Underachieving Gifted and Talented Minority Students in a Continuation Education Setting: An Interpretive Exploration

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

The phrase “the achievement gap,” as used in the United States, usually refers to the description of the level of academic discrepancy among the students of various ethnic groups, especially Whites/Asians and African Americans and Latino students. This persistent nagging reality has left a lot of educational researchers and pundits befuddled, giving rise to a variety of conflicting possible reasons for its existence. Within this broad generality lies an even more puzzling conundrum --- that of students who though identified as gifted and talented (GATE), and should therefore be undisputedly successful achievers, end up as “underachieving GATE students.” This group of students present their own version of the “achievement gap” that transverses all ethnic groups. This interpretive case study sought to understand how these students understand their educational lives in an alternative program --- a continuation high school --- that is designed to forestall their downward decline into possibly becoming part of the minority high school dropout statistic.
Dedication

Dedicated to my parents, Chief James Amudia and Mrs. Rhoda Oseawhaire Mowoe

My brothers: Immanue Efe Mowoe, Peter Uchebruoghene Mowoe, Abraham Mowoe, and Israel Obatharhe Mowoe

And sister: Rachael Mowoe
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Vita

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Publications


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At no other time in the nation’s public education history has the phrase “the achievement gap” taken on a more urgent call to action. Usually defined as an educational gap between the achievement of white and black and/or Hispanic students (often referred to as minority students), the alarm seems to have been sounded more loudly now because of persistent test scores that show this disturbing pattern (Ford, 2004; O’Connell, 2008; Duncan, 2009; Hernandez, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Rose, 2009; Thernstroms, 2003; The National Urban League, *Time*, February 21, 2011). The No Child Left Behind Law of 2002 mandates that all students must be proficient in English and math by 2014 (Ravitch, 2010). That Law is currently under review in preparation for its reauthorization, with some provisions being made to reduce its adherence to just college attendance but also on career choices (Paulson, *The Christian Science Monitor* (2/2/10).

The focus has been so much on the “underachievement” of these students, yet there are smaller sub-groups of gifted and talented students within these groups who remain invisible/unresearched.” They are the smaller sub-groups of gifted and talented students. Such students, whether part of this
underachieving minority groups or from the dominant white student population, are often placed in gifted and talented education (GATE) programs.

Students who are identified as GATE are usually about two levels above their chronological peers. However, not every student who has been certified GATE is academically successful, resulting in the designation known as the gifted underachiever (Whitmore, 1980; Ford, 1996; Reis, 1998; Reis and McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2004; Robinson, 2004). Gifted underachievers are those students whose academic production is not commensurate with their identified talents, resulting in poor scholastic performance. They, therefore, do not fully realize their full potential.

**Research Focus**

The main focus of this research study was the exploration of how minority underachieving GATE students interpret their giftedness in a continuation education setting. A continuation education setting is often referred to as one of the alternative education options for students who were not successful at the comprehensive/regular high school and therefore are credit deficient, and have truancy or behavior problems (Raywid, 1983; California Department of Education, 2011; Knoeppel, 2002; Knutson, 1999). The setting for this study specifically included students who had the descriptors of the student population of a continuation high school given above. The 2 key questions that guided this study were:
1. How do students understand/interpret their status of gifted and talented?

2. What does it mean to be a minority GATE student in a continuation high school setting? What do minority gifted students make of continuation education, and what does it make of them?

While there is a plethora of writing on underachievement, possible solutions, (Ford, 1996; Rimm, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Siegel, 2004) and on the benefits of continuation education (Stits, 2001; Knoeppel, 2002; Thomas, 2003), a close review of the literature indicated a dearth of research on my chosen research focus (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Hostettler (1991) made a passing reference to the possible success of GATE students in alternative programs in his article on underachievement. Knoeppel (2002) mentioned them as part of general writing on continuation education, and Hwang (2003) as a master’s thesis on teachers in a continuation education setting.

There, however, has not been the combined effort at undertaking an in-depth research at understanding the lives of these underachieving students within the educational culture of a continuation education setting, especially those classified as being members of minority cultures. This research study was designed to significantly contribute to the current literature on underachievement among minority GATE students in a continuation education setting.

In California, as in most other states, students identified as gifted and talented (GATE) should be in comprehensive high schools. However, there are
some for whom the comprehensive setting has not worked, so they attend alternative education sites to continue with their education. Sometimes, these sites are the continuation high schools or the independent study sites.

It would seem that GATE and alternative education have very similar goals --- preventing students from dropping out of school. While GATE aims to do this by providing a more intellectually stimulating/challenging curriculum, continuation education aspires to cater to the needs of those students who, for one reason or another, found the structure of the regular comprehensive high school limiting (CCEA President's letter, 2000; Knoeppel, 2006; Raywid, 1983).

Giftedness, GATE and Continuation Education

Giftedness

The concept of giftedness is rife with multiple definitions, ranging from the use of the more traditional testing instrument of Intelligence Test scores to the more liberal approach of the inclusion of multiple intelligences in such areas as creativity, leadership skills, interpersonal relationships, among others (Renzulli, 2002). This study on minority gifted students in a continuation high school was not geared towards the selection of the “best” of any one of the multiple ways used in determining how these students qualified for GATE designation in the district. Rather, the minority student participants were chosen as part of the research because they were already so designated by the district through its own particular instrument of designating GATE students.

GATE in California

Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) in California is the use of specially designed teaching strategies to meet the intellectual demands of gifted students.
Continuation Education in California

Continuation education in California is one of the three alternative education offerings developed to address the needs of students who were unsuccessful at their comprehensive high schools (the others are independent study and community day schools).

Context for study

My interest in understanding underachieving GATE students’ experiences in continuation education setting was sparked by one of my students I was fortunate to come across in the very early years in my career as a high school teacher. Pete\(^{1}\), who it turned out, was someone who could be classified as a GATE “underachiever” (Whitmore, 1980; Ford, 1996; Reis, 1998; Reis and McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2004; Robinson, 2004) was in two of my English classes.

As Merriam (1988) notes:

Research problems can arise from a number of sources. McMillan and Schumacher (1984) list personal experience, deductions from theory, related literature, current social and political issues, and practical situations as common sources of research problems…. For example, a teacher might observe that all her efforts to include certain students in classroom discussion have failed. Any number of research questions might be asked in this situation. Is there something about these students that they fail to participate? Is it the methods the teacher uses to include them? Is there something about the classroom atmosphere? The personality of the instructor? (p. 42)

\(^{1}\) Pseudonym
This was research that was chosen as a result of my direct personal experience with the educational difficulties that were being experienced by one of my students.

My interest in GATE at the time (2001) was a “new” research field. I’ve always been interested in engaging my students in higher order thinking exercises, but not specifically with GATE students per se. However, my interest was piqued by my brief and delightful encounter with Pete. He was a student in my English 9/10th grade class during the tail end of the 2001/2002 academic year. His father was a person of Arab background, from the Middle East, and his mother was White. Pete was my enigma. He did not “produce” much in the form of written assignments, but he was very articulate and displayed a keen intellectual mind when we were engaged in whole class discussions/debates. While he chose to take my class twice, he never seemed to be able to get his act together in some of his other classes. That got me wondering about the whole situation. I pride myself with trying to stay in touch with my students’ parents, so calling Pete’s parents was a normal practice for me. As I listened to his mother, a lot of the missing parts of the puzzle fell into place. She told me that Pete had been certified GATE as an elementary school student. But this extremely gifted student was having a hard time in high school and in his social life. Pete left my school for adult education in the middle of the 2002/2003 academic year, but I still called and spoke with his parents for a while after he left (in fact, he surprised my colleagues and me during a lunch presentation I was giving on November 6, 2002, by bringing me lunch and a drink that he had bought for me!).
Coincidentally, at the time that I was going through this phase with Pete, I discovered that quite a few of my other students were engaging and analyzing concepts at much higher levels than were some of their classmates. So, because of Pete and those students, I decided to start attending the district’s GATE meetings so I could get some guidance on how to better connect with/challenge these students. These meetings whetted my curiosity even more, and when my then principal informed us of the district’s plan to start and partially finance teachers’ acquisition of a GATE certificate, I signed up. Those classes have contributed greatly to my growth as a teacher, especially at a continuation high school site.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical foundations undergirded this study: underachievement theory and cultural analysis theory.

While the definition of underachievement is rather nebulous, the one consensus belief shared by those who study this phenomenon among gifted students (Ford, 1996; Ford and Tyson, 2004; Reis and McCoach, 2002; Rimm, 2004) is one of performance not being proportionate to potential, as shown by various test scores and other instruments that were used in the identification of the student as gifted (Renzulli, 2002). This underachieving behavior can be presented in either performance in one subject area or in a conglomeration of other subjects.

