *Marland Report* (1972), which caused attention to be poured into the highly intellectual

students after the launch of Sputnik, the focus of the public was on social justice and equality that we recognize as the Civil Rights Movement.

In 2013, some schools are fighting to make the 2014, 100% grade-level proficiency deadline of No Child Left Behind (2001) and continue to leave our gifted students behind because the gifted students have already reached the target. Not only are the academic needs of these students being forgotten or ignored (Duffett, et al, 2008; Jhoff, 2007), the unique social and emotional needs have been ignored as well, due to funding cuts or redistribution of funds at all levels. In the western state where this study was conducted, a waiver was approved by the U. S. Department of Education which has relieved some of the pressure of the initial mandate but still requires “ambitious but achievable Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) (U. S. Department of Education, 2012).” This state was one of only ten to have received some flexibility through the filing of a federal waiver but many other states have applied since that time and have also been granted flexibility. Although this is allowing the state to focus on individual student growth, the waiver is only good through the 2013-14 academic year and an extension must be applied for in order to extend it past that date.

In addition to the historic work that is cited in this section, there are also references to work conducted in the western state where this study will be conducted. Through state recruited workgroups a series of manuals were produced to help guide the state’s school districts in designing programming for their gifted population. The state department of education work groups analyzed and filtered years of research and programming models to develop these manuals however, it must be noted that availability of the manuals to aid the school districts in no way implies that the use of the

materials is, in any way, mandated to the school districts, nor does the state directly or indirectly imply endorsement requiring districts to purchase materials from companies that may market the materials which are cited in the guidebooks.

Defining the Gifted Learner

Gifted individuals are creators, intellectuals, leaders, artists, dancers, actors, and more. Because the earliest practices in the United States focused on the work of early gifted research leaders such as Lewis Terman, most people recognized “giftedness” as an intellectual construct that held a requirement of intelligence at 135 or greater as measured on a Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test (Terman, 1925). Because the majority of those reaching the 135 or higher benchmark were White, middle-class, and academically achieving, ‘gifted’ was seen as an elitist treatment and thus began negative connotations being applied to the needs of the gifted student (Richert, 2003). To combat this, the federal government requested a report be prepared that would better define gifted ability. Since the release of the *Marland Report* (1972), the federal government has recognized a definition of ‘giftedness’ that encompasses all the above areas of potential giftedness as well as for a time, psychomotor ability, which was later eliminated from the federal definition (1988) after it came to light that some school districts could subvert the meaning and use gifted funds to support only their athletic departments and athletic programs (Davis & Rimm, 1998). The shortened definition, as follows, is found in the revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act, specifically known as the Jacob K. Javits Gifted Students Education Act (1988) and has been the same for the last 25 years:

GIFTED AND TALENTED- The term ‘gifted and talented’, when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who

need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (P.L. 100-297, Sec. 4103. Definitions).

Although considered too constraining by some experts due to the focus on a specific ability to the exclusion of other factors such as “task commitment” and “creativity” (Reis & Renzulli, 1982), the definition has been adopted in many states to provide guidelines to build their own definitions, policy, and identification processes. This research project, conducted in a western state, considered the gifted learner to be a student identified within the realm of the public school arena and thus identified through conformance with the state’s definition of giftedness, which closely mirrors the federal definition:

"Gifted and talented children" means those persons between the ages of five and twenty-one whose abilities, talents, and potential for accomplishment are so exceptional or developmentally advanced that they require special provisions to meet their educational programming needs. Children under five who are gifted may also be provided with early childhood special educational services. Gifted students include gifted students with disabilities (i.e. twice exceptional) and students with exceptional abilities or potential from all socio-economic and ethnic, cultural populations. Gifted students are capable of high performance, exceptional production, or exceptional learning behavior by virtue of any or a combination of these areas of giftedness:

- General or specific intellectual ability.
- Specific academic aptitude.
- Creative or productive thinking.
- Leadership abilities.
- Visual arts, performing arts, musical or psychomotor abilities. (CDE, 2004)

Because terms such as “require special provisions to meet their education programming needs” and “developmentally advanced” are vague and not further defined within national or local definitions of giftedness, there have not been universally understood or agreed upon identification criteria or programming requirements put in place to protect gifted learners.

In an effort to help the public understand gifted learners and to help teachers and other education professionals to understand how to best meet the unique needs of these learners, leaders within gifted education have developed models that have outlined descriptors to help identify these learners and have provided strategies to help meet their educational and social and emotional needs. An example of this is the Autonomous Learner Model, developed by Dr. George T. Betts and Jolene K. Kercher (1999). This model grew from preliminary work done by Betts and Maureen Neihart, titled *Profiles of the Gifted and Talented* (1988). In the earlier work, gifted learners were characterized by their unique social and emotional differences (Betts & Neihart, 1988). Gifted learners ranged from the “Type I” learner or “Successful Learner,” the student that is most easily recognized by teachers because of their desire to please teachers and who consistently work to achieve high marks, to the “Type VI” learner or “Autonomous Learner” who has reached the highest pinnacle of learning; the desire to learn for the sake of learning, without need for anything more than facilitation and guidance from an adult mentor or facilitator (Betts & Neihart, 1988). Between the Type I and Type VI learner are a range of students that share little more than their ability, as some are defiant and challenging (Type II), some attempt to hide their ability, not wanting to stand out (Type III), some don’t fit in or perform in the traditional school setting (Type IV), and others’ abilities may be masked by struggles with learning that are caused by learning disabilities (Type V), also known as the twice-exceptional learner (Betts & Neihart, 1988). Although significantly simplified for the purpose of this project, it must be acknowledged that the depth and breadth of the characteristics is far too extensive to brush under the proverbial rug as it seems many school districts and school buildings are wont to do, underscoring

even more the need for social and emotional support to be present in schools where gifted learners are present.

As the Autonomous Learner Model was developed, Betts and Kercher took all of these learning profiles into consideration and developed a model that contained elements that could address each of these types of learners, to allow them to be not only who they were but also attain the level of a Type VI (Autonomous) learner. This outcome is accomplished through the implementation of passion learning that is researched and lived via enrichment opportunities and in-depth study over a prolonged and supported gradual release system where students became more self-sufficient as they progress (Betts & Kercher, 1999). This model, and others, have provided not only descriptive characteristics of gifted learners, whereby educators can recognize the similarities and differences between them, but also provides strategies and lesson planning ideas for teachers to implement in order to more immediately meet the needs of the learners without having extensive training in gifted education.

Other leaders in gifted education have come up with other models and other descriptors that supported their perception of the gifted learner. Although this serves to validate the many types of gifted individuals, it also serves to confuse attempts at clearly defining who or what a gifted learner is. For purposes of this project, it was helpful to look further at one classification of gifted learner – the underachieving gifted learner.

Underachieving Gifted. The underachieving gifted learner is recognized as a child that shows a discrepancy between what they are capable of achieving and that which they actually do achieve as reflected in their classroom grades or their achievement tests (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Rimm, 1997). Through the lens of this definition it could be

said that a relatively large percentage (15 to 25%) of the gifted learners in school today could be classified as underachieving based on the achievement percentiles found in growth model data reports. This discrepancy is often cause for alarm as parents and educators scramble to determine what has gone wrong. Susan Winebrenner provided a list of factors, besides those related to learning disabilities or other challenges. Items included in Winebrenner's list are issues related to perfectionism, work that is either too easy or too hard, differences in learning style between the teacher and the student where the teacher will not allow the student to use their strength area to show their understanding, and fear of being different (2001). Within this list it is clear that social and emotional concerns are often at the heart of the child's underachievement.

In addition to the factors that Winebrenner indicated to be evident in many underachievers, Jim Delisle recognized some of the same factors (as well as others) to be characteristics of "non-producers," those who can do the work but won't or choose not to do it. Often, according to Delisle, these are otherwise healthy students who are independent and are able to articulate why they don't produce. The true "underachiever" doesn't know what the problem is, tends to be withdrawn, and has a poor academic self-concept. To define which of these truly makes up the gifted 'gap-student' population, those capable of producing but not doing so, is difficult to tell without getting to know the students personally. In attempting to change the behaviors, different interventions are required and cannot be met with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach (Delisle, 1991) and cannot be easily diagnosed by a teacher with thirty-five students in their classroom and spanning the entire width of the ability continuum.

Although it may be necessary to understand that these students can show discrepancies between their ability and their classroom performance, if they are making conscious choices to non-produce, they may be making a statement about the lack of challenge or the poor ability of the teacher to pace the instruction to their needs. If this is the case, it would not be out of the question to see test scores commensurate with their ability indicating clearly that they have mastery of the content while not being willing to play the game of school. Because the focus of this project was academic growth, it was perceived that the achievement level would not be as much a factor as it would have been had the focus been achievement. If the overall achievement level of the disaggregated student population was below the 75th percentile there could be other factors present which were not considered for this study.

Identification of Gifted Learners

The identification of gifted learners has evolved over the years but generally current practice reflects the definition adopted by the identifying agency. One of the earliest identification criteria used to measure gifted ability in the United States came about in 1925 when Lewis Terman conducted his longitudinal study of 1,528 children. By Terman's definition, the gifted were those who scored above 135 on the Stanford-Binet IQ test (Terman, 1925). Clearly, Terman's definition left little doubt that early ideas of giftedness would include only intellectual ability.

Although focused on children with IQ scores above 170, during Leta Stetter Hollingsworth's career, which spanned from about 1916 through her death in 1939, she recognized that gifted students had diverse social skills and intense emotional needs, thus pioneering the idea of counseling for the special needs of gifted children (Colangelo &

Davis, 2003; Hollingworth, 1926). This insight did not impact the definition of giftedness or how people were identified as gifted, but there were some educational programming impacts for gifted learners, on a small scale, as Hollingsworth had students spend “about half of their school hours working on the regular curriculum and half pursuing enrichment activities” that she felt would push them to learn the necessary skills to be productive leaders (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p. 6).

There were only isolated pockets of concern within gifted education between 1925 and 1959, but things changed abruptly as a result of the launch of the Russian satellite, Sputnik. Reports were published indicating that the U.S. was neglecting the educational needs of its students, especially the gifted (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Still the focus was clearly on the intellectual aspect of giftedness. This would change around 1970 when the federal government, via the *Marland Report* (1972), brought gifted education to the forefront of public awareness (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). The aspect that has been most lasting from the report was the definition of giftedness that has impacted identification and programming.

Identification today has moved away from the single indicator of giftedness as defined by an IQ test score. Typical of today’s process is that which is used in the western state where this research was conducted. In this state, the collection of a “body of evidence” that includes ability scores (that could come from abilities testing or IQ type assessments), achievement scores that generally come from normed assessment tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or annual state assessment testing, portfolios of artifacts, behavior checklists, and self-, teacher-, parent-, and peer-nominations, is collected and analyzed (CDE, 2004). This process is still less than perfect and there is

ongoing dialog about what can be done to identify children from underrepresented populations, such as culturally diverse students and those from lower socio-economic communities (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The connection between the definition of giftedness and the identification of gifted individuals, in turn, drives the programming adopted by states and school districts as well (Davis & Rimm, 1998).

Programming for Gifted Learners

Gifted programming is more than gifted programs; however, it often gets confused as being the same thing. Gifted programming addresses four specific components: structure, differentiated instruction, content options, and affective guidance (CDE, n.d.). Gifted programs fall within the content options component and is represented by opportunities such as summer enrichment camps, Saturday schools, and clubs and other extra-curricular activities, to name a few. When schools believe that they are offering gifted programming because they have a chess club after school, they are not meeting the gifted programming needs of the gifted learner.

Structure. The western state where this research was done specifies that the structure component include: instructional delivery models, school settings, placement options, and grouping considerations. The state recognizes that a variety of options are necessary to meet the needs of gifted learners while also taking into consideration the constraints experienced in the demographics of the school districts for funding, staffing, and so on (Coleman & Shah-Coltrane, 2010). One structure with little to no impact, for both school sites and gifted learners, but which is often used by teachers, is a classroom that utilizes flexible grouping (Rogers, 2007). This type of grouping is most often used within mixed ability classrooms and results in a zero effect size ($ES=0$, that is, growth of

only one year) for high ability learners, unless the high ability learners are grouped together and differentiated instruction that challenges learner reasoning is also employed (Rogers, 2007). Another structure option which shows a zero effect size (only a single year's growth) includes general education opportunities with peer-tutoring where high ability students are used as teachers for struggling students (Rogers, 2002, 2007).

Although the options in the previous paragraph clearly do little to support gifted learners, there are other options that produce better results. According to Rogers, the structures with the best effect sizes are: grade skipping ($ES = 1.00$, indicating two full year's growth in a single academic year), curriculum compacting in math or science ($ES = .83$, slightly more than a year and three-quarters), academic pull-out groups ($ES = .65$, almost a year and three-quarters), then cluster grouping with an effect size of $.62$ (a bit more than a year and a half, Rogers, 2007). Somewhere between $ES=0$ and $ES=.62$ fall additional possibilities for structural supports. This list of options includes: cross-grade grouping, cluster grouping, resource rooms used for pull-out programs, Honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes, special interest clusters, magnet classrooms and schools, schools within schools, and self-contained schools for the gifted (Coleman & Shah-Coltrane, 2010).

Differentiated Instruction. Differentiated instruction is a practice that is advocated almost universally, for all learners, although in mixed-ability classrooms this often means that high-ability learners are given more work and not work that accelerates, extends, or provides higher order thinking opportunities - all practices that leaders in the field of gifted education indicate are necessary for gifted students (Reis, Burns & Renzulli, 1992; Tomlinson, C.A., Kaplan, S., Renzulli, J., Purcell, J., Leppien, J., &

Burns, D., 2002; Winebrenner, 2001). Generally approached, differentiated instruction focuses on modifying content, process, or product (Reis, et al, 1992; Tomlinson, 1999; Winebrenner, 2001). Content modification includes pre-assessment that provides what the student comes into the classroom knowing and allows for compacting of what is left to be learned with the added opportunity to extend for complexity and depth (Reis, Burns & Renzulli, 1992; Tomlinson, 1999; Winebrenner, 2001). Process modification allows the learner to acquire new learning through the use of various means including contracts, pacing adjustments, and questioning and discussion strategies (Tomlinson, 1999; Winebrenner, 2001). Each of these allows students to take ownership of their learning, often with only limited guidance from a teacher, thus freeing the teacher to work directly with students that need more attention. Product differentiation is the modification most often used by classroom teachers as it appears to require the least amount of preparation. The limited effort often means a 'product menu' is developed from which students can choose to show their learning. To be most effective for gifted learners, product differentiation should include the use of varied techniques and materials as well as opportunities to explore real-world solutions to the problems investigated, not simply create a diorama or technology aided slide show (Reis, et al, 1992; Winebrenner, 2001).

If teachers considered the essential elements of acceleration, extension, and higher order thinking (including creative and critical thinking elements), in each of the areas of content, process, and product, it would go a long way in aiding the growth potential of gifted learners. Although this practice can take time and may be difficult for teachers for whom it is not a habit, given time and practice it can become second nature. Additionally,

the opportunity for teachers to collaborate and share ideas aids in the development of a collection of approaches to incorporate rigor for highly capable learners.

Content Options. In the state where this study took place, there is a foundational position staked in the construct of “Ascending Intellectual Demand” which is defined as “the process whereby a teacher consciously increases the depth, complexity, sophistication, and novelty of thinking required by students as they acquire and process knowledge, e.g. scaffolding” (Tomlinson et al., 2002). Although similar to differentiation, this component recognizes the need for differentiation even within the population of gifted learners. As a result of this need to differentiate differentiation, teachers need to consider providing students with more complex learning materials (such as classic literature, above-level texts, current real-world research questions to explore, etc.), more complex processing demands through higher order processing skills such as the identification of assumptions related to a topic, or approaching a situation from an alternate perspective (Tomlinson, et al., 2002). Because the research was conducted in a state that identifies gifted learners by content strength as well as general intellectual ability, the component that calls for the provision of content options is one that was explored to determine if it played a part in the high growth experience.

Affective Guidance. Affective guidance is necessary for gifted learners due to the unique needs of the population. Leaders such as Leta Hollingsworth, Dr. Kazimierz Dabrowski and Annemarie Roeper, spent much of their careers focused on the social and emotional needs of gifted learners. Dabrowski is known for his research on “Over-excitabilities” and his Theory of Positive Disintegration and their impacts on gifted learners (Dabrowski, 1964; Mendaglio (ed.), 2008). Roeper spent her career teaching

gifted learners and helping them to discover their emotional giftedness through global awareness issues such as alleviating hunger, and “self-actualization and interdependence” (Davis & Rimm, 2003; Roeper, 2007, p. 413). The research embarked upon considered whether schools with high growth rates had found a way to meet these affective needs while still instructing content with the requisite rigor to meet the needs of the gifted adolescent.

The question of whether schools can meet the affective needs of gifted learners has been challenged in recent times where funding has been cut. This holds true in middle level schools where the focus on grade level proficiency has pulled resources away from not only programming that addresses academic needs, but more dramatically, from affective and social emotional opportunities for gifted students (Gentry, 2006). With students grouped heterogeneously in over-crowded classrooms, general educators are not able to meet the affective needs of the gifted learner nor do these teachers have the training to understand gifted learners, let alone provide the needed supports. In many cases general education teachers are not even aware that gifted learners are special needs students often as a result of their social and emotional needs.

Middle Level Learning

In addition to the changes within gifted education, changes have also occurred in schools that serve our middle level learners. For many years, beginning around 1900, students would attend elementary schools for six or seven years (kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade or first through fifth or sixth grade) and then move on to junior high where they would continue for three or four years (sixth or seventh through ninth grade) and then finish at a high school for tenth through twelfth grade. During these years the

focus of schools was on preparing students for either vocational pursuits or college readiness. With the recognition of the unique developmental stage of the young adolescent, a third concern was noted and junior highs sought to fill the “unique social, personal, and academic needs of young adolescents” (Manning, 2000, p. 192).

It was believed that by separating these “between-years learners,” the specific needs of this developmental age range could be met more easily (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007) by teachers that were trained and understood the needs of this group of students. When it was determined in the early 1960s that junior highs were not adequately preparing the middle level learners, the idea of the Middle School Concept was born. Since that time middle schools have come under fire for their lack of academic rigor and some are returning to K-8 models to reduce transitions for students while providing a continued nurturing environment where students feel safe.

Middle School vs. Junior High

Webster’s New World College Dictionary defines middle school as, “a school between elementary school and high school, usually having three or four grades, variously including grades 5 through 8” (2002, p. 911). Although this definition is how many people commonly think of middle schools, the waters are muddied by the middle level learning model that bears the same name – the Middle School Model. It is necessary here to attempt to delineate between the types of middle level learning environments as each educational philosophy has the potential to impact the achievement and academic growth of middle years learners.

Besides the changes brought about in gifted education at the time of the Soviet launch of Sputnik, there was also a concern regarding whether junior highs were actually

addressing the needs of the adolescent learner. Thus began the reform of middle level learning in the U.S., created to address the unique needs of this age group in a time of civil and societal upheaval due to civil rights and the Vietnam War. Through the formation of the Middle School Model that would bridge the years between elementary and high school and replace the junior high model, there was a hope that children would be better citizens for having been allowed to explore social issues as well as to do what they needed to do to build their self-esteem within a framework that fostered group interactions and relationships (Yecke, 2006). This model has now also become a target for educational critics as U.S. scores continue to dip in terms of competitiveness in global comparisons of academic ability (Allen, 1992; Meyer, 2011).

A couple of the focus points of the Middle School philosophy were to be the use of thematic teaching by teams of teachers that would allow the creation of small communities that would provide a more nurturing environment for the social and emotional development of the preadolescent and pubescent youth of the target age range (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). Configured across a variety of grade levels, for example fifth through seventh or sixth through eighth grades, the constant was that seventh grade was always included in the definition. It was believed that by segregating the early-adolescent learner from those younger and those older than themselves, the teachers would be better able to directly concern themselves with the needs of this age group. It was furthermore believed that a transition period needed to happen prior to the necessary transition that occurred as students forayed into high school and thus the transition at either fifth, sixth, or seventh grade was deemed a good time as it was a natural time of

physiological change as well. It didn't take long before the Middle School Model also came under fire from critics.

The downfall of the Middle School Model began in the late 1980s as the focus of the schools moved away from academics and rigorous academic standards in order to provide for the developmental and social issues deemed more demanding at the time (Yecke, 2005). In 2005, Cheri P. Yecke, of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Washington, DC, released a report in which she criticized Middle Schools for the prevalence of their focus “on such concerns as self-esteem, mental health, identity development, interpersonal relations, egalitarian principles, and social justice” (p. ii). Furthermore, Yecke cited data that clearly indicated, across the years since implementation of the Middle School concept, the achievement drops experienced as a result of the lack of focus on academics and achievement (Yecke, 2005). Many of these same concerns were indicated by Coladarci and Hancock in their report from 2002, where they found that on achievement and social and emotional measures, Middle School numbers were lower than those of other design models such as the K-8 Model. Also in the late 1980s, Middle Schools came under further scrutiny as President George H. W. Bush called for rigor and accountability through reform measures at a governors' summit.

In contrast, the Middle School philosophy was being lauded as the report, *Turning Points*, was released that expounded on the emotional decline of young adolescents and pre-adolescents. It further touted the need for these youngsters to pursue their self-exploration, hence reinforcing the philosophy of the middle school concept (Yecke, 2005). With conflicting perspectives, things remained unchanged in the setting for middle level learners. Although the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has pushed all

schools to increase rigor and accountability, the Middle School philosophy is the prevalent middle level school structure in the western part of the U. S. As the demands of NCLB (2001) remain for states to meet, even those that have received waivers, some schools have had to adjust their programming and focus, sometimes moving away from a strict Middle School format and philosophy. Thus although many schools have “middle school” in their name, they may not follow a true Middle School Model. With the adjustments and movement away from the true model, many middle schools have yet to show much movement and academic rigor, achievement gains, and growth, are still lacking (Arcia, 2007; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Yecke, 2005).

K – 8 School Models

In 2006, Cheri Yecke discussed the need to redefine “middle years learning” due to the confusion that occurs between the middle school concept and the term “middle school.” Many people will use the term “middle school” intermittently with junior high or vice versa, simply meaning the years of school between elementary and high school. This reference might not be a problem if all types of middle-years school models were equal. The middle school model that was developed in the latter 20th century and the schools that follow that model have come under fire for their relative lack of academic rigor (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). As a result, the perceived lack of rigor has left a bad taste in the mouths of many as Yecke discerns that

“Although many U.S. middle schools are flourishing with strong and rigorous academic programs, the middle school concept—the notion that middle schools should be havens of socialization and not academies of knowledge—has wrought havoc on the intellectual development of many middle school students” (Yecke, 2006).

In an effort to resolve the confusion, as well as for other reasons, some states have returned to the K-8 model that was most common in the early 20th century.

Reasons are mixed for the use of one model over another and each has its supporters based on factors such as cost, politics, and geographical reality (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002). Few would argue that the barometer used to determine the best model *should be* that which is best for student growth and achievement. The return to the K-8 Model is due in part to research that has shown higher attendance statistics in K-8 schools, higher academic achievement (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Yeeke, 2005), and higher social and emotional outcomes in areas of self-esteem, leadership and attitudes toward school (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). It is not hard to see the connection between many of these factors (i.e. school attendance and attitudes toward school affecting academic achievement) but other research calls into question whether the move to K-8 models is the best option (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Yerke, 2005).

In a large-scale empirical study conducted by Vaughan Byrnes and Allen Ruby using schools in Philadelphia, PA, results indicated that although there was evidence of higher academic achievement for the middle level students in existing K-8 schools, there was little difference in the newly formed K-8 schools when compared to the Middle Schools. The key difference was found to be school size where the smaller the school the greater the academic achievement experienced. The findings of this study also discussed the potential for success of middle schools that adhere to the “best practices” that were part of the Middle School Model design (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007).

Research by Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver, also conducted in 2007 indicates that all is not lost for schools desiring to maintain the Middle School Model and also desiring to experience high achievement. Also conducted in Philadelphia, the study by Balfanz, Herzog and Mac Iver noted that there were schools using the Middle School Model

elements of “small learning communities, professional development, cooperative learning, and other pedagogical and classroom instructional strategies (p. 131).” While both of these studies illustrate potential for each model they also recognize the potential shortcomings of each (i.e. the new K-8 schools may not be as high achieving yet due to the newness of their school community and may need time to come together and build the type and level of trust and culture that exist within the existing K-8 school communities) and indicate that the need exists for more studies to be conducted (Balfanz, et al, 2007; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). It is also possible that like many other initiatives, theories, and ideas in education, it may not be a one-size-fits-all solution.

Besides the concern over the lack of academic rigor in middle level learning environment, there are also concerns over student behavior. While some attribute high rates of middle level learner suspensions and high school disciplinary data to the overall pre-teen and adolescent developmental stage, others point directly at the lack of structure in the middle grades and blame the Middle School philosophy specifically (Arcia, 2007). The argument maintains that if it is simply a life stage anomaly and that it can’t be fixed, then why is it that all countries don’t experience the plunges in academic testing that we see in our middle level scores? With the evidence from Weiss and Kipnes regarding higher social and emotional data results in K-8 programs when compared to Middle Schools, there is clearly a need for additional research to investigate what is at the foundation of the differences.

While disciplinary issues are not a common or major concern within the gifted population, gifted students are not immune to the potential for disciplinary action nor are they immune to the behaviors that precipitate behavior interventions. In addition to the

potential for being personally impacted by behaviors that provide the statistics within schools around behavior concerns, it is also recognized that disruptive behaviors affect the learning of others. Emily Arcia conducted a study that looked at suspension rate data comparisons between students in K-8 settings and students who had transitioned from either an elementary or K-8 setting to a middle school setting for sixth grade. The results indicated that middle schools experience higher rates of suspension although causality could not be determined from the data (Arcia, 2007).

