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# Letters from a Gifted Educator in Georgia

Heather Holley  
*Georgia Southern University*

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# LETTERS FROM A GIFTED EDUCATOR IN GEORGIA

by

HEATHER HOLLEY

(Under the Direction of Robert Lake)

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a collection of letters from me as I explored the significance of the current standardized curriculum milieu on gifted learners' educative opportunities in a public elementary school. The inquiry drew information of gifted learners' characteristics and educative, affective, and social needs from the works of Gagné (Gagné, 1985, 2000, 2005), Renzulli and Renzulli & Reis (Reis & Renzulli, 1997, 2010; Renzulli, 1986, 2012; Renzulli & Reis, 1997). I also drew from Gallagher (2000, 2003, 2004, 205, 2015) and Sapon-Shevin (1996, 2003) for information on the political implications of gifted education. The study employed *currere* (Pinar & Grumet, 1976) to reflect upon my educational experiences as a gifted education teacher, hermeneutic imagination (Davis, 1991) to aid in the interpretation of the data, and Schwab's four commonplaces of curriculum (1969, 1971, 1973, 1978) for a balanced view. I reviewed multiple samples of personal memories and journal entries, class observation notes, notes and letters received from previous students, previously written essays, and memories of my own children's experiences to develop themes on which to focus. These were interpreted and expressed through the epistolary genre from a variety of imagined stakeholders. This dissertation expresses an inside perspective that is wanting in the current literature. By "handing off the baton" to younger classroom teachers and imparting ways to develop personal agency in gifted learners, future possibilities are envisioned for improving gifted learners' educational opportunities in spite of the stifling milieu they often experience.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted Education, Currere, Recovering volition, Hermeneutic imagination, Epistolary genre, Standardized curriculum

LETTERS FROM A GIFTED EDUCATOR IN GEORGIA

by

HEATHER HOLLEY

B.A., University of Georgia, 1984

M.Ed., Troy State University, 2003

Ed. S. Augusta State University, 2006

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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HEATHER HOLLEY

Major Professor: Robert Lake  
Committee: Ming Fang He  
Pamela Wells  
Laura Rychly

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## DEDICATION

Above all, this dissertation is dedicated to my amazingly patient husband, Greg Holley, who supported my decision to take on another adventure in education. Even when he had no idea what I was talking about, he listened while I worked through my thoughts. During my times of doubt and frustration, he was my guiding light and voice of reason. It is also dedicated to my children, Paige and Zack, whose unbelievably gifted minds have challenged me to grow as a mother, educator, and advocate of gifted learners. They have inspired me to be a guiding presence and fighter for gifted learners whose education is being stifled in so many classrooms. This is also dedicated to my family who never in their wildest dreams would have expected me to “go to school” for so many years! Mom and Dad, I think I have done you proud.

For the future generations of beautiful minds, may you always be encouraged to grow intellectually and creatively without the stifling constraints of standardized schooling.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The extensive work of educators, researchers, and theorists within the field of gifted education has been the bedrock on which I have built my teaching career. One can gain years of personal practical knowledge; but, until it is validated in our culture, it is only personal. The Curriculum Studies Department of Georgia Southern turned my world upside down when it admitted me into the EdD program. Not only did I learn more about the world of education than I ever imagined existed, but I also learned more about myself than I ever dreamed possible. Once I gained certain knowledges and viewed the world through various lenses, it became imperative that I kept my eyes open and remain mindful. Dr. Ming Fang He's incredible knowledge, insight, and forthright comments influenced me beyond words. Her influence will be with me forever as I find ways to make a positive impact on my students and fellow teachers through "creative insubordination."

Dr. Laura Rychly, from the intersecting position of a parent of gifted learners, educator, and curriculum studies scholar, drew attention to the word "gifted" that led me to reclaim the word and work toward standing strong in my volition. It takes perspectives from "more knowledgeable others" (Vygotsky, 1978) to shake loose beliefs that have become barnacle-like, and Dr. Rychly's multifocal positionality was instrumental in that regard.

Dr. Pamela Wells found the words of encouragement that were needed for me to keep my footing on the journey. She established connections to my work that resonated with hers, and sharing that gave me a boost to continue my endeavors.

My advisor and main cheerleader, Dr. Robert Lake, saw something in me that I was not sure existed. I identified with his education story and was inspired by it. Dr. Lake's writing style and subjects are so similar to mine and *what I aspire to be* that it is uncanny. I appreciated every



note of encouragement, link to references, quote to ponder, and suggestion for wording in my journey toward my EdD. I will be forever grateful to Dr. Lake and his keen thoughtfulness of who would best be my team. Together, these amazing scholarly mentors and I made it!

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## PREFACE

Even though there have always been highly intelligent, perceptive, insightful thinkers among us, “gifted” education and the American public have engaged in a tumultuous relationship that has vacillated between love and hate since Leta Stetter Hollingworth coined the term in the early 1900s (Held, 2010). Hundreds of men and women have influenced our thinking, developed amazing creations, explored untouched universes, and dared to think beyond the norm. These people surely have a gift of some exceptional ability. “She is a gifted surgeon.” “His gifted vision for economics makes him indispensable.” “Without their gifts of...” These terms and phrases are handed out without hesitation or consternation when they are seen as a product or outcome. Something very different happens on the other end of the thinkers’ timeline, however. We shy away from using the “g” word for *learners* for fear of showing favoritism to a group, fear of giving an undemocratic edge, or perhaps for fear of feeling inferior to these learners. The irony is that *gifted* is just a word. I do not deny the word has been an irritant in the field of education, nor do I deny that it has taken on a life of its own with all the trappings of divisiveness. With that in mind, I want to address the elephant in the room before we begin so my account of these students and their learning environments and opportunities can be examined without the perception that I feel they are superior in any way. These learners think differently: not better, not worse. It is with that concept in mind that I would like for you to proceed.

Curriculum Studies pioneer Dwayne Huebner (1999) tells us that language is developed and sustained interpersonally. The interpersonal is shaped by society which is often influenced by class, cultural groupings, economics, political structures of the society, and the distribution of power. Language, then, has the ability to influence power, and power influence language. The implications of language in this study cannot be overlooked. In regards to the terminology of

gifted education, words—symbols of concepts—have evolved in ways that have caused a variety of connotations. The process of hermeneutics allows us to venture into what we mean when we use certain words by problematizing the usual categories for understanding them (Davis, 1991). The term “gifted,” as multifaceted as it is, often takes on negative associations. For those of us who are in the trenches, in the midst of the day-to-day education of gifted learners and have chosen to embrace their differences in positive ways, “gifted” is just a word. Gifted learners, gifted students, gifted characteristics, gifted classrooms, gifted programs, gifted curriculum, gifted and talented. I did not create the words that are used to “label” these children and their characteristics, nor did I choose to specialize in gifted education because of some perceived elitist attitude. And, although there are synonyms that could be used in its place, I do not believe it would matter. That word would describe the same type of learner, and, given time would take on the same connotations and invoke the same uncomfortable feelings.

Instead of trying to find a more inclusive, less offensive word I choose to reclaim and take ownership of "giftedness" for the learners it has been intended to describe, students whom I will introduce you to and reveal many of their inimitable trials. I follow Joseph Renzulli's viewpoint of using gifted to describe the behavior and not the person (Renzulli, 1986; Renzulli & Reis, 1997); therefore, I focus on the students as dynamic learners, not one-dimensional children. It is the children *as learners* that I am concerned with. If you are a parent of these students, do not take pride in, nor apologize for their abilities. If you are a person unfamiliar with the unique characteristics of these learners, look beyond the lexicon of gifted education and get to know them as learners. If you are jarred by the terms and ideas I present in this study or are uncomfortable with my focus on the needs of a group perceived as advantaged, keep a few things in mind as you read this. For one, it is necessary for learners to know themselves—no matter

what level they perform—so they are better able to maximize their potential. For another, ability does not come in a neat package that requires no attention or effort to become fully developed. Finally, everyone has the right to an education, not just “schooling.” By schooling, I mean the enforced placement of students in an artificial setting with a group of his age-mates, who may or may not be academically matched, being forced to learn a mandated curriculum (Gatto, 2001). I am also drawing from Illich’s idea of the system of schooling as the “state’s apparatus for enslaving minds” (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995, p. 23; Illich, 1975). Another idea of schooling, as opposed to educating, can be found among Pinar’s list of 12 “intersecting effects of traditional schooling” which include, “hypertrophy or atrophy of fantasy life, a division or loss of self to others via modeling, and criticism by others and the loss of self-love” (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Pinar et al., 2000, p. 518). These effects significantly distinguish between educating and schooling.

Gifted learners often possess a deeper sense of intuition than their age-peers, a greater sense that something is different in their learning; and, different is not always perceived as good or acceptable. No, we do not want to instill in these learners a sense of superiority or entitlement; but, ignoring their... gifts, for lack of a different word, is detrimental. So, it is with confidence that I take back the “g word” for my fellow gifted education teachers, for parents of gifted learners, and for the students themselves. Again, these learners think differently: not better, not worse, just differently.

It is an understatement that research is bountiful in gifted education. Studies on gifted learners within the standardized era of “schooling” has been exhaustive (Borland, 2003; Brown & Wishney, 2017; Gallagher, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2015; Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007; Reis, 1994; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Renzulli, 2012). Specialized programs for various content

areas (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Reis & Renzulli, 1997, 2010; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2004; Van Tassel-Baska, 1988, 2003) varying levels of giftedness and talent (Gagné, 2005; Gardner, 1993, 2000), attitudes of gifted learners and attitudes toward gifted learners (Borland 2003; Brown & Wishney, 2017; Carmen, 2011; Cross & Cross, 2005; Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2008, 2015; Hofstadter, 1963; Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1998), underrepresented populations and overrepresented populations within gifted programs (Gallagher, 2003, 2005, 2015; Islas, 2017; McBee, 2010; Renzulli, 2012; Sapon-Shevin, 1996, 2003), multi-exceptionalities (Gardner, 1993, 2000; Renzulli & Reis, 1997), racial and socioeconomic discrepancies within programs (Sapon-Shevin, 1996, 2003; gendered studies, and the psychology of gifted learners (Clark, 1997; Dweck, 2008, 2015; Van Tassel-Baska, 1988, 2003) name a few of the myriad subtopics within gifted research. One could say that there are very few perceptible gaps in the decades of research, and I would agree. One group, however, does stand out for me—my students; those learners whose lives I have touched. My research is focused on my lived experiences as a teacher, advocate, and parent of gifted learners. An autobiographical journey through personal journals, memories, previous essays, and observations would allow me to revisit, review, reflect upon, and relive my years of experience. Applying the process of *currere*, “the infinitive form of curriculum” (Pinar, 2012, p. 5), to my autobiographical journey will hopefully help me in this endeavor of gleaning a reconception of educating gifted learners. Before I can hope to come to a better understanding of what I have lived for more than half my life, I must “bend [my] thought back upon itself” (Grumet, 1976, pg. 131-132), be willing to look through fresh eyes and new lenses, ask difficult questions, engage in “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2012), challenge biases and assumptions, and have the nerve to accept what I interpret. After so many years of comfort in my reality, will I have the guts to

respond to them? Will my thoughts renew and freshly empower my resolve and volition as Grumet (1976, *ibid.*) suggests as an outcome of *currere*?

I have chosen to share many of my findings through the forms of letters. I believe that the distance between the imagined recipients of these letters and me as the creator allows me to be honest and forthright. To sustain the epistolary medium, I have personified a couple of concepts. Personification allowed me to give human attributes (Scopa, 2017) and personality ("Personification," 2015) to both milieu and subject matter, two of the four commonplaces of curriculum, as well as enabled me to the development of a sense of complexity to these non-human entities (Scopa, 2015). As it is found in poetry, prose, and music, this form of figurative language often makes it easier to understand a non-human entity, makes the writing more vivid, and creatively expresses feelings ("Personification," 2015). It is my hope that M/milieu and S/subject M/matter are grasped in a different way through personification, and seen as equally alive and dynamic as the other recipients and writers.

Letter writing can be cathartic. With enough time to ponder the thought, choose the precise words, and develop the right tone, years of guilt can be offered up for absolution. Alas, years span wider than distance, allowing memories to fade. A memory, a nascent flicker of a past event, can lie quietly among neurons and synapses until a scent, a song, a new perspective taps it awake. Once awake, it may find comfort just being acknowledged every so often, or it may demand attention. What was once a quiet blip on the screen may become a nagging thought or an obsession. To help that obsession find its place and for the owner to be at peace with it, it has to be shared, parceled out, and released. So, it is with great catharsis that I share the flicker that has burned within me for most of my teaching career. It all started with a frustrated comment (sp)uttered to a boy named Ryan.



CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

An Apology

~ ~ ~ ~

*Dear Ryan,*

*I am sorry.*

*This apology has been almost 25 years in the making. I have often reflected upon the daily interactions we had when you were in my fifth-grade class. Those reflections are not very positive. In fact, when I think of that first year as an elementary teacher after coming from the high school level, you are the most potent memory that stands out. I would hope that I made a difference in someone's education that year, but I doubt it was you. In my mind, I failed you.*

*You were the first gifted student I ever taught. You were quick-witted, insightful, broadly knowledgeable, and unchallenged. Because of the very characteristics that were a part of you, along with the inane curriculum and teachings of a newly minted elementary teacher, you pushed my buttons! I reacted in ways that make me tear-up with embarrassment and regret when I think back on them. I hope that my comments to you did not deter you from growing intellectually to your greatest desires. I pray that I was the last teacher ever to compromise your true learning opportunities, although I suspect I was not.*

*“You are gifted. You should be able to show your work for this math problem.” I feel the heat rush up my neck and into my cheeks even as I type this, knowing how I now fight for my students' rights to a fair and adequate education! It's ironic how life comes full circle sometimes. Not only did my own children grow into gifted learners, but I became a teacher of*

*gifted students about five years after you were in my class. Five years too late to be an encouraging, nurturing, caring teacher to you. All I can say is that I just didn't know any better.*

*I didn't know that your comments that came across as insolent were those of a mature mind in a child's body. Your questioning of my curriculum choices or pedagogy were not meant to question my abilities, but true inquiries into the relevance to your education. Your slouching body and condescending demeanor were the outward manifestations of the ennui residing in your being. For four days out of five, your world came to an inspirational halt. Thankfully, one day of the week you were challenged, inspired, encouraged to soar to heights unavailable in the regular classroom. For one day out of five, you went to a classroom where you were understood and supported by a teacher like I would one day become. He recognized the need to offer activities that built on your critical thinking, encouraged creative thinking, and pushed your thinking. His lessons were engaging and enriching on your appropriate level. On this day, you found solace in the gifted education classroom.*

*For the past two decades, I have pondered the questions: how did you perceive the "education" you were receiving? In middle school and high school, did you have teachers who guided you towards finding your niche, or were your academic needs pushed to the side as they plowed through the curriculum to prepare for "The Test"? Gifted learners of any age, when their needs are pushed aside, are not only vulnerable to losing motivation in learning and losing opportunities to practice critical and creative thinking skills, but they may develop a negative self-perception, believing they are inconsequential (Dweck, 2015; Ricci, 2013). Did you feel cared for by your teachers? I don't mean just about whether they cared if you performed well on tests and showed proficiency in their classes, but really cared for your emotional, affective, and social well-being. Finally, I have pondered long and deeply about the impact I had on your fifth-*

*grade year. Did my enthusiasm for teaching have any positive effect on you as a learner, as a growing boy, as an intellectual mind so far ahead of the class?*

*Ryan, I am not looking for absolution from you; I do not even expect a response. This letter, although intended for you, will never be sent. It is a heartfelt admission of guilt from a teacher who was young, unaware of the unique needs of learners like you, and a bit intimidated by your incredible knowledge and abilities. I had the Bermuda Triangle of anti-intellectualism within me and did not even know it. It is my honest hope that you excelled in spite of me and that you reached for excellence and were able to grab it! Please know that you propelled me toward the teacher I am today. Although I know that I cannot erase the damage that has been done to countless gifted learners across the country, nor can I protect every child who spends time with non-supportive teachers or peers, I can offer them a chance to have their voices heard. Because of the impact you had on me, Ryan, the following letters have been composed. That they somehow reach other teachers and make an impact on their teaching of gifted learners is my ultimate goal. I am forever remorseful and thankful.*

*Your Fifth Grade Teacher,*

*Heather Holley*

~ ~ ~ ~

### The Landscape

The field of curriculum studies entreats educators to explore the political, social, and economic underpinnings of what and how we teach and learn with goals towards social justice and better world understanding. It necessitates that we strip away the common and accepted practices and assumptions held about our students, our society, and education as a whole to

discover their origins, to “defamiliarize the familiar” (Greene, 2007). In the case of this inquiry into gifted education, I will have to scale the fire tower, so to speak, to take a bird’s-eye view of the scene. Instead of the usual tree trunks, underbrush, and critters of the forest in my immediate focus, I must rise above and look back upon the paths I have taken, turn, and look toward paths yet to explore.

“Politics is about power” (Levin, 2008, p. 8), and as policy, that means there is domination over others. It is highly unequal with the least powerful having the least political clout (Levin, 2008). In addition to Levin, Freire and Foucault have pointed out the pervasiveness of this concept in America. It is no surprise, then, that the political landscape has had a prolific impact on gifted education. Proponents for the appropriate education for highly able students have been a part of American history since the early 1900s. Nowhere in modern history, however, has it been more politically motivated and supported than the mid-1950 "Space Race." After the launch of the first artificial satellite, Russia's Sputnik, beating the United States to the accomplishment, the focus (blame?) turned to public education (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Gallagher, 2015; Jolly & Robins, 2016; Matthews & Dai, 2014). This event spurred America to "reexamine its human capital and quality of American schooling particularly in mathematics and science” (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], n. d.). It is not surprising that a federal spending bill for education that had three times died once it entered the House of Representatives was rebranded as a defense bill and passed as the National Defense Education Act (1958). Because it was of national importance, identifying and nurturing intelligence and talent, especially in math and science, became paramount (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Gallagher, 2015; Jolly & Robins, 2016; Matthews & Dai, 2014). The bill’s seemingly inclusive language made funding available for all students “of ability” for higher education opportunities. With

historical hindsight, the wording harkens to the Spencerian question of worthy knowledge (Spencer, 1859), and others who so often asked, whose knowledge counts? And, who gets to make those decisions? Data does not appear to be available on the distribution of grants and financial assistance for African-Americans or other minority groups through the NDEA, but from a historical perspective, I expect that a meager percentage of "students of ability" were other than White men. Within the K-12 realm, however, counselor training for testing, counseling, and programs for gifted and talented students grew exponentially. As psychological studies became more prevalent and accepted in the field of giftedness and education, views of identifying these learners also experienced somewhat of a paradigm shift from traditional intelligence quotient (IQ) measures to a more holistic perspective that considered characteristics of creativity and leadership (Jolly, 2009). No national event of crisis has catalyzed America towards education reform since the 1950s, not even the terroristic attacks of 9/11. Our struggles now seem to be internal (Cross & Cross, 2005).

For at least the past quarter century, the educational endeavors of America's public school teachers and the learning opportunities of many of our students have been negatively affected by policies and mandates that originate well outside the classroom. Well-meaning leaders (I would like to believe), most of them far removed from the classroom, tangled with capitalistic opportunities and the democratic ideals of America, have come to us a wolf in sheep's clothing bearing plans to right the ills of our education, save the children, and preserve our national standing. For years, complaints were made about the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) because of the unrealistic reliance on test scores. As the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) has experienced reauthorization for over 50 years, it has grown and has become more detailed, digging the bureaucratic fingers deeper into what needs to be locally controlled.

