STAKEHOLDER OR GATEKEEPER: THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN GIFTED EDUCATION

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A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Patrick D. Pauken, Advisor

Principals make decisions on a daily basis that impact gifted children’s access to an education commensurate to their abilities. Even though principals are influential in all areas of education, their role in gifted education is often overlooked in the literature. This study sought to understand the experiences of principals and their role in the educational lives of gifted students. The primary findings include the essence of the participants’ lived experience is one who supports gifted education as a stakeholder in the lives of gifted students. Furthermore, this role is an active one and includes advocacy and understanding of gifted students. The stakeholder works to provide educational opportunities for the advancement and betterment of gifted students.

As a result of this study, several recommendations for further research in instructional leadership and instructional practice are made. The essence of the phenomenon is one of stakeholder. In the literature, a principal often works with stakeholder groups but is not considered a stakeholder. The principal as stakeholder warrants further research. Additionally, the interaction between the principal as stakeholder and the gifted student as stakeholder would be another area for further research. The role of the superintendent in gifted education, as either stakeholder or gatekeeper, should be considered for further research.

From an instructional practice point of view, the recommendations include the participants offering suggestions of increased professional development opportunities that are of high quality. As districts look to hire new principals, the credentials of prospective candidates should reflect coursework and/or experiences with gifted students.
This work is dedicated to my family:

My children, Mia and Miles
My husband, Chris
My parents, Mom and Dad
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

In the field of gifted education, many definitions exist as to what is giftedness. There is not one definition that is “universally accepted” (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 18). In Ohio, the definition of giftedness is determined by law (Ohio Revised Code [ORC] § 3324.01-.07). A student’s identification as gifted in Ohio is based on his or her performance on an achievement, ability, and/or intelligence test (ORC § 3324.03). In the areas of visual or performance arts, identification is based on a portfolio and/or performance (ORC § 3324.03). Definitions of gifted or gifted and talented also abound in the literature (e.g., Coleman & Cross, 2001; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; Renzulli, 1978). The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2008b) “does not subscribe to any one theory of the nature of human abilities or their origins” (para. 2); however, it does offer a definition of gifted: “A gifted person is someone who shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression” (NAGC, 2008). Even when society has agreed upon a definition of giftedness, there is a love-hate relationship with gifted individuals (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). The contributions these individuals make are cherished by society; however, this same society questions whether resources bound by equity should be used to cultivate individuals’ gifts. Society’s interest in gifted education waxes and wanes depending on the perceived need for its benefits (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994).

Although gifted individuals dot history books, being held up by the societies that sanctioned their abilities and achievement, formal gifted education only began in the United States in the late 1870s (Davis & Rimm, 2004; NAGC, 2008a). Early services allowed students to move at faster rates than age peers (otherwise known as grade acceleration or grade skipping).
Into the 20th century, researchers authored intelligence tests, revolutionizing “the science of psychological testing by capturing intelligence in a single numerical outcome” (NAGC, 2008a, para. 7). By the second decade of the 1900s, approximately two thirds of larger cities had some provision of services for gifted students (Davis & Rimm, 2004). According to Davis and Rimm (2004), in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, interest in gifted education waned for two reasons. The first reason was that educational climate of the time was one of equity; the second reason was the Great Depression. With the launch of Sputnik by the Russians in 1957, however, reports of a failing American educational system became popular (Davis & Rimm, 2004). This spark of national interest in gifted education, which included the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958, lasted for a brief time only to flare again in the 1970s (NAGC, 2008a). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s *A Nation at Risk* reported that America’s brightest failed to compete with their international counterparts and made recommendations for appropriately serving gifted students. Since the mid-1980s, the field of gifted education has suffered due to the anti-ability grouping movement (Davis & Rimm, 2004). In the 1990s, interest in gifted education again flowed (Davis & Rimm, 2004). The release of the U.S. Department of Education’s (1993) report *National Excellence: A Case for Developing American’s Talent* highlighted how America was squandering its talent. In 1998, NAGC published Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards and revised them a decade later (NAGC, 2010). Moving into the 21st century, gifted education, like the rest of the education community, has focused on the standards-based education movement. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and defined gifted and talented students as:

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in a specific academic
field, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (PL 107-110, § 9101.22)

As federal and state educational reforms impact local educational agencies, educators are left to sift and sort through products, materials, and promises that are marketed as research-based best practices and will garner needed mandated outcomes. At the building level, principals are responsible for not only being instructional leaders but also day-to-day managers. Principals live with one foot in the classroom and one foot in administration. They are the closest administrators to teachers and children, yet they are within reach of district-level administrators. In the course of their day, principals make decisions that run the continuum from simple to complex. A decision to stay inside for recess due to foul weather is different from a finance, policy, or curriculum dilemma involving morals, values, and beliefs. Such a complex decision involving the education of gifted students would involve one’s ethics with concern to critique, justice, and care (Starratt, 1991). A decision concerning providing access to different levels of curriculum, whether or not to support subject or whole-grade acceleration, or how to ration resources for students already proficient in knowledge or skills is situational and may invoke different styles of leadership. Minimal research exists about the role of the principal in decision-making concerning gifted students and their education. Even less research exists concerning the experiences of principals with regard to gifted education.

The State of Gifted in Ohio

This study took place in the state of Ohio; thus, it should be noted what it means to be gifted in Ohio. The 2012–2013 State of the States report by NAGC and the Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted (CSDPG) presents a snapshot of gifted education in the United States (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013). The data reported in the most recent report include the total state funding for Ohio in 2012–2013 to be $40,723,826, which is a slight increase over the
previous year by just more than $200,000. The figure is substantially less than 2010–2011, which was $64,563,226. The most recent count of identified students in Ohio stood at 265,555 in 2011–2012, about 20,000 less than in 2006–2007 (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013). The report shows Ohio’s mandates for identification, including the auditing of programs for gifted students. The report also points out Ohio’s policy for early entrance to kindergarten, early entrance to high school, and concurrent enrollment between high school and college or university. Although this report presents a healthy picture of gifted education in Ohio as compared to other states (e.g., South Dakota does not mandate identification or service and does not provide school districts state funding), it gives a false picture of what is really happening in Ohio. The biennium budget of 2009–2011 (House Bill 1; Ohio Department of Education, 2010) mandated districts to spend the amount of funds they did on gifted education in the previous biennium in fiscal year (FY) 2009. Gifted students in districts that spent funds were fortunate and benefited from this mandate. Unfortunately, gifted students in districts that chose not to provide services may still not be receiving services, as districts are not held to the task of doing so. Also, with that legislation, districts no longer received funds tied to units. For the previous quarter of a century, units were given to district based on student attendance rates. Funds were awarded according to maintenance of effort provisions through FY2013.

*Mind the Gap! Report*

The performance of students is at the forefront of every decision made in education. Results of high-stakes testing are dissected and studied to see growth and regression. Teachers and administrators become detectives trying to figure out where the silver bullet to student success lies. Gifted education is concerned with the achievement of different populations of gifted students. Literature surrounding the various groups of underrepresented gifted students
abounds (e.g., see Baum, 1990; Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997; Brody & Mills, 1997; Hébert & Beardsley, 2001; McBee, 2006; Nielson, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 2007). Plucker, Burroughs, and Song (2010) published their report, *Mind the Other Gap! The Growing Excellence Gap in K–12 Education*. The purpose of the report was to “review national and state assessment data for the existence of ‘excellence gaps,’ differences between subgroups of student performing at the highest levels of achievement” (Plucker et al., 2010, p. 1). The Ohio profile shows the NAEP and Ohio Achievement Assessment data “demonstrate the existence of substantial excellence gaps for Black, Hispanic, and Free and Reduced Lunch Eligible students on most exams” (Plucker et al., 2010, p. 1). The profile continues by stating, “White students had higher average AP scores than Black students on AP tests and were more likely to make a ‘5’ on an AP exam while Hispanic performance was more competitive” (Plucker et al., 2010, p. 1). The profile recognized that Ohio’s state assessments have rigorous standards for meeting advanced status (Plucker et al., 2010, p. 1).

Rationale for the Study

From district to district, services for gifted students vary as much as the laws, policies, and procedures that govern them do (NAGC & CSDPG, 2009). Although gifted students are gifted 24 hours a day, every day of the year, formal services may not be available or supported at even a minimal level. Regardless of the level of services, or lack thereof, principals make decisions that impact the education of gifted students. These decisions result in both intentional and unintentional consequences affecting gifted students and their education.

In the field of gifted education, there is a gap in the literature involving the role principals play in educating gifted students. The literature in gifted education generally looks at gifted students, their abilities, identification of giftedness, and services; however, the principal and his
or her role are mentioned very little (e.g., see Lewis, Cruzeiro & Hall, 2007; Taylor, 1984; Weber, Colarulli-Daniels, & Leinhauser, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experience of building principals with regard to their decision-making when it comes to gifted education. Specifically, the study sought to understand how principals solve dilemmas and balance the needs of gifted students with the needs of the building community. By interviewing principals, their experiences with addressing dilemmas and achieving balance emerged. To contextualize these experiences, a framework utilizing the ethics of critique, justice, and care (Starratt, 1991) was applied.

Research Questions

The following two questions were answered through this study:

1. How do principals describe their experiences regarding gifted students and gifted education?

2. Which experiences encourage principals to make a commitment to gifted education?

Analytical Framework

Starratt (1991) opened his article, “Building an Ethical School: A Theory for Practice in Educational Leadership,” with the following:

During ordinary times, which are never ordinary, but especially during a period of school restructuring, educational administrators need to consider their responsibility to promote an ethical environment in their schools. This article develops three foundational ethical themes—critique, justice, and caring—as the pillars on which to build such a school. (p. 185)

The theory that Starratt (1991) puts into motion is that educational leaders need to address all three ethics in order to promote the ethical school. He contends that “educational administrators have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment
for the conduct of education” (Starratt, 1991, p. 187). By engaging in ethical inquiry, administrators can begin the task of building the ethical school (Starratt, 1991, p. 188).

This study used Starratt’s (1991) theory of building the ethical school as an analytical framework for looking at the relationship between the principal and his role in gifted education. More specifically, using this framework allowed the data to be analyzed utilizing the ethics of critique, justice, and care. All three function in conjunction with each other, never in isolation even if one ethic wanes as another ethic waxes. To illustrate this point, I offer the following: an ethic of critique asks where the balance of power lies and who benefits from the power structure; an ethic of justice addresses this power imbalance through governance and how governance should be carried out; and an ethic of care asks those to care with regard rather than reward. An ethic of critique does not provide steps for fixing the imbalance while an ethic of justice does not ask us to care for one another; thus, all three are necessary to build the ethical school. These ideas are explored more deeply in Chapter 2.

Significance of Study

This study sought to fill a gap in the present literature about the role principals play in the education of gifted students. Of greater significance is the potential this study has to impact the way in which principals are prepared to lead and continue their learning when it comes to gifted education. Policies and practices related to gifted students and their education can be addressed based on the outcomes of the study. Approaches to advocacy can be refined as a result. These collective approaches can impact the ways in which change in the field transpires with greater effect and timeliness.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the study:
1. Bracketing: According to Van Manen (1990), bracketing “describes the act of suspending one’s various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world” (Glossary).

2. Coordinator of Gifted Services: Defined by ORC in Ohio, this individual coordinates services for gifted students, and among other duties associated with gifted education, provides staff and administration with professional development on topics related to gifted education. This person also acts in the capacity of advocate who works closely with parents and community.

3. Epoche: This is the setting aside of prejudgments and opening the researcher to view the experiences of the participants in an unbiased and receptive manner (Moustakas, 1994).

4. Ethic of Care: The ethic of care is one of regard. This ethic focuses on the demands of the relationship rather than a contract or legal standpoint (Starratt, 1991). People do not become the means to an end but are the end in of themselves.

5. Ethic of Critique: The ethic of critique, in Starratt’s writing (1991), asks one to examine where the power lies in a relationship. By questioning who benefits from a structure or gives definition to what is valued, one is able to uncover or expose unjust situations that would otherwise maintain their legitimacy.

6. Ethic of Justice: The ethic of justice, according to Starratt (1991), asks us “How do we govern ourselves?” (p. 191). We do so by acting just, both as individuals and as a community. An example of this is the reciprocal relationship between schools and their students. By meeting the individual needs of the students, students become productive citizens, thus meeting the needs of the community.
7. Gifted: The federal definition is 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 field, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (NCLB, 2002). Although this is a working definition for the federal government, many states, including Ohio, define giftedness differently. Within the field of gifted, many experts disagree about what gifted is and what it is not. In Ohio and for the purposes of this study, the definition of gifted found in Ohio Administrative Code § 3301-51-15(A)(1) and Ohio Revised Code § 3324.03 will be used. Under the Ohio Administrative Code § 3301-51-15(A)(1), “‘Gifted’ means students who perform or show potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared to others of their age, experience, or environment and who are identified under division (A), (B), (C), or (D) of section 3324.03 of the Revised Code.” Ohio Revised Code § 3324.03 further defines gifted students in four categories: superior cognitive ability, specific academic ability, creative thinking ability, and visual or performing arts ability.

8. Gifted Intervention Specialist: This individual is an intervention specialist who holds an intervention specialist license, valid for teaching gifted students ages 5 through 21 (Ohio Administrative Code § 3301-51-15).

9. Principal: For the purpose of this study, the principal is considered the person in charge of the building. This person is properly credentialed and recognized by the district as the leader of the building. As leader of the building, this person is responsible for the education, safety, and welfare of the students and staff assigned to him or her.
10. Service Model: The way in which services are provided to gifted students. Different models include the resource room model where students are pulled out of general education and into a separate area for learning to take place; the cluster-grouping model where like-ability students are grouped together for instruction; the inclusive model where the gifted specialist may team-teach with a general education teacher; or the consultation model where the gifted specialist only works with the general education teacher to provide services and does not directly work with students.

11. School culture: This “is the complex set of values, traditions, assumptions, and patterns of behavior that are present in a school” (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009, p. 60).