McDermott and Varenne’s cultural theory approach is captured in the title of their book, *Successful Failure*. They argue that America’s system of
evaluating students in school through tests that pigeon-hole them into pass/fail and/or good/bad categories is so perfect in its execution that it successfully guarantees that there must always be students who belong to each defined category at any given period of their educational cycle. They provide us with alternative sets of lenses from which to tackle this perennially vexing question. They examine the American educational system through the prism of the entire culture that defines success only through the measurable instruments of test scores to the detriment of other ways in which students can be smart and successful. Thus, students are designated as special education students and made to feel incapable of working individually if they do not accomplish tasks within stipulated timeframes. Unlike in America, they argue,

> Most other cultures are not organized around a needless competition of all against all, and even ruthlessly competitive cultures, contemporary Japan being a good example (Rohlen 1980, 1983), can leave the acquisition of literacy outside the competitive arena. (p. 37)

Using a variety of case studies, they demonstrate how this system “acquires” students that are then labeled to suit the description of their status. For example, in one of their case studies, they chronicle some experiences of students in an alternative school setting to which they were transferred/referred because they could not fit into the traditional educational configuration. A majority of these students, they argued, were successful in the real life of surviving on the streets, outside of their school walls because of their rich life experiences and alternative successful projects in which they were involved as part of their alternative setting curriculum. Instead of becoming dropouts from
the entire academic system, they flourish in their new setting and become contributing citizens of society by joining the working class in various capacities (p. 87). It is a similar community of students who comprise the population of my research site.

The blending of these two theoretical frameworks is important because, on the one hand, the examination of underachievement assists in diagnosing a possible problem. On the other hand, cultural analysis theory asks that we question our attitude as a culture towards what constitutes real success. In other words, cultural analysis theory questions the existence of such a concept as underachievement.

**Methodology**

I used the interpretive case study approach (Stake, 1994) because I wanted to understand the issue of giftedness in relation to underachievement among GATE students at my chosen site. My sample included the minority GATE students (in this school, African American and Hispanic/Mexican American and Asian American students). At the time that I started my pilot study in 2008, the school had 12 GATE students on campus, nine of whom were classified as minorities. The racial/ethnic classifications used in this research to describe the participants was taken from that which is used by the California Department of Education (CDE) on testing materials for students and what were considered the major racial/ethnic categories as designated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget standard classification, including:
White: A non-Hispanic person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East; Black: A non-Hispanic person having origins in any of the black racial groups in Africa; Hispanic: A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race; Asian: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan and Korea; Filipino: A person having origins in the Philippine Islands; Pacific Islander: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, Samoa; and American Indian/Alaska Native: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North America and maintaining cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition. However, during the course of our various interviews, students were asked to self-identify themselves, in recognition of the possibility that they might have different ways of identifying themselves based on their individual preferences, which one did in classifying himself as white, but I left as Asian American because of strong references to his mother who is from Hong Kong.

The research methods used in this study included participant observation in some of the classrooms and activities in which my participants, both students and teachers, were involved, and analyses of various GATE and other available district documents from about them.
Significance and Limitations of the Study

The primary significance of this study is its attempt to provide more in-depth understanding and insights into minority/marginalized students’ interpretations of what it means to be certified as gifted, their underachievement, as well as their experiences with GATE programs. The dearth of current literature on marginalized GATE student experiences in a continuation setting made this a timely and critical qualitative study. As an interpretive study, this study was contextual in its examination of the case at this particular continuation high school site and thus cannot be replicated or have immediately generalizable findings. Whatever claim to generalizability will be so determined by the concerned party (Wehlage, 1981). The sample size was small and resulted because of my current relationship to the GATE students in this study. As their teacher and researcher, many tensions and challenges existed; namely, issues of validity, and researcher-participant relationships, among others. There were also ethical questions about which I had to be cognizant. For example, “How appropriate was it for them to participate in my research?” For those who did participate, did they do so because their parents asked them to? Did they participate because they were in any one of my classes and so felt obligated? Were they comfortable enough to tell me what they really thought/believed? I analyze these tensions as part of my methodology.

Organization of the Dissertation
In chapter two, I situate the theories --- underachievement and cultural theory --- that undergird this study with the accompanying literature review upon which it was founded.

Chapter two expands on my theoretical frameworks of underachievement and cultural analysis as well as a literature review on GATE as it is practiced in the State of California. I also discuss the differences between comprehensive high schools and alternative schooling for high schools students. In addition, I attempt to offer an un
Understanding of what is giftedness, underachievement and its relationship to GATE students in a continuation education setting.

Chapter 3 chapter, the methodology chapter, in addition to chronicling the usual aspects of research involved in the decisions surrounding the research choice, chosen paradigm and methods employed in the process, also engages in decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999, 2005) through reflection and analysis of the research(er) context. My contextual realities are multiple and include me, the research instrument, being a foreigner who is undertaking this endeavor in situations that include students from various cultures, in an environment that is different from the one that shaped my worldview. It offers insights into my use of an interpretive case study, provides an in-depth context of my field site, research design and methods to be used, as well as ethical considerations for undertaking my proposed study. The research participants comprise, from pilot study: three students, three teachers, and one counselor; from the dissertation research: four students and two teachers.
The fourth chapter incorporates the detailed findings from both the pilot study and the dissertation research.

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss my research findings in relation to the current literature as reviewed in chapter two and include some innovative ideas for policymakers to help tackle the issue of the achievement gap that emerged in the course of this research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundations of the study appear contradictory upon cursory consideration: Underachievement theory used in conjunction with Cultural Analysis theory. Although lacking a defined definition the absence of a particular crop of “founders,” almost all of the researchers who are familiar with the symptoms of underachievement agree on one common descriptor as it relates to gifted and talented students. They all agree that underachievement in gifted education is the situation where the educational performance of a student who has been so identified is not commensurate with her/his educational output. Such a student is said to be performing below his/her potential (Winebrenner, 2001; Reis and McCoach, 2000, 2002; Ford and Tyson, 2004; Siegel, 2004; Siegel and McCoach, 2005; Coil, 2004; Clark, 2007).

The cultural analysis theory of McDermott and Varenne (1999) argues that we as a culture are responsible for the “successful failure” that has plagued generations of racial and developmentally disabled groups, among others. Culture, they claim, dictates standards of race, class, gender, and we do everything in our power to walk lock, stock and barrel to the beat of these expectations, only to turn around and wonder when we end up with the same failed results over and over again, especially as it relates to the education of our
children. This assertion does not totally strip humans of the presence of personal agency, that there are not instances when we cannot be transformational intellectuals (Giroux, 1988). However, the argument here is that the majority of the culture, us, is so entwined in the web that we have spun that dissension appears impossible, but because we do have some modicum of human agency, there is the possibility of change actually happening, as McDermott and Varenne state in the following quote:

Cultural analyses that highlight the weight of tradition and structure and only belatedly emphasize change can leave us with either angry desires for revolution or hopeless pangs of social impotence. Both feelings can produce a withdrawal educators cannot countenance. We are working with a different theory of culture. We assume persons are always active and potentially reconstructing received conditions, even when the conditions are overwhelming. The “system” is not set in concrete. “It need not be lived again.” The trick is to become most engaged where hostile conditions are fragile and open to breakthrough, as well as where more benign conditions are fragile and must be secured. (McDermott and Varenne, 1996, p. 27)

And they are not alone in holding that criticism of culture’s debilitating effect on students. Gold and Mann (1987) also claim that

It is important to note that the theory as stated here primarily addresses the defense against the external threats which can arise from the performance-, regulation-, and evaluation-centered atmosphere of the traditional secondary school. Why the emphasis on the student role? No other role incumbent on young people in our society is so fraught with failure as studenthood. William Glaser, in his book describing Schools Without Failure (1969, 26), has even asserted that “very few children come to schools failures, none come labeled failures; it is school and school alone which pins the label of failure on children.” (p.6; Emphasis in original)

And Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2003) consider racial inequality “America’s great unfinished business, the wound that remains
unhealed.” They believe that culture is a contributory factor to how well students perform in school.

The paradox in the juxtaposed usage of both theories lies in the fact that with underachievement, the assumption is that students who are thought to be underachievers are on the cusp of failure, traditionally speaking. Cultural Analysis theory, on the other hand, complicates such an assumption by directing our understanding of what constitutes success away from traditionally accepted markings to more alternate leanings. Therefore, rather than automatically labeling a student as an underachiever because he is not successful at the comprehensive high school with all its tests and rigid administrative and curriculum setup, another set of criteria have to be applied to categorize achievement/success.

And, as if in vindication of their assertion that no cultural educational paradigm shift is cast in stone and can therefore be changed, recently (2010), Diane Ravitch, one of the architects and proponents of the most recent cultural educational practice --- No Child Left Behind--- released a book in which she chronicles the genesis, implementation and failure of the staunchest in testing practices---the NCLB stipulations, providing detailed explanations of how such a program with lofty ideals ended up being one of testing accountability and punishment for all on whom it had an impact, including the students, teachers, and their communities.
Underachievement

Almost as difficult to define as what constitutes giftedness is the definition of what constitutes underachievement. The most widely held definition of underachievement is the situation where students perform below their identified potential (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Butler-Por, 1987; Rimm, 1997; Whitmore, 1980; Reis and McCoach 2000). Such performance can be attributed to a variety of reasons that include the absence of “self-efficacy, goal-directedness, or self-regulation skills” (Siegel & McCoach, 2002, in Reis and McCoach, 2002, p. 113); some could be as a result of undiagnosed disability, and still others because of unhelpful educational practices at districts and sites (Reis and McCoach, 2002).

