2-14-2019

Stakeholders’ Conceptions of Giftedness

Ashley Y. Carpenter
University of Connecticut, ashley.carpenter@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/2066
Stakeholders’ Conceptions of Giftedness
Ashley Yorke Carpenter, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut, 2019

In the world of gifted education, educators must first find students who qualify for gifted services. Various stakeholders in public elementary education often nominate students for gifted identification and ultimately gifted programs. It is important to determine if stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness are the same or different, as conceptions influence actions. There is substantial research on teachers’ conceptions of giftedness but limited research on parents’ conceptions of giftedness. The purpose of this study was to explore stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness and answer the research question: How do stakeholder groups describe giftedness? Participants included parents of elementary gifted students (n = 217), general education K-5 teachers (n = 213), gifted teachers (n = 87), and gifted coordinators (n = 36) from 3 states and 23 schools that mandated gifted identification and programming. Gifted stakeholder groups described giftedness as differences from same age peers in four subthemes: (a) advanced capacity to learn and reason, (b) high-level performance, (c) the need for challenge, and (d) unique personality characteristics and behaviors. Stakeholder groups all described giftedness as differences from same age peers; however, the frequency of each subtheme varied. Parents emphasized a need for challenge beyond the typical age-based learning environment. General education teachers emphasized high performance. Gifted teachers and coordinators emphasized district and state criteria for gifted identification, stressing ability test scores and potential.
Stakeholders’ Conceptions of Giftedness

Ashley Yorke Carpenter

B.S., Eckerd College, 2002
M.A., University of South Florida, 2006

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the
University of Connecticut

2019
Acknowledgements

This journey started when I was a middle school science teacher for a gifted magnet program in Florida. Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska led a professional development session on the curriculum units we used at our school. That day planted a seed. In that moment, I said I was going to be a gifted guru one day, and the journey began.

Throughout this process, I have grown in more ways than I can count. I have transformed from a K-12 teacher to an academic. I have learned to love research. I have learned that I am capable of so much more than I ever thought possible. I have conquered my fears and pushed through every hurdle that came into my path to reach my goal. I could not have done this alone, this was truly a group effort.

First, to my family, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement. To my husband, Matt Carpenter, I could not have done this without you. You are my rock. Thank you for believing in me and doing everything at home that needed to be done so I could completely focus on my dissertation. To my mother, Karen Hastings, thank you for the countless times you drove across the state to babysit and for your love and support.

Second, to my committee members, thank you for all of your time, energy, patience, and editing. Del Siegle, thank you for your moral support and encouragement. You always knew just what to say and when to say it to boost my confidence. Catherine Little, thank you for asking me the hard questions and helping me to improve my writing. My dissertation is of much better quality because of your guidance. E. Jean Gubbins, thank you for reading my numerous drafts with such detail and precision, your edits and suggestions are greatly appreciated.
Finally, to my cheerleading squad of wonderful women friends and fellow students, thank you for believing in me when I didn’t believe in myself. To Melissa, Jody, Jen, and Megan, your encouragement from afar meant the world to me. Thank you for listening and taking this journey with me. To my fellow doctoral students at UConn: Emma, Pam, and Stacy, thank you for lunches and coffees and listening. Thank you for your help, your guidance, and understanding like no one else could.

This dissertation is dedicated to Wyatt A. Carpenter, you are my reason! Mommy loves you!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY
- Background of the Problem 1
- Purpose of the Study 5
- Significance of the Study 5
- Assumptions 6
- Definitions of Terms 6
- Summary 7

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
- Conceptual Framework 8
- Teachers’ Beliefs and Attitudes About Giftedness 10
- Historical and Cultural Conceptions of Giftedness 11
- Teachers’ Conceptions of Gifted Characteristics 16
  - Ability and Aptitude 16
  - Learning and Thinking 18
  - Classroom Behavior 19
- Student Demographic Factors Influencing Teacher Conceptions 20
  - Race/Ethnicity 21
  - Culture and Language 22
  - Socioeconomic Status (SES) 23
- Family 24
- Teacher Factors Influencing Teacher Conceptions of Giftedness 24
  - Exposure to Gifted Students 25
  - Training in Gifted Education 25
  - Stakeholder 26
    - Preservice vs. in-service 26
    - Classroom teachers vs. gifted teachers 27
- Summary 28

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS
- Research Design 31
  - Paradigm/Epistemological Perspective 31
  - Methodological Approach 32
- Participants 32
  - State Selection 33
  - School Selection 34
- Data Collection 35
- Data Analysis 36
  - Order of Analysis 36
  - Inductive Analysis 37
- Trustworthiness 43
  - Reflexivity Statement 44
  - Validity and Reliability 45
- Summary 46

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS
- 47
Conclusions

APPENDICES

Appendix A: School Demographics by State
Appendix B: Abbreviated Interview Protocols

REFERENCES
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Site Visits 34
Table 3.2 Interview Questions by Stakeholder 36
Table 3.3 Data Sources 37
Table 3.4 Transcript Excerpt – Gifted Parents 09/19/16 39
Table 3.5 Redistribution of Categories, Sub Categories, and Codes 41
Table 3.6 Transcript Excerpts With Axial Codes 42
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Stakeholder Differences – Capacity for Learning and Reasoning 55
Figure 4.2 Stakeholder Differences – Performance 58
Figure 4.3 Stakeholder Differences – Needs Challenge 65
Figure 4.4 Stakeholder Differences – Personality Characteristics and Behaviors 69
Figure 4.5 Stakeholder Groups 70
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background of the Problem

In the world of gifted education, students who qualify for gifted services must first be found and identified. In many cases, stakeholders are charged with nominating students for gifted identification. In the majority of states, a general education teacher or parent typically starts the identification process with a nomination. Who a stakeholder nominates is based on whom they perceive as gifted and their conception of giftedness. “Teachers’ conceptualizations and rationalizations regarding giftedness therefore have an impact on who is nominated for further assessment” (Peterson & Margolin, 1997, pp. 83-84). Conceptualizations of giftedness influence the behavior favored in nominating students for gifted identification.

A person’s conception of what it means to be gifted or show gifted characteristics influences who he or she nominates for gifted identification. When studying nomination, over-nominate refers to when stakeholders nominate students who do not qualify for gifted identification and under-nominate refers to when the children who would qualify are not nominated by stakeholders. The majority of studies show classroom teachers over-nominate students who are highly verbal in the dominant language with good behavior (e.g., Gear, 1976; Hernández-Torrano, Prieto, Ferrándiz, Bermejo, & Sáinz, 2013; Peterson & Margolin, 1997) and under-nominate minority students (Harradine, Coleman, & Winn, 2014; Miller-Washington, 2010; Peterson & Margolin, 1997), students from low-socioeconomic communities (Rohrer, 1995), English learners (Peterson & Margolin, 1997), students with disabilities (Bianco, 2005), and girls (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2013) for gifted identification. Rimm, Siegle, and Davis (2018) suggested that teachers tend to favor those cooperative, abled, English speakers who complete classwork and are well-behaved. In a small qualitative study, Rohrer (1995) found that
teachers’ beliefs about a student's family affected their judgment of a student’s giftedness; family problems were stated as reasons children with high achievement test scores were not nominated for gifted programs, teachers said they weren’t ready despite their achievement. Stakeholder attitudes toward giftedness affected the action of nominating students for gifted programs. The literature supports the conclusion that teachers are inefficient and ineffective at nominating some student populations for gifted identification (e.g., Jacobs, 1971, McBee, 2006).

If conceptions of giftedness influence the children who are nominated for gifted identification, it is important to understand stakeholder conceptions of giftedness. A number of authors have recognized that stakeholders hold various conceptions of giftedness. Goodnough (2001) reported that these conceptions ranged from vague and multidimensional to specific and IQ-based. Conceptions of giftedness vary greatly from one individual to another. There are patterns that emerged from the literature. One pattern is general education teachers tend to hold a traditional conception of giftedness that includes cognitive, personality, and behavioral characteristics (e.g., Brighton, Moon, Jarvis, & Hockett, 2007; Persson, 1998; Rohrer, 1995). The cognitive characteristics include high intellect (e.g., Geake & Gross, 2008), comprehends quickly (Hany, 1997; Persson, 1998; Schack & Starko, 1990), strong vocabulary (e.g., Hernández-Torrano et al., 2013), early reading (Persson, 1998; Rohrer, 1995), interest in unique topics (Rohrer, 1995; Schack & Starko, 1990; Siegle, Moore, Mann, & Wilson, 2010) and a large amount of general knowledge (e.g., Brighton et al., 2007). Personality characteristics include uniqueness (Persson, 1998; Rohrer, 1995) and maturity (e.g., Rohrer, 1995; Speirs Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassidy, & Dixon, 2007). Behavioral characteristics include motivation (Persson, 1998, Schack & Starko, 1990), the ability to work hard and carry out multiple verbal directions (Brighton et al., 2007), and good grades while being attentive (Hany, 1997).
Several researchers recognize that teachers’ traditional conceptions of giftedness shape how they view underrepresented populations, focusing on deficits or family problems instead of student strengths and abilities (e.g., Brighton et al., 2007; Miller, 2009; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007). Moon and Brighton (2008) found the teachers in their study had a difficult time conceptualizing gifted students that lack early reading ability, strong English vocabulary, and internal motivation in the classroom. These are characteristics commonly associated with children from low socioeconomic households and English learner populations. Allen (2017) also found that the language barrier made it difficult for teachers to recognize gifted characteristics in culturally and linguistically diverse children. Harradine and colleagues (2014), as a part of the USTARS PLUS project, found teachers reported more barriers to recording strengths in Black boys than any other group, citing behavior issues and lack of parental involvement as the main barriers. Teachers’ traditional conceptions of giftedness and tendency to focus on deficits instead of strengths reduced their ability to see gifted behaviors in underrepresented populations.

The most pressing problem in gifted education is the underrepresentation of specific populations in gifted programs (Siegle et al., 2016), including those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, those who represent racial/ethnic minorities (specifically Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans; Miller, 2004), English learners (EL, United States Department of Education, 2014), and students with disabilities (Coleman, Gallagher, & Foster, 1994).

“Dating back to the 1930s, every report and study has shown that Black students are underrepresented in gifted education by almost 50%, followed by Hispanic students (almost 40%)” (Ford, 2012, p. 57). Even though this alarming statistic has been a concern among gifted educators for over 70 years, little has changed (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).
Underrepresentation is attributed to a variety of factors. The three main reasons reported by The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) were test bias, selective referrals, and a deficit-based paradigm (Frasier, García, & Passow, 1995). McBee (2006) analyzed approximately 700,000 elementary student records that included demographic information as well as gifted nomination and identification status. Black and Hispanic students were less likely to be nominated for gifted services compared to their White and Asian peers. Children from backgrounds of poverty, as designated by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch were even less likely to be nominated for gifted identification. This finding steers the conversation about underrepresentation toward the issue of under-nomination. The nomination phase of gifted identification contributes to the problem.

Minority and other disadvantaged students are less likely to be nominated for or included in an identification or screening process because of the low expectations educational professionals have for culturally and linguistically diverse students, their low levels of awareness of cultural and linguistic behaviors of potentially gifted minority students, their insensitivity to the differences within and among groups, and their inability to recognize “gifted behaviors” that minority students exhibit. (Frasier et al., 1995, p. xi)

This leads to the question: What conceptions of giftedness do the stakeholders charged with nominating students for gifted identification hold?

Definitions of giftedness vary greatly around the world and by state in the United States. McClain and Pfeiffer (2012) surveyed 50 states and the District of Colombia on definitions of giftedness and the identification policy, reporting a lack of agreement on how states define a gifted student and their categories of giftedness. This shows that there are variations in how
giftedness is defined and described cross the country. They also reported differences in gifted identification policies; over one third of states mandate either intelligence or achievement tests, a quarter of states require a nomination, and approximately 18% of states require a behavioral checklist. “Definitions of what constitute students who are gifted and talented as well as policies and procedures to identify these high-ability students play a critical role in determining which individuals actually receive gifted services” (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012, p. 59).

In the literature, there is an abundance of research on teacher conceptions, including the comparison of preservice and in-service teachers and general education teachers to teachers of the gifted, but those studies do not include gifted coordinators. Do all the main players involved in gifted nomination and identification agree as to what and who they are nominating? Are students who qualify and need gifted services being missed? There are also few studies on the conceptions of giftedness held by parents of gifted students. This study will address these voids in the literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness. This study addresses the following research question: How do stakeholder groups describe giftedness?

**Significance of Study**

The purpose of gifted education is to provide alternative and/or additional curriculum and instruction beyond the typical grade level curriculum and instruction to students who qualify and/or would benefit from this service. Gifted education starts with identifying children who qualify for gifted services. In schools, it is various stakeholders that determine who is and who is not eligible for gifted services. The first step in the majority of schools is nomination by a
teacher or a parent. It is important to understand how parents, teachers, and gifted coordinators conceptualize giftedness and how those conceptions differ. When conceptions of the stakeholders involved are different, problems may arise. Students who are eligible for gifted services may be missed and students who are not eligible may be nominated, using valuable time and resources during the identification process. This information can be used to guide identification policy and professional development in schools.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, the researcher’s assumptions include

- All stakeholders interviewed answered the interview questions honestly.
- General education teachers have a role in nominating students for gifted identification.
- Certain stakeholders’ influences and opinions have greater weight in the gifted identification process than others.

Definitions of Terms

Characteristics. Characteristics are qualities that identify a person, place, or thing; a characteristic is a distinguishing trait or quality.

Conceptions of giftedness. Conceptions of giftedness are the ways stakeholders believe giftedness is manifested. It includes a person’s knowledge, beliefs, and understandings of the characteristics of giftedness. Each person has an independent conception of giftedness that may or may not be based on research and best practices. Conceptions influence behavior and decisions when individuals are nominating and identifying students.

Identification. Identification is the process that determines if a student qualifies for gifted status and/or gifted services according to the state or district gifted policy.
**Nomination.** A nomination brings a student to the attention of the school for determining gifted eligibility. This is the stakeholder’s initial step in the identification process; a universal screening is not considered nomination.

**Stakeholder.** Stakeholders were involved in a gifted child’s life and path to gifted services. They included parents, general education teachers, teachers of the gifted, and gifted coordinators.

**Underrepresented populations.** Underrepresented populations are specific populations in gifted programs for whom the percentage of students identified for gifted programming does not match the corresponding percentage in the population. These populations include students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, racial/ethnic minorities (specifically Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans), English learners (EL), and gifted students with disabilities (twice exceptional).

**Summary**

This chapter provided a rationale for the study of stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness. This chapter included a background of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose, significance, and assumptions of the study. Definitions of common terms were included. In the next chapter, I review the literature on teacher conceptions of giftedness.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ of gifted students, general education teachers’, and gifted teacher/coordinators’ conceptions of giftedness. In this chapter, a review of the literature focusing on teachers’ conceptions and parents’ conceptions of giftedness in the United States is presented. There is a substantial research base on teachers’ conceptions but limited research on parents’ conceptions of giftedness.

What does it mean to be gifted? This seemingly straight-forward question is among the most debated in the field of gifted education. The question is of such critical importance that Sternberg and Davidson produced two edited editions (1986, 2005) describing major conceptions underlying many theoretical models in the field of gifted education, while Plucker, Rinn, and Makel (2018) recently edited a volume exploring how practice reflects different theories of giftedness. These volumes, in addition to published literature, indicate there is little consensus on a single conception of giftedness. This review of literature focuses on the conception of giftedness held by one group, teachers, who often serve as the gatekeepers to gifted programming. Teachers’ conceptions of giftedness are important as they often make decisions about which children to nominate for gifted identification, and these nominations are often based on characteristics they associate with giftedness. After reporting the research on teacher conceptions, I review the limited research on parents’ conceptions of giftedness.