Parameters of the Study

This study is set to intentionally look at principals and the roles he or she play in the education of gifted education. Possible participants were chosen through a criterion-based process as outlined in Chapter 3. The study will not look at why some principals do not, either by choice or circumstance, play an active role. The study took place in Ohio, utilizing its principals. This was a conscious choice due to the fact that laws and policies governing gifted education are different from state to state. Additionally, the state of Ohio offered realistic travel distances for conducting interviews. The phenomenology structure of the study allows for deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2007). This design allows for some generalization, which can be of value to those with an interest in gifted education and principalship.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on the topics of being an instructional leader; influencing school culture and climate; ethics and gifted education; and gifted students
and their education. Chapter 3 contains the methodology for the study as well as addresses issues surrounding trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents the findings and summarizes the essence of the experiences. Chapter 5 relates the findings to the literature, addresses the two research questions, and offers both limitations and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As the instructional leader, the principal becomes “the teacher of teachers” (Moorehead, 2004, p. 29). In today’s educational climate of high-stakes accountability, principals are at the lead in more ways than just being a building manager (McGough, 2003; Quinn, 2002). Principals are responsible for the everyday as well as the long-term educational health and well-being of those in their charge: staff, students, community members, district-level personnel, and volunteers. Additionally, these individuals are under the microscope of performance measures and competing priorities (Clark, 2002; Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006).

The purpose of the following review of literature is to situate the research in the current body of knowledge. Specifically, the review seeks to provide an overview of the principal’s role as the influential educational leader. Additionally, the literature surrounding the ethics of justice, critique, and care as well as the relationship between the gifted student and his or her principal are explored. These key elements were chosen to set the stage for what is known about principals and their experiences with gifted education.

Influencing School Culture and Climate

Roland S. Barth (2002) stated the obvious: “Every school has a culture. Some are hospitable, others toxic” (p. 6). According to Williamson and Blackburn (2009), school culture is defined as reflecting “the complex set of values, traditions, assumptions, and patterns of behavior that are present in a school” (p. 60). Williams and Blackburn added that school culture is “an indicator of the most deeply held beliefs about schooling” (p. 60). To understand a school’s culture, one must look at how the values, traditions, assumptions, and patterns of behavior are
reflected by the building faculty and staff (Shann, 1999). What is celebrated? Who is celebrated? What is revered? Who is revered? What stories are shared and what is the tone of the sharing? What and who are rewarded? When someone walks the halls, what artifacts are present and what is the message they send? What are the covert, overt, and tacit meanings attached to the messages? Deal and Peterson’s (1999) book, *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership*, dissects eight major roles the principal plays in shaping school culture. These roles are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Major Roles Principals Play in Shaping School Culture

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<td>Historian</td>
<td>Seeks to understand the social and normative past of the school (pp. 87, 88)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthropological Sleuth</td>
<td>Analyzes and probes for the current set of norms, values, and beliefs that define the current culture (pp. 87, 88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visionary</td>
<td>Works with other leaders and the community to define a deeply value-focused picture of the future for the school; has a constantly evolving vision (pp. 87, 89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Affirms values through dress, behavior, attention, routines (pp. 87, 90–92)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Role</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potter</td>
<td>Shapes and is shaped by the school’s heroes, rituals, traditions, ceremonies, symbols; brings in staff who share core values (pp. 87, 92–95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poet</td>
<td>Uses language to reinforce values and sustains the school’s best image of itself (pp. 88, 95–96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor</td>
<td>Improvises in the school’s inevitable dramas, comedies, and tragedies (pp. 88, 97–98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healer</td>
<td>Oversees transitions and change in the life of the school; heals the wounds of conflict and loss (pp. 88, 98–99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar practices and commitments are recognized by Kouzes and Posner (2002) as necessary for exemplary leadership. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) offered a list of attributes found in resilient school leaders. This list, again very similar to Deal and Peterson’s and Kouzes and Posner’s works, details how leaders are pivotal in managing school culture.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty’s (2005) *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results* puts a quantitative spin on these roles, practices, commitments, and attributes of leadership and how they impact student achievement. Their work included the meta-analysis of 69 studies spanning 23 years (1978–2001) that examined the relationship between building
principal and students’ academic achievement. Twenty-one responsibilities, or categories of behavior, emerged as having a correlation of .18 or greater to student academic achievement. A factor analysis further showed that culture (ranked second), ideals/beliefs (ranked third), and knowledge of the curriculum, assessment, and instruction (ranked fourth) are necessary components for first-order change, or change that is incremental. Second-order change includes knowledge of curriculum, assessment, and instruction (ranked first), optimizer (ranked second), and ideals/beliefs (ranked seventh and last of those responsibilities necessary for such change). Interesting, but not surprising, second-order change was found to be negative on culture, communication, order, and input (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 73). Such dramatic changes brought forth by second-order change may not take into account the well-entrenched culture of that of which is being changed.

Whether the practice of communication is called a role, commitment, or responsibility, its importance cannot be overlooked as principals are instrumental in “promoting a clear vision of the school’s mission, a safe orderly environment, high expectations for all students, productive working environments for teachers, optimal time for learning without disruption, and incentives and rewards to encourage excellence” (Shann, 1999, p. 392). In order to promote a clear vision, principals must be able to communicate well. Halawah (1999) studied the relationship between the effective communication of high school principals and school climate. Halawah asserted that “creating a collaborative environment and open communication has been described as the single most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives” (p. 335). Results of the study indicated there is a pattern between high values for principal communication and high values for school climate.
When it comes to gifted students, are they celebrated? Are they included in the stories that surround the building’s history and, if so, are the stories told in positive language? Is the culture such that gifted students are afforded the access they need to keep learning and growing? If so, what is the principal’s role in cultivating such a culture and climate?

Influence of Leadership

Principals impact students’ educational lives on many fronts, including the instruction they receive as well as the curriculum and assessments used to determine their growth. How do they impact such pillars of pedagogy?

Principals’ roles impact instructional practice and as a result, students’ achievement and engagement. In a study on principal leadership behavior’s impact on instructional practice and student engagement, Quinn’s (2002) looked at how principals encouraged and collaborated with teachers to create an environment that valued and supported student engagement (p. 452). The study sought to identify correlations between leadership behaviors and instructional practice descriptors and to “determine whether there were predictive relationships for the instructional leadership subscales with each of the instructional practices inventory scales” (Quinn, 2002, p. 452). Results indicated that principals are able to make more of an impact on instruction at the far ends of the student engagement continuum. Items such as teacher-led conversations, teacher-led instruction, and student seatwork/teacher-engaged showed no significant correlation to the strong instructional leadership factor (Quinn, 2002, p. 460). Interesting to note, the visible presence subscale of strong instructional leadership did not correlate with any of the instructional practices inventory. This result led Quinn to the conclusion that as a principal, visible presence in one’s building does not significantly impact instruction (p. 460).
Gentilucci and Muto (2007) explored the principal’s influence on academic achievement from the student’s perspective. The study uses the term *indirect* to acknowledge that principals indirectly affect student achievement by “influencing the influencers” (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 220). By using the term *direct*, the researchers referred to the active engagement of the students on the part of the principals. They contended that visiting classrooms, monitoring student work, discussing academics, and publically and privately praising achievement while sanctioning failures is actively engaging students in meaningful relationships (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 222). Gentilucci and Muto were interested in student perspectives and noted the lack of student-centered research surrounding “what works” in schools (p. 223). Students’ voices often bring a perspective different than their adult counterparts, and that is what the authors were hoping had emerged. The study focused on three school districts from which three middle schools were chosen to participate. Thirty-eight students participated in the study. The authors chose eighth graders because “it was assumed that these middle school students would be more articulate than elementary students and more willing to share their thoughts and feelings than high school students” (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 227). The data from the study showed that even though there were differences in the demographics of the students, the responses about their thoughts and feelings about their principals within their educational careers were similar (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 228). Again, merely being a presence on campus was not considered a highly influential practice. Engaging students about their learning was seen by students as positive. Classroom visits that were more than just visits also led students to believe the principal was more influential in affecting instruction. Low influence behaviors were interpreted by students to mean the principal did not care enough about the students (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 232). In the discussion, the authors acknowledged that the job of the principal
means many roles to fill, some of which are in direct conflict with each other. Gentilucci and Muto closed the article with the advice that principals can reinvigorate themselves by adopting high influence instructional leadership behaviors identified by the students in the study (p. 233). In doing so, the consumer relationship principals have with students will grow.

Influence can be a two-way street. The Quinn (2002) and Gentilucci and Muto (2007) articles recognized the influence a principal has over his or her constituents. One wonders who then influences the principal? McGough (2003) explored the leader as a learner and how he or she forms and transforms professional perspectives. The article posed three questions:

1. What are common pathways to principalship?
2. What are the patterns of influence affecting principals’ perspectives?
3. How are the identified patterns of influences manifest in a principal’s practice?

(McGough, 2003, p. 453)

In-depth interviews of the 23 participants were conducted and analyzed. Notable findings from the study included the “confirmation of the biographic nature of principal learning” (p. 466) and teacher-leader roles as “venues for formative experiences” (McGough, 2003, p. 467). McGough drew conclusions helpful to the present study:

Those wishing to understand and affect a particular principal’s perspective can proceed by (a) engaging with that principal in a critical dialogue over stories of lifelong significant learning experiences, perhaps through a perspective interview; (b) noting and examining the patterns of influences through his or her biography using the structures developed in this project; [and] (c) searching for a dominant theme threading through those stories. (p. 469)

If the present study can draw from the experiences of principals supportive of gifted education and find patterns of influence and or dominant themes within their experiences, I can better influence less supportive principals by what I have learned.
Ethics in Relation to Gifted Education

The current high-stakes nature of accountability coupled with ever-decreasing resources in the field of education continue to fuel the debate of what is essential for student learning. Gifted education is part of this debate. Building and district-level administration are often faced with deciding whether or not gifted services are truly necessary for student performance and achievement. As leaders evaluate programs for effectiveness in obtaining accountability standards, gifted education’s stigma of elitism for only educating those who already have the most rears its ugly head (Besnoy, 2005; Grant, 2002; Kettler, 2003; Schultz, 2005). Cries of unfairness come from parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members who note that all children deserve an appropriate education. Resources need to be allocated to increase struggling students’ performance. Voices on the other side of the debate, including gifted students, their parents, teachers, and gifted service administrators, sound off that gifted individuals also deserve such an appropriate education. Gifted students need challenge, rather than review, to keep interest and achievement high. Who is to judge the argument of whether gifted students receive services and an education consummate with their ability? School leaders will ultimately have to decide.

Starratt’s (1991) theory for building ethical schools is one of practice. For the reflective school leader, this theory can be used every day as a means to frame moral situations encountered in practice. Starratt suggested the joining of three ethics: the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of caring. None of these ethics by itself offers an educational administrator a fully adequate framework for making ethical judgments; together however, each ethic complements the others in a developmental context of practice. Each fills out an ethical perspective on policy choices. Because none of these ethics compels choice in every instance, one perfect choice does not exist; the three perspectives, however, enable one to make choice with the consequences more clearly delineated, to move toward the “best” choice under
the circumstances, or to a choice that, although it favors one ethical demand, will probably be balanced later on by other choices. (pp. 186-187)

Starratt believed that “educational administrators have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education” (p. 187).

The current problems, concerns, and issues strapping public education are not new. As leadership faces such barriers, the ethic of critique needs to be exercised (Starratt, 1991). To take such action means looking critically at all aspects of one’s educational setting (Starratt, 1991). This includes everything from relationships between different sections of staff and administration, to the ways in which students learn best. The ethic of critique examines such situations by asking questions: “Who benefits by these arrangements? Which group dominates this social arrangement? Who defines the way things are structured here? Who defines what is valued and disvalued in this situation?” (Starratt, 1991, p. 189). Starratt suggested that by uncovering the answers to these questions, injustice can be addressed from a social justice and human dignity point of view. Grant (2002) agreed with Starratt that “no social arrangement is neutral” and “is usually structured to benefit some segments of society at the expense of others” (p. 189). For those individuals in the field of gifted education, the answers to such questions are as varied as the situations and organizations in which they practice. Who would benefit from providing services to gifted students? The students? The school community? Likewise, who would benefit from opting not to provide services? Can a group, such as gifted students, dominate? Should they have the influence to dominate? Is it up to the student, teacher, parent, gifted services staff, or the school administration to define structures? If so, then who holds the influence to redefine dominate structures? Is it up to the same group to define the value (or lack of value) gifted education holds within the educational organization?
An example of the ethic of critique can be found in Grant’s (2002) article, “Justifying Gifted Education: A Critique of Needs Claims and a Proposal.” His work examines the needs claims that are rampant in the field of gifted education. Grant defined needs claims as “claims that a group possesses a need or needs a certain service” (p. 359). Examples of needs claims include gifted children “needing” special services, have counseling “needs,” or “need” to develop their talents. Simply stating a “needs” claim with an expectation of fulfillment of the claim is short-sighted. For example, to state a reader needs access to encyclopedias because she is a gifted reader is a disservice to this child. The statement does not take into account the student’s taste for reading material or the fact that encyclopedias may not be the best source of reading material for her. This example may seem far-fetched but the point being made is that needs claims about a generic label such as gifted, which is overarching and rather nonspecific as written about in Chapter 1, often fail to achieve their intent. As gifted services are often susceptible to funding cuts, cries of elitism, and hostility, justifying that services are simply needed sets it up for easy targeting and criticizing. Grant further contended “needs claims that embody values widely accepted among gifted educators may, to those who do not share the values, look like bald expressions of elitism and favoritism—constructions meant to serve a dominant ideology” (p. 360).

Grant (2002) cited three problems with needs claims:

1. Needs claims represent as matters of fact what are matters of values, speculation, and opinion.
2. Needs claims define a paternalistic and authoritarian relationship between those serving needs and those getting needs served that, at least, unexamined and, at most harmful to those served.
3. Most important, the use of needs claims encourages the unnecessary, divisive, and counterproductive impression that gifted students deserve things other students do not deserve. (p. 360)

With respect to the first problem cited, Grant (2002) pointed out that needs claims based on values, speculation, and opinions are not often tied to theory that contains good empirical support. Needs can only be seen “(a) by the light of a theory or belief about what people or a group of people are like and (b) on the basis of beliefs about what is required to achieve a goal or end state” (Grant, 2002, p. 362). Needs claims concerning gifted individuals are the values of those individuals who author them, which impacts the legitimacy of the claims and field. Grant noted “it encourages the belief that it is the way things are that makes it necessary for a group of people to have certain services” (p. 364). Callahan (1988) described the mistake of presenting value judgments as fact. By stating a fact that is actually a value, the argument lacks sufficient justification for the conclusions made. Although the conclusions may be true, the argument fails to provide evidence for the conclusion (Callahan, 1988, pp. 17–18).