For this study the middle level years in the state where the research was conducted recognize grades six, seven, and eight as the common “middle years” grade levels, with the designation of “Middle School” scores being reported for those grade level combinations within the SchoolView Growth Model Data published annually on the state website. Thus the data base used for determining the schools that were considered included a variety of grade level configurations: K-8 schools, middle schools, and combined junior/senior high schools but the grade levels were always sixth, seventh, and or eighth. It was understood that factors such as the population of the community, the resources available to some communities, political pressures, or other extenuating and unconnected circumstances could dictate the number of buildings opened, and the numbers of personnel hired, etc. Additionally it is possible that various districts usurp logistical concerns to put in place a model that they deem best for their community’s children and thus make conscious choices to choose one model over another that might fit those logistical concerns better.

Evolution of Growth Models in Education

No Child Left Behind Act (2001)

In 2001, a bi-partisan committee recommended changes be made to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The ESEA of 1965 held primary objectives of moving the country from norms to standards in terms of how we look at educational effectiveness, and to require annual assessment for grades three through eight and again, one time during high school. This created the foundation for Public Law 107-110; the No Child Left Behind Act, which passed both houses in 2001 and was signed into law in January 2002.

The act, which had as a primary objective, “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice” (NCLB, 2001), was initially supported by both Democrats and Republicans. With the passage of this public law came the mandate that required each state to show “Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)” toward grade-level proficiency for all learners and included a requirement to disaggregate the data for a variety of sub-groups. The focus, however, was to be specifically honed on those underrepresented populations that the closing of the achievement gap was designed to aid (NCLB, 2001). The construct of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was left to the states to define. That is, states were given the ability to establish their own tests to measure proficiency, determine cut-off scores for proficiency, and were allowed to create the standards and definition of what would be considered proficient (McCall, Kingsbury, & Olson, 2004; NCLB, 2001). Stipulations mandated included the continuation (from ESEA, 1965) of annual assessments, the closing of the achievement gap, and movement of student scores, for all students, to meet the 100% grade level proficiency goal by 2014

(NCLB, 2001). With required tracking and reporting, the federal government was able to enforce the potential stated consequences for schools that were not moving toward the 2014 goal. These penalties included the choice for parents to have their child attend a school that wasn't on an "improvement plan" in the event that their child was attending a school that was underperforming, and sanctions to underperforming schools in the form of elimination of funding, placement on an improvement plan, state takeovers, or conversions to charter schools (NCLB, 2001).

The start date of the law was July 2002, thus the first full year of implementation was the academic year, 2002-03. It didn't take long for questions to arise and suggestions to be made to improve the measurement of student growth (McCall, et al, 2004). These concerns and criticisms have impacted how we look at the annual testing as well as the ways that we work to meet the requirements of NCLB, how we allocate resources, and how we measure educator effectiveness.

Concerns and Criticisms

The greatest concerns and criticisms focused on the recognition that the use of a single number that represented the percentage of students scoring "proficient" each school year was not going to show the progress or growth that schools were making. That growth could be seen, however, if groups or cohorts of students could be followed over time (McCall, et al, 2004). The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), one of the first computerized testing companies, had many years of testing data and saw great potential for the use of "statewide assessment system[s to] measure the amount that individual students change from one year to the next..." and considered it to be a better way to look at school effectiveness (McCall, et al, 2004, p. 3).

Most significant to this study was the criticism by McCall, Kingsbury and Olson, who found that “The NCLB model does not take the performance of students above or far below the standard into account” (2004, p. 20). This clearly suggests that the focus must be placed on the learner for whom the NCLB model is focused on, that student that is close to proficient but not quite there yet. Another point made in the Northwest Evaluation Association study from 2004 was that more information could be gleaned from complex growth models and that an advantage in using them was “the ability to partition growth into parts that are attributed to the school, district, and to previous scores” (McCall, et al., 2004, p. 22). This type of data could truly allow schools to use data to drive instruction and planning to help all students grow academically.

By 2005, then Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, had heard the states’ cries for an alternative means to show progress rather than simply looking each year at the percentage of students scoring proficient or better. The rationale behind instituting the Growth Model Pilot Program was to allow interested states (up to ten) to include measures of the growth that students were making toward proficiency within the annual yearly progress (AYP) data, even if they were not showing an increase in the percentage of proficient scores. By doing this, it would allow those schools that were otherwise not reaching AYP from being put on improvement plans due to the fact that they were showing improvement and were implementing the kinds of interventions, strategies and efforts that the improvement plan would be requiring anyway (American School Board Journal, 2008, Braun, 2009, Department of Education, 2011). This was also advantageous to the government as the money used to help struggling schools could be focused on schools that were not increasing their number of proficient students *and* were

not showing growth gains either (Government Accountability Office, 2006). What initially came from this was the idea of “Safe Harbor,” a two-tier, cross sectional gains model that, in regard to test scores, requires the reduction in non-proficient targeted subgroups by 10% or more from the prior year which is then combined with the number of students actually scoring proficient (GAO, 2006) to determine whether AYP had been met. Furthermore, Safe Harbor required that another indicator of academic performance, specifically in the areas of attendance or graduation rates, show progress, and thus there was not a complete disregard to all factors outside of the high stakes test requirement.

When applications were considered for admission to the Growth Model Pilot Program, only Tennessee and North Carolina qualified to use a growth model to report gains (Department of Education, 2011) in the first year, while many others were given grant money to develop longitudinal data systems (Department of Education, 2011; GAO, 2006). By 2006-07, eight states were accepted into the program and a year later, 2007-08, saw nine states accepted (Department of Education, 2011). Eventually the ten state cap was eliminated and many states now utilize a growth model as a portion of their reporting to the federal government.

By 2006, there were a large number of states using growth models – 26 in use and 22 others in the process of implementing or considering using them (GAO, 2006) - for a variety of reasons; however, NWEA had already found that students who had started in the higher score ranges, were not showing the large growth that those in lower score ranges were indicating (McCall, et al, 2004). The report from the NWEA Growth Research Database, in 2004, showed concern for high ability students as the longitudinal data indicated that, with the growth model being allowed by NCLB, it was apparent that

the focus would be on the students closest to the proficiency line (the “bubble students”) that could show the most gain *and* had the potential to reach proficiency (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010; Ho, et al., 2009; Jhoff, 2007; McCall, et al, 2004; Sokola et al., 2008). With only two states meeting federal criteria to use a growth model, it was clear that many of the growth models being used were not in compliance with NCLB requirements. The advantage that many could see however was that growth models had at their foundation the ability to measure growth for all students, not just the students who would serve to fulfill the objectives of NCLB.

A major criticism of the Growth Model Pilot Program was that it didn’t allow state participation if the model used was a “Value Added Model.” Value Added Models are those that attempt to measure effectiveness by taking into account the baseline, or starting point, of students. This can be thought of as comparing the average gains of students in any given school to the gains that those same students could have been expected to have made had they gone to a school with average performance levels. (Weiss, 2008). Many wanted the ability to show the improvements that schools were making and this was best illustrated through showing gains in achievement or proficiency for the same groups of students over time, through growth models which, like status models, had the ability to show movement toward 100% proficiency (GAO, 2006). One of the fears held by those in the field of gifted education was that the achievement gap would be closed by the decline in scores of the most capable as a result of resources being poured in the direction of the struggling students (Gentry, 2006).

In the next section, a brief overview of some of the accountability reporting models will be provided. Although there are many more reporting models than what are

described, the following will give a layman's description without the inclusion of confusing statistical terminology that would only serve to complicate the basic differences between status and growth models.

Accountability Reporting Models

Status Models. Annual assessments are the tool used to measure movement toward meeting grade-level proficiency goals but at the time of implementation of NCLB, many states did not have databases with which to measure the change (Jhoff, 2007; McCall, et al, 2004) and thus it became necessary to use a 'status model' to measure movement toward the goal. The status models compared scores from year to year, as a snapshot; for example, this year's fifth graders would be compared to last year's fifth graders. This design resulted in finding the distance from average but did not indicate change or growth within the same cohort of students. Stated simply, it compared apples to oranges and spoke more to the demographics of each student group than it did to the effectiveness of the schools (McCall, et al, 2004).

Growth Models. As policy makers, educators, and the public were becoming critical of the status model due to the fact that it provided no consideration of how much better or worse schools were performing compared to prior year(s) (GAO, 2006); a movement was in place to utilize a different model; the growth model, a model that was believed could spearhead the education reform movement. The education reform movement was based on a belief that test averages were too low and that there was a societal responsibility to illustrate to the public how students were doing in terms of attaining goals and not just how they compared to national norms (McCall, et al., 2004), as well as an implied ethical responsibility to report, to parents and communities, how

school sites were doing at teaching children and to insure that the needs of *all* students were being met, not just those that were close to the proficiency line. Jhoff stated that “the big value of growth models [is] that educators focus on what their goal is: that is, to grow kids [academically]” (2007, p. 25). With states now having longitudinal data, the time was right to consider implementation of “student growth models - a variety of methods used to connect student scores over time” (O’Malley, Murphy, McClarty, Murphy, & McBride, 2011, p. 3), and defined by the U.S. Department of Education as “models that track the growth of individual students” (GAO, 2006, p. 17).

Several elements were necessary to inform growth model reporting. These elements included, 1) performance commensurate to a standard, 2) a growth trend over time, and 3) an ability to compare the growth over time against the standard while taking the starting or baseline level into account (McCall, et al., 2004). Subsequently, several different growth models emerged. States were free to choose which model to use and many, because of their complexity and the difficulty in attempting to explain how they work, have been criticized as being more telling of demographic characteristics than truly reflecting student academic growth (GAO, 2006; McCall, 2004; O’Malley, et al., 2011). Even though growth models were confusing, it was clear that change was needed (GAO, 2006; Jhoff, 2007; McCall, et al, 2004).

One model that was used extensively because of its similarity to the Growth Model Pilot Program’s acceptance of models that mimicked the use of Safe Harbor in addition to the status model was a “projection growth model.” These projection growth models have been criticized because they give the illusion that schools are on track to meet the 2014 deadline however, now that the deadline is nearing, it may not be possible

to meet the objective (Weiss, 2008). With this model, schools divide the points needed to hit 100% proficiency over the number of years in which they have to reach the target, thus allowing those students to be counted, who are not yet proficient but who are on target to reach proficiency by 2014. What could happen under this model is that as the deadline nears, the gap in need of closure has gotten too large to reasonably attain in the time remaining. One option open to states to resolve this issue is to modify the rigor of the standards or the cut-off scores that define proficiency.

Aware that the 2014 deadline to meet proficiency is largely a measure of the rigor of the standards, it had become apparent that there is disparity in the difficulty of state standards as a result of states being able to define proficiency and cut-scores for themselves and the lack of national standards (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010). This has resulted in the evolution of the Common Core State Standards now adopted by most states whereby states are all connected to a common set of standards and benchmarks to measure proficiency at each grade level. Reports from 2007 and 2009 each indicated that many states lowered their standards and proficiency cut scores, even some states that held the highest scores in the nation (Cronin, Dahlin, Kingsbury, & Adkins, 2007; Dahlin & Cronin, 2009). The complexity of growth models makes it difficult to determine if the desired outcome is within reach. With some states lowering their high standards (Cronin, et al., 2007; Dahlin & Cronin, 2009) and others meeting AYP through Safe Harbor, 2014 may arrive without much progress toward the desired goals of 100% proficiency or the closure of the achievement gap (Jhoff, 2007).

Colorado's Growth Model

The state of Colorado adopted a growth model for diagnostic purposes through passage of House Bill 04-1433 (H.B.-04-1433, 2004) in 2004. Colorado had applied for a position in the Growth Model Pilot Program but was denied participation because they only used growth model data reported at the school level and not at the level of individual students (GAO, 2006), a requirement held by the Department of Education as it conformed to their definition of “growth models.”

By 2007, Colorado passed House Bill (H.B.) 07-1048 which built on H.B.-04-1433 but refined the calculation methodology to make it useful for schools and parents (Technical Advisory Panel, 2008). This was the beginning of Colorado's foray into the use of individual student data for growth model reporting. Within the refinement of H.B.-04-1433, was a stipulation that a consultant must be hired to help the Colorado Department of Education develop their longitudinal growth model, which they desired to have as the cornerstone of their educational accountability system (CRS§22-7-604.3). As a result, The National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, at the hands of Damian Betebenner, was hired and proceeded to design the model that Colorado uses today, which at its core utilizes “Student Growth Percentiles” to measure growth (T.A.P., 2008). Colorado also attempted to address other criticisms of NCLB by making clear declarations regarding high ability learners and the difficulty of showing growth greater than what might be deemed “typical,” therefore making clear that schools would not be penalized in the event that the scores of the high performing students should slip due to measurement error (H.B.-07-1048, 2007).

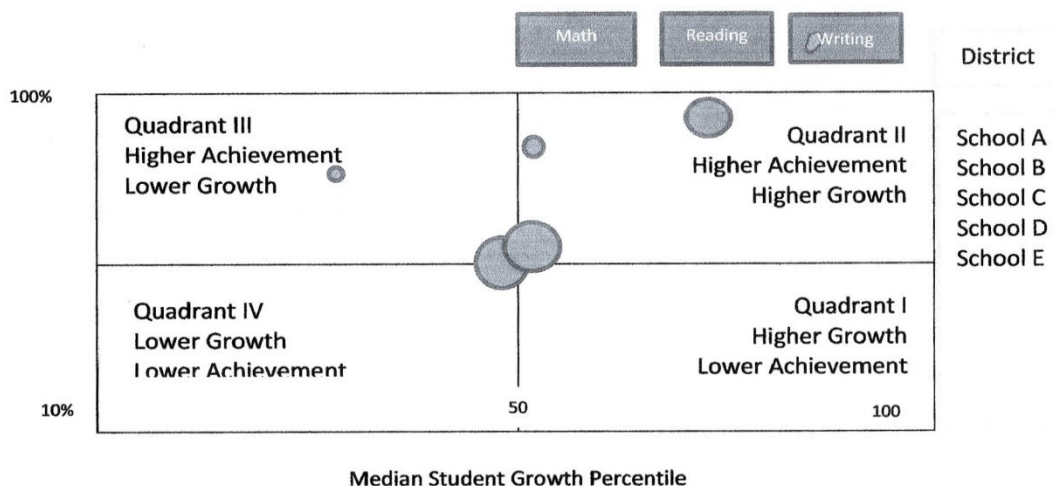
Betebenner and his design team ultimately designed a quartile regression model that served as an indicator of student growth without implying causality in the process, as the state recognized the complexity of influencing factors that go into student performance. Within this model are graphic representations of where student performance falls in comparison with other schools within the district and the state (see Figure 1). Each quadrant represents levels of achievement and growth. Specifically, the bottom right (Quadrant I) would be the area where schools would appear that are showing low achievement percentages but high growth percentiles (growth indicated on the x-axis, achievement on the y-axis). Under NCLB (2001), schools performing in this area would be likely to experience sanctions due to the low number of students reaching proficiency; furthermore students given permission to attend another school because of the underperformance of this Quadrant I school, could opt to attend a school that has higher achievement but not necessarily growth or the tools to help this lower achieving student grow to proficient or high achievement levels (McCall, et al, 2004).

Quadrant II (upper right), is the desired quadrant. This quadrant shows high achievement and high growth, indicating that students are performing well and schools are using best practices to ensure continued learning for students (McCall, et al, 2004). Because the data can also be disaggregated and individual sub-populations viewed (as long as the sub-population has 20 or more students represented), it is possible for parents to determine what schools are best meeting the needs of a particular sub-group. In the case of gifted students, for example, parents could go deeply into the data, to the “groups” level, to see how particular schools are doing in regard to growth and

achievement for the gifted population. The closer the bubble is to the top right corner, the better.

Quadrant III (upper left quadrant) is indicative of high achievement but low growth. Schools that consistently fall in this quadrant can become complacent because they are comfortable in the fact that the students are doing well and they don't need to put forth much effort to keep them there. Schools in this quadrant are frequently thought of as the 'best school' in any given locale but may not be the best choice for a student looking to leave an underperforming school because the teachers really are not doing anything to help students grow (McCall, et al, 2004). Lastly, Quadrant IV is the least desirable place for schools to find themselves. This quadrant represents the lowest performing and lowest growth schools. Schools falling in this quadrant are schools that can best be targeted for assistance that would lead to a stronger curriculum, better oversight, and stronger instructional leadership; all of which are elements present in the best performing schools (McCall, et al, 2004).

Figure 1 : Example of a Four-Quadrant Quartile Regression Model



Summary

Chapter II provided the context of the purpose for, and the implementation of growth models through a review of the history of the federal involvement in public education. The requirement for all students in grades three through ten to be proficient in reading and math by 2014 came about after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and quickly created a maelstrom of contention as states and districts began the journey to compliance. What quickly became clear was that status models were not able to recognize the hard work that was going into many of the school programs as students in failing schools were showing high growth in learning but had been so low that they were not yet hitting the proficient mark. With proficiency as the goal, if percentages at “proficient” were not where they needed to be, it didn’t seem to matter that the school was doing great things for academic growth. Schools that were showing high growth were still being restructured because they didn’t have enough students reaching proficiency, while other schools that had high numbers of proficient students were flat-lined in regard to growth but considered to be performing well even though students were not growing. Although much time and money have gone into growth model development, the 100% proficiency goal is still the focus of schools, meaning that the utilization of the data that could serve all students is not happening.

Also included in Chapter II are the evolution of middle-level learning structures – junior highs, middle schools, and K-8 structured models - and a look at gifted learners. Middle schools have a reputation of de-emphasizing academics and this presents a conundrum when aligned with the mandate imposed through NCLB to meet 100% proficiency for all students by 2014 or really for simply preparing children for the 21st

century. When taking into account the needs of the middle-level gifted learner, in the context of the middle school concept, it is not hard to understand why gifted learners become complacent about learning and lack the resilience to endure the rigor of high school and college, thus adding to the types of social and emotional difficulties that these learners commonly experience.

This literature review has illustrated the complexity of the triangulation of factors that come together in the enigma regarding how to best meet the academic growth needs of gifted learners at the middle grade developmental stage. Gifted learners bring their own set of special affective and academic needs. Middle grade school structures are lost in a web of confusion over the priority between social justice, self-discovery and academics. Federal mandates for achievement have schools scrambling to find the best means to meet the requirements while also determining how best to measure and show growth to avoid the long-arm of federal consequences for non-compliance.

Chapter III will provide the methodology that was used to uncover what is occurring in middle grade learning environments where high growth is being experienced. Schools were selected that are achieving high growth for the gifted and talented population as well as the general population, indicating that whatever is happening is good for all kids. Ultimately the goal was to attempt to provide a way to continue to move our general population to proficiency or better while not leaving our gifted learners behind in the process.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The research conducted was structured around the research question, “What conditions support today’s middle level learning environment that fosters sustained ‘high growth,’ as defined by growth model data, for its gifted populations?” The phenomenological method, a form of qualitative research, is a method described by Gall, Gall, & Borg as “the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate experience of the phenomena” (2007, p. 495). This method was chosen by the researcher due to the desire to determine the essence of the phenomena of high growth for gifted students. The research was approached from a constructionist epistemology, which is foundational in the use of phenomenological research as it requires one to create or build meaning after having set aside all pre-conceived ideas or previous experience (Crotty, 1998). This required the use of ‘bracketing’ (or *epoche*, the term coined by German mathematician Edmund Husserl) whereby the researcher’s experiences and background knowledge were set aside, as much as is possible, in order to reduce personal bias or influence on the essence created (Creswell, 2013).

This chapter provides the reader with the reason why a qualitative format was chosen as well as the specific steps that were conducted in carrying out this study. The

initial step in the process was to determine which middle level schools were considered for participation. Once determined, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was drafted and submitted (see Appendix A for the IRB narrative) although specific schools were not named. The purpose behind excluding specific school names was that the phenomena was to be uncovered through interviews with professional educators, both administration and staff, of high performing schools regardless of the schools, to determine the aspects of these schools that were making a difference. Once IRB permission was granted (see Appendix B), letters were sent via email to the administrators of the candidate schools to determine their interest in participating. Once the participants agreed to participate, appointments for interviews were set up. All participants were provided consent forms before the interviews were conducted. After all interviews were completed, analysis of the data were conducted and findings were developed through a hand coding process that was then summarized into a rich narrative.

Qualitative Research

The use of qualitative research emerged from the idea that traditional science is too rigid to explain the everyday events that occur (Creswell, 2013). Critical components of qualitative inquiry include the concern for context, a natural setting, use of a human instrument, an emergent design, purposeful sampling, establishment of the trustworthiness of the data, inductive analysis of the data, and the reporting of the findings (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996).

The first component, concern for context, addresses the idea that events and phenomena do not happen in isolation, in fact, they are a product of the influences of the greater world around them (Ary, et al., 1996; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Merriam,

1998). A key element in qualitative inquiry is that it seeks to relate human experience as it interacts with the surroundings, be they cultural, political, emotional (i.e. anger, satisfaction, joy, happiness, etc), in other words, the experiences that are difficult, if not impossible, to measure with numeric data.

The second component, natural setting, is necessary due to the need for the researcher to be in the field versus conducting the study in a laboratory setting where all potential influential variables can be controlled. The field can be whatever setting connects with the phenomena being studied (Ary, et al., 1996, Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Generally, within the study of education this means the school, and in this study, the school is not only the natural setting, it is the living environment of the phenomena being researched. As such, the setting was scrutinized in regard to demographics such as the size of the student population to determine what factors may be impacting the high growth rate that consistently is experienced by high-ability learners in these schools from which the data were collected. The use of a natural setting allows for a holistic approach to the research by allowing the researcher to see all possible factors involved in the outcome being measured (Ary, et al., 1996), in this case high-growth for gifted learners.

Component three addresses the means used to collect the data. In the case of qualitative inquiry, data are gathered by a human investigator who uses a variety of fieldwork techniques that may include observation, personal interviews, focus groups, interaction with the subject(s), and document analysis (Ary, et al., 1996; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). In this study, the researcher was the primary instrument of the data collection. The first step of the process was to look at the state growth model data to develop the sample and then data were collected directly from the participants using

personal interviews. During the course of the interview phase there were several defining documents collected which were used to better understand the structures in place within the school sites as well as to provide the triangulation necessary for the establishment of credibility of the information and findings.

Emergent design, the fourth element, discusses the structure of the research project. In qualitative inquiry, the investigator can only provide a skeleton structure to use as a guide (Ary, et al., 1996; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). An example of this component can be illustrated through the consideration of an interview setting. In qualitative inquiry there is generally a framework of questions designed to guide the conversation, and in phenomenological studies the number of questions asked is typically less, where the subject is invited to consider all possibilities. However in any interview setting there should be follow up questions and questions that will be asked for clarification purposes that cannot be anticipated prior to the interviews.

Within qualitative inquiry, the sample size is not expected or required to be large (Gall, et al., 2007; Merriam, 1998). This fifth element is in stark contrast to quantitative inquiry that considers any investigation with a small sample size, suspect. Because the purpose of quantitative inquiry is to provide understanding that is generalizable to the greater population, it is necessary to have a large enough sample size for it to be representative of that greater population (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). The acceptance of a small sample size in qualitative inquiry is anticipated due to the in-depth nature of the investigation. It is also characteristic of qualitative inquiry to employ non-random and purposeful subjects with which to carry out the research (Ary, et al, 1996; Merriam,

1998). Qualitative inquiry is not designed to be generalizable to the greater population, but rather to help understand “the *meaning* of human *action*” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 213).

Because of the small sample size, it would be possible to question the credibility of the data that emerges from a qualitative study; therefore, it was necessary to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. The methods typically used to establish credibility include triangulation which is “the use of multiple sources of data, multiple observers, and/or multiple methods” (Ary, et al., 1996, p. 480)] and third-party audits where an independent party examines the investigator’s audit trail to “attest to the dependability of procedures employed and to examine whether findings are confirmable – that is whether they are logically derived from, and grounded in, the data that were collected” (Schwandt & Halpern, in Ary, et al., 1996, pp. 480-481).

The next component of qualitative inquiry is the use of a complex interaction between deductive and inductive analysis. In contrast to quantitative inquiry that uses only deductive analysis, the data collected through interviews, observations and documents were considered as they were collected, reviewed throughout the process, and interview questions were revised as needed. Themes were deductively derived that further data collection refined and/or validated (Creswell, 2013). This ongoing analysis meant that adjustments to aspects of the research may have been modified to help build the understanding. For example, follow-up questions were required as were requests for documents and artifacts. It also meant that the investigator had to have the skills necessary to carry out the complex interaction between inferences and had to have the flexibility to make the necessary adjustments (Creswell, 2013).

The final component addresses the reporting of the findings. Due to the nature of qualitative inquiry, the final product of a qualitative study does not include numeric explanations and formulas but is narrative in form and contains rich descriptions of the findings (Ary, et al., 1996; Merriam, 1998). Perhaps the most important element of this component of the investigation was the significance of the findings. Besides allowing the use of the information for the greater good, it also served to spell out any shortcomings and made recommendations for future research potential (Gall, et al, 2007).

Phenomenological Research

The purpose for choosing the phenomenological research approach to qualitative inquiry was due to the researcher's desire to examine the lived experience of schools that have been successful in meeting the academic growth needs of their gifted student population. Although specific schools could have been researched through a case study framework it was considered a better option to develop the phenomenon of high growth as it occurred across school sites in order to determine if the essence of the phenomena could be found without the specificity of a single school site. As such interviews from teachers and administrators of three schools comprised the data used.

