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## Supporting Students With Gifted-Talented Potential In High Need Schools: A Portraiture Study

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SUPPORTING GIFTED-TALENTED POTENTIAL IN HIGH NEED SCHOOLS

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH GIFTED TALENTED POTENTIAL  
IN HIGH NEED SCHOOLS: A PORTRAITURE STUDY

by

Anna Zillinger Sheppard

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

OVERVIEW

The inclusive classroom model is celebrated because it encourages the creation of learning environments where all types of students can come together. An inclusive classroom ideally offers a space for students of differing academic levels, physical/mental abilities, and cultural/socio-economic backgrounds to engage in a shared classroom experience. The inclusive classroom model sounds wonderful in theory, but does not always reflect the goal of full inclusivity when put into practice. Schools with greater student need often struggle to support the wide range of skills and abilities their inclusive classrooms reflect, leaving some students without adequate support or challenge to progress at equal rate in comparison with their peers. Test-heavy school environments that primarily focus on getting students to (not beyond) grade level mastery run a great risk of leaving students that have the ability to advance beyond grade-level academic skills unsupported, students that could be considered or identified as Gifted-Talented. Because of my personal and professional experience engaging with students who have Gifted-Talented potential that attend high need schools, my research is centered on the following question - *How are students with Gifted-Talented potential supported in the inclusive classroom model when it is implemented in high need public schools?*

Students who are not prioritized in inclusive classroom settings often experience opportunity gaps, i.e. “the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities” (Abbott, 2013, para. 3) that can disable or delay their personal, social, academic and/or creative growth. Opportunity gaps presented by lack of resources and educator support have very real impacts - those gaps can delay academic progress and stifle future potential. All students should

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be given equal opportunity to succeed at a rigor that suits their skill level and potential, including those that could be considered or formally categorized as "Gifted-Talented."

Gifted-Talented potential often cannot be defined by one specific behavior or determined by any single test. Students from differing family and cultural environments express skills and potential in different ways. The definition of Gifted-Talented potential utilized in this capstone integrates two perspectives: a theory commonly referenced in K-6 education from Joseph Renzulli titled "Ingredients of Giftedness" and a relatively uncommon theory created by Kazimierz Dąbrowski's titled "Overexcitabilities." Renzulli's three "Ingredients of Giftedness" are 1) above-average ability, 2) task commitment and 3) creativity (Marland 1972 as cited in Renzulli, 2011, p. 81). Dąbrowski described overexcitabilities as "higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested either by psychomotor, sensual, emotional (affective), imaginal, or intellectual excitability, or combination thereof" (Dąbrowski, 1972, p. 301). My research focuses on high need schools and students who exhibit qualities Renzulli and Dąbrowski defined as Gifted-Talented potential in those contexts. High need public schools – in this case, "schools located in an areas where at least 30 percent of students come from families with incomes below the poverty line" (No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2002) - have both a great amount of student need and a great amount of student potential. Both need and potential should be accommodated equally in the public school classroom.

I personally attended a high need elementary school and was part of a specialized program for Gifted-Talented students offered there. I received an appropriate level of challenge and support that allowed me to achieve at an advanced level, ensuring my success in future educational and professional settings despite all odds presented to students coming from contexts of lower socio-economic status. I worry that many students with Gifted-Talented potential are not

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provided that level of challenge and opportunity in high need schools today. The most noticeable difference in public education from my time as a student and my time as an educator is the shift from specialized programs to the inclusive classroom model. I hoped through this research to gain a deeper understanding of the potential and pitfalls of the inclusive classroom model when implemented in high need schools, so I can better advocate for the model that best serves students with Gifted-Talented potential.

### PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I come from an economically disadvantaged community on the west side of Indianapolis. One of my earliest school memories involves taking an assessment to attend a Gifted-Talented elementary school program offered to the students from lower income areas of the city. I recall this specific test as one that was particularly stressful at a very young age. If you passed the test, you could attend a great program with veteran teachers and rigorous opportunities for study. If you did not pass the test, you would be placed in one of the low-achieving public schools in the area. Thankfully, I passed the test and was able to attend. This program changed my life and learning trajectories for many other children. I would not be who I am today without it.

My years in elementary school coincided with one of the few times in public school history that educators were making great strides in serving Gifted-Talented students, particularly those coming from disadvantaged communities. At that time Gifted-Talented was defined by 1) above-average ability, 2) task commitment and 3) creativity (Marland 1972 as cited in Renzulli, 2011, p. 81) – the Renzulli definition of advanced potential. Specialized classes for students identified as Gifted-Talented were offered in public school districts as an outcome of recommendations from the National Commission on Excellence in Education report titled *A*

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*Nation at Risk* (United States, 1983, p. 32). These specialized programs increased considerably in the United States during the 1980s, but began to decrease in the following decade.

In the 1990s, parents and educators started to critique the specialized offerings for Gifted-Talented students. They expressed concern about the identification process and funding, ultimately making the case that public education was “playing favorites” by providing specialized services to students who expressed a need for greater challenge (Sapon-Shevin, 1994, p. 14). As advocacy for an inclusive classroom model increased, specialized programs for Gifted-Talented students decreased - even in areas where programs proved successful for meeting various student needs.

Teachers that lead inclusive classrooms have expressed concerns about the challenges of meeting the needs of a much wider range of students (Robinson, 2003b, p. 322). Through the sharing of teachers’ experiences and reflections, there can be greater understanding of how Gifted-Talented students in high need public schools are supported – allowing for either improvement of the inclusive classroom model or justification to change classroom practices to ensure that all students’ educational needs are being met. My professional experience as a teacher influenced me to bring the voice of teachers to the forefront of this research.

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Throughout my four years of teaching, I typically experienced student mastery levels ranging from four years below to two years above grade level competencies. In all school environments, I found myself pushed by administration to focus my energies on students with lagging academic and socio-emotional skills, which meant at- or above-grade level students were



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rarely given adequate whole group, small group or individualized support. It was a constant struggle to find the time to support all students – creatively, socially, and academically.

I observed many students with Gifted-Talented potential struggling with boredom and frustration as much of the support went to their below-grade level peers. It was not surprising for me to discover in research that the repeat provision of inadequate resources for this specific demographic of Gifted-Talented students (i.e. students from high need contexts) leads to them struggling socially and emotionally well beyond their years of required schooling (Robinson, 2003, p. 252). Even at a young age, resentment and frustration is clearly felt by these students; one can only imagine how significantly years of that experience can shape a young person's perspective on academic success.

My professional experience varied quite a bit over time. I taught fifth grade, then first grade. I supported kindergarten small groups as a part of literacy intervention. I served as a Movement Specialist for kindergarten through fifth grade. I guided first grade reading in small groups as part of a co-teaching model. Outside of licensed positions, I taught preschool for three years and offered educational support services in libraries for seven years. Because of my dedication to serving communities similar to the one I came from, a majority of that work was in high need schools and involved supporting disadvantaged communities.

All of those professional contexts had a shortage of resources and staff to meet the needs presented by their students. I am addressing “need” in a very broad way in this capstone, as most of the needs students present in schools require additional resources and staff: academic, social, emotional, and situational. Throughout my years of teaching, I observed significant delays in assessment and a number of needs not being accurately assessed. When need is not assessed and recognized, the funds that could support that need cannot be allotted. In those cases, there are not

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enough people or resources to make the classroom environment as productive and/or calm as it could or should be. When that experience is paired with the pressure of proving student success through test scores, it is easy for important things – such as meeting those various needs - to become deprioritized. Experiencing that common combination of pressure for teachers in high need schools, I too felt like an ineffective teacher and experienced a great amount of guilt because of it. All students in the classroom deserve a meaningful and supportive education; I was not providing that to them.

All of these schools had data-driven culture or school culture that focused solely on passing national and statewide tests. Every professional development session focused on analyzing data and increasing effectiveness for getting students to pass. I would have taught very differently if I were not always asked to focus my lens on students who were almost testing at grade level, i.e. the “bubble kids.” I found it very difficult to teach to that group of students with fidelity while also prioritizing students at- or above-grade level. Additionally, finding time for students to explore self-expression and creativity in the context of many of these schools was almost impossible. That is not to say there were not some successes in meeting the needs of all students at the same time, but those moments were, honestly, few and far between.

I found that small groups were a more successful strategy for meeting a wider range of academic need than whole group study. Whole group study often meant teaching to one level, not the five or six required to offer equivalent challenge for each student. Small groups would at least allow me offer the appropriate pace and rigor to two or three different levels of students. Unfortunately, it was very difficult for me to ensure student success in the independent, computer-led, or paraprofessional-led small groups; students would get off-task and sometimes needed more teacher support.

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All schools in my career involved classrooms that not only had academic needs, but also social-emotional needs. Without teacher presence, independent reading circles might involve a student kicking a chair over because another student bumped into them; an independent group project could lead to a yelling match between two students about something that happened on the bus. Leadership in the schools commonly discussed these behaviors as outcomes of students experiencing stressors that are a byproduct of growing up in contexts without adequate resources. Regardless of understanding or empathy towards the experience, psychological and social-emotional support that many students needed could not be provided by the school. Those experiences and emotional expressions came up often through the school day. Many teachers talk about the feeling of “putting out fires all day.” That was my experience, as well.

As a teacher, I felt pulled in so many directions and had to address so many different needs at one time. My conversations with professional peers throughout my time serving in schools reflected that same frustration. This research is an extension of those conversations in hopes of gaining a more nuanced understanding of that experience by exploring successes and failures, strategies and barriers.