Although each legislative reauthorization claims an answer to the American complaints, the greatest thorn remains: student and teacher accountability in the form of a snapshot of the year's learning—"The Test."

### Close to Home

Test scores from yearly assessments firmly connect public education to the purse strings of state and federal coffers by ensuring that schools provide appropriate services to those intended to benefit. Educational research that seemingly links student achievement test scores to teacher behavior creates perceptions that these test scores monitor the success of the schools and teachers (Craig & Ross, 2008). Test scores and school ratings drive many aspects of our local economy and societal status, which in turn increases the hierarchy of power and political authority over and within our schools. For instance, on a popular real estate site, *Zillow*, schools are rated and applied to the housing map. For convenience, the site links schools to more in-depth information including test scores. To most parents, the score is the gospel. There are no explanations of, validity of, or personal narratives for those numbers. The system is caught in a "catch 22" with its existence dependent upon public backing, both fiscally and supportively, but unable to earn it without performing at high levels. The high levels of performance come from assessments created to ensure that the children are learning and the teachers are teaching the standards they are supposed to. Having standards in education, as a whole, is not a bad thing. As educators, we need to have expectations for our students. When those standards become the only focus within the curriculum, the picture turns dull and lifeless.

## On the School Grounds

Rather than embracing the obvious realization that public schools are filled with a great diversity of learners who need various educational experiences and teachers whose experience and personal practical knowledge can guide them, programs have been designed to standardize teaching and learning—the polar opposite of what is appropriate. Maxine Greene stated it as “screen[ing] out the faces and gestures of individuals, of actual living persons” (1995, p. 11). To assure that the various programs work as they were designed, surveillance in the forms of students testing and teacher assessments have become the norm (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2000). This surveillance agency (Foucault, 1995) is controlling what teachers teach, when they teach it, and how to teach it. This invisible surveillance has created a hierarchy of power (Foucault, 1995) that, in turn, has created an environment of scripted, boxed, and teacher-proof lessons that are devoid of creative thinking or deep learning (Pinar et al., 2000), with classrooms “increasingly become testing hubs that de-skill teachers and disempower students” (Giroux, 2016). In an effort to make their voices heard, many parents in Georgia applied social pressure to educational policy-makers to address the standardized curriculum and consequent assessments that were being forced on the states in 2010 in the form of The Common Core Standards. Georgia’s response to her angry and concerned constituents was to “rebrand” (renaming rather than scrapping) the controversial plan; yet, schools are still under a great weight of testing and contrived accountability. By “schools,” it must be understood to mean “teachers.” Teachers, under pressure to generate capital in the form state test scores from *all* of their students, are left with little extra to give, especially when *all* of their students may include students with learning disabilities, students with behavioral or emotional problems, as well as on-level, high ability, and gifted students. With little left to give, many teachers under-utilize lesson

differentiation to meet the educational needs of gifted learners. Instead, many of these students are “left ahead,” a commonly used phrase in gifted education literature, waiting for the other students to catch up with them (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). In this light, young gifted learners become political, social, and economic pawns in an adult chess match.

Pinar believes that the reformation acts that have steered the educational paradigms for decades have led to “school deform” (2012, p. 15) instead of improvements. Noddings sees the process as “anti-educational reforms,” and wishes policymakers would “drop the dull project of standardization, the ill-conceived demand for higher test scores, and the sick enchantment with GPAs and rankings” (2013, p. 143). If our students who have unique potential are continuously trapped in stagnant educational milieus with teachers who are under the stifling structures of bureaucratic power, being fed uninspiring subject-matter, I do not foresee positive outcomes of creative and critical thinkers. We are stuck in an era of standardization in education. Our students have been born and raised in it. It is imperative that we find ways of emboldening them to develop personal agency for their future. Although Pinar and Noddings' comments speak for growing numbers of us, I hope that my interpretations presented here will also illuminate and educate those who read this study.

“Standards, assessments, outcomes, and achievement: these concepts are the currency of educational discussion today” (Greene, 1995, p. 9). Maxine Greene made this statement almost a quarter of a century ago; yet, the discussion had been ongoing for years before *Releasing the Imagination* (Greene, 1995) was published. Sadly, the discussion has not changed. Now, for more than thirty years, standardization of curricula and high-stakes testing have been the canon in America’s public schools. That means that the 3.6 million public school teachers who have an average of 14 years of experience know no other educational climate (Leowus, 2017). In an



effort to “close the achievement gap” and address the inequities in our schools, attention, and funds have been directed towards bringing low achieving or special needs students up to levels deemed proficient by state standards (Gallagher, 2004). While no one would suggest this is unimportant, there is a group of students, not traditionally marginalized, whose academic needs often are pushed to the side and devalued—the academically gifted. By pushing their needs to the side, these students are not only vulnerable to losing motivation in learning and losing opportunities to practice critical and creative thinking skills, but they also may develop a perception that their academic needs, and thus they personally, are inconsequential (Dweck, 2015; Ricci, 2013). This is a polarizing issue in America’s education system; yet, it is one that needs to be investigated for the social, political, and ethical influences it has on the creative and intellectual potential and educational opportunities of gifted learners within our public schools.

#### Autobiographical Roots

Every time I reflect on my educational past, I have to laugh. I might as well since others have! Most teachers recall growing up spending their time playing school with dolls, stuffed animals, siblings, and friends in preparation for the real classroom they would have one day. That scenario was never a part of my childhood. It was not until I realized the uselessness of my degree that I even entertained the idea of teaching. Some things happen for a reason; some things happen in spite of your life plan; some things happen because you *don't* have a life plan... The following letter not only explains my educational upbringing but also shows the wild ride that landed me in the most unlikely of places: in the gifted education classroom.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*To My Young Adult Self,*

*There is an adage that states, “Be careful what you wish for, lest you receive it!”*

*Heather, you are not going to believe this, but you are going to fulfill your dream of being a professional cheerleader! Your socializing and total focus on living life to the fullest are going to become central, driving forces in your journey. The journey is going to take you places you never imagined, and you will experience things along the way that will become life lessons. One thing you will grow to believe is that there are many versions of what is true, and they are contingent upon time, place, social contexts, and myriad other aspects. This, you will learn, is a postmodern worldview, a perspective that you have possessed without being able to name it. That will be a good thing to remember when I expound upon these statements. I know you; you want the details; so, here they are:*

*You will become a cheerleader for...children; you will become a teacher. Yep, crazy, huh? What’s even crazier still is you will spend the majority of your career as a gifted education teacher! Remember how you loved Ms. Learing’s fifth-grade class? Her experimental class with learning centers, collaboration, projects, performances, and learning contracts will come to mind often and inspire the way you teach. You will encourage your students to learn something new each day, to find creative ways to solve problems, and to stretch their critical thinking with the power of “Why?”*

*I bet you are wondering how you could possibly go from pompoms to chalk dust. It was not easy. It was not quick. It was not cheap. It was not always enjoyable; but, it was well worth it. The turning point was having to reinvent yourself as a learner after flunking out of college. (Yeah, prepare for that one.) Too embarrassed and clueless to find a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978) who could have helped you navigate study skills and writing techniques, you*

*will struggle alone. Although it will be a miserable experience, it will imbue you with the tenacity to stay focused on a task until you achieve it. Life lesson number one, White privilege does not earn you a degree; you must work for it.*

*After graduating with a BA in English, it becomes painfully evident that you really cannot make a career out of your degree. Mom will suggest that you go into education because you like school and perhaps you could be a cheerleading coach! Even in the depths of despair, she will focus on your strengths. You will reflect on your lackluster high school transcripts, your “time away” from college, and your friends who have already established their paths. You will doubt your abilities and that you know enough to be a teacher. Thankfully, you will have a husband who supports you and sees more in you than you ever could, and two amazing children who will teach you what it means to be truly gifted learners. You will begin your journey into education that will not stop until you are about to retire! Don’t think you will ever be complacent! On the contrary, you learn more about children as learners, curriculum, and pedagogy as each year passes. And when you decide that you want to earn just one more degree, you find that you have avoided the complicated conversations (Pinar, 2000) of education. Life lesson number two: never say you are finished with school. It will come back bigger and more intense than anything you have ever done.*

*Let me tell you about where you and I are now. I believe that I have one of the best teaching gigs available. I work with children who possess creativity, critical thinking skills, unique personalities, various interests, and a desire to learn. I can guide them towards unlocking their potential and talents and exploring new avenues of interests in a low-risk atmosphere. I have parameters in which to work that allow me to use my personal gifts and talents, and to continue to grow. I am still in awe of where I am considering my educational track record. As I*

*have shared, I did not enter teaching with the knowledge necessary to recognize gifted potential. It has taken years of experience to build the personal practical knowledge that allows me to reflect hermeneutically.*

*The institution of school is, among other things, a social construct. Social in that there are connections and relationships to be created. I have always enjoyed the institution of “school” because it gave me a place to socialize and make connections. If Dewey (1897, 1938) was correct in his idea of residual effects of life experiences building knowledge, and Vygotsky (1978) correct in his theory that learning is influenced by social contexts and “more knowledgeable others,” I was in a perfect element for learning! Somehow, as I floundered through school (as my transcripts indicate), I was building connections that would one day make sense. With education as an afterthought to my undergraduate degree, I returned to school with a new focus...to learn! So many concepts that had been swimming around my head, enjoying the space, started to gel. The proverbial lights started coming on. I was excited to share this transformation and found my niche in the classroom. Not always prepared for the various personalities and learning styles of my students, I found ways to make connections. Starting in high school Language Arts and Humanities, I felt I could help them make connections to life outside of the classroom. I shared new information with my students, as well as life lessons that would hopefully spare them lost years of existence that I felt I had squandered! Each year in the classroom added to what I knew about children, learning, and teaching, and what I believed. Without realizing it, I was developing an exceptional kind of knowledge: personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). Through diligence, I pursued advanced degrees, specialized certifications, and*

*National Board status. Perhaps I feel I have something to prove; but, that psychoanalysis will have to wait for another time.*

*Fast forward. After close to two decades of educating gifted learners and being a parent of two gifted children (now adults), I feel confident in my convictions and advocacy for gifted education. Once in the doctoral program of Curriculum Studies, however, I realized that I had been cruising through my career, gaining knowledge that agreed with me, with my pedagogy, with my view of life. It took the charge of “problematizing gifted education” to shake my world. I realized that I had never really questioned the curriculum taught in the core courses. The narrative that I lived was that of the dominant culture; it made sense to me. I had never questioned the gifted education that I was a part of, nor the gifted education of which my own children were a part. Shaken, I faced my positions of power and privilege, concepts so foreign to me at the time, and the many biases my stance has held. This was going to be a rocky ride as I searched for the answers to those indelible questions: What is worth knowing? and, Whose knowledge is of most worth? I add to those unforgettable questions several of my own that are less philosophical yet just as important. They will be revealed later.*

*Dewey wrote of profound differences that come from conflicting elements in a genuine problem; a place where sects arise and select a set of conditions that support their view and build buttresses against the other side (1902). From a new perspective, one that had to recognize and adjust to the life experiences built on White privilege, I realize that I have built buttresses for years! Although I had researched and written papers recognizing the imbalance of diversity within gifted programs, the validity of gifted education, the characteristics of gifted children, the influences of poverty on children’s potential, and various other topics, I continued to accept the students sent to my class with little wonder. I knew that diversity situations existed, yet my*

*classes looked like my school, or what I saw as my school, predominantly White and middle-class. By taking a multifocal view of gifted education overall, and more immediately within my school and the children I have taught, all of these issues can be found and serve as examples of ills that must be addressed. As the saying goes, "I can't see the forest for the trees." I am embedded in the education of gifted learners; however, it is time that the phenomenon be considered with a more critical lens for the impact power structures, political controls, and social influences have had upon our gifted students as well as the teachers who educate them.*

*I hope I have not scared you into buckling down and pursuing a career in something other than education! If I had not experienced the highs and lows of life, I genuinely believe I would not be as resilient and passionate as I am today. Go cheer well tonight. Your enthusiasm for life will continue, and you will fulfill your dream to be a professional cheerleader. You will matter to more than the ending score. You will matter to children!*

*Thank you for the memories,*

*Your Much More Mature Self*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

### Purpose

Elitist, privileged, White, politically driven, inequitable, equitable, commensurate, necessary. These are just a few adjectives along a continuum used to describe gifted education; and, when the topic arises in virtually any situation, controversy is close behind. For all but the last few years in my gifted education career, I have been soundly in the latter end of this continuum. Over the past few years, however, I have become painfully aware that what we gifted education teachers have comfortably nestled into may neglect the critical perspectives of gifted

education. Questions such as who is being excluded from opportunities for gifted services, and how are we supporting the status quo that we *know* is unfair have recently been highlighted, but have not been taken to the heart of “the program.” Fearful that I have spent (too) many years blindly comfortable in the faces of my students, the faces that currently represent the majority of gifted students in America—white and from middle-class families, I want to ensure that the remaining years of my career are spent with a critical consciousness toward diversity, care, power structures, as well as appropriate accommodations in gifted learning despite the standardization milieu.

The study is primarily for my personal growth and understanding; however, in addition to my own praxis, I want to find a way to open the eyes of teachers outside the gifted realm—those who are new to the profession, who may be unfamiliar with gifted characteristics, who may have their focus on struggling students, or who may even have adverse attitudes toward these children—so they have a better understanding of the potential they may be hindering. The purpose of this inquiry, therefore, is to delve deeply into the construct that has enveloped me for the past two decades, gifted education, as well as the perceptions young gifted learners have on their education in a continuing era of standardization.

I have been immersed in the education and advocacy of these children. This immersion has been my cloak and, sometimes, my dagger. It has shaped me in myriad ways. It has softened me towards the quirky, misunderstood students who annoy their classmates and exasperate their teachers. It has given me unbelievable patience for the incessant questions that seemingly come out of nowhere. It has allowed me to develop a sense of how far to push a child in her struggles to comprehend and when to prompt her with a nugget of information. It has also given me the strength to stand up for the underachievers and insist that their teachers look beyond the messy

assignment, the inattentiveness (ennui, perhaps?), and occasional below-average test scores. It has propelled me to fight for their rights as *learners*, not just as my students, so that they have equal opportunities for learning in our current standardized environment.

I have spent many years advocating for these learners. They have provided me with ample examples of how they feel short-changed in their education. Their comments have come to me from class discussions when we focus on what it means to be a gifted learner. I have received notes from students while they were in my class, when they were in high school, and once they matured to the point of being able to objectively reflect. Times innumerable, I have had conversations with young adults who find out I am a gifted education teacher. Often not a former student of mine but one of a gifted program, they recall the excellent experiences they had and how they lived for their "gifted day." I regularly hear from parents of students who have struggled to complete school, but remember the best times of their education were within the gifted classroom. These shared encounters, notes, class discussions, reflections, and fond memories have something in common that ties to the purpose of this inquiry...they are personal forms of communication. The very characteristics of letters, or the epistolary medium, are found within. They shared their stories with authenticity and an epistemological foundation of "truth" in the shared experiences (Jolly & Stanley, 2005). Focusing on a specific time and place in their learning lives, these stories tell of a time when the expectations of school did not match their educational needs.

It is my belief that caring teachers, administrators, and school-community members would have a better understanding and, therefore, insist upon a more supportive curriculum if they could hear what I have heard. As one of the four commonplaces of curriculum, Schwab (1978) saw the teacher as a knower and an integral component. He even acknowledged that she



could hold more than one expertise: possessing knowledge in teaching, as well as subject matter, students, and/or milieu (Craig & Ross, 2008; Schwab, 1978). In this light, I take the role of knower seriously, yet cautiously, as I venture hermeneutically into the past three decades of teaching, looking for a better understanding of gifted education in the current standardized setting and a remarkable way to share the inside perspective with those who are capable of making a difference.

Although I have never addressed my colleagues in this manner, the following letter reveals what I wish I could share.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*Dear Teachers,*

*With the beginning of another school year upon us, I want to share some insights into the minds, hearts, and souls of the children we have in common: gifted learners. For many years, I have walked among you, taking on the role of Teacher. I use the capital T to indicate the completeness of the position. The personal practical knowledge you have gained as a teacher is valued and respected. I put on the cloak of the Teacher, the one who understands your frustration with the students who ask too many questions, turn in messy work, disrupt the flow of the class, and make you often second-guess yourself. I have supported you by talking to the children who transgress upon your expectations and sternly admonish them for giving you less than their best. On other occasions, you have become frustrated with me because I point out that the behaviors you are so exasperated by are often characteristics of a gifted learner in their mismatched environment. The cloak starts to slip off, and the dagger of my advocacy becomes more evident. The behaviors that many of you expect from a gifted learner are stereotypical, not*

*realistic. I know the picture many of you have; you see a gifted child as one who is always attentive, does her work perfectly, is conscientious about time management, and is always prepared. This concept, however, is characteristic of a high-achiever, not necessarily a gifted learner.*

*On the contrary, Reis, Renzulli, Sternberg, and Van Tassel-Baska (names you have heard so many times in reference to gifted education) remind us that gifted learners usually learn quickly and often fail to see the reason for teachers continuing with the lesson. They may make connections between prior knowledge and new information in ways that escape most of their peers, leading to misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Their advanced levels of ability may be in one area or several, and they may even have a deficiency in a subject that overshadows their giftedness or potential. They are usually the ones who are not on the same sentence in the group-reading or appear to be doing something other than listening to the lesson. Although they may not be "with you" they are usually able to tell you what is going on or are able to ace the tests. These children may very well become impertinent or sassy, behaviors that rankle the most easy-going teacher; yet, their asynchronous development is generally the driving force behind it. The negative attitudes that come across are often legitimate questions he has of how the lessons are relevant to him. I do not condone the behavior, nor do I encourage you to accept it! I want you to recognize that these characteristics more commonly describe gifted learners. You are seeking the perfect student.*

*I have to be both a Teacher and an advocate for my students. It is a fine line to walk, and I have crossed the borders often. From the standpoint of a gifted education teacher, I have paid keen attention to my students' laments of bearing the "gifted" label. I have mined experiences from years of being both a Teacher and a gifted education teacher, the joys and lamentations*

*from dozens of gifted students, and the delights and pains from my colleagues. From the reflections of my positions, I hope to put into words what many of them have not had the power or platform available to them. I hope that you read the “Letters from the Classroom” with an opened mind and glean both the care that they feel you have for them and the growing despair they experience within the confines of the standardized curriculum. We can all learn from our students.*

*I get it. It is hard to be confronted with the possibility that what we have viewed as reality or truth is only a variation of it colored by our personal worldviews. Keep in mind that I am one of you; but, I am also a voice for my students. I have not come to this place without battle scars! It is my hope that you can better understand the children whose education you will influence so that they believe in themselves as learners and as valuable beings.*

*With Sincere Respect,*

*Heather Holley, Gifted Specialist*

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#### Theoretical Perspective

As it has been important for me to share the inside of the classroom with others who may have the ability to elicit change towards the educational opportunities for gifted learners, I have chosen to use autobiography and *currere* as theoretical frameworks for this inquiry. Although autobiography has been called self-indulgent, solipsistic, and pompous by some critics, I believe that it is the best way to share my experiences as they pertain to the education young gifted learners are receiving within our current educational milieu.