Phenomenological research is about identifying and describing the "subjective experiences of respondents" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 192) and is grounded in the underpinnings of philosophical foundations related to the creation of understanding formulated through the stripping of all notions taken for granted to experience the phenomena at his most pure existence (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Gall, et al., 2007; Merriam, 1998). It is about describing rather than explaining and looks at the phenomena from the perspective of the participants, not on rationalizing or explaining in a logical

manner, although it can have an interpretive dimension to it that will allow it to be considered more universally, potentially leading to implementation in other institutions as a result of the findings (Lester, 1999). Grounded in the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the methodology has evolved since its earliest roots to now reflect a more subjective approach to the understanding of a phenomenon or experience, rather than the original intention of getting to the “genuine, objective nature of things” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 192). The desired objective of this research was to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Creswell synthesized the work of Moustakas and van Manen to develop the defining features of phenomenology. The list contains the following:

- Emphasis is placed on a single concept or idea
- The exploration of the phenomena with a heterogeneous group of individuals that have all experienced the phenomenon
- A philosophical discussion around the idea of phenomenology that allows participants to see their input as subjective and yet part of a greater experience
- “bracketing,” or openly discussing personal experiences related to the phenomenon, in order to partly set those influences aside in order to focus on the experiences of the participants
- Data collection that focuses primarily on interviews (but can include other methods)
- Data analysis methods that follow a systematic procedure that moves from narrow units to broader units which then lend themselves to rich detailed descriptions that incorporate the “how” and “why” of the experience
- A descriptive passage to summarize the findings that provide the essence of the experience (2013, pp. 78-79)

The phenomenological study conducted in this project fell primarily within the phenomenology type known as “transcendental phenomenology” which included bracketing and the data analysis method described in the section above (Creswell, 2013). Secondly, it also included the hermeneutic vein that incorporated the unveiling of the reasons for the participant schools having been able to experience high growth for gifted

learners while speaking of “manifestation and unveiling... to invoke the notions of interpretation and description” (Crotty, 1998, p. 97).

Research Method

The research method section provides the descriptions and explanations regarding the selection of participants, or sample selection; the methods used in conducting the research; an explanation of epoché, or bracketing, a requisite practice in phenomenological research; and the structure which was used for the analysis of the collected data.

Sample

A purposive sample was selected through the review of data available in SchoolView, found on the department of education website for the state in which the study was undertaken (CDE, 2013). The decision to study only middle level grades was made consciously due to the fact that elementary schools do a majority of the identifications of gifted learners and have programming options in place that have shown growth for that level learner. The high school level was not considered as the academic programming at that level allows high ability learners to engage in programs such as International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement programs. Rarely are there concerns aired regarding the options or challenge available to learners at the elementary or high school levels of public education. Growth figures for middle level learners, throughout the state, do not fare as well and the data for gifted learners specifically, does not show the levels of growth that could or should be expected for the gifted student, indicating an area of concern about whether the intellectual needs of the gifted learner are being met.

The data being referred to are “Growth Data,” collected from annual state proficiency assessments that measure movement for learners from one year to the next and which allow for the disaggregation of sub-population data in the content areas of Mathematics, Reading, and Writing. The data used in this study showed multiple layers of rich information regarding the performance of elementary, middle, and high school level students indicating levels of proficiency to the state standards in various academic contents. At the top level of the data one can see every school in the state displayed however this provides no valuable data due to the large volume of schools throughout the state as well as the comparison being apples to oranges if one compared high schools to elementary schools, for instance.

The next level of data that can be looked at may be a single school level (i.e. elementary, middle, or high school) within the state or one could choose to look at each district and the schools within that district individually. For this study the approach taken was to look at a single level – middle level – within each individual school district. Each school district was analyzed, moving district by district, alphabetically from A through Z. Within each district the options for elementary and high school were unchecked so that only the schools containing middle level grades were revealed. These included all possible configurations for middle level learning options including traditional Middle Schools, K-8 schools, junior high schools, or combined junior/senior high schools. Although many of the combined schools are configured that way due to what is believed to be the size of some of the rural communities and the scarcity of resources which preclude other options, all potential school configurations were considered in the event that the configuration itself may have been a factor in the successful growth experienced.

Once the middle level schools were isolated within a given district, the growth scores for the general population of each school were recorded. The next step was to break out each school individually to obtain the next level of data which was the disaggregation by “Group” where any and all sub-populations with twenty or more members in that sub-population have their achievement and growth percentiles displayed. Due to privacy considerations only information at the district level, school level, and at a disaggregate level for sub-populations, of twenty or greater students are provided to the public. Although it is possible that some critical data were missed as a result of this privacy issue, it was determined through the pilot study conducted during the spring of 2012, that there were an adequate number of schools that showed the type of growth percentiles sought for this project and therefore the inability to gain access to those schools was not considered to be detrimental to the findings. As a result it was determined that a sample was able be constructed from the schools available that had adequate group sizes to produce publishable scores.

Thus, the next step in the process required a review of the data for all schools with disaggregated gifted and talented populations of twenty or more students. If the requisite twenty students existed, the growth percentile scores for Mathematics, Reading, and Writing, for the gifted population, were recorded next to the scores that had been recorded for the general school population in the previous step. The reason for recording the percentiles for the general population was due to the desire to investigate schools with a priority of meeting the needs of the majority of the learners in their school, not just focusing on one particular group of learner. It was also important that the growth percentiles over the four years that growth data had been available for gifted and talented

sub-populations be recorded, as the desire was to see what was happening in schools that are sustaining high growth, not simply schools that experienced a ‘good year.’

Additionally, single year growth spikes can be difficult to explain and may be suspect when media accounts each year report incidents of unethical practices among school personnel that result in scores being ‘thrown out’ and therefore not included for that particular year (these can be in a particular grade and or a particular tested content area). Therefore, the study required at least the maintenance of high performance (performance above the 70th percentile) for two years of the four years used in the look back period (Spring of 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013).

When the pilot study was conducted in the spring of 2012 there were only two years of growth data available for gifted and talented learner populations (CSAP, spring 2010 and CSAP, spring 2011), the additional two years (TCAP, spring 2012 and TCAP 2013) had the potential of not only adding to the number of possible sample schools but also had the potential to have schools that had been high performing in terms of growth, drop from candidacy as a result of declines. In addition, during this time the state moved from the state assessment program test to a transitional assessment program (SAP vs. CAP) in order to aid school districts in the move from the old state standards to the more recently adopted, and more rigorous state standards which align with the Common Core State Standards adopted by the state. Thus it is possible that some drop may have occurred due to the more rigorous nature of the objectives being measured during the transitional period. Ultimately the results found in the data indicate that there was a shift in eligible schools from the time of the pilot to the time of the research collection for the final project.

Once all the schools containing data for the requisite population were recorded, the percentiles were examined and analyzed. Any schools with growth percentiles at or above 90% were highlighted with a colored highlighter. Schools with 80-89% growth percentiles were highlighted with a second color highlighter. Finally, for the sake of fall back, all schools with growth percentiles of 70-79% were highlighted with a color. Once the highlighting task was completed, lists from highest to lowest percentile (99th percentile down to 70th percentile) in each testing content (Mathematics, Reading, and Writing), were created.

The pilot study previously conducted required the analysis of data for 182 school districts and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The data were collected for this project in the same way that they were for the pilot study, with the exception that this project had the advantage of having two additional years of data. The data collected for this project reflected a total of 183 school districts or BOCES, for a total of 602 public, charter, and online schools. Over the period of the four years several new schools were established and several other schools were shut down or otherwise did not have scores reported for one or more years that were reviewed.

Contemplating the percentiles experienced at the 70th percentile or higher for three content areas tested, for 602 middle grade school configurations across the entire state resulted in a very small percentage of high performing schools. Table 1 shows the number of scores above the 70th percentile for each of the tested content areas over the four year period disaggregated for the general population as compared to the gifted and talented population. The numbers do not indicate the number of schools therefore it is possible that a single school could represent, for example, three of the 70th percentile

scores in 2010 if the school had a 70th percentile score in Mathematics, Reading, and Writing.

Table 1.

Number of test scores experienced in all tested content areas at the top growth percentiles, by percentile range.

| | 70-79 th percentile | | 80-89 th percentile | | 90-99 th percentile | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|----|--------------------------------|----|--------------------------------|----|
| | General | GT | General | GT | General | GT |
| Spring 2010 CSAP | 58 | 39 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Spring 2011 CSAP | 47 | 35 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Spring 2012 TCAP | 37 | 35 | 10 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Spring 2013 TCAP | 44 | 45 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 2 |

A deviation from the process of the pilot, for this study, required that schools be included that may have experienced a decline in growth percentile scores sometime during the four year review period due to the fact that no schools have maintained increasing growth percentiles each year over the four years. Additionally it was not unusual to find schools dropping below the 70th percentile after showing growth percentiles in the 80th percentile just a year before. It cannot be determined how much, if any, of the decline can be attributed to the change in the rigor of the test as it moved from measuring the old standards to measuring the new standards. For purposes of this study, each school that was considered had at least one year where one or more content areas dropped below the 70th percentile for either the general population or the gifted and talented population. Had these schools been eliminated due to this growth decline, there would have been only two schools eligible for participation and that would have been only in the content area of math. Although anticipated to have a fairly large number of schools to contact, based on the scores recorded for 2010 and 2011, the number of

schools eligible was actually reduced to just four schools (three of which had high growth scores in more than a single subject area), as determined through the following process.

After the data were analyzed to determine which schools were experiencing the phenomena of high growth percentiles for their learner populations, it was noted that there were a total of fourteen schools that could be considered. Of those fourteen schools several were ruled out. Six top performing schools only had growth scores available for their general population and because the purpose of the study was directly connected to the high growth of gifted and talented students the lack of gifted student growth data made use of those six schools a moot point and thus the number of eligible schools was reduced to eight. As mentioned previously the gifted population would have needed to be twenty students or more in order to have scores reported so it was assumed that the six schools had fewer than twenty gifted learners among their population. Although it could be surmised that the gifted population scores were also going to be elevated, it could not be ascertained at what level they were performing and therefore these schools were eliminated.

Of the remaining eight middle level schools, four of the schools had only a year or two of data (with scores for only 2012 and or 2013) indicating they were new schools which in turn indicated, and was verified by disaggregating the data by grade levels on the SchoolView data site, that they represented only a single grade level in their first year of operation and then sixth and seventh grade scores, only, existed for the second year of school operation. These differences make it difficult to compare scores equitably to schools with three grade levels. Subsequently these schools were also eliminated which reduced the number of potential candidate schools to four.

Table 2.

Math, Reading, and Writing Growth Percentiles across four years for the three schools used for this study.

| School | Content Area | Spring 2010 CSAP | | Spring 2011 CSAP | | Spring 2012 TCAP | | Spring 2013 TCAP | |
|---|--------------|------------------|---------|------------------|---------|------------------|---------|------------------|---------|
| | | Overall %ile | GT %ile | Overall %ile | GT %ile | Overall %ile | GT %ile | Overall %ile | GT %ile |
| College Bound – Main Street 6 th /7 th /8 th | Math | 92 | 87 | 77 | 62 | 75 | 75 | 78 | 70 |
| | Reading | 76 | 74 | 72 | 77 | 69 | 78 | 62 | 61 |
| | Writing | 85 | 93 | 78 | 77 | 73 | 90 | 67 | 64 |
| College Bound – North Forest 6 th only 2010 6 th /7 th only 2011 6 th /7 th /8 th 2012 & 2013 | Math | 95 | 91 | 94 | 97 | 81 | 73 | 73 | 72 |
| | Reading | 83 | 77 | 71 | 86 | 58 | 53 | 65 | 71 |
| | Writing | 89 | 93 | 79 | 75 | 67 | 65 | 69 | 72 |
| Green Valley Middle Level School 6 th /7 th /8 th | Math | 78 | 84 | 81 | 76 | 69 | 71 | 83 | 81 |
| | Reading | 72 | 71 | 76 | 74 | 68 | 70 | 74 | 82 |
| | Writing | 72 | 78 | 79 | 81 | 66 | 77 | 74 | 79 |

Three of these four remaining, qualified schools were charter schools operating in an urban area while the fourth was a rural public school operating approximately forty-five miles north of the urban center where the charter schools were located. Of the three charter schools one was ultimately eliminated due to the fact that the high growth scores existed only in the area of math content. The result of eliminating one school was that it left three schools to focus on, all of which provided between one and three interview participants.

Table 2 (on the previous page) shows the general and the gifted and talented growth percentile scores for the three schools that were ultimately included in the research including the scores as they were recorded over the four years (2010-2013) in all three academic content areas tested by the state tests. The information that follows will provide more detailed information about the schools.

Schools.

College Bound Charter Network.

Two of the schools identified for this study are part of an urban Charter Management Organization which was started in 2006 with the opening of a single middle level school (the first of the subject schools). The school opened with a single grade (sixth) when a three year charter was granted by the local school district. The school then expanded one grade per year until reaching the typical middle level configuration of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The network has now grown to include one elementary campus, two high school campuses and six middle school campuses. All schools in the network are open enrollment, not-for-profit, public charter schools that were established to overcome the prevalent occurrence of low income students of color leaving middle

school without the requisite skills to be successful in high school, college, or life. The network is committed to providing a rigorous education as well as a safe educational experience for the greater than 90% low income and greater than 95% minority population of the neighborhoods they serve as a ‘neighborhood school.’

The mission of the network was to provide children a rigorous education with high standards, structure, and accountability. Promises were made to the families of the students attending these network schools that their children would be kept safe and they would be prepared to go to college. Due to high demand for the type of education the network promised, a second middle level campus (the second school included in this study – the North Forest campus) was added in 2009. Typical for this network, the school opened with a single grade level and subsequently added the next grades in the following years until it filled capacity by grade level and student population. In 2010, two more middle level schools were added and 2012 saw the opening of the two most recently opened middle level schools. Based on the possibility that a particular middle grades model could be indicated to affect the high growth that was experienced, it is important to note that the Charter Network schools do not carry any moniker related to a particular model, not “middle school,” “K-8,” or “junior high,” nor do they advertise the use of any such model. Growth continues as two high schools have been opened in the last two years as well, each in a location to receive the eighth grade students moving up from the middle level schools within the charter organization.

What is considered a simple commitment to provide rigorous education and a safe environment for learning has proved to be successful as the network led a major urban city’s school system in terms of student achievement and growth. The curriculum and

instructional practices incorporated by the network were developed through a study of practices used in high performing charter schools around the country. Many of the practices are elements cited by the teachers and administrators of these schools in the interviews, as being unique and atypical of most public schools. The list of best practices includes:

- Extended school day and school year – 20% more instructional time for the school day and ten days added to the school calendar
- A discipline system that included rewards and consequences
- Uniforms for all students
- An insistence on student safety and a maximum amount of time spent on learning
- Data driven instruction supported by ‘Data Days’ for teachers to review data provided through ongoing and regular testing cycles
- Data driven interventions for struggling learners that included up to an additional three hours per day of instruction in weak areas, in addition to core classes
- Use of technology in the classroom that meets the needs of students to prepare them for the 21st century workplace
- Neighborhood schools utilizing door-to-door promotion of the schools and establishing community connections
- Parent engagement maintained through constant and ongoing communication
- Three weeks of training for teachers over the summer where the focus for the upcoming school year is framed
- A high level of autonomy for teachers within their classrooms with an accompanying high level of accountability to obtain strong results expected in return
- The structure of the organization emphasized academic achievement
- Teachers received at least two periods of plan time per day and have few responsibilities outside of the classroom to distract them from their foremost task
- The administrative role was to remove obstacles to effective teaching

Many of these practices are in direct contrast to practices in place in public schools but were included based on what was experienced at successful schools around the country, as well as through the development of the network by its Board of Trustees.

With no intention on the part of the researcher to claim that the charter network included in this study has found the ‘perfect’ combination of elements to provide high growth regardless of where a school site is created, it is important to look at this

organization with a discerning eye toward excellence, as they have opened six schools that have all experienced what the state considers to be “high growth” as indicated by annual testing data. Due to the desire to have the findings of this research provide replicable themes, it was important to note that although there were only two of the six charter network school sites considered eligible for this research, the ineligibility of the other four was not due entirely to low growth scores.

The network has grown rapidly and the data shows high growth and achievement for all the campuses. Even the lowest performing campus maintained growth above the state average however it was not at the 70th percentile or better, which was the cut off for consideration for this research project. This lower performing school had undergone a change in leadership as the principal of the Main Street Campus from the fall of 2010 through the spring of 2013 has been moved to the underperforming campus to affect change in the climate and culture, with the hope of turning student performance scores around. It was the desire of the network to have all the campuses performing in the top thirtieth percentile (or better) in terms of growth scores. The other three campuses that were high performing were not included due to two of the schools having completed their first year of operation in 2012-13, providing them with only one year of scores (which would have been only sixth grade). The third campus, although it had several years of data, had no disaggregated data for the gifted and talented population, indicating that the campus had less than twenty identified gifted students.

Further review of the charter organization uncovered the names and professional positions of the Board of Trustees that revealed a listing of business leaders and executives as well as advocates of education reform and children’s policy issues. These

individual were all hand selected by the organization's founder for their expertise and commitment to children and excellence in education. The Board, coupled with teachers who meet high quality standards, creates a system that appears to be working based on the results used by the state to measure success. Information gleaned from the website showed the following information regarding the organization as a whole. Employees of the network received "competitive compensation packages" however salary figures were not available. The composition of the teachers in the network included 50% Teach for America corps members or alumni, 30% of the teachers have a Master's or Doctoral degree, and 100% are "highly qualified" according to standards specified by Federal and State governments.

It is also important to note that although the charter organization had received fairly substantial grant monies since its inception, the school had worked very hard to operate with only the public school funding provided through the district (per pupil cost and mill levy monies) within which it operates as well as state and federal funds to which it is entitled, such as Title I funds. Since the economic downturn it had been necessary to tap the funds from donor partners in order to keep up with the capital growth demands of the organization but otherwise public funds were used to maintain instructional needs.

College Bound Middle Level School – Main Street Campus. The Main Street Campus was the oldest of the schools within the Charter Network and was the only campus building owned by the charter network (the remaining campuses lease space from the local school district and in some cases share buildings with other public schools within the school district). Established in 2006, the Main Street campus has a population of approximately 350 students in grades six through eight. It is a tuition free, public

charter school within an urban setting that serves a population of approximately 90% “free and reduced” lunch students and a roughly 99% minority population. 51% of the student population was English Language Learners (ELL) and 8% of the population was special education students. A stated goal of the school, aside from the network goals, was to make each member of the school ‘family’ feel supported, challenged, and loved. The core beliefs of the school adhere to the network beliefs and the staff supports the mission of the network. One subject, Ms. Cooper, was interviewed from this campus. Ms. Cooper was the administrator of record during the years of high academic growth reported for this study and volunteered to provide her insight into the growth phenomenon that occurred there during her leadership. Ms. Cooper, as a result of her strong leadership ability, was reassigned to the school within the charter network that had experienced the lowest scores of the organization, with the hope that she will be able to turn the school around through focused attention being given to the school’s culture and climate.

College Bound Middle Level School – North Forest Campus. The second of the Charter Network campuses to open, the North Forest campus opened in the fall of 2009. It had a student population of approximately 375 students who fit the profile of the other Charter Network schools regarding its demographic make-up. That is, greater than 90% were eligible to receive free and reduced price lunch and greater than 95% of the students were students of color. With slightly less English Language Learners than the Main Street campus, the North Forest campus was home to 42% ELL students and 12% of the students received special education services. North Forest was also a tuition free, public charter school that offered open enrollment with preference to the boundary

neighborhood, thus making it a neighborhood school of choice. The interviews conducted for this campus included that of the school principal, Ms. Adams, as well as two teachers at the school, Ms. Baker and Ms. Davis. According to Ms. Adams, the message of the North Forest campus reflected a commitment to all of the students to push them to achieve great things that would “reflect on their faces as they recognized all that they had learned and what was still before them to achieve.” This campus also adhered to the tenets of the Charter Network and worked to standardize the practices to create the environment that promoted student academic achievement and growth.

Green Valley Middle Level School. Green Valley Middle Level School was a small, rural, public middle level school in a Western state that had experienced high academic achievement and growth for several years. Although it carried a “middle school” label it was not determined that the school actually followed a Middle School Model as the school is too small to have multiple small ‘teams’ within the school and there was at least one teacher who taught not only multiple content areas but also multiple grade levels. At Green Valley Middle Level School only about 16% of the 381 students were eligible for free and reduced lunch and less than 15% of the students were students of color. Further demographic review indicated that the median income of the community surrounding the school was about 45% higher than the state average and the community had experienced an 87% population increase since 2000. The differences between these organizations were fairly dramatic, especially in regard to their demographic data, yet they were both doing very well to meet the academic growth needs of very different student populations.

Upon describing the school building itself, one teacher interviewed from Green Valley shared that for at least the last fifteen years the school had “open classrooms” meaning that folding doors between single classrooms were opened to provide a large instructional area that was shared by two teachers who were then free to team teach. This structure was endangered when a new principal came to the school “five or six years ago” but after observing for a year, the principal decided to trust the teachers who worked well within the open classroom design, and it was therefore maintained. Another teacher subject shared that the building was older and nearing capacity as the local community was undergoing sizable population growth.

The school motto of Green Valley Ranch was “Success lasts a lifetime.” On the school’s website, the principal indicated that student success is gained through high academic rigor in core and enrichment classes. It also stated that life-long lessons are learned through co- and extra-curricular opportunities. Supporting that assertion the school bore a Focus School label as an EXCEL school, that is Extra-Curricular Engagement and Learning, and had as one of its school-wide goals to have 100% of students participate in extra-curricular activities. The philosophy behind that decision was based on the belief that students that are involved in school activities outside of only attending classes are more likely to be successful in school. Furthermore it was thought that by providing enrichment opportunities in which all students are encouraged to participate outside of the academic school day, it left more time during the school day to focus on core content. A quick review of the clubs that were offered, in addition to the sports programs, indicates that the extra-curricular focus is taken seriously and that there was a broad variety of clubs available that should allow every child to be able to find a

club that would interest and engage them. Two classroom teachers were interviewed from Green Valley, Mr. Edwards and Ms. Foster.

Methods

Interview.

Data were collected primarily through personal, unstructured, in-depth interviews, in settings that were suggested by the individual participant. Interviews were arranged directly with the subjects. Three participants chose to be interviewed at their school site, one chose a coffee shop, and two, although not optimal, were conducted by telephone due to that being the most accessible for time and opportunity. Estimated initially to take thirty minutes interviews ultimately ranged in length from thirty-two minutes to just over an hour and a half. Each of the participants was ultimately a ‘gatekeeper’ (a key individual within the group that provided access to other participants, Creswell, 2013), and whereby one administrator did play that role in getting teachers involved, it was not determined to be necessary to contact additional participants from information gathered during the interviews with any of the subjects.

All interviewees were provided with informed consent forms prior to being interviewed allowing them the opportunity to decline participation should they desire. Permission to record the interview session was also obtained from the participants as voice recordings produced the best format to gather responses without relying on memory or poor shorthand skills to recreate significant statements later. Participants were also notified that if at any time they felt uncomfortable or desired to stop the interview, that request would be honored, however that did not occur and all participants completed the

interview. At the end of each interview the subjects were informed that they would receive a gift card as a ‘thank you’ for their participation.

Although there were not a large number of participants from each location the information gleaned in total from all the participants provided a repetition of ideas regardless of the specific school site. This conceptual saturation was deemed to have occurred and interviews were deemed complete when respondents shared the same idea and it was believed that all new possibilities had been exhausted.

In addition to obtaining the permissions mentioned previously, participants were provided with the background about why their school was selected to participate, the confidentiality of the information that they were about to provide, and they were informed that they would be given an opportunity to review the descriptive statement that was created out of the research, for validation of the statements in regard to their perspective. This process called “member checking” where the respondents have the opportunity to verify what had been transcribed and can make additional clarifying statements or modify statements that may not accurately reflect the sentiment that was intended, was carried out and each subject was sent their personal statement.

Due to the nature of the study, the questions used were few, broad, and open-ended. The questions were designed to guide the responses in the best way possible to develop the structural and textural descriptions that “ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) without having guided the participant in any specific direction of desired statement. The desired effect was to have the interview ‘conversational’ in nature in order to help develop the descriptions during the analysis of the data and the development of the themes. The

questions were created around the following two descriptive contexts: *textural description* responses that addressed the question of *what* it is that the participant experienced; providing an account of pre-reflective perceptions and intuitive responses to the experience, while the *structural descriptions* addressed the *how*, or the conditions, situations and contexts that were more of a judgmental, imaginative perspective (Creswell, 2013; Gall, et al., 2007). Although there were additional questions asked for clarification purposes, the intent was to avoid any questioning that would in any way lead the participant in his or her responses.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in such a way that there was no input on the researcher's part that could influence or change the perspective of the subject. The researcher's position remained neutral and objective in order to collect only the perceptions of the participant. Occasionally a restatement of the understanding of what was said was made, in order to clarify meaning of the subject's opinion.

Having kept the above considerations in mind, the primary questions that led the interviews with all participants were:

1. Why do you believe your campus is more successful at producing high growth for gifted learners than other campuses within the state?
2. To what would you attribute the high growth that your building consistently attains?

If participants were uncertain how to respond to either of these questions or indicated a need for further direction, the following questions were provided to guide them in developing areas of possibility with which to respond.

- a) What is the structure of the school day? (i.e. extended day, # of contact hours per day, etc.)
- b) Are there unique programs or curriculums used that could play a part in student growth?
- c) What is the attitude or belief system within the staff of the campus that contributes to the growth experienced by the students?
- d) What instructional model is in place for the GT students and does it differ from the model used for other students in the school?
- e) What leadership style provides the most constructive means to attain a high growth attitude among teachers and students?