This literature review operationally defines conceptions of giftedness as how teachers view, define, characterize, discuss, identify, and perceive giftedness. Teachers’ conceptions of giftedness, coupled with state, district, and school policy, influence and often determine who is nominated for the process of being identified as gifted. According to Peterson and Margolin (1997), “teachers’ conceptualizations and rationalizations regarding giftedness therefore have an
impact on who is nominated for further assessment” (pp. 83-84). Teachers are most often responsible for nominating students for gifted programs (McBee, 2006), and their own conceptions of giftedness influence their decisions and actions as they nominate students for gifted identification.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptions and resulting attitudes people hold influence their behavior (Stern & Keislar, 1975). Therefore, personal knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of gifted characteristics and individual beliefs about giftedness contribute to one’s perceptions, conceptions, and attitudes. The National Association of Gifted Children’s Programming Standards state that,

> Beginning gifted education professionals . . . [need to be] aware of how their own and others' attitudes, behaviors, and ways of communicating can influence their practice, and use this knowledge as a foundation to inform their own personal understanding and philosophies of special education. (Johnsen et al., 2016, loc. 568)

All educators must understand their own conceptions of giftedness and realize their potential biases. Peterson and Margolin (1997) argued that “teachers’ conceptualizations and rationalizations regarding giftedness . . . have an impact on who is nominated for further assessment” (p. 84). Pfeiffer (2012) extends this premise, suggesting that the entire construct of giftedness is not a real thing, “Although we may view giftedness as something real, something that certain students either have or do not have, it is nothing more than a social construction” (p. 3). If giftedness is a social construct, it is necessary to determine patterns related to how stakeholders involved in the education of gifted children view this construct.
Teachers’ Beliefs and Attitudes About Giftedness

Conceptions include both the knowledge individuals have, as well as the information they believe to be true or accurate. Accordingly, studies on stakeholder conceptions of the nature of giftedness, the characteristics they associate with giftedness, and the beliefs and attitudes they hold about all students, including those from underserved populations, are important to examine. In the subsequent sections, the literature on teacher attitudes and beliefs is reviewed.

Teachers’ beliefs are unique and exposure to the same experiences can result in differing conceptions. Ross and Anderson (1982) defined beliefs as firmly held cognitions, opinions, or convictions; something that is accepted or believed to be true. They also reported that the beliefs and biases people have can persist even when presented with logical contradictory information. Teachers’ beliefs about the characteristics used to describe, nominate, or recommend students for gifted services are one way to probe their conceptions of giftedness. Various researchers have focused mainly on the characteristics teachers believe relate to giftedness, rather than their underlying conceptions. Some research (Moon & Brighton, 2008; Peterson & Margolin, 1997) demonstrates the varied conceptions of giftedness teachers believe are based both on student factors as well as teacher factors that will be explored in future sections of this literature review.

Numerous studies about teachers’ conceptions of giftedness have attempted to measure attitudes. Almost five decades ago, Stern and Keislar (1975) described the features of an attitude as the way individuals feel about a person, idea, or situation that causes them to act in a certain way when a choice is available, suggesting that attitudes are learned through experiences and consequently, influence behavior. Myers (2005) defined attitude as a positive or negative evaluative reaction toward something or someone, while Gagné (1985) defined attitude in a more active way as “a state that influences or modifies the individual choice of a personal action” (p.
Bégin and Gagné (1994b) reviewed over 30 studies related to attitudes toward gifted education, noting over 50 factors that predicted either positive or negative attitudes. The researchers were unable to identify a single variable that consistently explained people’s attitudes toward gifted education. This may be due to the many different types of participants surveyed (e.g., teachers, undergraduates, parents) or the various types of gifted education included in the research. When studying attitudes, researchers usually focus on factors that predict either a positive or negative attitude toward gifted students or gifted education. The attitudes that teachers hold relate to what giftedness is and the associated characteristics would accordingly influence their student nominations.

**Historical and Cultural Conceptions of Giftedness**

A historical review of giftedness in the United States often begins with Terman’s (1926) study of individuals in the top 1% of intelligence, as measured by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, a test he assisted in developing for the United States. This work resulted in a conception of giftedness, defined solely by an Intelligence Quotient (I.Q.). Terman’s work identified people as gifted, portraying individuals as either gifted or not gifted based on their scores on the Stanford Binet intelligence test. This conception of giftedness, often referred to as a traditional view, remained dominant until the early 1970s (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018) when Marland, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, offered a broader view of giftedness in a national report:

> Gifted and talented are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and /or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contributions to self and society.
Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential in any of the following areas, singly or in combination:

1. general intellectual ability
2. specific academic aptitude
3. creative or productive thinking
4. leadership ability
5. visual and performing arts
6. psychomotor ability. (Marland, 1971, p. 10)

Important theoretical models (e.g., Gagné, 1985; Renzulli, 1978) expanded earlier conceptions of giftedness to include affective characteristics, creativity, motivation, and environmental factors that guide identification and programming in many schools across the United States today. After decades of debate, the National Association for Gifted Children’s Board of Directors (2010) also published an organizational definition that has not been as widely adopted as previous definitions:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports). The development of ability or talent is a lifelong process. It can be evident in young children as exceptional performance on tests and/or other measures of ability or as a rapid rate of learning, compared to other students of the same age, or in actual achievement in a domain. As individuals mature through childhood to adolescence, however, achievement
and high levels of motivation in the domain become the primary characteristics of their giftedness. Various factors can either enhance or inhibit the development and expression of abilities. (para. 1)

In the United States, most states adopt their own definitions of giftedness. These definitions differ across the country, as McClain and Pfeiffer (2012) found when they conducted a national survey of state policies in gifted education, including definition and identification procedures. They found that 48 out of 50 states had a state level definition of giftedness, using the terminology including either gifted and talented, gifted, or high ability. The state definitions included characteristics such as intelligence (90%), high achievement (78%), creativity (54%), specific area of talent (56%), leadership (30%), and/or motivation (6%; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Most state definitions still focus on the traditional view of giftedness initiated by Terman (1926), intelligence, as measured by a cognitive abilities test or school performance.

A persistent problem related to defining and identifying gifted students is the lack of cultural and racial/ethnic diversity in gifted programs around the country, perhaps because teachers are not nominating nor identifying students from these groups as gifted (Ford, 1996; Plata & Masten, 1998). In 1988, Congress passed the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act to increase research about gifted students and gifted education, with a core mission related to serving underrepresented students.

The major emphasis of the program is serving students traditionally underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, particularly economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient (LEP), and disabled students, to help reduce the serious gap in achievement among certain groups of students at the highest levels of achievement. (United States Department of Education, 2017, p. 1)
The Javits Act has provided funding for numerous studies that focused on the possible causes of underrepresentation of specific groups of students in gifted programs. One researcher, Frasier, was a pioneer in identifying underrepresented gifted students and the designer of the Frasier Talent Assessment Profile (Frasier et al., 1995), which was developed as part of her work as one of the original associate directors of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented established under the Javits legislation. Frasier worked with Passow, a researcher on children in poverty (1994), and they suggested the lack of nomination of minority, economically disadvantaged, and limited English proficient children as the root of underrepresentation in gifted programs. Ford and colleagues (2008) followed that work with research suggesting that educators’ “deficit thinking” and lack of education and sensitivity to the characteristics of racially and linguistically diverse gifted students undermine educators’ ability to make fair and equitable gifted nominations. Ford also brought attention to the fact that many educators are White and proposed that “it is possible that teachers are more effective at identifying giftedness among White students, but less effective with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CDL) students” (1996, p. 295). Ford (1996) previously reported that most of the Black students in one of her studies had test scores that met or exceeded the criteria for gifted identification but went unidentified because staff members never nominated them. Plata and Masten (1998) conducted a study of teacher rating scales for over 200 students (115 Hispanic, 119 White), finding that teachers nominated significantly more White students than Hispanics to the gifted program even though students had similar ratings on gifted behavior scales.

Bianco (2005), conducting research on teacher nomination, asked elementary teachers how likely they were to recommend the student in a vignette for gifted programming. Teachers received one of three vignettes labeled with either no exceptionality, a learning disability label,
or an emotional/behavioral disability label. A significant difference existed in the number of recommendations between disability labeled and non-labeled student vignettes. The “students” labeled with a disability were less likely to be recommended for gifted programing than the exact same “students” without a disability label.

Most recently, the new National Center for Research on Gifted Education conducted a study on the proportion of students identified as gifted that also qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Hamilton et al. (2018) found that students of poverty were less likely to be identified for gifted services than their higher socioeconomic status peers, even after controlling for achievement. The level of poverty of the school also predicted the number of students identified as gifted, the poorer the school, the fewer gifted students. Previous research (e.g., Siegle et al., 2016) focused on the likelihood of students from low SES being identified for gifted programs, but Hamilton et al. (2018) contributed a new aspect to the research, reporting that these students are even less likely to be identified for gifted programming if they also attend a high poverty school.

The underrepresentation of specific populations in gifted programs (Siegle et al., 2016), including low SES (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2018) students, racial/ethnic minorities (Miller, 2004), English learners (EL; United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014), and students with disabilities (Coleman, Gallagher, & Foster, 1994) is still of great concern. Little has changed even though this has been a focus among gifted educators since the 1980’s (Ford et al., 2008). In the next section, the literature on characteristics used to describe gifted learners is presented.
Teachers’ Conceptions of Gifted Characteristics

In attempt to better understand teacher’s conceptions of giftedness, some research has focused on characteristics teachers believe describe gifted students or suggests the presence of giftedness. Several studies (e.g., Brighton et al., 2007; Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Schack & Starko, 1990) surveyed teachers asking them to choose from a list of characteristics that they associated with giftedness. Others (Siegle et al., 2010; Siegle & Powell, 2004) asked teachers to rate or choose which students described in specific vignettes they would nominate for gifted services. Another set of studies (Miller, 2009; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995) asked teachers to describe the characteristics of gifted students or giftedness. In summary, the research using these different research techniques highlights how teachers conceptualize or describe gifted characteristics. In the next section, I will describe teachers’ conceptions of gifted characteristics that cluster under: (a) students’ abilities and aptitude beyond their age, (b) how students think and learn, and (c) classroom behavior.

**Ability and Aptitude**

The first theme that emerged in the literature is that teachers characterized gifted students as having ability and aptitude beyond their same age peers, including a broad knowledge base or general storehouse of knowledge and an extensive memory (Brighton et al., 2007; Miller, 2009; Moon & Brighton, 2008; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle & Powell, 2004). Teachers also associated advanced or early academic ability with giftedness, including early reading and problem solving skills in math (Brighton et al., 2007; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle et al., 2010; Siegle & Powell, 2004). Another characteristic often reported as descriptive of gifted students is an extensive precocious vocabulary and facility with the English language (Brighton et al., 2007; Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Jacobs, 1971; Miller, 2009; Moon & Brighton, 2008; Peterson & Margolin,
1997; Rohrer, 1995). High I.Q. is historically associated with giftedness, with some research reporting that teachers chose it as a characteristic that described gifted children (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Schack & Starko, 1990).

One of the most frequently cited research studies in this area was conducted by Brighton and colleagues (2007) with 434 K-2 classroom teachers from diverse public schools. Teachers associated a general storehouse of knowledge, facility with the English language, strong vocabulary, and reasoning skills with characteristics of giftedness. The teachers conceptualized talent as strong verbal skills and the ability to read, as well as favorable classroom characteristics.

The majority of survey respondents and the majority of case study teachers seemed unable to consider students who deviated from these textbook indicators of giftedness. These pervasive beliefs seemed to most significantly disadvantage students from poverty and those students whose first language was not English. (Brighton et al., 2007, p. xxi)

In addition, Miller (2009) surveyed teachers in grades 2-5 across urban and suburban U.S. school districts, and found the most used characteristics to describe giftedness on ability and aptitude were, “has an extensive and sophisticated vocabulary,” “has a broad range of knowledge,” and “is able to remember a great deal of information.” Rohrer (1995) reported similar results in a small qualitative study, with teachers’ conceptions of giftedness including “unusual skill levels, extensive vocabulary, use of complex, expressive language, wide general knowledge, advanced insights, problem-solving ability, creativity, high level of curiosity, initiative, interest and ability in written language” (p. 274).
Learning and Thinking

The second theme that emerged from the literature was teachers characterized giftedness by how students learn and think. Teachers characterized gifted students as curious (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Miller, 2009; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995; Schack & Starko, 1990), creative (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Hunsaker, 1994; Miller, 2009; Rohrer, 1995; Schack & Starko, 1990), having advanced reasoning/thinking skills (Brighton et al., 2007; Miller, 2009; Moon & Brighton, 2008; Rohrer, 1995), unique interests (Rohrer, 1995; Siegle et al., 2010; Siegle & Powell, 2004), needing challenge (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Miller, 2009), and learning quickly (Miller, 2009; Schack & Starko, 1990).

Schack and Starko (1990) asked preservice, in-service, and gifted teachers to choose characteristics they used when referring gifted students for programming, the most frequent characteristics chosen were “creativity,” “curiosity,” “learns quickly and easily,” and “initiates own learning” (p. 346). Moon and Brighton (2008) surveyed primary teachers on their conceptions of giftedness and reported that the majority (>90%) of teachers could easily imagine a gifted student who “transfers learning into other subjects or real-life situations,” “has an active imagination”, “can devise or adapt strategies to solve problems,” and “has unusual interests for their age” (p. 458). Miller (2009) reported similar characteristics that teachers (>88%) used to describe giftedness such as “sees patterns, relationships, connection, generates many imaginative/original ideas, asks lots of questions/is inquisitive, is able to use logic to solve problems, enjoys discovery, and is attracted to new ideas and new information” (p. 81). Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) found that secondary teachers listed inquisitive over other characteristics associated with giftedness and “needs challenge” was listed by more teachers with gifted experience than those without. Siegle and colleagues (2010; Siegle & Powell, 2004) found
that preservice and in-service teachers tend to nominate student profiles for gifted services that described unique interests.

**Classroom Behavior**

The third theme that emerged from this review of literature on conceptions of gifted characteristics relates to teachers’ descriptions and selection of traits that describe positive classroom behavior and completion of schoolwork. Many teachers consider characteristics other than ability and thinking and learning skills in their conceptions of giftedness. Several studies suggest that there is a behavioral component to the ways in which teachers describe characteristics of gifted children (e.g., Brighton et al., 2007; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007). Teachers equated giftedness with characteristics of good behavior (Brighton et al., 2007; Jacobs, 1971; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle & Powell, 2004), mature personal characteristics (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007), school work completion, and effort (Brighton et al., 2007; Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Hunsaker, 1994; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle & Powell, 2004), and likability (Peterson & Margolin, 1997).

As described earlier, Brighton et al. (2007) reported that even though one of the characteristics associated with giftedness was a large storehouse of knowledge, classroom observations revealed that student behavior was more important to teachers than ability when referring students for gifted programs. Students with negative behaviors were viewed as not “ready” for gifted programs. Similarly, when Hunsaker (1994) interviewed nine teachers about their conceptions of giftedness, they all mentioned creativity, but when teachers described the observable characteristics that would persuade them to nominate a student for gifted programs, they reported: work habits, high test scores, and academic achievement, not creativity. In similar
form, Peterson and Margolin (1997) asked middle school teachers to recommend students for a temporary gifted program with no guidelines, teachers most frequently mentioned characteristics of behavior and work habits: “‘good behavior’, high academic achievement, ‘excellent student’, . . . hard-working, . . . leadership, . . . responsible, verbal strengths, . . . assertiveness, . . . not lazy, goal oriented, . . . thoroughness, . . . ‘great kid’, ‘nice, good’, ‘excellent person’, and ‘likable’” (p. 88). Echoing other studies, Speirs Neumeister and colleagues (2007) reported the top characteristics of giftedness fell under the category of “self-motivated/independent worker” by 21 out of 27 fourth grade teachers. Rohrer (1995) also reported classroom behavior influencing teacher conceptions of giftedness, primary teachers in the study “appear[ed] to discriminate against children who were shy or behavior problems” (p. 276) when referring students for gifted services. These studies show a disconnect between how teachers conceptualize giftedness and the criteria they use to nominate students for gifted programming.