The second concern with needs claims is the well-being of individuals made without “sanction or consultation” from the individuals (Grant, 2002, p. 364). By stating what individuals need without their sanction or consultation “puts one in the position of seeming to know better than the persons concerned what should be done to and for them” (Grant, 2002, p. 365). Gifted children can report their experiences, desires, and hopes for education; however, they cannot report on their needs unless they are privy to the researcher’s values or theoretical scheme and are skilled in applying these to themselves. Researchers cannot derive needs from self-reports “without arguing a link between their data and a theory or their data and values” (Grant, 2002, p. 365). Grant (2002) further clarified that in some instances wants and desires are also called
“needs” rather than the preferences that they are (p. 366). From this stems an “obligation or
guideline for teaching gifted students” (Grant, 2002, p. 366). Grant referred to a mythology
created by Feldhusen (1982) about gifted students needing to acquire a lot more information
because of students’ interests in atlases, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. This mythology of need
reduces a “variety of phenomena that have many motivations to a single ‘need’ characterizing all
gifted students” (Grant, 2002, p. 366). Students are no longer regarded “as the directors of their
own learning or as partners in the process of school learning” (Grant, 2002, p. 366).

The third concern of needs claims is it implies gifted students have special needs, giving
the impression that average students do not have needs and do not need anything more than what
schools already offer (Grant, 2002). Such claims are “used to characterize differences between
groups and to justify treating them differently” (Grant, 2002, p. 367). Grant (2002) wrote that
this particular claim “that gifted students require special services because they have special needs
is one of the most popular justifications for gifted education” (p. 367). The power of this claim
lies in characterizing differences between groups and thus justifying treating them differently.
Yet, the presence of a difference does not automatically signal a need for being treated
differently. If groups are to be treated differently, “rationales for treating one group differently
than another must establish that it is fair or good or right to treat the different groups differently
based on moral principles, not just that the groups are different” (Grant, 2002, p. 368).

Grant (2002) believed that a defense of gifted education must be made through theory,
evidence, and moral values. When the debate turns to the necessity of services for gifted
students, rationale should be explicit and defend its values and assumptions. This allows for
transparency and critique in the public education arena. According to Grant, an “approach to
developing an educational theory for the gifted starts from general principles, regardless of their
applicability to current public school practices” (pp. 370–371). This philosophy “states and defends a view of the good life and good society, a view of what people are like, and a view about how to achieve the good life and good society” (Grant, 2002, p. 371). It makes a sound justification for gifted education.

Starratt’s (1991) second theory of framework for ethical decision-making is the ethic of justice. The ethic of justice is a spectrum that encompasses two schools of thought: (a) individuals, who employ reason to their advantage and obligation to society, and (b) society, as a means through which individuals learn morality. At one end of the spectrum are the rights of the individual while at the other end is the good of society.

Strike, Haller, and Soltis (1998) detailed how freedom of expression as an individual right makes society better even though it can initially cause unrest and discomfort. When individuals, as moral agents, express their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas, they can be debated and then refined. This refinement yields better decision-making and personal growth of individuals; thus, creating a greater society. The principles of benefit maximization and equal respect guide individuals in their decision-making. When faced with a decision, benefit maximization judges the individual’s decision as just by the greatest good it does for the greatest amount of people (Strike et al., 1998, p. 16). Additional reflection is necessary by the individual to determine what the benefit is and who would deem it a benefit. The principle of equal respect asks us to treat each other as an end rather than a means to that end (Strike et al., 1998, p. 17). Secondly, as individuals, each must regard the other as an individual who is a free and moral agent (Strike et al., 1998, p. 17). Lastly, the principle of equal respect calls attention to each individual’s difference being of equal worth. Strike et al. reminded readers that “regardless of native ability, is entitled to equal opportunity” (p. 17).
In gifted education, the debate that often surfaces for school administrators is whether services should be provided for gifted students and, if so, why? Can services be justified to the larger community? Gifted students are often perceived as having a responsibility to provide their talents for the greater good. If this is truly the case, then the argument would be to provide rigorous curriculum and experiences to further develop their gifts and talents. However, providing services to such a population is often seen as giving more to those who already have plenty. With resources stretched to the limits of feasibility, leaders are forced to allocate what is available to the majority rather than the minority. In this scenario, gifted students are often the minority.

Ethical school leaders, while providing for the common good, must also be just in their provisions for the individual. The debate becomes a balancing act: how to provide for the common good while providing for the individual. However, Grant (2002) contended justifying gifted services based on individual rights or differences is as counterproductive as needs claims. He stated, “The existence of differences between two groups of people implies nothing about what we ought to do or what either group deserves” (p. 368).

Kettler (2003) proposed *A Disquieting Suggestion* to the field by extending Grant’s (2002) argument. Grant first contended the following:

a more ambitious approach to developing an educational theory for the gifted starts from general principles, regardless of their applicability to current public school practices. Such a philosophy states and defends a view of the good life and good society, a view of what people are like, and a view about how to achieve the good life and good society. (pp. 370–371)

Kettler interpreted this approach to justification as one built “on a sound rational philosophy” that results in school leadership being better equipped “to answer criticism and provide services to gifted students that are welcomed and supported by the school community” (p. 9).
Early researchers of giftedness focused on “intelligence, measurement, and individual differences” (Kettler, 2003, p. 11). This narrow focus set precedence and the foundations of gifted education in psychology. Kettler (2003) argued that the overreliance on psychological methods of research and analysis has weakened the field’s knowledge base (p. 11). By not addressing philosophical foundations, the field has set limits to its own justification.

To justify gifted education, the field must decide how philosophical foundations can defend the good life and society as well as a view of how to achieve such (Grant, 2002; Kettler, 2003). Kettler (2003) acknowledged

students identified as gifted are no more likely to achieve the good life than their non-identified peers….that all humans, big and small, have needs some of which can be addressed by schooling….that gifted students are no more likely than non-gifted students to make significant lasting contributions that preserve our democratic American culture. (p. 14)

What remains to justify gifted education? According to Kettler (2003), justification comes from a virtuous teacher (p. 14). This virtuous teacher “desires the goods internal to the practice of teaching so that she in all decisions acts in the best interest of the gifted learner so that he comes to know and desire the good himself” (Kettler, 2003, p. 14). Kettler described what Callahan (1988) referred to as deontological reasoning when making decisions, including justification of gifted services, for or against an action or practice (p. 20). By employing such reasoning, the justification becomes internal to the practice. Thus, a good teacher concerns himself with “doing, being, and having what it is good for one to do, be, or have, and in so doing becomes motivated by reasons that direct him toward some good” (Kettler, 2003, p. 12). For school administrators, the virtuous teacher can be the balance between what is good for the whole versus the individual as what student is not deserving of a good teacher? By doing what is best for the group, the individual may suffer; however, doing what is best for the individual may
be what is best for the group. Kettler concluded “gifted education is the intellectual engagement of virtue in a way that models for gifted learners how too they can do, be, and have what is good” (p. 15). Could the same be true for principals? As the lead teacher, principals are at the cusp of balance. For the school leader, justice means choosing to act justly as an individual as well as be part of a community that governs justly (Starratt, 1991, p. 193). Starratt (1991) stated, “The ethic of justice demands that the claims of the institution serve both the common good and the rights of the individuals in the school” (p. 194). By striving to serve both the common good and the individual, debate will surface. According to Starratt, debate is the only way to promote ethical attitudes and understand self-governance.

Starratt (1991) recognized the close relationship between the ethic of critique and justice, yet the framework stands incomplete without the third piece: the ethic of care. Without the ethic of care, the ethics of critique and justice are incomplete as they do not recognize the philosophy of the person (Starratt, 1991). The ethic of care focuses on the demands of relationships “from a standpoint of absolute regard” (Starratt, 1991, p. 195). These relationships are not contractual or legalistic but rather ones that require fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, openness to encountering them in the authentic individuality, and a loyalty to the relationship. Such an ethic does not demand relationships of intimacy; rather, it postulates a level of caring that honors the dignity of each person and desires to see that person enjoy a fully human life (Starratt, 1991, p. 195).

The ethic of care is concerned with more than the efficiency and accountability marking today’s educational landscape (Callahan, 1988; Kettler, 2003; Starratt, 1991). Care is more than the extrinsic and external forces impacting the decision-making processes of school administrators (Calabrese, 2002; Callahan, 1988; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hersey, Blanchard &
Johnson, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Such extrinsic and external forces often include culture, politics, economics, public interest, legal issues, and the values and beliefs of individuals as well as both the intended and unintended consequences of decision-making (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2003). When school leadership has an understanding of these forces, it is only then relationships will grow in “regard, mutual respect, and honest contact between two persons” (Starratt, 1991, p. 196). Such cultivating will require leadership to “explore with their teachers those conditions necessary to initiate and maintain trust, honesty, and open communication (Starratt, 1991, p. 196).

Cultivation and exploration of the ethic of care begins for school leadership in many different ways. Many individuals arrive in leadership roles by traditional means while still others take the road less traveled. No matter the route, school leaders are obligated to adhere to certain ethical standards. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium’s Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) uphold six standards for school administrators. Each standard is broken into three sections: knowledge, dispositions, and performance. In the dispositions section, each standard is addressed by what an administrator believes in, values, and is committed to doing. Standard 1’s first disposition reads, “The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to the educability of all” (para. 4). This disposition sets the tone for the successful school leader. With the many external forces discussed earlier, leaders are charged with educating various populations: teachers, parents, community members, students, and themselves. Before a caring, ethical leader can educate, influence, and impact, she must first understand. Where does such understanding come from?

Gilligan (1987) stated, “From a care perspective, the relationship becomes the figure, defining self and others” (p. 23). Understanding begins with caring. Caring begins by
recognizing the relationship for what it is. A relationship takes two, self and other. In this study, the self is the principal and the other is the gifted student (Mayeroff, 1995). Each is interdependent on the other (Gilligan, 1987, p. 24). An example of the ethic of care is one cares to hear and be heard rather than the right to be heard (ethic of justice). Mayeroff (1995) added, “to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself” (p. 335). To care means carrying devotion rather than obligation (Mayeroff, 1995, p. 338). It involves much more than token kindness or wishing someone well (Mayeroff, 1995, p. 335). It takes knowing, alternating rhythms, patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage (Mayeroff, 1995, pp. 339–346). With regard to caring for gifted students, one can apply Mayeroff’s statement: “In the broad sense, ‘being with’ characterizes the process of caring itself: in caring for another person we can be said to be basically with him in his world, in contrast to simply knowing about him from the outside” (p. 352).

Gaining understanding—thus caring—also comes from many situations and experiences. According to Stein and Nelson (2003), leaders must have leadership content knowledge just as a social studies teacher has subject material knowledge in history and geography or a gifted lead teacher has subject material knowledge in gifted education. As leaders move higher up in the organizational structure, the complexity of necessary knowledge increases. Due to this complexity, it is unreasonable to believe leaders can and will have all of the necessary knowledge. To deal with the complexity, the leader’s role shifts from “teacher” to “leader” in so much as knowing where the expertise lies (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Rather than being the transmitter of knowledge, the leader recognizes the expertise of others in relation to the task and arranges the environment in a way that supports utilizing the expertise to its fullest extent. Stein and Nelson defined the role the administrator assumes as
responsibility for (a) understanding the learning needs of individuals; (b) arranging the interactive social environments that embody the right mix of expertise and appropriate tasks to spur learning; (c) putting the right mix of incentives and sanctions into the environment to motivate individuals to learn; and (d) ensuring that there are adequate resources available to support learning. (p. 426)

As school leaders critique and justify services for gifted students, care allows trust to be developed between leadership, gifted education staff, parents, community members, teachers, and students. Through a cultivation of expertise, credibility develops and solidifies the common goal of the educability of all. Once credibility is established, leaders, both formal and informal, can exert influence on thinking and behavior that is both in the best interest of the community and individual student. The principal’s care for the other in the relationship opens him or her up to actualizing more than just him- or herself (Mayeroff, 1995).

Hatch, Eiler White, and Faigenbaum (2005) provided an example of how school leaders can foster trusting relationships by employing the responsibilities previously defined. The researchers studied how four teachers used expertise, credibility, and influence to influence policy, advance research, and improve performance. The four individuals in the study did not hold formal positions of leadership within the hierarchy of the school district. The focus of the study was “the nature of the activities and relationships that enable teachers to make significant contributions to the work and development of peers, policy-makers, researchers, and others who may or may be “below” them in the organizational hierarchy” (Hatch et al., 2005, p. 1013). To examine the activities and relationships, Hatch et al. drew upon literature based in situated and organizational learning and institutional theory (p. 1014). This research suggests

that an individual’s influence on the learning of his peers and the development of his organizations rests on the sharing of tacit knowledge in joint and parallel activities, the creation of explicit representations of knowledge that can be shared across contexts, the value or “warrant” of the representations and the individuals who produce them, and the receptiveness of the individuals and audiences who may benefit from the representations (Hatch et al., 2005, p. 1014).
Such individuals take it upon themselves to share their knowledge by various means. For the
gifted lead teacher, he may model different styles of teaching, participate in committee work, or
support the parent group. To make expertise explicit, individuals can reflect on and examine their
art of teaching either alone or with others (Hatch et al., 2005). Through this reflection,
representations form to document the learning that takes place. It is these representations that
have the potential to influence as they have the ability to move within and out of different
contexts, extending their reach (Hatch et al., 2005). The extent of the reach the representations of
practice makes depends on

the nature of teacher’s activities and representations, the connections they develop, and
the norms, values, and cultures in their schools: if an individual is perceived to have
relatively little useful expertise, others may pay little attention to any representations that
individual produces; however, if that individual or others establish the values of the
representations—if those representations are “warranted”—then those representations are
regarded as credible and may be more likely to be shared widely. (Hatch et al., 2005, pp.
1014–1015)

If school leaders employ the ethics of critique, justice, and care, they will look to their gifted
education staff to provide expertise; however, leaders will only look to such individuals if they
find their expertise credible. Thus, it is up to the gifted education staff to not only be experts in
the field of gifted education but also hold their practices credible through continued professional
development.