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

I interviewed teachers with multiple years of varied experience to understand how they are meeting the educational and social-emotional needs of students in high need schools, particularly those with Gifted-Talented potential. Most of the teachers served at schools that lacked assessments for identifying students as Gifted-Talented. Because of that limitation, my research focused on Gifted-Talented potential, i.e. students who might be able to express those advanced skills or competencies without being formally identified. I believe with a greater

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understanding of how teachers are or are not providing for students with Gifted-Talented potential (regardless of formal identification), there is the opportunity to influence positive change that could ensure their future personal, social, academic and professional success. My objective in writing this capstone was to analyze the current system of educational services so that we may provide greater, more equitable learning opportunities to all students regardless of the neighborhoods and circumstances they come from. I was provided an opportunity to succeed; every child deserves that same opportunity.

The remainder of the report includes the following chapters – Literature Review, Research Methods, Results and Conclusion. The Literature Review explores the current educational context the teachers and students in high need inclusive classrooms exist within; the review focuses on identifying and assessing student need, current testing methods and outcomes, barriers to receiving equal education and defining student potential. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's *Portraiture*, the research method for this report, is outlined in the Research Methods chapter, providing justification for the use of the method to better support bringing the voice of teachers to the forefront of this discussion. The Results chapter reviews the information analyzed through the *Portraiture* method, identifying the similarities and differences of opinions expressed by the teachers interviewed. The Conclusion chapter weaves together the information from all previous chapters and advocates for meaningful outcomes related to the information presented through the report.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### OVERVIEW

Four primary topics of research were determined to help answer the question - *“How are students with Gifted-Talented potential supported in the inclusive classroom model when it is implemented in high need public schools?”* Those themes are: 1) Gifted-Talented Identification, 2) The Achievement Gap and the Impact on Gifted-Talented Students, 3) Impediments to the Identification of Gifted-Talented Students, and 4) Defining Gifted-Talented Behavior and Potential. The research in this review focuses primarily on students from lower-income communities; cultural/racial differences and disparities will be addressed intersectionally, but not separately in the context of this report.

#### GIFTED-TALENTED IDENTIFICATION

The most common means for schools to identify Gifted-Talented students is through a combination of standardized tests and aptitude tests that show the “ability to perform well in a particular situation or domain” (Lohman, 2005, p. 333). Schools often rely on aptitude tests that have students present skills in existing competencies. This practice inevitably favors students whose families have more support and resources to provide practice in skills valued by formal school settings (Lohman, 2005, p. 335).

Standardized tests offered to all students annually allow for some identification of students through analysis of achievement in formal academic subjects; an additional test is required if one is to assess for academic or creative potential (National Society for the Gifted & Talented, 2015, para.1). There are varying opinions as to whether these specialized tests are

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effective at identifying all students who express or have the potential to express Gifted-Talented attributes or skills (to be explored at length later in this chapter). Some educational advocates believe the variables that make achievement gaps a reality are the same factors that affect identification and support of students with Gifted-Talented potential in high need schools; those variables being institutionalized racism and classism (Elhoweris, 2008, p. 35). Because of that, it is important to further explore achievement gaps and the impact those gaps have on students with Gifted-Talented potential.

### ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND THE IMPACT ON GIFTED-TALENTED STUDENTS

The “achievement gap” as a concept originated in the 1966 publication of the “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (referred to as the Coleman Report) that was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (Coleman, 1966, p. 27). This report highlighted the disparities of educational provisions within and outside of school that shape students’ success. Since that time, researchers and educators have applied the concept of the achievement gap to categories of identification such as socio-economic status and race (Lee, 2006, p. 6).

The factors that account for students not being identified and supported as Gifted-Talented are the same factors that shape the lack of support for students from limited Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds and students of color – lowered expectations that are a byproduct of class/race based prejudices (Elhoweris, 2008, p. 35). These lowered expectations influence everything from budgets to parent-teacher communication to classroom management. The term “achievement gap” refers to the difference of academic performance or *achievement* between groups of students, most commonly between high-income and low-income students or white students and students of color (Murphy, 2010, p. 3).

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If a student has a skill-set beyond that of their grade level peers, their scores often stagnate or fall when placed in high need contexts (Robinson, 2003, p. 251). High need schools are less likely to be provided rigorous curricula and are less likely to have qualified, committed teachers guiding student development (Burney, 2008, p. 302). Common forms of instruction for children at high need schools are “low-level, drill-and-kill practice of mundane, uninteresting, and un-motivating learning tasks... [students are not] exposed to or given the opportunity to explore their ability to be creative, critical, or analytical” (Callahan, 2005, p. 99). As students who have Gifted-Talented potential are placed in these contexts year after year, educators observe diminished confidence and decreased motivation. (Robinson, 2003, p. 267). It is important to discuss why students are not identified as Gifted-Talented and what impedes the process of receiving the advanced support they need.

## IMPEDIMENTS TO THE IDENTIFICATION OF GIFTED-TALENTED STUDENTS

Alexinia Young Baldwin who wrote “Identification Concerns and Promises for Gifted Students of Diverse Populations” puts into question the use of IQ scores and similar intelligence-based evaluations to receive accommodations for Gifted-Talented potential (2005, p. 106). Acknowledging that many evaluations assess existing skills rather than potential skills, she calls for assessments based on behavioral characteristics as the means to identify Gifted-Talented students (Baldwin, 2005, p. 111). Pointing to the work of educational pioneer Lev Vygotsky, Baldwin highlights the need for identification on the basis of a student’s “zone of proximal development” – the assumed potential to express skills, not simply identification of skills already expressed (Baldwin, 2005, p. 110).

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There are many personal, structural and institutional barriers that shape the educational experience for students coming from disadvantaged communities. These barriers limit the acquisition and expression of competencies that allow for Gifted-Talented potential to be recognized through traditional sources of assessment (Pierce, Adams, Neumeister, Cassady, Dixon, & Cross, 2007, p. 113). When students grow up in a cultural context that differs from the perceived educational “norm” (i.e. middle class, mainstream, white), their differing learning styles and behaviors present a challenge for teachers attempting identify their Gifted-Talented potential or accomplishment. Offering a more expansive perspective on Gifted-Talented potential allows more students have their unique capabilities and talents recognized.

## DEFINING GIFTED-TALENTED BEHAVIOR AND POTENTIAL

Joseph Renzulli - current director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented – developed a three-ring model of giftedness in 1978. His model presents a Venn diagram titled “ingredients of giftedness.” Those three ingredients are 1) above-average ability, 2) task commitment and 3) creativity. The diagram presents a traditional understanding of gifted-talented expression and shaped many Gifted-Talented programs in the United States at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see also Diagram A p.11).

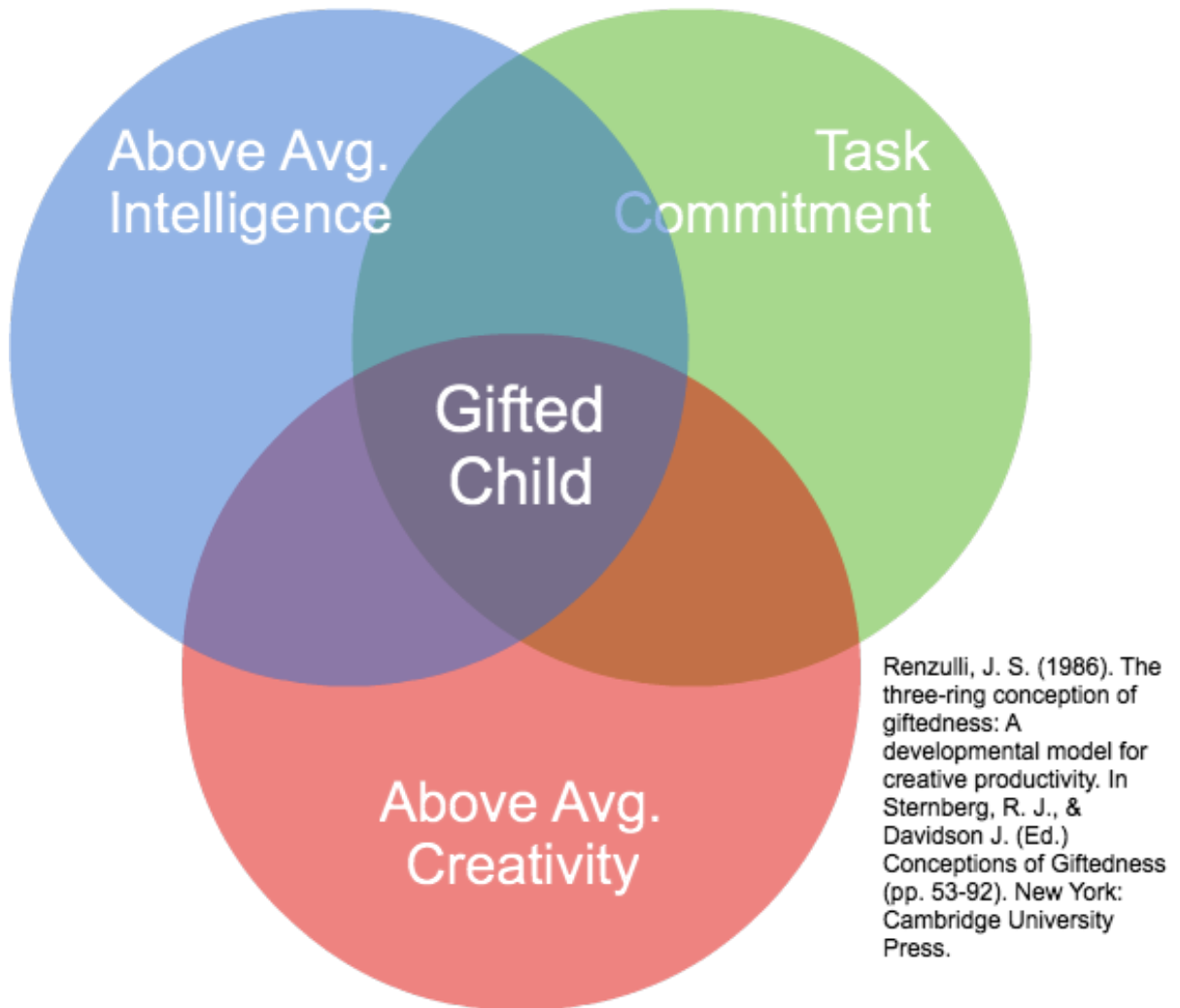
Renzulli stated that children capable of expressing gifted behavior tend exhibit the following abilities or capacities:

- 1) general intellectual ability, 2) specific academic aptitude, 3) creative or productive thinking, 4) leadership ability, 5) visual and performing arts aptitude, 6) psychomotor ability (Marland 1972 as cited in Renzulli, 2011, p. 81).



Renzulli (2011) once said, “It is important to point out that no single cluster (on the diagram) makes ‘giftedness.’ Rather, it is the interaction among the three clusters that research has shown to be the necessary ingredient for (being) creative/productive.” (p. 81)

DIAGRAM A



A theorist that offers more expansive perspective on Gifted-Talented potential is Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1902 – 1980). He was a Polish psychologist, psychiatrist and physician.

Dąbrowski is known primarily for his psychological theory titled “Positive Disintegration.”

Dąbrowski (1972) wrote:

Each individual has his own special kind of developmental potential. This developmental potential is individually and concretely coupled with a form (or forms) and level of excitability or psychoneuroses, or both, in a set which is for the most part positive but not without its characteristic developmental danger. (p. 210)

It is stated by contemporary researchers that Dąbrowski’s work provides a theoretical base for: 1) recognizing aspects of personality development in the gifted and 2) reframing characteristics that often are viewed as annoying and troublesome as essential aspects of gifted individuals’ developmental potential (Susan Daniels as cited in Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 263). Dąbrowski’s theory revolved around the concept that psychoneurotic behavior is an indicator of outstanding potential and when that exaggerated or *overexcitable* behavior is channeled, a person of any age could achieve a higher level psychological functioning and personal success.

Dąbrowski’s theory offers viewpoints that frame difficult student behaviors in a more positive light. In an ideal application of his work, the viewpoints could help mitigate outcomes of lowered expectations for students from disadvantaged communities and inspire a new understanding of student potential. Dąbrowski defined Overexcitabilities as “higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested either by psychomotor, sensual, emotional (affective), imaginal, or intellectual excitability, or combination thereof” (Dąbrowski, 1972, p. 301). Dąbrowski broke down the concept of Overexcitabilities into five specific types of

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Overexcitabilities. Listed below are the types of Overexcitabilities and their primary expressions, stated by Dąbrowski (as cited in Daniels & Piechowski, 2009):

- Psychomotor: surplus of energy, psychomotor expression of emotional tension
- Sensual: enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure, sensual expression of emotional tension
- Intellectual: intensified curiosity of the mind, penchant for probing questions and problem solving, and reflective
- Imaginational: free play of imagination, capacity for living in a world of fantasy (dramatization), spontaneous imagery of an expression of emotional tension (mixing truth and fiction), low tolerance for boredom
- Emotional : feelings and emotions intensified, strong somatic expressions, strong affective expressions, capacity for strong attachments + deep relationships, well-differentiated feelings toward self. (p. 21-22)

The overexcitabilities often exist in combination - with two or more excitabilities expressing at the same time. A student who has Intellectual-Sensorimotor-Emotional Overexcitabilities will typically struggle in a highly structured classroom even though they have the ideal orientation for staying curious, active, and invested their work. These students are common in every classroom and exemplify the correlation between overexcitability and Gifted-Talented potential.

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### SUMMARY

Defining the understanding of Gifted-Talented potential through the work of Renzulli and Dąbrowski helps frame the discussion of services to Gifted-Talented student in the high need school setting. Reflecting on how students with Gifted-Talented potential are perceived, identified and supported will help researchers examine if those educational mindsets and services are effective for supporting all students. Perceiving the barriers of access to education for students from high need communities encourages more expansive perspectives on educational support and success. These themes included in the literature review will shape every aspect of this research – creating the context for exploring how we support Gifted-Talented students in high need schools and how we can improve services for those students.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

OVERVIEW

Five teachers currently serving in high need urban schools were interviewed about their support of students with Gifted-Talented potential. I taught with all five teachers at some point in my professional career. I selected them because of their dedication to supporting the unique needs of every single student. Having that familiarity with their work in the classroom, I wanted to include their voices as I knew they could speak of successes they had in the midst of very challenging circumstances. I find their work inspiring and believe it will be inspiring to others.

Their participation in this project provided detailed descriptions of educational services and made clear some potential progress or pitfalls in the implementation of the inclusive education model when serving students in high need schools. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, then analyzed and organized by way of Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's research design method titled *Portraiture*. The process and outcomes allowed for greater understanding of the experience of teachers and can encourage duplication of successful practices or improved services for Gifted-Talented students in high need inclusive classroom settings. The goal was to provide a nuanced and meaningful exploration to answer the question - "*How are students with Gifted-Talented potential supported in the inclusive classroom model when it is implemented in high need public schools?*" With that information, we can potentially increase the implementation of successful classroom methods and address the many different barriers encountered when attempting to address a wide range of student need.

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### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is “a means for exploring the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). This qualitative research project gave teachers an opportunity to ascribe meaning to the services they provide for a wide range of students and a forum to discuss problems they aim to solve with strategies and support throughout their school day. The teachers interviewed were encouraged to discuss the various classroom situations they encountered in detail and to reflect on how students with Gifted-Talented potential were supported under their leadership. Teachers had the opportunity to reflect on any previous year of teaching and any student behavior that was of interest to this study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for an expansive exploration of this topic.

### DATA COLLECTION METHOD: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The interview process was semi-structured and took place in informal settings. Each participant was asked a specific set of predetermined questions (see also: Appendix A) and an unlimited number of unplanned questions with the goal of creating a well-rounded and detailed narrative of teachers’ experiences and perspectives. By definition, a semi-structured interview:

...includes a list of questions or topics to be addressed by all participants  
(and)... is only semi-structured in that the researchers can change the order of questions, omit questions or vary the wording of the questions... also add other questions during the interview to probe unexpected issues that emerge (Lodico, Spaulding, Voegtle, 2006, p. 32)

Interviews were scheduled with enough time for the questioning process to be semi-exhaustive; the conversation rested only when it seemed there was no further information to

glean. Teachers were interviewed separately, each in the comfort of their own home. The interviews typically took two to three hours. They were recorded on a laptop computer then transcribed verbatim. Upon the completion of the interviews, data was analyzed and organized by way of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's research design titled *Portraiture*.

### RESEARCH DESIGN: PORTRAITURE

*Portraiture* focuses on “narrative and analysis...(with) explicit recognition of the uses of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, "Art and science" n.d., para. 1). Five elements that define the Portraiture method are: *Context*, *Voice*, *Relationship*, *Emergent Themes*, and *Aesthetic Whole*. All elements will be applied in the context of this capstone.

When developing the research, there were three types of *Context* to take into consideration – personal, historical, and internal. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) stated,

Personal context is evident as the experiential repertoire of the artist or researcher, historical context places the portrayal in a setting that transcends the limits of aesthetic space, and internal context comprises the contextual details included within the aesthetic space (p. 74)

This research design differs from others in the unique use of the researcher's *Voice*. Traditional research often involves a distanced and a more objective perspective where Portraiture involves a different strategy. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) once stated about the role of the researcher that “...(h)er perspective, her questions, and her insights are inevitably shaped by.... profound developmental and autobiographical experiences” (p. 95). In Portraiture, there is

no need for a researcher to separate from the internal motivations that keep a researcher dedicated to the work; the voice and personal experiences of the researcher are of great value and have the possibility to provide greater insights through application of those understandings in questions presented throughout the research.

The natural extension of voice is *Relationship*. The element of *Relationship* in the Portraiture method refers to the radical notion presented by Lawrence-Lightfoot that (research relationships) “are complex, fluid, symmetric and reciprocal... (reflecting) a more responsible ethical stance... likely to yield deeper data and better social science” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, “Relationship” n.d., para. 4). Relationship guides the interviews and ultimately supports the discovery and exploration of the *Emergent Themes*.

*Emergent Themes* address the aspect of the work that involves “scrutinizing the data, searching for convergent threads, illuminating metaphors, and overarching symbols, and... constructing coherence” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, “Emergent Themes” n.d., para 1). There are observable patterns or contradictions that bring clarity to the research topic and allow one to gain true perspective on the current circumstance. Though the emergent themes differ from each other, they are used together to structure the *Aesthetic Whole*.