In summary, teachers characterize students having giftedness as having above average ability and aptitude as compared to their peers, including a large storehouse of knowledge, a precocious vocabulary, and early reading. Teachers also characterize giftedness by how students learn and think. Students who are curious, learn quickly, are creative problem solvers, and who display advanced reasoning skills are viewed as gifted, but must also have desirable classroom behavior, good work habits, and speak English to be recommended by their teachers for gifted programming.

**Student Demographic Factors Influencing Teacher Conceptions**

In this section, I review research on students’ demographic factors and teacher conceptions of giftedness. Previous research has demonstrated that teachers’ conceptions of giftedness are influenced by student race/ethnicity (e.g., Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, &
Holloway, 2005), culture (e.g., Moon & Brighton, 2008), language (e.g., Allen, 2017), socioeconomic status (e.g., Rohrer, 1995), and family standing (Peterson & Margolin, 1997). A number of authors have recognized that teachers’ conceptions of giftedness tend to focus on traditional views, including high intelligence and superior classroom performance from dominant culture, English speaking children (Brighton et al., 2007; Miller, 2009; Moon & Brighton, 2008; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007). In a study of Midwestern classroom teachers, Peterson and Margolin (1997) found that teachers discussed giftedness as if it were a universally agreed upon concept across all cultures and contexts. When teachers were asked to describe what talent actually looked like, Brighton and colleagues (2007) reported that their frequent responses revealed fairly traditional beliefs, such as having a precocious vocabulary. Through observation, researchers also documented that students showed various talents that were unnoticed or overshadowed by less than desirable classroom behaviors or lack of academic accomplishment. Speirs Neumeister and colleagues (2007) also found that teachers were unaware of how culture and environmental factors influence the presentation of giftedness in racial/ethnic minorities and students living in poverty.

**Race/Ethnicity**

Elhoweris and colleagues (2005) studied the effect of a student’s race/ethnicity on teacher referral for gifted education, asking 207 elementary teachers to read vignettes describing a gifted child. Teachers received vignettes with either European American, African American, or no race/ethnicity information at all. “Elementary school teachers treated identical information contained in the vignettes differently and made different recommendations despite the fact that the basic student information was identical in all ways except for ethnicity” (Elhoweris et al., 2005, p. 29). Recent studies (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Grissom, Rodriguez, & Kern, 2017)
indicate that the race/ethnicity of teachers and school personnel corresponds to the racial/ethnic representation of minorities in gifted referrals and programs. Grissom and Redding (2016) found that African American students are referred for gifted programs at a lower rate when their teachers are not African American. Similarly, in schools with more African American teachers and principals, a more equitable African American representation in gifted programs occurs; schools with more Hispanic teachers also have more Hispanic representation in gifted programs (Grissom et al., 2017). One study found the greatest discrepancy in teacher nominations based on student race/ethnicity was between Hispanic and Anglo females (Plata & Masten, 1998). Harradine and colleagues (2014) studied the impact of a teacher observation tool to document student potential, used in 100 schools, and reported significant relationships between teacher race/ethnicity and perceptions of student behavior. Teachers also reported the greatest difficulty identifying strengths in African American boys. Accordingly, it is evident that race/ethnicity is a factor that may affect teachers’ perceptions of giftedness.

**Culture and Language**

De Wet and Gubbins (2011) surveyed teachers about their beliefs regarding culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students, finding that teachers believe CLED students do have the abilities necessary to succeed in gifted programs. Over half of the teachers agreed that CLED students express their abilities differently from White, English-speaking students and that their I.Q. scores may not reflect CLED students’ abilities well. In spite of these promising results, researchers report (e.g., Allen, 2017; Moon & Brighton, 2008) that culture and language influence teacher conceptions of giftedness. For example, Moon and Brighton (2008) asked primary teachers to recommend services for four “students” described in vignettes. Teachers recommended gifted services for the White, middle class “student” and deficits
services (counseling, medication, and remediation) for the English learner and student of poverty. The researchers also surveyed teachers, finding that teachers had difficulty conceptualizing gifted students with limited English vocabulary (Moon & Brighton, 2008). Allen’s (2017) findings contribute to the argument that teachers cannot see gifted characteristics in underserved populations, stating that “the language barrier makes it difficult for teachers to recognize gifted characteristics among students who are CLD [culturally and linguistically diverse]” (p. 82). Teachers look for a precocious vocabulary and facility with the English language, limiting their ability to see strengths in English learners.

**Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

Several studies suggest that a student’s socioeconomic status influences teachers’ perceptions of that student as gifted or capable of participating in the gifted program (Miller, 2009; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle et al., 2010; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007). Rohrer (1995), for example, reported that students on free and reduced-price lunch were under nominated (2% vs. 39% of school) by the teachers he interviewed and observed. The teachers indicated the reason that they did not refer these students was the students’ inability to read. Peterson and Margolin (1997) found that teachers viewed low SES and minority statuses as deficits and noted that they were generally unaware of these biases.

Of great concern in this selection process is not so much the biases, per se, as the belief that favoritism is not operating. Except for a single dissenter, nowhere in the discussion of giftedness did these classroom teachers consider that their criteria for excellence, talent, and intelligence were culturally minded. (Peterson & Margolin, 1997, p. 94).
In another study on teacher judgements, low SES students were perceived to be less attentive and less confident (Guskin, Peng, & Simon, 1992). Family income level is not the only factor that shapes teachers’ perceptions of students.

**Family**

Another area that teachers mention as reasons to nominate or not nominate students for gifted identification or services is the reputation, education, and profession of family members. Teachers cited family problems as reasons children with high test scores were not “ready” for gifted programs (Rohrer, 1995), suggesting their perception that children were more likely to be gifted because they had siblings who did well in school and lived with both parents who were educated. This belief is echoed by Peterson and Margolin (1997) whose research found that teachers referred to student families as “hard-driving parents” and “they’re both well educated” (p. 91) as criteria for gifted program selection. This research consistently provides evidence that teachers, as a group, often do not conceive or see gifted characteristics in students who are learning English, from poverty, or from a racial/ethnic group different from themselves.

**Teacher Factors Influencing Teachers’ Conceptions of Giftedness**

Justman and Wrightstone (1956) made a seminal contribution in the area of conceptions of giftedness based on teacher factors. They reported that teacher attitudes toward a special class for gifted children varied by their years of teaching experience and experience teaching gifted children. Later, in 1994(b), Bégin and Gagné reviewed the literature from the previous 40 years of studies on teacher attitudes toward gifted education and concluded that no single variable consistently explained teacher attitudes, possibly due to the differences in study designs. This prompted Bégin and Gagné (1994a) to develop their own attitude scale The literature detailed in subsequent sections of this review suggests that exposure to gifted students (e.g., Jung, 2014),
gifted education training (e.g., Bangel, Moon, & Capobianco, 2010), years of teaching experience (Rubenzer & Twaite, 1979), and grade taught (e.g., Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992) influence teacher attitudes and conceptions of giftedness. Based on the research, additional training in gifted education, knowledge, exposure, and years of teaching experience (especially with gifted students), enables teachers to better recognize giftedness and have a more positive attitude toward gifted students and programing.

**Exposure to Gifted Students**

The first teacher factor that predicts positive attitudes toward gifted children or gifted education is exposure to gifted persons (Bégin & Gagné, 1994a; Jung, 2014; Justman & Wrightstone, 1956). In one of the first studies conducted about teacher attitudes of gifted classes, Justman and Wrightstone (1956) found that more exposure to gifted students created more positive attitudes toward a special class for the gifted. Bégin and Gagné (1994a) later used their attitude scale to determine which teacher factors were associated with positive attitudes toward gifted students, finding that contact with gifted students explained 10% of the variance in scores.

**Training in Gifted Education**

The second teacher factor that influences conceptions of giftedness is participation in gifted training (e.g., Bégin & Gagné, 1994a) in the form of degrees, college courses, or professional development. Gear (1978) found significant improvement in teacher effectiveness in identifying gifted students after teacher training program, with 86% accuracy for the treatment group as compared to 50% for control group. Rubenzer and Twaite (1979) identified several teacher characteristics that resulted in higher identification rates of gifted students. Teachers with at least one training period on gifted students were also significantly more likely to identify gifted students when compared with teachers with no training on the gifted.
Goodnough (2001) interviewed teachers during an introduction to gifted education course, finding that at the beginning of the class participants held narrow, unidimensional views of giftedness, but that by the end of the course, 65% of teachers had a broader conception of giftedness. Bangel and colleagues (2010) also reported that preservice teachers believed their knowledge of gifted characteristics increased after completing a gifted course with a Saturday enrichment program. While examining the influence of professional development on decreasing stereotypical beliefs, Megay-Nespoli (2001) reported that preservice teachers demonstrated several stereotypical views of giftedness before training. After the professional development, preservice teachers’ attitudes significantly changed on more than half the survey items. In contrast, Miller (2009) compared teachers’ graphic representations of giftedness, finding no difference between teachers with and without training in gifted education, but also noting limited similarities between the teachers’ conceptions of giftedness, suggesting that there may be more complex factors at play.

**Stakeholder**

Numerous studies investigated pre-service, in-service, and gifted teachers’ conceptions of giftedness. This section summarizes a review of relevant research (Adams & Pierce, 2004; Guskin et al., 1992; Siegle & Powell, 2004; Tallent-Runnels, Tirri, & Adams, 2000; Troxclair, 2013) related to differences between pre-service and in-service teachers and summarizes the differences between classroom and gifted teachers as relates to conceptions of giftedness.

**Preservice vs. in-service.** Researchers have reported mixed results related to differences between preservice and in-service teacher attitudes, knowledge, and ability to rate gifted students. Some research suggested that pre-service teachers hold more negative attitudes toward gifted learners as compared to in-service teachers (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2000; Troxclair, 2013)
while other research found pre-service teachers held low to moderate positive attitudes toward gifted learners (e.g., Adams & Pierce, 2004). As has been previously reported, studies on the effectiveness of gifted education workshops or courses showed positive results with pre-service teachers. For example, after preservice teachers participated in intervention workshops they reported “improved attitude and confidence in identifying, assessing, adapting and individualizing instruction for these learners” (Megay-Nespoli, 2001, p. 178).

Another area of research compares how in-service and preservice teachers rate student profiles for gifted characteristics or as students identified as gifted. Researchers found that in-service teachers were more likely to view student profiles as gifted than preservice teachers (Siegle et al., 2010). In similar fashion, in-service teachers rated all students higher than preservice teachers did (Cramond & Martin, 1987; Guskin et al., 1992).

**Classroom teachers vs. gifted teachers.** Several studies (i.e., Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Siegle & Powell, 2004) suggest that gifted teachers/specialists hold different conceptions of and attitudes toward gifted students. Decades ago, Jacobs (1972) surveyed K-1 classroom teachers and found they held negative attitudes toward gifted children. Schack and Starko (1990) analyzed the criteria classroom teachers and gifted teachers used to nominate students for gifted services finding that classroom teachers preferred classroom performance and grades more than gifted teachers, and gifted teachers preferred vocabulary, multiple interests, and I.Q. They also found that the criteria reported by gifted teachers matched theorist recommendations better than general classroom teacher criteria. Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) surveyed teachers’ perception of gifted students finding significant differences in teacher perceptions based on whether they had been trained in gifted education and the number of years of experience they had teaching gifted students. Negative characteristics were mostly listed by teachers with no
gifted courses nor workshops as compared to teachers with one or more. Other research suggested that gifted teachers valued mental computations and problem solving even when completion of work was not evident over general classroom teachers (Siegle & Powell, 2004).

Summary

Teachers are often the gatekeepers for entrance into gifted programs and, based on both seminal and recent research (Gear, 1978; McBee, Peters, & Miller, 2016), they often do not effectively nominate gifted students for gifted identification. In particular, they tend to under nominate culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED; e.g., McBee, 2006) students. Researchers (e.g., Ford et al., 2008; Frasier & Passow, 1994; Peterson & Margolin, 1997) hypothesize that teachers’ conceptions of giftedness, along with how they view students, influences gifted nominations.

Based on this literature review, teachers characterize giftedness as ability and aptitude beyond chronological age, including an extensive English vocabulary (e.g., Moon & Brighton, 2008), a broad knowledge base (e.g., Miller, 2009), advanced academic ability (e.g., Siegle et al., 2010), and high I.Q. (e.g., Schack & Starko, 1990). Teachers also characterize giftedness based on the way students learn and think including traits of curiosity (e.g., Peterson & Margolin, 1997) and creativity (e.g., Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992), the ability to think critically (e.g., Moon & Brighton, 2008) and learn quickly (e.g., Miller, 2009), and intense interests (e.g., Siegle & Powell, 2004). These characteristics are in alignment with characteristics on the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (SRBCSS, Renzulli et al., 2010). The scales were originally created in 1976 and were among the first to specify characteristics of giftedness in teacher language based on empirical research of gifted characteristics. The first four scales, learning, motivation, creativity, and leadership, are most commonly used and describe
characteristics of giftedness, with items such as “possesses a large storehouse of information about a variety of topics (beyond the usual interests of youngsters his age),” and “displays a great deal of curiosity about many things; is constantly asking questions about anything and everything.” While scales such as these have extended teachers’ understanding of gifted behaviors, they often are based on White, middle-class behaviors. A. Brice and R. Brice (2004) found that 24% of the items on many rating scales cover behaviors skills not necessarily related to academic giftedness and are biased against underserved populations. For example, statements such as assertive, initiating activities, asking questions, and contributing in classes may not reflect behaviors exhibited by EL students. This shows that teachers as a group characterize giftedness similar to researchers but may be overlooking English learners, students from poverty, and students with learning challenges or disabilities.

Above average ability and how students think and learn are not the only characteristics that comprise teachers’ conceptions of giftedness. Teachers also view characteristics of a good student as gifted characteristics. These include good classroom behavior (e.g., Brighton et al., 2007), mature personal characteristics (e.g., Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007), completing school work, (e.g., Hunsaker, 1994) and likability (e.g., Peterson & Margolin, 1997).

There is research to support the claim that student factors such as race/ethnicity (e.g., Elhoweris et al., 2005), culture and language (e.g., Moon & Brighton, 2008), socioeconomic status (e.g., Rohrer, 1995), and family (e.g., Peterson & Margolin, 1997) impact teachers’ ability to view gifted characteristics. Teacher factors also influence conceptions of giftedness. Training in gifted education (e.g., Megay-Nespoli, 2001) and experience teaching gifted students (e.g., Siegle & Powell, 2004) influence teacher attitudes about gifted students, knowledge of gifted characteristics, and ability to notice those characteristics in students. Professional development
has been shown to increase knowledge of gifted characteristics (e.g., Bangel et al., 2010) and the use of the USTARS PLUS project (Harradine et al., 2014) has shown positive results in teachers’ ability to identify gifted students from underrepresented populations. It is critical to study how teachers describe, characterize, and understand giftedness, as these thoughts and beliefs guide their actions.

There are limited studies on other important stakeholders in gifted education. The studies on parents’ conceptions of giftedness include one study that surveyed parents, teachers, students, and scientists in Korea (Kim, Shim, & Hull, 2009). Researchers concluded that these stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness focused around intelligence, task commitment, and creativity. Solow (1999, 2001) also conducted a small qualitative study on parents’ conceptions of giftedness and found that parents reported multiple types of giftedness not synonymous with intelligence. Teachers’ conceptions of giftedness tend to focus on the traditional views, including high intelligence and superior classroom performance. Solow’s findings suggest parents do not see giftedness the same way. This speaks to the importance of understanding how different stakeholders in gifted education conceptualize giftedness.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore different stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness. The stakeholder groups included general education teachers, teachers of the gifted, gifted coordinators, and parents of gifted students. The study focused on answering the following research question: How do stakeholder groups describe giftedness? This study was part of a larger project conducted by the National Center for Research on Gifted Education (NCRGE). NCRGE researchers conducted focus group and individual interviews with various stakeholders in 23 public elementary schools across 3 states. At the time of the interviews, each state had a mandate to identify and serve gifted students. During the interviews, researchers asked participants questions about their conceptions of giftedness.