Hatch et al. (2005) contended that although individuals may have expertise and
credibility, their audiences may not be prepared to receive representations. In order to influence
thinking and behavior, individuals need to be able to “shape their conversations, presentations,
and documents to conform to the different standards and constraints across classroom and
schools, research traditions, and political contexts” (p. 1015). By combining expertise and
credibility with influence, individuals can extend the learning of all and expand such influences
into greater contexts. The teachers Hatch et al. studied were not motivated by traditional leadership power nor have they endeavored to build their influence. Rather, their efforts are to think deeply about (critique) questions and problems in their practice, articulate what they are learning, and build and maintain their credibility (justify) through relationships (care) with their colleagues (Hatch et al., 2005; Starratt, 1991).

The above examples utilize literature surrounding teaching staff and the roles they play in teacher-leader relationships. Is it too ambitious to apply the same thinking that similar relationships can transpire between principals and gifted students? In some cases, gifted students possess the knowledge of an expert on given topics. They can question, articulate their learning, and earn credibility through true relationships.

Leadership within the field of gifted education, yet not necessarily the same persons involved at the district level, also have an ethical role to play. Grant (2002), Kettler (2003), and Schultz (2005) pointed out the necessity of a solid philosophical foundation for the continued growth and sustainability in the field of gifted education. The National Association for Gifted Children is a professional organization that charges its membership with moving the field forward in such thinking. The Conceptual Foundations Division began in 1991 and its mission includes theory; definitions and conceptions of giftedness and talent; philosophical foundations; trends, issues, and future directions for the field; historical perspectives; and perspectives from outside the field from which the field can build appropriate curriculum, identify students, and do research (Cohen, 2006). Researcher LeoNora M. Cohen (2006) analyzed convention strand and special sessions for the Conceptual Foundations Division from 1989 through 2004, totaling 360 presentations. Of the 360 presentations, 41 addressed the three main branches of philosophy:
metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology. Of the 41 presentations dealing with philosophy, only one, given in 1997, focused on leaders having wisdom and compassion (Cohen, 2006). Cohen (2006) supported Grant’s (2002) and Kettler’s (2003) views on the current ideologies plaguing gifted education: focusing on making the gifted child a successful worker or creating a meritocracy. The article acknowledges the “two dominant paradigms in the field, talent development and asynchrony, as well as considerable vestiges of older measurement and needs-based ones that continue to compete and pull on each other” (Cohen, 2006, p. 94) depending on the politics of the moment. Cohen conceded that the field is still debating the final destination of paradigms and its “ability to resist political pressures in considering what is good and right for gifted children” (p. 94). Cohen charged the field to “continue to work on theories and approaches that help young people become ethical, caring, aesthetically sensitive, and socially-just individuals who will take action to ensure fairness and peace” (p. 94).

As the field continues to work on Cohen’s charge, Kaplan (2002) outlined how leaders in gifted education can use language to help advocate for gifted services. As leadership evaluates the legitimacy of such services, practitioners in gifted education can use terms and phrases found in common language, already in use by policymakers, to gain credibility and influence. Using the words *achievement gap* can describe the “existence of the achievement gap within the gifted population as consequence of the academic, linguistic, economic, and culture diversity in the group” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 59). This gap can be attributed lack of gifted programs and insufficient professional development to teachers. The *democratic classroom* is a place where students are taught the democratic process and to respect the individual. This classroom considers “the unique and differential needs, interests, and abilities of all students, and this includes the needs, interests, and abilities of gifted students” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 65). Although leaders often speak of
accountability in terms of outcomes, Kaplan contended the word needs to be redefined to include “moral accountability or to make educators and policymakers accountable for their decisions and the outcomes commensurate to these decisions” (p. 65). Leaders need to be asked, or critiqued, about their decision-making. Lastly, academic rigor can be used to address the needs of all students. Kaplan closed the article by stating, “Redefining the common language for the common good of gifted students is the challenge and demand of today’s educational political climate” (p. 65).

The debate of what is good and just for the education of all students continues, including the field of gifted education. As school leaders evaluate what is essential for student learning, gifted education brings more viewpoints into the debate. Those individuals practicing in the field of gifted education are often called upon to justify services for students with academic gifts and talents. Such justification is a struggle when the field cannot agree on the foundation in which services should be provided. This struggle has lead to a weakening of the field as charges of elitism are often heard.

The field of gifted education can look to the literature of leadership and decision-making and to its own researchers to provide the necessary justification of services to gifted students. By employing Starratt’s (1991) theory of building ethical schools, leaders can critique, justify, and care about gifted services in a way that also addresses the weaknesses in field. By viewing the justification of gifted services through Grant (2002) and Kettler (2003), the field can work with school leaders to move the achievement of all students forward in a time of high-stakes accountability. This movement can be approached in several different manners. One, those practicing in the field (i.e., students, teachers, intervention specialists, coordinators, parents) can employ their expertise and credibility to ensure that correct information is being used to make
solid decisions. Two, working together with school leaders to gain trust and further influence is a must. Lastly, school leaders need to be prepared to accept expertise and credible influence. This can be achieved by using leadership content knowledge, using knowledge of gifted education, and utilizing the language spoken by audience members.

Principals in Gifted Education

Who are the educational leaders for gifted students? The generic answers include teachers, gifted intervention specialists, principals, counselors, coordinators of gifted services, mentors, and even other students who support their unique abilities and or achievements. This study is particularly interested in the principal. Interestingly enough, there is very little in the literature about the principal in the lives of gifted students. Plucker and Callahan’s (2008) *Critical Issues and Practices in Gifted Education* claims to be “the definitive reference book for those searching for a summary and evaluation of the literature on giftedness and gifted education” (back cover). That very well may be true since little in the literature exists, but not one of the 50 issues covered in the 760 pages explicitly mentions the role of the principal. Textbooks in the field geared toward undergraduate and graduate studies in gifted education mention the coordination of programs, advocating for such programs, the methods and materials right for instruction, and counseling (Coleman & Cross, 2001; Karnes & Bean, 2009; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006). One textbook written by Barbara Clark in 1992, in its sixth edition, dedicated a little more than three pages for gaining a principal’s support and care for a program. Dettmer, Landrum, and Miller (2006) included two paragraphs about the role of school administrators with respect to carrying out professional development. Davis and Rimm (2004) and Gallagher and Gallagher (1994) both dedicated a full chapter to program planning but never
mentioned the role of the principal. Johnsen, Haensly, Ryser, and Ford (2002) acknowledged the principals as part of the factors influencing teachers’ changes in instruction.

The structure of schools puts the principal in an ideal location to affect this particular group of students’ lives, thus making it surprising that such a small quantity of literature exists. In 1984, Taylor asked, “Are you a gifted principal?” in her attempt to get principals to reflect on their beliefs and actions concerning gifted students. Eighteen yes or no questions were asked and resources were provided should a principal need more information. The article appeared in a trade magazine for individuals with an interest in gifted education. Moving two decades ahead, another article emerged about the role of two principals at two different schools for the gifted. In “A Tale of Two Principals” (Weber et al. 2003), the authors lamented about the lack of research available pertaining to the role of the elementary administrators for schools specifically for gifted students (p. 55). The authors interviewed two principals about their role in the buildings where they were principals. The settings of each school were different from each other, one being a private school, and the other, a magnet school within a public school setting. In the case of the private school, the students must be gifted to attend. At the magnet school, criteria differed based on several factors and socioeconomic status was taken into account. Both schools were in Florida and followed that state’s definition of gifted. To generalize the experience of these two individuals to the average, everyday public school—the experience of most gifted students—is a bit of a stretch.

The third article located also noted the lack of literature about the role of the principal in the educational lives of gifted students. Lewis et al. (2007) focused their research on the principals at rural public schools in a Midwestern state. The article detailed strengths of the two principals who were purposely chosen based on their reputation for strong gifted programs.
Themes specific to gifted education emerged and although considered strong programs, each had areas of concern to the researcher that had not been addressed. Unfortunately, the interview questions (or examples of them) were not included in the article. The authors closed the article by offering suggestions for how administrators can strengthen programs. It was interesting to note that these principals were considered strong by the state consultant for gifted education, who constructed a list of possible participants for the study at the request of the researchers. Additionally, the authors listed recent training undertaken by one principal to include “differentiation, tiered lesson planning, brain research on learning styles, and differentiation strategies” (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 2). These are all types of trainings that would benefit all students in their buildings—nothing in the list is “gifted only.” The affective development of gifted students, perfectionism, underachievement of gifted students, and the underrepresentation of certain populations would be topics more suitable to lending to their credibility in the name of gifted. It makes me wonder if the bar is set too low for what I would expect a solid gifted program to be or if people just get excited that individuals are doing something, which is better than nothing; thus, giving the appearance of strength and/or knowledge of what makes a gifted student a gifted student.

Summary

Peachman (1942), a teacher in the Cleveland Public Schools renowned Major Works classes, wrote of the short, formal history of gifted education some 72 years ago that captures attitudes of gifted education still today. In the article, “Attitudes: Their Significance in Education for the Gifted,” she wrote of the growing recognition of the importance of attitudes of individuals connected to gifted education. She outlined the attitudes found in the literature of the time, the attempt to measure attitudes, the attitudes of parents (both of gifted and nongifted students)
toward the gifted, the attitudes of educators, and the attitudes of children. She closed the article by discussing recently expressed attitudes toward the place of the gifted in society. Aside from the difference in formal writing styles, a person could place this article in any section of the history timeline NAGC (2008a) provided on its website. Not much has changed for gifted students and the attitudes of those that surround them (Gallagher, 1991; see also Gifted Child Quarterly, 26[1]) and 53[4]) since the article was written. Peachman recognized that gifted children will be called upon to make many decisions for themselves and “possibly for others” (p. 194). Peachman wrote “Society cannot wait to view life in retrospect. The present is important” (p. 196). The same can be said for the gifted student. If the ethics of critique, justice, and care (Starratt, 1991) are applied, what would the gifted student achieve if his or her leaders held the belief that present day is important?
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter addresses the methods of the phenomenological study. This qualitative approach along with the role of the researcher is examined. The selection process for participants, interview procedures, instrumentation, and data collection is thoroughly described. Lastly, concerns with credibility and trustworthiness are explored.

Research Questions

1. How do principals describe their experiences regarding gifted students and gifted education?

2. Which experiences encourage principals to make a commitment to gifted education?

The Phenomenological Approach

According to Creswell (2007), phenomenological studies describe “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). The purpose “is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Van Manen (1990) defined essence of a phenomenon as “a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon” (p. 10). Essence is obtained through data collection via interviews and observations (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher suspends her experience of the phenomenon in order to fully describe that of the participants’, allowing the essence to come through the data analysis. Analysis and reflection lead to understanding, thus essence emerges (Moustakas, 1994). “Phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our every day existence, our life world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11). Phenomenology is concerned with life world (Van Manen, 1990). As such, it is a natural fit to apply phenomenology to the experiences surrounding the decision-making processes that
principals go through concerning gifted education. More specifically, the goal is to allow principals’ experiences concerning gifted education to emerge. Van Manen described the point of phenomenology research as borrowing “other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experience in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole human experience” (p. 62). By gathering the principals’ experiences, I am better able to understand their role in the lives of gifted students’ education.

Cross, Stewart, and Coleman (2003) wrote of the wealth phenomenological studies can bring to the field of gifted education. In their article, “Phenomenology and Its Implications for Gifted Studies Research: Investigating the Lebenswelt of Academically Gifted Students Attending an Elementary Magnet School,” the authors used phenomenological methodologies to give voice to the coparticipants, gifted elementary students. As a result, the authors were able to uncover “invariant structures that represent the essence of the human experience” (Cross et al., 2003, p. 202). The life worlds, or lebenswelts, of gifted elementary students were captured through interviews that were later transcribed and analyzed for themes and significant statements (Cross et al., 2003). Similarly, Muratori, Colangelo, and Assouline (2003) used the structure of phenomenology for their work with early-entrance students and their experiences with the first semester of postsecondary study. They, like Cross et al., sited their choice for phenomenology methods as appropriate due to its affording “rich detail and thick description” (p. 224).

The Epoche Process

Moustakas (1994) reminded his readers that the word *Epoche* is a Greek word that means to “stay away from or abstain” (p. 85). Husserl, according to Moustakas, “called the freedom from suppositions the Epoche” (p. 85). By suspending one’s own experience or opinion on the
topic of study, by bracketing each, the researcher allows the participants’ experiences to fully
develop. Bracketing my experiences allows my bias in the experiences to be put forth so that I
can be open to what my participants want to share.

Bracketing

During my third year at university, I met a professor who studied giftedness. I began
working at his summer institutes for gifted adolescents. Upon graduation, I enrolled in graduate
school and began formal studies in the field of gifted education. I came to realize that I was once
a “gifted kid,” having been served through pull-out enrichment classes in elementary school.
Throughout junior high and high school, I was tracked in honors and college preparatory classes.
I will did well enough and earned high grades; however, I never thought of myself as “gifted.” I
worked hard at some things while enjoying the ease that other tasks brought. Even if I knew the
word gifted, it would have been one-dimensional and not with the understanding I currently now
own.

I left graduate school full time to become a teacher. I took a position as a Gifted
Intervention Specialist with a small urban district. My assignment was to serve gifted students in
three buildings where the grade levels ranged from kindergarten to eighth grade. This assignment
allowed me to work with five different principals and three different assistant principals. Each
building functioned differently due to not only the attitude of the principal, but also the age of the
students and attitudes of the staffs. Some of the administrators were parents of gifted children
while others admitted that their educational philosophies did not include gifted. I was fully aware
of the philosophies of all administrators and it is safe to say they covered all ends of the
spectrum, from fully supportive to wishing I was not assigned to their building.
After three years of teaching, I was reassigned to supervise gifted services for the entire district. It was a quasi-administrative position. I later became the full-time administer in charge of overseeing the entire service continuum and worked directly with all principals and assistant principals. I found more principals that were fully supportive and a few that I made uncomfortable. The new position afforded me many opportunities, including a greater network of people throughout the state and country who held the same position. I often inquired as to their experiences with principals, the principals’ philosophies about gifted education, and their actions in support of gifted students. This inquiry often brought out the sarcasm in people as they were quick to reply that most principals were at most indifferent to the students and at the very least cared about them in hopes of attaining high test scores to pad the building’s and district’s ratings where high-stakes testing makes or breaks school performance. As the conversations continued over the years, the gripes never seemed to change albeit some died down. This dying down could be a result of a wearing out and individuals burning out in the name of fighting the good fight on behalf of gifted students.