The *Aesthetic Whole* is where the four former components – context, voice, relationship, emergent themes - come together, “creating a gestalt... weaving the complete tapestry... (developing) a rich portrayal that will have resonance with three audiences” : the actors, the readers, and the portraitist (Lawrence-Lightfoot, “Aesthetic Whole” n.d., para 4). Aesthetic Whole will ideally make the current experiences of the inclusive classroom more transparent for all those contributing to and connecting with the research.



### DATA ANALYSIS

Transcripts of the interviews were read five times and analyzed for five emergent themes, as prescribed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot in the development of her *Portraiture* research method. Those five themes added significant structure to the narrative. The weaving of the voices together through those themes created a strong understanding of the high need inclusive classroom and how we can better serve the students that exist within it. American sociologist Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) stated that the researcher (should see individuals) “as knowledge bearers, as rich resources (and) the best authorities on their own experience” (p. 141). In bringing forward the voices of teachers, the research makes apparent the value that their voices and experiences retain.

Once the interviews were collected and read five times, the five emergent themes were established: *Identification, Testing / Evaluation, Support, Failure, and Success*. These emergent themes were determined through discovering repeat topics and language in the teachers' responses – the teachers repeatedly came back to these five themes regardless of the questions asked. My process discovering those five themes was reading intensive. I read the transcriptions three times without highlighting any text. The fourth reading I took notes of words that came up in every interview – collecting fifteen potential themes. On the final reading, I circled the words that directly related to those themes in each of the transcriptions. The top five potential themes were determined based on their greater frequency of those terms in the transcriptions. The transcripts were read an additional five times to identify and aggregate quotes related to those five themes. I used specific color of marker for each theme and underlined the related statements. Some statements addressed two or more themes, so their color-coding reflected that.

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After the related quotes were aggregated, they were then sorted according to the sphere of influence: Classroom, School/Network/Institution/District, and Political/Structural/Status Quo. The sorted interview data was then merged together by copying the quotes from the original typed transcripts and pasting them on a new digital document according to both theme and sphere of influence. This reflected the voice of the five teachers coming together to address experiences and practices related to each of the five themes.

### SUMMARY

This research method is unique and offers a flexible, responsive means for collecting data. Though someone could duplicate the general structure of the process, it would be impossible to duplicate the specific process of this and any other Portraiture method previously implemented. Portraiture states that the *Voice* of the researcher is distinctive and included, that the *Emergent Themes* are determined after the interviews are complete, and that the *Aesthetic Whole* is dependent on the unique context and narratives brought forward by those interviewed. Much of the Portraiture method happens in the process of research; the objective of the method is to bring unique voices into more significant discussions without assuming the outcome.

Chapter 4

Results

OVERVIEW

The results reflect a summary of information provided by participants to answer the question - “*How are students with Gifted-Talented potential supported in the inclusive classroom model when it is implemented in high need public schools?*” It was a very intensive process to narrow the collected information into the five themes and to produce summaries based on information related to those themes. *Portraiture* guided the process by offering structure to the aggregation of data collected. The method also offered a mindset that allowed for me to honor the voice of teachers; the recommendations of meeting teachers in a comfortable space and giving a generous amount of time to engage encouraged deep, documented listening. I was able to glean more personal and insightful information by offering teachers a space to reflect in depth. The philosophy and structure of *Portraiture* allowed for a broad exploration of this topic.

The five teachers interviewed provided information about their experience in the profession, the types of schools they worked for, the types of students they worked with, and their reflections on the support of students who expressed higher level academic skills / creative potential. I have informally observed each of these teachers at some point in their professional work as a professional peer, will acknowledge candidly that they are all professionals with student-centered mindsets and are stakeholders in improving educational services in our highest need communities and schools. They do not take their professional commitments lightly – they are reflective and continually strive to increase their effectiveness. After years of teaching, these teachers are acutely aware of their strengths and limitations; they are also aware of institutional strengths and limitations that impact their work. All participants were provided the same

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structured questions and understood that additional unstructured questions would be asked in case more clarification or elaboration was needed. The interviews reflected a comparable amount of depth and detail around the topic of serving students with gifted-talented potential in high need inclusive classroom contexts.

### THE TEACHERS

Teacher A is in her eleventh year of teaching; she has always taught in a high need schools. Her first four years were in St. Louis, Missouri public schools, teaching sixth and ninth grade. She moved to Minnesota where she taught sixth, kindergarten and fourth grade students in North Minneapolis and Columbia Heights, Minnesota. She continues her work as a fourth grade teacher in Columbia Heights. She has never worked in a school that formally tested and identified students as Gifted-Talented.

Teacher B started her teaching career as a Gifted-Talented Coordinator in a K-5 high need school setting in St. Paul - identifying kids and then also working with students already identified. She also taught kindergarten in North Minneapolis for four years. The last few years she has been teaching second grade; pull out intervention for fourth, fifth and second grade; and kindergarten at a charter school in Columbia Heights, Minnesota. She continues to teach kindergarten at that same school.

Teacher C taught at a high need charter school in Palo Alto, California as a fifth and sixth grade classroom teacher, then served as a fourth grade literacy teacher. After that, she worked as a student-teacher in four high need schools around the bay area. She then moved to Minnesota and worked at a high need charter school in South Minneapolis teaching fourth grade, kindergarten

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and technology. She currently teaches technology for kindergarten-fourth grade in South Minneapolis. She has never worked in a school that formally tested and identified students as Gifted-Talented.

Teacher D started out her teaching career as an education assistant in a pregnant and parenting school in the suburbs of the Twin Cities. She taught in North Minneapolis with third through eighth graders in special education and general education classrooms. She worked in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota teaching sixth through eighth grade. She mostly recently served kindergarten through sixth grade students at an elementary school in St Paul, continues in that position at this time. All schools she worked at were designated as high need settings. She has never worked in a school that formally tested and identified students as Gifted-Talented.

Teacher E worked at a middle school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; an elementary school in St. Paul, Minnesota; and an elementary school in South Minneapolis, Minnesota. The school in St. Paul offered a Gifted-Talented program within the context of a high need school where they identified students and provided differentiated work through an advanced curriculum. She currently works at a high achieving, high need charter school and teaches second grade.

## FIVE EMERGENT THEMES

The five emergent themes were determined based on the topics and reflections that came up in each of the conversations. Though these teachers all agreed services and support for students expressing Gifted-Talented potential could be improved, they all provided different reasons and routes for improving those services and supports. The five emergent themes that reflect their insights are: *Identification, Testing/Evaluation, Support, Failure and Success.*

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### THEME ONE: IDENTIFICATION

All teachers in this study communicated their disappointment about the lack of means to identify, develop and support students with Gifted-Talented potential and overexcitable behaviors. Three out of five of the teachers (A, B, D) had never worked at a school that intentionally assessed, identified and supported students with Gifted-Talented potential. Teacher B served as the Gifted-Talented coordinator at a high need school, but the program cut one year after the implementation of the program.

All interviewed teachers mentioned that students who express higher skill level or potential in academic subjects are more readily identified as “advanced” or “excelling.” All teachers mentioned students that independently taught themselves to achieve mastery multiple grades beyond their formal education; students who could grasp material the first time they were exposed to the skill or relevant details. Teachers shared that students expressing advanced skill in academic subjects were not called Gifted-Talented and were not always given support to expand their knowledge beyond the grade level material taught whole group in the inclusive classroom environment. This was true for all teachers.

Three teachers (A, C, D) mentioned they had students who were very successful in the classroom, but their test results did not reflect that. Because giftedness and overexcitability vary in their expression dependent on the quality and type of skill they reflect, how students express those qualities is varied as well. All teachers noted that tests do not allow students to express understanding in different ways; tests are typically multiple choice, closed-ended questions. All teachers lamented that many skills that qualify students as Gifted-Talented programs are rarely taught, assessed or celebrated in many high need schools. Teacher A and D noted that students

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can be placed the incorrectly for small group study and then often act out in those groups due to boredom.

All teachers in this study expressed concern that overexcitable students who have Gifted-Talented potential would be seen as “problems” since their behaviors typically make them stand out in comparison to their grade level peers –either expressing overexcitable behavior when engaging on topics of interest (loud exclamations, increased chatter or movement) or defiant behavior when they were not offered adequate challenge (attention seeking or corrective behavior). Depending on the school culture and the overarching narratives/examples of leadership, a child would be supported and/or diagnosed in accordance with the prevailing pedagogical themes. If there is a tendency to over-identify students as receivers of Special Education, overexcitable students often will be moved that direction over any other. Though those services are meant to help a student be more successful, all teachers in this study said the tracking (or placing students on a specific and stable academic track) and lowered expectations as a result of tracking often leads to the students being provided less academic challenge than they want or need. Teachers B and E were dismayed at the thought that a student with Gifted / Talented potential could be severely limited by a misdiagnosis of this kind.

On a political / structural level, all teachers in this study pushed back on repeatedly on the over-testing / over-evaluating environment of many urban high need public schools today. They mentioned how contradictory it is to have such high pressure without adequate support – support that many of the decisions makers already know is desperately needed, but do not provide. Teacher A mentioned that test-taking is not an innate skill. Teacher B lamented that children are expected to be good at it from day one.

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There are many personal and social barriers related to assessments that cause schools to inadvertently overlook some pretty significant skills, motivation and potential in students from more culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As Teacher B mentioned, if the end goal is to lift students who are behind and support them through college – we have to provide the additional resources and opportunities. It cannot simply be equal – it has to be equitable. If the students have less, they should be provided more - more opportunities to show their potential and more opportunities to succeed.