This chapter describes the specific methods, research design, participants, sampling procedures, data collection procedures, and data analysis used for this study.

Research Design

I chose a qualitative research design for this study because it best fit the purpose of exploring stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness. I chose a basic inductive methodology in which I used previously collected interview data from parents of gifted students, general education teachers, teachers of gifted students, and gifted coordinators in public elementary schools to answer the research question: How do stakeholder groups describe giftedness?

Paradigm/Epistemological Perspective

The epistemological perspective of this study is of a constructivist or interpretive paradigm. Constructivism “assumes that reality is socially constructed . . . there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). The goal of this study was to understand, interpret, and describe
people’s conceptions of giftedness as revealed through their descriptions of giftedness and/or people they believe are gifted. Each person has his or her own reality based on experiences, culture, and values. In the field of gifted education, when a determination is required as to which child is gifted and which child is not, it is important to understand how stakeholder groups conceptualize giftedness.

**Methodological Approach**

The methodological approach used was a basic qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) characterized by constructing meaning based on people’s interpretation of a phenomenon; in this case, the phenomenon is giftedness. The purpose was to understand how people conceptualized giftedness. Techniques of a basic qualitative study originated from Grounded Theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) and include the researcher as the instrument of analysis, the constant comparative method, and grouping data into categories. The difference between Grounded Theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) and a basic qualitative approach is the goal. The goal of this basic qualitative study was understanding, not production of theory.

This study addressed the following research question: How do stakeholder groups describe giftedness?

**Participants**

The participants in this study included stakeholders from K-5 public education. The participants were chosen by the principals in schools that had previously been selected within specific states for the larger NCRGE study. After each principal described the research study, participants agreed to be interviewed. Participants were interviewed and placed in one of the study stakeholder categories based on their role at the time. The stakeholder categories used in
This study are gifted coordinators, general education teachers, teachers of the gifted (also here called “gifted teachers”), and parents of gifted students.

Gifted coordinators included district-level gifted staff who worked with multiple or all schools with gifted programs in the district. General education teachers included K-5 classroom teachers with a heterogeneous group of students. Gifted teachers included teachers who provided services directly to K-5 gifted children and, in many cases, had additional training and/or an endorsement or certification in gifted education. Parents of gifted students included parents who had children receiving gifted services at the school where the interview took place.

In cases in which the participant’s job title did not match the NCRGE stakeholder categories, researchers labeled the interview with the closest stakeholder category. For example, some school districts had one gifted coordinator, while others had multiple gifted specialists or coaches who served several schools in the district but were not in charge of district-wide policies. In both types of districts, researchers labeled the individuals in question as gifted coordinators.

State Selection

Researchers at NCRGE chose the three states for the study using a deliberate selective sampling process. States had to meet the following criteria: (a) mandated identification and services for gifted students, (b) a data set that allows identification of student-level outcomes (c) data that includes achievement over time, demographics, gifted identification status, and school assignment. Eleven states met initial criteria; six additional criteria were added to make the final decision:

- The state gifted director or district coordinators had advanced training in gifted education and were involved with schools statewide.
- There was a commitment to underserved populations.
- Information about the state laws and policies was available.
- There were vertically-scaled student achievement data.
- There were a diversity of service delivery options.
- The state had a reputation for educational innovation and reform guided by research.

Out of the original 11 states, three met the additional criteria.

**School Selection**

Within the three states, the research team selected schools using purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell, 2012) based on student demographic and achievement data. The NCRGE team used state databases to create estimates for several factors, including underserved status, achievement, gifted program effectiveness, underserved gifted program effectiveness, and identification of underserved gifted students. Program effectiveness was determined by math and reading achievement outcomes. The goal was to select schools that were most effective at both identifying and serving underserved students and schools with similar demographics that were not so successful at either identifying and/or serving underserved gifted students. The research team visited the schools that agreed to participate; these included 23 schools in 16 districts (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Districts</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State 3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The student populations varied across the 23 elementary schools. The percentage of White students ranged from 6.6%-91.7%. The percentage of African American students ranged from 0%-78.7%. The American Indian population was 2% or below, and the Asian population was below 7% across schools. The percentage of Hispanic students ranged from 3.1%-83.2%. The percentage of students with two or more races ranged from 1.4%-9.8%. The percentage of students designated as eligible for free and reduced-price lunch ranged from 10.1%-99.8%. The demographics of each school where researchers conducted focus group/individual interviews are displayed in Appendix A.

**Data Collection**

Focus group and individual interview data were collected from participants at each school site as a part of a larger study, “Systematic Exploration of Gifted Programming: Seeking Promising Practices in Three States,” conducted by the NCRGE. Researchers at NCRGE collected focus group/interview data from stakeholders in public education from 23 schools in 16 school districts in three states.

Researchers conducted individual and focus group interviews with volunteer stakeholders at each site. The stakeholders included coordinators of gifted programs, teachers of gifted students, general education teachers, and parents of gifted students. Interviews were semi-structured with questions focusing on gifted identification process and programming. The goal of the original study did not include focusing on characteristics of giftedness; however, on the majority of the interview protocols, questions about the stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness were included. The number of questions asked pertaining to conceptions of giftedness differed by stakeholder group (see Table 2). Questions (see Appendix B) included, “What does ‘gifted’ mean to you? How would you describe a gifted child? What behaviors and
characteristics would suggest to you that a child may be gifted? and What do you believe are some positive and some challenging characteristics of gifted students?” The research team recorded all interviews with permission of interviewees, and a third-party company transcribed the recordings.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>What does “gifted” mean to you?</th>
<th>How would you describe a gifted child?</th>
<th>What behaviors and characteristics would suggest to you that a child may be gifted?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents of Gifted Students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education Teachers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers of Gifted Students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted Coordinator</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Alternative question: What do you believe are some positive and some challenging characteristics of gifted students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

I started by uploading all focus and individual interview transcripts into the online data analysis program, Dedoose. I labeled each transcript with the stakeholder title, state of the site, school code, and the date of the interview.

Order of Analysis

The data included 51 focus group interview transcripts and 26 individual interview transcripts (see Table 3). I read the data from each stakeholder group in the following order: parents of gifted students, general education teachers, teachers of gifted students, and coordinators of gifted programs. My rationale for this order is that the research question, “How
do stakeholder groups describe giftedness?” is based on stakeholder groups. It was important to read and code all the data within each group, then record my initial thoughts, possible categories, and emerging themes before moving on to the next stakeholder group. I chose to start with parents of gifted students because they are the group most removed from the public education system and training in gifted education but are most familiar with their child’s characteristics and behaviors. I then moved on to general education teachers, who had the least amount of gifted education training or experience in gifted education of the school stakeholders. I then moved on to the teachers of gifted students who had more training and experience in gifted education. Finally, I chose to finish with gifted coordinators as they had the most experience, training, and knowledge of their state and district identification policy. Reading the data in this order helped me to keep each stakeholder group separate and not let gifted education training or state or district policy impact the categories and initial themes of parent and general education teachers.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>Focus Group Interviews</th>
<th>Individual Interviews</th>
<th>Number of participants¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gifted Coordinators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers of Gifted Students</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education Teachers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of Gifted Students</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Note: Based on consent forms signed and represent the maximum number of participants that agreed to be interviewed, not confirmed participants in interviews.

Inductive Analysis

The method of analysis for this study was general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006), which included reading the data, applying codes to the data, creating categories, and determining
themes. The first step was to read each transcript, recording notes and memos of my initial thoughts and possible categories.

I read through each transcript, with the research question in mind, and used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) for any data pertaining to conceptions of giftedness. Relevant data were coded when participants answered the target questions and described a gifted child or giftedness throughout the transcripts. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) refers to assigning a code to excerpts of text, which is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative salient, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a position of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). I used a mixture of In Vivo and descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2016). In Vivo codes “refer to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). Descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102). An example of an excerpt of coded transcript is displayed in Table 4.
While reading and rereading the transcripts, I used the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) of combining codes, forming categories, and condensing categories (see Table 5).
Finally, axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was completed for themes to emerge. I exported the transcript excerpts in each category into a spreadsheet, read through each excerpt, and recorded an axial code into a new column. For example, initial codes were created using mostly using the language in the excerpt, if a participant used the word creative, the code was creative. If the participant used the terminology “out of the box” thinking, I coded it out of the box. In axial coding, all excerpts were combined that fit into the main category Thinks Differently, then Thinks Differently, Ability and Intelligence, Learns Faster, and Cognitive Ability were all combined to create the subtheme Capacity to Think and Learn. I then combined all the excerpts and read them without original codes, creating an axial code that answered the question: What are they really describing? This helped me to get a big picture and ultimately the subthemes and categories within subthemes emerged. See Table 6 for an example of axial coding for the subtheme Personality Characteristics and Behaviors.

The goal of axial coding was to again combine codes and subcategories while finding more meaning and connections between excerpts until themes and subthemes emerged from the data. After completing several rounds of axial coding and more combining of categories, one theme emerged with four subthemes common to all stakeholder groups.
Table 5
Redistribution of Categories, Sub Categories and Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>They think differently</th>
<th>Capacity to learn</th>
<th>Personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Thinker</strong></td>
<td><strong>Creative</strong></td>
<td><strong>Precocious</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt their learning</td>
<td>Different ways to do things</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply it to new things</td>
<td>Put non-typical ideas together</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t see black and white</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks and differently</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deeper thinking on a higher level</td>
<td>Make their own stories</td>
<td>conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to explain</td>
<td>Think outside the box</td>
<td>Above grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way they explain things</td>
<td>Multiple answers</td>
<td>level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt what they learn</td>
<td>Brilliant answer</td>
<td>Powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Unique answers</td>
<td>vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surprising answers</td>
<td>Mature choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Great ideas</td>
<td>in books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrate understanding in unique ways</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Innovative way of thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

41
Table 6

*Transcript Excerpts With Axial Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
<th>Axial Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ClassTeach_09/27/16_State_1</td>
<td>I actually did that this morning. I truly have a child who’s completely defiant and have another one who is gifted and their personalities they just don’t mix well. And so I called one of them out in the hallway and I asked what happened and she explained to me and so I kind of explained to her that maybe she just wanted to help. Did you feel like she was helping or did you feel like she was being harmful about it? And then I pulled the [gifted] kids out and then I talked to both of them and just kind of explained both of their personalities and both of what I think she was trying to do this, and I thinks he was trying to do this but I think both of you kind of took it the wrong way. Kind of one of those things. But yeah, definitely talk to the others too because it’s not fair. And when I say it’s not fair I mean I don’t want you know, I don’t want my gifted children to feel like she’s always asking me to do it. She’s always asking me to change. And I feel like the other children have the ability and they’re capable of changing too. So it’s not that just our gifted kids are set in their ways, all kids are.</td>
<td>social issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ClassTeach_03/16/16_State_2</td>
<td>(Long Pause) Text book or/…P: /or how we feel?…P: How you feel because I would say gifted child is self-motivated but that’s not what I see…P: /Nope. …P: /in real life. …P: Nope. …P: It’s just the opposite.</td>
<td>personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ClassTeach_03/16/16_State 2</td>
<td>It can be. I think their little quirky sometimes. Often times they’re, they don’t necessarily look like all the other kids or behave in the same way that the other kids behave.</td>
<td>quirky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ClassTeach_03/16/16_State 2</td>
<td>A lot of them are disorganized. (Clear throat)</td>
<td>personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ClassTeach_03/16/16_State 2</td>
<td>Goes back on that (coughing) that child who helped out, said quarters man, he’s got, he has a knowledge, a very, a very special knowledge that the Bob people did not, even though he is tested as gifted. Something like, maybe common sense, maybe some streets smarts, maybe has used money and had to figure out/</td>
<td>personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ClassTeach_03/16/16_State 2</td>
<td>Well I also think it gives, it teaches those gifted students patience. Because they expect everybody to know everything that they know. And so when you group them differently that they also have to teach, they learn compassion, patience, teamwork.</td>
<td>social skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once the theme and five subthemes were determined, I read through the excerpts from each subtheme and re-categorized them to determine similarities and differences across stakeholder groups. When organizing the findings section, I read through the excerpts of each subtheme and chose excerpts that captured the subtheme and represented multiple participants. When determining the differences between groups, I combined gifted teachers and gifted coordinators into one group. Conceptually, they both had additional training in gifted education compared to the parents and general education teachers, and they had more similarities than differences. I describe the findings comparing three stakeholder groups: parents of gifted students, general education teachers, and gifted teachers/coordinators. I read through the excerpts from each of these groups for each subtheme to capture the story the stakeholders were trying to tell. The goal was to use participant words to tell their story and to use my words to compare, contrast, organize, and create meaning.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, making the validity of a researcher closer to the reality of the participants than a survey instrument. I am qualified to conduct this study based on successful completion of my coursework for my doctoral program, including Qualitative Methods 1 and Advanced Qualitative Methods. I also have 2.5 years of experience working on the Qualitative Research Team for the NCRGE. During this time, my responsibilities have included preparing for and participating in site visits that include collecting data through focus groups and individual interviews, conducting classroom observations, and gathering other materials while on site. I have also performed qualitative analysis of interview transcripts using the online analysis program *Dedoose* and have used the codes and themes from these analyses in writing site-specific case studies.
Reflexivity Statement

I am a White female from an upper-middle-class family in Connecticut. Even though I was identified as gifted as a child by the school, I was not involved in gifted education as a child nor aware of what it meant to be gifted until I was a teacher. I moved to Florida when I was 18 years old to earn my Bachelor’s degree in Marine Science. After graduating, I became a teacher, with no teaching experience nor training. My mother was a teacher, and I grew up helping her grade papers and putting up bulletin boards. My first teaching position was in a self-contained classroom for middle school students with mental illnesses. From there, I taught dropout prevention, then general education science, and eventually I was recruited to teach gifted students. I taught middle school science for 15 years, 6 of those in a full-time gifted magnet program. Before I became a teacher of the gifted, I did not know what the term gifted meant. I did not know I should look for gifted students in my general education classes, nominate them for identification, or differentiate instruction for them. Once I became a teacher of the gifted, I was trained in gifted education through state endorsement courses and district professional development workshops. I completed the five graduate courses in gifted education required to teach gifted students in my state, and I eventually taught the Guidance and Counseling course for teachers working on their endorsement. My first understanding of what it is to be gifted was the state’s definition and identification requirements. The state has an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) component and a gifted characteristics component. The state also has an alternative pathway to identification for specific underserved populations. This definition influences my conception of giftedness. I am also the wife and mother to two twice-exceptional individuals. They are the reason I pursued my doctorate in gifted education. My life experiences, being a gifted individual, being married to a gifted individual, and being a mother to a gifted individual affect my
conception of giftedness. Over the last 8 years, I have taught approximately 700 gifted middle school students. Each one of those students has shaped my conception of giftedness but each was identified under the state’s gifted identification requirements.

I am currently a doctoral student in the Giftedness, Creativity, and Talent Development Program at the University of Connecticut. My experience as a doctoral student has broadened my conception of giftedness and exposed me to the large body of literature in gifted education. I have been a Graduate Research Assistant for the National Center for Research on Gifted Education since August 2016. I have never taught for nor been employed by any schools or districts included in this study. I was a member of the research team that completed site visits for two of the schools, where I conducted interviews and classroom observations. I was involved in reading and coding 35 of the original study interview transcripts. It was the reading of these transcripts and the different ways interviewees described gifted students that motivated me to conduct this study. It is my personal belief that the lack of information and training may be a reason why teachers unknowingly overlook gifted students, as I did for the 9 years before my training.

**Validity and Reliability**

To ensure internal validity was strengthened, I used peer review. A trusted colleague, familiar with the data, both coded selections of data to determine that my codes aligned with the chosen excerpts and reviewed my combining of codes into categories. On several occasions, we met and discussed any discrepancies in our individual categories until we came to agreement. This process strengthened the validity of the findings.