As the interviews unfolded there were additional questions asked but nothing was original nor designed to take the response in a different direction. The additional questions served only to clarify or follow a statement from a participant. Upon completion of the interview portion of the project, each participant was sent a gift card as a token of appreciation for the time provided by the subject to this project. The following section presents the interview subjects through a table and short narrative overview. The information presents the positions, backgrounds, and experiences of the six interview subjects who volunteered to participate in this study.

Subjects.

Table 3 provides a quick-view of the interview subjects that participated in the research. Following the table is a short professional biography of each of the respondents.

Table 3.
Interview subject names and descriptions

| Participant Name | School Name | Participant Role | Education and Years in Education |
|------------------|---|--|---|
| Ms. Adams | College Bound Charter – North Forest Campus | Administrator | B.A. in French & Spanish M.A. in Education 3 years as 6 th grade Writing Teacher within the Charter Organization 2 years as Chief Curriculum Officer within the Charter Organization In her 2 nd year as Principal of North Forest Campus |
| Ms. Baker | College Bound Charter – North Forest Campus | 8 th Grade Reading Teacher | B.A. in unknown area M.A. in Education Teach For America member/alumni 12 year teacher 3 rd year at North Forest |
| Ms. Cooper | College Bound Charter – Main Street Campus | Administrator | B.A. in Africana Studies M.A. in Education M.A. in School Leadership Previously taught 7 th grade science Teach For America Teacher for 2 years 3 years as Main Street Campus Principal In her 1 st year at another network middle level school |
| Ms. Davis | College Bound Charter – North Forest Campus | 6 th Grade Reading Teacher | B.A. in English with Minor in Elementary Education 6 years teaching 5 th grade at public school in neighboring district 4 th year 6 th grade teacher at North Forest |
| Mr. Edwards | Green Valley Middle Level School | 6 th Grade Math Teacher | B.A. in unknown area M.A. in Mathematics 15+ years teaching 15+ years at Green Valley |
| Ms. Foster | Green Valley Middle Level School | 7 th & 8 th Grade Language Arts and Social Studies Teacher | B.A. English M.A. Elementary Education 19 years teaching 2 nd year at Green Valley |

Ms. Adams Ms. Adams was the principal of the North Forest campus and had been with the Charter Network since its start seven years ago. Starting as the 6th grade writing teacher in 2006, Ms. Adams served that function for three years. After that, she served as the Charter Network's Chief Curriculum Officer for three years, which she stepped down from due to feeling too removed from the students. Ms. Adams has now been the principal at North Forest for two years.

Ms. Baker. Ms. Baker was an eighth grade reading teacher in her third year with the Charter Network, specifically at North Forest, and her twelfth year teaching altogether. She was one of the College Bound Charter Network's teacher/coaches who are responsible not only for teaching, but also for helping to coach other teachers to be better at their craft. Ms. Baker graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder and earned her Master's degree in Education from Loyola at Marymount. A Teach for America member, she had taught in the inner city in Los Angeles, CA and had the opportunity to travel to other countries with fourth and fifth grade students. Ms. Baker was a self-proclaimed former gifted and talented student, and had some insight into the needs of this population, based on her own experiences, that provided her with a unique perspective allowing her to present options for gifted children at North Forest, during her tenure there.

Ms. Cooper. Now in her fourth year with the College Bound Charter Network, Ms. Cooper was the principal of the Main Street Campus for three years. Her experience prior to joining the network was as a seventh grade science teacher in a large urban school on the east coast and she was a Teach for America corps member for two of those years. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Africana Studies and two Master's degrees; one

in education from Pace University and one in school leadership from Harvard Graduate School of Education. Ms. Cooper had been moved to an underperforming campus, by the Charter Network Board at the beginning of the school year, where her work was focused on changing the climate and culture of the school.

Ms. Davis. Ms. Davis was a sixth grade reading teacher/coach at North Forest, in her fourth year teaching for the Charter Network. She earned her B.A. in English with a minor in Elementary Education and then went on to teach in two public schools in neighboring districts for a total of six years before coming to the network. Ms. Davis was the only subject who was not found to have a Master's Degree but she indicated during her interview that she was completing studies in Special Education with a possible desire to work in that field. Ms. Davis was the only subject interviewed who showed discontent in her experience with the job and thus lent a different tone to what other respondents reported.

Mr. Edwards. Mr. Edwards was a sixth grade math teacher who had taught at Green Valley for approximately 17 years. He enjoyed teaching and expressed joy at being at Green Valley. He had a Master's degree in Mathematics and indicated that the research he conducted during his Master's program was centered on the construct of meta-cognition. He shared that he has used that research to help his students better understand the learning process and how their brains work during thought and reflection. Although a math teacher who indicated that he used data to drive his instruction, he admitted having a dislike of number crunching, the analysis of student data, and the use of statistics to sell educational curriculum.

Ms. Foster. Ms. Foster is a second year teacher at Green Valley Middle Level School, who came to this state after teaching in a neighboring state for 17 years. She saw Green Valley as “an amazing school” and based that on her many years of experience in public and private schools as well a wide variety of grade levels. Ms. Foster had a degree in English and a Master’s degree in Elementary Education. She taught language arts and social studies at two grade levels for a total of four preps at Green Valley. She considered the schedule to be grueling but she loved her school and expressed that she was happy to have a job after indicating that several positions for which she applied had sent her rejection notices indicating that she had been one of about 400 or 500 people applying for a single job.

The next section that will be discussed is document analysis. Document analysis was important in this study after the collection of evaluation rubrics, network designed student performance tests, and school handbooks.

Document analysis. A secondary form of data collection, document analysis, was also used in this study due to the mention of several documents during the interviews that were believed to be instrumental in the conditions under which the schools and teachers function. Documents collected included a rubric used in teacher evaluations, as well as the school handbook provided to families of students attending schools in the charter network that was included in the project, and a copy of a school designed benchmark test that is used to help teachers drive instruction. Each of the documents lent valuable insight into the level of expectation that is required of families, students, and staff members and which together all played an integral part in the structure of the organization that they represent.

Memoing. The final form of data collection used during the process was memoing. Described by Creswell (2013) and Schwandt (2001), the process involved note taking during and just after the interview whereby the investigator provided notes and commentary that described aspects of the setting and the development of categories, patterns, and theories as the investigation unfolded. Although subjective in nature the ability to integrate these non-verbal aspects of the interview process aided in understanding the phenomenon when viewed alongside other pieces of the project. It was through this memoing process that commonalities of thought began to develop the categories of similarity between participants. From these categories came the first glimmer of the factors that created environments conducive to high academic growth.

Bracketing. Bracketing or epoché is essential in phenomenological research. The process of bracketing occurred when the researcher declared any prior experiences or understandings of the phenomena being studied in a direct statement as a means of suspending what Husserl termed “the natural attitude” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 19), in order to “focus on the intrinsic nature of the phenomena” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 19). The investigator’s epoché follows.

The investigator had been a middle level gifted education specialist in the western state where the research was conducted. The investigator is also the parent of young adults who were identified for gifted education programming in their K-12 education careers, in a school district within the state where the research took place. The experiences lived through both of these roles provided background about what was offered in typical middle level gifted education programs within public school settings, as well as the prevailing practices and philosophies that administrative leadership bring to

the decisions regarding what programming is put in place. The researcher also gained knowledge through attaining a Master's Degree in Gifted Education, therefore is also familiar with research in the field that has formed much of what is believed to be most suitable and best practice for meeting the needs of the gifted population. In a desire to unveil what is being done in schools that are successfully meeting the academic need for challenge, the researcher attempted to suspend what is known, to try to determine what is working in schools with data indicating high growth for their gifted population. The investigator has not experienced the high growth phenomena being researched.

Data Analysis. Analysis of the data, like much of the qualitative approach, was emergent in nature, meaning that the data underwent ongoing analysis throughout the data collection period (Creswell, 2013). Not only were interviews transcribed as soon as possible after the completion of the interview, but also by conducting the interviews within a window of two weeks, it allowed the data from one interview to be clearly remembered apart from the others. When so many individuals were interviewed who held similar views it would have been possible to confuse the responses. However, the completion of the interviews in a short window also allowed the researcher to recognize when the introduction of new ideas had ceased. This combined with the memos that were prepared during and immediately after the interviews, helped to delineate when salient points were shared by more than one participant. Without the memos it was possible that confusion could have occurred regarding whether a single respondent had shared a belief or if it was shared by more than one person, especially given the close time proximity of the interviews to each other; some occurring in the same day and at the same location.

Next, the process of hand coding occurred where categories and themes were identified as the interviews were transcribed. The ongoing analysis also allowed for adjustments to be made to the questions that were asked, although it was evident that the questions provided a good platform for participants to express their beliefs with no modification of the questions being needed. Through ongoing analysis the researcher was also able to ascertain when saturation had occurred. Saturation was considered to have occurred at the time that responses from different individuals no longer produced new information or ideas. It was not anticipated that saturation would necessarily occur across sites but in fact there were more similar themes across sites than anticipated. Although understood that the findings cannot be generalized due to the nature of the study and the small sample, it was a bonus to find similarities across sites and not simply between the participants from the same schools. Additionally it indicated an increased potential for other school sites to add some of the themes, or elements of them, to their own schools with the hope it would increase their test scores as well.

All data from the interviews and any documents collected, were reviewed in their entirety and were hand coded to develop the categories or themes that allowed the inductive development of the experience to emerge and be developed into the final statements. The first review of the data required a focused review of the interview transcripts where significant statements were highlighted that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). This process, termed “horizontalization” (Moustakas, 1994) but also known as open coding allowed “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 284; Moustakas, 1994) to be developed. These “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013 p. 284; Moustakas, 1994)

became the themes that, with the memos, evolved from the interview transcripts into meaningful statements.

This open coding, or horizontalization, of the transcripts occurred as a first formal step in the analysis process. Although through memoing ideas developed that were noted anecdotally, it was through the detailed reading of each transcript that the categories began to fully emerge. Each transcript was read with fresh eyes, that is, there was no attempt to force one participant's idea into another's category simply as a means to streamline the process. Each transcript was given its own opportunity to have categories developed directly and only from that interview in the event that it was a unique opinion. Once all transcripts were coded for categories, open coding was complete.

Once coded, the analysis method most aligned with the phenomenological research approach is called "reflective analysis." This is a largely subjective approach "in which the researcher relies primarily on intuition and judgment in order to portray or evaluate the phenomenon being studied" (Gall, et al., 2007, p. 472). Clearly this approach is not structured but allows for a thorough holistic reflection on any, and all, elements that may impact or influence the phenomenon. Although the necessary 'bracketing' requires the researcher to set aside what they know, the analytic process required by reflective analysis requires a sizeable amount of background experience and knowledge. Described by Gall, et al., (2007) through an artistic analogy, it is similar to an artist who perceives a phenomenon that is then portrayed in the work of the artist, not only in the basic picture but also in the textures and deeper meanings that come through the artist's ability to put the essence of the phenomena onto the canvas. The artist's experience and skill allows for a deeper representation than a simple stick figure could

portray, and therefore, like the investigator, the depth of knowledge held by the researcher allowed a thick description to emerge. Although perhaps best conducted within group research opportunities or after a good deal of research experience, it was possible with a good deal of experience in the content being investigated, and extensive review of the data, to recognize the salient themes that recur in the data, thus allowing for the structured aspect to emerge (Gall, et al., 2007).

The clusters, or themes, that emerged were then used to create two statements; the “textural description [that tells] what the participants experienced, and the structural description that reflects the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). “The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). The final descriptive statements are the composite descriptive representation of the essence of the phenomenon, which is the synthesis of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013) and are summarized in the conclusion.

Summary

Chapter III outlined the methodology used for this research study. A phenomenological research method was chosen to create an understanding of the phenomenon best described as schools that have experienced high growth for gifted learners. Upon determining what schools were to be included as participants, based on “Growth Model” growth percentile scores in Mathematics, Reading, or Writing, IRB application was made and the IRB was approved (see Appendix B). Upon approval the

schools were contacted, interviews were conducted, memoing occurred, interviews were transcribed, documents were analyzed, and the analysis of the data were undertaken.

Constructionism coupled with prior professional knowledge of the construct of giftedness and the nature and needs of this special population, allowed the researcher to build an understanding of what is working to affect this phenomenon of high growth, and the use of “bracketing” allowed the researcher to set aside notions that could have biased the perspectives of the participants as well as potentially biasing the analysis of data. With the data collected and accurate construction through the analysis completed, this study provides information that is applicable to many districts and school sites and will enable the academic needs of the gifted middle level learners be met and sustained while also providing growth for our average and struggling learners as well. Educators owe it to all students to consider the possibilities of this research in providing the most academic focused and best structured environment for all learners to thrive. In Chapter IV the results of the data collection provide the structure from which the five themes of the study emerged.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Chapter IV presents the purpose for the study, the data collection and analysis methodologies and processes, the results of the subject interviews, and the themes that emerged during the data analysis process. As is recommended by the guidelines for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2012), it was through the emergence of themes that the research ultimately developed its textural and structural descriptions. The data gleaned provided four emergent themes: programming, leadership, culture, and school size as the key elements in the success of these schools in providing high academic achievement and growth. Furthermore these themes lend considerable food for thought regarding what schools might consider in a move toward high academic growth experiences for all students in a variety of school settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to build an understanding of what is present in schools to meet the academic growth needs of gifted middle-level learners. The rationale for this inquiry was partially based on the understanding that No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and difficult economic times had created an educational environment for many gifted learners that ignored their need to have a challenging and enriching learning opportunity that would result in academic growth. Additionally, middle level schools

have a rocky history regarding meeting the needs of the young adolescent regardless of ability level as illustrated through the movement from K-8 schools to junior high schools, to the Middle School Model implementation, and now a movement back in some communities across the country, to K-8 models again (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Yecke, 2005) in an ongoing quest to discover a school configuration that will meet the many and varied needs of the pre-adolescent and pubescent middle grades student.

Amidst all the changes and the noted lack of challenge, however, there are a small percentage of schools that are successfully meeting the academic challenge needs of both gifted learners as well as the average and below-average ability learners. It is desired that the results of the study, as indicated by the interview results and analysis of the artifacts gathered will provide schools with cost neutral options that can improve academic growth within middle level school sites.

Data Collection and Analysis

Six interviews, (one administrator from a high performing public charter school, one administrator and two of her teachers from a second high performing public charter school, and two teachers from a high performing public middle school) were conducted in a Western state. Analysis of four years of school performance data from the state's department of education database determined which schools were candidates for selection. While originally intending to collect information on schools performing at an 80% or greater growth percentile, analysis of the data indicated that the 80th percentile level had not been maintained consistently through the four year look-back period and therefore it was necessary to drop the cut-point into the 70th percentile range in order to find even a single school to include in the project. After the schools were determined,

administrators from each school were emailed with an explanation of the project and a request for their participation.

One administrator responded indicating a willingness to be interviewed but indicated that she had been asked to transfer to another network organization school and therefore was no longer at the high performing school. Because she had been the administrator during the time of the occurrence of high growth in the high performing school, her offer was accepted and she was included in the study. A second school within the same system was also contacted due to strong performance. The administration at this school agreed to participate and as a result of sending out a request to her staff she was also able to recruit two teachers who were willing to participate. These teachers, besides being classroom teachers, also took on instructional coaching responsibilities to provide guidance, support, and training to other teachers within their building and the larger network of schools. The network having a total of six middle level schools might have had more of their schools included in the study except that two of the schools had only existed for one year, a third school of the remaining four had no disaggregated gifted and talented data, indicating a gifted population of less than twenty students, and the fourth school was underperforming and therefore the school that the Main Street Campus principal had been transferred to in order to resolve the low-performance issue. It is important to recognize that the organization as a whole has been successful since it was created in 2006 and that underperforming school issues are addressed with a desire to have all the campuses meet the high expectations of the organization.

The third building represented was not affiliated with the other two schools. This school was a public middle school, as opposed to the public charter schools already

mentioned. Contact was made with twelve teachers from the school based on contact information provided. Through email contact, two teachers responded and agreed to participate thus providing a different school profile from the first two schools.

As each meeting occurred, participants were provided a consent form and subjects were informed that they would be able to stop the interview at any time. Two subjects (Ms. Davis and Ms. Foster) chose to be interviewed by phone. Ms. Davis was met, in person, as the researcher was at the North Forest campus interviewing Ms. Adams and Ms. Baker. She signed the consent form at that time. Ms. Foster was never met in person, however a consent form was emailed to her, she signed, and returned it by fax. The other four participants signed at the time of their interviews.

Participant interviews were held at times and locations convenient for the subjects. The interviews with the first and second subjects, Ms. Adams and Ms. Baker, both from the North Forest campus of the College Bound Charter network, were held at their school during their work day, at their request, and each took just over thirty minutes to complete. The third interview subject (Ms. Cooper) was interviewed in her school office during her work day as well and, like the first two, stayed closely to the expected thirty minute time frame as a means to honor the time being taken from a work day that the researcher recognizes is always busy. The interview with the fourth subject took place at a local coffee shop, was more relaxed regarding time, and thus lasted closer to ninety minutes. The final two interviews were conducted, at the request of the subjects, over the telephone as their availability to meet in another setting was not possible due to scheduling issues and other commitments. One of these interviews lasted approximately one and a quarter hours, the other was approximately three-quarters of an hour. Although

lacking the non-verbal aspect of the connection, the discourse was still rich and thick with information that provided additional support and saturation of ideas previously stated in other interview session. During the interviews, any mention of documents used by the school that appeared to have the potential to be informative, resulted in a request for a copy of the document for analysis later.

Each interview was digitally recorded and subjects were informed that a copy of the transcript would be sent to them for verification after each was transcribed. Transcripts were emailed to each participant with a request for corrective feedback in the event something was misspoken or miscued. Additionally, follow up questions from comments in the transcripts that needed clarification were emailed to the subjects. Only one of the follow up requests was not replied to; the request for a classroom grading rubric used by one of the participants who indicated the value of her rubric in terms of fostering a safe classroom where gifted students feel free to share while not dominating the discussion, and where average or struggling students are encouraged to participate and also feel safe. The requests for follow up documents and clarifications that were received provided further information which was included in the results where appropriate. As interviews were transcribed, patterns of concepts emerged that correlated with artifact evidence from document analysis and field notes from memos made at the time of the interviews. These sources of data formed themes that addressed the structural and textural definitions sought. The next section will show the interview results from the administrators and/or teachers from the high performing schools that were selected. Subject names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Ms. Adams

Ms. Adams was in her second year as the principal of the North Forest campus at the time of her interview. Having served as a founding teacher of the Main Street campus and thus the earliest beginnings of the College Bound Charter Network, Ms. Adams had served in three roles over her seven years with the network.

Several elements were mentioned by Ms. Adams regarding the unique structure of the school day and the importance of them to the organization. Specifically mentioned were the “mission fit” of the teachers, the “amazing” teacher talent and the high expectations to which the students were held. There were several ideas that were new to what Ms. Adams believed played a part in the success of the North Forest Charter School. Areas mentioned by Ms. Adams included the importance of a small school setting, the support of parents, and the awareness of the expectations prior to the first day of attendance at the school. Many of these aspects were core to the foundational structure of the network and reflect what the founders of the network felt were best practices that help schools ensure academic growth and achievement.

Ms. Adams spoke to the structure of the school day adding that in addition to the 150 minutes of reading and writing instruction provided to sixth graders was an additional 50 minute literacy block provided to all seventh graders indicating that both sixth and seventh graders experience 150 minutes per day of literacy instruction each day. She also mentioned the expectation that all content area teachers provide homework assignments each night that require students to complete several hours of homework in addition to the extended school day. The enrichment block at the end of the day was a 50 minute period where students selected an area of interest offered by the teachers in an

area of passion to the teachers. These could be any variety of classes. Several mentioned were cooking classes, foreign language classes, and even sports team practice times. For sixth graders, the first six week cycle required them to take a math boot camp which allowed students to have their math skills sharpened in order to allow them to successfully complete their middle level math requirements. This meant that 6th graders were actually receiving 150 minutes of reading and writing and 150 minutes of math each day in addition to 50 minutes of world studies and science.

When asked about why she thought that some campuses within the network outperformed others, Ms. Adams was uncertain what specific reasons could be cited but did feel that, the more established the campus and the more veteran the teachers, the better the campuses were able to perform. Ms. Adams felt that there were phenomenal teachers within the network, but added that the less turnover a school experiences the better it is for the school as a whole. Although “mission fit” dictates that teachers be “dedicated to our mission and doing the work we’re doing while also maintaining high standards and high expectations for all students,” this takes time to experience in action and is different from schools that say that these things are important but aren’t really accountable to it. The fewer teachers within a school who need to internalize this, the more consistently the expectations are held and realized. In addition to acknowledging that the teachers were very talented, there was also an awareness of how “fantastic” the students are and how hard they work.

Ms. Adams also addressed the door-to-door neighborhood promotional campaign which administrators conduct through a two-stage process. At the time of school enrollment in the spring, administrators visit the homes of all local potential incoming

fifth grade students. At that time, they answer questions the families have and explain the core parts of the program which include, “extended school day, uniforms, students receive homework in every class every night and they have to complete it, homework check every morning, explain the discipline system” and make sure that they are very clear on the expectations. If parents enroll their child to attend North Forest, administrators pay a second visit to the home in the late spring to present the school handbook, which includes the school contract. The contract spells out what the student, family, and teacher agree to and everyone signs so that there is no confusion over what is being asked. Parents are very supportive and appreciate the promise made by the school to provide a safe place for students and an education that will have them prepared for college.

Because it was considered important that the schools be kept small, there has been a waiting list for families desiring to have their students enrolled and it was the reason that the network has been able to grow so rapidly. The basic reason for small schools was to provide a close and caring community where the neighborhood can be part of the school and there was a sense that the school was part of the community that was providing the necessary nurturing to raise the children. Parents wanted their children to have a chance to attend college and the network schools promised to have them prepared, therefore they were willing to support the school’s tight discipline policy.

Alongside the strong academic focus was the adherence to character education. Students were expected to put forth effort, be respectful, virtuous, scholarly, team-players, and were to act intelligently. To motivate students toward these character traits, they were rewarded through a “paycheck system” where they were paid a dollar a day for

exhibiting each of these six characteristics. At the end of the week, they could earn \$30.00 or more just by following the expectations. Similarly, not following expectations could result in money being withheld, for such things as not wearing uniforms, chewing gum in class, being disruptive and so forth. A behavior such as not bringing one's homework resulted in the loss of a dollar whereas repeated behavior such as "spacing out" in class every day (an infraction regarding effort), could result in a potentially larger fine of \$10.00 which was also a demerit. Three demerits in a week resulted in detention after school, so infractions could multiply. This system also served as communication to parents regarding their children's behavior on a weekly basis, and the desire was that parents discuss their student's academics and behavior as part of the family part of the contract.

The last area that Ms. Adams felt was unique and special regarding the network was the teacher-designed curriculum. She explained that the philosophy of the network focused on teachers having a single prep in order that they are able to design a really good lesson that could then be differentiated really well to meet the needs of all levels of learners. Furthermore, it was not an expectation for teachers to design curriculum alone. Besides the shared resources with other charter organizations across the country, there was an expectation that teachers work together to design lessons. This was facilitated through the use of the professional development or Data Days that occurred every six weeks where part of the day was content time and part of the day allowed for horizontal or vertical team time across the network. In the next three interview segments, two teachers and another administrator from the Charter Network organization provided their views on what makes the school they work in so successful.

Ms. Baker

The interview with Ms. Baker was the first of the teacher interviews conducted. As this was the first interview of the study with a teacher, the researcher had an expectation of new comments and emerging themes that were expected to add to what had been gathered through the interview held with the principal of the North Forest campus just hours earlier.

When asked to indicate what she believed was the reason for the high growth scores achieved at the North Forest campus Ms. Baker indicated many of the same things the administration had stated. However, there were some responses where Ms. Baker directly addressed the dedication of the teaching professionals more than had been spoken of to this point, and she elaborated more on the importance and impact of the small school size. In addition to these elements, most other categories related to rigor of curriculum, teacher collaboration and lesson design, the element of safety, differentiation, parent involvement and teacher experience.

Ms. Baker spoke directly to the issue of boredom experienced by gifted learners who “feel like they don’t have enough to do” or “they don’t have the right kind of work to do.” Due to the high level of expectation of all students, Ms. Baker indicated that boredom is seldom a factor due to the fact that a lot is required of them, both in terms of the quantity of the work but also the quality expected from them. This led into conversation about the idea that because teachers are able to develop their own lessons, it allowed her to create her lessons from the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Processes, with specific attention to what would be expected from the various abilities of the learners in her classroom. She also spoke to the question of ability

grouping by saying that the practice at North Forest has been to group heterogeneously. This was true throughout the network, except for sixth grade, although there was a movement away from homogeneous grouping that had happened at the sixth grade level as well. She had seen homogeneous grouping in action and said it served to meet only the needs of the high ability students. This made the practice of differentiation more important.

The expectation for teachers to collaborate facilitated teachers being able to meet, compare ideas, and develop plans based on what had worked, or not worked, for various teachers across the network. Use of the professional days (Data Days) and 'Cloud' technology have allowed teachers to be able to collaborate by creating documents that could be shared electronically, reducing the amount of face time necessary to develop units. Ms. Baker sees the level of differentiation as unique to this network and says, "I think that the teachers work hard to differentiate here in a way that I really haven't seen in other places." She also credited the special education teachers with much of the success of their differentiation, because they did a phenomenal job of helping classroom teachers with accommodations and modifications to aid in differentiation ideas and strategies as well as the fact that they held teachers accountable to make sure that the differentiation was actually happening.