### THEME TWO: TESTING / EVALUATION

Testing is a daily occurrence in the classroom. Subject-based formative assessments and curriculum and/or statewide summative assessments take up a significant amount of educational time. In elementary schools, the tests prioritize reading and mathematics. All teachers interviewed all expressed concern that the tests do not capture – therefore validate and affirm – skills that go beyond the test: science, arts, communication, research, critical thinking, etc. Teachers A, B, and C stated that tests often do not even effectively assess mastery in the subject or strategies they were designed to test; all teachers in this study stated at some point (or even multiple points in their interview) that “mastery can be expressed in a number of different ways” – papers, presentations, experiments, performances. Multiple-choice testing rarely catches the subtleties of deeper skills and understandings. But computer tests and written tests both have their drawbacks in assessing mastery – for example, Teacher B stated “computer tests feel like a game” or Teacher D stated “written tests lead to exhaustion.” There is no perfect option to offer all students. All teachers mentioned they have to teach test taking as a skill and message the



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importance of a never ending stream of tests; they do not want students disinvested in test-taking, because it is unlikely that this model of educational evaluation go away.

All teachers in this project repeatedly advocated for more effective methods of continuous assessment. They wanted fluid groupings of students to differentiate instruction for varying levels of students mastery in each subject, unit, or lesson. They cited small groups as the most successful way to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Teacher B emphasized the importance of changing groups frequently depending on skill sets related to specific lessons – especially in math. They all advocated for changing dynamics and routines of the group so more students could have chances to shine.

When viewing testing / evaluation on a school, institution or district level – all teachers felt strongly that they were pushed by the prevailing leadership to define student achievement in a singular definable way – completely relative to the tests that determine school funding and success on state and federal levels. All teachers noted that students take a number of tests as soon as they are in school – commonly mentioning Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test and typically curriculum-based and/or standards-based assessments. The MAP tests are taken three times a year in three subject areas: Language, Reading and Math. In Minnesota, the statewide tests taken from third through twelfth grade are called the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA). MCA test are taken once a year in three subjects: Mathematics, Reading and Science. Because of the number of tests and so much school support being tied to them, all of the schools where the teachers served were very data driven. Teachers A and C had experienced a peer or a group of peers being “reamed” on the basis of inadequate test scores. Teacher evaluations are closely tied to the test.

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All teachers articulated many concerns for students who are at or above grade level stating those students rarely receive additional class time to focus on developing increasingly difficult skills at the same rate of their peers – as Teacher E asked “If one group gets to move forward two grade levels, shouldn’t every student get to move two grade levels?” In most cases, teachers said that administrations encouraged “teaching to the middle” which inevitably left many students, typically those above or far below grade level without support to grow. Every teacher interviewed saw this as a direct outcome of the testing practices implemented soon after Nation at Risk was published and the subsequent increase of testing after No Child Left Behind.

Every teacher expressed concern for kids that are not good at test taking, noting that they rarely go through that experience without shame. Teacher D found it to be an issue with the expression of skill in a subject and Teacher E believed that the resources are not culturally reflective of demographics represented in high need schools. Teachers A and C mentioned the well-publicized statewide exam in Florida that tested vocabulary and comprehension using a narrative about skiing and snow – a clear compromise for students who typically do not experience either. They made the case that students cannot be tested on experiences that they have not had. If we are going to focus so much of school activity on tests, the tests need to be reflective of and responsive to the interests of students in high need schools.

### THEME THREE: SUPPORT

Discussions on the topic of support focused on how it is lacking as opposed to how it is effective. All teachers interviewed discussed the desire to implement project-based learning to allow for more differentiation or tailoring of instruction to meet individual needs. They thought this method could support the higher achieving students and students with Gifted-Talented

potential. All teachers felt they did not have the support to consistently make that happen throughout their professional career. Teachers A and B currently teach in an IB school, which offers some curriculum support to do project-based learning, i.e. teaching methods that provide authentic opportunities to explore a question, problem or challenge in an interdisciplinary manner. The teachers stated that project-based learning is not a common model for high need schools, as it was not common in the schools they served.

One way that teachers in this study experienced support was students being taken out of the classroom to receive academic, physical, psychological or social-emotional interventions. All teachers interviewed expressed concern of students' learning needs not being met during that allotted time and that unfortunately "pull-out" time was valued over the work happening in the whole group classroom environment. Teachers A and D said something along the lines of – "what is happening in the classroom should be meaningful enough for all students to actually *be there*." Academic interventions, when done correctly and thoughtfully, can push students to greater levels of success. All teachers in this study consistently wanted more training on co-teaching to make "push-in" and "pull-out" interventions more successful.

Teachers A, B, C, and D mentioned efforts to teach students with increased motivation or excitability to work independently – in the hopes of the students being able to push themselves. They recognized that without a supportive service for those students, the student would have to fight boredom by becoming a self-motivated learner. Teachers A, B, and C mentioned their experience of being the same type of student and having to develop the same type of skills. Teachers A and B indicated that the stamina and grit required to get to and through college is not easy to muster, even for students from more resourced schools and communities. Teacher A said

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it is her job to teach students to be independent readers, writers, researchers, so they may be successful despite all potentially negative circumstances that may come their way.

On a school and/or institutional level, it came through clearly that none of the teachers received training to support students expressing advanced skill or Gifted-Talented potential – even the two who worked in schools with Gifted-Talented programs. Teachers A and B mentioned being at schools that, due to lack of or mismanaged funds, offered no continuing education credits or training at all. All teachers mentioned that at some point (or sometimes all points) of their career, they received support for passing tests and that was all. Though they all recognized the importance of assessments, the teachers felt it was unnecessary to focus every moment of their learning day on that singular point of testing that so often came at the expense of many student interests and needs.

Teachers B, C, and D made the case that having two educators in the classroom would likely be able to address the range of student need in an inclusive setting, giving all students the opportunity to be challenged at any equal level of rigor and pace. They envisioned that one teacher could address the whole group while the other supported unique academic or social-emotional needs. They believed co-teaching would allow more intentional small group support. Unfortunately, even when a co-teaching model was implemented for all teachers interviewed, rarely were co-teaching strategies applied to make the model effective. It may be that there is higher need than the models can address. It may be that the curriculum or academic goals shift too often for teachers to effectively master the existing tools and support. It may be that schools are reinventing the wheel instead of utilizing best practices and executing them to fidelity. All of these are speculations teachers communicated in the context of the interviews. If teachers with a number of years of experience are feeling as though the baseline of support provided in

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successful schools is insufficient – one can only imagine the experience of new teachers at high need schools without any support. Even with the understanding of what is needed to meet all student needs, there is a steep learning curve for new educators and an even steeper curve for the capacity that can be effectively shouldered by any one person.

All the teachers interviewed had some experience of not feeling supported by their fellow teachers and school leadership or administration. Teachers C and D mentioned they would have loved meaningful, caring feedback from peers but there was rarely the time or the constructive methods for giving and receiving it. It seems like there is a wealth of knowledge and experience that is not shared or retained for future reference; high teacher and leadership turnover rates common to high need schools shape the lack of long term organizational stability and knowledge that could truly be of benefit to any teacher that serves in those schools.

Because high need schools are at the historical and political intersections of various traumas, physical compromises, mental compromises, and lack of resources to support them – basic needs are often not met in the homes of children coming to those schools. Many of the children rely on an unstable network of adults, because of frequent moves and/or changes in schools and other community environments. Additionally, for students in need of formal supportive services, evaluations for those services can sometimes take years to complete. During those evaluative years, classroom teachers are often not provided all the support required to address the student's need – in some cases, when they finally do receive services, it confirms that a student needed 20+ hours a week of additional support. These situations add more work to an already overworked teaching schedule. All teachers in this study mentioned that feeling of overwhelm coming from a deep care for the students and a sadness of how extensive the need can be without sufficient support to address it.

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Teachers A, D, and E in this study also spoke of “school expectations” as a form of support, i.e. when there is a strong school culture, it can support positive behavior and increase learning time in the classrooms. Interestingly enough, all teachers also mentioned a concern of having “too rigid of a behavioral system” (i.e. one that involves proactive classroom/hallway routines and reactive disciplinary systems) – saying the rigidity stifles student creativity and individual expression. The teachers all seemed to feel conflicted about this – do you offer more structure or less?

Curriculum is another primary form of school or institutional support that some schools offer and others do not. Teachers A and B mentioned that good curriculum prevents the lowering of standards; they noted that when you are encouraged to “teach to the middle,” and the middle is achieving two grades below the grade level you are teaching, students at and above grade level are significantly compromised - and that this is a common experience for inexperienced teachers at schools without curriculum.

Advanced high school classes and college entrance exams require meeting a certain standard level of academic achievement; additionally, to be in competitive programs, students have to meet a competitive level of success. In a political environment where people are fighting affirmative action, it is all the more important for students who are coming from economically compromised areas to be competitive despite difficult circumstance. Exposure to quality information, skills, and strategies in various academic and artistic disciplines is essential.

Teacher A mentioned that most schools she worked at struggled to expose their students to rich and meaningful literary experiences. They offered mediocre reading curriculum, lacked in-school libraries, did not offer time for teachers to move beyond speed and accuracy to deeper comprehension as emphasized reading skills. She felt strongly that if a child cannot read to find

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information independently or does not internalize reading as an essential skill for life, it limits their future in ways that cannot always be identified during their school years. All teachers in this study discussed their fears about the impact of ineffective instructors and inadequate materials.