Reliability is the ability to repeat a study and get the same results. Merriam (2002) mentioned, “replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results . . . reliability lies in
others’ concurring that given the data collected . . . makes sense – they are consistent and dependable” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). To increase reliability, I maintained an audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This included memos of how I created categories and condensed categories, and what my thought process was as analysis progressed.

**Summary**

I conducted a basic qualitative (Thomas, 2006) study using general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) to answer the question: How do stakeholders describe giftedness? I utilized focus group and individual interview data from a larger project conducted by NCRGE. Researchers interviewed 217 parents of gifted students, 213 general education teachers, 87 gifted teachers, and 36 gifted coordinators in a combination of focus and individual interviews from 23 elementary schools. I read and open coded 51 focus group interview transcripts and 26 individual interview transcripts for data on conceptions of giftedness. I combined codes into categories using the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) after every 5-10 transcripts. I used a peer reviewer to confirm that my coding and categories captured what participants conveyed. After axial coding and combining of categories, one theme and four subthemes emerged.

In the next chapter, I present my findings starting with the major theme, then each subtheme with its categories. While presenting each subtheme I compare and contrast the different stakeholder groups’ conceptions within that subtheme. I end the chapter with a summary of each stakeholder group’s conception of giftedness and a chapter summary.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from this qualitative study. The research findings are presented first by theme and subthemes, then by stakeholder group.

Parents of gifted students, general education teachers, and gifted teachers and coordinators were asked in several ways to describe what gifted meant to them. After I analyzed the data using inductive analysis, one theme emerged. Stakeholder groups described gifted children as different from other children, presumably in the same classroom and grade level. Participant groups described the differences with varying frequency, emphases, and language; however, the theme was consistent across all stakeholder groups: gifted kids are different. I organized these differences into four categories that make up the subthemes. When describing gifted children, stakeholders often described several characteristics from multiple subthemes. First, participants described giftedness as a different level of capacity for learning and reasoning. This included higher intelligence, faster learning, more creative thinking, and higher potential than same-age peers. Next, participants described giftedness as high-level performance or achievement, often comparing gifted students to their age group peers by referring to gifted children as “above grade level.” Next, participants described giftedness as a need for challenge beyond typical age-based classrooms. They described that gifted children often sit and wait, have a desire to learn, and face barriers to meeting this need. Finally, participants described giftedness by unique personality characteristics and behaviors such as emotional intensities or sensitivities, quirkiness, and perfectionism. The subthemes and respective categories are presented in no particular order.

Theme: Gifted children are different from same age peers.

A. Gifted children have a different level of capacity for learning and reasoning.
B. Gifted children are high-level performers.
C. Gifted children need challenge beyond typical age-based learning environments.
D. Gifted children display unique personality characteristics and behaviors.

**Different From Same-Age Peers**

All stakeholder groups described giftedness in regard to a child or children, and these children were described as different from others of the same chronological age. Participants described differences in ability, learning, thinking, performance, needs, emotions, personality, behavior, and social skills. Each of the characteristics and behaviors was an example of how gifted children stand out and are unique in comparison to their age peers. One participant described a gifted child, “she is not the typical person of her age” (Parent, State 1, 10/18/16). When you are gifted “your brain works a little different than other kids’ brains” (Parent, State 3, 11/10/16). “They’re different than the average child” (Parent, State 3, 10/19/16). Another participant described the many ways gifted children are unique:

So gifted kids, boy they are unique to say the least. They’re beyond their peers. They’re a critical thinker. Intense. . . . You’re a self-directed learner. Gifted kids come up with complex ideas, farther than a bright learner would be. Just different. Different ways of thinking. Different ways about going about tasks. Very intellectual for the most part, critical thinker. High energy level at times. They’re very diverse in their interests and abilities. . . . I found that they, they don’t require much re-teaching. They get it right off the bat and they retain that information quickly. And they also like new ways of doing things and also suggesting other ways to do things than maybe the teacher has suggested. (Gifted teacher, State 2, 03/16/16)
This is echoed by another participant, “They’re different and they just don’t think like the other kids” (Parent, State 2, 09/20/16). Each participant explained behaviors and/or characteristics that set gifted children apart from their same age peers:

My groups this year oddly enough, they all like to get out the dictionary and study that and they’ll look for synonyms or antonyms to go along with other words to use them and just to try to go up and speak to each other and make them figure out the word they’re trying to use in context. They’re an odd little group, but I love them. (General education teacher, State 3, 01/31/17)

Participants described giftedness as differences from same age peers on four subthemes. These subthemes are described in the following sections.

**Capacity for Learning and Reasoning**

The first subtheme participants described is giftedness is a different level of capacity for learning and reasoning. All participant groups described giftedness as a different level of capacity for learning and reasoning. When asked what gifted meant to them or what characteristics described a gifted child, participants used the words advanced, brilliant, smart, bright, sharp, quick witted, capable, high learners, and talented.

I think [gifted is] somebody who learns differently, processes information differently usually at a higher order level than your average student. They can be gifted creatively. They can be a little bit more analytical. There’s a bunch of different learning styles tied to gifted children. I think they have a higher intellect and higher ability than a regular student. But definitely I think the biggest is that they learn differently than a basic ed[ucation] student. (Gifted coordinator, State 3, 11/09/16)
Participants spoke of intelligence and natural abilities, of how quickly gifted students learn and process information, and how their brain works differently than their peers.

**Subtheme categories.** The descriptions participants used to describe this capacity fell into three categories: (a) advanced cognitive ability, (b) learning, and (c) thinks differently. Each one is described below.

*Advanced cognitive ability.* The first category participants used to describe gifted children’s advanced capacity for learning and reasoning was high intelligence or cognitive ability. Many participants talked about gifted children by stating a specific number that referred to a cognitive aptitude test, psychological assessment, or intelligence test (I.Q.) score. One participant said, “I think of gifted as just in that real concrete term of that I.Q., . . . above 130” (Parent, State 3, 11/10/16). Another participant reported, “I’m used to it being your I.Q. had to be in the top 2%” (General education teacher, State 2, 09/19/16). Participants often referred to state or district cut off scores for various students if they qualified for the main or alternative pathway to gifted identification. Participants also used specific cognitive ability assessments by name or acronym to describe giftedness. The Naglieri, WISC (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children), Raven’s, RIAS (Reynolds Intellectual Assessment Scales) ,CogAT (The Cognitive Abilities Test), and KBIT (Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test) were mentioned by name or acronym and were often accompanied with a specific percentile score that constituted giftedness. One participant explained how using cognitive screening tests for all students helped to identify students who were never nominated for gifted identification,

[Joan] is finding Latina girls at Sixth Grade and they’ve never been in any - she had one little girl that scored in the 99th percentile on her CogAT Quantitative and had never
been in an advanced math class, but she’s just a little, quiet thing and she just never said this is too easy for me. (Gifted coordinator, State 2, 12/06/16)

Other participants talked about ability in more general terms such as an I.Q. test or simply said I.Q. or high intelligence. When asked what gifted meant to them, one participant responded, “I think high intelligence when I think of gifted” (General education teacher, State 1, 09/27/16).

Participants also used the terms potential, ability, and capable to describe the difference between gifted children and their same age peers. One participant explained what prompted nominating a student, “once I start suspecting a student has some type of capability that looks like . . . a little bit higher than their peers and stuff, I will verbally talk to [the gifted teacher]” (General education teacher, State 1, 10/20/16). Another participant described his/her son’s potential, “I was a little bit aware that his reading level, his math level, just ability to comprehend his questions, being able to do puzzles, things like that” (Parent, State 2, 09/19/16). One participant described how students can have potential and underachieve,

So, you can begin to work with those students and develop those students because sometimes . . . they’re underachievers. And they may not necessarily have their intrinsic desire already instilled into them and as a nurturer, I can bring out some of those attributes and qualities. So sometimes you will see me with students and you will say that’s not a person she would be with but yes, it is a person I would be with because people have potential. (Gifted teacher, State 1, 10/19/16)

All of these descriptions paint a picture that stakeholder groups associate advanced cognitive ability, aptitude, intelligence, and potential with giftedness and often described specific assessments that measure cognitive ability.
**Learning.** The next category participants used to describe gifted children’s advanced capacity for learning and reasoning was speed and ease of learning. When describing gifted students, participants said they learn faster, require less repetition, and complete assignments faster than their same age peers. “I just thought my kid just was learning faster than the other kids and comprehending things faster than they are” (Parent, State 2, 09/19/16). “They are able to retell stories in big vocabulary words that they might have just learned” (Gifted teacher, State 2, 01/27/17). “I just usually think of someone who learns relatively easily” (General education teacher, State 1, 09/27/16). In a focus group one participant said, “we teach it and they get it.” Then another participant agreed, “Yes, exactly, so it doesn’t need a lot of remediation, a lot of review, repetition for them; they can grasp it the first time” (General education teacher, State 3, 10/13/16). “I look at how quick they are and their memory; they can memorize really fast. They can grasp the concept really good and really fast too” (Gifted teacher, State 3, 11/10/16).

Participants described gifted children’s ability to learn faster, with less repetition, as compared to their peers as a characteristic of giftedness.

A group of teachers described a unique trait of gifted English learners. They described that in their experience speed of English acquisition was one way that gifted English learners stand out from their peers. Gifted English learners learn English at a faster rate compared to their peers. One teacher described this trait as a possible gifted identifier,

I’m not sure if we really look close enough at a student’s ability to learn a new language to help identify that [gifted] piece because we’re trying to say okay, are you or aren’t you while they’re still learning that this is a table and so it’s a little tricky, and yet we do have kids – we have a student now who came to us at the beginning of this year, actually a month into this year. He used the word stethoscope and you’ve got to go, what? Now he
is making that cognate from Spanish to English and all of that. . . . I think are we looking at some of those kinds of things; is that a gifted trait that we’re not tapping into? (General education teacher, State 2, 12/06/16)

Speed of learning, especially a new language in elementary school was described by participants as a gifted trait.

**Thinks differently.** The final category participants used to describe gifted children’s advanced capacity for learning and reasoning was they think differently. All participant groups stated that gifted children think differently, creatively, and are capable of advanced reasoning. Participants described gifted children as out of the box thinkers, critical thinkers, problem solvers, and analytical. They also described giftedness as coming up with complex ideas, having imagination, thinking more globally that regular students, and making connection in unexpected ways. “I would say that the things I look for are just out of the box thinkers” (General education teacher, State 2, 12/06/16). “[Their] brain works a little different than other kids’ brains” (Parent, State 3, 11/10/16). “They think differently like, they might kind of go somewhere with an idea that no one else typically would” (General education teacher, State 2, 05/16/16). One participant defined giftedness as, “Creativity, their imagination; mine has deductive reasoning, ridiculousness that he shouldn’t have had at five years old” (Parent, State 3, 10/12/16). When asked to describe what giftedness meant to her, a participant also described that creative thinking was a component,

I want to say the creative part from my perspective . . . I do believe that they adapt something they learn in one subject and they adapt it even into another subject and it’s very – it’s almost like seniors I believe. So, I think that creativeness that they come in
with, they think outside the box...; they get to that destination, but they go a whole new avenue to that destination. (Gifted teacher, State 3, 01/27/17)

Participants describe giftedness as thinking differently, including critical and creative thinking, problem solving, and advanced reasoning.

**Stakeholder differences.** All stakeholder groups described giftedness as a different capacity for learning and reasoning but described it in different ways (see Figure 1). Parents and general education teachers described this aspect mostly by emphasizing how children learn and think. They both described curious, inquisitive behaviors and thinking outside the box. General education teachers described speed of work completion while parents described learning faster and needing less repetition. Gifted teachers and coordinators used intelligence, I.Q., and other cognitive assessments when describing gifted students’ capacity for learning and thinking. All stakeholder groups used intelligence to describe giftedness, while gifted teachers and gifted coordinators used the terms intelligence or I.Q. the most compared to parents and general education teachers. Parents also described intelligence or an innate cognitive ability in their children that was the factor that made them gifted, but used the terminology super smart, intelligent, bright, higher I.Q., higher intelligence, really smart for his age, or sharp.
Performance

The next subtheme participants use to describe giftedness is exceptional performance and achievement in one or more domains compared to same age peers. “[Gifted] students perform at a higher level than their peers of the same age or in the same environment usually in my classroom” (General education teacher, State 1, 09/27/16). Participants used the terminology higher level than peers, highest, above average, more capable, and further ahead as a way to compare gifted students’ performance to their age mates.

Subtheme categories. Participants talked about this high-level performance or achievement in two categories: (a) achievement tests, (b) classroom performance.

Achievement tests. Participants described high-level performance as performance on achievement tests. These tests included state assessments, end of year assessment, reading Lexile assessments, and math tests. High-level performance was described as “one or two grade levels
ahead,” and “over and above grade level.” One participant recounts a time a teacher had to be brought in to teach the students above their age level:

We had a group of high math students at the school and it was kind of one of those beyond high, like you look and it’s that bubble of kids that you’re like holy cow, these kids are knocking the socks off of things! We ended up bringing a teacher in that taught Sixth Grade curriculum to those students during their math time that year, so they got Sixth Grade curriculum in their Fifth Grade year. . . . (Gifted coordinator, State 2, 09/28/16)

Participants also described top levels on state achievement tests as a sign of giftedness,

The little boy I spoke of the two [level] fives [on the state assessment] . . . he was a foster child. And he brought all sorts of issues to the table with him. So yeah, we had everybody involved with him. You know, because he was melting down during the [state achievement assessment] and I just knew he had failed it. But smart was what that child had going for him and . . . he passed that test with two [level] fives because that was the one thing he could depend on. (General education teacher, State 1, 09/27/16)

Participants often used percentiles to differentiate who was and who was not gifted. Various participants stated different percentages ranging from the top 1% to 10%. Others mentioned specific percentile scores on achievement tests such as 95th or higher to describe giftedness. Participants often mentioned these percentiles in combination with achievement in one or more domains. However, some participants used terms such as more, higher, or top when comparing gifted students to their same age peers. General education teachers and parents also mentioned percentiles of 98th or 99th to describe gifted children without reference to a specific assessment.
**Classroom performance.** The second category in performance is classroom performance. When participants described classroom performance, they did so by comparing gifted students to their peers. They used phrases like the high group, top of the class, high performing, above and beyond the norm, do well in most subject areas, advanced tip-top kids, excel, high achieving students, and top performers. They described students reading at a 12th grade level or being in a grade level math above their chronological age. Some participants discussed classroom grades, but the consensus was that giftedness and classroom grades did not always go together “Some students make straight 100s and some make 25s” (General education teacher, State 1, 10/20/16). Other participants talked more about grades:

Participant 1: Some students . . . [get] straight As all of the time and then usually [teachers] . . . go and see if they’ve already been tested and they have and they’re not the ones [identified as gifted]. Some people think just because . . . they’ve got these great grades [they are gifted], but it’s not always that case but just self-motivated, driven on their own.

Participant 2: Yeah, the grades are interesting because if they do all of the things, they can make straight As . . . but then I have kids that just won’t do an assignment at all. And that kid’s gifted you know? So, you can look at the grades, but it’s not always what you want.

Participant 1: They don’t need to do the homework because they get As on all the tests. So why do the homework? (General education teachers, State 3, 10/19/16)

Participants described above average classroom performance as a characteristic of giftedness, but not always straight As.
**Stakeholder differences.** Gifted teachers and coordinators and classroom teachers mentioned performance or achievement more frequently than parents (see Figure 2). Parents mentioned performance and or achievement the least of all the subthemes. When the gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness and performance, they often referred to scoring in the top percentage or percentile on state or district achievement tests. When general education teachers talked about performance, they equally talked about achievement test performance and classroom performance. They often used comparisons to describe giftedness, describing gifted students as the top performers or high group. Both general education teachers and gifted teachers and coordinators described gifted students as above grade level on math and/or reading assessments. One area where gifted teacher and coordinators stood out from other stakeholder groups was their discussion of underrepresented populations and performance. This is discussed more in future sections.