A theme emerged for me: Both principals and their assistants either “got” gifted education or they did not. By “getting it,” they in some way supported gifted students. Whether it was empathizing about the lack of gifted students’ needs being met to being fully engaged in improving the service continuum, these principals knew this particular group of students was not just a high test score but a set of students with different needs. On the other side of the spectrum, there are principals who did not believe in the labels associated with gifted education and that all children are gifted in some way. This philosophy is inappropriate, as we would not declare all children are learning disabled in some way. The position of principal, including the assistant, is one of power. The principal, as instructional leader and building manager, holds positional and
personal power. Thus, his or her philosophies and actions can have a profound impact on the lives of gifted students. I made great efforts to change the ways in which I interacted with principals whose philosophies about gifted were different than mine. I also began to share more with those in my growing network about how to approach these instructional leaders. In addition, I continued my work with principals whose philosophies were similar to mine. Building capacity for understanding gifted children and their place in our schools became one of my most sacred professional goals. I began to understand that my world of “giftedness” and the experiences within it appeared normal and forthright because it was the only world I knew. Some principals are in that world, yet there are those who are not. Likewise it can be written that I do not know the world of special education because I do not possess first-hand knowledge or experience within it.

In the fall of 2013, Sandusky City Schools, my employer, opened the doors to The Regional Center for Advanced Academic Studies. This free public school is the region’s only all-gifted elementary school. Students identified as gifted, by the state of Ohio, in reading, mathematics, or superior cognition in grades 4–6 were welcomed to attend. The first student body numbered 76. In the fall of 2014, we expanded to grade 7 at our middle school and brought third graders to the Center. Our district has received much media coverage of the Center’s opening and variety of learning opportunities for gifted students. Students who do not reside in the district are also welcome to attend through open enrollment.

My experiences with gifted education have also been affected by the times in which we live. As the earlier history of gifted education noted, interest in the field is waxing. Research has debunked myths long associated with gifted education (see, e.g., Gifted Child Quarterly, 53[4])). Technology has provided access to research and provides a tool to spread advocacy efforts. For
example, Ann Sheldon, executive director of Ohio Association for Gifted Children, used Twitter to alert people to state legislature’s actions regarding the biennium budget and the lack of funds for gifted education in Ohio. Based on these Tweets, supporters mobilized to testify in front of the State Finance Committee and were recognized by the members of the committee for their efforts. Additionally, technology is providing students access to curriculum and instruction consummate with their levels—either with or without the support of local school administrators. The changing face of bricks and mortar education to jobs of the future that do not even exist has people responding. The response in Ohio has been legislative action, policy concerning credit flexibility for students to demonstrate mastery of knowledge and or skills, and a performance indicator on building and district-level report cards.

Although many items currently influencing gifted education in Ohio have been addressed by the literature in the field, it seems odd that principals still may not be supportive of gifted education. Most philosophies about education center on the ability of all children to learn. While noble, it has been my experience that actions of individuals do not support such ideals. Likewise, it has also been my experience that people do not support gifted students in the same nature as students with disabilities due to the misperception that gifted kids will just “get it.” If I, applying an ethic of critique (Starratt, 1991), examine the power structure and where the balance lies, then I become elitist. I will have given more to those who allegedly already have the most. Additionally, if I care about gifted students for the fact that they are students with needs rather than to care about them as a means to an end, where is the harm in that? How is it that some principals see gifted students for who they are while others continue to view them as a high-stakes test score? If we served them for who they are, would they not provide the outcome these individuals seek . . . and more?
Methods

This section shares how participants were selected. Interview protocol is outlined as well as the data collection.

Participant Selection

Phenomenology requires that all participants actually experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), “criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 128). As such, the goal of the study was to understand the phenomenon of the participants as a whole and translate that experience into the essence. Eight individuals participated in the study. Because the phenomenon must be one that all participants have experienced, I utilized the Ohio Association for Gifted Children’s Coordinator Division representatives for possible leads on principals with reputations for being positive toward gifted education. I made initial contact with participants through phone calls, email and face-to-face when opportunities presented. Contacts were also made through contacting superintendents with reputations for strong gifted services within their districts and seeking their input. I also asked confirmed participants if they knew individuals who may be interested in participating (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Interview Protocols

Open-ended, semistructured interviews were conducted with each participant. The content for the questions come from gifted education literature and from Starratt’s (1991) work on the balanced school (see Chapter 2). Three, one-hour interviews were scheduled with each participant separately. All but two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. The remaining two were conducted over the phone due to scheduling conflicts. The goal of these interviews was
to reconstruct the experience of the participants within the topic of study; in this case, gifted education.

The first interview asked participants about their experiences with gifted education up to our present day (see Appendix A). This interview allowed for their experience to be put into context (Seidman, 2006). Questions such as “Tell me about your earliest experiences with gifted?” and “How did you come about understanding and acknowledging the unique needs of gifted students?” allow the participant to begin the story of his or her experiences with gifted education. Such questions were intended to draw out the participants’ philosophical foundations and theoretical frameworks of gifted education.

The second interview asked participants to describe their current everyday experiences with gifted education (see Appendix B). Prompts such as “Tell me what it is like to be a gifted student in your building” allowed the participant to provide details of his or her present experiences with gifted education. Additionally, each participant was presented a set of scenarios from which they were asked to offer insight and advice to colleagues and instructional leaders in training (see Appendix B). Three (#1–#3) were part of original scenarios that come from Coleman and Cross’s (2010) *Being Gifted in School: An Introduction to Development, Guidance, and Teaching* and were modified with the authors’ permission. The modifications were made to include representation of ethics of critique, justice, and care. The other two scenarios come from conversations with gifted coordinators over the past decade and include elements of the ethics of critique, justice, and care as well. Participants were offered a transcript of the first interview to review for completeness of thought. Any areas needing clarification by the researcher were addressed at this interview.
With the third interview (see Appendix C), participants were again given a transcript of the second interview to review for completeness of thought. The researcher addressed any areas in need of clarification. Preceding interviews provided the foundation for the following interview. The third interview offered participants the opportunity to reflect on the first and second interviews. This reflection took the form of the researcher asking the question, “Given what you said about your experiences, what insight would you give colleagues and future leaders about gifted education?” By asking this last set of questions, the series of interviews cycled through the experiences of the participants and created a beginning, middle, and end to their stories (Seidman, 2006).

**Trustworthiness**

*Peer Debriefing*

Two individuals performed the task of critical friend for this research. Each is a former principal, now retired, with a combined 77 years of public school experience. Both candidates have proven track records for supporting gifted education (allocation of resources, graduate coursework in gifted education, working with or they themselves are parent(s) of identified students). Prior to working with willing participants, the researcher piloted the interview protocols with the peers. Based on feedback from the peers, additions or corrections were made to the semistructured interviews and scenarios.

*Member Checking*

Each participant received a transcript of the interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts for completeness and to ensure that their experiences were truly captured.
**Thick Description**

By utilizing the three-interview format, I was able to provide a strong description of the participants’ experiences with gifted education. This format allowed me to build a solid relationship with each individual participant, as the intent was to draw out as much of their experience as I could. Additionally, the three interviews allowed each participant to think about gifted education from three different perspectives; thus, adding to the overall description.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Chapter four describes the process used to collect and analyze data, shares the experiences of the participants, and summarizes the themes of the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a 2 1/2-year period through the interview process described in Chapter 3. Participants were asked a series questions through three interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were completed via telephone. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed by a hired individual. The transcripts were reviewed for completeness and to ensure trustworthiness. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure their responses were accurately captured.

Data Analysis

Once the transcriptions were complete, the interviews were analyzed for significant statements (Creswell, 2007). This process, which Moustakas (1994) referred to as horizontalization, provides an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). From these statements, themes emerged and they will be presented in the following pages.

Participant Demographics

Participant 1 (P1) is a now-former secondary principal with 14 years of experience as a building principal. P1 completed postsecondary education in Ohio upon graduating from high school. She continued her post-bachelor’s-degree work at institutions of higher education within Ohio. Prior to holding the position of principal, P1 spent 20 years in the classroom teaching mathematics. Her classroom experience was in rural, suburban (in Texas for 1 year) and urban
districts. As a principal, P1 has worked in a rural setting. Other experiences in leadership include testing coordinator and virtual school coordinator.

Participant 2 (P2) is a now-former secondary assistant principal and building principal who served in these positions for 9 years in a rural setting. P2 completed postsecondary education in Ohio upon graduating from high school. He continued post-bachelor’s-degree work at institutions of higher education within Ohio. Prior to holding the position of assistant principal and principal, P2 taught social studies for 16 years in a rural district. Other experiences in leadership include his current role as superintendent.

Participant 3 (P3) is currently a secondary assistant principal in a city district. P3 completed post-secondary education in Ohio upon graduating from high school. He continued post-bachelor’s-degree work at institutions of higher education within Ohio. Prior to his current position, P3 spent 7 years teaching Spanish at a rural district and 3 years as a secondary assistant principal in the same district.

Participant 4 (P4) is currently an elementary/middle school principal in a rural district. P4 completed post-secondary education in Pennsylvania upon graduating from high school. He continued post-bachelor’s-degree work at an institution of higher education within Ohio. Prior to his current position, P4 spent 16 years teaching all subjects in an elementary classroom, was an elementary principal for 6 years, and served 13 years as a junior high principal in the same urban district. Although educated in Pennsylvania, P4 spent his entire career in Ohio schools.

Participant 5 (P5) is a former secondary assistant principal who served 14 years in a rural district. P5 completed postsecondary education in Ohio and continued his post-bachelor’s-degree work at institutions of higher education there as well. Prior to his current role of superintendent
in a rural district and as an assistant principal, P5 was an Occupational Work Experience (OWE) teacher and a Title I coordinator and had responsibilities with district transportation.

Participant 6 (P6) is a former assistant elementary principal in a rural district and an elementary principal in an urban district. She collectively served in these roles for 10 years. P6 completed post-secondary education in Ohio and completed post-bachelor’s studies at institutions of higher education in Ohio as well. Prior to her role as principal, P6 spent 15 years teaching in suburban and urban schools in various settings, including reading and math intervention, self-contained fourth grade, ninth-grade skills class, grammar and composition, and middle and high school English. P6 currently serves as a curriculum director in a rural district and has coordinated Title I programs.

Participant 7 (P7) is a former secondary assistant principal in an urban district and principal of a career center for a total of 9 years. He currently serves as a superintendent of a suburban district. P7 completed his postsecondary studies and post-bachelor degree work in Ohio as well. Prior to his role as an assistant principal, P7 taught 7 years in an urban district in secondary science and intervention. Before his appointment to superintendent, P7 served as assistant superintendent for 2 years in an urban setting.

Participant 8 (P8) is currently an elementary principal serving in a rural district for the last 4 years. P8 completed his postsecondary and post-bachelor’s-degree work in Ohio. Prior to his current role, P8 was an assistant principal and principal in nonpublic schools for 6 years. P8 spent 5 years in the junior high classroom teaching literature in a nonpublic school.

A summary of all of the participant’s credentials and experience is included in Table 2.
### Table 2

**Summary of Participant Credentials and Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Type of District Employment</th>
<th>Number of Years as an Educator</th>
<th>Number of Years as a Principal</th>
<th>Licenses Held by Educator</th>
<th>Other Leadership Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Small town with low student poverty and small student population</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mathematics, Computer Science, Speech, Principal, Superintendent</td>
<td>Test Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Small town with low student poverty and small student population</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Social Studies, Principal, Superintendent</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Suburban with very low student poverty and average student population</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Spanish, Principal</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Rural with high student poverty and small student population</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>K–8, Principal</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Special district</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Principal, Superintendent</td>
<td>Title I, Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Type of District Employment</td>
<td>Number of Years as an Educator</td>
<td>Number of Years as a Principal</td>
<td>Licenses Held by Educator</td>
<td>Other Leadership Roles</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Suburban with low student poverty and average student population</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1–8, K–12 Reading, English, Principal, Superintendent</td>
<td>Title I, Curriculum Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Small town with low student poverty and small student population</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Small town with low student poverty and small student population</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Principal, Superintendent</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Emerging Themes**

Themes emerged from the series of interviews. Participants acknowledged their earliest experiences with gifted education, their families’ influences on their education, and their experiences as not only a principal but also as a principal dealing with gifted parents. Furthermore, there were themes relating to the participants responding as principals to certain situations, their experiences with gifted coordinators, and future experiences with gifted education.

*Earliest Experiences in Gifted Education*

Participants were asked a series of questions related to their experiences with gifted students and gifted education (see Appendices A and B). The first interview began with inquiring
about participants’ experiences as students. Of particular interest was whether or not the participant was formally identified as gifted and, if so, whether or not he or she received services.

P1 shared her experience of being in an advanced group in the fourth grade. Students “knew who was in the smart class and who was not.” She commented, “no one told my parents or anything like that” when asked about being labeled gifted. The words “advanced, maybe smart” were used. In middle school, P1 reminisced about her peer group and felt “your peer group helps you to maximize or minimize your abilities. Who you hang with makes a difference in your potential.” Most of her friends went to college and graduated with degrees. In college, P1 had to make adjustments as she “was in with a bunch of overachievers and gifted people . . . I actually had to start working.” P1 liked education and felt she was good at what she liked; thus, she chose education as a major.

P1’s first experience as a teacher came when she was teaching in inner city Columbus during desegregation in the late 1970s. Her junior high became a magnet school. She was discouraged by her department chair to move a student through the curriculum at a faster pace due to the sequencing of courses. P1 added,

That was when I was first introduced to it. The one thing about being a high school teacher . . . I’ve always advocated for honors math classes; if a child is ready you should push them ahead . . . I think we have a lot more avenues now to get students where they need to be with gifted, especially with mathematics more than we used to. We don’t tend to hold kids back because it won’t fit the system; we’re a lot more flexible.

P2’s first experiences with gifted began with being “in the smart group if that’s the way you want to explain it.” As a former secondary school teacher, P2 stated, “Truthfully at the high school level very rarely do you use the word gifted . . . it’s more of a term of advanced kids then gifted. Very rarely did I talk gifted with others.”
P3’s earliest experience was “a little unique” as when he was younger, his mother, a teacher, received her master’s degree in gifted education from an Ohio institution of higher education. P3 attended the private school where his mother created enrichment programs for students. He claims he was “100% average . . my brother was identified as gifted and did very well.” As a secondary foreign language teacher, P3 had an experience with a student “who basically showed me in five weeks that the way I was teaching was not cutting it for him.” After consulting another teacher and his mother, P3 “basically began to differentiate my instruction on which students I had in the classroom. I really didn’t become an expert in gifted education, but I began to use the techniques my mom used in LEAP [gifted program].”