In terms of political or structural support, Teachers A and D found that the influence of “intervention” based approaches for serving this student population came from this level. Teachers A, B, C, and D mentioned the concern that “people who do not get a chance to see the many ways their students shine” are making the decisions that ultimately impact their ability to develop those unique attributes and talents. Teachers A and B spoke of their only curriculum being intervention-focused and that was low quality, lacking the tools to really invest students in learning. This is not uncommon in high need school settings.

All teachers spoke of the lack of restorative practices, i.e. practices that repair the harm and allow them to internalize positive community-centered behaviors, in response to difficult student behaviors. Students were often removed from the classroom instead of remediated so they could stay in the classroom. Teachers C and E addressed that racist and classist narratives of rigid control to educate and assimilate continued to permeate spaces that serve high need communities. Teachers B, C, and E had experience teaching at schools with the almost opposite demographic – white, suburban, middle class / affluent. To quote directly, Teacher E stated, “White male students in the suburbs can exhibit developmentally appropriate excitement without it being judged the same way as poor African-American and Latino boys would when exhibiting the same behavior in the classroom.” Teacher A mentioned that she considered working at a school with a predominantly Latino, lower SES student population and could not take the job because the school removed play and nap time from the nine hour full-day kindergarten schedule. She said she could not imagine that being approved at a school with an all white,

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affluent student population where play and rest are both essential aspects of schooling that cannot be denied. It is difficult to realize that the goal of passing tests can lead to decisions on a political level that invalidates basic needs of the students they seek to support.

There was much discussion about the term “differentiation” that seems to thread through school-wide teacher training and larger discussions in the field of education. Differentiation is the practice of meeting various student academic needs through offering lower and higher levels in addition to the grade level resources offered in the study of any given subject. The ideal implementation of differentiation gives equal challenge to all students; it exposes students who are behind to higher level material, student who are on grade level to appropriate at grade level rigor, and deepens the study meaningfully for students expressing skills above grade level. All teachers in this study highlighted that achieving this feat is possible at schools with average balance of needs expressed – i.e. ratios of below, at, or above grade level leaning to the majority of the classroom being at grade level with a handful of outliers. However, at high need schools, those ratios rarely – if ever – exist; there is significant need and significant range of student mastery in most classrooms. All interviewed teachers came back again and again to the discussion of co-teaching, seeing it as one of the best ways to address varying student needs. Differentiation implemented by one teacher with eight grade levels of academic skill expressed in one classroom simply is not sufficient and adequate support to accomplish quality differentiation. Teachers B and E even mentioned that the use of the term tends to grate on their nerves – because it purports teachers *can* meet the needs all by themselves if they simply “try harder.”

Teachers D and E expressed their frustration with lack of support from their teaching peers. They mentioned teachers who had already given up, teachers with lowered expectations,



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and teachers who are secretive or competitive. Having worked at some point with each of these interviewed teachers, I personally can attest they are all in the “work smarter, not harder” camp and do not believe in reinventing a functional wheel – they believe if you do something well, you should share it. Knowing how hard it is the first years of teaching, they tend to help as much as possible. As Teacher A mentioned, the learning curve of the first year of teaching in a school involves “curriculum, management, communication with parents, dealing with small and significant emergencies – things you cannot learn until you are *in it*.” Teacher turnover and the high stakes environments cause fractured or competitive relationships with professional peers. That directly impacts the success of students and the teachers that serve them.

The topic of statewide standards and national requirements came up repeatedly. All of the teachers in this study found the standards and requirements themselves are inadequate in providing direction or setting up teachers to accomplish those goals in high need schools. Standards do not tell you what resources to use and they do not effectively guard against lowering expectations – so ultimately, one cannot say that standards alone allow for equal depth and challenge at all schools or even classrooms within the same school. All teachers in this study advocated for clear guidelines on how to offer equal opportunity and challenge to all students, stating that better support could be provided if everyone understood how to create student success for all levels in various types of classroom environments. When every school environment seems to be reinventing the wheel, many teachers seem to be calling for greater consistency based on best practices.

### THEME FOUR: FAILURE

The broad topic of failure was present throughout every interview, often framed as how the teachers felt they, their schools, their profession, their nations failed the children. When so many conversations about education use that term - "failing grades", "failing schools", "failing tests" - it is not surprising that teachers are burdened with that term and often use it to describe micro and macro compromises to the work they perform.

All teachers interviewed pushed back on the notion that students need to keep bodies and voices under control at all times – they considered it a failure to not respond to children’s developmental needs. Teachers D and E referenced this “militaristic” or “militarized” student control coming from deeper-seated racist and classist perspectives in the field of education, as well as national political and historical influences – addressing the implications of a predominantly higher SES white professional field seeking to control the bodies of lower SES brown and black community members. Teachers A, B, and C interviewed also pointed to the lack of cultural responsiveness and responsiveness to individual student needs/interests as a common issue or concern in high need schools; when failing to honor cultural differences and create cultural relevancy for students in the classroom, teachers said the environment did not foster deeper learning experiences that lead to school success on the long term.

The high teacher turnover and the commonplace of inexperienced teachers were also pointed out as failures in high need school settings. Until procedures, classroom management and mastery of teaching grade level material is accomplished – no differentiation or individualized support can even be considered. All participants in this study expressed that even when knowing the needs of your students and what has to be done to ensure their success, the personal and professional capacity of new teachers in high need settings is often completely

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maxed out. Teachers A, C, and D noted that it is difficult to take or give meaningful professional opinion or perspectives and to see training as anything beyond “one more thing” added to an already overflowing, hard to prioritize to-do list.

Teacher B, who had assessed for placement in a Gifted-Talented program (thus having the most training in identifying successful combinations of expressed student potential), said she is constantly worried about not catching a skill parents and administrators were expecting her as a classroom teacher to notice. When the classroom is rigidly structured and the lessons are formal / prescribed, it is hard to identify the academic and creative skills that go beyond those assessed or those that differ from what is traditionally taught. It is considered a failure if you as the teacher do not provide opportunity even if you do not know what opportunity to provide.

All teachers interviewed pointed to most institutional failures as outcomes related to lack of support and training. Teachers A, B, and D spoke of some professional development focusing on “dumbing things down” so students could access grade level material though a year or more behind. They saw the problem with “dumbing things down” as being most compromising to students who were capable and motivated enough to explore higher-level materials. Teachers A, B, and E pointed to the problem of intervention-focused curriculum not being as engaging and not offering the rich reading materials that inspire self-motivated learning. The combination of lowered expectations and mediocre curriculum sets all students in the school up for stunted growth.

When addressing the needs of students with overexcitability – Teachers A, B, and E came back to their experience of administration focusing on “classroom control” and the worry of their classroom not “looking right” when parents, teachers, administrators, board members, etc. visited. Many high need schools have ongoing cycles of evaluation and are open to visitors who

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may be interested in supporting or funding their school. Though all the teachers who participated in this study expressed that they would prefer to channel overexcitable energy, they found that most school administrators encouraged aligning the behavior with the level of compliance needed for the whole group to be successful. If the behavior could not be fixed to make the student a participating member of the whole-classroom learning environment, the student was typically removed from the setting rather than being more effectively supported or accommodated.

Additionally, Teachers D and E noted that there is little understanding extended to students with IEPs (individualized education plans) and 504 plans (accommodation plans for students with disabilities that typically do not qualify for IEP services). Teacher D said that ADHD is seen as a problem so consistently that most teachers and administrators extend little or no empathy towards the diagnosed learning disability. Students were pulled from classes because of behavior common to individuals diagnosed as ADHD; when students were pulled from the learning environment because of behavior perceived as a choice, there was often little attempt for administrators to remedy the loss of learning time. There usually was not a plan for it, even if it was recurring. Teachers B and E came back to discussion of co-teaching models as applied to supporting students with behavioral concerns. Teachers A, C, and E speculated that a second teacher or paraprofessional could be very helpful for classroom management so they could go beyond simply "controlling the behavior" or "removing the behavior" to supporting classroom inclusion through accommodating student needs in a more different way – ideally, channeling overexcitable behavior into greater creative and academic potential.

The political and structural influences typically shape the mindsets of administrators and subsequent decision-making around supports to increase academic growth. When a failure

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happens on this level, it impacts almost every teacher and student in almost every school. The No Child Left Behind act came up repeatedly in our discussion of how students are failed by the current methods of assessing and responding to varying levels of student achievement. All teachers interviewed stressed that the high pressure testing culture works against students as it defines personal and student success in a painfully limited way and shifts all focus of support on that narrow view. This sentiment is mirrored in schools throughout the country, not limited to high need schools.

In addressing the negative outcomes of testing, all the teachers questioned if summative tests and the frequency of tests issued were developmentally appropriate practices for K-6 students. Teachers A, B, and C noted that computer tests do not make apparent every skill mastered. Teacher B mentioned her experience of watching a kindergarten student clicking random buttons because he had a tough night at home and that a number of students did not take computer tests seriously; at age five, most computer activities feel like a game. Test scores drive funding for schools, influence increases or decreases in student enrollment, and even determine teacher pay/retention. A teacher's daily assessments and experience of a student may communicate a clearer message of success, but if more significant (in the minds of state and local government) test taking data does not show that success – there is not much that teacher can do to prove the progress in those areas. It feels like a failure when some of those outcomes are outside of their control. It feels like a failure when students are told they are not successful when they are.