Coil (2004) goes further to distinguish between the overt and the hidden underachiever. The hidden underachiever is that student who is underperforming when her/his product is disproportionate from what it should be when compared to test scores. Such a student becomes an underachiever because he is bored with the repetitive nature of some classes and is probably thinking about dropping out when she/he gets old enough. By contrast, the “hidden” underachiever does fairly well in class with B’s, is proficient by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standards, gets easy classes, but is not intellectually challenged. He hides his giftedness because being gifted among friends “is not cool.”

Underachievement can also be the product of school practices that are imposed upon them and end up creating realities of boredom for some students. Because of the demands of high-stakes tests that require all students to be
proficient, those who are better than proficient but are in the same class, are
confined to repetitive practices, when they most likely have mastered the concept
the first time it was taught. Faced with this reality, some of them become
behavior problems in class or drop out mentally (Martha Flourney, in Posnick-
Goodwin, 2011), then physically, what Reis (1998) has termed “dropping out with
dignity.” For some of these students, teaching to the skills required to pass
some high stakes tests become encumbrances as they lower the intellectual
level at which these students perform.

Working with a sample that was mostly drawn from White middle to upper
middle class families, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen (1997) conducted a
comprehensive five-year longitudinal empirical study of GATE students, using
both quantitative and qualitative methods. They provided students with pagers
so they could be contacted at home, while they were with friends, asked about
their relationships with their families, and, especially, what it felt like to be gifted
students. They discussed the presence of “Flow theory” as one of the most
important contributory factors to the students’ success or failure in school.
Simply put, students who took great satisfaction from their tasks had “flow” with
the process and were more successful in whatever area they were identified as
being gifted, such as math, science, music, art, and athletics.

Researchers also note that poverty’s role in underachievement cannot be
ignored. Unlike their fellow identified gifted students from wealthy homes, those
who live in poverty have fewer resources and access to personal role models
and mentors (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, Whalen, 1997; Ford, 1996; Baldwin,
As Banks (2007) notes, poverty is heavily defined along racial lines:

In 2004, 12.7% of the U.S. population—37 million persons—lived below poverty level. However, the poverty rates for African Americans (24.7%) and Hispanic Americans (21.9%) were more than twice that of Whites (10.8%) (Mischel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2006). (Banks, p. 11)

The student participants in this study and the vast majority of those in California’s continuation high schools fall within this demographic, even the gifted and talented ones.

Various GATE identification processes have not been very inclusive of minority students (Jackson, Sharonda, personal website; Ford, 1998; Baldwin, 2002). Baldwin notes further:

In the late 1960s, programs for the gifted that included minorities were practically nonexistent. There has been a gradual change in numbers, but the proportion of culturally diverse students placed in classes for those with mental disability far exceeds the proportion placed in classes for the gifted. (p. 140)

Teachers are the important part of the instructional system because it will be their task to recognize abilities that might be quantifiable and plan activities to meet those needs....Inclusion of higher thought processes, as recommended by Renzulli (1977), is a part of the instruction that helps students think more constructively. Baldwin (1971), however, found that minority students who had spent some time with lower level thought processes were much more successful in developing new ideas, synthesizing concepts and evaluating concepts presented to them. (p. 144)

The ethnic makeup of the district where I conducted my research already puts it against the conventional practice of underrepresentation of minorities in GT programs, with the breakdown of GT-identified students being, as of November 12, 2009: 13% African American, 73% Hispanic, 9% White/Caucasian.
and 5% Other. And as Michelle stated during our focus group interview (November 16, 2009), Hispanics are in the majority in the State of California. The trick, therefore, is getting minority Gate-identified students to stay in Gate programs, after the implementation of Prop 227 Laws (English-Only) that stipulated that all English language learning students be taught in only English after one year. This is especially difficult for students whose first language is Spanish (or Chinese).

**Cultural Analysis**

McDermott and Varenne’s cultural theory approach is captured in the title of their book, *Successful Failure*. They argue that America’s system of evaluating students in school through tests that pigeon-hole them into pass/fail and/or good/bad categories is so perfect in its execution that it successfully guarantees that there must always be students who belong to each defined category at any given period of their educational cycle. Using a variety of case studies, they demonstrate how this system “acquires” students that are then labeled to suit the description of their status.

Similar beliefs on the effect of culture on its peoples have been expressed by personalities as varied as Frederick Douglass:

> The story of our inferiority is an old dodge, as I have said; for wherever men oppress their fellows, wherever they enslave them, they will endeavor to find the needed apology for such enslavement and oppression in the character of the people oppressed and enslaved.

(“The Equality of all men before the Law,” speech delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in
Boston, April, 1865. It was given within days of the close of the Civil War and the Assassination of President Lincoln.)

And other writers of color such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2005) and Russell Bishop (2005) have made similar assertions in their discussions of the manner in which Native Maoris were treated by their white colonizers. Smith writes:

Once indigenous peoples had been rounded up and put in reserves the ‘indigenous problem’ became embedded as a policy discourse which reached out across all aspects of a government’s attempt to control the natives. Both ‘friends of the natives’ and those hostile to indigenous peoples conceptualized the issues of colonization and European encroachment on indigenous territories in terms of a problem of the natives. The natives were, according to this view, to blame for not accepting the terms of their colonization…. By the 1960s this approach had been theorized repeatedly around notions of cultural deprivation or cultural deficit which laid the blame for indigenous poverty and marginalization even more securely on the people themselves. The ‘indigenous problem’ had by then also become an academic discourse in which research played a crucial role. Many Maori people who grew up in New Zealand in that era believed that we were to blame. (p. 91; emphasis added)

In essence, therefore, the indigenous Maories who were doing what they needed to do in order to protect their individuality and cultural traditions that had sustained them for centuries before the advent of their colonizers, had now become, in the eyes of those same colonizers, the intransigent, uncivilized “natives.” The culture under which they had survived prior to their colonization was now deemed problematic within the superimposed cultural milieu of the colonizers.

In one of their case studies, McDermott and Varenne focus on students in an alternative school setting to which they were transferred/referred because they could not fit into the traditional educational configuration. A majority of these
students, they postulate, are successful in the real life of surviving outside of their school walls because of their rich life experiences and alternative successful projects in which they are involved as part of their alternative setting curriculum. However, because they are alternative, their achievement is considered less than straight-out successes because of the culturally rigid adherence to more formal standards of measuring success.

Their is a detailed examination of the American educational system that puts students in labeled boxes after obsessively watching them perform tasks that proclaim them failures. In this respect, they are like Hacking and Foucault (in Whortham, 2006) who examined the ways in which older societies went about delineating people “and making visible categories of “special needs,” “gifted” and other types of students. This surveillance is a kind of power according to Foucault because it allows institutions and individuals to label and normalize people’s behavior” (Wortham, 2006). Wortham calls it “denaturalizing,” because Foucault and Hacking show how people were put into groups and labeled to fit the characteristics of those groups as deemed fit by society; thus, we have gifted, etc. He takes this further to more modern times and instead of waiting for historical comparisons, uses more immediate local timescales that are shorter in duration, for example, one year. Hacking and Foucault denaturalize models of identity that had society identifying people in pathological ways --- varies according to the society. McDermott and Varenne focus on this identification in education: the continuous testing system that always ensures the “failure” of some students. The thesis might appear to be counter to Hacking and Foucault,
but not wholly, because even Wortham recognized this in his book and in the conclusion. We just have to be more open-minded, less restrictive in how we implement these labels --- we must use them for the betterment of our students’ lives, not as stigmas from which they cannot be rescued.

However, while I agree with McDermott and Varenne’s approach to culture and its undermining effect on our students’ skills in whatever manner it manifests itself, I am less comfortable with their approach to multicultural education. Though they believe, like Ladson-Billings (1994), Delpit (2006) and Banks (2007) in equal justice through education for all students, they are not huge proponents of “multicultural education” (1999, p. 9, quotation marks in original). Their cultural theory which examines culture as a social construction into which children are placed by society is in direct opposition to the style of multicultural education that believes that there are indeed differences, no matter how subtle, among cultural groups and does draw distinctions among these various cultures. As someone who wrote to the Secretary General of the United Nations about world issues as a high school student in Nigeria, I am more like Banks, Delpit and Ladson-Billings in my understanding and practice of multicultural education.

Ladson-Billings worked with eight teachers for a period of two years for her study for her book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. This detailed ethnographic study covered the intellectual and spiritual approaches of those teachers to their work as teachers, mostly, in their communities. They did not just know their students at school, but were involved with them in their communities in various capacities. Calling them as being
aware to culturally sensitive ways of teaching, these teachers took their students' cultures into consideration in their curriculum planning, teaching about Africa’s contribution to world and national civilization, building on their home culture instead of treating it as deficient, and expecting/demanding excellence from all students.