P4 was not considered gifted in school but was in the top third of his class. He stated his “memory of my grades was much better than the reality of my grades.” P4 was tracked in some of his classes, mostly math for college-bound students. He knew early on in his high school career that he wanted to be an elementary teacher and got along well in school. P4 admitted his experiences with giftedness as a teacher were slow to develop. He began teaching in 1975 and taught to the middle. He learned mostly by watching other teachers challenge students and from students who challenged him.

P5 graduated as the salutatorian of his high school class and did not consider himself gifted. He preferred saying, “that I am high achieving. I do think that I am an overachiever. I probably work harder than most people.” As a physical education teacher, the term gifted was never used. As an assistant principal, P5 taught a leadership class with strict guidelines for admittance. Many of his students were very bright and he challenged them with “gifted projects.”

P6’s mother thought she was gifted at an early age because she could read before she went to school. Although P6 believed she was not gifted in school, she “was always at the high
end.” P6 remembered working through activities quickly in elementary school and in high school and college, taking “a lot of higher level courses but I was never identified as gifted.” As a teacher, P6 shared, it wasn’t “until I taught fourth grade [that I] really start talking about gifted students and I had students that were gifted. I only knew to push them.”

P7 was not identified as gifted during his tenure as a student. In fact, several times during the interview, he stated was “an average student.” P7 spoke about how school did not come easily to him and he recognized that he had to work hard to get good grades. Education became very important to him because he “missed out on so many things that I should have been offered and taken advantage of in high school.” As a teacher, he admitted he was not sure if he came to understand the unique needs of his gifted students. He stated,

My philosophy has always been that success of each student is different. That means their experiences that they have will be different. That’s always been my philosophy. You have to look at each individual kid and see what their capabilities are, what success looks like for that student. I hate to admit it but I don’t think I thought of the realm of gifted. I probably could have done more to challenge those students that were at the higher end of the spectrum.

P8 attended a nonpublic school for elementary school where the experience was very structured and rigid. P8 explained, “As a student who struggled very early on I felt like I was always behind, or just bulldozed over and left to fend for myself.” He continued, “I never felt like I was really connected to school.” The connection came in middle school thanks to his classroom teacher. Being “a late bloomer,” he started to view education differently and “everything started taking off for” him. As a teacher, P8 first experienced gifted through his work with a gifted coordinator. The gifted coordinator would meet with him once a week to review lesson plans, help create projects, and connect classroom instruction. In addition, P8’s seventh-grade social studies class was home to a first-grade student who wanted to do more with
his studies. P8 worked with the principal and his class to create a welcoming environment for the student.

Table 3 highlights significant statements of early experiences with gifted education shared by the participants.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statements of Early Experiences</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Label of self during primary years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label of self during secondary years</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience as a teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with teachers as colleagues</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family Influences on Educational Experience

A section of the interviews asked the participants about their families’ role in their education. Many stated their parents were supportive of their educational pursuits and held high expectations.

P1 spoke about her mother’s expectation that she would attend college while her father, who did not graduate from high school, did not weigh in one way or another. Her peer group’s parents all expected their children to attend college. P4’s parents were first-generation Americans. His father barely finished high school, and his mother attended only through eighth grade. According to P4, “all they ever really wanted was for me to do better than they did. They wanted my life to be easier than their lives were.” P6 said, “My parents always expected me to do very well in school and expected me to get good grades.” P7 came from a blue-collar family who wanted him to do well in school. His father dropped out of school in the ninth grade, and his
mother dropped out when she was 16. He stated, “My parents wanted me to do well, especially in the lower grades. Upper grades they realized I was an average student and I was going to get B and C grades.”

P2 shared that his parents were not strict, and they just wanted him to do his best. In college, P2 switched majors from journalism to law to education. The father accepted the switches according to P2 because he knew if his son put his mind to it, he would be successful.

In eighth grade, P8’s mother just wanted to get him through high school; however, as grades improved in high school, the conversation turned to attending college. P8’s father encouraged him not to go into the family business of selling insurance.

Several of the participants also spoke about their role as parents and how it impacted their professional lives. P1 shared the experience she had as a parent with her boys not being gifted:

When my boys were in school in District H, there was a cap on the number of gifted students accepted. My boys, had they attended District D would have been identified gifted. With the number of students in District H, my boys did not make the cut. They were bright, but there was a lot of competition. I was resentful of that and as I said as a principal I think all students should succeed.

P4 shared, “I had my own kids, who were not labeled gifted, but they were very bright. I watched them as they interacted with their friends who were higher level thinkers. I would listen to what they would say about the teachers, how they focused in class, if they were bored.” P5 had similar a similar experience with his sons. Although he considered both bright, they were never identified as gifted. “I wish they would have been challenged in school. They are both now very successful,” commented P5.

Table 4 summarizes the participants’ statements about family influence.
Table 4

Significant Statements of Family Influences on Educational Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of achievement/performance</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance in postsecondary education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of own children’s experience</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiences as a Principal

The participants’ gifted experiences as principals varied. From formal gifted programs with financial support to no formal services or financial support, the participants detailed what it is like for a student to be gifted in their current or former buildings. The interview questions also addressed the relationships the participants have or had with parents of gifted students.

Participants were asked how they would respond to scripted situations involving gifted students.

P3, as an assistant principal in a suburban secondary building, shared what it is like to be a gifted student in his building, “The picture of a gifted student in our building is going to be different based on the student.” He provided several examples of high-achieving gifted students as well as the gifted “B average” student.

We have a gifted student in our building that’s about a B average student, but he’s a really gifted kid. He’s into soapbox derbies and even a national qualifier. He signed up for a technical education class and the class project is to build a soapbox derby car and he’s the leader of the project. He’s brought a lot of students on board with this project mainly because he’s so passionate about it. I guess I would say that gifted students in our building all look different. I would also say that there are gifted student in our building that we may not be pushing or challenging enough.

P4 tells a different story in his middle and high school. No honors classes are offered and they try to group students for higher level math. Students are identified as gifted in the district. P4 stated, “Whenever I talk with gifted students, I always try to challenge them in some way, so
when they state something I will take a contrary opinion, so if they don’t respond I’ll say ‘really you’re going to let me say something that dumb and you’re not going to come back with anything?’” Budget cuts have taken a toll on the gifted program at the elementary building, and the gifted intervention specialist was moved back to a classroom position. Although there is no formal program for gifted, P4 shared what teachers are doing in their classrooms. The question, “Tell me what it is like to be a gifted student in your building?” brought about some uncertainty. P4 talked about the teacher’s job to get more students to higher levels of performance on the state-mandated tests. He emphasized differentiated instruction as an expectation.

For gifted students in P5’s district, their education begins with his enrichment coordinator building a schedule by each student’s area of identification. The district is situated on an island and with a limited population, it utilizes multiage grouping. This service setting allows the district to serve students in their area of identification through differentiation. P5 shared his experience with a family moving to the island from the mainland. The parents had researched the district and had concerns that the district would not be able to meet the needs of their three gifted children. P5 had other ideas:

I assured them and promised them we could and also told them not to be surprised if we surpassed their expectations. Now this put pressure on me to make sure we did this. I sold them on what things would look like, what we’d be doing, who they would be working with, and so on. Since that time I’ve kept an eye on the situation because the parents gave me a pretty good interview when they came in and I continue to make sure my words are true and I follow through.

When P6 became principal for the first time, she admitted she did not know what was happening with the gifted students. She invested the time in the classroom to figure it out. In her next appointment as principal, she credited a school climate of supporting gifted students. Students moved from place to place in the building for the services they needed whether it was gifted, Title I, or special education.
“As a building principal you would certainly be more on my radar today then in the past,” said P7. “I would want to know if you’re in my building what your targets were going to be. I would want to know how your teachers are going to challenge you. What experiences are they going to expose you to?” he continued. When asked about stories people may share about being gifted in his buildings, he “didn’t think there is any negative, pros or cons, stories about gifted.” P7 did not see any type of stigma with either being a gifted student or teacher. He felt it was about how “we carry ourselves in front of our students and staff.”

P8’s situation was like that of P4. As principal of an elementary building, he described services for gifted students as “incomplete.” His district has focused its gifted resources in grades 5–8. P8 does get minimal support through the district’s gifted intervention specialist 2–3 times a week and feels it is more enrichment rather than gifted services. Any narratives shared are hit or miss, as P8 shared most students in his building probably did not know gifted services existed in any form. There are no artifacts from the program in the hallways and there is relatively little connection between the classroom teachers and the gifted intervention specialist. P8 has brought his concerns as to the incomplete nature of the services to the superintendent but as of this writing, no substantial changes have occurred.

Table 5 shows significant statements related to experiences as a principal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement of Experiences as Principal</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing opportunity, choice, or challenge</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding gifted</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting the needs of gifted</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experiences With Gifted Parents as a Principal

The questions about relationships with parents drew a variety of responses. Both P1 and P2 felt they have good relationships with their parents. P6, P7, and P8’s responses were similar in that they did not see a difference between the relationships they have with nonidentified gifted students’ parents and that of identified students’ parents. It was reported by P2, P4, and P6 that on occasion, a parent may have a concern about a grade or that the student was not being challenged enough. As an example, P2 shared,

I have good relationships with our parents of gifted children. The parents seem to let us go and don’t tend to get overly involved. We’ve had a few program adjustments in the past 2-3 years. Some of our students wanted to leave the gifted services and complained it was more of an extra work scenario and not being challenged.

P3 did offer that his counselors meet with every student once a year and parents twice a year. He stated, “Our community is very involved.” P3 added, “When someone is identified as gifted, the community has high expectations for that student.”

Responding as a Principal

The participants were given five scenarios to ponder and then asked to offer strategies for addressing the situations presented (see Appendix B for full scenarios). More specifically, they were asked to respond as the principal involved the situation.

The first scenario begins with an 8-year-old gifted student who is harnessing fifth-grade work with a Stanford Binet score of 168. The paternal grandparents, who have refused permission for acceleration, are raising the student. All of the participants agreed on the importance of keeping the student reading at her ability level rather than her age. P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8 expressed interest in keeping the student in the regular classroom and working with a team of educators to bring the curriculum to the student. P7 commented,
It’s a team approach. We would all have to come together as team to create a plan and keep the student engaged. The job of the teacher is to keep students motivated no matter what the level. There is no silver bullet . . . you have got to be involved as a team to support this student.

P2 stated, “I believe it would be best to subject accelerate at this age.” Three participants (P1, P3, and P8) spoke about how they would work with the grandparents to build trust and understanding of their granddaughter’s giftedness. Only P6 and P8 spoke about directly interacting with the student and speaking to her about possible educational opportunities.

The second scenario plays out between a twice-exceptional student and her general education teacher. The student has a learning disability related to reading, is gifted in mathematics and receives pull-out services. The general education teacher refuses to allow her to go because the student does not complete her reading seatwork. The student’s attitude begins to suffer, and the parents have become involved, but to no avail. The gifted intervention specialist and counselor have tried to work with general education teacher as well, but with little movement. The scenario asks the principal how he or she would support the student. The participants were direct in their responses. P3 stated, “I think it’s a job of the administration to make decisions on the benefit of the child and if you need to push back on staff then that’s what you do.” “I would first have a come to Jesus meeting with the general education teacher,” was the comment made by P5. P1’s beliefs were very similar, stating, “I would go after the general education teacher and explain without a doubt that she takes her directive from me.” The rights and needs of the student were brought up by P4, P6, and P7. P7 said, “This child needs our team to create a plan to work together and at some point the principal is going to have to take the leadership and make sure all teachers understand the importance of meeting the needs of this student.”
The third scenario caused angst among the participants. The student in this scenario is extremely bright and well liked; however, he is failing courses when he does appear for class. The counselor suggested dropping out of high school to pursue a GED. His parents recognized his creative side and just want him to be happy. The participants were asked how they would work with staff, who feel they are doing their job in recognizing underachievement, to understand function and happiness as measures of success rather than going through the motions of obtaining a diploma. P3 remarked, “I think you have to love the kid for who he is and be excited about his achievements and successes.” P6 had similar thoughts, “Just because he’s underachieving doesn’t mean he needs to be fixed but possibly something in his environment needs to be fixed. It would mean thinking out of the box.” P8 added, “If a student doesn’t feel connected to school, they are just going to go through the motions and not gain anything from school. A student’s happiness is essential. We need to get creative and engage the student in school so they feel connected.” P1, P3, P5, P6, and P7 offered solutions based on getting to know the student better, working with all of the stakeholders, providing professional development, and using nontraditional means of educating the student. P1 remarked,

We need to sit down with the student and parents to see what the extenuating circumstances are that is making it difficult for the student to be engaged in school. We need to look at flex time. Who cares if it’s seat time in a classroom or online?

P3 offered similar thoughts,

We need to get to know the student and foster a relationship with them, find out their strengths, interests and see what they want, rather then putting them into a classroom of 25 that sit quietly, listen and raise their hand. I think this is something the state of Ohio is starting to look at when it comes to credit flexibility and learning outside the classroom.

P5 stated, “I believe the guidance counselors could have benefitted from taking gifted professional development. P6 offered, “I would make the teacher work with Sara and see her
strengths in math and understand her weaknesses. Her strengths in math should be used to help her weaknesses in reading.”

The fourth scenario showcased a parent-teacher conference where the teacher tells a parent that he is not required to serve the student even though the student is identified as gifted. The teacher assures the parent the student will pass the high-stakes test with no problems and the student should just enjoy the year. The parent is outraged and demands his student be moved to another classroom. The superintendent has already called because the parent posted a very troubling message on the district’s website blog. Participants were asked how they would handle the situation and regain the trust of the family. P7 was very straightforward,

First I would ask my teacher . . . what were you thinking and did you really say that out loud? I would have to be in agreement with the parents, and I would be very supportive of the parents. That teacher would certainly be spending time with me to repair their attitude and the attitude they conveyed to the parents. This goes completely against what the OTES [Ohio Teacher Evaluation System] says and that each child needs to show growth.