A detail each participant came back to over and over is what the tests do not evaluate – student skills in areas that go beyond the traditional academic subjects of reading and math. Teachers A, C, and E stated that if a skill is not on the test, the skill is not taught – the arts,

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sciences, social studies and many other subjects or skills that could ensure success in college or professional work are often deprioritized; they are the first programs to be cut. For many students from economically compromised areas and difficult family situations, school is the only place they will be exposed to opportunities for practicing a wider range of skills and exploring potential interests. Teachers A, B, and E expressed that they would love to teach subjects and skills in an interdisciplinary fashion – incorporating movement in science or art in the study of literature, for example. Many administrators and experts in the field of education encourage this type of practice – but with absence of time and the pressure for success on the test, struggling teachers rely on rote repeat practices of test-related tasks and an almost militaristic methodical social control to ensure every student is getting the same information at the same rate. All teachers in this study said we are failing kids by not teaching them essential information that goes outside of what is evaluated on a standardized test. Students are often given the message that anything that does not fit in the “cookie cutter” ideal of educational settings is not of value.

The problem for schools with the inclusive classroom model is that the assurance that all individual needs are being met falls on the actions of one teacher. All teachers in this study noted that that expectation is often unfairly paired with lack of training and lack of support. Classrooms are difficult to control, expectations are high, blame is abundant, and very rarely do professionals have the resources to do their job effectively. Students who are achieving, excited, and/or motivated may not be in the best situation to receive the support they need to be successful; others perceived as having greater need are prioritized. All teachers in this study made the case that every student should be prioritized equally, all students should be provided equal opportunity to advance.

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### THEME FIVE: SUCCESS

There were some incredible stories of success in the classroom, on school school/institutional levels, and political/structural levels throughout these interviews. Addressing this topic was a source of joy and hope for all of us in this project. All teachers included have closed some student achievement and opportunity gaps despite all difficulties and odds in the high need public school environment. Their work should be celebrated and so often it is not.

Incorporating physical movement and offering varied classroom environments were considered successes to all of the teachers interviewed. Teachers B, D, and E spoke to the difficulty of giving children the space to express developmentally appropriate but sometimes distracting behavior in “high stakes” environments – i.e. environments where teachers are expected to close achievement gaps in short time frame. Teachers B and D were proud of their ability to create accommodations for different movement types, incorporate different senses in learning, and regulate student energy levels. Teachers B spoke of students standing up when completing worksheets and doing quick jumping jacks in the hallway to work against afternoon slump; she emphasized that children with higher levels of energy and motivation have to find ways to work with their differences to be successful in a group environment. Teachers B and E mentioned being busy bodies themselves and each of them had stories of teachers who helped them channel that excess or extra energy. Teacher A mentioned it is still important to tell students that it is okay to be bored and that some of the greatest revelations of our time happened when people were bored. All teachers interviewed spoke of how students need to have an understanding of how to self-regulate and view their differences in a positive light.

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Other successes teachers discussed involved the creation of more engaging tasks. Teachers B and D said that what is happening in the classroom should be worth keeping the kids in the classroom; three mentioned that the “best behavior plan is a good lesson plan.” All teachers noted the steep curve of learning in the first few years and great stories about how they finally became successful in implementing strategies to make learning interactive and fun for all levels of learners in their classroom. This often involved created culturally-responsive lessons with interdisciplinary activities to offer the opportunities for students to express skills in various depths and formats. Teachers A, D and E spoke of incorporating art into academic lessons to engage students who are more visually oriented; having more writing opportunities for students to express their thoughts and develop their unique voice; and giving students the chance to express themselves in front of the class. Classrooms are often celebrated for their calm – but all teachers in this study mentioned that learning requires excitement, discussion, mistakes and messiness! The high energy and expressive students need that space to grow to their potential.

Suggestions for offering exciting, effectively differentiated classes included “starting with what you want them to learn and then plan for all the creative ways to get there” i.e. what many educators call “backwards planning.” Teacher D said she was able to slowly build her capacity by adding on smaller stretches to the assignments early on – often through what she called “natural assignments” or assignments that naturally link with the students’ existing interests or assignments that allowed for information gathering in the students out-of-school environments to extend the activity in a more natural way. Field trips were brought up by all teachers often, with all stating that exposure to different environments close opportunity gaps and help students have a broader vision of how all the learning fits together in their future. Other possibilities teachers mentioned were: debate classes, building projects, inquiry-based learning,



novella writing, and class choice like J-Terms (i.e. a time in January where students get to choose a topic, area or project of focus; often times going outside of their classroom to learn with other teachers). Teacher A, the teacher with the most experience of the five interviewed, mentioned the great feeling of moving “towards being a guide on the side, as opposed to a sage on the stage,” allowing students to guide their learning and helping all students be leaders in the classroom environment. She believes that is an essential quality of an effective teacher especially in high need inclusive classroom environments.

When exploring the successes on the school or institutional level, all teachers celebrated that status quo is shifting to allow more discussions about movement and physical accommodations for overexcitable students in the classroom. Another success noted by all teachers is the inclusion of more social-emotional learning. Creative students, overexcitable students tend to be emotionally expressive students; it is helpful for them (and every other student in the class) to learn strategies to channel and express the emotions they have in response to their learning and their greater world. Teacher C and D mentioned the successful incorporation of social skills curriculum. Teacher E mentioned the use of conflict resolution strategies that allow students to independently address their social conflicts. All of these successes were said to have made it possible for more students to stay in their classroom and to bring their “whole self” to the space. Teachers D and E expressed that they were hopeful about the decrease in labeling or diagnosing students. They perceived this shift as one that goes beyond the educational field to more expansive field of child psychology – teachers perceived a shift of the status quo reflecting one that is less concerned with finding problems to fix and focusing more on strengths to further support.

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Many questions led back to the topic of good curriculum and adequate peer support. When the teachers in this study could make a case for school-wide success, they highlighted 1) co-teaching 2) fluid and responsive-leveling 3) small group rotations that allow for classroom, grade level, and school-wide shifts in student groups. If a school can provide those supports, all teachers in this study believed success and adequate challenge could be provided for a higher percentage of students.

### SUMMARY

The disaggregating of interview data into the five emergent themes of *Identification, Testing / Evaluation, Support, Failure, and Success* facilitated a deeper exploration of the topic of serving students with Gifted-Talented potential in high need public schools. Through examining the parallels and divergences of the sorted interview data in conjunction with the information explored in the literature review, many insightful conclusions could be drawn from the research. Those conclusions are explored in the next chapter through the four components of the Portraiture Method— *Context, Voice, Relationship, and Emergent Themes*.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

OVERVIEW

To conclude the discussion of this research, all four components of the Portraiture Method— *Context, Voice, Relationship, and Emergent Themes* – will come together to create the conclusion, the *Aesthetic Whole*: a summary of research developed with the goal of resonating with the reader, the researcher, and the community represented by the project (Lawrence-Lightfoot, “Aesthetic Whole” n.d., para 4).

COMPONENT ONE: CONTEXT

The research question “*How are students with Gifted-Talented potential supported by the inclusive education model when it is implemented in high need public schools?*” was asked in the *Context* of our current educational environment. That context reflects a change in school practices through past thirty years – a movement away from specialized programs for Gifted-Talented students to the inclusive classroom model to serve all students needs in one classroom space, typically with one primary educator. The context also reflects a change from interest-driven classroom teaching to an educational model that embraces a more evaluative, data-driven approach. Five teachers were interviewed in this capstone project to increase understanding surrounding of the impact of those changes.

COMPONENT TWO: VOICE

The *Voice* of the teachers mostly echoed, corroborated, and expanded on topics explored in the literature review. Teachers in this study shared that their experience serving in high need

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schools involved many challenges that effected their ability to address the needs of all students, especially those who were achieving or perceived as being capable of achieving at more advanced levels. Throughout their interviews, it was made clear that these students are often deprioritized in the public education context - a context that purports to value the educational progress of all students equally. All too commonly, the teachers spoke of administrators encouraging them to focus on students that *could* pass the tests versus student who are already capable of passing the tests or those who are so far behind it is unlikely they could pass the tests that year or in the future (Burney, 2008, p. 302; Callahan, 2005, p. 99). These opportunity gaps create the achievement gaps most commonly identified through ongoing classroom assessments and statewide test scores – these unchallenged students often stagnate, act out, or disengage (Robinson, 2003, p. 251-252).

All teachers spoke frequently of those achievement gaps – confirming or paralleling the information outlined in the literature review (Elhoweris, 2008, p. 35; Burney, 2008, p. 302).

They addressed the culture of lowered expectations for students of color / students from lower-income contexts and the end result of significantly varied skill level in the classrooms (Callahan, 2005, p. 99). Teachers made a case to shift the focus to *opportunity gaps* instead of *achievement gaps*, because lack of funding and support negatively impact the number of opportunities provided students in regards their future success and achievement. It is important to highlight that all teachers expressed fear that students were not getting enough exposure to the arts and sciences, noting that those are the first subjects and resources to be cut in response to more limited school budgets. The teachers continually addressed their limitations in identifying as students having Gifted-Talented potential; the removal of classroom time to explore creativity

and critical thinking further limited to their ability to observe and support all students in their unique skills and talents.