A recurring complaint about American teacher education programs is that they are populated by White prospective teachers, most of whom do not fully understand the diverse the cultural milieu that has been the country’s reality for a few decades now (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Delpit, 2006; Banks, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ford, 1996). What happens in such situations, these researchers argue, is that the minority students (Blacks and Hispanics, especially), are not introduced to the cultural contributions of people like them to the overall development of their own country, resulting in feelings of alienation for some of them and total disengagement from the system of education. This line of argument can be connected to that proposed by McDermott and Varenne who claim that the problems some students have in school is partially caused by the entire culture (1999). Banks (2007) expounds further on that by claiming that it is the type of culture that sets up an educational requirement where students were supposed to know the core facts about themselves and the United States through curriculum advocates such as Diane Ravitch and E. D. Hirsch. Such practices pushed for a very narrow understanding of what should constitute students’ cultural knowledge.
The argument in *Successful Failure* is similar to Ladson-Billings' (1994) explanation of the assimilationist approach to teaching. That is the one that believes that there are always some students who must fail. This is compounded by the teacher education system that is mostly Eurocentric in composition and pedagogy (Bennett, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Delpit, 2006; Banks, 2007). These researchers argue that the education curriculum needs to be expanded to include the cultural realities of all students for the successful intellectual benefit of minorities in particular and everyone in general. Cultural democracy, exposing all students to various cultural strengths, must be practiced in tandem with national identification and the country’s core ideals of “justice, equality, and human dignity” (Banks, p. 124).

Ladson-Billings, Florio-Ruane, and Banks advocate for teacher education programs that expose Caucasian teachers to the varied realities of the increasing minority population of our public schools. Banks (2007) notes that “in 2004, 43% of the public school population in the United States were students of color (Dillon, 2006). About 46% of the nation’s school-age youth will be students of color by 2020 (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989)” (Banks, p. 114). That is similar to the population of the school where I conducted my research. Given that possibility, therefore, he argues that the country’s public education system must create a system where students from various cultures learn to understand one another for the simple continued existence of the country’s survival.

Multicultural education is vitally needed, these researchers believe, because the nation is becoming more diverse (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Banks,
In pursuit of this goal, Banks infuses multicultural practices into one of his courses to show how culture and ethnicity are socially constructed. Even though he is not sure whether his former students continue practicing what they learn in the class in their professional lives, they showed positive reception in their evaluations at the end of the course. He concludes:

Teachers with the knowledge and skills I teach in my course are better able to integrate the assumptions of official school knowledge, less likely to be victimized by knowledge that protects hegemony and inequality, and better able to help students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to take citizen action that will make the world more just and humane. (2007, p. 34)

Ladson-Billings, in her Keynote Address as the AERA President in 2006, goes beyond the usual examination of the issue of the achievement gap to an analogy of the disparity among the ethnic groups in the language of economics and economic policy. She tackles the problem in terms of the national debt and the national budget deficit to focus her listeners’ and readers’ attention on the national education debt that is owed to those who are assumed to be the “inhabitants” of the achievement gap. (This analogy resonates even more now in light of the “bruising” battle that transpired between the White House and the 2010-elected House of Representatives just this past summer --- 2011.) Her argument about the education debt and its cyclical repercussions is comparable to the wealth gap which we are currently discussing in the present economy. It is much easier for White families to hold on to their wealth and their inheritance than it is for minority families (NPR, *Morning Edition*, September 15, 2011). The education debt, Ladson-Billings argues, stems from the failure to invest in programs that would have laid the solid foundation necessary for minority
students to achieve success in school so they would not become future statistical problems that seem to plague these students. She quotes from Wolfe and Haverman’s 2001 book, *Accounting for the Social and Non-Market Benefits of Education*, six points that are directly pertinent to this study. These nonmarket benefits include:

- A positive link between one’s own schooling and the schooling received by one’s children
- A positive association between the schooling and the health status of one’s family members
- A positive relationship between one’s own education and one’s own health status
- A positive relationship between one’s education and the efficiency of choices made, such as consumer choices (which efficiency has positive effects on well-being similar to those of money income)
- A relationship between one’s own schooling and fertility choices (in particular, decisions of one’s female teenage children regarding nonmarital childbearing)
- A relationship between the schooling/social capital of one’s neighborhood and decisions by young people regarding their level of schooling, nonmarital childbearing, and participation in criminal activities. (pp. 2-3; quoted in Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5).

Ladson-Billings’ national monetary and education debt analogies have direct impact on the lives of a vast majority of the students on continuation high school sites. An example is that of one of the participants in this study, Julian. He had to take a semester off from his community college in the spring of 2009 so he could work to pay for his healthcare coverage. Had it been about a year and a half later, with the Affordable Care Act that President Obama signed into law in March 2010, he would have been able to attend school continuously without having to work. With this bill, he could have stayed on his mother’s plan until age 26. Although derogatively referred to as “Obamacare” by its detractors, the Act has proved to be very helpful to those students who would not have been
able to afford health coverage, as one of the millions who has been helped notes:

“It means I don’t have to spend every penny I make to get health care. I can use some of it to further my studies – or buy food” (http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20110060-10391704.html?tag=mncol;1st;1 (p. 3).

Another area from the Wolfe and Haverman quote that affects the members of the demography that comprise this study is that of them as consumers. Among other goals, The United States Financial Protection Bureau that was established to protect college students from being lured into signing up for numerous credit cards without parental consent, among other protections. Research shows that naïve college students who do not have the financial savvy to effectively manage their economic well-being while in college dig themselves into deeper holes from which they have a harder time getting out of when they graduate. The United States Financial Protection Bureau was supposed to help curtail those realities. The Bureau, however, is still currently without a Senate-approved. This is one more area in which these students will get stiffed, making it a little harder for them to start their lives on a solid financial footing. The importance and urgency of the need for such knowledge is made all the more stark by the present international and domestic realities, as shown by the following quote:

As a result mostly of the steep downturn in the housing market in recent years, between 2005 and 2009, the wealth gap among the different racial groups have increased, especially in such states as California, Florida, Nevada, and Arizona which have some of the highest numbers of the country’s Hispanic population. The value of the median white households’ net worth, or the difference between assets and debts, was 19 times greater than that of black families at the end of 2009, the most since comparable
that lack of solid financial footing for minority students especially contributes to the presence of the ever-widening wealth gap. As Ladson-Billings (1994) shows, this stems from the presence of the education debt, which is also connected to the political access and power that is available to members of minority populations. She argues that the 15th Amendment did not automatically result in voting by Blacks, but the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made a more positive difference. This Act is being threatened by some state legislators that are enacting laws that are deemed to have more negative repercussions among minority communities by creating practices that are likely to “legally” disenfranchise a large number of minority voters. The enactment of Affirmative Action in the admission of students into colleges contributed to the creation of a solid Black middle class, Ladson-Billings argues. But that practice was attacked by those who did not like it, such as Ward Connerly, a former Black member of the University of California Regents. He was part of those who stripped the provision for racial identification from the UC admission application process (Pollock, 2004).

Multicultural education examines the ways in which some students are left out of the educational process because of their race, ethnicity, gender, social class. It aims to teach all students the ideals upon which the country was
found --- The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, The Bill of Rights. It is always needed to combat the changing needs of various groups as other groups attain less discriminatory status within the larger society. Multicultural education is closely related to democratic education because it attempts to involve every voice in the continued development of the nation. It is within such a pedagogical appreciation that one of the elementary school teachers in Ladson-Billings’ research can teach her students about Africa in kindergarten, or Jaime Escalante can proudly tell his students that math is in their Mayan blood (Ladson-Billings, 1994)). The one small but equally significant question that I have about Ladson-Billings’ research is that it was conducted at the elementary level. As the research shows, there is indeed a cultural divide between most teachers and their students. The gulf, however, is not entirely the fault of some of these teachers.

It would be disingenuous for a dedicated teacher and researcher to deny the fact that racism and poverty disproportionately affect minority communities. That reality, however, should not be the excuse mantra for the children to be disrespectful and horribly inhumane to those who do stay and try to teach them in the climate in which they have to operate. Delpit (2006) documents some of the reasons why minority teachers left the profession in the 1990’s. The problem is still there in the revised 2005 edition of the book. And the reasons are no different in 2011, with the Secretary of Education now calling for more minority male teachers. Among the reasons Delpit gives is one that resonates in public school settings: discipline. She, however, devotes just one single paragraph on
that very important issue, referring to some teachers’ practices for trying to instill some modicum of control in their classrooms as “demanding obedience.” As one of the teachers who is still in the trenches, I see it more as asking for mutual RESPECT from everyone who is engaged in the practice of education. It is time, I believe, for educational researchers to turn the lens on another aspect in the world of public education. It is time to work with those teachers who do stay to find out about their realities. It is time to conduct genuine research that compares the real experiences of public schools with the more selective charter schools, one of those very schools that Delpit’s child was privileged to have attended.