*Figure 2. Stakeholder Differences – Performance. Venn diagram of parents of gifted students, general education teachers, and gifted teachers and coordinators.*
Needs Challenge

The next subtheme that emerged from the interviews was gifted children need challenge beyond typical age-based learning environments. Many participants defined giftedness as a need for something different from what the regular classroom provided, “Gifted means to me that the child needs to be put in another learning environment” (Parent, State 3, 01/24/17). They described how gifted student needs are different from other children’s needs:

It’s the same as special ed[ucation], kids do better because they get that extra [service] and those [gifted] kids would do better as well by getting that one extra [service] that hits their needs that are different that other kids’ needs. People will question why wouldn’t you do that with every kid? And it’s well cuz typical kids can learn in a really great fashion through regular system but [gifted] kids, special needs kids, they function in a different way. Their brains think in a different way, especially [gifted] kids. (Gifted teacher, State 2, 09/19/16)

Parents conveyed that their children need challenge; they deserve the opportunity to learn instead of sitting and waiting, finishing work early, and experiencing a lot of dead time, bored. Gifted teachers and coordinators often described giftedness as a need for enrichment or a need for services.

When participants talked about the need for challenge, they used phrases: need more, need different, need it faster, and individual learning. Participants explained that gifted students need challenge to learn, to grow, to love learning, to stay engaged, to avoid behavior problems, and to reach their full potential. One participant explained that gifted students need to be challenged to grow academically:
So, for her to come from making a [level] two in the Third Grade to a [level] four in Fourth Grade I was so pleased, and she is not even [gifted] in reading; she is [gifted] in math. But for her to move in both areas . . . I made the right decision in challenging her and saying I think I should go ahead with her. (Gifted teacher, State 1, 10/18/16)

One parent explained the need for challenge to stay motivated:

Some people don’t understand that there’s a difference between high achieving kids and gifted kids . . . a high achieving kid, who’s doing really well, won’t have a problem left where they are. They could handle being accelerated but they’re not going to exhibit any behaviors . . . that says we need to get this kid doing harder stuff. They’ll just get As . . . and they’ll be happy and then go to recess. The gifted kids are gonna be, “Oh this is too easy,” and they’ll get bored and they tune out – even though they know it, they just aren’t motivated, and they really need the challenge. (Parent, State 2, 09/19/16)

Parents, more than any other stakeholder group described an unhappiness in their children, a loss of excitement for school, and a need for challenge in a typical classroom. One parent described that lack of challenge leads to a loss of the love of learning, “when they don’t get challenged, [gifted children] tend to shut down and they just start hating school” (Parent, State 2, 09/19/16).

Participants described that gifted children need challenge to grow, learn, and stay engaged in school.

**Subtheme categories.** When participants described need for challenge, they talked about those needs in three main categories: (a) sitting and waiting, (b) desire to learn, and (c) barriers.

**Sitting and waiting.** The first category participants described when talking about need for challenge was being bored and sitting and waiting. Mostly parents explained a need to be
engaged in a school climate where the expectation is for every student to learn certain content or skills, but the gifted child has already mastered them, so he just waits:

> Well sometimes he comes home just saying he gets bored sometimes you know. I guess . . . it’s sort of tough for him to just sit there . . . while she’s teaching the others and stuff. Just having to sit through thirty, forty-five minutes of instruction that they’ve known for you know a year or two years, depending on the child. (Parent, State 1, 04/27/16)

Parents told many stories of students sitting in typical age-based classrooms with content that was too easy. Another parent echoed this, “Like in my son’s case, he has said that it’s hard for him to sit there and go through the regular work when he already knows it and he’s waiting for the more challenging stuff that really grabs him” (Parent, State 1, 04/27/16). Parents’ descriptions of giftedness often included the need for something different than what the general education classroom and curriculum offered because their children were bored, sitting and waiting to learn. They needed challenge.

**Desire to learn.** The next category participants described when talking about needing challenge was desire to learn. All participant groups described gifted children as having a drive to learn, a motivation, a thirst, an eagerness, and excitement to learn information. Participants also described giftedness as a curiosity, inquisitiveness, and a quest for knowledge. Gifted children “can be asking a bazillion questions and you know not satisfied with any one answer” (General education teacher, State 3, 10/19/16). “They’re so eager. Eager to learn more. There’s never enough knowledge. They are always, there’s more to gain. In every situation, where their strength is and outside that strength, that academic area” (Gifted teacher, State 2, 03/16/16). A gifted teacher also described a gifted child as eager, excited and driven to learn, “they’re driven to learn and understand; that’s the thing I look at, the driving passion they have” (Gifted teacher,
State 3, 10/13/16). Gifted students’ desire to learn leaves them wanting more challenge in age-based learning environments.

**Barriers.** The third category participants described when talking about gifted student needs was barriers to meeting those needs. All participant groups, including general education teachers, described barriers that inhibit challenge in age-based learning environments. Barriers included lack of time, lack of resources, grade level curriculum, and meeting the needs of other students.

Participants described that meeting the needs of gifted students competes with meeting the needs of students that have yet to learn the grade level curriculum, and with limited time, teachers choose the lower students.

You have twenty-seven kids, half are high, half are low, and you only have so much time to meet in small groups, you have to just, you know give your direct instruction time where the kids who need it more unfortunately. (General education teacher, State 2, 09/19/16)

Another participant explained how difficult it was for one teacher to meet the needs of students with varying abilities in one classroom and recommended cluster grouping,

Our encouragement to the administration is the cluster grouping; we want to have our students in inclusion classrooms together with other like-minded peers, so we encourage and start a rubric not to have Tier-3 on the high level and Tier-3 on the low level in the same classroom. . . . It’s impossible for the teachers to meet the needs of all of those learners and it’s not best practice for our students. (Gifted coordinator, State 3, 11/10/16)
All participant groups reported that the way typical classrooms are organized makes it difficult to meet gifted student needs. One participant explained a need for something beyond differentiation, something more than he or she can offer in a general education classroom:

    We try truly to differentiate for everyone but there, gifted kids are enough different and they have enough special needs, they really need a full time person working with them. That was the way, the reason why we grouped that way this year. And by pulling them up we feel like, yeah, they have to leave the classroom but they are getting so much more of what they need. . . . They know these things, they’re moving on. And then we have what’s left and that helps us to differentiate amongst the survivors and the remainder.

(General education teacher, State 2, 03/16/16)

Several general education teachers talked about the expectations that they follow the district curriculum and meet the needs of others, making gifted learners at the bottom of their list.

    Well I’m not being negative, but until something is done about the time issue and the class size you know, my time – if I had the choice between a little girl who is crying because her mom dumped her and she doesn’t get breakfast where she is living now and she’s crying so hard she can’t work, and having that gifted group read with me, guess where my time is going that day. So sadly, that you have to kind of prioritize and so as long as we have really big classes and you know the needs of our kids are getting harder . . . Well because we know that [the gifted kids] can handle it so it’s unfortunate.

(General education teacher, State 2, 09/20/16)

All participant groups described barriers to challenging gifted students, citing lack of resources, lack of time, class size, and other students’ needs as barriers to meeting gifted student needs.
Each category within needs challenge provided a purpose. Participants described gifted students sitting and waiting to stress that they need challenge. They described gifted children’s desire to learn to explain that they want challenge. They described barriers in the typical age-based learning environment to communicate that when teachers have a goal of content mastery with limited time and resources, gifted students are left needing more.

**Stakeholder differences.** All stakeholder groups described giftedness in terms of needs, but how they talked about those needs differed (see Figure 3). Parents described giftedness as the need for challenge beyond typical age-based learning environments more than any other stakeholder group. Parents equally described their children sitting and waiting, being bored, and wanting to learn. Several parents discussed barriers to meeting student needs in the typical age-based classroom. Some parents discussed gifted programming also not meeting their child’s individual needs and the possibility of home schooling.

Gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness as a need for enrichment or services as part of district gifted identification criteria. They often mentioned that gifted students need challenge and discussed barriers that existed in general education classrooms to providing challenge. They discussed that gifted children need challenge to learn and grow. They did not talk about gifted students sitting and waiting but described that when gifted student needs are not being met boredom leads to behavior problems.

General education teachers described giftedness as need for challenge less than the other stakeholder groups. As a group, they mostly discussed the barriers to meeting the needs of gifted students with the current classroom organization, time, resources, and teacher expectations.
Figure 3. Stakeholder Differences – Needs Challenge. Venn diagram of parents of gifted students, general education teachers, and gifted teachers and coordinators.

**Personality Characteristics and Behaviors**

The final subtheme that emerged from the interviews was gifted children have unique personality characteristics and behaviors. Participants spent the majority of interviews describing how gifted children were different from peers, but when we asked what gifted meant to them, many started by saying, “every gifted child is slightly different” (General education teacher, State 3, 11/09/16). The personality characteristics of gifted students stood out, but were not consistent. Personality characteristics did not define them as gifted, but they were a part of what made gifted children different from other children.

I think the biggest misconception about gifted is that they all fit in this one pretty little box and are all similar and yet they are so diverse, although they do have similar traits . . . they are so diverse and different. . . . There isn’t an average gifted; there are a lot of
different personalities, there are a lot of different strengths. (Gifted teacher, State 3, 11/10/16)

Participants described personality characteristics including independence, concern for fairness and world problems, having a unique interest, being detail oriented, and having messy backpacks. Gifted teachers and coordinators mentioned using checklists and scales to find students with unique gifted characteristics, “teachers have a Gifted Behavior Scale that they have to fill out that looks at their motivation, their work habits, their leadership” (Gifted teacher, State 1, 04/27/16). Parents described how different their gifted children were from one another, “In my house it looks a little different because all four are different, completely” (Parent, State 3, 11/10/16). Some were described as high energy and talkative, while others were described as quiet deep thinkers. Some were described as absent-minded professors and others as lawyer types that debate and question authority. Participants also described behaviors that make gifted children different from their same-aged peers.

**Subtheme categories.** When participants described these unique behaviors of gifted students, they talked about them in two categories: (a) emotional responses, and (b) social skills.

**Emotional responses.** The first category of unique behaviors was emotional differences. Participants described gifted children as having emotional differences from their peers. They described gifted children as emotionally intense, sensitive, emotional, having anxiety, and having meltdowns. All participant groups described gifted students as having unique emotional responses, overreacting to situations unlike their same age peers. These emotional responses were described in conjunction with perfectionism and social issues. One parent described his/her gifted child as follows:
She sees the world a little differently, sometimes social things are difficult for them because they don’t identify – at least mine didn’t with her peers very well and things that wouldn’t normally affect other kids, like seeing a commercial on television would just throw her into a tailspin about being worried about it and just sometimes clothing kind of sensitivities. (Parent, State 2, 03/16/16)

Another participant echoed the sentiment that gifted children have trouble with emotions:

We have quite a few that bottle anxiety so we’re constantly working on strategies to incorporate with them on how to like cope through those things. We have some that are OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder] and it’s just helping individually to work with that child for them to figure out okay what strategies can I employ myself that can help me work through whatever issue it is that I’m facing someplace. (Gifted teacher, State 3, 11/10/16)

All participant groups also described gifted children as perfectionists who held themselves to a high standard. “They’re critical sometimes of themselves when they don’t achieve the way they want to achieve” (General education teacher, State 3, 10/13/16). One participant recounted experiences with gifted children,

You know I’ve had children who were gifted who melted down because all of a sudden, they can’t do a question on the test and they did not know the answer to that question and that could not be. It was not possible for them to not know it. And it’ll just kind of break your heart. (General education teacher, State 1, 09/27/16)

Participants discussed the stress, anxiety, and pressure gifted students feel. Many participants recounted stories of children who were accustomed to knowing all the answers. The next category participants described was social issues.
Social skills. The second category of unique behaviors displayed by gifted children is social issues. Participants often used the word quirky to explain social differences that make gifted children stand out from their peers. “They’re quirky . . . and what I mean by quirky is they just have kind of behaviors that aren’t the typical behaviors” (General education teacher, State 3, 10/09/16). These quirky traits include being odd, weird, or having problems interacting with peers. Participants described social issues as trouble communicating, wanting to be with like-minded peers, trouble working in a group, being literal, not fitting in, getting frustrated with people moving at a slower pace, and being bossy. One teacher explained,

So I think sometimes I find that those kids have struggles talking with each other and so helping to build those social skills I think would be really beneficial for me, as how do I teach them to make friends, to get their ideas on the paper, but then also to take someone else’s idea and build on it because that seems very difficult for some of them. (General education teacher, State 2, 12/06/16)

“They have a harder time sometimes of common-sense knowledge and like social smarts than the average students” (Gifted teacher, State 3, 11/10/16). Even though the many participants reported that gifted children had social issues, some also reported that every gifted child was different, and some get along well with same age peers.

Stakeholder differences. All stakeholder groups equally described the unique personality characteristics and behaviors of gifted children. No one group talked more about social and emotional issues than another group (see Figure 4). General education teachers talked about personality characteristics and behaviors in a more negative way than either parents or gifted teachers and coordinators. Gifted teachers and coordinators discussed behavioral scales
and checklists containing characteristics of giftedness that schools use in the gifted identification process.

Figure 4. Stakeholder Differences – Personality Characteristics and Behaviors. Venn diagram of parents of gifted students, general education teachers, and gifted teachers and coordinators.

Stakeholders

The main theme, gifted children are different from same-aged peers was consistent across all stakeholder groups. All stakeholder groups described differences in the four subthemes: (a) capacity to learn and reason, (b) performance, (c) needs challenge, and (d) personality characteristics and behaviors but emphasized those subthemes differently (see Figure 5).
Parents of Gifted Students

- Need for Challenge:
  - Strong & wanting, bored
  - Loss of love of learning
  - Shutdown & behavior problems
  - When challenged: Happy & excited to learn

- Capacity to Learn & Reason:
  - Bright, smart
  - Fast learners
  - Creative problem solvers

- Personality & Behavior:
  - Emotional response
    - Perfectionism
    - Stress & anxiety
  - Intensity
  - Social issues
    - Not fitting in
    - Want to be with intellectual peers

General Education Teachers

- Disparity between participants:
  - Performance:
    - Achievement tests, percentiles
    - Compared to age-mates
    - Above grade level

- Capacity to Learn & Reason:
  - Speed of learning
  - Intelligence, I.Q. scores
  - Creative thinking

- Personality & Behavior:
  - Quirkiness
  - Perfectionism
  - Lack of social skills
  - Negative characteristics
    - More than any other group
    - Annoyance

Gifted Teachers and Coordinators

- Identification:
  - I.Q.
  - Cognitive assessments
  - Nonverbal screenings
  - Potential

- Performance:
  - State assessment percentiles
  - Underrepresented groups
    - Different cut scores/performance levels

- Need for Challenge:
  - Need for enrichment/services
    - For growth
    - Avoid behavior problems

- Personality & Behavior:
  - Behavior checklists
  - Social Emotional Needs
  - Perfectionism
  - Quirkiness

Figure 5. Stakeholder Groups.

Parents

As a group, parents described giftedness as a need for something beyond the age-based learning environment more than other subthemes. They described this need as a need for challenge so their children would not experience boredom. They do not want their children to lose their desire to learn, to shut down, and to become a behavior problem because of lack of learning. One parent explained her son’s behavior when not challenged, “Well, he just kept getting in trouble and I knew he was bored and we tried everything” (Parent, State 3, 10/12/16). Parents described their children as happy and excited when in an environment that matches their needs. For example, one parent reported,

My daughter comes [home] and talks about the vocabulary. They’re learning some new words and she’s using that and she loves that and loves talking about that, that excitement and so just the vocabulary, the higher thinking that she told me about how they were talking about their brains and how their brains work and their neurons connect and you
know I think sometimes being taught at their level, it makes it exciting for them. Or when they feel like they’re getting challenged, a lot of kids thrive on that. (Parent, State 2, 09/19/16)

Next, parents described giftedness as an ability to learn and reason. They described their gifted students as bright, smart, and fast learners. They described their children thinking differently and as creative problem solvers. Finally, parents described the unique social and emotional issues that set their children apart from their peers. They described emotional intensities, perfectionism, anxiety, stress, and not fitting in with peers. They described that their children felt most comfortable when they were with like-minded peers and teachers that understood and appreciated their quirkiness. Parents described performance the least when describing giftedness.