A single specific strategy that Ms. Baker regularly employed in her classes was Socratic Circles. When asked about issues that sometimes arise in heterogeneously grouped discussions, Ms. Baker indicated that she hadn't experienced the problem due to the grading rubric she used that required students to step up as well as step back and encourage others to participate. The issues of concern were occurrences such as high

ability learners not being understood when their ideas are shared, due to their ability to think more abstractly, or the problem of lower ability students choosing not to share as a result of not feeling competent among more abstract thinkers. Because Ms. Baker had expectations built into her classroom routine there had not been a problem with these types of issues. As a result, the emotional safety net was there for all students to feel successful, and avoid the dilemma that occurred when some students ran away with the conversations while others said nothing.

Asked about specific gifted programming, Ms. Baker indicated that there was nothing designed into the day, however, when she started at North Forest she used the enrichment time to start a Destination Imagination team. The list of gifted students names were provided to her and she gave those students right of first refusal to participate. Given that the only time available to meet was up against all other enrichment opportunities including sports teams, there were those who might have participated but didn't due to conflict with other interests. Once the gifted students had been asked, teachers could recommend students not identified to receive gifted education services, who they felt had the dedication allowing them to benefit from participating in a project like that. For students who had participated, Destination Imagination was a great addition to their school experience and one in which parents had voiced great pleasure.

Lastly, Ms. Baker discussed the role of teachers in the network and the small school size. She first acknowledged the role that experienced teachers play in carrying out the established routines and systems of the school. The additional knowledge of the network way and adherence to the expectations helped to provide the physical and emotional safety that allowed children to perform without fear of reprisal of any type.

The ability to take risks allowed children to rise above what even they thought was possible and ultimately it made it “cool to be smart” at North Forest. Because the school was small, it provided a sense of community that made teachers feel safe and it also felt like family. The supportive aspect created by that type of environment allowed families and school staff to build personal relationships. Ms. Baker liked the feeling of the close community and indicated that she is more comfortable working with committed educators in a small ‘family’ network who weren’t just there for the paycheck.

Ms. Cooper

Ms. Cooper was the principal at the Main Street campus of the College Bound Charter School network for three years. During her three years there test scores were high and she was considered a positive leader in terms of encouraging the network mission. As a result of her leadership ability the network’s Board of Trustees moved her to a lower performing campus to reverse the decline of student test scores there, by addressing the issue of school culture.

Ms. Cooper cited several elements as being keys to the success achieved at her school. Specific elements attributable to the success of the Main Street campus are: “incredibly hard work to make sure the instruction is really high level,” “teachers get a lot of coaching,” “strong mission fit,” “systems are strong and students know expectations,” and “data driven instruction.” Ms. Cooper went on to further explain the reasons that she feels strongly that these elements are so important. She gave high praise to the teachers at the Main Street campus calling them, “...phenomenal! The best teachers I’ve ever worked with in my life work there.” Those teachers, as a result of their amazing teaching ability, were utilized as coaches, and teachers from other campuses were sent there to

observe them teaching. High-level instruction therefore was achieved through the hard work of teachers that were supported and coached to continue to make them better teachers.

Ms. Cooper indicated that differentiation was expected of all teachers however, few teachers came in with the skills necessary to differentiate well. Through professional development opportunities and the coaching of master teachers, new hires had many opportunities to grow their skills. Coaching was considered to be a great asset to the skill set of teachers. Coaches, who were also classroom teachers, went into classrooms to observe teachers. Individuals who were assigned this role went with specific skill sets in mind, to observe, target, and work with teachers until the teachers were proficient with those necessary skills. In some cases, the teacher/coaches had received specific training in the skills they were coaching, but, in other cases, they were teachers who were simply highly competent in the desired skill set. Between teacher/coaches observing and working with teachers, and the opportunities offered for teachers to observe master teachers in action, young and/or inexperienced teachers had ongoing opportunities, “like a huge push that you’re getting better and that you’re growing as an instructor.”

“Mission fit” was a term used frequently throughout the interview with Ms. Cooper. This concept was described as the, “really high sense of, ‘Our children are amazing. They can do amazing things. We’re gonna believe in them’ and you can’t work here if you don’t believe that.” The idea behind this was that the Charter Network had a reputation that drew people to it who believed in what they were doing, therefore, if a candidate didn’t believe in the students, “they just won’t make it here.” The driving force behind this belief was that, as a staff, they knew what needed to be done and they would

do whatever it took to make it happen. Throughout the interview it was apparent by Ms. Cooper's animated facial expression that her belief in the students was genuine and that she wasn't just *saying* the students were amazing, she truly believed it.

The next concept addressed was the strength of the system in terms of students knowing what was expected of them. Ms. Cooper made it clear that this wasn't simply about discipline, but also about positive consequences and culture framing. She shared that having worked in differently structured schools had provided her insight into the amount of time that could be spent in a traditional classroom just trying to get kids to class, or to keep them from shouting out and disrupting the learning of others. The structure in place at the Main Street campus (as well as the other Charter Network schools) allowed teachers to focus on instruction because students understood exactly what was expected of them and when they didn't follow the rules they were reminded that their parents were promised that their children would be safe and would be prepared for college, neither of which could happen if respect and expectations weren't strictly enforced and adhered to. Explicitly instructed, students "understand why they are expected to be respectful in class."

Ms. Cooper's last key element was data driven instruction. Data were gathered through network designed tests that were administered every six weeks to measure students' progress toward the benchmarks of each standard. Once the tests were administered and scored, a Data Day was held where teachers across the network analyzed the data to allow assignment of students to targeted interventions to meet individual student needs, and the curriculum for the next six weeks was designed and solidified around the need for intervention or the need to move forward. Various

strategies for interventions were used including push-in models, pull-out models, whole class interventions; all dependent on the needs of the students. The interventions were created based on the concept of, “what does that child need? And where is it, their need, going to be a best fit, more than what do we like best?” This clearly indicated that whatever was in the child’s best interest to get the necessary skill or benchmark would be what was done. This begged the question of interventions for gifted and talented and Ms. Cooper responded with a belief statement that “all children are gifted and talented” and that “really high level, rigorous instruction is meeting students at all kinds of levels,” coupled with the “expectation that you’re differentiating on both ends and we spend a lot of time talking about that.” The differentiation was further explained to include flexible grouping and the creation of opportunities within heterogeneous classes for homogeneous grouping situations.

Although the points outlined above were specific points that Ms. Cooper used as elements attributable to the success of the school, she also pointed out several other elements that she considered important. These points include the structure of the school year and school day, teacher created curriculum, an enrichment period set at the end of the day, an internalized growth mindset held by staff and students, a culture of happiness, and regular messages to students that they were believed in. Although several of these were self-explanatory, others needed further definition. For example, the school year was longer than that of the public schools in the same district, starting a full week before the rest of the district and getting out a week after the other schools in the district had sent students home for the summer. This coupled with a longer school day, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., allowed for considerably more instructional time for students. Within the longer

school day, students all received one hundred minutes of reading, one hundred minutes of math, considered by Ms. Cooper to be “huge” in promoting student success, and an additional fifty minutes of writing for sixth graders. Sixth graders also received a fifty minute per day math “boot camp” during the first six weeks of the school year that provided them with focused skills training to help them meet the mathematical demands they would experience during their years in the network. Other core classes such as science and social studies were also allotted daily fifty minute blocks.

After spending time with Ms. Cooper and watching her interaction with her students, it was the opinion of the researcher that Ms. Cooper was a strong and competitive leader who believed in the ability of the students to achieve whatever they put their minds to. She believed that pushing students to excel helped them to build their self-esteem and that pushing was required. Although the idea of pushing students may sound negative it was also clear that the students also needed to hear the message, “I believe you can do this.” This message not only showed the students that the staff cared about them and their success, it also played a part in the expectations she held for herself, her staff, and the students in the school. It was important to Ms. Cooper to hire teachers who believed in the children who lived urban settings, teachers who are passionate about children and educating those children, and who were comfortable with critical feedback and could use that feedback to improve their teaching. With this shared cultural foundation, the staff were able to join her by always being willing to go above and beyond in providing a safe school that promised college readiness for each of its students. It was clear that the job was difficult, but the staff expressed confidence in their ability to address the challenge.

Ms. Davis

Ms. Davis was a reading teacher at the College Bound Charter Network's North Forest campus. She brought with her some experience regarding the successful use of ability grouping from her years teaching in a public school district where specific programming was in place for gifted learners. Besides having some awareness of how grouping practices could provide for meeting the unique needs of gifted learners, Ms. Davis brought some different perspectives to the research and presented a picture that was a bit different in terms of teacher contentment in the charter school network. The overall discontent expressed by this subject was directly related to the rapid growth that had occurred in the network coupled with the total immersion into the Common Core Curriculum. She felt that the Common Core derailed the mission of the organization as it existed when she was hired four years ago. Although her frustration was not appearing to affect student performance yet, it was insightful to hear a different opinion stated.

What Ms. Davis did offer in terms of similarity to the other subjects was that differentiated instruction was a mainstay of her practice. Because of this, she understood the need for gifted learners to get "different work" and not the oft used "more work" answer to meeting the need for challenge for the gifted. Even in a system that required its teachers to differentiate, Ms. Davis had seen teachers simply provide more work for students needing challenge. This had bothered her considering that there had been talk for a long time regarding the provision of some type of programming for gifted and talented learners however nothing was ever done. She felt that the time was long past for it to be put on the school's growth plan and truly addressed. Ms. Davis furthermore felt

that the lack of GT programming was to blame for the drop in performance scores that the schools in the network experienced by 8th grade.

In addition to using differentiated instruction in her classroom, Ms. Davis used project-based learning opportunities and cluster grouping practices within her classroom to provide opportunities for her gifted and high ability readers to have a chance to work on novels that were in their interest areas and on their reading levels and to be able to challenge each other. Because she had prior success with ability grouping, Ms. Davis continued to use it in her classroom even though true homogeneous classroom grouping was not practiced in the network anymore. The use of ability grouping within her classroom allowed her to use Literature Circles. Ms. Davis shared that, although it meant more work for her because she felt that she had to read all the novels that her students were reading, she wouldn't do it any other way because that's what her job was as a teacher. She stated that, "there's a hesitancy of some teachers to do it because it's a lot more work," implying that she does what is best for kids, not what is easiest for her. This meant frustration for her as new teachers joined the network that didn't want to use strategies like Literature Circles because it meant a large amount of time had to be put into preparation.

Ms. Davis was also grateful that she was empowered to make her own choices regarding how to instruct. She recognized the advantages of collaborative planning and lesson design but had again experienced a downside inherent in the young network, as there were few teachers with as much experience as she had from whom she could learn and grow. Even her evaluating administrators had lacked the content knowledge or experience to be able to coach her and provide her with constructive feedback to enable

her to grow. In her words, she felt that her, “career has flat-lined.” Asked about the potential for advancement to leadership within the organization, she indicated that, when opportunities had presented themselves, she had been told that she was too good as a sixth grade reading teacher and that they needed her to stay in that position. As a veteran teacher in her career as well as the network, she could comfortably coach others but didn’t feel as though her professional growth needs were being met. Within what was an otherwise supportive organization, those teachers with experience often felt isolated as Ms. Davis shared that other veteran teachers had also expressed similar frustration and had spoken of leaving the network to find work elsewhere.

Overall, Ms. Davis felt that the network had moved away from the beliefs that had initially attracted her to the network. She stated that, when she was hired, she felt she would “walk through fire” to follow the vision of the founder. Four years later, she felt like the focus was on the growth of the organization, the hiring of teachers who had “cultural competency” at the expense of actual experience and rapport with children. She said there was once a time when the organization listened to the voice of the members and was small enough to consider everyone’s viewpoint, but not anymore. Ms. Davis agreed with the participants who had indicated agreement that the top performing schools had the most experienced teachers, but the turnover rate was increasing and hiring practices were not replacing veteran teachers with veteran teachers. Being a young network, with the oldest site opened just seven years ago, the practices of hiring inexperienced teachers in order to train them in the way they want them to instruct means that unless teachers were hired with some experience, the most years of experience these teachers could hope to have would be seven.

In addition to the growth rate impact, Ms. Davis felt that there had also been a shift in the design and purpose of the internal testing instrument designed by network staff to measure student progress toward benchmarks. She used to feel that the tests enabled them to recognize areas where teaching and learning had not come together, but she now felt that the test was designed more as a preparation test for the upcoming Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test that students in the state will be required to take. It is apparent that “some teachers are now modeling their teaching after the tasks on the test and that’s not teaching the kids anything except what the test will look like. Teachers used to make a point of not teaching to the test but now it has become status quo and nobody says anything.” The fact that students were scoring well on the test made Ms. Davis’ sentiments moot and her concern had not been taken seriously. The bottom line for Ms. Davis was that what was the foundation of a great organization may now be shifting to a place that would impact the future success of the organization and more importantly the students.

Mr. Edwards

Mr. Edwards was a sixth grade math teacher at Green Valley Middle Level School, the public middle school located in the northern half of the state where this research was conducted. He expressed how much he enjoyed his work and interacting with the students in his classroom. However, Mr. Edwards also expressed some level of frustration as he felt that school districts were too concerned with trying to standardize education into a “one-size-fits-all” approach where “it doesn’t matter what zip code you live in,” you would receive the same education as everyone else. Being in education for as long as he had been, Mr. Edwards recognized that “different schools have different

make ups and history and culture and – it had better depend on your zip code.” He also felt like the pressure on teachers was increasing more and more, and, with the added pressure of the Common Core Curriculum, it felt like the screws were tightening. He didn’t have a problem with the concept of Common Core or what it was asking kids to do. He had a problem with someone else telling him what to teach and how to teach it to get kids where they needed to be. This led to one area that Mr. Edwards expressed a great deal of happiness with, the opportunity to do what he wanted in his classroom.

Mr. Edwards shared that, a few years ago, the district mandated that the school provide accelerated math opportunities. He was very negative about this and didn’t believe it was in the best interests of the students. Since that time, the school has held the district at bay, keeping them from forcing Green Valley to offer Geometry in eighth grade, and he felt that the reason, as well as the reason he had been left to teach what he wanted, in the way that he wanted, was due to the high achievement and growth scores that the school continued to earn. Due to the fact that it was a lengthy interview, there were many elements that were considered to be factors in the success, but, for this subject, the single best indicator was “the relationship piece.”

Mr. Edwards discussed the relationship piece through a variety of lenses, everything from small school opportunities to build trust with families, to providing a safe, supportive environment in which kids were encouraged in the classroom through what Mr. Edwards called “community agreements.” Mr. Edwards stated that he encouraged his students to take risks and that there were only the following two classroom rules: “1) ask for help when you need it, and 2) give help when asked.”

Although he considered “relationships” to be the top key to success, he gave high praise to the leadership of the principal.

Considered to be competitive by his teachers, the principal built trust among the staff in his first year by telling them that in his first year as principal he would make no changes; he was there only to observe. He did only that, and, although he had given reason for some concern at the beginning of the year, by the time that year two rolled around, he had learned to trust what was working for the teachers including leaving the divider wall open between the two classrooms. This was huge because the classes had worked with a “team-teaching” model for a number of years. All the staff was asking was for him to trust them and they showed him that they were able to achieve the high scores teaching in that way. The wall stayed open. Since the first year, things have gone well, and Mr. Edwards thought that the principal was a decent leader who was flexible and willing to listen to his staff.

As for structure, there were a few things noted to be potentially influential. The first was the daily schedule and the second was placement of students into classes. The first, the daily schedule, had historically placed the math and literacy blocks in the morning. Being on a block schedule means that students had a double period of literacy and math as well as a block of science and social studies every other day. Enrichment classes, typically elective style classes that include physical education, art, and music, had traditionally been at the end of the day however in the current school year a move had occurred that had enrichment spread throughout the day. In addition to the core classes, struggling students could be nominated to participate in either literacy or math labs, which were designed to target specific areas of weakness based on individual need.

In order to participate, students had to be willing to give up their enrichment period, however parents support the idea and had even asked for students to remain in the lab after they had earned proficiency on whatever concept or standard earned them the nomination to begin with, in order to continue to have the additional support that had worked for them and had gotten them ahead.

In regard to questions asked about programming specifically designed to address the needs of the gifted and talented students, Mr. Edwards shared that there wasn't pull-out type programming, but he indicated that there were some ability grouping opportunities based on the district mandated requirement to provide advanced math classes. He also indicated that he felt that the kids and their parents believed that the students' needs were being met in the classroom through his ability to differentiate instruction. Mr. Edwards shared that he encouraged kids to feel unsure, "that there are gonna be times where you question yourself, when you don't get it right now, and that's great because that's my job." He went on to say that it's all about the "Why?" questions, the "Why do you think it's that?" The real work comes in making students "problem solvers," and he thinks he had accomplished this through teaching kids to be metacognitive, that is, to think about their thinking and to learn through exploration, not through having the answers given to them. Although there *was* a pull-out type class for seventh and eighth grade gifted students, he taught it one year and was frustrated at the lack of structure. Students were of mixed strength areas, with some identified for gifted education services in math and others in language arts. He indicated that there was no direction for what was to be done. Students threw out suggestions of things to study and sometimes it would come together, but most of the time it was chaotic. Someone else

now teaches that class and Mr. Edwards isn't sure if there is any more structure now than there was when he taught it. Mr. Edwards further indicated a level of concern over the fact that he felt that classroom teachers often shirked their responsibility to the gifted population in providing them what they need and "it comes from the administration too, and that comes from the whole culture in your school."

On the topic of leadership, Mr. Edwards credited the principal with allowing the teachers to play to their own strengths. By playing to one's own strength, Mr. Edwards believed that students could experience the most growth because teachers projected their passion and confidence in their teaching, into what they did in the classroom. The principal led a book study on *Teach Like A Champion, 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College*, by Doug Lemov and Norman Atkins (2010), and he required each teacher to read it. Mr. Edwards found one element to be the most powerful aspect of the book the message about "positive framing." He found that element to be powerful because he believed that it was just as easy to pay a compliment to those following directions as it was to fault those who weren't, and he saw negativity as a downward spiral that was too easy to get caught up in.

According to Mr. Edwards, a final aspect of the success of the students at Green Valley had little direct relationship to his content area of math. He felt strongly that the development of building a culture of "readers" had been promoted and emphasized to the point that "reading is cool" and the result was that the students love to be readers. This was accomplished by establishing a 30 minute Advisory period at the beginning of the day where everybody read. Although motivated in part by a grade that was based on individual goals to gain points on Accelerated Reader (AR) tests, students who

accomplished the goal, continued to read because there were a number of other incentives and kids had come to authentically enjoy reading. The AR program is a commercial package which has reading comprehension tests created for each book. Students read the books and earned points based on the difficulty level of the book and the score on the test. Although an opponent of AR as a package due to the low level of the questions asked on the tests, Mr. Edwards had witnessed firsthand the power that it had to encourage kids to read. Although the program offered the foundation he credited the real excitement to factors other than the program which had been created by the school and were used to encourage reading beyond the basic points earned. He saw it more about the culture of the school that made it fun to read.

Throughout my conversation with Mr. Edwards it was clear that he had a passion for pushing students to learn to think, to learn to problem solve, and to never stop asking the “why” questions that drove students to deeper understandings. He believed in the power of the relationships he built with his students. He clearly was dedicated to differentiating to meet the needs of all the students in his classroom through the design of meaningful assessments that measured conceptual understanding, providing lessons that targeted strands that were weak areas for students, according to state assessment data, and by providing challenging materials for students ready and willing to try difficult math and logic problems.

Ms. Foster

Ms. Foster was the seventh and eighth grade Language Arts and Social Studies teacher at Green Valley Middle Level School. A vivacious person, Ms. Foster appeared to have an outgoing personality and seemed to genuinely enjoy her work. After sharing

that she had taught almost every grade from Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade with the exceptions of third and sixth grades, she was asked what her favorite grade to teach was. Her response was, “I’ve found that my favorite year is the one that I’m teaching.” By the end of the interview it was clear that she did truly enjoy what she was doing and had immersed herself into this school family which she had been part of for only about thirteen months.

Ms. Foster jumped right into the interview explaining her role at Green Valley. Several facets of the structure of her position included the inter-disciplinary nature of the content areas she taught and the fact that the seventh and eighth grade teachers “looped” with their students. “Looping” means that if a teacher taught seventh grade this year he or she would follow the students up to the eighth grade for the same subjects the following year. When those eighth graders left for high school the teacher would drop down and pick up the next group of seventh graders and start a two year journey over again. For Ms. Foster this wasn’t exactly the scenario she experienced as she was hired to handle the overflow of students that created half of a grade level position for each of grades seven and eight, thus the reason she had four preps. The upside of the inter-disciplinary position was that, as a language arts and social studies teacher for the same group of students, she knew exactly what the students had been taught regarding their writing and she could hold them accountable for the same expectations in social studies where she had regular assignments that required longer writing style products for assessment. The ability for the teacher to not have to review learning to see what was previously addressed and the ability to know behavior issues before the year started

meant that it was possible to “hit the ground running” and not have to spend the first month or more trying to fill in the learning gaps that had occurred over the summer.

Along similar lines, expectations for academics and behavior were explicitly taught from the first days of school. Ms. Foster said the hardest to train were the new sixth graders who arrived into Green Valley that may have attended a feeder school that had a different structure or expectations. It was truly starting at the beginning with those students. From the day she was hired, Ms. Foster was informed that writing would be integrated into every content area. Also the expectation was clear regarding what was to be included, in order to make a “correct complete response” to any question (besides multiple choice questions) asked of students on any assignment or assessment. Because Ms. Foster already considered writing to be an integral part of her social studies curriculum, the expectations meshed together well and having taught both content areas previously it allowed her to seamlessly integrate herself into the expectations of the position. In addition, it had been easier to become assimilated as a member of the staff due to the necessity of helping teachers of elective subjects understand how they could implement writing into their content areas and she explained to them what was expected in a proficient, or better, piece of writing.

Ms. Foster also believed that the size of the school played a major part in the success that the school had experienced. She felt from her very first day that the school community was a family and that they were supportive of each other. The school approached the writing focus in a “unified effort” and there was a clear sense that “it’s not me versus the teacher next door” and that all the staff worked together. Ms. Foster believed that at least a part of this was due to a “meticulous effort” on the part of the

principal in regard to his hiring of people who were going to be team players within the school community.

The school leader was given a lot of credit for his role in providing time for teachers to work together, collaboratively to make the team effort a reality. Besides the content area meetings which occurred one to two times per month for thirty to forty-five minutes, there was also time provided during Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) which met the first Wednesday morning of every month when students arrived on a delayed opening schedule. The PLC meeting times were opportunities for teachers to share philosophies, student work, approaches to teaching various contents as well as the time to share student concerns, and curriculum. Each meeting was approached with a set agenda in mind which kept the meeting focused and prevented them from becoming “random gripe sessions.” This type of meeting opportunity provided teachers with the opportunities to assess where they were and where they needed to go next in regard to the teaching and learning cycle.

Like Mr. Edwards, Ms. Foster discussed the culture of the staff that was developed around the book, *Teach Like a Champion* (2010). Seen as a bit more valuable by Ms. Foster, it had provided her with “tidbits of wisdom” that were simplistic, such as, “be really specific when students give you an answer...don’t get so excited over a student delivering half of an answer that you finish it for them. Ask the hard questions like, ‘Can you take that further?’ to allow students to have to dig deeper to give support and details.” She indicated that the principal followed up on the importance of the book to what the school was trying to do through his feedback and coaching. These were conveyed through short notes delivered via email after he had completed a walk through

visit of the classroom and observed lessons and student work. As a result, teachers were constantly working to include the strategies from the book into their daily lessons.

Also considered by Ms. Foster to be a big part of the school's success was the thirty minute per day planned reading session that was carried out school-wide through Advisory classes. The grade for these classes was based entirely on Accelerated Reading goals that were expected to be challenging, yet appropriate, for each student. She also indicated the role that the school leadership had in playing up the importance of reading for every student through the incentives that were provided to keep kids reading even after they had met their quarterly goals. Parent involvement, through the parent committee, in offering items such as Kindles for raffle opportunities for students meeting their goal, showed the partnership between the parents and the school in making reading a priority.

When asked to address the opportunities and programming options available to the gifted student population, Ms. Foster indicated that there really wasn't much offered. She indicated that the special education person in the building sent out emails with tips and strategies for meeting the needs of gifted learners, but she didn't perceive that teachers necessarily utilized what was suggested. The parent of a student Ms. Foster taught this year met with her early in the school year to ask for more challenge for her daughter. After providing assessments to the student to verify what material she already had mastery of, Ms. Foster was able to provide her with individualized assignments to allow her to work at a level more appropriate to her needs. The teachers of this student from the prior year stated that, "Her parents indicated she was getting low grades because she was bored. We thought she was getting low grades because she still needed to learn

the material.” Although Ms. Foster didn’t wish to disrespect her colleagues, she recognized this as a lack of desire to “deviate from what their lessons were.” She recognized the need to sometimes provide a more compacted and differentiated approach, although she admitted that she did not do this for all students or even all gifted and talented students. She also provided excuses for other teachers as she saw it being difficult for the majority of the teachers in the school, to differentiate, due to the team-teaching model where teachers shared sixty to seventy students.