Patricia Lesense (in Delpit, pp. 193-199) notes that she works in an urban setting that is becoming increasingly more Latino and Black. So do I. I work with students of African descent, some of whom blatantly refuse to acknowledge that connection. Some are like Whoopi Goldberg who famously said, while acting as host for a White House-sponsored event, “Believe me, I have been to Africa. I am an American” (November 24, 1993.). As for the Latino students, the pride which teachers like Jaime Escalante instilled in his students all those years ago have given way to a preference, for some of the younger ones of the 2000s, for “corridos” (music that celebrate the lives of drug cartel kingpins). These are some of the realities within which teachers have to wrestle on a daily basis, in addition to trying to figure out how to better serve the intellectual and social needs of students whose academic abilities run the gamut from “far below basic” to gifted.
The History of California’s Gifted and Talented Education Program

Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) is the direct descendant/brainchild of the Mentally Gifted Minors (MGM) program. Established in the 1960s, the MGM was designed to address the intellectual needs of K-12 students who scored in the 98th percentile or above on IQ tests. It was determined that these students needed more sophisticated intellectual stimulation because they were operating academically about two grade levels above their chronologically-aged peers.

The MGM was replaced with GATE in 1980 to widen the definition of mentally gifted to include those who were talented in a variety of other ways:

- Intellectual ability: A pupil demonstrates extraordinary or potential for extraordinary intellectual development
- Creative Ability: A pupil characteristically:
  1) Perceives unusual relationships among aspects of the pupil’s environment and among ideas;
  2) Overcomes obstacles to thinking and doing
  3) Produces unique solutions to problems
- Specific Academic Ability: A pupil functions at highly advanced academic levels in particular subject areas
- Leadership Ability: A pupil displays the characteristic behaviors necessary for extraordinary leadership
- High Achievement: A pupil consistently produces advanced ideas and products and/or attains exceptionally high scores on achievement tests
- Visual and Performing Arts Talent: A pupil originates, performs, produces, or responds at extraordinarily high levels in the arts
- Any other category which meets the standards set forth in these regulations

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3 California Association for the Gifted (CAG), Raising Your Gifted Child: A Guidebook for Parents of Gifted Students (2003), p. 36
Identification of Giftedness

There is not set definition of giftedness (Schultz and Delisle 2007; Cooper, 2007). Renzulli (2002) discusses the continuum for the definition of giftedness that covers the range from conservative to liberal. Among the conservative designations are those that limited giftedness to high IQ performance on intelligence tests, such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test. The more liberal varieties of tests advocated by Renzulli and those who believe as he does take into consideration other aspects of students’ lives, especially because a lot of minority students do not perform well on strict cognitive tests – such as the IQ tests; Fletcher and Massalski (2004) call for site-specific tests that also include students’ portfolios. Those now more liberal ways of testing students include Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences. This is also the stance proposed by the Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988. It states:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26)

Galbraith (2007) advises parents to look for the following: Advanced intellectual ability; verbal proficiency; creativity; high energy; focus, passion, intensity; logical thinking; sensitivity; and sense of humor in their children as signs of giftedness.
Underrepresentation in some GATE programs

The problem of underrepresentation among minority students in gifted programs has sometimes led to the assumption that GATE is elitist (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997). The two major theories that capture the issue of underrepresentation are the discrimination theory and distribution theory.

**Discrimination Theory:** This is the belief that “underrepresentation is created by inappropriate identification procedures, limited definitions of giftedness, and prejudice on the part of members of the educational community” (Clark, 2007; also Mickelson, 2003). Closely related to discrimination theory is deficit hypothesis (Ford, 1996; Ford and Harris, 1999). Teachers who subscribe to such thinking doubt that minority students can be gifted, thereby leading to lower expectations for these groups of students in both their educational productivity and in decisions related to whether or not they get referred for gifted identification tests. Even when some of these students are referred, they argue, the test contents might be culturally insensitive to the cultural reality in which some minority and/or low SES students were raised (Ford et al, 2002; Smith and Perez, 1992). Fletcher and Massalski (2004) elaborate on one of the reasons why there needs to be a rethinking of the current practice. They state:

“High potential youth” includes America’s school children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, for they too constitute the “very essence” of the gifted and talented. We are at an evolutionary moment when the tools for identification and a pedagogy for difference can support the inclusion of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and if these students are enabled, will stimulate the “growth and creative development of a civilization.” (p. 158)
**Distribution Theory:** Family’s access to wealth, social knowledge, etc. might affect students’ levels of intellectual and social development (Baldwin, 2002; Mickelson, 2003). Advocates of the distribution theory of underrepresentation are concerned about how this unequal development is caused and how it can be prevented. A significant body of information has shown that there are real differences in the level of important intellectual skills and achievement ability among racial and ethnic groups and that these IQ/achievement gaps and what caused them are real and important. These advocates point out that cultural groups differ on availability of support systems, provisions of resources, priority given to certain kinds of talent, individual initiate, and leadership, among other factors. “What is valued by the culture is produced by the culture.” (Clark, 2007).

And as recently as May 2011,

The *Los Angeles Times* also reported that Latinos, who make up nearly half of student enrollment in California, represent just 28 percent of students enrolled in gifted programs; African Americans represent 7.6 percent of the state’s total enrollment and 4 percent of students enrolled in gifted programs. On the other hand, Asians make up 8 percent of total enrollment and 17 percent of total enrollment; white students make up 29 percent of total enrollment and 43 percent of gifted enrollment. \(^4\) (p. 18)

The need for a more inclusive identification of gifted students is important because, as Clark (2007) articulates, under-representation is almost tantamount to waste of human potential.

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**GATE at the district level**

The problem of underrepresentation in my school district is curtailed through the deliberate practice of testing every second grader with the Ravens Progressive Matrices Test, which is a spatial test. In addition to the test are other criteria that include: self-identification, parental identification, high-stakes test scores, and teacher recommendations. It is also the practice to have every second grader tested. There are 2,995 GATE-identified students in the school district within which the school in this study is located, with a breakdown of 73% Hispanic, 13% African American, 9% White/Caucasian, and 5% Other.

The district organized annual GATE conferences from 2003 - 2008 with sessions that were targeted at students, their parents and guardians, teachers, and the community, especially on strategies for parents on how to assist their gifted child(ren). This was changed in the 2009-2010 academic year to a Parent Unification Summit, with the same idea, but now geared towards more community involvement, with participation from all schools to showcase their programs, making it more like an in-depth open house with concentrated information in one setting, instead of visiting individual teachers for a few minutes. In both the conferences and the summits, there were college and career fairs. The district also sponsors a Parent Institute as part of its community outreach activities. Its specific goal is geared toward providing parents with the skills that they need in shepherding their children’s success. Enrollment is limited to about 20 parents for 10-week sessions, after which they are awarded certificates (testimony from neighbor, May 2011).
GATE, Culture and Underachievement

The proportion of culturally diverse students to white teachers is growing (Ford, 1999; Ford and Tyson, 2004; Florio-Ruane, 2001) within GATE programs. Therefore, they propose, educators need to be better informed and appreciative of their students’ cultures. Ford and Tyson (2004) compare the resultant clash between a teacher of a different culture and her students from another culture to the clashing of two icebergs. Florio-Ruane, (2001), states that in worst cases, teachers and students find themselves locked in a year-long stand-off in which neither side can afford to yield ground.

In the style of a primer, Ford and Tyson provide 5 dimensions of culture that they hope will be helpful to a teacher/educator: (1.) Concept of Self: This is the individual v. the collective. In this style, more cooperative learning is preferred by the student (Erickson, 1986); (2.) Personal v. Social Responsibility: Fairness means applying the same treatment to everyone, regardless of the situation, universal v. particular --- Absolute – right is always right v. Situation dictates response; (3.) Concept of Time: monochromic v. polychromic --- set time within which to have work completed v. more malleable; (4.) Locus of Control: Internal v. External --- You have the power to determine your own destiny v. there’s an external power that is in charge; and (5) Styles of Communication: Indirect/high context --- nonverbal cues used in communication mostly v. direct/low context --- clear directions that must be followed. There is not a whole lot of nonverbal directions given --- here, a teacher might ask students to follow the writing rubric listed, rather than giving direct feedback to them (2002, p. 22).
African American culture, they advise, operates more in the second description of each dimension, so educators will better address the educational needs of African American students if they applied some of those practices as part of their pedagogical delivery.

Ford and Tyson also list some possible questions that teachers could ask themselves:

1. How do I feel about working with students who are different from me?
2. What stereotypes, biases, and fears do I hold about diverse students?
3. Which of these stereotypes hinder students’ achievement, motivation, and interest? (How might these stereotypes hinder me from referring culturally diverse students for gifted education screening and placement?)
4. What aspects of my teaching and classroom practices (for example, my instructional style or reward system) hinder minority student achievement, motivation, and interest?
5. How are the expectations I hold of diverse children different from those of White children? (For example, are diverse students given challenging assignments? Do I have lower expectations of diverse students? (p. 24)

Some minority students are affected by the manner in which their racial identity is perceived by the wider culture (Ford, 2002). Some choose not to identify themselves as gifted and feel they need to conceal their giftedness in order to fit in with their peers so as not to be seen as “acting white” (Ford, 1996). Additionally, some perform poorly on IQ tests if they are told ahead of time that that’s the aim of the test. Ford states that although this particular research is focused on African American students, the findings can be successfully applied to students from other minority groups.
Students in my research did not include African American students, but some of the characteristics she discussed about minority students sabotaging their own success through procrastination and lack of motivation was noticeable among some students in my research population.