In summary, parents of gifted children described giftedness in terms of how their child was different from other children their age. They mostly described a need for challenge the general education classroom cannot provide. They described that their children have an advanced ability to learn and reason and unique characteristics and behaviors.

**General Education Teachers**

General education teachers were the most diverse group when describing giftedness and gifted children. They described performance more than any other stakeholder group. They described gifted students in terms of achievement test percentiles and compared classroom performance to their age peers describing them as the high group or top of the class. They described gifted students as above grade level and finishing classwork quickly.

Next, general education teachers described giftedness in terms of capacity to learn and reason. They equally described speed of learning, creative thinking, and intelligence. General
education teachers discussed I.Q. scores that seemed to match state gifted identification requirements.

Next, general education teachers described giftedness as differences in social emotional characteristics. Like parents, general education teachers also described quirky behaviors and emotional concerns including perfectionism. General education teachers talked about gifted children’s lack of social skills and trouble getting along with age peers more than other stakeholder groups. General education teachers stood out from other stakeholder groups in the number of negative characteristics mentioned when describing gifted students. They described behaviors such as staring into space, questioning authority, not working well in a group, thinking they are equal with the teacher, laziness, and not knowing how to work hard. One general education teacher commented, “Some . . . are just obnoxiously gifted” (General education teacher, State 3, 01/31/17). Other general education teachers commented that gifted children think they know it all and complete work too quickly that results in making mistakes. While some general education teachers described gifted children with a fondness, others descriptions revealed a dislike or annoyance toward gifted students. One general education classroom teacher described a gifted student:

I don’t think I’ve ever met a less motivated, lazy, for lack of a better word, gifted child who does not care. I mean he really doesn’t, and for him, he has a label, he’s gifted, he’s smart, so I don’t need to do this; I know I’m smart; I’m in gifted. I’m okay with just being gifted; I don’t care. (General education teacher, State 3, 01/31/17)

Finally, general education teachers described gifted students’ needs. Some teachers talked about needs in terms of a job they were supposed to complete, “Like if the student is gifted, you need to make things harder for them whenever possible is basically it” (General education
teacher, State 3, 11/09/16). General education teachers reported that gifted students need more challenge but barriers exist preventing them from meeting those needs. General education teachers described the barriers of lack of time, lack of resources, expectations to teach grade level curriculum, and needing to meet the needs of students other than gifted children that prevented them from providing challenging activities to gifted students.

In summary, general education teacher responses were the least similar to each other. As a group, they described performance more than parents or gifted teachers and coordinators. When they talked about performance, they described percentiles on achievement tests and classroom performance compared to age peers and on grade level curriculum.

**Gifted Teachers and Coordinators**

As a group, gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness in terms of district and state identification policies on cognitive ability assessments, performance, characteristics of giftedness, and need for services. First, gifted teachers and coordinators talked about I.Q. and cognitive screener tests more than any other stakeholder group when describing giftedness and typically mentioned a cutoff score. It was unclear if these descriptions were their personal conceptions or if they accepted these conceptions as a way to identify students in their district. A group of gifted teachers and coordinators described nonverbal cognitive assessments in a way that reveals screening using these assessments helps to find intelligent students when the general education teacher did not recognize students’ potentials,

But also, from some of the other data that I get from the Naglieri Test that comes in, that’s a big one for finding kids of . . . you know, from different populations, I really pay close attention to that and make connections quickly with teachers when I see a child, that, that teacher doesn’t even think is very smart at all with a ninety-nine on the (NNAT)
so, I mean that’s kind of what my job is, to be looking for that, making connections.

(Gifted teacher, State 2, 05/18/16)

Gifted teachers and coordinators also described how gifted students with disabilities are gifted but did not perform on grade level,

You do have students who might even have – they might even be low grade level and they’re gifted students and that happens to us all, but we have the twice exceptional and the last school I was at I had quite a number of those students. I had students with one-on-one paras, para professionals that assisted them throughout the day so there are definitely a lot of needs within gifted. (Gifted coordinator, State 3, 01/24/17)

Next, gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness as performance at a specific level above their peers, often in the top 10%. They often spoke of achievement test performance as criteria for gifted identification. One thing that stood out from other stakeholder groups is how gifted teachers and coordinators talked about ways to find students who had potential but were not performing in the classroom or high enough on achievement tests to be nominated by general education teachers.

When we get those second-grade screener CogAT scores they’re like, “Oh my gosh, where did this kid come from.” Teachers didn’t red flag it. [They] had no idea, then all of a sudden here’s this amazing score and then they go have a conversation and the teachers. . . [L]ike oh I guess they do, . . . or they’re absent so much that I really haven’t seen it . . . other challenges would be . . . their backgrounds interfering . . . if they’re thinking about food or if they’re thinking about mom being . . . beat or . . . dad just lost his job or . . . baby has to take care of the kids after school. They’re not going to shine in the classroom.

(Gifted coordinator, State 2, 03/16/16)
Gifted teachers and coordinators described various ways to find gifted students from underrepresented populations who were not nominated by teachers, did not have high enough achievements test scores but showed potential.

Gifted teachers and coordinators also defined giftedness as a need for services or need for enrichment. They described how lack of challenge led to boredom and unwanted behaviors in gifted children. One area that no other group described was students from poverty and their need for services. One gifted coordinator even called himself an advocate for these children who showed potential.

I have that kid that gets taken back to [the city] because mom wants the pay check and then he gets taken away and gets dragged back; the teachers are frustrated. So, I make sure I advocate for him and I got him counseling because it is my role as a gifted teacher. He’s frustrated because intellectually he can’t get what he needs. His hierarchal needs are not being met. Therefore, he’s in fourth grade and he doesn’t know his times tables. He’s tremendously frustrated. They deserve the services. They need the services. (Gifted teacher, State 3, 01/31/17)

Finally, gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness by characteristics and behaviors. Participants often referred to gifted rating scales and gifted checklists but did not state specific scale names or list the characteristics. Like other stakeholder groups, they described social and emotional issues as well as personality and behavioral characteristics such as curiosity, leadership, and quirkiness. However, gifted teachers and coordinators were the only group that described social and emotional needs of the gifted in addition to the unique behaviors. Several gifted teachers and coordinators described how gifted students from underrepresented populations did not exhibit the typical gifted behaviors, for example,
In our culturally linguistically diverse students, giftedness manifests itself in ways that are not found in some of our traditional dominant culture students. And so, I think it’s important to when we talk about gifted students in general to also understand that giftedness may look different in different populations. So, for example a student who maybe a characteristic would be that they are independent, right? In the dominant culture it may come across as . . . they are motivated and they’re getting their work done . . . . And so, a teacher would go, “Oh wow, that’s a great schoolhouse gifted kind of kid, right?” And then a lot of times in our culturally linguistically diverse students an independent student is someone who may resist authority. Who may have their own way of doing something and is not willing to listen at all. So, giftedness is a sum . . . of multiple different characteristics. It goes beyond just the academics. There’s a social emotional component and even cultural pieces as well. (Gifted coordinator, State 2, 05/16/16)

In summary, gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness as criteria for gifted identification more than anything else, especially cognitive ability. Criteria included all of the following: advanced cognitive ability, high performance, a need, and gifted characteristics. While several gifted teachers and coordinators stressed the requirement for multiple criteria, in several cases advanced cognitive ability was described as giftedness in the absence of performance. This group described ways that giftedness presents that makes it challenging to identify students from underrepresented groups. They also described how they find these students who are not nominated for identification.
Summary

Gifted stakeholder groups described giftedness as differences from same age peers. These differences were described in capacity to learn and reason, performance, needs, and personality characteristics and behaviors. Gifted children have an advanced capacity for learning and reasoning, high cognitive ability or intelligence, learn quickly, and think creatively. Gifted children have high performance and achieve on and above grade level expectations. Gifted children need challenge beyond typical age-based learning environments. They were often sitting and waiting in general education classrooms for age peers to learn what they have already mastered. Finally, gifted children have unique personality characteristics and behaviors. Participants asserted that gifted students were emotionally intense, perfectionists, quirky, have trouble interacting with same age peers, and have unique personalities.

Stakeholder groups all described giftedness as differences from same age peers; however, the frequency of each subtheme varied. Parents described giftedness as a need for challenge beyond typical age-based learning environments more than other stakeholder groups. General education teachers described giftedness as high performance more than other stakeholder groups. Gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness using district and state criteria for gifted identification, stressing ability test scores and potential more than any other group. Gifted teachers and coordinators also discussed underrepresented populations more than other stakeholder group.

In the next chapter, a summary of the findings and how they relate to the literature is discussed. Limitations and recommendations for practice, policy, and future research are presented.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter includes a summary and discussion of the study findings, the relationship of the findings to the literature, and a conclusion. In addition, I present implications and limitations of the study and recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

Summary of Findings

This qualitative study was conducted with stakeholders in K-5 public education. The purpose of the study was to explore stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness. Three stakeholder groups were interviewed for this study, parents of gifted students, general education teachers, and gifted teachers and coordinators. Researchers asked participants one or more questions pertaining to their conceptions of giftedness. I inductively analyzed focus group and individual interview transcripts and one theme and four subthemes emerged.

The main theme was that gifted students were different from their same age peers. Participants described this difference in four key ways: capacity to learn and reason, high level performance, need for challenge, and unique personality characteristics and behaviors. Participants first described giftedness as an advanced capacity to learn and reason; this included advanced cognitive ability, learning faster than peers, and thinking creatively. Next, participants described giftedness as high-level performance on achievement tests or in the classroom. Participants also described giftedness as a need for challenge beyond what they and their peers received in the typical age-based classroom. They described how gifted children often sit and wait in a typical classroom, have a desire to learn, and encounter barriers to meeting their need for challenge. Finally, participants described gifted children as having unique personality characteristics and behaviors. They described how gifted students stand out, display unique emotional responses, and have trouble with social skills.
Stakeholder groups all described giftedness as differences from same age peers using each of the four subthemes; however, their responses exhibited different terminology, frequency, and emphasis. Parents of gifted children described giftedness as a need for challenge more than any other subtheme. Gifted teachers and coordinators described giftedness as an advanced capacity for learning and thinking, stressing cognitive assessments more than any other subtheme. Classroom teachers described giftedness as performance more than any other stakeholder group.

**Discussion of Findings**

Gifted education starts with identifying who is gifted and who requires or would benefit from gifted education services. In schools, various stakeholders determine which child is gifted and which child is not. When conceptions of stakeholders differ, problems may arise; therefore, it is important to understand how stakeholder groups conceptualize giftedness and how those conceptions differ. Students who are eligible for gifted services may be overlooked and students who are not eligible may be nominated, requiring time and resources during the identification process.

When participants were asked what gifted meant to them, they talked about giftedness as though it were a defining trait that a child did or did not have. Participants viewed giftedness as fixed, it was something that children were, not something that children were becoming, or an adjective that described their talents. They talked about giftedness in the terms of gifted children or described a specific gifted child. They relayed that gifted children were different from others, they were unique, odd, quirky, smarter, faster, more able, and needed something more than other kids. To many, it was an impression about a child, to others a certain score on one or more tests.
was required. To some participants, observation of one of the four main subthemes meant a child was gifted, to others the child needed to show all four of the subtheme differences.

**Capacity to Learn and Reason**

One way that gifted children were different from others was their ability to learn and think. Some participants used general terms like smart and bright, some needed a cognitive test to prove to them that a student was intelligent enough, and others just saw potential. To all the participant groups, gifted meant advanced ability. This advanced ability was observable by how gifted students can do things that others of the same age can’t do or what older children would be expected to do. Each characteristic in this subtheme related to high intelligence: great memory, speed of learning, advanced vocabulary, reading at an early age, solving problems in creative ways, finding connections, understanding advanced concepts, responding with complexity, and curiosity; however participants did not necessarily described this using the terminology intelligence, I.Q., or cognitive ability.

**Performance**

Another way that gifted children stood out from their peers was how they performed. This performance was on classroom or standardized math and reading assessments. Participants cited above grade level performance, reading levels above what was expected of age, and percentiles in the 90s as reasons a child is gifted. Some mentioned classroom grades, but usually to relay the message that grades are not always a reliable predictor of giftedness. Teachers and parents both talked about how some gifted children choose not to do homework or assignments but ace tests. One teacher also mentioned that when the straight A students are nominated for gifted identification they are not all necessarily identified. Gifted coordinators also described how students from underrepresented populations can underachieve or have achievement scores
in the 80% tiles but show potential. Gifted coordinators explained that gifted students with disabilities, students in low performing classrooms, students of poverty, students learning English might not show high level performance. This reveals a difference in conceptions between general education teachers and the other stakeholder groups: general education teachers’ conceptions of giftedness were more performance driven than parents and gifted teachers and coordinators.

Performance was a measure of learning. When all the students were taught the same content, the gifted students retained more than their peers, scoring in the high 90% tiles on assessments. Also, when students took a reading test that was adaptive or tests beyond grade level expectations, gifted students scored above what was expected of their age mates. Performance was the evidence of ability to learn.

**Needs Challenge**

Next, participants stated gifted children display a need for challenge that the typical age-based classroom does not provide. Typical age-based classrooms have a bell curve of student ability and cover the prescribed grade level curriculum at the pace of the average student with re-teaching for students who do not learn the content. The typical focus is on every child mastering grade level expectations by the time the end of the year test is given. From what participants said, this is insufficient. Gifted children either already know the majority of the content or master the content with less repetition and time than peers. This leaves them bored, sitting and waiting for peers to finish and move on to the next thing, and desperately wanting to learn. To parents, this is what sets their gifted students apart from others and why they need to be identified. It is reasonable that students’ unhappiness forms parents’ conceptions of giftedness. They need to be
in a learning environment that challenges them. Needing challenge is a symptom of ability to learn.

**Personality Characteristics and Behaviors**

The final difference participants described when describing giftedness was unique personality characteristics and behaviors. These were all the ways that gifted students behaved that made them stand out from their peers. The take away was there are unspoken social norms and the majority of gifted children that were described stood out because they do not abide by these social norms. Most of the characteristics and behaviors relayed trouble with emotional regulation or social interactions. Teachers described characteristics of specific gifted children they had in their class. Parents described their children and characteristics or behaviors that were different from peers. This reveals that parents and general education teachers may develop their conceptions from observing students identified as gifted and teacher rating scales. Gifted teachers and coordinators spoke of gifted behavior scales or checklists but did not list the information on these lists. They were referring to district documents with characteristics to look for when nominating students for gifted identification. These checklists with behaviors may influence gifted teachers and coordinator conceptions of giftedness.

Many of the characteristics or behaviors reported appeared to stem from high intelligence, curiosity, or high expectations. Perfectionism and lack of emotional regulation were mentioned with expectations gifted students put on themselves. Several participants mentioned that gifted students are accustomed to knowing all the answers and when they do not they cannot handle it. Teachers described gifted students as being lazy or not knowing how to work hard or struggle. These behaviors may stem from having an ability that is beyond their peers at a young age, a lack of challenge, and achieving with little effort.
Stakeholder Group Differences

**Parents.** It is apparent that parent conceptions are based on their own children and how their children stand out from other children their age. They notice that their child talked earlier than the other children or used vocabulary that made people’s heads turn. These conceptions could have come from other parents mentioning the difference or observing children at parties, playgrounds, and family gatherings. Giftedness is something that makes the child stand out. Parents also witness their children’s thirst for knowledge at a young age, the bazillion questions, quickly picking up on concepts, excellent memory, and love of learning. They may experience the excitement at anything new, especially school, until they attend school. Ultimately, the child most likely comes home from school bored, starts to tell his or her parent that he or she sits and waits in class, and no longer enjoys school. This most likely is what prompts parents to seek other resources and request testing. Parents want their children to be happy and the older they get, the more their love of learning fades due to lack of challenge. Gifted children, according to parents, need the gifted program, more resources, different curriculum, individualized learning, and challenge. Yes, they are odd; yes, they are smart, but what gifted means to parents is they need a different learning environment. If their children were being challenged in the general education classroom, it is reasonable that they would not need the identification or the label. The label gets a child services, at least for part of his or her time in school.