*Currere*, a theory developed and explored extensively by Pinar and Grumet (1976/2015), allows for exploring my lived experiences as they relate to developing a deeper and clearer understanding of educating this type of student (Morris, 2015). Pinar expressed the method of *currere*, the infinitive form of curriculum, as the “running of the course,” (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. vii). It involves considering one’s academic experiences, personal histories and identities so “we can see more of it and see it more clearly” (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. vii). Contrary to the act of running, *currere* requires one to slow down, to revisit the past, and “meditatively imagine the future” (Pinar, 2004, p. 4). From this journey of reflection and contemplation, and “in one’s own terms,” one is able to “analyze one’s experience of the past and fantasies of the future in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one’s submergence in the present” (p. 4). With this running and reflection “can come a deepened agency” (p. vii). To aid in the process that includes analyzing past experiences, I have chosen to employ Schwab's four commonplaces of curriculum as I attempt to make sense of the impact standardized curricula and high-stakes testing has had on gifted elementary-aged learners. Also within this interpretive study, I used hermeneutic imagination (Davis, 1991). Just as gifted education is multifaceted and kaleidoscopic, I feel the need to utilize as many tools as necessary, and I endeavor to meld them with few seams.

Schwab wrote extensively about the four commonplaces of curriculum—the teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu. Dewey, although spending many years advocating for student-centered education, also acknowledge the strong alliance among teacher, student, and environment (1987, 1902, 1916, 1929, 1938). Within gifted education literature, there is also a strong correlation to the interrelatedness of teacher, student, subject matter, and environment in works by Renzulli and Reis (1986, 1994, 1997, 2012), Sternberg and Davidson (1986, 2005), and

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) to name just a few. I believe strongly in the interconnectedness of these components of education, and have kept them central to the study. As each component, or commonplace, is vital to the balance of curriculum, they also merit a focus of their own.

I have chosen to employ the concept of teachers' personal practical knowledge as a basis for knowledge (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1996; Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). Because I have chosen to take an autobiographical journey in which I draw from my past educational experiences, personal practical knowledge supports and informs the study. The combination of theoretical and practical knowledge born of lived experiences lives within me (Elbaz, 1991). A more in-depth look at this theory follows in the Literature Review.

Finally, I utilized the hermeneutic imagination (Davis, 1991) to interpret the "data" collected through the reflective journey. Hermeneutics has been used abundantly in interpreting literature from esoteric Biblical texts to prose (Davis, 1991). I have chosen to apply hermeneutics in the interpretations because I have brought assumptions with this inquiry, have a well-developed knowledge-base, and know my participants well. Developing a clearer understanding that is not just another iteration of my knowledge is a goal of this inquiry; therefore, I will use Gadamer's practice for "developing new horizons" (Gadamer, 1994, 2006). Each of these theories and concepts is integral to my study. As with Schwab's commonplaces (Schwab, 1976, 1994), these theories and concepts balance the load of my journey.

### Questions Guiding My Research

As teachers and schools within the current era of standardization and high-stakes testing, are we benefiting or hindering our young gifted learners' education? To attempt to find answers, the main questions that guide my research are: What is the current educational milieu as

perceived by gifted learners? How is it affecting their learning opportunities? I also ask, How does the care their teachers express towards them influence gifted students' education? Because I have learned an immense amount from my teaching experience, I wonder, how have I affected students as I have evolved as a gifted education teacher?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature supporting gifted education, Schwab and his four commonplaces of curriculum, hermeneutic imagination, and the epistolary genre is extensive and expansive. Where possible, I have synthesized the information in an attempt to show the interconnectedness of my choices of theories, interpretive analysis, and subject matter(s). The explorative journey that follows also includes correspondence—letters—that hopefully add depth and character to the literature.

#### Schwab's Four Commonplaces of Education

The historical fluctuations that have riddled gifted education can be viewed from multiple perspectives, as can be most politically influenced institutions. Joseph Schwab (1973) posited that a complete curriculum must include four commonplaces: the teacher, the student, the subject matter, and the milieu. Omitting one, or letting one dominate would "omit a vital factor in educational thought and practice" (p. 509). Schwab was an educator, a philosopher, polymath (Roby, 2008; Westbury & Wilkof, 1978), curricular scholar, and "best known of all educationalists during the mid-1900s" (Connelly, 2013, p. 624), a time when educational reform was a central focus. Revered and respected by former students and those in the curriculum studies field, the publication of Schwab's "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum" (1969) shook the curriculum studies field by declaring it "moribund" and in danger of disappearing unless educators, reformists, and researchers focused on the *doing* of education rather than the *theorizing* (Eisner, 1984, 2014; Schwab, 1969). Until Schwab's groundbreaking work, researchers had rarely stepped inside a classroom as a field of study, and those that did were more often on "commando raids than to learn how that part of our culture actually operated"

(Eisner, 1984, p. 5). Schwab's impact has been huge, widespread, and long-lived. Although his popularity eventually waned (Eisner, 1984; Westbury & Wilkof, 1978), the practicality of his work can still be found in scholarly studies and as an underpinning for analyzing a plethora of curriculum topics. The controversial Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) is one timely example (Roskos & Newman, 2013). Within gifted education, however, scholarly discourse on Schwab's commonplaces is limited. Several theorists incorporate students, teachers, subject matter, and milieu, as well as the interactions among them, in their writings; yet, the credit to Schwab is virtually non-existent.

Schwab (1973) contended that there are four commonplaces in education: teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu. The concept of "commonplace" can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when people would write information, quotes, and references in a "commonplace book." These books held funds of knowledge that could be drawn upon in a variety of situations (Johnson, 2010, n. p.). Schwab's commonplaces of curriculum, analogous to the commonplace books of learned men and women centuries ago, hold funds of knowledge for curriculum. He defined commonplaces as tools for creating fully informed curriculum, "constructed by a certain mode of systematic comparison of the principles, premises, methods, and selections use by and in each enquiry" (1978, p. 339). The commonplaces must all be ranked equally and must inform the others lest one becomes dominant, skewing the focus of the curriculum. Schwab pointed out that too many paradigms in education had done that with unsuccessful results.

Craig (2008) adapts Michael Connelly's "walking around the curriculum tree" activity as a way to grasp multifocal perspectives. From different angles, represented by the four commonplaces, Connelly helps his students (and subsequent readers of the practice) "see" the



different perspectives. Experience or learning does not occur in a vacuum. There is “an inseparable connection between situation and interaction” (Dewey, 1938, p. 58).

Although it is difficult to describe and explain each commonplace without the interconnectedness of the others, the following is an attempt to delineate each. In keeping with the epistolary medium, one that I feel allows me to imaginatively construct my hermeneutic reflections and understandings of my study, I have synthesized the literature in letters from Gifted Education, the subject-matter commonplace; a representative for Milieu; Average American Teacher; and A Gifted Student. I have also expounded upon the information where necessary. To keep the flow of the medium, I will incorporate quotes from a variety of resources. Without them, I would be sharing my personal practical knowledge which could be construed as biased.

### Subject Matter

Subject matter is defined as bodies of knowledge; scholarly material (Schwab, 1973). Schwab stress that knowledge of subject matter should include what it means to be a practitioner of discipline as well. About subject matter, Dewey stated, “anything that can be called a study...must be derived from which on the outset falls within the scope of ordinary life-experiences” (1938, p. 73). It builds fuller experiences and gradually grows into what is presented as the subject matter. Synthesizing various perspectives, Deng and Luke (2008) posit there are three types of subject matter knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and curricular knowledge. (This begins to intersect with the *teacher* commonplace, an intersection that I am trying to avoid.) According to Schwab, subject matter in the practical sense is particular to the time, place, and students, and should be “treated as indefinitely susceptible to circumstance...and highly liable to unexpected change” (1978, p. 289). Lessons

and textbooks, therefore, need to be filled with “examples of the uncertainties, the differences in interpretations, and the *issues* of principle which characterize the disciplines” (Schwab, 1978, p. 270).

### Subject Matter for Gifted Learners

For gifted learners, subject matter can be very personal. Overall, however, it must be delivered as a cross-curricular, in-depth, complex opportunity. As often as possible, students must be able to create a learning experience that is important and challenging to them. Not only should the subject matter follow Schwab's conception of a dynamic entity, but it should be presented (or available) as such. The importance of the variety and complexity of subject matter for gifted learners of all ages can be supported by the immense amount of evidence-based curriculum units available for teachers and their students. The Center for Gifted Education at William and Mary School of Education has been a forerunner in this area for over 25 years, creating material in each of the content areas specifically “designed to respond to gifted learners' characteristics of precocity, intensity, and complexity” (Curriculum: The Integrated Curriculum Model, 2018). The context must offer challenging opportunities that provide generative situations if gifted learners are to perform optimally. Those situations must also demand high standards of excellence (Van Tassel-Baska, 2003). A Google search for "curriculum units for gifted students" revealed over four million results, with many of the highly important research names in gifted education offering a plethora of units for study (e.g., Davidson Gifted Center, Renzulli Learning Center, Torrance). It seems that the abundance of learning opportunities on a wide range of levels and topics dedicated to the specific needs of the gifted learner is not only a substantial capitalistic opportunity but also one of great importance in gifted education.

The following letter is written from the personified subject matter. As mentioned in the prologue, I used this literary method to “develop a greater sense of relation to and identification with the non-human entity” (Scopa, 2015, para. 4). In addition to the information given in the following letter, there are extensive publications that support the various conceptions of gifted education described. Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness is incorporated in classrooms across the country. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences has been a familiar pedagogical strategy for decades. Sternberg and Gagné have been foundational in many programs. As I have mentioned previously, I do not want my obvious positive stance on gifted education to overshadow the fact that not all is rosy. There are critics inside and outside the field that illuminate valid concerns—mainly, the underrepresentation of diverse populations in American gifted programs. Wherever the underrepresentation emerges, it remains a vital component to the fiber of gifted education in America, for they do not happen in a vacuum (Dewey, 1938).

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*Dear Teachers, Students, and Researchers,*

*I am Gifted Education, your subject-matter. In this letter, I will attempt to shed some light on the background and foundation of this study. Of course, I am biased about who or what I am; but, I will be as unbiased as I can. Much like Odysseus (Homer, n. d.), my journey has been fraught with ups and downs, following the political tides and social winds. I have had to plug my ears against the Sirens who have tried to sway my supporters and me toward devastating programs. I have had the misfortune of having to choose between Scylla or Charybdis, giving up on promising concepts for the survival of more acceptable "schoolhouse" ideas. And there have been many islands of lotus flowers, sacred cows, and possessive goddesses that have held me*

*hostage in the name of progress, only to be misused and abused, offering fodder for critics' firestorms.*

*Easily traced back to the teachings and discussions of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, gifted minds have been recognized and nurtured for centuries. These men, it can be said, must have been gifted in some sense of the word to earn their place in this academic arena. My history is well documented in an abundance of publications from official reports to research results, books, articles, and critiques.*

*As I reflect on my history through a present-day lens, it's no wonder that the critics of gifted education have been able to find fault in this field of education! Not only did educators focus on a unique group of learners, separating them from the general audience, but their conceptions of what comprised this group vacillated as the years went on. The concept was born from a need to appropriately teach a particular group of children: highly capable students or, as William T. Harris, superintendent of public schools in St. Louis, stated in his 1872 address to the National Education Association, "students with superior abilities" (NAGC, 2008). He recognized the need to "hold these bright pupils up to the work which they are capable" which would "[keep] them from acquiring habits of carelessness and listlessness" (Whipple, 1920, p. 12). It was evident then and remains so today that this caliber of learner must be challenged to maintain their interest and future learning. Where we are today was built by creative, critical, and daring thinkers—gifted thinkers, no doubt.*

*In 1869, Francis Galton (younger cousin to Charles Darwin) published Hereditary Genius, in which he concluded "one's sensory ability—that is, intelligence—is due to natural selection and heredity" (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p. 4; Galton, 1869). His theory influenced many psychologists' studies on nature versus nurture, eugenics, and intellectual heredity. With over a*

century of extended research on genetics and neuroscience in relation to intelligence, eugenics has been debunked, yet many of his ideas are still considered today. Over the next century, several empirical studies on intelligence emerged and influenced American education. In 1906, French researchers, Simon and Binet, developed a test to determine which Parisian students were of “inferior intelligence” so that they could be separated from the average students (Benson, 2003). Their test led to a single numerical outcome, or intelligence quotient (IQ). Lewis Terman brought the Binet-Simon test to the United States and “Americanized” it (NAGC, 2008). The following Stanford-Binet IQ test became the standard for many years. In addition to Terman, Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Lulu Stedman became forerunners in gifted research and opened the doors for gifted education in America’s public schools. Leta Hollingworth, referred to as the “nurturing mother of gifted education” (Colangelo & Davis, 2003, p. 7) and credited for coining the term “gifted” in reference to intelligently advanced children, worked with highly gifted children, ones with IQs in the 130-200 range, with a combination of regular curriculum and enrichment experiences. She published the first textbook on gifted education, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture* (1926) (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Held, 2010). Stedman worked with gifted children, setting up “opportunity rooms” in the University Training School at the Southern Branch of the University of California. There she recognized the need and made available individual learning opportunities for the varying levels of gifted children (Davis & Rimm, 1998; [humanintelligence.com](http://humanintelligence.com), 2016) and published the highly acclaimed *Education of Gifted Children* (1924). Where Hollingworth nurtured the “emotional education” of highly gifted students, and Stedman recognized the individual educational needs of gifted children, Terman focused on the psychological, physical, social, and professional development of “highly intelligent” children, (Clark, 1997; Davis & Rimm, 1998); concentrating on describing and

*defining giftedness through the belief that giftedness was hereditary (Benson, 2003; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; humanintelligence.com, 2016). His longitudinal study followed approximately 1500 gifted children through their adolescence, adulthood, and into their retirement years. Although his findings were impressive, the participants were typical for the time—predominantly White males. Terman's data has been used in recent work, making this study one of the longest-running studies of a large group of participants.*

*As was the leading protocol of the day, all were using the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, focusing on IQ as a determining factor of giftedness. During this time in America, those being identified and benefitting from gifted research and education were relatively local to the researchers—Stedman and Terman in California, and Hollingworth in New York—as well as predominantly white males from more well-off families. Their decades-long studies not only helped develop pedagogy for teaching gifted children, but they also helped determine that gifted children need supportive affective educational programs and debunked the myth that brilliant children were "weak, unattractive, or emotionally unstable" (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p.6). Their research continued, albeit localized, during a time in America when educational issues were put on the back burner as our collective attention turned to survival during the Great Depression (NAGC, 2008). Following the trajectory of American education (which, by the way, is said to be a mirror of the American political scene), the face of gifted education continued for generations to cater to the dominant culture: White and middle-class.*

*The IQ test, as you can imagine, is one area where many critics set their sights; for this I am thankful. Some of the most enduring critiques are that the test is unfair to the disadvantaged student, minimizes the importance of other domains in intelligence, has changed very little over the years, and leads to "scientific racism" (Gould, 1981). The IQ test would remain the gold*

*standard for many more years to come, especially after the shocking event that blindsided the national security of America: Russia's Sputnik becoming the first artificial satellite in space ("Sputnik spurs," 1957). This unexpected event shook Americans to the core, and prompted the United States to look for and develop math and science potential (NAGC, 2008, A Brief history: "1957"; "Sputnik spurs," 1957) and brought about a strategic national plan to tap into our brightest and most capable students—the National Defense Education Act of 1958 [NDEA] (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2013; "Sputnik spurs," 1957). Finally, attention was given to educating high ability students (Cross & Cross, 2005).*

*Whereas Sputnik became a symbol for national security in the 1950s, education is now struggling against the multiple reauthorizations of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (2001, 2009) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) firmly connect public education to the purse strings of state and federal coffers by ensuring that they provide appropriate services for those intended. Educational research that seemingly links student achievement test scores to teacher behavior creates perceptions that these test scores monitor the success of the schools and teachers. As I see it, we are fighting against the semantics of the Acts when we should be fighting for the education of our students. Thankfully, working for appropriate educative pedagogy below the radar of policies, several conceptions of giftedness were being researched and developed.*

*Every culture has a conception of giftedness and the standards by which they are recognized. America's conceptions of giftedness and gifted education changing over time give the perception to some critics as being unstable (Purcell, 1994). To others, however, it is perceived as being alive and dynamic (Treffinger, Nassab, & Selby, 2009). Between the mid-1980s and present day, there have been a handful of men and women who have viewed*

*intelligence differently. But, now, dear readers, these researchers ventured to open our eyes to the variability of what these unique learners could be. So, as the critics made valid points and attempted to shame us toward developing more equitable education, these pioneering theorists widened the net to identify more diverse potential and giftedness in American schools. To me, it is two sides of the same coin—if all students have the right to a quality education where they are given appropriate opportunities to learn, educators need to find ways to identify the students' areas of potential so they can be nurtured. My focus on giftedness within American schools is intentional; for it is here, Cross and Coleman (2005) remind us, that the majority of the development of giftedness takes place.*

*In 1972, a Congressional report focused on the needs of gifted and talented learners in America. Later called the Marland Report, it was instrumental because it recognized and named the diverse areas of giftedness: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability. (The latest iteration of the report, however, omits psychomotor ability). Also, the Marland Report created the first federal definition of gifted and talented. The definition, although not required, has been incorporated by most agencies in their definition of gifted. It has been revised several times within the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), and currently reads:*

*Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities [Title IX, Part A, Definition 22. (2002)].*



*Following this report, Joseph Renzulli, Robert Sternberg, François Gagné, and Howard Gardner introduced their perceptions of gifted learners which veered away from solely using IQ scores and toward the diverse areas of intelligence. Others added to the field with their perspectives of how to teach these unique learners, how to nurture them, and how to enhance the myriad potentialities of giftedness (i.e., Clark; Torrance; Van-Tassel-Baska). It was an exciting time within a field that fought against views of elitism, anti-intellectualism, and classism.*

*The conceptions of giftedness fall into several common categories—categories that are Schwabian (although not mentioned in the research) in that they focus on his four commonplaces of curriculum and education: the teacher, the student, the subject-matter, and the milieu. Not all of the commonplaces are apparent in the entirety of the conceptions; yet, they are evident enough to note. Most notably are the components of above average intelligence in general or in a specific domain, an environment conducive to this domain, creativity, and motivation. Renzulli's "three-ring" theory (1986), Sternberg's triarchic theory (1986), and Gagné's theory differentiating gifted and talented (1986) all share these components in varying forms. Other points focus on the outcomes of behaviors when two or more of the conceptions merge—products of the behaviors that are salient and "valuable" in the eyes of society. Still utilizing the societal values of the dominant culture to determine who qualifies or possesses the characteristics of a gifted learner (Islas, 2017; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1999; Sapon-Shevin, 1996, 2003), these conceptions have been instrumental in broadening the ways we see this unique learning potential. To broaden the view further by focusing more intently on the various domains of giftedness, Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences* (1983) purported that "every child has some level of each of the separate and distinct intellectual domains, or intellectual gifts: verbal/linguistic, mathematical/logic, musical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal,*

*naturalist, and existential. Gagné and Sternberg, although not as well-known on the classroom level, described a variety of learning and intelligences in their work that attended to the differentiation between gifts and talents (Gagné, 1986, 2005) and the analytical, creative, and practical influences on intelligence respectively (Sternberg, 1986; Giger, 2006).*

*I am writing about gifted learners as if they are continuously in development of intelligence, products, and creations; this is far from the intended! These characteristics are “found in certain people, at certain times, in certain circumstances” (Renzulli, 1997, p. 8), and sometimes fail to manifest what society would consider valuable contributions at all. This underachievement of learners with gifted potential is an area within my field that deserves and attracts much attention. It is so much so that the research camps of Renzulli, Van Tassel-Baska, Gagné, Gallagher, and others write extensively with the aim of reversing the trend.*

*All of these researcher/theorists have continued their work, making many iterations and extensions to their original conceptions, indicating (to me) that they welcome and have embraced change. Studies in the malleability of the mind and the neuroscience of giftedness, extensions of brain research from the 1970s, are evident in revisions and further iterations of familiar studies. Fortunate for educators, this research has become more teacher-friendly and classroom appropriate (Subotnik, Robinson, Callahan, & Gubbins, (Eds.), 2012). Intelligence, these authors agree, is not fixed, but instead malleable throughout our lifetime. With more research on the plasticity of the brain, how we learn, and how we create, scholars will have a greater understanding of giftedness. Subotnik et al. promise to bring a new angle to the dynamic nature of the field of giftedness with *Malleable Minds: Translating Insights from Psychology and Neuroscience to Gifted Education* (2012).*

*While all of these theorists have focused on giftedness and gifted education, their conceptions vary. American society has benefitted from the theories that moved away from the singular test-based (IQ) concept of giftedness toward a more complex or multi-dimensional one (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2004). From the singular view of giftedness being measured by an IQ score to multi-dimensionality and diversity, and to the neuroscience of giftedness, the history of gifted education offers an opportunity for more profound understanding of a social construct of giftedness. With the enormous rapidity in which technology advances, there is no reason to believe that this work will not continue. As it continues, there will be critics to balance the public's availability to information.*

*Stay tuned, dear readers, as I, Gifted Education, evolve, develop and publish new taxonomies, and make new histories.*

*Humbly Submitted,*

*Gifted Education*

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## Milieu

Milieu is defined as a person's social environment (Oxford Dictionary, n. d.). As one of the four commonplaces of curriculum (Schwab, 1978), it can be as immediate and concrete as the classroom in which a student sits and the community in which he lives, or as abstract as a sociocultural realm (Eisner, 1984/2014). For gifted learners, milieu is especially important because of their astute intuition and sensitivities (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988). Inherent in a standardized era of Schooling are social messages of anti-intellectualism, equity over excellence,

and sameness over uniqueness. Many theorists weigh in on the magnitude that milieu plays on education, as we will learn from our next letter from “Milieu” itself.