Mickelson (2003) argues that students whose cultures are accorded positions of importance/prominence within the wider cultural milieu often tend to do much better academically. The students in my sample belong to cultural groups (African American and Mexican/Hispanic) whose histories with the more dominant Anglo culture have been less than harmonious. For the African American student, it could be the presence of what Ogbu has classified as being an “involuntary immigrant.” For the Mexican American student, it could be the unfair classification of most Mexicans being considered illegal immigrants. For the African American student who does not feel a sense of belonging, therefore, especially because of what he might experience within his immediate environment, of not too many people in his life being successful, he might make either a conscious or a sub-conscious effort to sabotage his own success by becoming an underachiever in school (Ford, 1996; Mickelson, 2003; Wortham, 2006). The Mexican American student, for his part, sees a cultural/legal system that appears hostile to his culture when laws are passed that stipulate that he must be taught in English only after his first year in school and be expected to be proficient in mandated high-stakes tests (The Unz Initiative, 1998; Florio-Ruane, 2001). Here, we have the underachiever and the student from which the culture is asking something that is almost setting him up for failure (McDermott and
Varenne, 1999). (I would like to make clear here, though, that not all bilingual educators regard the California English Immersion Law, Proposition 227, as something negative.)

But such realities present educators with unpalatable dilemmas as they strive to work with their multiethnic students, a difficulty that’s captured in the following quote:

> Studying our metaphors for culture is difficult. Either, culture is everywhere and therefore as *The New York Times* recently proclaimed, “means anything, bad as well as good” (Rothstein, 1999), or it is so remote as to be irrelevant. The concept of culture, when applied to education, is similarly elusive. On one hand, it peppers most educational discourse concerning equity in practices and curricula. Yet it all but disappears in the major polices and practices of public education in our time. Since at least the end of the last century, schools have been places where a shared “American” identity was expected to be forged (Greene, 1994). Given this socializing mission, it has not been a priority of teacher education to, in Delpit’s (1995) words, “foster inquiry into who our students really are or encourage teachers to develop links to the often rich home lives of students” (p. 179). Instead, students’ nonschool lives and associations are “checked at the door,” as schools focus fervently on academic learning and attainment of American political values as if they were independent of ethnic, linguistic, or social identity. Thus, pupils and teachers experience what Barbera (cited in Walker and MacGillivray, 1999) calls a “culturalectomy.” (Florio-Ruane, p. 23)

**The Comprehensive High School**

The terms comprehensive and regular high school are often used interchangeably. Descriptively, it is the most common type of educational school setup used in most American schools. A typical school day’s bell schedule has between five and six 55-minute class periods, lunch, and preparation times for teachers. School starts between 7:30/8:00 a.m. and ends between 2:21/2:56 p.m. Classes can either be individual stand-alone periods or block schedules.
Comprehensive high schools also have large varieties of extra-curricular activities, including academic decathlons; football, basketball, baseball teams; and a variety of social clubs. The administration and faculty are usually expected to strictly adhere to the district’s curriculum as set out in the yearly scope and sequence designed by specific subject area groups of teachers in the summer months. Class sizes at these sites are usually on the high side, sometimes in the realm 32 to 36 students in a class. Students are required to complete all of their assignments for the semester in order to be awarded their total five credits at the end of each semester. Failure to complete assignments is an automatic failure of the affected class. When that happens too many times and the student is deemed likely be in trouble academically, she is referred to an alternative school, one of which could be a continuation high school.

**The History of California’s Continuation Education**

The continuation education program was adopted by the State of California in 1919 as a possible response to the dropout rate in its schools. In 1965, as a result of changes to the Education Code, it was mandated that California school districts use continuation education programs as an alternative/primary solution to dropout curtailment. Continuation education, therefore, is one of the alternative offerings that are provided by districts to meet the needs of their student population. CDE: Continuation education --- at risk of not completing their education. Students are often credit deficient or in need of a flexible schedule for employment, family obligations, and other critical needs.

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http://www.ca.gov/sp/oe/ce/. Other alternative education programs include independent study, community day school. This solution had an “open entry, open exit” characteristic that necessitated the utilization of course packets from which students were expected to work with textbooks and earn their credits. This practice, it turned out, was sometimes not based on having students demonstrate standards competency as recognized by individual districts. This was because, more than standards, the emphasis was on “providing for the developmental needs of students by creating non-critical, affirming environments that would enhance a strong sense of self-esteem” (Stits, p. 2). The educational reality/climate is now totally different. In 2006, the pressure is now on alternative education programs to produce students whose diplomas accede to the fact that they have met and can meet all district requirements and state standards. They are now held to the same educational requirements as the comprehensive high schools. The challenge facing California continuation schools, therefore, include “preparing students to succeed on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), developing curriculum and instruction to address state curriculum standards, finding ways to increase instructional rigor, [and] producing higher student achievement on standardized tests.” (Stits, p. 2) These changes must be achieved “while also preserving the intimacy of a small school with its focus on student achievement, and the nurturing atmosphere common to alternative education programs” (Stits, p. 2). In addition to these academic requirements is the oversight requirement of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.
(WASC) for those continuation high schools that want to have their program accredited.

Contrary to some persistently nagging stereotypes about the student population at these sites, such as most of them being: “druggies, dummies, teenage parents, truants, gang bangers, etc, most of them are actually bright and articulate, are very creative and are talented in art and writing, etc. There are, however, the existence of some social and emotional “baggage” that do beset this crop of students. They include: poor attendance, personal circumstances, dysfunctional family situations, very little or no parental support, absenteeism, financial needs, parenting teens, drug use, incarceration, homelessness, among other problems (Knoeppel, 2006).

Some strategic ways to reach them include the paradoxical strategy of taking them from where they are, which might mean the infusion of SDAIE strategies into one’s pedagogical delivery and also teaching them like they are gifted and talented (Thomas, 2003), which involves having high expectations and demanding same from them. The hope with both combinations is that their understanding will be improved by the joint impact of both strategies.

The sheer number of students in the comprehensive high school setting with which a teacher has to contend precludes opportunities to sometimes successfully assist these students with their problems, as is some times possible in alternative school settings (CCEA President’s Letter, 2000). Most of these students are turned off by the traditional, rigid structure of regular comprehensive

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7 CCEA: California Continuation Education Association
high schools but thrive in alternative settings. In this setting they are presented with various ways to earn their credits, such as participation in the Regional Occupation Program (ROP) offerings and Adult Education classes. They also experience smaller class sizes and the availability of differentiated instruction.

Raywid (1993) delineates some of the major characteristics of general educational programs rather succinctly:

1. Alternative schools tend to emphasize the development of close interpersonal relationships within the school to generate a strong sense of affiliation to the program and to the others within it.

2. They typically offer different content, differently packaged than neighboring conventional schools. Courses may be designed not out of a single discipline but reflecting integrative themes that draw on several fields of study --- eg., a course on City Life and Survival, or Utopianism through science fiction.

3. They tend to stress learning by participation or observation, in preference to analysis and study. There is a lot of action and experiential learning, as well as service learning.

4. They are likely to have evaluation systems and formats which differ from those of other local schools. Students are often asked to participate in self-evaluation. Descriptions may replace grades, and portfolios, transcripts.

5. Fewer rules and less regulation of conduct are common, with students exerting more individual and collective decision making than in other schools.8

American educational culture gave birth to the alternative school system --- a system that though originally devised as a means to assist students who needed to work while working towards graduating from high school, has now been broadened to accommodate more and more of those students who “fail” in the comprehensive high schools’ record-keeping system of the culture. It is the same sentiment that is expressed by Gold and Mann (1987) when the write:

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“School adjustment” invariably means students accommodating to the organization of their schools. It is not necessarily unfair for schools to insist that the students adjust. It is a crucial feature of schools preparing students for living in their society. But some students will not — cannot — adjust, even when they’ve gotten as far as high school. They will not do their homework, they are inattentive in class, they truant frequently, and worse, they interfere with other students’ education by disrupting the educational process and sometimes even making the schools dangerous....

Thus, many young people remain in school today who in the past would have “adjusted” to the educational system by leaving it (pushouts, *Time* piece). Now, the less skilled, less motivated, and less self-controlled students continue to go to school --- more or less. Furthermore, law and practice have recently made it more difficult for these young people to drop out when they want to; or for educators to exclude them when they want to. It has become more incumbent upon the public schools to educate all children as much as reasonably possible regardless of the mutual unsuitability of the students and mainstream conventional schooling. (p. 1)

Increasingly, in addition to the original crop of at-risk students for whom this system of continuation education was established, there is also another subgroup of students who are showing up at these sites --- they are the underachieving gifted and talented students.