Many of the participants agreed that the teacher put the principal in a tough situation. P4 commented, “My responsibility as principal would be to help him understand what it means to be a gifted.” P3 explained,

We don’t teach to the middle. We teach top, bottom, and middle. In public education, we don’t get to choose the students who come to us. It may be a yearlong process of working with that teacher and helping them move forward. It may be a situation that you tell the teacher I’m going to help you grow or help you go.

P4, P5, and P6 responded about working with the family to regain trust. P4 would not be dishonest with the family while P5 explained how the team would be communicating with the family. P6 would sit down with the family and listen to them. She would also answer the question of how the student would be challenged. P8 spoke about utilizing the gifted coordinator and creating a plan to meet the student’s need for growth.
The final scenario dealt with financial resources. Principals are asked by their superintendents to propose budget cuts, including going to state minimums. Gifted services are not mandated in Ohio. Current district data support gifted services, as they are achieving growth for students served and at a greater level than general or special education. Participants were asked how they would approach the superintendent. P4 stated that he has played out this scenario as a principal. He gathered his staff to look at creative ways to provide services that the superintendent might not have thought through. He also stated he would hope he would be able to come up with options “particularly if I have data that supports this such as value-added.” P2, P4, P5, and P8 said they would provide alternative solutions including looking at all programs that may be underperforming. P6, P7, and P8 all responded by saying they would meet with the superintendent and show the data that supports gifted services. P6 stated, “We would need to create a long-term plan that shows growth and I would be willing to take on that fight. We need to meet the needs of all students.” Table 6 shows the significant statements of how participants responded as principals.

Table 6

*Significant Statements of Responding as a Principal*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting student needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectation of staff</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of self as leaders</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of resources/use of data</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experiences With Gifted Coordinators as a Principal

Some districts in Ohio employ gifted coordinators. Although responsibilities of this individual may vary from district to district, his or her main purpose is to formally identify gifted students, create and maintain services per the district’s service plan, provide professional development for faculty and staff, and serve as an advocate for gifted students and their families.

The experiences the participants have had with gifted coordinators varied from nonexistent to highly engaging. P2’s district contracted services from an educational service center and P2 was of the opinion “we haven’t had a good gifted coordinator since I’ve been superintendent and when I was principal we didn’t have a good one either.” He further shared,

I don’t think there is a vision for gifted education in Ohio. Columbus doesn’t seem to understand or they seem very confused on where gifted should be and where funding should come from. Now what we do is identify kids are gifted and that’s all the further the state says we have to take it. We tell parents their kids are gifted and then according to Columbus that’s it. There is not a push for gifted.

P3 had similar experiences in his two districts. Services were contracted with the educational service center and did little to move the districts forward in their knowledge of what to do with gifted students. Although some professional development was conducted for staff, he felt it was not enough nor was it research-based for gifted initiatives.

P4 had a different experience. He felt the gifted coordinator helped increase the staff’s knowledge and promoted gifted education. “It was always nice to have the gifted coordinator who could give you the 15 minutes you needed to help focus on what you can do for the students and this was great.” P5 had the opportunity to bring on a gifted coordinator when he was first hired.

I told her before I came to this district the only services the gifted students received was lip service. They would test the kids and then do nothing with them. I told her she’d have time in her day to service these kids . . . She has a really good feel of challenging kids to a deeper level of thinking and teaching them to a higher level of learning.
P7 relied on his gifted coordinator to make sure gifted students’ needs were being met and ensure they had the resources to meet their needs. He stated, “Our jobs as administrators were to make sure the resources were available and that the teachers had the time to use these resources and to be held accountable.” The experience of P8 was completely opposite of P2. As he recalled his experience with one particular gifted coordinator, he could not help but smile in reflection. He stated,

The gifted coordinator that I worked with at District St. M was the best. I think she was ahead of her time. She was doing things before anyone else. She did pull-outs, project-based, great connections with teachers. She never took ownership away from the classroom teacher, which was good.

Table 7 depicts significant statements made by participants when asked about their work with gifted coordinators.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statements of Experiences With Gifted Coordinators</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninfluential or noncredible</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Future Experiences in Gifted Education

The last interview asked the participants to be reflective. Specially, they were asked, “Given what you said about your experiences, what insight would you give colleagues and future leaders about gifted education?” (see Appendix C). P1 did not hesitate with her response:

Teachers need to be more advocates for students in the content areas and know which of their students are creative writers, excel in art, music, math, etc. As a principal I need to make opportunities available for all students. As an administrator and other administrators, we need to be advocates. We need to take risks, because risk taking is what is going to make it in education.
P2 addressed the individual student, “I think as educators we need to address every student on a case-by-case basis. If we had all the money in the world to educate our students, what would we do?” P4 detailed the challenges faced by gifted education, including finances and time management. He said, “The more training we get as principals on gifted education, the more we understand and are able to face the challenges and be successful.”

P3 felt he still did not know enough about gifted education; however, he offered advice to new administrators by encouraging them to find inspiration in a child who is underachieving or not being challenged, in working with the family who has little expectations, or in working with teachers to find ways to help students reach their full potential. He offered

Having stories you can tell that you were a part of in helping a student become successful is the greatest inspiration of being in the teaching field. You can look back and say it may have been a hard year, but there were successes along the way where you inspired your students and that makes all the difference.

P6 reflected on teachers putting themselves in “other people’s shoes.” She answered the questions by asking, “What would they do if it were their child? What are other districts offering and why can’t we do the same thing?” P7 commented,

Certainly whether it was my colleagues, new teachers, or administrators, I would tell them all the same thing. Don’t forget to meet the needs of all students. Each student needs to be exposed to experiences and to be challenged. Put them in a place to maximize their potential. I would caution teachers to not get too hung up on labels. We don’t need to teach to a label.

P8 offered the following,

Gifted is like our civil rights, our educational rights. The problem with this is there are so many advocates and so many laws that protect and help special education that the opposite end of the spectrum is a complete mess. The funding is not adequate. At some point the right person is going to lawyer up and this thing is going to explode—gifted education. In the meantime we have to advocate for gifted education and making sure our students receive services.
Table 8 shows significant statements with regard to reflection and advice offered by participants for the future of gifted education.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement of Future Experiences in Gifted Education</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Professional development</td>
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**Essence Statement**

Although the experiences the participants, as principals, have had with gifted education vary somewhat, several themes emerged in the study: supporting gifted students for who they are rather than their label, leadership style supporting teachers and parents of the gifted, and providing educational opportunities for the student to grow. These themes merge to create the essence of their lived experience: The principal who supports gifted education is a stakeholder in the lives of gifted students. This stakeholder role is an active one and includes advocacy and understanding gifted students. This stakeholder works to provide educational opportunities for the advancement and betterment of the gifted student in Ohio. What is the stake these principals hold? The stake is the success of the gifted student.

**Summary**

This study began with two questions: How do principals describe their experiences regarding gifted students and gifted education? and Which experiences encourage principals to make a commitment to gifted education? The findings, themes, and essence presented in Chapter 4 provide candid insight in responding to the questions. To answer Research Question 1,
participants described their experiences in a mostly positive manner that included thoughtful reflection on past experiences as well as acknowledging their short-comings and offering advice to their colleagues. The participants described their experiences through positive narratives that included the act of caring. Many admitted they could do more and seek to do so. Their collective experience as principals fueled the encouragement they needed to make the commitment to gifted education. In some cases, the lack of experience drove them to seek out answers. Interestingly, in trying to answer Research Question 2, participants were more committed by individual experiences rather than supporting a collective system of gifted education. The participants viewed students on a case-by-case basis rather than through a systemic structure.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature

This study sought to understand how principals solve dilemmas and balance the needs of gifted students with the needs of the community. The two research questions used to drive the study (How do principals describe their experiences with gifted students and gifted education? and Which experiences encourage principals to make a commitment to gifted education?) were used to flesh out the decision-making process used by principals. The experiences that were shared to answer questions in the interviews varied; however, particular themes in these experiences emerged. The themes include the participants’ early experiences in gifted education, family influences, experiences as a principal, experiences with parents and gifted coordinators, how they respond to dilemmas, and the future experiences in gifted education.

As a group, the participants averaged more than a decade’s worth of service as a building principal. In Ohio, that equates to about a third of one’s education career in the role as a building principal. The level and varieties of experiences presented by the participants mark an overarching experience of experience, meaning that during the course of their careers they have had a plethora of experiences, including experiences with gifted students, their teachers, the students’ parents, and the community at large. The participants have been making decisions in an era of high-stakes accountability, changing funding formulas, changing political climate, and the demands of a fast-paced, 21st-century learning environment.

The biographical questions sought to formulate a collective experience of the participants as it related to their time as students from kindergarten through graduation, then as teachers, and finally as principals. This allowed for an understanding of who influenced the influencers (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; McGough 2003). Many of the participants spoke about the
expectations their own families had for their success as students. The participants shared various examples about specific expectations about which grades were acceptable, to parents just wanting their child to do his or her best. Experiences of the participants as teachers and understanding the gifted were not as easy to come by. Some of the participants recognized they had high-achieving students while others stated they rarely—if ever—talked “gifted.” This may be due to their teaching assignments in secondary education where labels such as “honor” or “advanced” are used. Additionally, teaching assignments in physical education and Spanish are not typically related to giftedness.

Stories of non-influence were also offered. When teaching, the participants’ principals did not instructionally lead them when it came to gifted students or gifted education. Lessons learned through the shared experience included the realization that the participants did not want to lead as their former principals led. Several also found their principal experience with gifted coordinators less than ideal, where the coordinator was not influential and lacked credibility (Hatch et al., 2005). Almost all of the gifted coordinator experiences were with individuals who were not employed directly by the district. These gifted coordinators were hired through contracted services via educational service centers and were not assigned to the individual districts full time. By being shared across several districts, the coordinator is not able to influence the stakeholders like he or she would if available full time. Additionally, several participants questioned the their coordinator’s expertise in the field of gifted as a result of receiving misinformation. This questioning could have led these participants to teaching themselves about gifted. While they built up their understanding of gifted, the delay could have negative impact on any services provided to gifted students.
As principals, the participants’ shared experiences as Historians, Anthropological Sleuths, Symbols, Potters, Poets, and Healers (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Several participants acted as the Historian by seeking out the past as it related to gifted students and gifted education in their position as principals. One participant in particular had no idea what the gifted students were supposed to be doing or what their services were to be, so she made it a priority to find out; thus, acting as the not only a Historian but also an Anthropological Sleuth. This questioning enabled her to also understand the building’s culture. The participants as Symbols came to light as they answered the scenario questions as principals. Their responses as principals set behavior expectations for their teaching staff, parents, students and superintendents. Most noticeable was how they portrayed their behavior as a response to correcting an imbalance of power between teachers and students. As Potters, the participants were advocates for gifted students. Again, through their responses to the scenario questions, they responded as leaders who would shape the learning environment that celebrates all students as individuals. Again, the participants’ answers to the scenario questions revealed how they are Poets. By advocating for gifted students and gifted education, their choices in phrasing reinforced how their buildings valued gifted. As Healers, the experiences were more about mourning what they do not have rather than mourning a loss of something they once had. The experience of P4 was one of loss as he worked to rework gifted services after budget cuts. Collectively, these roles are that of an engaged stakeholder.

The participants spoke very little about school culture and their role within that culture. Although the implication was there that the participants supported gifted students and gifted education by meeting the criteria, a positive reputation for gifted education, for the study, only one participant explicitly referenced such support in the interviews. Another participant shared a story where there is no advertising of gifted services, no artifacts on the walls, and most students
do not even know there are services available. In this instance, the students are not celebrated (Barth, 2002; Williams & Blackburn, 2009). This principal, at the time of the interviews, was actively lobbying the superintendent to increase services for gifted students. The perceived positive reputation for gifted students and gifted education was evident throughout the course of the interviews; however, it would seem the positive reputation did not stem from first understanding gifted. Rather, the reputations were built from understanding students first and their needs as gifted second.

The dilemmas presented to the participants provided the imbalance required to apply the ethics of critique, justice, and care (Starratt, 1991). With respect to the ethic of critique, the participants recognized no social arrangement was neutral within the scenarios presented (Grant, 2002). They worked to think through how to provide the balance. The strongest examples were the scenarios that involved the twice-exceptional student and the student at-risk of potentially dropping out. The participants were not as comfortable in their thinking as they were when thinking through the scenarios where the student was simply gifted or when asked to persuade the superintendent to keep services during budget cuts. Participants made statements that fell into the “needs claims” phenomenon described by Grant (2002). As stated in Chapter 2, Grant defined needs claims as “claims that a group possesses a need or needs a certain service” (p. 359). Even though participants made such claims, it was not necessarily tied to the label of gifted. The claims’ content had to do with the whole student first and then as a piece of the whole—their giftedness was secondary. Several of the participants defended gifted through data. This was particularly true when it came to the fifth scenario in which the superintendent has asked for budget cut proposals. It is interesting to also note how infrequently the participants spoke of consulting with the students in the scenarios presented. Participants stated they would
work with the classroom teachers, counselors, coordinators, parents and superintendent but they hardly mentioned either speaking or working with the student. How can one claim to know the needs of a student with little or no interaction with him or her?

The ethic of justice looks at the rights of the individual versus the good of society (Starratt, 1991). The participants provided stories that ranged from doing what one must do as the good soldier to being willing to take on the fight. Many times throughout the interviews, participants would refer to the individuality of the student being discussed. They would talk in terms of needs claims. The decisions participants spoke about or that were portrayed in the scenarios were individuals, thus favoring the equal respect and individual rights end of the justice spectrum. In other words, there was never a mention of the betterment of the community first. There was also never mention of gifted students as a group being before the community’s needs. It would seem that a gifted student here or there could be addressed; however a group of gifted students may have the potential of upsetting the perceived balance between different groups of students’ needs. While this scenario did not come up in the interviews, it may help to explain the good relationships the participants have with their gifted parents. It is much easier to make one or two parents happy than it is to make an organized group of gifted parents happy. No participant stated there was an organized parent group for gifted in their community. One parent’s concerns over his child being challenged or an organized parent group demanding curriculum changes is different in scope. Strike et al. (1998) wrote of the principles of benefit maximization and equal respect. The decisions the participants have made utilize benefit maximization to some degree, but they also revert back to the needs of the individual. The principle of equal respect, which calls attention to each individual’s difference being of equal worth, was more pronounced (Strike et al., 1998).
Lastly, but no less important, the ethic of care carried most of the content in the interview responses. The ethic of care asks educators to care with regard, not obligation (Starratt, 1991). Educators strive for fidelity to the person, thus remaining true to the relationship. Which came first for participants, understanding gifted students or caring for gifted students? It could be argued that the caring came first. Participants, while they recognized giftedness in various parts of their careers, all cared for their students first. They spoke about the students in terms of the whole students where gifted is just part of the students. When discussing the five prepared scenarios, the participants were always concerned for the student first. Several of their answers included how they would promote trust and engagement within their relationship with the student. During the course of the interviews, the participants would tell stories of their past experiences and how students pushed them to become better teachers because they felt the students deserved better (McGough, 2003). Along the same lines of thinking, the participants individualized their actions to the student’s needs without using a label such as gifted. Some commented about students who were advanced or quick learners but to them, the label gifted was rarely used. One participant’s story about caring about the student led her to seek out more knowledge about giftedness. She did not need to understand her to care about her, but because she cared, the participant invested in understanding the student (Mayeroff, 1995; Starratt, 1991).