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*Dear Readers,*

*I am Milieu. I represent the presence of the immediate environment, the attitudes of those who share the environment, and the level of understanding and support of the community.*

*Relevant milieus include where the learning will take place—school, classroom, playgroups, sports groups, family (and all attitudes within), and the cultural climate. Particularly crucial to gifted students and gifted curriculum is the possible influence of anti-intellectualism and a high value on conformity (Hofstadter, 1963; Schwab, 1978). Schwab asked, “What are the conditions, dominant preoccupations, and cultural climate of the whole polity and its social classes, insofar as these may affect the careers, the probable fate, and ego identity of the children whom we want to teach?” (1978, p. 367). This attention to detail, if I did not know better, seems written especially for gifted learners.*

*With any concept or programming that accepts some students over others, there are levels of acceptance. In the local community of my inquiry, where the enrollment in gifted programs averages 12 percent (2013-2014 Gifted enrollment, n .d.), significantly higher than the national average of 7 percent (2013-2014 Enrollment estimates, n .d.), it would be reasonable for me to expect a supportive community toward gifted education. With the elementary gifted program, the parents and students who have been a part of it, the teachers who buy into its ideology, and the businesses who benefit from the students who have participated in the advanced education offer a supportive environment. The recent advancements in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and science, technology, engineering, art, and math*

*(STEAM) curricula, as well as the local cyber-security community, have added a positive attitude toward gifted, or at least high-ability, education. From a broad view, do we want students who have to be told what to do rather than use critical and creative thinking skills? I believe our community supports intelligence, and therefore, supports gifted education. When, however, it becomes a personal loss, perhaps where one's child did not qualify for the program, feelings can cloud the overall benefits.*

*I must mention the concept of nature vs. nurture here. The “concluding” interpretation of which is more important or has more influence on a child's cognitive ability is that they are intertwined. “Giftedness requires social context that enables it to mature” (Tannenbaum, 2003, p. 54). Their measurable biological differences are the result of continuous interaction between their genetic makeup (nature) and the myriad opportunities provided by their environment (nurture) (Clark, 1997; Renzulli, 1978, 1986). Although the teacher is a substantial part of the nurturing environment, she will be discussed later. What follows would seem to be appropriate for any educationally enriching environment; yet, the sensitivities of most gifted learners are particularly heightened and attuned to the various milieus that comprise their “world.”*

*I consider the classroom environment as the most immediate milieu outside of the home. Physically, the environment should have abundant and diverse resources available to the students. Resources need to be in personal, print, and technological forms of numerous levels, topics, and domains. Stimulating and thought-provoking sights (but not so many that the students are visually overwhelmed) should be visible throughout the space. Various configurations of workspace, including sound and lighting options, are appropriate. More importantly, however, is that the social context of the classroom enables giftedness to mature. Socially and emotionally, the environment must be as non-judgmental as possible. Gifted students need a space where they*

*are encouraged to take risks in their learning, experiencing nurturance, urgings, encouragement, and even pressures from a world that cares (Tannenbaum, 2003).*

*Csikszentmihalyi, a renowned voice in creativity development, considers learning environments as the most influential component in shaping creative activity in gifted learners. Giftedness does not develop in a vacuum but interacts with particular domains or fields in sensitive and meaningful partnership (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).*

*Of course, there are myriad milieus or environments outside of school that influence gifted learners. Neighborhoods, peer groups, sports teams, religious and ethnic groups to which the child belongs are just a few. The attitudes towards the conception of giftedness as well as the unique dynamics of each group have considerable influence on the gifted learner. Just as the political tides sway public view on issues, so does popular culture. High-profile figures such as entertainers and sports figures have an enormous influence on public opinion. Harkening back to the mid-1950's space race when marketing through food, clothing, literature, and other forms of entertainment made intelligence cool, desirable, and futuristic, the American milieu was pro-science, pro-math, pro-education, pro-intelligence. Recently, sports figures, entertainers, scientists of various forms, and other well-known intellectuals have emerged to support STEM and STEAM tracts and futures for our young learners. Golfer Phil Michelson and his wife Amy in conjunction with the National Science Teachers Association and Math Solutions created the ExxonMobil Teachers Academy. This partnership has impacted over 1,400 teachers and 30,000 students across America (Exxonmobil, 2015). Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist, has a phenomenal following for his radio show, podcasts, and televised episodes of space-related themes. He is accessible to elementary children through his engaging books, as well. No doubt, his knowledge and passion for space are influencing a new generation of learners. Bill Nye "the*

*Science Guy" is known by virtually every student who came through public schools within the past two decades, and is revered as a kooky but cool intellectual. Through his videos, Nye explains scientific concepts by using experiments, analogies, and catchy tunes. His relevant topics and ability to connect with students of various ages and ability-levels continue to enrich classroom lessons. Outside of the classroom, his connections to space exploration as The Planetary Society CEO strengthens the social support of intelligence. Whether as a marketing tool or a philosophical drive, each time a role model backs a product, an ideology, or a way of life, there are followers ready to take it in.*

*In addition to the recent role-model support, clothing styles have jumped on the bandwagon. Graphic t-shirts, especially for young girls, have created ways to declare their positive attitudes about being smart, strong, independent, and creative. In 2016, Hidden Figures, a movie based on the true story of three African-American women who were the brains behind the men of NASA during America's most significant space operation: sending a man into space and having him return safely. Not only did this movie celebrate intelligence, but it also celebrated the intelligence of two underrepresented populations: Blacks and females. Television shows are excellent barometers of society. Since millions of dollars are at stake, networks rarely risk a time slot on a storyline they do not see as profitable. Geeks and nerds better be profitable if they are to win a coveted timeslot. Scorpion is one that had a four-year streak. A team of eccentric geniuses and "misfits" work with Homeland Security to keep America safe. Weekly, Walter O'Brien and his crew discover a sinister high-tech plot to thwart the safety of the United States; and, through the team-work, brilliance, and luck of "Scorpion," the threat is eliminated. With a "normal" mom and a prodigy of her own thrown into the mix, America connected with the intelligent characters (and nail-biting expectations) and pulled for their knowledge,*

*creativity, and critical thinking skills to save the day (Scorpion, 2014-2018). On the comedy scene, who would have ever expected a show about a group of scientists and one “blond” to become a pop culture phenomenon? The Big Bang Theory has been just that. Since 2007, this show has talked about geology, space, quantum physics, computer science, biology, and “Flags of the World,” topics that have no doubt spurred its viewers to Google things they have heard. More than that, it has changed the public perception of scientists from that of boring introverts to that of humans with varied interests. Many other movies and shows support intelligence in a positive light. The enduring outcome is that “science is socially and culturally embedded” (Li & Orthia, 2016), and it works in my favor; in Milieu’s favor.*

*With their inherent sensitivities, gifted learners are more attuned to the attitudes and milieus than most of their age-peers (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988). If the milieus in which the gifted learner are steeped in anti-intellectualism, equity at the expense of excellence, or if the expectations for excellence in education are no longer deemed a standard, cultivating giftedness will be in grave danger. At the very least, the research indicates that our gifted students are receiving mixed messages (Tannenbaum, 2003), a trend that must be turned around to a globally positive and caring milieu.*

*Sincerely Caring,*

*Milieu*

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Obviously, it takes more than graphic t-shirts and sitcoms to create a milieu supportive of gifted education. From the perspective of these socially embedded ideas, however, I believe more people are in favor of building an intelligent society, and that includes the multiple



domains of intelligence, the interconnectedness of intelligences, and the future developments of intelligence.

### The Student

Schwab pointed out that the student must be understood before he can benefit from a curriculum. Dewey (1902) believed that every student is unique with unique interests that should be the basis for their education. The unique characteristics of gifted learners in America should be known by their educators and those developing curriculum.

### Characteristics of Giftedness in America

Understanding the students who will benefit from the curriculum cannot be generalized. Schwab (1971) posited that the curriculum reformation must focus on the specifics of education to be relevant. That included the specific students of a particular time and place under certain circumstance (a concept echoed by Renzulli). Schwab (1973) posited that as much as possible needed to be learned about the particular students. This would include a myriad of domains, including their age and the general abilities of that age, propensities for the group, what they are ready for, and how to teach them.

Knowing and appreciating the characteristics and behaviors of “typical” gifted learners as well as the unique differences of each student is of utmost importance for the teacher of the gifted. Although there are more similarities with their age-peers than differences when it comes to noncognitive aspects, researchers of the variety of conceptions of gifted behaviors (e.g., Clark, Gardner, Reis, Renzulli, Rimm, Sternberg, Van Tassel-Baska, etc.) believe there are some prevalent characteristics or traits recognized in gifted learners. I must note that not all are necessarily present in any one person, nor that any one of the traits necessarily indicate giftedness.

Oddly, no universal definition is used to identify a gifted learner. It is imperative that you learn as much as you can about your students in order to have a complete and balanced curriculum (Schwab, 1971). You have to know about specific students at a particular time under certain circumstances (Renzulli, 1986; Schwab, 1973). The closest America has come to a national definition came from the Marland Report (1972). With the dynamic nature of our brain, intelligence, and societal acceptance, the National Association for Gifted Children (one of three prominent organizations for gifted learners and their education) revised their definition of giftedness in 2010 to be:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, and sports).

States devise their own definitions and qualifying matrices for giftedness. Whereas this may come across to some people who are in opposition to “giftedness” as unstable (Purcell, 1994), I hope you see the dynamics of it (Treffinger et al., 2009).

*Abilities*—High levels of abstract thinking, verbal, spatial, and numerical reasoning; advanced vocabulary and verbal skills; read earlier than age-peers, two grade levels higher on average; read widely and more quickly; enjoy word-play, metaphors, puns, and synectics (finding connections between seemingly unrelated things or ideas); excellent memory, powers of abstraction, conceptualization, and synthesis; learn at a different rate; crave depth in areas that interest them; capacity for acquiring and appropriate use of advanced amounts of formal and tacit knowledge; unusual or quirky sense of humor; good problem-solvers; fluent, flexible, elaborate,

and original thinkers (creative); preference to communicate with adults; have richer and more complex learning structures necessary for continued building of knowledge.

*Affective Domain*—physically and emotionally sensitive; high sense of in/justice, right and wrong, loyalty; may question authority if they feel an injustice has occurred; may develop skeptical, critical, and evaluative attitude; perseverance and dedication for areas of high interest.

The characteristics and traits above are not exhaustive, especially when one may consider the specific conceptions of giftedness. The overarching notion of asynchronous development, or the unmatched development of age, cognitive, physical, emotional, moral, and socio-cognitive expectations in a child's development, must be realized as the most common thread in gifted learners. Prevalent in gifted research, it cannot be stressed enough that gifted learners have unique academic and affective needs that cannot adequately be met in today's regular classroom settings (Brown & Wishney, 2017; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Cross & Cross, 2005; Gallagher, 2003, 2004, 2015; Geake & Gross, 2008; Jolly & Robins, 2016; Marland, 1972; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Renzulli, 1978).

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*Dear Teachers,*

*I speak to you on behalf of quirky kids who seem to burst onto the scene with a sense of adventure in learning. The ones who ask questions off topic, not to get you mad, but to get an answer to a tickle in the brain that has been pleading to be investigated. The ones who know the answers before you ask it. The ones who cannot hide their boredom. The ones who push every button you have and seem to enjoy it. The ones...I am A Gifted Child.*

*I know there are several ways to be identified as a gifted learner where I live, so it makes sense to me that we are not all alike. There are no blood tests or scientific images that can be done to recognize a gifted learner as of 2019. It cannot be overlooked, however, that there are common characteristics found when we are viewed broadly. Remember that not all are necessarily present in any one person, nor that any one of these traits indicates giftedness. Above all, you must get to know my “present state of mind and heart” (Schwab, 1973, p. 503).*

*I learned to read at a very young age, maybe four. Something just clicked in my mind when Mom or Dad read to me. The pictures told a story, but the tiny pictures all in a line began to speak to me. They said the same thing that Mom said! I realized that those tiny pictures in a line were words. Words repeated and were there in other books. They were on signs over the road, on cereal boxes, on signs in stores, and at the bottom of the videos I watched and sang along to. They were everywhere! “Read a lot, learn a lot” became my mantra. Read I did, and learn I did.*

*I remember one day in kindergarten when my teacher was reading the instructions from a worksheet to the class. “Circle the red items,” she read. “It says to underline them,” I told her. Maybe she misread it. I didn’t mean to show disrespect! Thankfully, my two teachers saw something in me other than a cheeky five-year-old. After sitting with them for a while, reading whatever they asked me to, they made the discovery that I could read and read far beyond my peers. Mom knew too but had no idea what was “normal” for kindergarteners. Although many children learn to read in kindergarten, this was my first noticeable characteristic of giftedness within the school setting.*

*No one told me that my reading level was different from most of the other kids. I had a hard time understanding why we were still learning letter sounds when my teachers could just*

*tell the others that when you put them together they made words, and those words would open their worlds to dinosaurs, Magic Tree Houses, talking elephants, how to take care of rats, all about space, what life was like “on the prairie,” and so much more! Looking back, this lack of understanding followed me throughout elementary school.*

*Boredom led to a lot of extra talking, picking at other children, and generally getting into trouble with my teachers. Thankfully, in second grade I had a teacher who recognized my advanced abilities and made arrangements with the third-grade teacher to let me join her class for Language Arts. Looking back, she probably did that for her sanity rather than for my benefit! It didn't squelch my active nature. When she told Mom that I was “the most hyperactive child she had ever taught,” I was sitting in my favorite place, a claw-foot tub filled with pillows, reading intently. Hyperactive? What in the world did that mean?*

*The following year, I was able to go to a class with a different teacher once a week where we worked on projects, used computers, and read lots of books on so many topics. There were only a few of us, but it was a magical time whenever it was “Challenge” day. The other days of the week were too quiet, too structured, and too boxed-in for my mind. I couldn't really put it into words at that time, but now, I realize the gifted education teacher “got me” and the others in her class while my other teacher didn't even seem to like me.*

*Still later in elementary school, in fifth grade, I was becoming a mess. I failed to do my homework and sometimes my classwork. It was not because I couldn't. It was because I had not found the value in doing the work. It didn't fulfill me, enrich me, or even interest me. Where was the relevance? There certainly wasn't a challenge to the task. I did well on the tests, and that was from just being present in the classroom when the teacher talked about it. It did not win me favor from my teachers. My interpersonal skills were suffering, my self-esteem was tanking, and*

*the relationship with my parents was getting rocky; I was only in fifth grade. This was not a good sign for my life in school that was yet to come.*

*By the time I was in middle school, I was slipping further into despair. Our country was under attack by outside forces that I had no previous concept of. Where was our safety? Who was in charge? I became extremely attuned to current events and wanted to discuss them with my teachers. Although I did not have the words or understandings for it then, I was beginning to develop personal agency that would separate me from the majority of my peers, or I should call them classmates, or the other teens that breathed the air that I did in school. I was not understood, was seen as weird, egg-headed, know-it-all, "grade-curb crasher," and was generally disliked. Looking back, there were only a few teachers who championed me. The majority, I hate to say, disliked me or barely tolerated me. Understood me, nurtured my education, tried to guide me...no. Although research does not show a strong correlation between giftedness and depression, I fell deeply into a depression that filled my head with thoughts of self-harm, hate, and rage. It was not until college did I find a path for me. That was not going to be easy either, but at least I was freed from the entanglements of School and schooling.*

*Oh, I have many characteristics of what America has deemed as a gifted learner. I would say that I am the antithesis of the stereotypical gifted child—a teacher-pleaser, straight As, perfect work, and happy with life: who even created that stereotype?! I was an early reader, voracious learner, had an extensive vocabulary (and enjoyed using it!), appreciated diverse topics with depth, had a great sense of justice and loyalty, thrived on challenging conversations with adults, and loved solving problems. I also had very little tolerance for "stupidity," insincerity, posing, and shallowness. When you think about high school, well, that covers the majority of the students. I was not popular by any means, and I was fair game for bullies.*

*Many people think that gifted learners have it all: intelligence, popularity, a good future, and happiness. In a perfect world, perhaps. In reality, we often feel the world that our peers just see. It is in the feeling that we either grow or we get beat down. We come into this world with potential. How we are nurtured as young learners can be the determining factor in our becoming adults with creative, critical, and intellectual abilities. I implore you to rethink us. Champion us. You may be the catalyst that sparks one of us to change the world!*

*I am just one,*

*A Gifted Child*

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### The Teacher

The teacher has been discussed previously in this work as being the lowest in the hierarchy of the power structure yet having the greatest influence on a student (Feiman-Nemster & Floden, 1986). Learning should emerge from the interests of the student making it the educator's responsibility to be in tuned to the student's musings, queries, and interests (Dewey, 1897, 1902). She must be capable of selecting the influences of society and teach how to respond to them (Dewey, 1897). Not only do teachers have to know their students, they "have the right and responsibility to know themselves" (Ayers, Quinn, Stovall, & Scheiern, 2008, p. 309).

### Teachers' Personal Practical Knowledge

An important knowledge that teachers must have, according to Dewey (1987), is knowledge of social conditions in order to interpret the child's powers accurately. Teachers create a special kind of knowledge that often determines their praxis: personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1996; Connelly,

Clandinin, & He, 1997). Also, it often becomes a deciding factor for success or early burn-out (Clandinin & Huber, 2005). Research shows that “educational quality hinges on the knowledgeableability of practitioners and those practitioners studying their schools and situations to improve their knowledgeableability” (Vanassche & Kelshtermans, 2015), and that teachers develop special knowledge that becomes a valuable commodity within curriculum. The knowledge goes beyond that of the subject matter, the students, and pedagogy. The special knowledge is “positioned at the interface of theory and practice in teachers’ lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 24). Taking the epistemological view that it is based on a teacher’s life history (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998), her feelings, values, needs, and beliefs (Elbaz, 1983), this knowledge is personal. On another level, this knowledge underpins practical knowledge as “those beliefs, insights, and habits that enable teachers to do their work in schools” (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986, p. 512), and allows for the knower to meet the demands of teaching (Paradowski, 1989). Practical knowledge is situational, specific, and deliberative towards action. A “working knowing that guides action” (Gholami & Husu, 2010, p. 1520) within the context of school makes this knowledge practical. Intertwined and composed of both kinds of knowledge, a truly extraordinary concept emerges: *personal practical knowledge* (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1987, 1992, 1995, 1996; Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). Clandinin defined personal practical knowledge as “...knowledge which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person’s being. Its meaning is derived from and understood in terms of a person’s experiential history, both personal and professional” (1985, p. 362). Other researchers have described it as knowledge of teachers, developed by teachers themselves (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015), a tacit understanding (Paradowski, 1989; Schubert & Ayers, 1992), and the sixth sense that comes with experience in the classroom (Schubert & Ayers,



1992). It is often considered a key factor in a teacher's success (Clandinin & Huber, 2005), and without it, she may become overwhelmed, frustrated, and burned out (Gholami & Husu, 2010). For teachers, this is validation that their "...knowledge plays a critical role in teaching" (Feiman-Nemster & Floden, 1986, p. 514) and that they are knowledgeable beings.