Because it was apparent that nothing special was done academically for most of the gifted population, the question of social and emotional support was asked. Again the response indicated that nothing specific or special was offered. Ms. Foster brought up the small school size again as a possible explanation and the sense of belonging and community that existed among the student body. Students were continually reminded to, “Do your best!” year round, and, although the community aspect was nurtured, there was competition among grades and individuals, which kept students striving to always be at “peak performance.” For example, throughout the year, students could earn points for their grade level class for behavior, spirit, and academics, which were totaled at the end of the year and the top class would earn the Top Dog Award. The spirit of this competition was joined into throughout the school community, and, although competitive in nature, it was more of a friendly competitiveness that was seen as a way to push students forward in their quest to be the best that they could be.

Asked to summarize what she believed to be the top contributing factors to the school’s success, Ms. Foster listed the following:

- Dedicated teachers willing to do what's best for kids, not simply what's easiest for them
- Willingness to be flexible and do what was necessary to help kids succeed
- A deep seated belief that the school was the best school ever
- A loving, wholesome, supportive staff with little turnover
- A competitive leader that believed in community and ongoing communication with parents
- Culture built around *Teach Like A Champion* (2010) that was reinforced through feedback and targeted specifically by leadership to strengthen the instruction of the teachers through high expectations, positive reinforcement, and suggestions for improvement

As a relatively new teacher to the Green Valley Middle Level School, Ms. Foster also had some concern for the future of its success. She had heard that the old building was slated for replacement in the near future due to the growth of the surrounding community and the demand for what the school offered in terms of academic success. Already students come from neighboring communities to attend there. Having worked in large schools, Ms. Foster had seen first-hand the divisiveness and lack of support, collaboration, and unity that occurred in larger school settings. Although she hoped this wouldn't happen at Green Valley, she sees the district's position that financially it would be more cost effective to run one larger school than it would be to run two small schools and concluded with, "There's definitely something to be said with the small coziness of the size of the school."

Themes

As each interview unfolded there were consistencies that sprang up across the subjects as well as across school sites. Although some could have been derived through analysis of the demographic data of the school sites, i.e. the size of the schools, it was made clear through the subjects' stories that elements such as school size were more than the numbers and supported the reasons for pursuing this research from a qualitative approach. The themes that were explored were: programming, leadership, school culture, and school size.

Programming

Several areas of similarity emerged between the Charter Network charter schools and the public middle level school, Green Valley. Specific elements that were seen across school sites included:

- A focus on academics and behavior with high expectations for both
- High level, rigorous instruction
- Well done curriculum differentiation
- Extensive time spent in core content classes with interventions based on student need
- Grouping structures
- Collaboration
- Teacher autonomy for teaching content
- Academic enrichment opportunities
- Passionate and dedicated teaching staffs

The first five elements listed above can all be discussed together as they were very much related to each other. The focus that these organizations place on academics was illustrated, in one respect, through the decisions made to spend ninety minutes or more on the core content areas, plus additional time for targeted interventions for students needing additional support in core content areas of literacy and math. Specifically, the Charter Network schools required 150 minutes per day in literacy for all sixth and seventh grade students and 100 minutes for eighth graders, and they required 150 minutes per day for the first six weeks of the sixth grade school year in math, which is then reduced to 100 minutes per day for the remainder of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Green Valley also required a large percentage of their day be devoted to math and literacy. Each student received ninety minutes per day of instruction in math and 120 minutes per day of literacy when one included the thirty minute Advisory period where all students were required to read for the first half-hour of the school day.

Providing that amount of time for core content is not likely to help however if the instruction is poor. The requirement that teachers in both organizations offer high level, rigorous instruction and that the administrators in both organizations provide feedback and suggestions for improvement indicated that it wasn't simply something that was talked about and then not followed up on. Specifically stated through interviews of individuals from both organizations, teachers were targeted to use specific strategies in classes that they had been taught through professional development offered in-house. These strategies were meant to create deeper thinking for students, and, when combined with differentiation strategies such as tiered lessons, leveled reading assignments, the use of Bloom's Taxonomy to develop questions, Socratic Circles, compacted curriculum

measures, and cluster grouping within the classroom, it was easier to get students to that deeper level of learning.

Regarding grouping structures, although minimal homogeneous grouping was happening (advanced math class offerings at Green Valley being the exception), several teachers spoke to the awareness of positive results coming from experiencing the grouping of high ability students. Within the Charter Network, sixth grade classes have been homogeneously grouped in the past but that practice has changed as of a year ago at the Main Street campus and in this current year at the North Forest campus. It may be important to note here that the overall reading growth of the gifted students at the Main Street campus dropped from the 78th percentile to the 61st percentile between 2012 and 2013. Because this represents two different groups of students it cannot be causally determined to be due to the removal of homogeneous grouping but it may be a factor in the change. Although no longer grouping entire classes homogeneously, the Charter Network teachers described using various cluster grouping arrangements, such as Literature Circles, to allow opportunities for high ability students to read more challenging text, and to “challenge each other’s thinking.”

Another critical element was the high expectations that teachers had for all students. Both organizations, the Charter Network and Green Valley Middle Level School, share a belief that “clearly stated” and “explicitly taught” behavior expectations were important in allowing the classroom focus to remain on academics. Ms. Cooper stated it well when she said, “I have worked in schools in the past where there’s real focus on trying to get kids to be in class and we don’t have to spend all our time trying to get kids to be in class. In our system, they’re absolutely in class...or to keep children

from yelling out in class, we don't have to spend a whole lot of time worrying about that, because our systems are strong and students know the expectations." Clearly, high expectations for respectful and proper behavior taught through character education that was part of the school motto was considered a major element in the academic success of the school.

The teachers' ability to teach their content in their own way was also experienced in both organizations. Although collaborative practices were intricately woven into the fabric of the curriculum creation in the Charter Network, it was also an expected part of the Green Valley system, although not as much in designing curriculum, as the collaboration around sharing what was working, among colleagues who could then take the successful strategies back and use them in their own classroom. Within the Charter Network schools, teachers were given complete autonomy to create their lessons with the single exception of interventions that were used for the most struggling students. Charter Network schools collaborated not only within their own campus walls but also across the network to strengthen what was being done throughout. There was a complete expectation that teachers would share resources and, in fact, much of the foundation of the organization came about through the sharing of best practices. Mr. Edwards shared the idea that Green Valley Middle Level School teachers may enjoy a higher degree of autonomy than other schools in the same district, due to the fact that their scores were high and it was difficult to tell a high performing school that they were "doing it wrong and needed to change."

Another category of similarity between the organizations was found in looking at the enrichment opportunities offered. Both organizations indicated that they had

MathCounts teams which were competitive problem solving teams that required some higher level reasoning and problem solving skills to be successful. Although Green Valley also had other enrichment activities that could appeal to gifted students, such as an acting club and a photography club, the Charter Network schools offered their enrichment opportunities during their enrichment period allowing five day-a-week meetings but which lasted, in most cases, only six weeks. The exception was the Destination Imagination team that met through two six-week cycles. Regardless of the time slot in which the enrichment was offered, it was noted that both organizations had a large variety of options that appealed to a wide continuum of interests.

Last, but in no way least, was the power of the passion and dedication held by the teachers within these schools. Teachers worked hard to build relationships within both organizations, indicated through their willingness to work with students to provide enriching opportunities. The amount of time outside of their work day that was devoted to creating meaningful lessons for students and, as Ms. Baker indicated, simply working with teachers who have the same dedication to their students and their jobs as she did was considered to be a key difference between these organizations and the typical middle level school. Ms. Baker also indicated that she saw her colleagues as “overachievers” who were always willing to “go above and beyond to do what is best for students.”

Noted through the subject interviews, there were clearly a plethora of programming elements that had been included by the participants in their descriptions of what made a difference. Although examples such as the extended school year and school day structure are felt to be large factors in the academic success of the Charter Network schools, it was also noted by Ms. Davis that that she feels that “we have a lot of kids who

are English language learners as well, so we have to have that total immersion for them, to kind of really develop the language, and then extra time that is given to them in terms of processing time, so having the extended school day is critical.” At a school like Green Valley, the need for extended day for the reasons indicated by Ms. Davis (language immersion), were not likely to be an added value to the organization. For this reason, the results that may be represented in the Charter Network but not in the Green Valley organization or vice versa will not be highlighted in the development of themes in order to maintain focus on the elements that are common to these two school systems with very different demographics.

Leadership

Within the theme of leadership, there were five major strands of commonality between organizations across the study. Although it could be questioned whether higher levels of administration (i.e. district leadership in the case of the public school) dictate much of the policy, the thoughts contained here were perceptions of the subjects and will be considered from the position of principals as decision makers, where applicable, having the authority that the subjects credit them with. The elements were as follows:

- Employee selection/hiring
- Structure and content of professional development
- Scheduling
- Evaluation and visibility
- Communication and community connections were seen as priorities

As was the case with the programming strand, it was recognized that several other elements could be at play based on the summaries of the interview data, however the only

elements included were ones that occurred or were mentioned by subjects in both organizations.

Employee selection was an area that many of the subjects mentioned during the data collection phase of this project. Whereby the Charter Network talked most extensively about “mission fit” in regards to their hiring practices, it was also clear that there were specific characteristics that were sought in the candidates who were considered to fill positions within the organization. Some of this information was provided by the subjects and some was gathered through the analysis of artifacts, specifically the website for the network. Additionally, not all of the subjects felt that the hiring practices were providing the same mission message as was in place as recently as four years ago. Ms. Davis indicated that after-work conversations were indicating frustration with the organization and their hiring of so many inexperienced teachers to fill the necessary slots that were required to open the new campuses.

With the recognition that there may be some disgruntlement, the process still seems consistent that the Charter Network hires teachers who believe in the same fundamental beliefs, specifically that they believe that urban, low-income, and minority children can be just as successful in school as any other child and that they will do whatever it takes to help those children succeed. In fact, both administrators interviewed from the Charter Network indicated that, if a teacher doesn’t believe in the terms of their mission, he or she need not apply. As a result of the close vetting of candidates, talented teachers are hired who “are willing to coach, be coached, and work really hard.” Working for this network was supposed to be a joyful thing and although the expectations were high, there was also a great deal of support to help people grow in their career

through thrice yearly evaluations, coaching observations and conferences, and through the opportunity to observe master teachers.

At Green Valley, Ms. Foster used the word “meticulous” to describe the principal’s hiring practices. Having joined the school community just prior to the 2012-13 school year Ms. Foster had recently undergone the process of interviewing with the principal. She emphasized that, as a leader, he had never asked staff members to do anything for which he had not offered support to aid the implementation or effort. Furthermore, she indicated that he was very upfront with his expectations, even spelling out in the interview the upcoming implementation of the writing focus across content areas. The message sent was, “this is what we expect so don’t get on board if you aren’t all in.” Besides being upfront he expected his staff to be team players and to support each other. Mr. Edwards also shared his sense that his principal had come to trust the teachers at Green Valley to do what was necessary, and treated them like professionals that would get the job done. The idea of being a team player led to the second element of the leadership theme, the consideration of the importance of collaboration.

Both organizations considered collaboration to be a necessary part of the unit structure. As such the structure and content surrounding professional development was all geared toward collaborative opportunities. At the North Forest charter campus, it was stated that, “if you want to go rogue, you won’t cut it here,” and, from the stories shared it was clear that no one was a lone wolf. Each teacher was put in a position to work with, at the very least, the content area teachers in the building, if not across the network. The meat of the content that filled in the skeleton built over the summer by the staff was completed through ongoing collaboration. Even if a teacher were to try something on his

or her own, ultimately the six-week assessment would either require them to share why the lesson was successful or why the lesson failed. Each lesson and unit was then modified to reflect the changes needed before it was put away to be revisited in the future.

The expectation of teacher collaboration was held in both organizations and opportunities for collaborative efforts were provided through the leadership of the schools. In the Charter Network, collaboration began in the summer with the three week training session and was then continued with professional development at staff meetings, Data Days every six weeks, and an expectation of time spent outside the work day to polish plans, whether in person or via technological applications such as Dropbox or Google Docs. As mentioned previously, the Charter Network holds high expectations for using collaborative practices in building curriculum units that are rigorous and differentiated. Time is afforded to teachers through a minimum 120 minute per day (and up to 150 minutes) of plan time in which to plan for a single prep. This was a huge amount of time when compared to what public school teachers are given which was typically ninety minutes at the middle level buildings. Time for collaboration was also provided through the data days where teachers used the data from the six week teaching and learning cycle to assess the effectiveness of their lessons.

The other area where leadership provided aid for teacher collaboration was in the ability of the principal to create a schedule that allowed content or grade level teams to meet at a common time for planning purposes. Mr. Edwards indicated that several years ago, under a former principal, the content area teachers misused common plan time and ended up losing it. With Common Core State Standards now imposing pressure on

teachers to deliver instruction in a different way, Mr. Edwards indicated that it would be nice to have that time back. The principal, at Green Valley, had maintained common plan time in the schedule for grade level teachers to meet during the time that their students were in enrichment classes.

Teacher evaluation opportunities and the visibility of the principals were also brought up by teachers and administrators alike. Within the Charter Network teachers were observed and evaluated three times each year. The evaluation rubric was extensive and required teachers to be aware of all facets of their profession. Conferences between teachers and principals allowed reflection on practices and strategies and teachers were provided opportunities to be coached and to be provided time to observe master teachers both within and outside of the organization. Ms. Davis was the only teacher to indicate a shortcoming in the system where she noted that veteran teachers were not always provided the same level of support as less experienced teachers due to network hiring of teachers with little or no classroom experience. In the realm of the Charter Network's stated role of the principal to "remove obstacles from instructional time" it was observed at the time of the interview with Ms. Adams that, indeed, that structure was in place. At the time of the interview a student had disrupted class, was removed by Ms. Adams and was taken to the office where he was then required to sit and wait until the teacher and Ms. Adams could address the behavior. The student showed respect and followed directions indicating a clear understanding of what was happening. Outside of the single criticism held by Ms. Davis it appears that teachers are provided ongoing support and opportunities to build their knowledge of instructional best practices with minimal disruptions to their instructional time.

At Green Valley a similar story unfolded as both teacher participants discussed the regular appearance of the principal in their classroom, a concern for the physical structure of the classroom, and the feedback provided after even the most informal of observations. Whether a result of the small school size or simply a characteristic of the principal it was indicated that he knew the students, he was the greatest of cheerleaders for the students and the teachers, and he was regularly seen in classrooms and hallways. In addition to the relationship between teachers and principal, it was noted that the relationship with parents was also paramount, in the respect that parent support and involvement in the school was very high and that the initiatives such as the incentives for Accelerated Reading goals, beyond the minimum needed for a grade, were supported by parents through the providing of Kindles and other high ticket items being funded through the parent committee.

Also found to be important within the school leadership arena were the priorities that were set by the principal; namely the importance of communication and community relationship building. This priority as seen at the Charter Network may be, at least in part, due to the organizational requirements as spelled out in the handbooks that are supplied to all families within the school organizations, but enforcement and follow through of the policies falls to the school leadership. Within the Charter Network communication began before students even applied to attend the school and were maintained and expected to be continued on a regular basis after the school year started. The communication was designed with the idea that parents should at least occasionally hear from the school to praise the student or to just say, "Hi!" For many families, the only time they might have heard from the school was when the child was in trouble or

was doing poorly in a class. There was a belief held by at least Ms. Foster, that if the parents heard from the school for good things, they would be more responsive in a positive manner, if and when, a phone call had to be made for something negative or disciplinary. The principal at Green Valley saw communication as a way to build relationships with families and community members and the forming of relationships was a key element in the culture of the building. Ms. Foster indicated that it was clearly stipulated to her by someone with knowledge of the principal, but who was an outsider to the school community, that the principal held high expectations for regular and ongoing communication with families.

The last aspect of the priorities within the leadership role, addressed the part that was most visible to the staff and the public. The fibers that create this strand included the principals' competitive spirit, their leadership philosophy that allowed them to coach and guide their teachers in a way that allowed the teachers to feel that the feedback provided was constructive and not punitive, and the visibility with which these successful principals approached their community. Many principals will say they are high visibility leaders but these principals "walk the talk." Although only two of the leaders were actually seen in action (those of two Charter Network schools), teachers from Green Valley reported regular visits from the principal where he would drop in, chat with students about what it was that they were engaged in, leave, and then send an email with his thoughts and observations. Ms. Foster shared that she enjoyed having the principal visit in order that should parents call upset about something that was happening in her room, if he had actually been there he could honestly address what was happening and diffuse situations that could otherwise escalate during the time while the principal was

investigating the situation. Where many teachers would be concerned if the principal spent time in the halls and classrooms, clearly these teachers accepted it and in some cases even welcomed it.

School Culture

Another very large and important strand, school culture, is a theme that contains several elements common to other themes as well as having a few elements that are unique to this particular category. Because the common elements have been discussed in previous sections due to the overlap between the themes and because some parts of some themes could fit in multiple categories, they will only be mentioned here and descriptions will be omitted. The elements related to school culture that both organizations shared were the collaborative nature of the schools and the expectation that the organization would be one of differentiation with a goal to meet the needs of all students. Both of these school culture elements were directly linked to the leadership of the school buildings that required teachers to work together for the betterment of their students, and the impact of dedicated and passionate teachers on student performance. This work was accomplished through teachers and school leaders working together, sharing best practices and ideas, and by developing lessons that utilized strategies that supported and challenged the most struggling student to the most advanced. Because these topics have been covered in detail in the sections on programming and leadership, they will not be repeated in the same level of detail in this section.

In addition to the elements of collaboration and differentiation were several other elements that were just as important. These elements included:

- Dedicated and passionate teachers that believed in the ability of all children to learn and grow academically
- A school culture and climate that recognized that the students were tremendous and could achieve great things
- A school culture that was grounded in trust and respect
- A school culture of high expectations for academic achievement for all students
- A school climate of positivity and happiness

The first of these school culture elements was the teachers. Not only did the administrators at the College Bound Charter Network schools speak of “mission fit” and the requirement for teachers to believe in the potential for success, of urban students of low socio-economic means and students of color, but they also made clear that teachers who wanted to close their door and “go rogue” would not make it in the organization. One teacher, Ms. Baker talked about working among “overachievers” who regularly “go above and beyond” to develop strong instructional materials for their students. The school leader at the Main Street Campus of the College Bound Charter Network, Ms. Cooper, expressed that she had never worked with a more masterful group of teachers and it was mentioned in both organizations that the years of experience and the expertise of veteran teachers was considered a huge element in the success of the schools.

Next, and equally important, was the recognition that students were at the heart of the organization. This element was present in both school organizations and mentioned by most of the subjects during their interviews. The driving force of each school site was the clear belief in the ability of the students to achieve great things and that decisions that were made by teachers and administrators were made with student interest and well-being

at the forefront of those decisions. Ms. Adams stated, "...but you know, our students are fantastic! They're doing the hard work." Ms. Cooper said, "Our children are amazing. They can do amazing things. We're gonna believe in them. And you can't work here if you don't believe that." Mr. Edwards shared that the success at Green Valley was attributable to the "great kids" that go there, and Ms. Foster said that kids were pushed, and that they push themselves, and are always told, "Do your best!" Although the students at Green Valley were not told several times a week how great they were by their teachers, the additional reinforcement from teachers and administrators in the Charter Network could not hurt kids either.

Another strand to this theme was the culture of trust and respect. At some point in each interview it was mentioned that there existed mutual trust and respect that allowed the greater school community members to do their job, whether administrator, teacher, parent, or student. Subjects from the Charter Network schools talked about the importance of respect, indicating not only that it was one of the six traits of the character education aspect of their organization, but also that children were directly instructed in how to disagree respectfully, a skill that was necessary for people to be able to advocate for themselves in many phases of their lives, not just as a student. Trust was also a huge presence in the Charter Network schools as parents had to trust that the organization would deliver on their promise to "provide a safe school for their child to attend," and to "prepare their child to attend and graduate from a four year college."

The culture of high expectations for all children to achieve academic success was seen in the vision statement of the Charter Network which stated, "Every child deserves a demanding standards-based education." The importance of that culture was also present

when one examined the “Instructional Rubric” used by Charter Network administrators in their evaluation of their teachers. Although infused in several standards and performance indicators on the rubric, one performance indicator succinctly stated the idea that all students’ needs should be considered in connection with the planning performed in preparation for student success. This performance indicator stated, “Plans reflect that the teacher assumes full responsibility for all students’ achievement and seeks innovative ways to support students with special needs, English Language Learners, as well as high performers.” In addition to holding teachers accountable, students were encouraged during meetings, promises were made to parents about their children attending college, and an intricate reward system was in place to reward students for committing to the proper conduct and growth mindset that would aid them in reaching their goals. In a community where few of the parents have ever attended college, these were huge goals and even bigger promises for schools to make.

Green Valley Middle Level Learning School was more subtle in their message. Mission statement, motto, and even their focus, discuss “life-long learning,” the idea of making their “focus school” endeavor one of extra-curricular activities in order to promote core academic time as the primary consideration during the school day, and their mission statement that indicated that the “community was focused on preparing our students for the future.” In a community with slightly more than 40% of its “over 25” population having a four-year degree or higher, it may be less necessary to incorporate the language of being “college bound” into the vision and mission of the school. It was clear however that it was very important to the school community that all students be well rounded and that they recognized that there should be a balance. Regardless of the

explicitness of the message, it was a clear intention of each of the schools to see the students grow to their greatest potential.

The final element in the strand related to the culture of the schools was the element of positivity and happiness. At Green Valley the mission statement proclaims, “Students are empowered to be happy, balanced, motivated life-long learners,” with “happy” listed even before balance, motivation, or life-long pursuits of knowledge. Green Valley Middle Level School’s Mr. Edwards also talked about the aspect of positivity and the “Positive Framing” strategy highlighted from *Teach Like A Champion* (2010) which each teacher was required to read. If the leadership believed fully in the constructs of that book and teachers showed their belief in the values of those principles by incorporating them into their classroom, then the atmosphere shifted and allowed for a more positive experience for students and teachers alike. In shifting attention to the urban school, the former principal at College Bound’s Main Street campus told a story that “people used to visit my school last year and be like ‘People are smiling...’ and I’d be like, ‘I don’t know what’s going on at your school if no one’s smiling.’” When this was discussed it struck the researcher that the idea of looking for happiness was not something generally considered however, it was apparent that Ms. Cooper goes out of her way to look for kids to be happy. When queried about opportunities available specifically for gifted learners and considerations regarding whether their needs were being met, Ms. Cooper responded, “the kid’s happy [referring to a specific student she had in mind and then shifted to gifted students in general], they’re learning tons, they tend to work way above grade level, their grades are high...” indicating that the elements of what she considered to be necessary to meet the needs of the gifted learner were in

place and all was good. Positivity and happiness were almost contagious and anyone who has had the opportunity to work in cultures of both positivity and negativity can attest to the preference to work in the former.

School Size

A big theme in a small package, the school size issue was brought up in interviews with all subjects. Though it was self-explanatory and self-contained it permeated all facets of the school sites and organizations. The three schools chosen for this study all had populations around 375 students. Small school populations are considered common in rural communities such as the Green Valley community and urban schools are generally expected to be larger, however in both situations in this study, the school populations were small and the participants considered the size to be of utmost importance. In both situations, teachers and administrators touted the “community” feel of the small school as well as the ability to build meaningful relationships with co-workers, families, and students as an element in the success of the schools.

The charter school organization was founded under the principle of maintaining a small school as a means to provide a safe environment for students and as the demand for enrollment increased the Board of Trustees made a decision to open new campuses rather than expand the original location. The principal of the North Forest campus stated that “it’s really important to keep our schools small because the community feel, not just the feel, the community is a core part of what we do as well,” indicating that it is as important to make the community a part of the school as it is to make the school a part of the community. Within each of the charter school campus locations was the guiding desire that the schools be neighborhood schools. Although they are part of the larger

school districts' school choice network they also, first and foremost, serve students from the neighborhood. As the Main Street campus principal put it, "If a student moves into the neighborhood, they might go to [the public neighborhood school], they might go to Main Street, and if they are getting assigned to where they go, school choice will assign them every other one. If a student moves into the neighborhood, and you're a boundary school, you can't be like, 'Sorry kid we're not gonna educate you,' we're gonna be like, 'Come on in, we'll find a desk.'"

While both Charter Network principals mentioned the rapid growth of the organization they were pleased that the schools were remaining small. Very little concern was expressed over the rapid growth of the organization saying only that "we've been growing really, really fast as a network and we haven't been able to keep our pace with expertise, but I don't feel discouraged when I think about that because I think we can learn very quickly." While one of the teachers echoed the positive aspects of the smaller school size and indicated that it not only allowed for the "building of personal relationships" and "provide[d] a feeling of safety for teachers as well" due to the supportive family feel of the staff, the other teacher was quick to point out that the rapid growth of the organization had left her feeling as though the organization was going the way of the public schools that she had been part of, "where decisions were made at a district level and they weren't always applicable to what was going on at our schools."

She also indicated that the two most recently opened schools in the organization had experienced "almost 100% turnover [in one] and the other one was pretty high, like a 60% turnover rate with staff." A similar concern was shared by one of the Green Valley teachers regarding the possibility of the staff and school community growing to keep up

with the population growth of the area and that it could detrimental to what had been accomplished in terms of student growth and achievement.

Both teachers at Green Valley indicated that the family or community feel that was a part of the school as a result of being a small school of only about 380 students was a good thing. Ms. Foster, being new to the Green Valley community, expressed concern over rumors that a new school was to be built that would replace their small rural middle level school. Having worked at schools with large student populations and large teaching staffs she had been part of a large school community and didn't care for it. Her concern went deeper than simply personal preference as she felt that the sense of community and the ability to build relationships was much more difficult in large school settings, and where relationships with students could still be built, there were several other students that would likely slip through the cracks due simply to the large numbers and the inability to keep track of all the students. Perhaps Ms. Foster's concerns mimic those expressed by Ms. Davis regarding the school districts' not thinking clearly in terms of the impact that a decision to open a larger school might have on not only the school culture and community feel but also on the achievement and growth of the students.