The literature review highlighted formal methods for identifying students with Gifted-Talented potential (Lohman, 2005, p. 333-335), but only two of the teachers had issued those types of formal assessments in schools. More commonly, administrators and educators did not discuss or recognize Gifted-Talented potential in the high need school contexts where the interviewed teachers served. Students from disadvantaged communities often have limited exposure to creative and advanced educational opportunities that could develop or highlight a unique skill or talent within or outside of school. A couple of the teachers even teared up when speaking about this inequity - saying that children with Gifted-Talented potential from disadvantaged communities could be the next world-changing artists, cancer-curing scientists or award-winning writers – but no one would know because they never had a chance to explore those possibilities that so readily are made available to others. This is the honest outcome of the achievement and opportunities gaps that many students experience, due to situations and decisions that are completely outside of their control (Lee, 2006, p. 6). The teachers expressed hope that the perspective on students with Gifted-Talented potential could shift, allowing more students to access the tools and support they need to truly succeed.

The teachers in this study appreciated the more expansive perspective on Gifted-Talented potential offered by Dąbrowski's Theory of Overexcitability and utilized that definition readily throughout the interview as they believe it described their lived experiences and perspectives in the classroom. All teachers mentioned that this interview inspired them to think more critically about the learning opportunities they provide students who are expressing Gifted-Talented potential by taking into account both Renzulli and Dąbrowski's perspectives (Renzulli, 2011, p.

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81; Dąbrowski, 1972, p. 301). The teachers stated that it would now be difficult deprioritize the students that fit into those categories and they further recognize the risk of them not developing to their full potential. Whether the students are formally identified through an aptitude test or are observed by a teacher as having potential to be developed, the interviewed teachers want those students to be recognized and want support to ensure their success. One of the primary discoveries teachers and I had in the context of the interviews is that the lack of training to support advanced, creative, or overexcitable students is a civil rights issue; every child deserves a quality public education and too many are denied that (Burney, 2008, p. 302; Callahan, 2005, p. 99). All of these teachers care about the success of students who have every right and reason to achieve at their highest potential.

Teachers in this project planned to bring this discussion forward to their peers and their leadership to extend their individual efforts. They all thought it is worthwhile to discuss Dąbrowski's positive framing of overexcitable behavior with other educators, knowing that teacher mindsets make the classroom. If the goal is inclusivity, all students should be equally considered and supported. All students should be seen as individuals who express skill and potential in unique ways. Teachers should have resources to identify and support those unique student needs.

### COMPONENT THREE: RELATIONSHIP

The *Relationship* the research has to high need school contexts across the country is significant. These teachers' experiences reflect the experiences of many teachers serving high need schools that utilize the inclusive classroom model, a model common in many schools and districts today. Classrooms in our city and our country have teachers with limited support

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attempting to meet a wide range of student need. Since *Relationship* concerns the ethical stance that emerges from the research, it is important to note that teachers in this study repeatedly addressed how conflicted they felt in recognizing the ongoing and pervasive underserving of this student population.

Another important take away from this research is that equal opportunity may not mean lifting every student to the same level but moving forward all students at equal rate of challenge. This research put forwards the notion that curriculum and other learning resources should support meeting the range of student need in an equally challenging and creative way. It purports that teachers should have the opportunity to explore alternative assignments and accommodations for students expressing creative and/or academic potential, as well as in response to overexcitable behaviors. Being provided an education that suits the skill level and potential accomplishment is not a want, it is a need; regardless of the challenges that effort may present the involved constituents, it should not be dismissed simply because it is challenging. Students need equal opportunity to succeed to their highest potential. Teachers in this report agreed that we should be providing dynamic learning environments that help *all* students succeed as self-motivated and creative learners despite the many barriers and struggles that exist in their lives. They did not think it should be dependent on a specialized learning environment with a specific evaluative process. They simply advocated for all teachers to have training for identifying and supporting student potential with adequate staff, curriculum, and administrative meet that need.

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### COMPONENT FOUR: EMERGENT THEMES

My findings and outlined results are limited. The *Emergent Themes of Identification, Evaluation, Success, Failures and Support* allowed for some meaningful exploration of the topic, but there were many other topics, concerns and curiosities that were not as prevalent in all participant interviews that would be great starting points for additional research. I would like to investigate the topic of how developmentally appropriate behavior is discussed and supported in high need schools that utilize the inclusive classroom model and how that topic intersects with current research on the race / socio-economic class of students served. If I were to do my study again, I would conduct a broader survey of teachers throughout Minneapolis. I would also extend my research through classroom observations and interviews with students who exhibit behavior that could be interpreted as overexcitability and/or Gifted-Talented potential. These limitations will be addressed by shifting strategies in my future research.

### IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

Implications for the study are potentially far-reaching. I believe the research and the results have the potential to influence policy and practices on many levels of public education. All too often politics and trends in education can inadvertently leave certain schools and students out of the discussions that ultimately shape the work and progress happening in their classrooms. By shifting the some of the focus to students in high need schools who have the potential to go beyond grade level mastery and skills, I believe those students will run less risk of experiencing opportunity gaps and be given more opportunities to succeed at their full potential.

Co-teaching models, responsive groupings, project-based learning, quality differentiation – the primary suggestions made by teachers in this capstone – all have the ability to serve a



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broader range of student skill and need more effectively than the single teacher, whole group inclusive classroom model of education. It is always a question of if/when schools and teachers will have the funding, stability and support to make those provisions and practices possible. The shift to make that possible often relies on a reframing of the discussion and a change in status quo. I consider this capstone project my first step in attempting to support that shift.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

My future research and writing will be extension of this work. It is my intention to publish more research on how educators support students with Gifted-Talented potential in high need public school settings. I would also like to publish editorials that reflect a more succinct and personal opinion/experience on this topic to a broader audience that would include educators, as well as individuals not working in educational environments. I plan to use these interviews in conjunction with other interviews to deepen the discussion and work towards more nuanced understanding through comparative demographic studies. My goal would be to unpack other inequities and disparities related to this topic to better prioritize my advocacy and efforts, addressing the more significant needs with greater urgency through my work, my publications, and my efforts in community advocacy.

## SUMMARY

Parents, school leaders, politicians and other influential figures should all be made more aware of the lived experience and challenges faced by teachers who have a strong desire to support all students, but are lacking the tools, training and resources to make that possible. When students who have Gifted-Talented potential are compromised in educational settings, our

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communities can suffer significantly – but more importantly, the child’s life trajectory is compromised irrevocably. Sometimes we have to move beyond the lens of nation, state, city, school statistics and address the individuals impacted by educational practices and policies. We all know students in high need schools often need and deserve more than provided or offered by the current educational system. I will challenge myself to keep a lens of equity focused on students with Gifted-Talented potential in high need schools and find the ways to make more educators and community members aware of their needs.

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### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

- 1) What is your experience working in high need schools (in this study - “schools located in areas where at least 30 percent of students come from families with incomes below the poverty line” (No Child Left Behind, 2002))?
- 2) Were any of your students categorized as Gifted-Talented for exhibiting 1) above-average ability, 2) task commitment and 3) creativity (Renzulli, 2011, p. 81)? Describe those students.
- 3) Did any of your students exhibit overexcitable behavior i.e. “higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested either by psychomotor, sensual, emotional (affective), imaginal, or intellectual excitability, or combination thereof” (Dąbrowski, 1972, p.301)? Describe those students.
- 4) What in-classroom services did you provide to students categorized as Gifted-Talented?
- 5) What in-classroom services did you provide to students who exhibited overexcitable behavior?
- 6) What out-of-classroom services were provided to students categorized as Gifted-Talented?
- 7) What out-of-classroom services were provided to students who exhibited overexcitable behavior?
- 8) How did your administration view and/or discuss students categorized as Gifted-Talented?
- 9) How did your administration view and/or discuss students who exhibited overexcitable behavior?
- 10) What range of student skill level did you typically observe/assess in your classrooms?

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- 11) If multiple grade/developmental levels were present in one classroom, how did you support students categorized as Gifted-Talented?
- 12) If multiple grade/developmental levels were present in one classroom, how did you support students who exhibited overexcitable behavior?
- 13) If working with limited time or resources, what students were your highest-priority for receiving additional teacher time or supportive resources?
- 14) If working with limited time or resources, what students were administrators highest-priority for receiving additional teacher time or supportive resources?
- 15) What are your thoughts and feelings about the current support students of categorized as Gifted-Talented in the high need inclusive classroom setting?
- 16) What are your thoughts and feeling about the current support of students who exhibit overexcitable behavior in the high need inclusive classroom setting?
- 17) How are educators effectively meeting the needs of students categorized as Gifted-Talented in the high need schools? How are they not?
- 18) How are educators effectively meeting the needs of students who exhibit overexcitable behavior in the high need schools? How are they not?
- 19) Do you think services to students categorized as Gifted-Talented in the high need schools setting should be improved? Why or why not?
- 20) Do you think services to students who exhibit overexcitable behavior in the high need schools should be improved? Why or why not?
- 21) Do you personally think the inclusive classroom model is effective for high need schools? Why or why not?

## SUPPORTING GIFTED-TALENTED POTENTIAL IN HIGH NEED SCHOOLS

- 22) What model of school support (i.e. inclusive, specialized, pull-out/push-in, open classroom, etc) do you believe is the most effective for meeting a wide range of student needs? Why?
- 23) If you had complete control over your school day and school setting, how would you provide services and support to the range of student need presented in your classrooms?
- 24) What further thoughts do you have on services provided to students in high need schools that are categorized as Gifted-Talented?
- 25) What further thoughts do you have on services provided to students in high need schools who exhibit overexcitable behavior?