The importance of personal practical knowledge is prodigious when it is recognized as a valid epistemology. Teachers interact with a multitude of daily experiences, most without having to stop and think about what to do. The tacit nature of the responses, or the "intuitive conception of the general nature of things" (Paradowski, 1989, p.118), builds on previous experiences, makes connections, and lies in wait for the future need for it. Being in the classroom with the students interacting in innumerable ways for hours and days and weeks, teachers can see "nuance, subtlety, and complexity" (Schubert & Ayers, 1991, p. vii) that become part of their knowledge. Within any profession, experiences of this magnitude are invaluable. As a teaching professional, they are irreplaceable.

Personal practical knowledge, as irreplaceable as it is, is not without its critics. Fernstermacher warns that a teacher claims "to have practical knowledge does not release them of the obligation to show how it is objectively reasonable to believe what they are contending" (as quoted in Clandinin & Huber, p. 27-28). How can a teacher's knowledge be tested? What counts as knowledge? (Feiman-Nemster & Floden, 1986). Harkening back to the values and beliefs that are building blocks of a teacher's personal practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1983), what power structures are at work, either for the benefit or detriment of the teacher? Although this concept is viewed in a positive light, not all life experiences intertwined with teaching experiences lead to positive outcomes. In response, Feiman-Nemster & Floden (1986) posit that, based on personal practical knowledge, "actions must maintain faith in what to do, and must be

justified on basis of public criteria rather than private ones” (p. 514). As a central figure in an educational milieu, the teacher claims a prime position for developing knowledge of Schwab’s four vital commonplaces of education. Teachers’ personal practical knowledge, recognized as a form of valid expertise, supports this study.

#### Teachers of Gifted Learners

Teachers of the gifted are expected to possess the same characteristics of the general education teacher; however, successful teachers of gifted students develop skills and knowledge in areas of expertise not required in general education (Croft, 2003). Those educators with more expertise tend to engage more deeply with their students in questioning levels, interests, and the transfer of knowledge. Also, they play the role of counselor, consultant, and coordinator, working with the students, the teachers, and the community.

#### Teachers as Gatekeepers

Although the more theories and models of gifted education address the multi-dimensionality of giftedness, and consequently have used over a decade’s worth of data to quantify the underrepresentation of minority groups within gifted education programs, studies show that gifted programs still fall short of mirroring the demographics from which they are drawn. Data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (2013-2014) show that out of the approximately 50 million public school students in the United States, 24.8 percent are Hispanic/Latino, 15.5 percent are Black, 50.4 percent White, 4.8 percent Asian, and 4.8 percent are of two or more races. Georgia's demographics for the same years are 13.3 percent are Hispanic/Latino, 37.1 percent Black, 42.7 White, 3.5 percent Asian, and 3.1 percent of two or more races. The fact remains that the majority of nominations for gifted testing originate from classroom teachers who are predominantly white, and from middle-class backgrounds, and they

may not consistently (or ever) recognize gifted traits and characteristics in culturally diverse or lower socioeconomic children (McBee, 2010). Giftedness manifests itself in different ways in different cultures and settings. To understand them, we must be willing to invest time and attention to familiarize ourselves with the various cultures and settings (Borland, 2003). In Georgia, students have several options for qualifying for gifted services, and we are constantly working on ways to identify underrepresented populations. With teachers as the main “gatekeepers” to possible gifted services, it is vital that we learn to recognize culturally diverse potential. Fortunately, there are many programs being piloted to address this concern. It will not happen overnight, or magically, or without effort. The outcome, however, promises to be a fresh perspective that diverse cultures offer, and new ways of creating and thinking (Li & Orthia, 2016). So, it stands, after more than a century of gifted history, no matter what theoretical stance or conception of giftedness society may have, unless the teachers are educated in ways to identify gifted potential from culturally diverse populations, the face of our gifted programs will remain mostly white and middle-class.

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*To All Concerned,*

*I have an average of 14 years’ experience in the classroom (Loewus, 2017). From these years I bring my epistemology and flexibility in my pedagogy; my characteristics and personality; my political affiliations; and my championed causes. I also bring my biases. I represent the majority of American public school teachers, especially on the elementary level...I am a White Female. Why do I feel that it is important to tell you this? Although I am, to use a euphemism, low woman on the totem pole, I am still considered the leader of the*

*classroom, acting as a “representative and agent of the interests of the group” (Dewey, 1938, p. 58). It is my business to see “in what direction an experience is heading” (p. 59) and use my experience to guide it. Teachers are the lowest person in the hierarchy of educational power but the one with the greatest influence on the students (Feiman-Nemster & Floden, 1986).*

*Unfortunately, the belief in the role of the teacher as a “passive transmitter of knowledge” has had a long and disturbing existence (Elbaz, 1981, p. 43). Freire called it a “banking method” of teaching in his portrayal of oppressive pedagogy, where students are receivers of knowledge rather than participants (2000). This is far from reality.*

*Each year, I am charged with nominating students for gifted testing. I have taught children who are identified as gifted; some are great to have in class while others dumbfound me. Often, the ones I nominate do not qualify. I have been told that I need to be more diverse in my gifted nominations. How am I supposed to nominate a child if they do not do their work, behave well in class, and show motivation to do more work? Also, how am I supposed to recognize “potential” from cultures different from what I know? Not until my students demonstrate giftedness by showing respect, doing their work excellently, demonstrating that they need to have enrichment activities, and can afford to spend time away from class will I feel right nominating them. I am the primary gatekeeper of gifted nominations. Without my nomination, your child may never get the opportunity to show his or her intellectual or creative abilities on the battery of tests used for identification. I am White, middle-class, and cluelessly squandering untapped potential. I am sorry to disappoint you.*

*Simply,*

*An Average American Teacher*

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### Hermeneutics and Hermeneutic Imagination

“Hermeneutic imagination works from a commitment to generativity and rejuvenation and to the question of how we can go on together in the midst of constraints and difficulties that constantly threaten to foreclose on the future” and “...has the capacity to reach across national and cultural boundaries to enable dialogue between people and traditions superficially at odds...” (Smith, 1991, pp. 187-188). It challenges us to venture into what we mean when we use certain words by problematizing the usual categories for understanding those words. With a general definition of hermeneutics previously explained, and to better grasp this concept, the word *imagination* needs exploration. Merriam-Webster defines imagination as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality” (Imagination, n.d.). Dewey saw it as a stage of knowledge, cognitive development, and power in action, and involving the whole being (1916). “Imagination...permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (Greene, 1995, p.3). It “enables us to perceive, uniquely interpret, and express in a new way” (Lake, 2006, p. 34).

Imagination has been the saving grace for many people found in every domain—even education. It allows those stuck in the world created by others to venture into devising their own. Imagination encourages our personal meaning-making and action (Lake, 2006) with the power of realizing what is not present (Dewey, 1916). It has been the catalyst for new inventions, improved ideas, enriched lives, and enhanced technologies. In hermeneutics, it allows for finding possibilities yet to be and encourages new realities into existence. From a generative perspective, imagination allows countless avenues to be explored. When it is hermeneutically generative, deeper considerations for "new horizons" are conceivable.

Imagination grows not by seeing a variety of things but by seeing the same thing from many different angles or perspectives (Kohak, 1978). Coming from the Latin verb *imaginari* meaning “to picture oneself,” the word invokes a reflexivity aspect (Pardue, 2003). Although everyone has imagination, some may lack eidetic imagination, capable of imagining facts but not new ideas (Kohak, 1978). The reflexivity of imagination marries well with the hermeneutic approach to interpretation as well as the practice of *currere* (Pinar & Grumet, 1976). Smith posits these requirements for utilizing the hermeneutic imagination: deep attentiveness to language, deepening one's sense of interpretability of life itself and rescuing the specificities of our lives from the burden of their everydayness to show how they reverberate within grander schemes of things.

A deep attentiveness to language draws on Schleiermacher's and Gadamer's intense focus on the importance of language within the processes of fusions of horizons, or understanding. The linguistically (a term used by Gadamer) of a situation included a study of the etymology; historical uses; and predispositions of metaphor, analogy, and structure. Atkin posits that our language “contains evidence of its malleability and evolution, reflective of political, economic, and social changes already lived” (as cited in Smith, 1991, p. 200). It elucidates who we are culturally.

By deepening our sense of interpretability of life, we cannot focus on the familiar narratives and culturally predetermined interpretations of our daily lives. The hermeneutic imagination calls for us to explore new discourses, to view life through different lenses, to deconstruct what is going on, and to question discourses. “Understanding sets free what is hidden from view by layers of tradition, prejudices, and even conscious evasion” (Pinar et al., 2000, p.

638). By discovering and using different lenses, we may begin to understand others better, as well as learning more about our “hidden selves.”

“The hermeneutic imagination works to rescue the specificities of our lives from the burden of their everydayness to show how they reverberate within greater schemes of things.” (Smith, 1991, p. 200). As Gadamer believed, to find ourselves we must be willing to lose ourselves in the conversation towards understanding and to create new truths by fusing horizons (1994/2003). Hermeneutics is inherently a creative endeavor, allowing us to engage in meaning-making, not just report or mirror what we hear or experience. As we use it to analyze our life material, it becomes a social action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Through the hermeneutic imagination, we are better able to interpret experiences with "a new sense of collective understandings" (Gadamer, 1994/2003, p. 202) rather than continuing to frame others' understandings through our own. Pinar et al. (2000) perceive the significance of the hermeneutic imagination as a possible way to "problematize the hegemony of dominant culture in order to enlarge it transformatively" (p. 195). As an educator, my overarching goal is to have students think deeply and critically for themselves, and instilling the concept and processes of the hermeneutic imagination seems like a promising strategy to achieve this. Smith (1991) stated:

Pedagogically, the highest priority is in having children and young people gain precisely a sense of the human world as being a narrative construction that can be entered and engaged creatively; to have a sense that received understanding can be interpreted or re-interpreted and that human responsibility is fulfilled in precisely a taking up of this task. (p. 201)

My students find themselves between spaces of the regular classroom and what is appropriate for their education. I am between spaces of Teacher and gifted education teacher. I

will endeavor to engage my hermeneutic imagination to create new horizons (Gadamer, 1994) through interpretive letters.

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*Dear Reader,*

*Do not be “a slave to your isolation of complacency, hubris, and self-contempt!” (Smith, 1991, p. 202). When we do not truly understand, or allow ourselves to interpret ideas hermeneutically, we fool ourselves into a comfortable state of being. Think of me, Hermes, messenger-god of ancient Greek mythology, and my responsibility for taking the decisions of the gods and putting them into a form that humans could understand (Pinar et al., 2000; Smith, 1991). I interpreted their messages. The Greek word hermeneuein, meaning “to interpret,” and I are usually referenced together (Sikh & Spence, 2016; Smith, 1991). The hermeneutic endeavor, according to my friend David Smith (1991), “attempts to show what is at work...and the mediation of meaning” (1991, p. 187). Pinar et al. (2000) state “it represents a concern for the process of understanding the meaning of text” (p. 638). Atkins (1988) reframed it as a “coping-with” rather than a “mirroring-of” reality. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) delineate it as “an approach to the analysis of texts that stresses how prior understandings and prejudices shape the interpretive process” (p. 27, note 6). According to Schleiermacher, immediate understanding of discourse is actually misunderstanding. There needs to be space and time (although not specified) before true understanding can be reached (Forster, 2002). This last definition elucidates the distance between the experience or idea and the interpretation. From ancient days, used to interpret biblical and specialized text for the “Everyman” population, hermeneutics has evolved to incorporate interpretation for understanding “any” text.*



*Schleiermacher, often called the father of modern hermeneutics, is credited with moving his theory of understanding linguistic communication into a universal discipline (Forster, 2017; Gadamer, 1994). From Schleiermacher's day, specifically the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, three themes of hermeneutics have been evident: the pivotal role of language in understanding, the interplay of part and whole in the process of interpretation, and the inherent creativity of interpretation (Smith, 1991).*

*Hermeneutics is an appropriate approach when there is a breakdown of understanding or a lack of understanding between conflicting paradigms (Dreyfus, 1985). Broadly, the works of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer inform the hermeneutic imagination that Smith conceived. Each philosopher put his stamp on what it means to understand, what is involved in the process, and specific ways to perceive hermeneutics, or, a way to interpret "current paradigms and their institutional embodiments" (Smith, 1991. P. 188).*

*Smith expressed Heidegger's casting of "interpretation as the primordial mode of human existence" (1991, p. 192). For Martin Heidegger, hermeneutics is the foundational practice of Being itself. His being-in-the-world concept goes farther and deeper than is essential for this study; however, his idea that humans are a part of the history of the world and "always already" exist within their experiences cannot be overlooked. He posits that the Being is historically, culturally, and socially influenced, creating the pre-understanding that is necessary in the formation of reality (Lavery, 2003).*

*These philosophers influenced Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his seminal publication, Truth and Method (1960, 2006), he acknowledged Heidegger's Being-in-the-world but extended his views to create his enduring hermeneutic voice. "We do not start from scratch," but "...partake in a continuing and evolving conversation" (Carson, 1986, p. 85). Gadamer's hermeneutical*

stance focuses on how understanding is created through dialogical structures (Coltman, 1998; Gadamer, 1960, 2003), or “conversations” where the parties lose themselves in the give and take of views. There are many forces involved in the “performative character” (Schmoop Editorial Team, 2008) of understanding such as the historico-temporal quality of human experience, the linguisticity of understanding, and the willingness to view the whole picture as well as the parts of which is it comprised (Gadamer, 1960, 2003; Smith, 1991). The relationships between the parties is a key consideration in the process of interpretation. The disposition towards the other impacts the give and take within the dialectic (Qureshi, 2005). Gadamer stated that we each have our own “horizon” of thought that comes from our life experiences. When two differing horizons come together dialogically, another horizon must emerge for understanding, or “truth,” to be shared by both parties. Gadamer called this process the “fusion of horizons” (Atkins, 1988; Gadamer, 1960; Makkreel, 2015; Pinar et al., 2000; Smith, 1991). This fusion of horizons does not happen immediately; sometimes it does not happen at all (Makkreel, 2015). Prolonged interaction yields understanding (Atkins, 1988). Misunderstanding, according to Gadamer (1960, 2003) is the immediate “understanding.” We are encouraged to “go ahead and interpret! But be prepared to remain open to inconsistencies” (Coltman, 1998, p. 5). Time, reflection, and mediation are all needed for our interpretation to develop. “The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 291). To interpret, we must “engage in the expression of creative spirit” (Smith, 1991, p. 191).

This creative expression calls on imagination. In hermeneutics, we must use a form of imagination that allows us to “shake loose dogmatic notions of traditions” and “...open up to a

*broader world which can be engaged in from within the language of one's own space*" (Smith, 1991, p. 187).

~Hermes

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### The Epistolary Genre

Epistle comes from Greek *epistellein* meaning "to send to." Very generally stated, an epistle is a letter, often intended for publication (Epistle, 2017). More commonly, however, letters are meant to be shared between two people. Biblical texts such as the letters from Paul, Celie's letters to God in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982), the fragile love story built upon letters between Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Márquez, 1988), letters of admiration and appreciation to the incomparable Maxine Greene in *Dear Maxine: Letters from the Unfinished Conversation with Maxine Greene* (Lake, 2010), letters that reveal the life and lifetime of critical education from Paulo Freire to his niece in *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on my Life and Work* (Freire, 1996), and letters that educate, illuminate, and inspire in *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination and Wisdom for 21st Century Educators* (Lake, 2013c) are a few examples among hundreds calling this medium a genre. It has "moved away from the restrictive definitions of letters, to acknowledge their complexly malleable features" (Poustie, 2010, p. 2), and includes forms of correspondence that may involve private correspondence between persons, or intended to be published for the masses (Toktagazin, Adilbekova, Ussen, Nurtazins, & Tastan, 2016), a letter in verse (Epistles Masterplots, n.d.), journals or diaries which often are imbued with emotion and personal observations (Jolly, 2001), and sometimes prose that does not expose itself as epistolary until viewed as a whole (Altman,

1982). Desblanche (2000) posits epistolarity combines narratives, dialogues, journals, poems, excerpts from diaries, biographical notes, fairy tales, news articles, as well as letters. Letters have been a common form of text from time immemorial. They have been found in most human societies and cultures, across levels of education and formality, and can be found in most domains of life (Barton & Hall, 2000; Cherewatuk & Wiethaus, 1993; Jolly & Stanley, 2005). Characteristics of the epistolary genre include communication with a dialogical perspective written to elicit a response (Taylor, 2009), a physical or metaphorical absence or distance between parties (Altman, 1982; Decker, 1998; Herrmann, 1986), and even may possess a voyeuristic quality (Doogan, 2016) since the reader, in essence, becomes a character just by the act of reading it (Ashworth & Hirst, 2017). Because of the real or perceived distance inherently characteristic of this medium, the writer has time to create the letter, reflect on the message, create a tone (or persona) that matches the recipient (Jolly & Stanley, 2005), "weave a network of intellectual and emotional discourse" that can be a tactful instrument of communication (Desblanche, 2000, p. 89), and decide to bridge or extend the distance between the parties (Altman, 1982; Decker, 1998).

The epistolary genre has flexibility due to the "nature of its predecessor—the oral dialogue" (Toktagazin et al., 2016, p. 5833). The flexibility that frees the epistolary genre from the constraints of the letter (Desblanche, 2000) gives critics plenty to critique. Jolly and Stanley (2005) make particular note of Derrida's deconstruction. He sees the time and space and all the uncertainties between writer and reader as proof that no language can guarantee authenticity or presence. Power structures often exist in letters and determine how the letter is received and interpreted. The relationships of the individual to social context, individual agency, time and memories exist. "Truth" of the writing is in the relationship rather than the subject (Jolly &

Stanley, 2005), and these relationships may change over time (Poustie, 2010). The power, according to Nieto, is that it “makes a private act public and it gives others access to insights and wisdom that might otherwise be inaccessible to them” (Nieto as quoted in Lake, 2013a, p. 85-86).