**General education teachers.** It is reasonable that general education teachers’ conceptions of giftedness revolve around what they observe in the classroom. Their experience with gifted children comes from how gifted students perform compared to others. Therefore, students who rise to the top of the class are viewed as gifted. Several teachers mentioned that high performance did not always translate to grades. When describing classroom performance,
several general education teachers reported that gifted children can be behavior problems but did not always say that they were under challenged. Teachers appeared to value grades, work ethic, taking time on assignments, getting along with others, non-bothersome behavior, and scoring high on achievement tests. General education teachers reported that already identified gifted students could be underachievers or choose not to do certain assignments, but the question is, would these teachers nominate them for gifted identification with these behaviors or are they describing children who already came with the gifted label?

**Gifted teachers and coordinators.** Gifted teachers and coordinators represent a unique population. This group included gifted teachers that started as general education teachers, gifted parents, gifted coaches, gifted specialists, and district level gifted coordinators. What they all had in common was they had additional training in gifted education and experience teaching gifted children. Several of them mentioned that because they were also parents of gifted children it motivated them to teach gifted students. When comparing this group to others, the conceptions of giftedness focused on identification criteria, particularly using cognitive ability tests and finding those students that had potential. However, they also talked about the need for challenge, gifted characteristics and behaviors, and achievement test scores. I think that this group’s conceptions come from multiple places, working with gifted children, the information from gifted courses and trainings, and their own gifted children in some cases. But they are also the staff members in a district that have the job of communicating and upholding gifted identification criteria. Personal conceptions may be that a child has an advanced capacity for learning and thinking, but when the state or district requires a specific score on a cognitive assessment that affects conceptions of what gifted is in that state and district.
Relationship of Findings to the Literature

The findings of this study tended to agree with the literature on teacher conceptions of giftedness. The main theme is that stakeholder groups conceptualize gifted children as different from same age peers. This main finding is consistent with many theorists in gifted education (e.g., Gagné, 1985; Renzulli, 1978; Terman, 1926). Participants consistently described these differences in four subthemes: (a) giftedness is a different level of capacity for learning and reasoning, (b) giftedness is high level performance, (c) giftedness is a need for challenge, and (d) giftedness is unique personality characteristics and behaviors.

The first subtheme participants used to describe gifted children was an advanced level of capacity for learning and reasoning. Participants described above average general ability in alignment with Renzulli’s (1978) Three Ring Conception of giftedness and natural abilities in at least one domain in the top 10% of peers aligning with Gagné’s (1985) Differentiated Model of Giftedness. Gifted teachers and coordinators described aptitude or potential in terms of cognitive assessments and cited specific scores that separated the gifted from the not gifted, this is consistent with teacher descriptions of I.Q. (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Schack & Starko, 1990). These cutoff scores were consistent with Gagné’s top 10% definition and Terman’s (1926) original definition of giftedness, an I.Q. score of 135 or above, or the upper 1%.

Participants also described giftedness as speed of learning. This is consistent with studies by Miller (2009) and Schack and Starko (1990) that reported teachers describe giftedness as learns quickly. A group of teachers spoke specifically about the population of English learners, describing their speed of English acquisition as a gifted trait. This is contradictory to earlier research that found that teachers associate giftedness with extensive vocabulary and facility with the English language and often overlooked English learners (Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer,
This finding is consistent with the report by the National Center for Research on Gifted Education (Gubbins et al., 2018) that recommends using speed of English acquisition as a screener for gifted identification for gifted English learners.

The last category participants described was gifted students think differently from their same age peers. They described that gifted children show out of the box or creative thinking. This is consistent with the literature that teachers describe and characterize gifted children as creative (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Hunsaker, 1994; Miller, 2009; Rohrer, 1995; Schack & Starko, 1990). Creativity as a gifted characteristic also aligns with Renzulli’s (1978) Three Ring Conception of giftedness. Participants also described gifted students as creative problem solvers, analytical, having imagination, and high level thinking, which is consistent with the findings that teachers describe gifted students as having advanced reasoning and thinking skills (Miller, 2009; Moon & Brighton, 2008; Rohrer, 1995).

The second subtheme participants described as a difference between gifted children and their same age peers was high performance. Participants described high-level performance as performance on achievement tests and classroom performance. This description of giftedness is consistent with the literature that teachers associate reading and math performance with giftedness (Brighton et al., 2007; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle et al., 2010; Siegle & Powell, 2004). The descriptions of specific achievement scores are aligned with Gagne’s (1985) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent defining talent as achievement in the top 10% of his or her age peers. Performance was also described as how students perform in the classroom. There was mention of grades, but participants reported that not all gifted students earn all As and that gifted students can be underachievers. This finding does not align to studies that reported completion of classwork influences teachers’ perceptions of giftedness (Brighton et al., 2007; Copenhaver &
McIntyre, 1992; Hunsaker, 1994; Peterson & Margolin, 1997; Rohrer, 1995; Siegle & Powell, 2004). This study did not investigate who teachers nominated or chose to label gifted; the participants simply described giftedness and in some cases, they described identified gifted students in their classes.

The third subtheme that participants described was a need for challenge beyond the typical age-based learning environment. Participants described gifted students sitting and waiting, bored in general education classrooms. These findings are consistent with studies by Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) and Miller (2009) that reported teachers chose needs challenge as a characteristic of giftedness. This finding is also consistent with Reis and colleagues’ (1993) work on curriculum compacting; they found that teachers could eliminate half of the regular curriculum for gifted learners with no change in end of the year achievement in several subjects.

The final subtheme participants used to describe giftedness was unique social emotional and personality characteristics and behaviors. Participants described gifted children as emotionally intense with perfectionistic tendencies. They also described gifted students as quirky with odd behaviors and social issues who preferred to be with like-minded peers. Participants described a desire to learn, curiosity, and a drive. These findings are consistent with Dabrowski’s (1967, 1972) overexcitabilities and a more recent study (Tucker & Haferstein, 1997) that recommends using these excitabilities to identify young gifted children. Lastly, participants described personality traits of gifted students, explaining that even though gifted students have traits similar to each other, they are all unique. This is consistent with what Passow (1993) described, gifted individuals are so diverse, those differences “may preclude a comprehensive theory” (p. 887).
Implications of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness. Stakeholders, especially general education classroom teachers, often nominate students for gifted identification and ultimately gifted programs. Thus, it is important to determine if the conceptions stakeholders have of giftedness are the same or different. This is important information for school district leaders to know to efficiently and effectively find, identify, and serve gifted students. The findings of this study indicate that stakeholder groups (parents of gifted children, general education teachers, and gifted teachers and coordinators) have similar conceptions of giftedness but view, emphasize, and prioritize them differently.

The findings indicate that parents of gifted children emphasize need for challenge over capacity to learn and recognize children’s unique personality characteristics and behaviors. General education teachers emphasize high-level performance on achievement tests above capacity to learn, unique characteristics and behaviors, and need for challenge. General education teachers view their role as teaching the grade level curriculum to all students, especially students needing extra help. Gifted teachers and coordinators emphasize capacity to learn and reason, especially cognitive ability tests and potential. They also include each of the other three subthemes as criteria for gifted identification depending on state identification criteria. Some states require cognitive ability, performance, characteristics, and a need for services and some require cognitive ability, but not characteristics or performance.

Implications for Practice

Based on the finding that parents of gifted children believe their children need challenge beyond the typical learning environment, it is important for school and district gifted staff to utilize this information. Parents have the unique position of knowing when their child is bored or
complaining about sitting and waiting. Parent input is a valuable often untapped resource. Gifted coordinators need to create a systematic way to include parents in the gifted nomination process. District and school staff should disseminate information to parents in multiple ways and languages. Parents should be asked to nominate their children for gifted identification if their child is showing signs of being under challenged.

Based on the finding that parents view giftedness as a need for challenge beyond the typical learning environment and sometimes beyond the gifted program, district and state gifted departments should take a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach to gifted education. Instead of a blanket one size fits every gifted child program, intervention or gifted services should be specific to the child’s individual needs and monitored for effectiveness. Is the child learning and challenged? One teacher mentioned that a gifted child in his or her class scored in the 99%ile on the beginning of the year achievement test. Using a one size fits all gifted program, the child may be pulled from the classroom for enrichment one day a week. Under a RTI model, that child showed a need for enrichment or acceleration in that subject area from the beginning of the school year. A change should be implemented for that child in that subject area and the child should be monitored for growth based on his/her ability, not his/her age. Under this model, general education teachers need professional development to determine when students need additional challenge and curriculum compacting (Reis, Renzulli, & Burns, 2016; Renzulli & Reis, 2014). Gifted teachers should assist with implementing either enrichment or acceleration opportunities.

Based on the finding that gifted teachers and coordinators emphasize capacity to learn and think over performance and reported that cognitive ability screening assessments found students general education teachers did not nominate for gifted identification, universal screening
should be incorporated into the identification process. This universal screening should include various cognitive ability tests and use local norms. Gifted coordinators reported that some gifted students from underrepresented populations, including students from low performing schools and students with disabilities, did not perform at high enough levels on achievement tests for a nomination. Gifted coordinators also reported that looking at achievement scores in the 70 and 80% tiles or the top levels in a student’s ethnicity group aided in finding gifted students from underrepresented groups. It is important to compare students to other students with the same opportunities and environments when looking for ability and talent.

**Implications for Policy**

Based on the findings that stakeholder groups all reported gifted students are very different from one another, more than one pathway to gifted identification needs to be implemented. Stakeholder groups all conceptualize giftedness as advanced capacity to learn and think, high-level performance, and need for challenge that result in unique characteristics and behaviors. I recommend including all of these as identification categories but with an OR, not an AND. If students show a need for challenge beyond what the typical age-based classroom provides they should qualify for gifted education in that school. If students show advanced cognitive ability and ability to learn and think beyond their peers but they are not performing in class, they should qualify for gifted education in that school with additional evaluation as to why they are not achieving. If students are scoring in the top of their class and above average on achievement tests, they should qualify for enrichment or acceleration. The form of gifted education should match the area of need. If a student is achieving in the classroom, advanced content or a faster pace may be needed in that subject area. If a student shows creative thinking ability and interest in an area, he/she should have the opportunity to work on an enrichment
project of choice. If a student shows high cognitive ability, he/she may require more than one of the previous suggestions.

I recommend that all general education teacher preparation programs include one or more courses in gifted education to better recognize and meet the needs of gifted students in a typical age-based classroom. Teacher observations can be useful when teachers are trained to systematically look for student strengths (Harradine et al., 2014).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Due to the gifted characteristics reported by teachers matching popular published behavior rating scales, these scales should be updated to include characteristics of non-majority culture, gifted students. A. Brice and R. Brice (2004) found that 24% of items on teacher rating scales reflected a cultural and linguistic bias. The purpose of gifted characteristics and behaviors scales or checklists (as participants call them) are to recognize advanced capacity to learn and reason. Based on the reports of several gifted coordinators, students of underrepresented groups do not demonstrate the same gifted behaviors and characteristics as students of the dominant culture. I recommend updated, research based, nondiscriminatory checklists or scales be published and schools use them as published.

Based on the review of literature and general education teachers’ conceptions that giftedness is based on performance, I recommend research on the impact of removing teacher nominations from gifted identification procedures. If general education teachers are nominating students based on achievement test scores, gifted coordinators or principals can easily obtain the same achievement and classroom grade data to select students for nomination without requiring general education teachers to start the nomination process. I suggest comparing the
demographics of students nominated by teachers for gifted programs to assessing all the students who have achievement scores in the top 10% of their class and grade level.

Based on the differences in conceptions within general education teachers and gifted teachers and coordinators, I recommend future research on how state identification criteria, number of years’ experience, number of courses in gifted education, and teacher or coordinator demographic factors influence stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness.

The final recommendation for future research is to investigate how stakeholders develop their conceptions of giftedness. Do some sources have a greater influence on conceptions than others? Are conceptions formed more by interactions with gifted students or training?

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study based on the use of data from a larger study. The interview recordings and transcripts were collected as a part of the larger study focusing on different research questions. Although questions were asked about stakeholders’ conceptions of giftedness, it was not the focus of the interviews. Interviewers probed participants on the topic of conceptions of giftedness at times, but I did not have the opportunity to probe as the data were already collected. Therefore, statements about needs or need for challenge were not explored further in the interview to determine specific needs or types of challenge. Also, the interview protocols asked both about conceptual and procedural information. In some cases, participants first described the identification criteria and procedure in the school and also described giftedness. It is possible that descriptions of giftedness related to, or was influenced by procedure and was not the conception of the participant.

Due to the focus group interview format, it is unclear if each stakeholder answered the questions pertaining to characteristics of giftedness. During focus groups, some individuals
participated more than others, meaning that some participants’ opinions were not heard or some participants might have swayed opinions of others. Although there are drawbacks to collecting data from focus group, interviews there are also opportunities to collect data that may otherwise be missed. Focus group interviews allow researchers to interview numerous participants at one time increasing the number of participants in a study. Focus group interviews also allow participants to prompt memories they may not otherwise have remembered if they were interviewed individually.

For this study stakeholder groups were assigned based on the role the participant held in that school, at that time. In some cases, gifted staff were also gifted parents and past classroom teachers. In other cases, general education teachers had taken gifted courses or obtained gifted certification but were considered a classroom teacher by their school. This study compared stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness and the crossover between groups may have impacted results. Each participant’s level of gifted training, years of experience in gifted education, or additional roles were unknown. General education teachers and the gifted education staff may have included parents of gifted children. Parents of gifted children may have included teachers. Teachers may have been gifted staff members at other schools. My assumption was that parents had the least amount of gifted training and gifted teachers and coordinators had the most training, but individuals within each group may have differed significantly in the training they had received.

Another limitation pertaining to trustworthiness is stakeholders were asked to participate by the principal of each school and agreed to participate knowing it was a research study on gifted education practices. It is possible that participants that were chosen had different conceptions of giftedness from those that were not chosen or did not agree to be interviewed.
Similarly, the parent group consisted of parents of gifted students already identified as gifted by the school. Parents of other students or students that were not yet identified were not included in this study and may have different conceptions of giftedness from this group.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore stakeholder groups’ conceptions of giftedness. Stakeholders are seeing different perspectives of the same picture. They all shared differences gifted children have from their same age peers. Parents of gifted children see their children not challenged. General education teachers see the high achievers. Gifted teachers and coordinators see cognitive ability and potential. Schools should ask each stakeholder for information from their perspectives to develop a more complete picture of the child. Find the talent, no matter how it presents itself.
# APPENDIX A: SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS BY STATE

## State 1 School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>1A</th>
<th>1B</th>
<th>1C</th>
<th>1D</th>
<th>1E</th>
<th>1F</th>
<th>1G</th>
<th>1H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>63.7%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced-price Lunch</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
<td>79.8%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## State 2 School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>2A</th>
<th>2B</th>
<th>2C</th>
<th>2D</th>
<th>2E</th>
<th>2F</th>
<th>2G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>83.2%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced-price Lunch</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>99.8%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## State 3 School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>3A</th>
<th>3B</th>
<th>3C</th>
<th>3D</th>
<th>3E</th>
<th>3F</th>
<th>3G</th>
<th>3H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced-price Lunch</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>96.3%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: ABBREVIATED INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

General Education Teacher
  What does “gifted” mean to you?
  How would you describe a gifted child?
  What behaviors and characteristics would suggest to you that a child may be gifted?

Coordinator of Gifted Programs
  How would you describe a gifted child? What do you believe are some positive and some challenging characteristics of gifted students?

Teacher of Gifted Students
  What does “gifted” mean to you?
  How would you describe a gifted child?
  What behaviors and characteristics would suggest to you that a child may be gifted?

Parent/Legal Guardian of Gifted Students
  What does gifted mean to you?
REFERENCES