A large number of minority, low-income students drop out of the California public education system annually, resulting in a 71% high school graduation rate as of 2005 (Perez & Johnson, 2008). As an attempt to stem the tide of dropouts, the continuation school system steps in. Perez & Johnson (2008) conducted a detailed descriptive study of continuation schools to try to find out “What actually goes on inside them” (p. vi, quoting Kelly, 1993, p. xv). Quoting Swanson (2005), they note that the graduation rates for the different ethnic groups in 2005 were: Black (57%), Hispanic (60%), and Native American (52%), White (78%) and
Asian (84%). They found that some of these schools try to help students who have been beaten down, have social and emotional problems and therefore unable to achieve academically. A teacher describes this as helping students erase the negative tapes from their past lives before they came to continuation sites before they as teachers can get to the secondary/primary job of teaching these students the curriculum (Perez & Johnson, 2008). It would be virtually impossible to do this at the comprehensive high school. At these sites, they are able to achieve little successes, like being placed on the honor roll. (Nate and Michelle got scholarships. Michelle was an Outstanding Student for the academic year.) Though set up as credit recovery programs which enable students to go back to their comprehensive high schools, some of them choose to stay on and graduate from their continuation school sites.

A few of the students who are admitted are younger than 16 (15) and older than 18 (19). At my site, 18 year-olds who are consciously working towards graduating are given additional time to complete their credits. This practice varies among programs as various administrators use their own discretion to meet the needs of the students in their districts (Perez & Johnson, 2008; Velasco, 2008). Orientation periods for new students vary from a few hours to a few days where some can form cohorts and work on skills to become successful students again. The school environment is almost devoid of drama because there are smaller classes, and students are encouraged to do better and made to feel special through relationships; school is like family. There are 180 instructional days, 180 minutes, 8-12; some have dual sessions to accommodate
students’ needs, class size range from 17.4 to 30. ROP classes are offered, availability of concurrent enrollment with the community colleges, but they are plagued by lack of electives.

Curriculum delivery at continuation high schools includes independent study and direct instruction, accelerated to earn credits faster, open entry, open exit. Curriculum rigor varies across the board (Hwang, 2003; Perez and Johnson, 2008) and include multiple ways for students to earn their credits. Some programs have supporting services that include nurses, counselors, school psychologists, on-site career and other counseling, and/or advanced programs (Perez & Johnson, 2008), and some others are starved for these services (McLaughlin & Velasco, 2008). Some have strong vocational education components (Perez & Johnson, 2008), others do not (McLaughlin & Ruiz de Velasco, 2008). A sizable number of the students are on free and reduced lunch, and some are English language Learners (ELLs).

Building on the description of Kelly of “Cooling out bins,” “Cooling out valves,” and “Safety Nets,” Velasco and his team of researchers who visited 37 schools from various regions of the California, further condensed his description into two major categories: “Fix the school to adapt to students” and “Fix the students to adapt to the school.” In the first, he found most of the characteristics of continuation high schools that meet the model continuation school criteria used by the California Department of Education, such as providing flexible opportunities for the delivery of content to accommodate students educational development with the end goal of wither attaining a diploma or at least sowing
the seed for educational pursuits, have strong principals who consider
themselves to be more like coaches and have strong relations with the central
office to leverage their effort to acquire necessary supplies for their schools, their
social environment are less authoritarian, with students describing the school as
feeling like a family (p. 10) and staff stepping into various capacities to meet
students’ social and emotional needs.

In their power point presentation on California’s continuation high schools
titled “Nobody’s Kids” presented to the Education Writers’ Association,
McLaughlin and Ruiz de Velasco (2008) discuss some of the challenges that
plague these schools and some of their triumphs. (The title calls to mind Delpit’s
book title, Other People’s Children. It connotes the feeling of being unwanted,
being pests to society/the culture into which they have been born (culture here is
used in the broad sense of McDermott and Varenne, 1999). The challenges,
they found, include credit-deficient students, ELL students and concentration of
ethnic/racial minorities; “system kids” --- those in foster care, group homes,
shelters, in the juvenile justice system; youth behavioral challenges such as
mental health issues, involvement in drug use, weapons. They also found that
there were variations among programs in the manner in which they were
administered --- some received more support from their district’s central
administration and their school boards than did some others. Performance, they
say is difficult to ascertain because of the lack of detailed longitudinal records of
students’ progress, but claim that continuation students “score lower on virtually
all measures of academic performance --- STAR, CAHSEE, API” (p. 4). While I
would be the first to acknowledge the erratic nature of these annual test scores, it is with great pleasure that I note here that the site where I conducted this research had the district’s highest in the most recent California State Tests (CST) with an increase in student academic improvement of 188 points. Together with the challenges, they note, are the positive aspects that include smaller class sizes, assistance with post-secondary choices, and the very capable and effective leadership that is found in some of these programs.

McLaughlin and Velasco (2008) also give detailed descriptive studies of continuation high school education, but again, no focus on the GATE students who are also part of the equation (Perez & Johnson, 2008; Velasco, 2008). This is even more disturbing when it is noted that they are part of the minority group that already populate these schools. The call for teaching all of these students like they’re GATE is even more pertinent, given the sad reality that even in such a program as the continuation setting, students still do become dropouts, including those designated GATE.

**Conceptual framework of Continuation Schools**

The following, therefore, comprise the three major categories of continuation schools as they are used in this research:

*Cooling-Out Programs:* Such programs are considered to be ineffective, operating under conditions similar to “situation[s] of structured failure” that undermine student aspirations and sense of academic potential. In the worst cases, the mismatch between program design and student need is significant,
and results in a large number of dropouts” (California Legislative Analyst’s Office report, February 2007, p. 15).

**Safety Net Programs:** These are programs that are designed to meet the needs of students that are not “well-served by large, inflexible, comprehensive high schools…. It is geared to meet the intellectual and social needs of those that the mainstream schools cannot or will not help…. It meets with some measure of success in reengaging students.”

The **Safety Valve Programs** are assumed to be those to which school administrators send over students that they do not want on their campuses. They’re seen as programs that “provide a mechanism to rid mainstream schools of failures and misfits without holding school administrators fully accountable for the consequences.”

The April 17, 2006 issue of time *TIME* magazine was a special edition that was devoted to the problem of high school dropouts; titled “Dropout Nation,” they put the dropout rate at 30% at the time. As part of their solutions to the problem, they advised the adoption of some practices:

1. **Teach reading early.** Third graders who can’t read well begin a downward spiral of frustration. Early literacy programs keep them ahead of the game.
2. **Create alternative high schools.** A choice of learning environments can help kids who are struggling in regular schools.
3. **Spot future dropouts.** Most dropouts telegraph their intentions by repeatedly skipping classes (the hidden underachiever, Coil, 2007). Early identification of at-risk kids allows schools to intervene in time.
4. **Support vocational education.** Many dropouts never see the connection between school and later life. Vocational education gives students real-world skills.
5. **Get the grownups involved.** It’s a long road to graduation. Students can’t get there without the support of a parent or mentor. (p. 40)
The “Marriage” Between GATE and Continuation Education

Traditionally speaking, students identified as gifted and talented should be in comprehensive high schools. However, there are some for whom the comprehensive setting has not worked, so they come to alternative education sites to continue with their education. Sometimes, these sites are the continuation high schools or the independent study sites. This dissertation aims to examine the relationship between these students and their chosen continuation education school site.

It would seem that GATE and alternative education have very similar goals --- preventing students from dropping out of school, while GATE aims to do this by providing a more intellectually stimulating/challenged curriculum, continuation education aspires to cater to the needs of those students who for one reason or another, found the structure of the regular comprehensive high school limiting (CCEA President’s letter, 2000; Knoeppel, 2006; Raywid, 1983). Some of these students who were struggling in the comprehensive high school setting tend to thrive when they come into the alternative education setting and find their niche (California Educator, March 2003). In essence, continuation education students, who are already “at risk,” should be in environments that have high expectations and teaching styles that teach them “like they’re gifted and talented” (USA TODAY, June 6, 2003). And that is as it should be, because GATE pedagogical strategies are just excellent strategies.

There is the egregiously erroneous belief among those who are unfamiliar with GATE students that these students are “problem-free,” that they do not have the usual challenges that accompany “regular” students, such as discipline,
emotional issues, absenteeism, etc. GATE students, they assume, are model students who do not need as much guidance and supervision as other students (Hansford, 2002). While they might be exceptional in various ways, GATE students still tend to behave as their peers do and express some of the same characteristics (Kerr and Cohn, 2001). It is not surprising, therefore, that the comprehensive high school students who are assigned to alternative programs, such as continuation high schools and independent studies, are so assigned for the same reasons as GATE students, resulting in a double classification for the latter. They are doubly classified because now they are not just GATE students with problems; they now bear the added burden of being labeled as “underachievers.” Because their intellectual/educational needs are not being met, they might channel those intellectual abilities to destructive endeavors that could result in devastating consequences for themselves and others (Kerr, 2001; Baldwin, 2002). Banks (2007) also warns about the same reality for those minority students who do not acquire the necessary educational skills to survive in our ever shrinking interdependent world.

This chapter discussed the theoretical frameworks that were used for the study. It also offered a literature review that undergirds key concepts (such as giftedness, underachievement) and contextual information that situates the field site within the larger discussion on GATE and minority education.