Considering the historically geographic and interpersonal distances (Decker, 1998) of letters, they invoke piecemeal interpretations. Reading them together may create a different understanding—one that could not be adequately conceived of otherwise (Poustie, 2010). This concept has underpinnings of Gadamer's part-to-whole notions for hermeneutic interpretation. “Letters present writer’s engagement with life, personal and professional, public and private, happily confused” (Jolly & Stanley, 2005, p. 1). Relationships, finding a way to bridge distances, establishing tactful instruments for conveying personal views and emotions, and reflexivity are all integral to this study. Following the reflective and imaginative epistolary media found in *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination, and Wisdom* (Kress & Lake, 2013c), I aspire to convey a similar authenticity in a better understanding of my students' perceptions and experiences in our current educational milieu based upon my hermeneutic interpretations.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

“There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves”

(Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 31)

I have chosen to use autobiography and *currere* to guide my study because this inquiry has been first and foremost for my own understanding. This qualitative inquiry focuses on my interpretations of my career as a teacher, advocate, and parent of gifted learners. I have drawn from my personal interactions, experiences, and musings to try to better understand this thing called gifted education in an era of standardized curricula and high-stakes testing. Harkening to the saying, “If I only knew then what I know now...,” my self-reflection as a learner, from various stages of my education, has been enriched and elucidated by my understandings of how curriculum influences every aspect of my students’ learning.

Pinar and Grumet introduced autobiography for educational research in *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (1976/2015). Specifically, Pinar developed a method by which a clearer understanding could be processed for some kind of social action—*currere*. “*Currere* is intended to interrupt habitual and well-travelled pathways” (Strong-Wilson, 2015, p. 621). This statement resonates with me because of the complacency I feel I have developed over the decades of teaching gifted education. *Currere* allows an inquirer to make connections among “school knowledge, life history, and subjective meaningfulness in ways that might function self-transformatively” (Pinar, 2008, p. 498). It involves “having a complicated conversation with oneself” (Pinar, 2004, p. 37) as part of the process, a phrase very familiar to curriculum studies researchers. What I mostly connect with is that *currere* looks beyond structures to allow me to “discover the path of experience that has led me [sic] to specific choice, place, and cognitive

styles [sic]" (Grumet, 2015, p. 108). As I interpret my experiences, "*currere* addresses itself to my [sic] own perception and understanding of my [sic] experience, maintaining that in reflexive process reside both the energy and direction for continued growth" (p. 108).

There are four steps, or movements, in the method of *currere*, according to Pinar. They are: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2015). The regressive step involves reflecting or "returning to the past to capture it as it was" (1976, p. 55). The progressive step we look towards what is not yet present—the possible futures based upon the past and present. In the analytical step, the inquirer "brackets" herself in order to see things more objectively. Finally, in the synthetical step, "one reenters the lived present" (Pinar et al., 2000, p.521) and looks for future possibilities. Grumet stated that *currere* is an attempt to reveal the ways that histories (both collective and individual) and hope suffuse our moment, and to study them through telling our stories of educational experience" (1981, p. 118). "*Currere* is what the individual does with the curriculum, his active reconstruction of his passage through it social, intellectual, physical structures" (Grumet, 2015, p.142). Within this process, one is tasked with interpreting memories, distancing herself from the "well-travelled pathways," in an attempt to find clearer meaning.

"Our experience is influenced by our past as it interacts with our present" (Eisner, 1985a, p. 26). Autobiography as a methodology has allowed me to be self-reflexive which supports the question of how I have influenced the students I have taught. I have revisited my career through personal journals, notes, letters, past essays, and memories. The study involves reflectivity and reflexivity in regards to my career. To interpret this study, I have chosen to use hermeneutic imagination (Smith, 1991) to draw toward a better understanding of the gifted education that I have been a part of for the better part of three decades.

Taking a telescopic view of my methodology, I begin by identifying with the constructivist paradigm. Although there are some aspects of this paradigm that I do not wholeheartedly agree with, I identify comfortably with Schwandt's explanation that the goal of constructionism is "understanding the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221). It is a complex process that involves social interactions, history, language, and actions. For there to be understanding, there must be interpretation. Ontologically, I stand with the notion of multiple "realities" that are generated by individuals or groups (Guba & Lincoln, 2000), relative to the situation. Significance of the phenomena becomes clear only when they are understood in context. "They are processes and not essences" (Cupchick, 2001, para. 11). In this light, reality has "pluralistic and plastic characteristics...that can be expressed in a variety of symbols and language systems...and can be stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of human agency" (Guba & Lincoln, 2000, p. 236). Plasticity allows for change to occur while retaining traces of that which was changed (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, it is malleable and socially influenced. The malleability of constructivism does not mean that it lacks validity or justification; on the contrary, it allows for polyvocality and numerous diverse texts to inform our understanding of "truth" and reality. It strengthens our confidence to answer those who ask How can there be more than one reality?, especially from those who are steeped in a positivistic world-view. Without personal convictions and a sense of value, however, the way we see reality and truth may be negatively construed as being "...a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is a consensus at the time" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 228).

How do we know what we know? Epistemically, I perceive *who I am* as a construction! I take the constructivist view that knowledge is built through interactions of our world



experiences; it is transactional (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Dewey (1938) supported this in his conception of how children develop knowledge within their environments. Dewey stated in *Experience and Education* (1938), "...there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 25). The quality of the experience, however, is the determining factor for growth in knowledge. Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development of children center on social interactions that are inherently imbued with the social, cultural, and historical facets of their life experiences (1978). The connection between the knower and what could potentially be known is intertwined. Eisner (1984) contends that knowledge is a constructed form of experience, and those experiences are colored by the knower's aesthetic perceptions of their world. Recent neuroscientific research in gifted education supports the physiological development of knowledge. As experiences occur and then reoccur, the pathways between synapses, the axons, become coated by layers of myelin which allows signals to pass more quickly, resulting in quicker retrieval and more complex knowledge (Subotnik et al., 2012; Zull, 2002). As we mature and develop cognitively, socially, physiologically, and morally, we are also constructing knowledge through our life experiences. Although I cannot entirely agree with Dewey's position in *Experience and Education* (1938) that an event or experience must be an actual life-experience for knowledge construction, I stand firm in my belief that every form of experience: textual, sensory, emotional, or shared experiences are constituents in meaning-making, albeit on multiple levels. For example, elaborating on second-hand experiences, if a child engages in a map, photo, story, or another second-hand account (or representation) of another's experience, and that encounter elicits curiosity and a drive to seek further engagement, the experiential continuum adds to the quality of the learner's knowledge

(Dewey, 1938). Generally stated, we construct varying levels of knowledge by interacting with our world, and the world is comprised of physical, emotional, sensory, and social phenomena.

Finally, to make sense of what is constructed, it must be interpreted. This brings me to the use of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has been used to interpret esoteric texts such as religious and scientific material for hundreds of years. The interpreter has been the liaison, the Hermes, between the original and the one in need of a more explicit, more understandable message. Gadamer's (1994) philosophy of hermeneutics was ontological, focused on differing views engaging in a dialogical conversation toward an agreed-upon truth, or reality. He referred to these differing views as horizons, and the "new reality" as the fusing of horizons. Broadly stated and explained earlier, hermeneutics is the approach to find understanding through interpretations. Perhaps the "art of interpretation" fits well due to the numerous and varied conceptions and iterations. Interpretations, according to Gadamer and many others, are strongly influenced by language, historicity (Heidegger, 1927), culture, and other life experiences, or what Gadamer called prejudices. By taking a hermeneutic methodological approach to this inquiry, I endeavor to explore artifacts of my teaching career deeply (e.g., personal journal entries, correspondence from previous students and their parents, reflections of encounters with colleagues, observations, photos, pictures, and field notes) and thoroughly work toward interpretations that may inform my guiding questions.

### Students of Focus

The students that I have been focusing on are elementary-aged students who have been identified as gifted learners. Taking into consideration that I taught these children in three different states over the course of almost three decades, their differences are greatly outweighed by a set of commonalities that make them appropriate for this study. First, they have all been

students in public schools. Their chronological ages have ranged from five to eleven, depending on grade-skipping and birthdays. The majority of students, however, have been between six and ten years of age while in my classes. Second, the students have been from middle- to upper-middle-class homes, based on socioeconomic terms for Georgia as being between \$39,560 and \$118,080 annually (Parker, Sept. 2017; U.S Census, 2016). Third, and most significant to this study, they have all be identified as gifted learners based on the qualification matrices of their originating school. Curiously, the construct that groups these students as unique and in need of a particular type of education also amalgamates the most significant differentiation. Though I have written in journals and have collected copious amounts of cards, letters, and notes from previous students and their parents, the outcomes herein are based on my personal hermeneutic interpretations of these experiences. My own children, now adults, have provided decades of feedback on their experiences as gifted learners during the same timeframe, and I find that they have kept me honest and clear-eyed in this endeavor. Finally, I cannot separate myself from this study; so, I am a participant in this hermeneutic endeavor.

Due to the regulations against using students as research participants in my school district, I will not be able to interview or survey the very students that I feel should have a voice in my study. To overcome this obstacle, I will draw from the plethora of unsolicited material I have saved over the years as well as previous essays reflecting on particular events and generalized comments from students, parents, and colleagues. My position as an observant-participant-researcher and the unforeseen fortune of being a sentimental pack-rat and journaler supports my confidence that my data is both ethical and legal.

## Data Collecting

Unknown to me prior to my doctoral journey, this inquiry has been in the making for almost 30 years. The procedure, then, involved a deep cleaning of squirreled-away journals and recorded events of what were ordinary days; notes, letters, cards, emails, and pictures with captions from my students; correspondence of concerns and accolades from parents; field notes from recent observations; previously written papers on close encounters with quasi- to non-supportive colleagues; and reflective commentaries on journal topics and opinions shared by students as well as other teachers. These artifacts helped re-create memories from my life experiences as a parent, teacher, and advocate of gifted learners. Only then will I be able to utilize hermeneutic imagination for analysis and interpretation.

As stated above, my artifacts span almost three decades, and they are in various forms and places. Compiling the material, most of which are hard-copies, and deciding what will be considered empirical material, will be the first step. It will be essential to be cognizant of what material I choose and what I omit, remembering interpretation does not privilege one horizon over another but engages in a dialogue in search of a new understanding (Gadamer, 1978). Step two will involve rereading (reliving) the material looking for themes that may coincide with my guiding questions. To keep the content organized, I may create a matrix using Microsoft Excel. Using this format will not only give a visual of the data but also allowed for manipulation of the organization of data for possible variations. This format aided in finding themes within the data. Although I used the technology of this format for organization, it was my duty to recognize emerging themes with their commonalities and/or oddities. Thusly, the themes that emerged became the supporting data. The topics that do not fall under one of my questions may spark a new direction to add or may present itself as an outlier unimportant to this study.

I have several assumptions of what I may find in the analysis of the data; biases, perhaps. By using various lenses from Schwab's four commonplaces of education: the teacher, the student, the subject-matter, and the milieu, I hope to mitigate these biases. These lenses should also encourage me to broaden my perspective and perceive this information from as many different angles as possible, or what Connelly has been cited as teaching researchers to "walk around the curriculum tree" (Craig, 2008). As an analysis method, I will engage my hermeneutic imagination (Smith, 1991) to fuse a new horizon (Gadamer, 1978) in the space between what I think I know, and what the artifacts reveal. From years of being embedded in the gifted education of elementary students, my assumptions are these: 1) students in my gifted education, pull-out model, enrichment-based class are not appropriately challenged in their general education classrooms, 2) they do not feel that their teachers care for them as unique learners, 3) these students are losing interest in Education as they are experiencing it which may, 4) rob them of learning opportunities that they need to grow as gifted learners.

I will draw from my personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly et al., 1997), built on three decades of varied and valuable school/education experiences to inform my interpretations. My "special knowledge" holds biases that I must recognize for the power and privilege that I have amassed over my lifetime. Being aware of my position as a power figure to my students, as well as my cultural, economic, and social upbringing that is imbued with White privilege is a starting point. I will focus on recognition of and appropriate responses for them rather than bracketing since I am an integral part of my study. This will not be an easy feat and will necessitate that I rise to a level of education connoisseurship (Eisner, 1985). Eisner posits that an education connoisseur draws upon their "developed ability to experience the subtleties of the form through sensory features of

the phenomenon" (Eisner, 1985, p. 28). Connoisseurship is developed only through intimate familiarity with the phenomenon where heightened perceptions and attention to nuances and multiple dimensions converge. Subsequently, what (hopefully) follows is the ability to critique the phenomenon by "describing, interpreting, and appraising it," followed by an aesthetic "re-education of the reader's perception" (Eisner, as quoted in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, pp. 244-245).

### What I Learned

The responses to the research questions and subsequent interpretations from the analysis were expressed in letters "from the classroom," drawing upon the epistolary medium. The empirical material, now supporting data for my research questions, are found in these epistolary creations of my interpretations. To ensure a polyvocal and multifaceted view of gifted education, characters are attuned to Schwab's commonplaces of curriculum: the teacher, the student, the subject matter, and the milieu.

I have created the letters from my interpretations of the results and outcomes of my study. The voices in the letters are imagined from traits and characteristics of students I have taught, teachers with whom I have worked, and milieus of the schools and communities in which I have taught. The subject matter, gifted education, is woven throughout. I was cognizant of the personae that I created, avoiding stereotypical views of gifted students or villainization of those against them. In the spirit of the epistolary genre, the characters are able to speak from their hearts and deep souls in a way they may not feel comfortable to in face-to-face encounters (Altman, 1982). The letters address the research questions by intertwining supporting information with the heartfelt message the character is sending. When the last letter is read, it is my hope that there will be a better understanding of how gifted learners in elementary school

perceive their education, especially against the backdrop of standardization and high-stakes testing.

CHAPTER 4  
REFLECTION OF MY INQUIRY

“*Currere* is a reflective cycle in which thought bends back upon itself and thus recovers its volition” (Grumet, 1976, p. 130-131). This statement has been quoted many times within education and curriculum literature. What is most poignant to me is that the process can continue indefinitely, each iteration or cycle illuminating new explorations of your past because of new experiences in your present. Also, the perception of bending back gives an extra dimension to the reflective process. When “thought bends back upon itself” (p. 130-131), it cannot help but take the present with it. I take Grumet’s use of the word “recover” to mean to take back or to salvage. With this quote as my guiding concept for my reflection, I return to the commonplaces of curriculum—the teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu.

As a constant within the theme, I address each through a letter with the aim of expressing my recovery of volition.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*Dear Student,*

*As I allow my thoughts to “bend back upon themselves [sic]” (Grumet, 1976, p. 130-131) to my experiences of learning to understand you, I feel a plethora of feelings—some emotions, some sensations. When I recall my understanding of Students as a new teacher, I feel a small bit of embarrassment because I had nothing to compare them to accept the Student I had been and the Students I had been raised with. My first students were mostly like me, which made it easy for me to know them. As one of the four commonplaces of curriculum, knowing the students is a prerequisite for a complete curriculum (Schwab, 1969, 1973), although I had no knowledge about commonplaces at that point. The embarrassment comes from the hegemony that was*



*instilled within my upbringing. I associated manners and behavior to ability to some extent, I think. As I reflect, the more a student fell under my power, the better I was able to “teach” them. Of course, I would not fathom this concept until nearly the end of my career.*

*Along with embarrassment, there are some positive feelings that come with this reflective cycle. Joy is one that fills me, especially in times of doubt. Every age, every ability level, every child is unique. It didn't take long for me to start getting to know students beyond the personae they presented in the classroom. One boy comes to mind as one of the first students in this new realm of knowing students. For half of the year in a school that drew students from the highest echelon to the subsidized housing projects of the city, Chris was just a boy in my “on-level” Reading class. He collapsed from a raging fever during the semester test and was taken to the nurse. I thought he was waiting for his mom to come pick him up to rush him to the doctor, but was shocked to learn that he was waiting for the bus to take him home at the end of the day. During our planning period, his science teacher and I sat with him, cooling his forehead, holding his hand, and soothing him as he cried and asked us how he was going to take care of his younger siblings while his mom was working or sleeping if he was sick. The smell that Chris often had on his clothes was not his own urine, but that of his little brother who slept with him. The bright eyes and jovial attitude that Chris exuded drew me to him. It made me want to give him another chance in class, to help him more than some of his classmates, or to scold him motherly when he became embroiled in hallway disruptions. After the fever incident, I saw that Chris's persona was, perhaps, his defense mechanism for the adult responsibilities he was taking on way sooner than he should have been asked to. Who else in my classes had hidden lives that molded who they were or who they were not? For every child that came to my classroom, I attempted to learn about them as more than a name on my roster. It would be decades before I*

*realized the importance of what I had started. This was accidentally a right move in the making of curriculum.*

*Hegemony was still a part of my make-up as a white woman from the middle-class socioeconomic South, and it would unfortunately continue to be. Becoming cognizant of the dominance that I have upon students because of my position, race, and socioeconomic status may not have changed the dynamics, but has allowed me to transform how I perceive O/others. Comparing the students of my past classes with those that I struggle to understand today sometimes leaves me echoing so many others' comment, "students are so different from when I first started teaching!" Really, Student, you haven't changed that much. Society has changed. Parenting has changed. Milieu has changed. Perspectives have changed. Technology has changed. The students that I educate, however, are still as multifaceted as they were three decades ago. They have minds that are developed by parental engagement, messages from popular culture, creative opportunities, social interactions, and myriad other collaborations. They come to school on diverse levels of readiness and learn on varying trajectories. With the innumerable differences of students, they all are imbued with a need to be cared for, to be heard, to be seen as an individual, and for opportunities to learn—whatever that means for them.*

*I bend back upon my experiences, taking where I am now with me. I have recovered my volition; I have salvaged my free will. I see a "new horizon" (Gadamer, 1994) to view Students not as collectively as I have in the past, but as individuals. Giftedness remains a word. The student is a learner. The learner has unique characteristics in certain milieus and at certain times; and, sometimes, gifted behaviors immerge. Making these things come together more often will open learning opportunities for all students.*

*Heather Holley*

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*Teacher,*

*Using the method of currere, I reflect upon you as a component of one of the four commonplaces of curriculum (Schwab, 1969, 1973, 1978), and I sit in amazement at how I have evolved—cognitively and philosophically. Although the Teacher has the greatest influence on her students within school based on the hierarchy of power (Feiman-Nemster & Floden, 1986), she is lowest within the order. She is as multifaceted as the students within her classes, more than just Mrs. So and So. This is brought to mind when she meets a student from her class in a store. They usually react in shock to see their teacher outside of school! It's as if they never pictured their teacher away from the classroom in which they spend so much time together, and perhaps they haven't. After all, the Teacher's place is within the classroom, in most young students' perception.*

*The philosophy of constructivist learning that has been a part of my pedagogy since I first stepped into the classroom has evolved from a student-based perspective to include what it means to be a teacher. I perceive that contextual, temporal conception of constructivism as an integral part to being the “leader” of my students. Drawing from the poem “Children Learn What They Live” by Dorothy Law Nolte (1972), if I aspire to have my students learn to embrace diversity because we all have value and have valuable funds of knowledge to share, then I must live it. If I want them to question what the text presents to the degree that allows them to contextualize it, problematize it, and use it to help them develop agency, I must model those skills and offer risk-free opportunities for them to practice it. If compassion is a goal, I must live that as well. In addition to these overt actions I must find ways of identifying the hidden curricula of the school—the many undertones of expected actions, behaviors, and other sociocultural*

*inculcations—and deliberate new horizons of how to live them. Schwab (1969, 1973) stated that the teacher, as an integral commonplace of curriculum, must be understood for who she is—what she knows, her worldviews, what she champions, what she vilifies. Through currere, I have seen why I have been the teacher I have been, how I have become an amalgamation of my own place as a student of life within evolving milieus and subject matter. Most recently, I have learned through curriculum studies that the classroom is only one place where the Teacher should be. The teacher should live as multifaceted as she does outside the classroom and should have critical pedagogy imbued in her person.*

*Teacher, I know it is scary to allow yourself to change! It is human nature to find comfort in routines. Rocking the waters, especially in today's era of teacher accountability and job uncertainty based on test scores, easily can be put out of one's mind, replaced by, "I only have X years left before I can retire. All I have to do is lie low and follow the rules." But, how can you ignore such importance? I have a few years before I can retire, but now I think, "I only have X years to plant these seeds of change in my students!"*