Finally, the impact of the small school community on families must be considered as well. Within the urban school setting it was expressed that the small school provided connections for parents. From open houses to show parents firsthand what happens at the school, to ways that parents can be involved, small schools provided a safety net for parents. In the rural setting of Green Valley, teachers worked well together, there were many opportunities for parents to get involved and Mr. Edwards indicated that even just being a part of the community for so long had provided parents with the trust necessary

for him to do his job with little distraction. With all of the top performing schools in the state being small schools, including some that were not considered in the study due to a lack of gifted student data, this theme had the potential to carry a great deal of weight in the discussion about what worked to create the best environment for academic growth and achievement.

Summary

Chapter IV presented the reader with a large amount of data collected during interviews with six participant subjects. Also included was information gathered through document analysis and memos made immediately after each interview to help the researcher recall interactions, observations, and other notes that were believed might help in understanding how high growth was occurring in these selected schools. The chapter also discussed the four themes that emerged during reflective analysis, and open coding.

The themes that emerged: programming, leadership, school culture, and school size, were all deemed to be equally important in the success of these schools and it was evident that none of the elements on its own could be the single difference in the success of high performing schools. Although some participants may have stressed one particular theme more than another, through the course of the six interviews it was fairly balanced regarding the statements supporting each theme. The next chapter discusses the application of the themes to the research question as well as implications related to the findings. Based on the findings of this study it is believed that there are also some suggestions for possible future research which will be discussed in the final chapter also.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter the researcher reflected on the findings as they related to the research question to determine if the question had been answered. Because this qualitative study was conducted in the phenomenological approach, the development of the textural and structural statements helped to provide the “what” and “how” of the experience, ultimately resulting in a statement that “provides the essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2013). Having made every effort to remain neutral throughout the process of this study, reflection by the researcher allowed consideration of any possible influence the researcher may have had on the results, as well as concerns the researcher had regarding the findings of Chapter IV. Finally, implications, considerations, and possibilities for future studies will be presented.

Research Question

The following research question was developed to guide this study:

What conditions support today’s middle level learning environment that fosters sustained ‘high growth,’ as defined by growth model data, for its gifted populations?

Six volunteer subjects were interviewed to develop the descriptive response to this query.

As Lester (1999) described it, the descriptive response serves to illustrate the perspective of the participants and does not intend to explain the phenomena. With its interpretive

dimension, the intent was that the description could be universally considered, thus lending itself to implementation in other schools.

In framing the study, it was imperative that no specific school was to act as a case study due to the fact that a brick and mortar building, an inanimate object (unless sick due to airborne mold or chemicals), does not impact the learning of children. In fact, it is a multitude of factors that come together through human interaction, beliefs, and structures that make it possible for children to learn. Said another way, a child could sit in the middle of a field and still learn given the right combination of elements. The most influential elements, according to this study are programming, leadership, school culture, and school size. These themes also provided the rich textural and structural descriptions that follow.

Themes

The structural and textural descriptions that are integral to the phenomenological study are based on the “*what*” (structural) and the “*how*” (textural) of the experience. It is not possible to answer either of these with a short, one-sentence response. However, it is not necessarily difficult to see how the themes fit nicely into either the structural or textural framework. Through the lens of the themes, the areas that answer the “*what*” question would include leadership, school culture, and school size. That would leave the “*how*” of the experience to be interpreted through the programming theme. Through the lens of the themes, what exactly have the participants experienced, and where does any of this leave the gifted learner and those who have dedicated their careers to advocating for this unique population and their special needs?

In some cases, the participants are not altogether sure *what* they experienced. Several subjects started their interviews with clarifying questions set in some manner of disbelief that their school could actually have high growth scores for their gifted population. The subjects' surprise was based on the fact that nothing was being done for gifted learners different than what was being done for any other students. This was of sizable concern for the researcher who recognizes the need to serve the unique needs of the gifted learner. Although reassured that students were having some academic needs met through the rigor of new academic standards, there was still great concern for other areas of need, specifically the social and emotional needs, and those in the areas of the arts, creativity, and leadership that are part of this state's definition of giftedness. Exploring the concern further, each participant was asked about services specific to gifted learners.

When asked about programming and options specifically for the gifted population, responses ranged from "we do nothing special or different for them," to the response from Green Valley teacher, Mr. Edwards, who indicated that the one pull-out style option offered to seventh and eighth grade gifted and talented students amounted to an unstructured mass of students in a classroom with little to no structure or direction. This is clearly not the type of programming that provides gifted learners with the opportunities to grow academically, or in any other respect. In order to empower these highly capable young people to move in the direction of leadership, service, or any production of knowledge, they must have the opportunity to work with a specialist who understands how to tap the 'gold ore' within the minds, hearts, and souls of these adolescents who don't even realize what lies within themselves.

When asked about who oversees the gifted and talented population within the buildings, responses were similar between the two organizations. Within the College Bound Charter Network schools, it was indicated that the special education teachers take care of making sure that differentiation for the gifted learners is happening, while administrators indicated that teachers are evaluated three times a year using a rubric that specifically requires teachers to meet the needs of all ability learners. If verifying that teachers are differentiating is believed to be all it would take for gifted learners to be successful, then it is clear that leadership does in fact bear at *least* some responsibility for gifted learners needs not being met. While the results of the study indicate that gifted learners are experiencing high growth it should be noted that in 50% of the growth scores (eighteen of thirty-six as indicated in Table 2) gathered in determining the schools to be included, gifted and talented learners showed lower growth than the general population.

At Green Valley, one teacher indicated that *someone* acted in the role of a gifted facilitator. Mr. Edwards indicated the role has looked different through the many years that he has been at Green Valley. Currently the position is more clerical, than instructional, with the Advanced Learning Plans and paperwork being covered by the contact person. In the past that person had student contact but instructional time is now covered entirely by classroom teachers. Ms. Foster, also at Green Valley, indicated her belief is that the special education staff in the building take on the responsibility for providing teachers with information regarding how to best provide challenge for the gifted learners in their classrooms, as well as “different things to think about when it comes to that group because their needs are different than the common body.” Considering these two statements, it is difficult to determine if there is a gifted specialist

in the building or not. Regardless of what the person's title is, they certainly have not made a large presence in the building or acted in any leadership type role to advocate for the needs of the gifted students. It appears the school has at least a couple of teachers that have made minor concessions to meet student need for academic challenge, although they admit they don't push students to take challenges and they don't compact curriculum with the exception of one student whose parents asked for it.

Programming

The prior section began to address the issues that are of great concern to the researcher; specifically, the lack of knowledge on the part of teachers and administrators, regarding the needs of gifted students, and the lack of expert presence in terms of having gifted specialists on staff to advocate for these students' unique needs. An additional identified concern was the need to provide assistance to the staff in building programming that meets the needs of gifted learners in areas beyond academics. At the time of embarkation on this project, the researcher anticipated finding exemplary gifted and talented programming would exist in the schools that showed high performance percentiles for this population. This did not prove to be the case.

This research appears to indicate that schools can perform well in meeting the academic needs of all students including the gifted learners without gifted education personnel, or programming options designed with the needs of the gifted learner in mind. Knowing that gifted services are not present, as indicated through interviews, the researcher has contemplated what the impact of a gifted education specialist might be on even greater learning opportunities for this unique population of learners.

It is necessary to begin by outlining some of what was indicated to exist as revealed through the data. Between the three schools in which the participating teachers and administrators work, there was a push for a couple of key elements: First was class periods that extended beyond a single sixty-minute class period each day, and, in addition to that time, intervention classes in even more core content areas for fulfilling student needs for additional instruction (however, this appears to exist only for the student who is below proficiency); secondly, both school systems maintain an expectation that teachers will differentiate *well* for all levels of learners. All instruction should be rigorous, incorporating higher-order thinking, inquiry, and the ever-present, “Why?” being asked in all content areas to force thinking more deeply. Next, high expectations are in place for academic and behavior performance and the expectations are maintained for all school community members without exception. These elements are not present in all public middle level schools, at least at the level of intensity shown in the three schools included, and could indicate areas of programming that would benefit a wide variety of learners as is evidenced through the data from this study.

Another element of programming that emerged through all the interviews related to grouping practices. The potentially divisive topic of ability grouping comes under attack every time it is brought up and the schools in this study seemed to be as embroiled in the controversy as any other institution, based on the shifts that have occurred in both organizations. A unique element identified was the autonomy afforded teachers. Several of the subjects cited the ability to determine for themselves how to teach their content, and to determine what materials to be selected for instruction. Teachers were happy to be able to make these decisions and they recognized that this is not the purview of most

teachers in traditional school environments. Moreover, that autonomy coupled with the collaborative practices of teachers who are dedicated to developing good instruction, all meld to create a more passionate delivery of material. These strategies are seen as “best practices” and collaborative practices are found throughout the state. That being said, the growth performance data, statewide, does not indicate that collaborative practices, at least not on their own, are the reason behind the success. The idea of teacher autonomy in deciding what instructional materials to use has been commonplace in gifted education as the opportunity to develop thematic, inter-disciplinary units has historically been part of the role of gifted educators in meeting the needs of their students. Although gifted educators, historically, have had that freedom, the collaborative opportunities have not existed, for gifted education specialists to work together to develop these instructional materials. The lack of gifted education specialists within the organizations included in this study may provide some understanding of the reasons that the percentiles of the gifted learners are, in many cases, not as high as the percentiles of the general population.

Several interview subjects testified to what they consider a key difference with which the researcher agrees, regarding how gifted learners needs are met in these schools when compared to other public middle level schools. That difference is that many schools say that they differentiate well, group students flexibly according to ability level for at least part of the day, and collaborate to create well designed and well differentiated lesson plans, while these schools and teachers actually do it. Not only are there accountability measures in place at the College Bound school sites but it is clear from the perspectives of teachers and administrators alike that teachers won’t last in the school if they don’t share the philosophy of the programming. Some items are non-negotiable.

First, consider curriculum differentiation. Product choice alone or providing more of the same work (i.e. increasing volume not rigor) does not provide what is needed in terms of differentiation. Several teachers in both organizations indicated they know of teachers who consider more work or a greater volume of work to be instrumental in providing differentiated instruction as a way to stave off boredom for gifted kids. Although the teachers from the College Bound Charter schools shared an example of how interventionists within their schools and network spent hours finding multi-leveled texts on the same subject with which to build a lesson, this is not enough for gifted learners. Ms. Baker shared that when she taught Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech, instead of handing the entire speech to each child, in its original text form, she accommodated a variety of learning levels with the help of an interventionist. Struggling learners would have been overwhelmed with the complexity and others along the continuum would have potentially experienced difficulty as well. Through locating "seven different forms of the speech" students throughout the class had what was needed for them to access, discuss and understand the text. This type of differentiating takes time but really only serves to help accommodate the struggling reader and does not address the needs of the gifted learner. The tenets of differentiation for gifted students would have brought in additional writings or speeches of Dr. King, or may have provided a speech with a contrasting viewpoint or message for students to consider and analyze. The only mention of what was being done for gifted students was that the teacher worked to ensure the incorporation of the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and questioning into the lesson planning. This is simply not enough to meet the needs of gifted learners.

The concern also arose regarding teachers that are not providing even this minimal amount of differentiation. These teachers truly believe that they are doing an adequate job providing valuable learning opportunities by asking open ended questions and they think that what they do is all there is to be done. Gifted education specialists know that the types of differentiated instruction that are necessary to create sparks for gifted learners are activities that inspire passion and opportunities for authentic learning. Betts and Kercher in *The Autonomous Learner Model* (1999) suggested that passion studies and in-depth studies developed and designed by gifted learners allow these children to “produce knowledge” just as experts in various fields of endeavor do in the real world every day. It is true that it may not only be gifted children who will be the inventors and entrepreneurs of the future, however, these children show the readiness to take on new challenges. As such the shortsightedness of our teachers who believe they are doing enough for these bright students today could have future inventors stuck in the complacency of mediocrity due to the failure to provide the levels of discovery that they are ready for now.

Next in the realm of programming is the element of minutes per day in core content classrooms (math and literacy specifically), to which many schools have turned. In the push to reach proficiency, many schools have built schedules that allow for two periods per day of math and literacy. This has of course had a tendency to upset science and social studies teachers. Science tests are administered at fifth, eighth and tenth grade and test not only the science learned at those levels but also the levels before it. Additionally, social studies tests will be administered for the first time in 2014, for some grade levels, in the state where this research was conducted. Needless to say, science and

social studies teachers may feel that they are not being given a fair opportunity to instruct students in those content areas and could rightfully make a demand to have additional time added for their content areas as well.

Of course, similar to differentiation, having longer classes by itself doesn't make any difference if the qualities of the pedagogy are the same for all levels of learners. It's necessary to maintain the high academic standards that are able to meet the challenge needs of the highest learners while through strategies such as sheltered instruction, the scaffolding needs of the struggling and English Language Learner students are also being met. While it is important to recognize that the foundation of the College Bound Charter School network was to reverse the trend of inner city children falling through the cracks of education and therefore not having the opportunity to attend college, it seems inequitable that there is no consideration for the gifted inner city learner who could become a physician or scientist whose ground-breaking research has a great impact on humanity if given opportunities and resources to develop and pursue individual interests. It is likely that more highly able individuals never have a chance because they don't have gifted education advocates who can see beyond the disruptions and acting out to recognize the giftedness that others can't see. Far too many times, the researcher has heard teachers rebuff requests for nomination for testing or building a body of evidence for identification based on the fact that a student can easily pull other children off task, or because the student shouts out answers before others have a chance to respond. This lack of understanding on the part of teachers is one of the issues that make gifted education specialists a necessity in schools.

Similar to the rigor of academics offered at these schools is also an expectation that behaviors be at the highest levels of respect and self-discipline. The researcher has contended for years that all students need structure and expectations for respect and recognizing right from wrong and being held to that understanding. A former principal of a middle level school created the analogy that seventh graders are the “tadpoles” that are not completely happy in water all the time as their gills close and they form nasal passages, but they aren’t completely happy on land either as they need to be in water most of the time still. This time of change is seen as a time where they must learn to be comfortable as frogs while still half tadpole and that seventh grade is the year to let them be social and grow out of the awkwardness into the confident eighth grade frogs, ready to leap off the lily pad. Interestingly, this is not a concern in the school buildings with which the subjects of this research are affiliated. It is really no different than raising children. As children go through growth phases, their parents don’t leave them in the woods to figure it out. Our job as educators is to provide the structure that will keep them safe, physically, emotionally, and spiritually while continuing to challenge them in ways that will help their brains grow along with their bodies. While behavior concerns are not generally a glaring issue with gifted children, it doesn’t mean that all gifted children are the Type I gifted child that Betts and Neihart described in their publication *Profiles of the Gifted and Talented* (1988).

When the topic of teacher collaboration and autonomy are considered it seems an interesting mix. They seem in some ways to present a dichotomy. However, it is important to realize that much of what is happening in these schools where collaboration is expected and there is at least some autonomy in what materials the teachers develop to

facilitate instruction and the freedom from using scripted curriculum, allows teachers to teach in the ways in which they feel most efficacious. The need to work together, planning for, discussing, teaching, and reflecting on units and lessons that truly bring to the front of the classroom the tools necessary for kids to grow and yet as stated by Mr. Edwards, recognizing that, “kids will achieve when taught by teachers who believe in what they are teaching” hence the opportunities to be autonomous and yet connected to colleagues.

Solid leadership can help to guide the necessary collaboration and autonomy by helping to provide time and professional development opportunities for teachers to work together. It also helps to have teachers trained in the practices that research indicates work best for students, including those with high abilities. In this way they can facilitate the development of leadership to provide empowerment and the sharing of teacher expertise. If principals don't feel that they have it in their power to have teachers shift their thinking or to allow teachers to develop plans, tools, lessons, etc. or to work collaboratively to develop good lessons, the staff and students can suffer under canned programs. The power of collaborative planning and discussion in a safe and trusting workplace can be the difference between job satisfaction, high turnover, and student growth. Additionally, in an industry that requires ongoing professional development to maintain licensure the field has a plethora of highly talented, capable and knowledgeable personnel that can help others to grow and build their skill set as well.

Another structure that is a programming element and that has been a point of discussion and controversy for decades is that of ability grouping and tracking. Ability grouping in the mid-20th century, in primary grade level reading groups resulted in what

came to be known as “tracking.” Tracking involved sorting students into permanent academic “tracks” that followed students through high school. As a prominent practice from the 1950s through the early 1970s it came to be associated with students being relegated to a range of expectations that came to define what they might hope to accomplish in life. By the 1980s the practice had been criticized extensively enough that any grouping design was considered to be suspect and thus grouping practices disappeared almost entirely. Research has subsequently shown that gifted learners benefit from being grouped with students with similar ability (Kulik, 1992) and several participants in this research project indicated that they had encountered success for gifted learners, when the opportunity for ability grouping was used. The researcher has experienced opportunities for grouping advanced learners with good results. Because many teachers have not been adequately trained in how to make flexible grouping opportunities work, and don’t know how to differentiate instruction well, the preference has been to instruct heterogeneously grouped classrooms without variance for ability. The work of the teachers in this study may corroborate the researcher’s personal experience in regard to the results that can be experienced through flexible grouping with differentiated instruction.

Grouping can be done in flexible non-permanent ways that avoid the pitfalls of tracking which have historically resulted in permanent placements of students across years of their educational experience. School leaders that recognize the value of research based strategies should recognize the research that has been conducted regarding the positive effects of ability grouping for gifted students. Gifted students should not be held back as a means to protect others from feeling inferior any more than gifted students

should be permitted to feel that they are superior to anyone else. Thus indicating a further need to have specialists who can discuss how to develop socially acceptable interactions with others in such a way as to decrease issues regarding bullying and more serious negative behaviors at the hands of individuals of great intellectual ability that have never fully understood what their gifts and talents mean and how the package of being a gifted individual is more than the ability to read or do math.

On the topic of grouping, almost all the interview subjects described classrooms that were either “advanced” classes (math at Green Valley and sixth grade reading at College Bound campuses) or in which they did some flexible grouping for Literature Circles and other exercises in order to provide time for high ability students to meet with students similar to themselves. All teachers expressed success with the model, though Mr. Edwards reported a philosophical aversion and has not been happy about the switch to having advanced classes. He indicated that his school site was the only middle level school in the school district that did not have a Geometry class in the eighth grade options.

Having reflected on many of the elements included in the programming theme for the last decade, the researcher finds some satisfaction in having located schools that validate the structures that together bring powerful success to students as well as the school they attend. Much of what is being done in these successful schools is what master educators consider to be “best practices” and elements that are recognized as requirements for good teaching. Therefore if these elements are working to the extent that they should - if they are in fact “best practices” - what does this mean for other schools that would be expected to also be practicing best practices?

The researcher and colleagues who teach gifted students are still tremendously concerned about the lack of gifted education programming, for the reasons indicated and more, especially as it concerns the affective needs of gifted students. There is also concern for students who are gifted in areas outside of academics as the elective classes in the College Bound schools specifically do not provide more than a modicum of instruction in any of the specialty areas in which some students excel and demonstrate gifted behaviors. Some of these areas are visual and performing arts as well as vocal and instrumental music. Perhaps these academically focused schools aren't concerned with trying to divide their focus and have chosen instead to address academics really well while leaving the arts and music to others.

Finally, the interventions that are offered are again aimed at only the struggling learner with the exception of the mixed-strength area enrichment class described by Mr. Edwards as an intervention. Without much structure, it would appear that considering that as an intervention would be similar to handing a struggling reader a book and simply telling him or her to read. Again, this would appear to be an area that someone trained in the needs of gifted learners would be able to lead. Providing gifted learners with an opportunity to do a study based on interests and passions or even adding in an extra-curricular style opportunity such as a creative or technology type competition teams, would provide learning and/or challenge, and still be a class where the classroom environment could be more relaxed in terms of students sitting quietly in one's seat while taking notes from a textbook. These suggestions are a minimum and don't scratch the surface of what might be possible with a gifted education specialist who also carries out teacher leadership duties and is trained in the necessary skills as an instructional coach.

Given opportunities to provide teachers with consulting, collaboration, and even professional development regarding the characteristics and needs of gifted learners, could potentially benefit not just the school or the students, but also the future of our society.

Leadership

School leaders often set the tone for the culture, relationships, and programming within schools. Ms. Cooper served as principal of the College Bound Charter School, Main Street Campus for three years. The organization moved her from that campus to lead a lower performing school in an attempt to affect change in the new school's culture. This provides the opportunity to observe the impact of the changes that might occur through a change of leadership.

Elements that came through from both organizations in this study were 1) principals were not going to hire people who wouldn't be receptive to constructive criticism in an effort to improve their craft, illustrating the coaching style leadership where the principals desire to help the teacher professionals grow and learn and become better teachers; and, 2) the reciprocated trusting relationship that keeps teachers from feeling micro-managed and provides leadership with the necessary opportunities to instill change to teacher craft without it feeling threatening to teachers.

When asked about hiring practices, Ms. Cooper indicated that she expects the job candidate to teach a mock lesson (or provide a video of themselves teaching a lesson) to the hiring committee, and then she will find some element in the lesson for which she will offer feedback. After giving the feedback, she will ask for the teacher to reteach the lesson to the committee, as though they were students, in order to see how they

incorporated the feedback into adjusting their lesson. Clearly there would be some need for the candidate to be composed under pressure as well.

Other leadership responsibilities brought this theme to the forefront. Specific elements that have seemed to provide the best response have been the ability to lead as a coach and to be visible and active in the building. The organizations identified in this study reflect similar teacher leadership styles, however this does not in any way indicate only one style of leadership to be most effective. Having completed educational leadership coursework, the researcher is aware that effective leaders must be flexible and able to change leadership styles depending upon the demands of a given situation. It is possible that the perspective of the teachers and administrators interviewed was more specifically aligned with the demands of the relationship between building leaders and the teachers in the school.

The ability of principals to work with teachers in such a way as to empower them to believe in their own ability to affect change and growth for students not only allows teachers to accept principal visits to the classroom with less fear, but it also enables them to see a leader who recognizes when students and teachers look good to families and the general public. It makes them shine as well. When a principal is in and out of classrooms on a regular basis, students behave better, teachers are at their best (or at least less likely to be sitting at their desk reading emails), and principal-student, principal-teacher relationships can be built that can help to establish the trust necessary within the school culture for high growth as well. Experience with less-visible principals has provided the researcher with the ability to recognize the benefits that can be derived through principal awareness of what is happening in classrooms. Ms. Foster stated that

she enjoyed having the principal walk through her room on a regular basis. She felt that his presence allowed him to better understand her as a teacher, her teaching style, her classroom management ability, and more. She further explained that having her principal recognize all these elements of who she is as a teacher and how her classroom operates has allowed her to feel supported at times when parent phone calls have come in inquiring about a concern. The principal has been able to speak honestly and fairly knowing the class and the teacher without the teacher needing to fear whether the principal would support her.

Finally, within the leadership realm, exist the priorities that the principal places on what are most important within the building and within professional development for the staff. In the case of the schools affiliated with this study it was clear that the number one priority is student achievement. It is important enough at the College Bound campuses that the school is willing to make promises to students' families that they will have them prepared for a college experience upon graduation from high school. This is a tall order considering that their affiliated high schools have not been open as long as the middle level schools, thus they were trusting that the public high schools would be able to continue to provide them the level of education that would carry them into the college experience.

For the staff, the priority placed on professional development for both buildings has been collaboration and differentiation. The collaborative element has allowed teachers to accomplish a great deal in a small amount of time by keeping them focused on what needed to be addressed and not turning meetings into an unstructured gripe sessions regarding students, the amount of grading to be done, or the next initiative being

mandated by the higher-ups. Although there never is enough time, these principals have done what they could to create an environment where teachers recognize the need to step outside of their contract hours to create the time that is necessary to develop good learning opportunities for students. When it came to discussing the dedication of teachers, it was clear that teachers at the North Forest Campus feel strongly about the value of working with teachers like themselves who are passionate about teaching kids. This was not discussed extensively by the participants from the Green Valley campus, but many public schools are influenced by teacher contracts that specify teachers to work specific set hours. Many teachers adhere to these hours regardless of whether it aids their ability to develop better lessons with other teachers.

There was something unique and different about the leadership at these high performing schools. The interview subjects mentioned them enough to have leadership emerge as a clear theme. That being said, there was also some criticism of the job these principals did in terms of the gifted students in the schools. Both Ms. Davis and Mr. Edwards, from different organizations, placed at least some blame on the building administration for the lack of gifted education programming and for not doing all that could be done to make teachers accountable to at least differentiate lessons to meet the needs of the high ability learner. Based on the teachers interviewed, it is apparent that meeting the needs of the gifted student is 'hit-and-miss' at best and appears directed toward the students whose parents request the challenge that should be provided for all gifted learners without the need to request such services.

School Culture

Having worked as a gifted specialist in a public school setting for over a decade, the researcher is aware of the importance of school culture on the performance of students. Personal experience has illustrated how quickly any change in culture can affect what happens with student test scores. For example, a change in administration within a building often results in bringing with it new initiatives when in fact, teachers already feel overwhelmed. Therefore it is clear that school culture constitutes a theme for this study.

Both organizations within this study appeared to exist within a culture of positivity, happiness, respect, trust, and high standards and expectations. It appears that with the leadership that is in place in both organizations, things have gone well for some time. Due to positive environments existing within both organizations, discussions did not occur regarding how cultures could be impacted negatively or what types of situations could develop those negative feelings within organizations. Drawing upon personal experience, it was felt that it can be small differences that can cause an immediate negative change in the school culture, not to mention, that it can impact trust between personnel as well. Intended or not, the loss of trust or an unrevealed philosophical difference can have a significant impact. These types of negative effects can be safeguarded against when leadership is aware of the negative potential and can head off incidents through transparency and open and honest communication.