One conclusion that can be drawn is that the participants evoke more of an ethic of care when it comes to individual gifted students such as those presented in the scenarios. They care about the student as an individual. However, when it comes to gifted education, the same level of support is not necessarily evident. The participants were not as quick to speak in terms of a larger field of gifted students or the field of gifted education. When gifted education was part of the
conversation, it was often not owned by the participant but rather played off with fault lying with the state of Ohio or the superintendent.

Limitations of the Study

As with any study, there were certainly limitations to this work. The study began with the data collection in July of 2011, ceased, and then began again in March of 2014. During this timeframe, the educational climate in Ohio changed. The most far-reaching change has been the state’s adoption of the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System and Ohio Principal Evaluation System in response to House Bill 1 from 2009. Districts who received Race to the Top funds began implementation with the 2013–2014 school year. Of significance in the two systems is the student growth measure accounting for 50% of the teacher’s or principal’s summative rating on their evaluation. Teachers and principals must show students growing at least a year’s worth within the year. If they are not successful, their overall summative rating could drop. Although some may argue that showing at least a year’s worth of growth for a gifted student is tough, value-added data has shown teachers, buildings, and districts are earning ratings of A on their reports. Sandusky City Schools earned an A for gifted value-added growth for 2012–2013. From the earliest data that were collected, the participants did not discuss data and value-added as much as the participants who interviewed in the later group. If all of the data were collected within the initial year of HSRB approval, the experiences would most likely have been more similar. Likewise, if all of the data had been collected within the last 6 months, the experiences may have been more similar, as more of the participants would have talked more in-depth about data.

Although phenomenological studies require all participants to have shared the experience, one limitation of this study is the depth of the experience. The criterion for being a
participant was being a principal who had a positive reputation for support of gifted students and
gifted education. The level of support was broadly defined. By being broadly defined, the level
of depth was not as deep as initially anticipated; thus, leading to less-than-optimal thick
descriptions. Only one participant explicitly shared support for gifted as the others spoke about
meeting the needs of students in terms of a more holistic approach where gifted was a piece. The
interview questions also revealed in some cases the support for gifted education and gifted
students was more talk than action. An example of this is the mandate for identification but not
services on Ohio. As P2 shared, Columbus does not have a vision for gifted education in Ohio.
At no time did P2 share his ultimate vision for gifted either in his district or at the state level.

Another limitation to the study was the interview questions. The interview questions were
peer reviewed by two individuals with principal experience and were edited for clarity prior to
being used with participants. As the questions were used, it became evident in some cases that
the questions were not clear enough to the participants. An example of this was the question
asked at the end of scenario 3:

As a principal, how do you work with staff, who feels they are doing their job and
recognizing underachievement, to understand function and happiness as a measure of
success rather than just having students go through the motions of obtaining a diploma?

Ohio is a state with a mandate to identify students, but it has no mandate to serve them (Ohio
Revised Code § 3324.01-.07). The study took place in Ohio and although it provided
transportation convenience, the transferability of the findings may prove too difficult, as other
states do not function in the same manner.

The different types of districts in Ohio are also a limitation. Four of the eight participants
were from a Type 3 district (small town with low student poverty and small student population)
while one was from a Type 0 district (special district). The remaining three districts were a Type
1 (rural with high student poverty and small student population), Type 5 (suburban with low student poverty and average student population), and Type 6 (suburban with very low student poverty and large student population). If the participants were from the same type of district or were more similar in typology, the findings may have been easier to generalize.

Recommendations

The rationale for this study was to identify ways in which principals can be better prepared to understand gifted students and gifted education as well as provide ways in which they can better advocate for policy and practice reform. The following recommendations address instructional leadership research as well as instructional practice.

Instructional Leadership Research

As stated in Chapter 4, the principal who supports gifted education is a stakeholder in the lives of gifted students. This stakeholder role is an active one and includes advocacy and understanding gifted students. This stakeholder works to provide educational opportunities for the advancement and betterment of the gifted student. Literature in the field of principal preparation as well as instructional leadership references stakeholder groups that principals work with collaboratively to further some agenda. The principal is not considered a stakeholder per se. Research by Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) suggested differently, “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school” (p. 5). Thus, I would agree that principals are in fact stakeholders and research needs to continue in line with this thinking. Principals are within reach of influencing student learning through their work with both teachers as well as district level administrators (Leithwood et al., 2004). Their contributions to student learning, and in Ohio student achievement and growth, depends “a great deal on their judicious choice of what parts of
their organization to spend time and attention on” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 13). Further research on the principal’s active role as stakeholder in the lives of gifted students and gifted education is warranted.

To further expand the literature base, research that brings together the stakeholder role of the principal and the stakeholder role of gifted students has the potential to bring about profound insight in how educators address needs claims. This research would bring to light how these two groups of stakeholders can work collaboratively to achieve the best educational experience possible for gifted students. As suggested by the findings, principals generally work through situations with teachers and family members rather than working directly with the affected students. What is the experience of the student when the principal directly involves the student?

Yet another potential stakeholder group to research is that of the district superintendent. Are they truly stakeholders or do they function as gatekeepers? What is their experience in working with building principals? With regard to Ohio specifically and the new evaluation systems for both teachers and principals, how do superintendents become stakeholders and work collaboratively with these established stakeholder groups to ensure gifted students are achieving and growing?

Although noted in the Limitations section, the variety of district types used in the study could be also be used as a jumping off point for further research. One district is noted as a special district as only a handful exists in Ohio. This district’s identification and service plans to address the educational opportunities for gifted students could be used as a case study. While only a few of these districts exist in Ohio and one may think generalizing results of a case study may not be a sound idea, the outcomes of the research could showcase how a district with few resources and variables to provide services are doing so because of its culture and value-structure. Similarly,
additional research that uses only the same type of district has potential to add to the literature base. The experiences of principals within these districts would provide a thicker description with deeper details.

Another suggestion for future research stems from the idea of benefit maximization and the principle of equal respect (Strike, Haller & Soltis, 1998). As stakeholders, principals are active participants in the educational lives of not just gifted students but also the lives of all of their students. Gaining more in-depth knowledge of how they make decisions so that all students can achieve and grow to their potential using these concepts would further advocacy mechanisms.

*Instructional Practice*

Throughout the course of the interviews, many of the eight participants reflected they could have done more for gifted students, both as teachers and principals, if they had had knowledge of giftedness. Many confessed they built their knowledge base because it was a function of caring for the individual student and figuring it out rather than looking for the giftedness first. A strong recommendation for professional development at all teacher and principal preparation levels as well as continuing education opportunities are necessary. High quality professional development by influential and credible facilitators is key. Gifted students generally get one take at a certain grade level while the teacher can make a thirty year career out of that same grade level. If teachers and principals were required to take classes or participate in high quality professional development as it relates to giftedness, students, teachers and principals would be in a better place to create learning opportunities that are authentic for gifted students. Additionally, as state initiatives roll out to districts, experiences and the overall essence of this study can be shared to inform both the format and delivery of professional development as they
relate to gifted students and gifted education. By creating this structure of professional growth, principals may become for committed to gifted education through a systemic approach versus an individual approach.

As districts look to hire new principals, it is recommended that hiring committees seek out candidates who have completed graduate-level studies that include gifted education and/or have availed themselves to experiences with gifted students and their families. It would also behoove committee members to include questions in the interview process about gifted education as well as an opportunity for candidates to show their positive reputation for supporting gifted students and gifted education.

As P2 stated, Ohio needs to confirm its commitment to gifted students and gifted education. It could be written that in terms of choosing to be a stakeholder or a gatekeeper to gifted education, the state of Ohio, via its lack of mandated services, is a gatekeeper. The funding formula remains ill-equipped to address the imbalance of resources allocated to gifted students. Less students are being identified; thus, even fewer students are receiving services.

Conclusion

Principals, as building leaders, have the potential to greatly impact the educational lives of gifted students. This study sought to understand how some principals are perceived to “get” gifted education and commit to gifted students. The experiences of the eight participants, all of whom had positive reputations for supporting gifted students and gifted education, yielded themes that included early experiences with gifted education, family influences, their experiences as principals, experiences with gifted parents, how they responded as a principal, their experiences with gifted coordinators and how they perceive their future experiences with gifted education. These collective experiences formed the essence that these individuals, as
principals, are stakeholders who support gifted students and their education by being active participants who advocate on their behalf. Overall, the participants were strong supporters of gifted students; however, the conversation of supporting gifted education beyond the participants’ buildings needs to continue.
REFERENCES


Ohio Administrative Code § 3301-51-15 (A)(I)


Ohio Revised Code § 3324.01-.07

Ohio Revised Code § 3324.03


APPENDIX A. FIRST INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about your earliest experiences with gifted education.
   a. Were you considered gifted in elementary school?
      i. If so, did you receive services? (pull-out, accelerated in subjects or by
         grade, special enrichment experiences, etc.)
   b. How would you have labeled yourself as a young student?

2. Middle school/junior high school years are a time of transformation and growth for
   many students. Tell me about these years and what sticks out most during this time.
   a. What did your parent(s) expect of you in regards to school performance and
      achievement?

3. Tell me about your high school years…
   a. Were you tracked?
   b. What classes did you take and who influenced you to take them?
   c. What was your college preparation like?
   d. What type of career counseling did you receive?
   e. Did you always want to be an educator?

      Probe: Based on responses, ask about the positive or negative nature of the
      experiences and either how the positive blossomed or the negative grew to be
      positive.

4. What, if any, were the formative experiences you had as a student that impacted your
   philosophies of education?

5. As a student, teacher, and principal, how did you come about understanding and
   acknowledging the unique needs of gifted students?
APPENDIX B. SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me what it is like to be a gifted student in your building.

2. Tell me about the relationships you have with your gifted students and their parents.

3. Tell me about the relationships you have with your gifted coordinator and gifted intervention specialists.

4. Tell me about the stories of gifted in your building—if I were a new general education teacher to your building, what are the narratives others would tell me about gifted here?

Scenario #1:

Dora, an 8 year old, is harnessing fifth-grade work with a Stanford-Binet score of 168. She lives with her paternal grandparents due to the death of her parents when she was very young. Dora’s grandparents, who hold elementary educations, report that she taught herself to read by age 5 and is an avid reader. School personnel have characterized her as having high ideals, friendly, conscientious, humorous, and mature for her age. While she has interests similar to her age peers, she prefers quiet games. Dora masters content quickly and her teachers recognized a mismatch between her present grade level and her achievement ability levels. Dora’s grandparents have refused permission for acceleration. How, as a principal and instructional leader, do you and your staff keep Dora engaged in learning?

Scenario #2:

Sarah is identified as a twice-exceptional student who excels in math. She receives services in math in a gifted resource room through a pull-out service model. Sarah’s general education teacher refuses to let her leave the classroom for math because she has not finished her reading seatwork. Sarah’s learning disability impacts her reading skills and causes her to read extremely slow. She is frustrated by this slowness and her teacher’s disregard for her math ability. They quarrel frequently. The teacher does not understand how Sarah can be gifted if she struggles so much in reading. Sarah’s parents have spoken with the general education teacher to no avail and now report Sarah has given up on her math abilities. Sarah’s new attitude is that she must be dumb. The gifted education teacher and counselor are trying different avenues of intervention with Sarah. Both the counselor and gifted education have tried to intervene with the general education teacher but have had no forward progress. As the principal, how do you support Sarah?

Scenario #3:

Edwin is an extremely bright student who came to the attention of school personnel through his unorthodox and creative behaviors at an early age. School and Edwin did not appear to mix by middle school. His grades were marginal at best and he followed behind
two sisters who were very successful in school. By age 16, the high school counselors asked him to withdraw formally from school since he was not attending anyway and failing classes such as geometry, Latin, and physical education. Teachers reported that when he did attend class, he was well liked by his peers and demonstrated high ability even though he produced very little or nothing at all. Edwin came from a professional family who recognized his creative writing ability and just wanted him to be happy. After completing a GED program, Edwin joined the Armed Forces. As a principal, how do you work with staff, who feels they are doing their job and recognizing underachievement, to understand function and happiness as a measure of success rather than just having students go through the motions of obtaining a diploma?

Scenario #4:

At parent-teacher conferences, a father asks about how his son will be challenged in the general education classroom. The teacher replies that according to state law, he does not have to provide services to the child even though the district says the child is gifted. He assures the father the son will pass the high-stakes test with no problem and he should just enjoy a stress-free year. Besides, the teacher continues, he has 24 other children who need him more than his son. The father is outraged and feels his son should be moved to another classroom and is threatening to go to the school board if this does not happen. The superintendent has already called as the father posted a very concerning message on the district’s blog. How do you handle this incident at its deepest level? How do you regain the trust from the family?

Scenario #5:

The superintendent has to cut the yearly budget. The proposed budget cuts include going to state minimums, which are very little for gifted education services. Current data support gifted services are achieving growth for served students and at greater level than general or special education. How do you approach the superintendent?

Probe: Depending on answer, ask the follow-up: The superintendent asks you to come up with a proposal to grow gifted services on limited funds. How do you approach this task?
APPENDIX C. THIRD INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Given what you said about your experiences, what insight would you give colleagues and future leaders about gifted education?

2. In the course of our time together, is there something you wished I would have asked about yet did not?
APPENDIX D: HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD

DATE: March 20, 2014

TO: Julie Lenner McDonald
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [441640-2] Stakeholder or Gatekeeper: The Role of the Principal in Gifted Education

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 19, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: March 18, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 3 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on March 18, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.