*From my reflections on my past educational experiences and my perceptions of the present, I look to what might be. I am still learning ways to recognize hegemony and develop avenues for reformation on a small scale. I have found myself incorporating critical pedagogy within my daily interactions with my elementary gifted learners. As I find a footing, I adjust what I learn to fit my young audience and slip in a question or a questioning statement that may plant a seed for growth. Will this part of who I am as a teacher within the commonplaces of curriculum change the world of education for my gifted learners? Perhaps not immediately; but, as I grow more confident, recognize more hegemonic undertones, and find avenues for change the curriculum for my students will encourage greater learning and building of personal agency.*

*We have evolved, you and I. To be a guiding component of curriculum, we must continue to grow—intellectually, philosophically, and pedagogically. For years, society has predicted robots and machines of Artificial Intelligence will replace teachers. I see many instances of this creeping into our educational system already. There is an urgency in this that makes me reiterate, “We only have X years to be a part of a change.”*

*Remaining Dedicated to the Learner,*

*Heather Holley*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*Dear Milieu,*

*There was a time when I could not wait to buy new decorations for my classroom. I loved the trending colors and patterns of the time, had fun coming up with witty displays for upcoming work, and felt pride in unique learning opportunities for my students. The environment of my classroom had to be one that teachers envied! Yes, through currere I have reflected on what I believed was an excellent learning environment, and with the knowledge and experience I now possess can see things more clearly. I am not proud of myself for creating an environment that was first and foremost a showroom. Of course, I wanted the students to enjoy my classroom, but I still lacked confidence in my teaching abilities. Like a bracelet or a nice purse, the decorations were more for a distraction from the less than adequate person or classroom.*

*The milieu of the classroom evolved as I did. The more I grew as an educator and the deeper I thought about my students and their lives in my classroom, the more meaningful the displays became. In addition to the walls, the environment began to take on a heartbeat of its own. You, the heartbeat of the room in which my students and I interacted, were found in where*

*the students sat and with whom, what was posted on the walls and why, the independence given to the students, the expectations of responsibility, the freedom to take risks in their learning, being both an individual and a member of a community, and the love and care that came from me to them as a person.*

*Outside of the immediate classroom, it is an uncertain milieu that has me concerned enough to engage in this study. What are the gifted learners' perceptions of their learning opportunities in an era of standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing? If I had not been disturbed by the innumerable comments and the diminishing joy of learning evident in the students I teach, I would not have delved so deeply into it. I have found that the milieu is incredibly influential in curriculum. Schwab posited that the teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu should be balanced within the deliberation of curriculum (1969). Milieu, I have to state that from my observations within my study, you have become an overwhelmingly essential component. You have, in my opinion, tipped the balance. Until there is a reconceptualization in the national milieu of test scores equating to education which defines the national standing and success of our country our curricula will be skewed. The trickle-down effect of pressure to perform on standardized tests—which reward or penalize states, districts, and schools—is palpable. No longer is the classroom a place that instills the thrill of learning, encourages creative innovations, inspires discourse, and incites wonder. The pressures to perform well have crept in and have replaced joy with fear. In the case of many gifted learners, they are rarely challenged or encouraged to reach their potential, but instead are berated because they did not perform high enough to pull the others up. What should be encouraging cheering for unique potential and possibilities are exchanged for reprimanding addresses to faculties about test scores. Instead of emboldening our gifted learners to voice their opinions, explore their passions,*

*risk new possibilities, and investigate new paths of learning, the greater milieu of education requires them to stay in line, allow the teacher to teach those who need to reach the benchmark, and make the top scores. Milieu, you have been abused, pimped out to the unrealistic belief that a score equates to international supremacy. Your importance has skewed the balance.*

*I made the analogy that you had been pimped out. Please don't take offense. I truly believe that you have been twisted, abused, and turned against those of us who believe in the positive affects you possess. Teachers know that the milieu of the classroom can make or break her students' learning. Unfortunately, the decorations that once were anticipated by every teacher have been replaced by standardized posters that show the way to perform a task, talking points that can be heard in every classroom, and replicated student work. These are visible indications of the forced milieu of our day. Fortunately, though, within your heartbeat, the heart of the class desires more. Every chance possible, teachers fill the environment with what we know matters in education—encouragement, opportunities for learning, and love for and genuine care for the students.*

*I am fortunate that I am currently in a position outside of the standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing classroom. I am still able to employ the best practices and enhance you, Milieu, to the benefit of the students who enter my room. Outside, you may be the oppressor, but inside you can be a comforter, a cheerleader, a guide rail, a security rope, an incredible idea to be explored, a cocoon nurturing new life. So, Milieu, you have gained more power than the other commonplaces of curriculum, something that Schwab warned against. Currently, you are the driving force behind the lack of learning opportunities for gifted learners. It is evident that Schwab was correct in his warning (1969). Our deliberations for a complete curriculum are*

*unbalanced, and until the system is reformed, your power is overwhelmingly against gifted learners.*

*Hoping for a Change,*

*Heather Holley*

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*Dear Subject Matter,*

*For the duration of my career in Gifted Education—the Subject Matter—you have been my constant. You have always been the component that I could build upon, find connections, adjust as necessary, and trust. As I reflect upon my experience with you from where I stand today, I am comforted in knowing that the changes that have happened over the past several decades has been based on science, philosophy, psychology, and human development. The subject matter of gifted education has been a dynamic entity, not a static set of facts. Where I am today, with hundreds of students in my past, countless lessons taught, and many courses taken to improve my pedagogy, I feel authenticated by where I have been. Gifted Education, you have had a problem with the great imbalance of racial and socio-economic diversity. For most of my career, I knew you as a predominantly white, middle class student. Within the policies of the time, I did not even question it. I was comfortable teaching the students who qualified. Did I think there was a disconnect between the faces of my gifted learners and the subject matter that I knew at the time? Not very often. As you evolved, I was able to evolve, too. I trusted you, Gifted Education, because I saw how the changes made sense.*

*Most recently, over the past several years, I have taken on new perspectives of the Student, Teacher, and Milieu. I have become aware of dimensions of education that were not*



*even fathomable before delving into curriculum studies. I have been made aware of critical ways to view these commonplaces of curriculum that have shaken me awake. Even after problematizing you which forced me to view you through new lenses, I have found solace in having something strong to tether to. So, as I reflect on my journey, I thank you for giving me somewhere to call home, somewhere I can always revisit to make sense of new knowledge.*

*Thank you for leaving the key under the mat,*

*Heather Holley*

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#### Future Possibilities

The fourth movement of the process of *currere* is synthetical (Grumet & Pinar, 1976, 2015). It is now time to picture future possibilities based on my reflective journey. My interpretations are that young gifted learners do not feel that they are being given learning opportunities. They are also losing their inner drive because their hunger has not been steadily fed. My interpretations indicate that most of the gifted learners I teach truly feel that their teachers care for them as children. That care, however, does not translate to sustained learning opportunities. My interpretations suggest that the environment of School and schooling, the milieu, has an overwhelming influence on learning, and that milieu is stifling to all learners, but especially the focus of this inquiry: gifted learners. Teachers are trying to educate children in a toxic environment. Everyone knows it is dangerous, but few can make a change. So, what now?

The era of standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing is too big for me to change. I do think it will change; but, it will be an extremely slow change. I know that I have to do what is possible for me. I see that within my classrooms, I need to find the opportunities to strengthen

my students' desire to develop their personal agency: to help them find their passion, realize their potential, and to develop strategies for sustained learning opportunities with or without their lead teacher.

Teachers need to be aware of the potential they have in their classrooms, whether it looks like their perception of potential or not, and assist in creating learning opportunities for any student who is beyond the daily lesson. In this era of standardization, teachers have more work that is policy-driven than work that is student learning-driven. There has to be willingness for collaboration as well as time for this to happen. That will be the most challenging part of this plan.

"Relay races are frequently won or lost by a poor arrangement of the runners or poor work in touching off or transferring the baton "(Murphy, 1926, p. 145). As I come to the last leg of my teaching career, I believe the insights I have to share must be passed on, firmly grasped by those coming behind me, and supported for many laps to come. Visualizing *currere* as a race on an enclosed track, I see my work continuing long after I have passed the baton. Finding the right relay members is vital.

Once I have a Doctor of Education degree, I will have a greater chance to reach pre-service teachers or teachers who are advancing their degrees by pursuing collegiate teaching opportunities. Being within the school (building) where I want to make the quickest change, unfortunately, may not be the best place to start. My colleagues work tirelessly and, for the most part, genuinely care for their students. I feel that the majority of my colleagues trust in my abilities, respect the career I have made in gifted education, and know that I am both a teacher and an advocate for gifted learners. They would not, however, appreciate the interpretations I have compiled, nor the imagined letters from the classroom. Removing myself from the teachers

with whom I have worked for over a decade and putting myself in another place of education has greater possibilities for positive influence. Having gone through many new revelations of who I have been, why I am who I am, and how I can bring about change within educating gifted learners has brought me to this: the possibilities are there.

## CHAPTER 5

### LETTERS: THE YOUNG, ADOLESCENT, AND ADULT GIFTED LEARNERS

Once all my research had settled, I found the need to focus on three distinct groups of gifted learners: the young learner, the adolescent learner, and the adult learner. As I used the epistolary genre previously, I feel the most honest manner of “speaking” to these learners is through letters. Interrogating history (Bower, 2013) and representing my engagement with life (Jolly & Stanley, 2005) are two characteristics of letter writing that I lean upon. I have had years to live the information, and months to develop the messages. The chapters that follow are my hermeneutic interpretations expressed through letters and supporting information.

#### The Young Gifted Learner

If I could give assurances to young gifted learners, I would let them know that the confusing feelings that they may experience in regards to their classmates and the learning differences they may perceive is okay. They are not alien, weird, or strange. These feelings may come as early as first grade for the highly perceptive child or much later for those children who do not take much notice about their surroundings. In my experience, however, there does come a time when differences are noticed.

Thankfully, most children enjoy the experiences they have in the early years of school. Although every grade-level teacher is valuable, I believe pre-school through first grade teachers are a very special breed. By nature (and nurture) they instill in their students a sense of love, care, and invincibility during a very impressionable time. Most of these students, young gifted learners included, do not have a perception of boredom because there are new experiences around them every day. Socialization, new manipulatives, fresh learning opportunities, and a plethora of learning modalities are offered every day of the week. Their thirst for knowledge

within a milieu of seemingly endless opportunities coupled with their egocentricity, young gifted learners are blissfully unaware of the challenges they pose for their teachers and the challenges that are most likely in their coming years.

Research has shown that characteristics of these children as learners often include reading an average of two years above their classmates, reasoning skills are usually more advanced, and abstract levels of thinking develop more quickly. There is a difference, not better or worse; but, these differences can lead to misunderstanding from the learner and his peers. In my years as a gifted education teacher, I have heard and witnessed hurt feelings on both sides. Frustration with others not knowing how to read, feeling the need to help others with unfamiliar words is perceived as arrogance, superiority, and being a know-it-all. Unfortunately, this perception comes from teachers as well as classmates. This is not unique to my experiences. It has been documented for decades in research to the point of being common. Teachers, depending upon their experience with educating gifted learners, react in a couple of common ways: they either understand these characteristics and redirect them appropriately, or, more often, they become as irritated as the other children and look for ways to catch them in the wrong. Once the opportunity arises, she is able to knock them down a peg or two. These teachers have not learned the characteristics of these unique learners; thus, they work to “get their ducks in a row,” as one of my daughter’s primary teachers tried to do. It may work for the teacher, but rarely does it work for those children who yearn to divert their way from the other ducks.

There is no singular outcome for the children either. It is our hope that all students learn to think for him/herself in spite of the standardized curriculum they are force-fed. Some do, but without guidance it is a rarity. What I have seen is more along the lines of falling into submission—getting in line with the other ducks—and giving up on their joy of learning. The

energy that had been poured into seeking knowledge rarely dissipates but instead comes out as excessive talking (usually telling someone an answer), aggression (usually correcting someone), impulsive actions (usually to fulfill a desire), feelings of failure (usually when they are expected to know how to do something, even without instruction), or withdrawal (usually into their own world). It is no wonder that young gifted learners' precocity is perceived negatively, especially by inexperienced teachers. They may focus on what to do with them, how to discipline them, or how to squelch their energy while she teaches the others (or performs for observations). After all, it is falsely believed, they will be fine learning on their own, reading a book, spending time on the computer, or even "doing a report" on a topic.

It is part of the gifted education curriculum (yes, even that is standardized) to teach our students what it means to be gifted, how to utilize their strengths, how to recognize their "weaknesses" so they can develop and use strategies to improve in those areas, and that gifted does not equate to perfect, better, worse, or one-dimensional. Of course this only touches on one area of interacting with gifted learners, but through many years of interpreting the students' comments, I have felt their frustrations and pressures to be right, have the answers, get the highest grades, and show the least amount of effort—across all subjects.

Varying levels of perfectionism usually finds a place within the learners' personalities, born from pressures, either self-inflicted or from parents, teachers, peers, and society. Thankfully, young gifted learners rarely develop debilitating levels of perfectionism; however, many fall into the realm of underachievement. Ironically, underachievement commonly develops from perfectionist qualities—not the kind that most teachers expect from gifted learners, but levels that push them to avoid anything that may lead to less than perfection. With a stew of

emotions under the pressures from “everyone’s” expectations, our young gifted learners are too often convinced to abandon their learning opportunities.

As bleak as this sounds, once away from the outside pressures and ennui-inducing standardization, young gifted learners are encouraged to feed their hunger of knowledge and creativity. There are teachers—many of them—who value their differences and have the resources to recognize their unique learning needs. The curtailing factor, however, is the precious commodity of time. When the commonplaces of teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu converge, something magical happens—true learning opportunities.

There are students who are just as in need of these learning opportunities that do not have the “gifted” label but have the same characteristics and unique learning methods. When they do not qualify, are they the antithesis of gifted—non-gifted? Does that put them in a category of students who have no one fighting for them? I have seen a greater number of these students who gain the reputation of low-level learners or discipline problems. This group is outside the scope of this study, but are a growing concern. Having received many letters such as one that follows, it is even more imperative that teachers recognize the characteristics of gifted learners and find ways of addressing those needs.

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*Dear Gifted Ed. Teacher,*

*My child did not qualify for the gifted program again this year and he was devastated. I have to find the right words to say to him when he comments that he must not be smart or creative because he “failed” the test. His best friend is in your class and they often talk about the projects they do. As I listen, I feel that they are very close in their thinking. I know that a lot of*

*parents think their kids are gifted and I may be one of them. What can we do to keep the fire alive when they are not getting the opportunities that may give them that extra push? How can we as parents help grow their abilities rather than watch them wither?*

*A Concerned Parent of a “Non-Gifted” Child*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*Dear Student,*

*You are an amazing person in an amazing time and place in your life! As you enter the first years of your schooling, you will be faced with an abundance of opportunities. There will be new people to meet; new textures, sounds, tastes, and sights to be experienced; and a multitude of responses for each new encounter. You may be overwhelmed by the choices, but you are not alone! There will be many other children in your classes. Remember that no two people are alike, even in their learning. What you may know or like may be totally foreign to the next child. That doesn't make either of you wrong. When you find yourself itching to know more and the others are not quite there yet, find joy in your environment. Question your surroundings. What makes this work? Why does that happen? What would happen if...? There may be times when you will have to search for answers on your own. You may have to wait, but do not give up! Do not sit idle and allow for the environment to fade into dullness. Find something you love to explore and learn all you can about it! Make connections with other students who have similar interests. You are unique, so do not get upset if this takes time.*

*At times, you may feel that the world around you is going in slow motion, like others are in quicksand or stuck in molasses. You may feel that you can help them by giving them the*



*answers, or by doing a task for them. As hard as it may be to understand, everyone has to experience struggles to learn. One day, you will find a struggle. You may be thrown for a loop, so to say, because you may not remember having to struggle before. Do not give up, and certainly do not question your abilities! With effort and practice, you can learn anything.*

*As you age, you will learn to see things in so many different ways. You will astonish yourself with the subjects you will explore, the topics you will find interesting, and the various strategies you will develop for problem-solving. This may sound absurd to you, or you may find excitement in the possibilities. I hope you find excitement. You have been born with potential to do so many things. Find excitement in every day in things you see and in things only imaginable. Question. Ponder. Search. Love to learn, and never let anyone stifle that love. You are in for an amazing journey.*

*With Love,*

*An Advocate*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

### The Adolescent Gifted Learner

Adolescence, it is believed by many, is a social construct that extends childhood for the sake of School and schooling; a fairly recent phase of growing up (Gatto, 2001). Dictionary.com defines adolescence as “a transitional phase between puberty and adulthood; the process of growing to adulthood.” WHO (World Health Organization) defines it as the ages between 10 and 19. In many countries without the abundant resources such as the United States, adolescence does not even make sense. Before 1904, adolescence was not even a concept used to describe a period in a growing child’s life. It came about because of the Child Labor Laws and mass public

education. Kids who had just a few years before been expected to become contributing members of the families were no longer being forced into adulthood. They were finding themselves in a state of trying to overcome their childish wildness “during a period of storm and stress” (Lerner & Israeloff, 2005, p. 4). G. Stanley Hall, psychologist, and his students identified mood disruptions, conflict with parents, and risky behavior as key aspects of this new stage of life called adolescence (Brief history of adolescence, n.d.). Adolescence may be a social construct designed to keep children from becoming thinking people in a society. Perhaps it should be reconceptualized as a learning deficit, another label to slap on kids in school that can be subjected to intervention and remediation. The lucky few who do not fall prey to the common characteristics of adolescence could then be free to think, learn, connect, grow, create, and go on to be productive members of the world. Another idea may be to go on to redefine the concept of adolescence altogether, once again giving teens a purpose beyond their own selves, perhaps allowing them to explore life choices. That is a study for another time.

When learners who are advanced in abilities, sensitivities, loyalties, and a sense of justice are mired in a culturally imposed time of limbo, chaos can develop. The following letters combine the angst that my own children felt in middle school and high school as well as what other gifted learners have expressed. You will see the juxtaposition between the narrators’ perceptions of adolescence as a learner with gifted characteristics. The learner’s characteristics voiced in the first letter demonstrate strong sensitivities, heightened awareness of world events even if they are not totally understood, and keen cognizance of social norms. These seemingly positive traits are undermined by the narrator’s fragile self-esteem and low opinion of herself: unbelievable characteristics from her parents’ perspectives.