Throughout the interviews it was clear from teachers that the leadership strengths of their principals provided trust and safety for the teaching staff. When teachers do not need to be concerned with whether they are supported by their administrators it allows

the focus to be placed on the students and their learning, which is where the focus should be. Another apparent skill that these school leaders possessed was the ability to provide feedback to teachers in a non-threatening manner. Coaching has become a big part of the school culture, and many schools now have one or more “Instructional Coaches” on staff to help guide the teachers in developing their expertise and craft. Many of these coaches work closely with building principals to help to develop the structures thought to be best for the school community in providing what is needed instructionally. With teacher leaders who are well utilized, there is great potential to empower staff and make everyone feel a part of the decisions that are made, ensuring support and enhanced collaboration toward making positive outcomes happen.

In addition to trust building and coaching that is modeled and incorporated into the culture by the leadership, there is an overall presence of positivity, happiness, and kindness that permeates the school community, imbuing it with family-like qualities – albeit these families are rather large ones. When these components are sincerely and truly believed in and embraced, the ensuing culture will create high expectations for academics to be second nature because that too is understood and believed in. Additionally, when one is happy, tasks seem less overwhelming. Therefore, as Ms. Baker shared, the trade-off is easier, (i.e., the hard work and long hours), when the work is shared with others who share the beliefs and dedication that you do. The family analogy can be illustrated when taken in the context that light work is made of cleaning the house when everyone pitches in with an attitude of grace.

In summary, the culture of a school can make or break anything else that happens in that school, however, it cannot stand alone to make the difference. Schools can still

perform, but it may not be at the level that could be attained with the right attitude from the top leadership the whole way down through the ranks.

School Size

A good deal of time was invested considering the potential of a particular school “model” being a factor, given that so much research and time had been spent through the last century adjusting the middle level configuration in an attempt to produce a performing school model for students of this age range. As the literature review shows, the configuration of the junior high model was thought to not adequately address the needs, especially the social and emotional, of the early adolescent. As a result of the concern, the middle school model was created, to allow for smaller communities where students wouldn’t feel so overwhelmed in the large mass of students making up some of the junior high populations of the time. The fiscal need to consolidate schools and create larger buildings had produced middle level schools that could have student numbers into the thousands. In these schools it was easy for students to fall through the cracks or not be noticed. The middle school model sought to change the trend of losing students however that was largely unsuccessful also.

After existing for several years, middle schools began receiving criticism over the lack of academic rigor. It seemed that the pendulum had swung and so much focus was being given to the affective needs of students, which generally appeared to be a simple allowance for students to ‘find themselves,’ that performance was suffering. Today there is a large mix of models and it seems, from the results of this research, that the model may not be so much an issue as the overall size of the school.

The schools that have experienced the high growth described in this study are all schools with populations of less than 400 students. The researcher did not expect school size to be a factor however, the findings of this study indicate that only schools with less than 400 students made high growth. The analysis of the data indicated that no larger population schools have experienced the growth that has been the case for smaller schools. While this cannot be considered causal, it does provide a consideration when schools have options regarding how to grow. The Charter Network appears to have kept this consideration in mind as they expanded, choosing to open new small schools rather than moving to larger campuses to house a greater number of students.

The principals interviewed from the College Bound Schools both spoke of the rapid growth of their network and the waiting list for entrance to the schools from the very beginning. It was indicated by Ms. Adams, who was the founding sixth grade writing teacher, that when the Main Street campus opened, it was important to the founders that the school populations remain small. Therefore, when the need for expansion came, the decision was made to maintain small schools and open new campuses. On the other hand, Ms. Foster shared that the Green Valley Middle Level School is looking to build a new school, but it doesn't sound as though the idea of maintaining the small school size will be paramount in the planning. Considering the concern of those interviewed, increasing the size of the school site itself and the too rapid expansion of a school organization may all have negative results.

The question of why school size matters can be seen through the data collected in the interviews. The bottom line is that relationships can be built and fostered in small school environments, and these relationships allow trust to build between all members of

the school community. The equation begins with having a single administrator (which is not possible when student population is more than four or five hundred students) who maintains the consistency across the staff for expectations and is able to evaluate all staff members. There is no division among the staff due to philosophical alignment with one school leader over another.

When administrators trust teachers to act in the professional best interests of students by holding them accountable, sharing ways to improve as professionals, and encouraging them to collaborate and share what is working in their classrooms, these alignments build on each other and are reflected back as teachers then trust the administration to be equitable and fair. Through collaboration with colleagues, trust is then fostered horizontally. If trust exists, there is not a fear of being vulnerable, and the openness to work together allows for the powerful creative force of many minds to come together in lesson planning, team teaching, shared successes and collegiality as well.

Finally, relationships between adults model for children how people should treat each other. As adults, we are all aware of how sponge-like children can be, absorbing even the most subtle nuances and insinuations, even when we think that what we say is over their head. Oftentimes, it is through something said later that we become aware of what they intuited without our even knowing it. Herein lays an important consideration when there is strife within a school site. This is especially true in small schools where teachers are less able to hide in their rooms or remove themselves from the rest of the staff.

Implications

Embarking on this research, it became apparent that little research has been undertaken regarding growth model data, especially as it relates to gifted learners. The construct of growth models is so new that the data needed to conduct any kind of longitudinal or comparative research are just now beginning to emerge as four years of growth data (for disaggregated subgroups) are now available for the state where this research was conducted. In addition to the short time that these data have existed, there is also the reality that the population of greatest concern is gifted and talented students whose academic needs are not being met due to the focus of resources and personnel being centered on ‘bubble students’ who are close to proficient. Growth models were designed to monitor the population of students that were not yet reaching proficiency and as such those schools not bringing students to levels of proficiency stand to lose local control over their instruction, if and when state agencies are brought in to help. Ultimately, as the result of having a model that disaggregates for many sub-populations, gifted included, we have the opportunity to measure what is being done for gifted learners also. With this in mind, the research identified the following implications.

First, given the findings of this study it *appears* that schools are able to meet the need for academic challenge that allows gifted learners to grow, without gifted education specialists to aid them. Although the three schools in this study have shown high growth for this population, the growth is still often lower than the growth of the general population and the number of schools meeting this level of growth is abysmal. It is clear that there is much to be done in terms of meeting the unique and comprehensive needs of the gifted middle level learner, including consistent and pervasive academic growth.

With almost one hundred years of work devoted to developing an understanding of the varied needs of this unique population there is still reluctance to accept that these students will not simply “make it on their own.” Because there has not been a perfectly replicable model developed that could be used to open schools that meet the needs of all learners, including the gifted learner, it is necessary to address what variables can be addressed that will make a difference. In order to do this there must be acceptance of the research connected to gifted education theory that indicates best practices as they relate to gifted learners. This includes grouping models and the use of structures such as grade skipping, content acceleration, and the use of in-depth investigations and passion learning, to name a few. Besides being open to the possibility of using these structures and strategies they must be used with fidelity and not simply given space on a page stating what is offered without truly using them in a way to best effect the learner’s needs nor to fully provide the potential for growth and extension that it offers students. All that being said, it is the contention of the researcher that the elements most lacking in the profiles of the schools identified for this study are the elements of programming, and support for the social and emotional needs of the gifted student population.

The second implication is that no matter how much energy and resources are spent on the academic, cognitive, or intellectual needs of the gifted adolescent, the area that should not be ignored is the social-emotional. With the results of this study indicating that academic needs may be able to be met through the use of “best practices” and good pedagogy for all students, it does not address the impact of social and emotional, or affective programming for gifted. Not only are the social and emotional needs of the middle grades child already in upheaval, as evidenced by the decision to

develop a new model to meet the needs of the general population by moving from an academically structured “junior-high” model school to a “middle-school” model where the social needs of the child could be better addressed, but the idea that middle level guidance counselors can handle the needs of the gifted child of this age is equally untenable. Although trained in the basic psychological, developmental, social and emotional demands of the adolescent child, the gifted adolescent has his or her own extra issues. Where we wouldn’t just simply have the middle school counselor handle the counseling and scheduling needs for an autistic child without, at minimum, the assistance of the special education resource teacher, we should not place the gifted special needs child in the hands of counselors untrained in the unique needs of the gifted child.

The third implication of this research finds the return to the rationale behind this project. There is a need to return gifted education to a level of importance in our country and to make it as much of a funding priority as any other part of education. Making up a mere three to five percent of the population according to many theories, the call of students who are gifted are not heard over the voices of the majority who see gifted education as elitist. The voices of those who attempt to advocate are sometimes silenced by those who are in positions of power. Advocates don’t want to make waves as they are often the sole voice in the room and it can be intimidating to go up against those who don’t understand the need. In the researcher’s experience there have been few administrators who are knowledgeable about the needs of the gifted population.

It is the contention of the researcher that if administrators can be educated about the unique needs of the gifted population, they will be in a better position to assure that the needs of this student sub-population will be met. School administrators, like most

education professionals, are passionate about children and want only the best for them. If these administrators fully understood the needs of this population and didn't see them as being able to fair for themselves, they might be better able to ensure that gifted education specialists are part of their campuses. With the aforementioned in mind, the greatest implication seen by the researcher addresses the need to educate educators and administrators to the needs of gifted students. Based on information provided by the participant teachers and administrators, none of these professionals has had training beyond what might have been experienced in pre-service teacher education classes. Based on what is offered to gifted learners on the campuses in this study, the knowledge about gifted education theory is not enough to help these educators to understand that the gifted population is unique. Without gifted education theory providing the answer to the, "Why does it need to be different?" question, the importance of gifted education cannot be understood. The attempts at differentiation that have occurred in the schools identified for this project have met the needs of the average and struggling student populations while providing more than a typical classroom. Perhaps those are good intentions but gifted children need and deserve more than good intentions. Once teachers more universally understand what are "best practices" for gifted students, movement can begin to occur in the direction of providing gifted students with challenging learning opportunities that better meet their need for passion pursuits and authentic learning opportunities, as well as providing the schools with even higher growth scores than they have experienced.

Although it would be nice to think that the needs of the gifted are able to be met in a cost neutral fashion, ultimately the necessity of having dedicated and passionate

gifted specialists in every school is not cost neutral, nor should it be. When school district personnel analyze their data and see students leaving for neighboring districts in order to get what is thought to be a better education, the extant programming should be analyzed to determine if the needs of those students are being met within their neighborhood schools.

Suggestions for Future Research

In moving forward it is important to recognize that this study looked at a small number of teachers from a small number of schools due to the low number of schools that have experienced the type of growth under investigation in this Western state. Reflecting on these low numbers, the researcher has created a list of future research considerations that could reveal a greater essence of the phenomenon.

1. The initial possibility for future research would be to take this to a regional or national level where more high growth school identification could build in more combinations of profile elements. For example, casting a wider net could allow for inclusion of a public urban school or a rural charter school in addition to the urban charter and rural public school that were used for this project.
2. Within each element, further consideration could be given to schools where high growth is occurring and gifted specialists are involved to determine the role they play in the success. The question developed through this research that if the school sites identified were experiencing the growth indicated without gifted intervention, what might happen if gifted intervention was in fact an integral part of the school model?

3. Due to the fact that the schools included were small schools, there was not a clear model of middle level learning labels. That is, the middle school versus junior high model versus K-8 model never fully developed and those interviewed were not sure under which model, if any, their schools were developed. As such the topic of school model influence remains a question that, although fairly researched, could be approached with the other elements revealed through this study and thus controlled.
4. Based on the findings of this research, indicating that gifted learners academic needs can be met through the use of good pedagogy and best practices, a suggested future project would include a qualitative study of the perceptions of gifted learners regarding whether their social-emotional needs are met in their middle level schools. Within education it is recognized that we need to consider the emotional needs of children within their school context, as evidenced through the adjustments that have been made to middle level models over the last century. Gifted education theory includes the necessity to look at the emotional needs of gifted learners as a means to address holistic educational needs.
5. A final future research possibility, similar to the previous suggestion, and based on the idea that the schools in the study focused on academic needs to the exclusion of other potential gifted areas (i.e., music, arts, and leadership) implies that public education may not be the venue through which the social and emotional needs of the gifted child, are met. The potential future research project could examine the need for gifted programming to meet social and

emotional needs from the perspective of educators, as well as, or in addition to, from the point of view of the students. Student perception would be valuable as it is not always apparent that gifted students realize that their needs are different from the needs of the general population.

Due to an interest in the potential changes that could occur in the scores of the schools identified in this study, the researcher will continue to watch the schools included to see what might happen. Each of the organizations has undergone change, or will be undergoing change, that will affect some of the themes identified in this study. As such, it will be of interest to see if those changes will impact the high learner growth that has been experienced to this point. It was clear to see that focus on specific elements can make change, such as the Green Valley School's focus on writing the year after their writing scores had dropped, that resulted in a score move to a higher level due to the intense attention it received.

Changes in aspects such as school culture as it relates to the happiness or positivity of staff can be more difficult to determine due to these being elements of perception. Clearly, in this research, three of four educators from the Charter Network felt as though the staff was all on the same page, united, and happy, but a single teacher of the group felt differently and expressed that there was frustration and unhappiness being experienced by veteran members of the organization. What happens when the attitude is perceived more widely could be impacting but may not be as easily determined as a change in something such as a leadership change.

The elements of this study are hard to measure quantitatively and the qualitative inquiry has served to develop a story of what is happening in high growth schools and

how it is happening. Given a perfect world, this research would be used to create the conditions with the perfect elements to achieve the perfect school. The reality is that perfection is not only elusive it is impossible. Therefore, this research stands as a testament to the dedicated teachers, administrators, and gifted professionals that go all out to create the environment that best provides for student growth and achievement as well as serves to meet all facets of a child's life to help him or her to be the best that they can be in life.

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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION
NARRATIVE AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Title: THE PURSUIT OF HIGH ACADEMIC GROWTH FOR GIFTED MIDDLE
LEVEL LEARNERS**

A. Purpose

The purpose of this research is to build an understanding of what must be present in today's middle level schools (6th, 7th, and 8th grades) to meet the academic growth needs of the gifted middle-level learner. Today's public schools have been pulled in many directions in their attempts to meet the demands of federal mandates and as such, the resources for the gifted learner populations have been decimated. With these reductions in resources it has become imperative that we figure out what is being done in school sites that consistently provide the means for these highly capable learners to experience high academic growth and then do what we can to replicate the conditions in order that the needs of our future leaders, innovators and change agents, be met during these important formative years.

I have made the choice to submit this application as "Exempt" due to the fact that there will be no 'at-risk' individuals involved in this study. Initial determination of the education professionals to be included in the sample will be made through a review of existing, publically available data, online through the Colorado Department of Education (Growth Model Data) website. Once high growth/high performing schools are determined, contact with the school administration will be made and appointments for conducting interviews will be scheduled with those administrators and educators influential in the high growth of gifted learners. Only professional educators in public middle level schools within the state of Colorado will be included in the study, thus there will be no children, prisoners, elderly or other individuals connected to this study, that would require a more thorough review process.

B. Methods

1. Participants

The study to be conducted will be of an "emergent style" of qualitative research, meaning that the study will evolve as it is conducted. As such there is no way to determine at the outset, exactly how many individuals may be involved in the interview phase of the research. What is known at this time is that individuals will be drawn from schools showing consistent high growth percentiles (70thile or greater) over a four year time span; 2010 through 2013 CSAP/TCAP testing

years). Schools will be identified based on existing publicly available data, through the Colorado Department of Education's Growth Model Data. Once schools that show a greater than 70th percentile growth rate for the disaggregated population of gifted and talented learners are identified, the list of potential participants will be narrowed based on distance from the researcher's location and the availability to be included in the research with the least restrictive access in regard to district administrative personnel and permissions. Building administration will be contacted to set up an initial interview appointment. During the initial interview process it is anticipated that the administrator(s) will provide names of other potential research subjects via a practice known as "snowball sampling" where the "gate-keeper," or initial contact, will provide the names of other individuals that they believe could add additional valuable information to the research.

All interview subjects will be professionals within a public middle school level setting. The ages of these individuals will most likely fall between 24 years and 65 years, give or take a year or so either way to allow for early college graduates that entered the public education workforce prior to 24 years of age or those that have not yet retired at the age of 65 years. Although it is not anticipated that any of the participants will be members of a vulnerable sub-population it cannot be guaranteed that there will be no pregnant women; however, it is not anticipated that any aspect of the interview process will put any undue stress or strain on any of the subjects at any time. All participants will be notified, prior to the first question being asked, that they will be allowed to stop the interview at any time that they feel uncomfortable or would desire to stop for any reason, without further explanation. Participant names and identifying information will be kept as confidential as possible and no identification of school sites or participants will be made. All participants will be asked to sign a consent form which will also inform them of the option to stop and that their information will not be able to be tied back to them.

2. Data Collection Procedures

As previously indicated, the first step of this research process will be to identify the schools to be included in the study. To make this determination, it will be necessary for me to access the Colorado Department of Education website. From there I will access "SchoolView" which contains the "Growth Model" data for the state. This data are collected for all third through tenth grade students in the state, from the state assessment tests taken each spring. These tests are currently known as TCAP (Transitional Colorado Assessment Program) tests and

were formally known as CSAP (Colorado State Assessment Program) tests. Once the data are accessed, it will be analyzed for each school district in the state. Specifically, filters will block all elementary and high schools (except those for which the middle level is combined with the elementary or high school, in the instance of the more remote or rural districts of the state) in order that only middle school data are being analyzed. Within each middle school, only schools with greater than 20 students will have data available. This is a protection afforded these small schools that might have the potential for individual student's information to be realized due to the small nature of the school. Likewise, within the disaggregated data, any sub-population within any school in the state, that has a population less than 20, the information will again not be available and therefore will not have the opportunity to be included in the research as a protection of privacy for those students.

After high growth middle level schools are identified the school administrators will be contacted via email, phone calls, or in-person visits to request their participation in the study. Participants will be notified that the interview will be digitally recorded and should take no more than 30 minutes of their time. School district involvement will not be necessary as this study will represent professional beliefs that result not from the school or district but from the personal and professional beliefs of the interviewees and will not target nor identify a single school or school district. At the time of the interviews, subjects will be provided a brief overview of the purpose of the research. Each subject will also be notified that participation in the interview will make them eligible to receive a \$25 gift card. Four subject's names will be drawn from the names of all interview subjects upon completion of the interview portion of the study and each will receive a \$25 general use gift card to be used as they wish.

After the consent form has been signed and the purpose has been explained, subjects will be asked open-ended questions to elicit responses without guiding the subject to respond in any pre-determined fashion. (See attachment for interview questions.) When the interviews are concluded, each digital recording will be transcribed by the primary researcher. A copy of the transcribed interviews will be emailed individually to each interviewee for review (member check), to verify that the words contained are the intent of the subject and to ascertain if there is anything further that the subject would wish to add.

3. Data Analysis Procedures

After interview recordings have been transcribed and member checked by the participants, data will be analyzed to code and develop themes which will describe and define the phenomenon of high growth for gifted learners as it occurs in a small percentage of middle level schools. Themes will be developed through multiple reviews of the transcripts. The researcher will look for salient

statements, ideas, and comments that are mentioned by multiple subjects or that corroborate what the researcher recognizes to be best practices of gifted education based on prior knowledge. Any artifacts collected during the process will be analyzed during this phase to determine alignment with the ideas presented through the interview process. As themes emerge content specialists will be consulted to provide triangulation and peer examination of the findings.

4. Data Handling Procedures

Initial confidential records will be consent forms. Consent forms, upon collection will be given to Research Advisor, Dr. Stuart Omdal and will be kept by him, under lock and key for a period of at least three years as required.

Digital interview recordings will be transcribed by the researcher, as soon after obtained as possible, after which the recordings themselves will be deleted from the recording device. All transcripts will then be kept under lock and key in a file cabinet in the primary researcher's home office. Numbers will be assigned to each interview and will be known only to the primary researcher. Only these assigned numbers will appear on the transcripts. Access to these transcripts will be given (outside that of the principal researcher) only to the Research Advisor in the event that he should need to see them for triangulation purposes and/or validity of coding and theme building.

At no time during the preparation of the findings, including the final dissertation, will the school sites or the participants be identified by name. They will be referred to as "high growth middle level schools in a western U.S. state" and will be described through demographic information that could be ascribed to multiple sites, including those not included in the study.

C. Risks, Discomforts and Benefits

There are no inherent, foreseeable risks related to this study. It is believed that subjects may feel uneasy at the possibility that honest disclosure could result in some repercussion however the investigator will do all possible to reassure that the statements made by the participant will not be reviewed or released to any person in a position to evaluate or have knowledge of statements made, nor will the final dissertation reveal names of participants or their school sites. It is further believed that the experience could be similar to that which could occur between the professional and a parent or colleague but could contain statements that might not be disclosed on those settings if the interviewee feels comfortable stepping outside of a "professional" demeanor to make honest disclosure that might be contained in a professional situation.

Potential benefits of this study include the opportunity to have practices replicated in schools throughout the country that provide the growth to gifted learners that all learners deserve to receive. Practices that are good for gifted learners are also good practices for all learners and it is believed that by including school sites that show evidence of high growth percentiles for gifted learners as well as the general population, school sites, districts, states, and the entire country can benefit from what these few school sites have shown positive results with. What the participants are providing has the potential of promoting cutting edge change in educational practices.

D. Costs and Compensations

Direct potential benefit from the study could be the receipt, by four participants, of a \$25 gift card, as four names will be chosen from the names of all participants in the study.

It is not anticipated that there will be any costs to the participants as the researcher is willing to meet the participants at a location of their choosing which could include their home, school site, other public place, etc., and will occur during a time of their choice.

E. Grant Information (if applicable)

Not applicable

Interview Questions to Guide Interview Process

Questions that will be asked of the interviewees will include:

- 1) Why do you believe your campus is more successful at producing high growth for gifted learners than other campuses within the state?
- 2) What is the structure of the school day? (i.e. extended day, # of contact hours per day, etc.)
- 3) Are there unique programs or curriculums used that could play a part in student growth?
- 4) To what would you attribute the high growth that your building consistently attains?
- 5) What is the attitude or belief system within the staff of the campus that contributes to the growth experienced by the students?
- 6) What instructional model is in place for the GT students and does it differ from the model used for other students in the school?
- 7) What leadership style provides the most constructive means to attain a high growth attitude among teachers and students?
- 8) Other questions necessary for clarification of responses.



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: THE PURSUIT OF HIGH ACADEMIC GROWTH FOR GIFTED
MIDDLE LEVEL LEARNERS

Researcher: Linda E. C. Pfeiffer, Doctoral Candidate, School of Special Education
Phone: 970-635-1907 E-mail: pfei0920@bears.unco.edu

Advisor: Dr. Stuart N. Omdal
Phone: 970-351-1674 E-mail: stuart.omdal@unco.edu

Purpose and Description:

As a doctoral candidate at the University of Northern Colorado, I am researching the perspective of educational professionals in specifically identified but not named, middle level schools in the state of Colorado that consistently show high growth for identified gifted and talented students in their school populations. The purpose of this study is to determine what conditions, attitudes, structures, etc. work to allow gifted learners to grow academically in their identified strength area(s). Due to focus having been placed on the needs of students needing to reach proficiency, funding and resources have decimated programs such as gifted education. School sites such as yours have shown sustained high growth on TCAP/CSAP for the testing years 2010-2013. It is believed that something is being done differently at your school site that allows students of all ability levels to thrive. The crux of this research seeks to answer the “how” behind your site’s sustained growth ability.

Your involvement is a matter of sharing your personal beliefs and experiences in an approximately 30 minute interview. You will be asked questions that should in no way make you feel uncomfortable. Should you mention a program or policy that you believe affects the academic growth at your school site you may be asked to provide the relevant artifacts for later examination and analysis. All interview recordings will be deleted once the transcripts of the recordings have been completed. A copy of the transcript will be emailed to an address you provide, for your review and for the opportunity to add to your statements or make changes to any statements that may misrepresent your intended meaning.

At the end of the study, we would be happy to share the findings with you at your request. We will take every precaution in order to protect your anonymity. We will assign a subject number to you. Only the principal investigator will know the name connected with a subject number and when we report data, your name will not be used. Data collected and analyzed for this study will be kept in a locked file cabinet at 331 Morgan Drive, Loveland, CO, (the residence of the principal investigator) which is only accessible by the researcher.

It is believed that there are no inherent risks associated with your involvement as everything possible is being done to protect your identity. Your involvement will take place at a time and place convenient to you in order to disrupt your routine as little as possible.

Once the interview has been completed your name will be entered into a drawing to receive a \$25 gift card as a thank you for your participation. The chances of winning will depend on the number of interviews conducted. Gifted students, teachers, administrators and university level instructors will be populations who most benefit from the results of this study, as any information gleaned could work to benefit scores of future learners and those who teach them through adjustments in the ways we work to meet the academic challenges of middle level learners.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Subject's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL MESSAGE

Date: 09/15/2013 11:59 PM
To: "Linda Pfeiffer" <pfei0920@bears.unco.edu>, "Stuart Omdal" <stuart.omdal@unco.edu>
From: "Megan Babkes Stellino" <no-reply@irbnet.org>
Reply To: "Megan Babkes Stellino" <megan.stellino@unco.edu>
Subject: IRBNet Board Action

Please note that University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [509309-1] THE PURSUIT OF HIGH ACADEMIC GROWTH FOR GIFTED MIDDLE LEVEL LEARNERS

Principal Investigator: Linda Pfeiffer, Ed.D.

Submission Type: New Project

Date Submitted: September 7, 2013

Action: APPROVED