The second epistle, in the form of a journal entry, stands in stark contrast to the first. In that, the narrator possesses many more socially acceptable attributes. The narrators are more alike than they appear on the surface, as the readers should be able to discern.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I know in my heart that I can come to you about anything; and, for all my life, I have been willing to do that. You have soothed my scrapes and bruises as well as my overactive imagination that kept us all up at night. Now, I am no longer a little kid, and my injuries go deeper than you can imagine; they are injuries that hurt worse than any physical knock or bump. You see me as an intelligent, creative, and deep thinker: an old soul, you have called me. You have raised me to believe in myself and my abilities. I have always (but secretly) tried to be that for you two; but, unfortunately, I never truly owned that. I want to talk to you but am afraid my emotions will take over. You will think I am just being overly dramatic; that puberty has caused many changes in me. That could be so; but, lately I feel that I am being torn in many directions and my conscience is in chaos. Our country seems to be divided on so many topics that, as I see it, are fundamental to humanity. Basic rights are being denied to people who have come to the US in search of a better life and to people who don't look like the majority of men in power. People who do not fit into the norm are being oppressed and marginalized, being brushed to the side and ignored. I see that happening a lot with the young people of America who are trying to make a stand to change what they see as wrong. You have always instilled in me the idea that you can be whatever you set your sights on if you are willing to put the time and effort into it. Were you selling me a load of crap, or have things changed so radically in America? Then there*

*are the maniacs who shatter lives, scores at a time, by killing those who anger them or who are different from them; in dark alleys, in businesses, in shopping malls, in schools. How can we feel safe anywhere? Maybe that's on a greater scale than what I am feeling and experiencing, but I see it, and it terrifies me. For me, personally, I am so tired of the people I go to school with not seeing the destruction going on around us. In class discussions, if you can call it that, no one makes connections from the inane drivel we are being fed from teachers and one-sided textbooks to the atrocities being perpetrated upon the weak or voiceless of today. I hunger for a conversation with anybody who is tuned in to the reality of the life we are preparing for, not one about the upcoming game or who is dating whom. I long for this connection with others but get ridicule instead.*

*Dad has often used the saying, "Damned if you do, damned if you don't." That saying fits perfectly for my "school daze." When I try to engage in discussions in class, I can hear the snickering and comments made by those around me. I only raise my hand in some classes when there is no one else participating and I feel like, "well, if nobody else can answer this poor man, I will." I hate the apathy of other students. I can feel their loathing and their disgust. Do I succumb to them like my soul begs me to or stand my ground because that is what my intelligence tells me is right? I want to find an avenue that will let me learn, become educated, extend my abilities and then apply them to something useful. If I can find it, will it create a larger target on my back or offer me an open road? Will it help me escape or just delay the inevitable? Damned if I do, damned if I don't.*

*Mom, I have told you about being bullied, but you can only associate that terminology with the young kids you teach. You cannot understand the level of meanness that can be poured on one person who is so low that she feels deserving of it. On one hand, I am glad that you are*

*capable of living in an innocent world of “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me.” On the other hand, the hand of your child, I am furious that you are so blind to my pain and reality, as terrorized, horrible, and demoralized as it is. As I write this, I predict the girls I will encounter in the hallways and the bathroom and begin to break out into a sweat. I want to make you understand, but I can hear you now, “Just ignore them.” The thing is, if I ignore them, they will swallow me whole. I have to stand my ground, puff up, become someone I am not so they cannot see my shaking soul. Perhaps the injustices I see on the larger scale really are closer than I imagined.*

*I used to think school was boring, just days to be endured until I could finally spend days with more like-minded people. What I would give to be back in a setting that did not expect much from us because we were just kids. Not yet an adult, no longer a kid. I am stuck in what Purgatory must be like. Unfortunately, I do not know which way I am going right now. Will adulthood be hellish or heavenly?*

*Don't think I have gone off the deep edge. I have had time to put my thoughts together in this letter, but I don't think I could tolerate the gap I feel is between us right now by trying to talk. I am not happy in my skin, in my mind, or in this place. My soul is bruised, I think. I know I am loved by you two, but that's your job. As much as I would prefer to leave this world, my job is to endure.*

*Adolescence sucks.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*Psych Journal Entry #14      What is your perception of “Adolescence” for Gifted Learners?  
I read it somewhere or my psych teacher said that the stage called adolescence is not really a thing. I mean, yeah, we go through the ages of a time grown-ups call adolescence, but there is no*

*universal measure of it. That makes it hard to respond to this journal topic. Nobody I know calls themselves an adolescent, but assuming that the prompt is aimed at focusing on what it means to be a gifted learner during the age and time I am experiencing now, I can try to put it into words.*

*I have always thought differently from most of my friends. By that, I mean I process my information differently. There are some things that just happen in my head. My math teacher in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade wanted to fail me for not showing my work. This was just asinine in my thinking and it still is. She thought I was cheating, I think. If I had gotten it wrong, maybe I should have had to write it out so I could figure out where I went wrong; but, it was just because she didn't believe me or didn't like that it came easily to me. When I have to slow down and explain or show my work, I get flustered. I almost feel like I doubt myself. This is more common in math than other subjects. I struggle with memorizing stuff, especially if there is no need for it. Do we really need to take up brain space for a date when the event, the reasons for, and outcomes from it hold the significance to the real-world? Can't we just "Google it" if we need to know the date? I have a knack for logic, critical thinking, and making connections. I don't know how other people process information, but from what I hear, there doesn't seem to be much processing going on. All I know is my mind works differently than most kids my age—maybe not better, but differently for sure. There are a couple of my friends who seem to think similarly to me, but it's not a strong talking point among us.*

*In my classes, I enjoy pushing the buttons of teachers who just teach what's in the book. If they would give us a chance to talk about what's going on in the world, maybe even help us make connections, they may be surprised to learn that we are more than pimple-faced kids. There are a lot of concepts and ideas I just don't get but seem to be important to the ways of the world. They teach us about politics, but don't allow us to be political. They teach us about world*

*religions, but they don't allow us to talk about God, or Allah, or any other deity. They teach us to be tolerant of others, but they shame and shun us for exploring any topics that are not "white bread." They teach us to take risks, but reel us back in when we stray from the acceptable standard. I get jumpy inside with "yeah, but" thoughts and "what if" questions that sometime come out as responses. Many teachers cut me off and tell us that we don't have time to get off topic because the end-of-course tests are right around the corner. Why is everything about the EOCs? What about gaining knowledge or developing thoughts that are original? Perhaps, that is the plan; give us the approved knowledge, keep us in our places, discourage radical thinking, and do their best to maintain the status quo.*

*Being an adolescent and being a gifted learner, in my opinion, are two separate things. As a person in my teens, I am exposed to many different ideas, more advanced concepts, and I am expected to make better connections. As a digital native, I am a click away from anything I want to learn about or voice as an opinion or collaborate on—good or bad. This is empowering, I have to admit. Is that an adolescent trait? Probably. As a gifted learner, I am naturally curious, have an insatiable hunger for things that really interest me, usually learn quickly, and make crazy connections to ideas and things I have learned before. I have an undying sense of loyalty to my friends and expect the same from them, feel injustices so strongly sometimes that I hurt for people thousands of miles and lifetimes away from me, dream about how far we will advance or decline as a society, and often wonder why someone hasn't created a vaccine for stupidity. Compared to how I saw myself as a gifted learner in elementary school, I feel that I have woken up and developed a consciousness of the world. I thought I knew it all and had an answer for everything. I finally got out of the habit of saying, "Actually, blah blah blah" correcting my peers and even some teachers when they gave a fact or made a statement that I thought was*

*wrong or even incomplete. I do not know why I did this, but I catch myself still doing it sometimes. Maybe one day I will look back and be able to see and understand better—like I can look back now on my elementary days.*

*So, what is my impression of being an adolescent gifted learner? If they have to be put together, I guess I have to compare it to being a caged tiger or other wild animal in captivity. The environment is designed to look like the natural habitat, but is miniscule in size. The tiger (or any wild animal) may even have been raised in that environment, but its instincts and genetic make-up tell it that it needs to be bigger, run farther and harder, explore the boundaries and even make them their own. The cage is safe, their needs are met, and they may gently interact with their “trainer” or caregiver; however, there is an undeniable fury building inside the beast. Given the chance and the right catalyst, it will explode. As an adolescent gifted learner, wouldn’t you rather I learn my boundaries, my explorations, my abilities, my strengths and weaknesses through appropriate learning opportunities than suppress them until they explode in wild abandon? Our next journal topic should be “What does it mean to you to be a suppressing teacher?”*

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### The Adult Gifted Learner

There have been many gifted learners who did not find eminence until adulthood. Some were not recognized as gifted until there had been a cultural shift and they were long gone. Thankfully, the views of giftedness have begun to broaden. What lays dormant or as unrecognized potential now has a greater opportunity to be nurtured—outside of School.



*Journal:*

*Today, I am celebrating my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I finally feel like an adult. To celebrate, I enrolled in a class that will lead to nothing more than my enjoyment and personal growth. As an adult and a learner, I can't help but reflect upon the various learning environments I have been a part of. When I was a child, I must have enjoyed my teachers because I remember being bored a lot of the time. I also remember reading so many books while the class worked on finishing an assignment. There were many notes home about my lack of attention in class, and most of my books ended up on the teacher's desk to force my attention. I did not complain after a while because I ended up getting extra work or berated for not getting a 100 on an assignment. I certainly don't feel that I was pushed or challenged to work to my potential. I am sure there are varying degrees of truth to my perception, but it was a proverbial piece of cake compared to middle school and high school. With teenage angst, depression, perfectionism that led to underachieving, and personality differences on top of the typical characteristics of gifted learners, I barely survived—literally. Looking back on my education—no, Schooling—it is a miracle that I ever got into college, much less actually made it through.*

*I remember entering my freshman year with such a sense of freedom. In retrospect, it was naivete and blinding ignorance that I mistook for freedom. I had spent so many years feeling like a caged wild animal, enduring School, my "peers," and clueless parents; but, that first step into college gave me hope. The wild animal that had endured being caged in School discovered that someone had left the door opened. I escaped so quickly, not wanting to have someone rush to close me in again, that I failed to realize that I had no clue as to how to be. I almost didn't make it to a degree because I was finding myself, discovering who I was, what it meant to have a voice, a choice, independence, and how just to be. My parents may not agree, and the experiences often*

*hurt, but it was money and time well spent. I came out of college with a degree that allows me to be gainfully employed in a field that I not only enjoy but also add value to. The student loans to be paid back are just a bonus! Although I still fought to find value in many of the classes I had to take and continued to wonder how many people could get through life on the limited brain cells they obviously had, School had eased into an education for me.*

*So, it is that today, on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, I have enrolled in Japanese Art and Culture at the local university. I will learn about a topic that has intrigued my for decades, and I will go about it how I want to, making connections with teachers inside the classroom and within the community. I will connect with peers, not just other students within my class, who share the same personal growth concept. I may even make a goal of a field study that will take me abroad. Immersion, not suffocation. For the first time in my life, today at 30 years old, I feel like I can truly work toward the potential I have possessed since I was a child. Today, I think I will become a gifted learner.*

*30 years not wasted, just preparing,*

*(Finally) A Gifted Learner*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

From a Teacher

*Dear Students,*

*You will never receive this letter. It is too dark and disquieting for impressionable students to read; yet, I have to get it out of my system so that it will not consume me. I compose it as a testament to the reasons I became a teacher and the reasons I count the days until my retirement. Today, there are 189 days left on my calendar to cross off. For you, however, it is the*

*day you come to me eager to start fifth grade: big kids on campus! How ironic that such diverse views share the same classroom: the teacher, the student, the milieu.*

*I am embarking upon my 32<sup>nd</sup> year of teaching, and I want to lay out the way Education has prearranged your fifth grade year. You will be assigned to a teacher based on several things. These conditions are not to be known to you or anyone outside of the front office. The rosters are made at random, you are told; yet, they come out astonishingly similar in number, color variations, and socioeconomic status. For anyone who looks more closely, or notices the number of students who leave on “gifted ed.” day, or leave with the “resource” teacher, or may come in with another teacher, the class roster is anything but random. Your label has been carefully scrutinized. This is disillusion number one.*

*The curriculum that you will learn has come prepackaged, aligned, parceled out in minutes per day, questions written for one answer and one world view, on one level, and “sanitized for your protection.” The good news is when you change schools, your new teacher should be on the same concept, same lesson, and same chapter as the one you just left. That’s how standardized curricula work. We are all in this together...working toward The Test...working toward international supremacy! The bad news is that we are not a standardized society. We pride ourselves on being unique, daring to be different, and to be our own person! When we spend the majority of our lives in an established model that teaches us conformity, we have very little chance to be anything other than cookie cutter copies of the society that put us here. There will be little hope of changing the wrongs that we know exist.*

*I want you to know that education wasn’t always like this. Oh, I wish you could have been in my class in the early 1990s! Teaching was fun; learning was fun; school made positive impressions on my students. One of my favorite units was on China. We learned a little Chinese*

*language; how to write characters using black ink and fine pointed paint brushes; we read stories of Chinese culture, religion, and folk tales; we cooked traditional Chinese food with one of our classmate's grandmother; and we celebrated the Chinese New Year with a parade complete with a huge red dragon controlled by poles held up by 25 laughing fifth graders! I remember the joy I had experiencing this new knowledge with my students, and I know they keep that impression within them, still. How many of you will be impressed by the many benchmark tests, uninspiring reading choices, and blocks of curriculum time we experience today?*

*Disillusion number two.*

*This is the last year you will be an elementary student. You have been told that you must prepare for middle school. You will not be given second chances to take a test. You must get organized. You must pass The Test. These are the directives that we teachers give to you, mainly, because we have been given directives: ones that state that our careers are at stake if we don't make the grade. The trickle-down effect that ends with you is long and impersonal; however, it comes down to our grades come from, among other things, your scores.*

*You know how your education has been. It has always been based on the system of accountability through standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing. You have been short-changed. This is disillusion number three.*

*You are more than a vessel waiting to be filled. You deserve creativity in your learning, and I deserve creativity in my teaching. Paradigms change. They vacillate with the winds of political change. It is time for another shift, and I pray that it will be in time for you to ride it. I pray that you learn who you are inside and find a way to learn in spite of the stifling education that you have been in. Hopefully, you will grow beyond the classrooms that you have been*

*assigned to. If you can and WILL, you may be disillusioned no more.*

*Praying for your future, and retiring in 189 days,*

*Your Fifth Grade Teacher*

## POSTSCRIPT

For decades, gifted education, the concept of giftedness, and the word itself—gifted—have been caught in a struggle of semantics. As an advocate and teacher within this realm of education, I have had to see both sides of the topic. Let me state that it is very difficult to understand, much less connect with the position that would *oppose* providing students with an appropriate education or differentiation that meets their needs. In a nutshell, that is what gifted education should do. Of late, however, I have found it challenging to support. It is not that I no longer believe in gifted education, gifted learners, or even the word gifted. It is because I have come to believe that School is training this unique trait out of our young learners. It is becoming harder to find ways to encourage students to transfer their love of learning and potential into a milieu that does not value it. Milieu, not teachers. Most teachers that I know believe that all children have the right to learn. That includes moving beyond what they can learn in the classroom.

My interpretation of the problem lies in the responsibilities teachers have to prepare students for their future...test. Recently, I have noticed that the students who have been expected to progress and show excellence in testing, namely the gifted students, have begun to slip a bit. Their work is not as in depth, thought provoking, or exceptional as I have seen in the past. Although the group has become more diverse over the past few years, their characteristics, abilities, and potential that identify them as gifted learners have changed very little. My conjecture, then, is that the current educational milieu is impacting their learning.

As cynical as this sounds, today's teachers have little opportunities for creative or meaningful activities because they must cover the expected material while differentiating it appropriately for the various levels of learners. Educational interventions, behavioral issues,

benchmark tests, pre-tests, post-tests, social and emotional matters, and scheduling all vie for the classroom teachers' time and attention. That leaves very little time or energy for creating and providing memorable lessons that make learning enduring. That also leaves young gifted students searching for opportunities to learn, that is, until they realize that there is little on the travel plan and they must go in search of adventure on their own. After a while, too many of these students lose their desire to venture beyond the familiar and revert to staying within their dulling box.

The entirety of this study has been to reflect, to muse, and to use my experience within School as I explored gifted education for elementary school-aged children in an era of standardized curriculum and high stakes testing. I have tried to be as unbiased as I could by drawing from my personal practical knowledge as a general education teacher as well as my experiences in the gifted education classroom. I painfully recalled a time before understanding the unique needs of gifted learners, and that tuned me into the daily interactions most teachers experience with various-level learners in their classrooms. I drew from the newly focused knowledge of the immense power structures we teachers are a part of. I recalled the numerous voices of students—young and young adult—and their views of their education. And, I heard the voices of my own children, now adults, reliving the lives of gifted learners in all the joys and angst. Given the embedded nature of my position as a teacher, advocate, and parent of gifted learners, I expect there is a slanted view to my study. I have written this for more than a grade, a degree, or even a title! I began this journey to help those who do not know the unique learning needs, the personal views, or the true feelings of young gifted learners to have an idea of what is at stake. I have written this for those students who could not find their voice in a time when they needed to. I have written this for my own children so they know they gave me a foundation on

which to build my teaching and years of examples and anecdotes to support my pedagogy. Finally, I have written this for myself, to remind me of the journey I have taken and the definite impact I have made on hundreds of students.

Several years ago when I began this journey toward my Doctor of Education degree, I thought that I would pose questions to my current students, past students, their parents, and teachers about the state of gifted education, their views of the pros and cons of the programs available, and wrap up a collection of personal narratives. Those narratives, I believed, would show that gifted children needed specialized education that would propel them to eminence—just where every gifted child could land given the right guidance. What I found was not quite as easily wrapped up. In fact, what I discovered about myself, the system that I am a part of, the students whom I teach, and the world views that influence all of the before mentioned cannot even be contained, much less wrapped up neatly. I fell into a quagmire of ignorance, shame, and guilt. I found that I have been ignorant of the hidden curriculum of the dominant culture, the oppression of marginalized groups, and White Supremacy. I have been ignorant of the power structures with which I have been complacent. I have been ignorant of the views of Others. I found shame in my perceptions of being educated. Having degrees means nothing when your focus is narrow, comfortable, complacent, and void of deep knowledge about your subject. I found shame that I had never even thought about a “complicated conversation” about education. I developed guilt that I had spent my career unaware of myself as an accomplice to the perpetuation of the status quo. Through autobiography and *currere*, I learned how to reflect upon my educational experiences to better understand my students and gifted education within standardization of curriculum; yet, I also developed guilt about those students who have



experienced mis-education within my classrooms. Ignorance, shame, and guilt—a heavy load to bear, especially with only a few years left to make restitution.

As horrible as that sounds, that quagmire has been astonishing. Aside from marrying a wonderfully patient and understanding man and having two remarkable children, being exposed to Schooling and the educational system as viewed from the multiple lenses of curriculum studies has been the most amazing experience of my life. Consequently, the inquiry that began as a neat package has turned into a revelation in reconceptualizing the realm of education that I have been a part of for the past two decades—gifted education. Gone are the interviews, videos, writing assignments, and musings of my students, parents, and fellow teachers. Local school district policies took care of that. What was left were my own memories, writings, experiences, and reveries. To be more than a sophomoric, egomaniacal rant of a doctoral candidate, I had to be willing to move beyond what I wanted to be true, and to be more than a rosy rendition of a dedicated teacher saving the misunderstood gifted learners. I still had to give voice to a population that I truly believe is marginalized, especially in an era of standardized curriculum and high stakes testing. I still had to pull from my experiences, and they are what they are, just as I am who I am. Interpreting them hermeneutically allowed me to develop new horizons and better understanding of the learners and the realm in which I teach. Thankfully, I have gained a sense of place and how strongly it affects who we are, how we perceive ourselves and O/others, and where we are positioned within a power structure. I have learned how to reflect upon our experiences with new world views, fresh eyes, critical lenses, and theoretical frames to see the familiar differently. The letters and journal entries were created to convey my interpretations. The voices I have created are from teachers and gifted learners of various ages. I hope you felt the spirit of each letter. There could have been thousands; for, for every day and every child,

parent, teacher, and educational environment there was an experience that was directly influenced by gifted learners' needs within a standardized milieu.

The journey is not over. Perhaps the first 30 years gave me data for my field study of gifted education. It is time now to unpack my experiences, run my fingers over the trinkets and treasures to check for damages done along the way, mending what I can and tossing what is irreparable. As I flip through the images of my past, I relate them to where I am now and ponder how they will affect my future. After a short rest, giving time for clear reflection not bathed in romanticism, I will be ready to extend my journey with fresh eyes, less encumbered views, and a renewed goal toward true education for gifted learners. Yes, it is *almost* time to pack...

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