The chapter that follows explains the methodology for the study.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The mere fact that GATE students in this study are at a continuation education site automatically signals, in the traditional definition, that they are gifted underachievers. If they were not so, whether they were underachieving in one class or multiple subjects (Renzulli, 2002), they would most probably be at one of the comprehensive high schools in the district. Conversely, cultural analysis theory claims that by not giving up and accepting the label of underachievement, these students are not allowing their futures to be “set in concrete” (McDermott and Varenne, 1999).

My study’s focus was an interpretive exploration of gifted minority students’ experiences at a continuation high school. Utilizing both cultural and underachievement theoretical lenses, I planned to examine and analyze how minority students in a continuation education setting understand, interpret and act on their giftedness. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do students understand/interpret their status of gifted and talented?
2. What does it mean to be a minority GATE student in a continuation high school setting?

To gain these insights, I used an interpretive case study approach
The chosen research design was interpretive because it best aligned with this study as it let me observe and work closely with the students and some of their teachers in an educational environment that is as close to natural as possible (Patton, 1990; Erickson, 1986; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Erickson (1986) addresses 3 key points about the interpretive approach that I believed were critical to my study, such as its inclusive nature (more so than the more limiting ethnography or case study; the avoidance of the perception that such research is totally devoid of any type of quantification; and the researcher’s interest in and interpretation of the lives of those under study (p. 119). Qualitative research also offers multifaceted methods of data gathering for more in-depth understanding of the said phenomenon (Smith, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Interpretive case study research is interchangeably referred to as naturalistic, qualitative, etc. It seeks to understand meaning in context. Though called qualitative, the use of interpretive is meant to draw attention to the fact that some quantitative aspects are incorporated in qualitative, though not entirely in the true straightforward quantitative practice. The qualitative researcher is a bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) as she/he employs various methods in the gathering of necessary data. The distinguishing difference between the two is that qualitative research is more inductive, going out into the field to understand how various parts of the phenomenon of interest contribute to the formation of the whole, that there is no one set understanding of the reality, that it changes depending on the context. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is more
deductive --- finding a world that is constant and that can be measured (Merriam, 1988). It is called a case study because it is too small to be generalized because chosen for its participants’ specific interest. It is different from random, probabilistic sampling that might have as its intent larger general reach so can be used for evaluation. Case studies are narrower in conception and execution. It studies the situation that gives richer data that can be studied in great, focused detail and is chosen by a researcher in order to address specific needs, as described by Patton (1990):

> The desire to evaluate individualized client outcomes is one major reason why case studies may be conducted. There are other reasons case studies may be preferred or needed. Sometimes researchers or policymakers are puzzled by particular cases --- unusual successes, unusual failures, or dropouts. Detailed case studies of these unusual cases may generate particularly useful information.⁹

It is ironically fortuitous that his explanation of case study captures exactly what I attempted to accomplish in this study --- to understand why these gifted and talented students who are supposed to be at the top of education because of their designation as GATE, end up being “failures” or dropouts in the most extreme cases.

Stake (2005) delineates among three types of case studies. They are: (1) The intrinsic case study, (2) The instrumental case study, and (3) The multiple case study (In Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 445). In intrinsic case study, which this study is designed after, the researcher is interested in studying the case specifically for the purpose of understanding it alone and nothing else.

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Interpretative case study differs from the descriptive and evaluative designs. Interpretive case study asks that the researcher be in the natural occurring setting of the phenomenon under study. For the researcher to be able to immerse herself in the phenomenon in order to better understand it and provide indepth analysis and understand it from the participant’s point of view is what sets it apart, the ability to arrive at “sense-making” or “meaning in context” (Measor, 1985; Erickson, 1986; Miriam, 1988; Brenner, 2006; Patton, 1990;).

Qualitative design looks at how the different parts combine to produce the whole --- what it means for participants to be in the setting --- lifelike, etc, in that particular setting. There is more devoted to examining the breadth and scope of the phenomenon under study. While quantitative research might look once at the problem, the qualitative researcher looks “again and again” as he/she teases out the murky complexities that surround the contextual study (Peshkin, 1988).

When used in the calculation of API and AYP scores in the computation of the annual NCLB compliance, for example, qualitative research would take into consideration such student variables as those who are on free and reduced lunch, problems that they might be having at home, those who are surviving against all odds, those who are struggling readers, and much more. Quantitative research, on the other hand, would be more focused on the reported/final scores. Such practice has been detrimental to the needs of educational research, as noted below:

The experimental quantitative model is ill suited to “examining the complex and dynamic contexts of public education in its many forms, sites, and variations, especially considering the…subtle social differences produced by gender, race, ethnicity, linguistic
status, or class. Indeed, multiple kinds of knowledge, produced by multiple epistemologies and methodologies, are not only worth having but also demanded if policy, legislation, and practice are to be sensitive to social needs (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004, p. 7; quoted in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. xi).

Gaining Entrée

My quest to gain access started with my sending an e-mail message to our superintendent’s Administrative Assistant in March of 2008 requesting a meeting with the Superintendent to discuss my proposed research plan. I got a call from the assistant the following day asking for more details. I told her that I needed to secure the superintendent’s permission for my dissertation research, whereupon she directed me to the Assistant Superintendent of Institution.

I was hopeful that she would not be a very demanding “gatekeeper” (Rossman and Marshall, 1995) because I had worked with her in her immediately preceding position as GATE Coordinator for the District. I sent both her and her assistant (whom I also knew) an e-mail message requesting a meeting. The assistant asked me to fax over a description of my intended research and some sample interview/questionnaire questions. I did so on March 24th, 2008. A few days later, I got a call from the assistant informing me that the Assistant Superintendent would like to meet with me to further discuss my abbreviated proposal, and that the only day she would be available to meet with me was April 2, 2008, at 2:30 p.m. She was leaving on her spring vacation the next day.

I arrived at my Asst. Superintendent’s office at 2:32 p.m. for my appointment. My Asst. Superintendent went over my sample questions with me and made some suggestions regarding my use of multiple questions on one of
them (Brenner, 2006) and another on my use of race/ethnicity. She gave me the green light to conduct my research and asked me to pick up my letter in a few days. After I secured my district’s approval. I turned my attention to my immediate site.

I dropped off a letter for the then Director of Alternative Education a few days after I picked up my formal permission letter from my Asst. Superintendent’s office. I followed up about two days later with an e-mail message requesting a meeting with her. She granted it, and we met and talked and she gave me a verbal commitment. I got her formal letter a few days later.

Fast forward to the 2008/09 academic year: August 11, 2008: Our first day back at school. I made an appointment to meet with our new principal to inform him about my research intentions. He was very supportive and granted his permission. On Wednesday, September 17th, I asked for and he gave me some time during our first staff meeting to talk to my colleagues about both the GATE program and my research. I put thirteen letters in their mailboxes the following Monday. I received two in the affirmative by lunchtime. I also mailed my letters of introduction, with self-addressed envelopes included, to my students’ parents. I got a verbal commitment from a parent whose son was due to graduate in a week’s time, but who promised to come and meet with me for interviews because he was not due to start school at Riverside Community College until January of 2009.

**Participant Selection**

Unlike the old type of ethnography where it was more common for the researcher to go to less familiar places to conduct her research (Van Maanen,
1988; Emerson, et al, 1995; Agar, 1996), it is now not uncommon to find researchers who work more closely to their home base (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2006). The choice of the continuation site in this study was pertinent because of it had direct “relevance to [the] theoretical issue” (Spradley, 1979) of the focus of my study ---- GATE students in an alternative high school setting. It was where my research problem was (Erickson, 1986; Merriam, 1988; Marshall and Rossman, 1995). It was an opportunity to learn what, specifically, could be gleaned from the study by conducting an in-depth study of the cases (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1994; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994).

Fontana and Frey (1994) ask, "How do we ‘get in’ [to] our chosen research site? Because of the combined exploratory and praxis nature of the research and my strong established relationships in the school district, when I developed an interest in and realized the possible beneficial implications of this research topic, I did not anticipate a difficult time from the immediate “gatekeepers” (Patton, 1990; Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Advising on one of the best ways to negotiate entry into a research site, Marshall and Rossman (1995) state: “Instead of controlling and sanitizing their presence, qualitative researchers identify and present aspects of themselves that will be useful. The energy that comes from high personal interest (called bias in traditional research) is useful for gaining access” (p. 62, emphasis in original). But the reality of less obstruction to access from those in charge, made me even more aware of my obligation to my future research participants when I did finally get the necessary permission.
A number of researchers have cautioned against possible ethical abuses that accompany the practice of qualitative research (Measor, 1985; Patton, 1990; Fontana and Frey, 1994, 2005; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Angrosino, 2005; Christians, 2005; Lincoln, 2005; Brenner, 2006). Stake (1994) notes that “the value of the best research is not likely to outweigh injury to a person exposed,” and that “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world” (p. 244). Fontana and Frey (1994) underscore the absolute need to “protect participants’ wishes and privacy” (p. 372), delineating the process into three distinct parts of “informed consent (consent received from the subject after he or she has been carefully and truthfully informed about the research), right to privacy (protecting the identity of the subject) and protection from harm (physical, emotional, or any other kind.” (p. 372). And Marshall and Rossman view “ethical considerations as a critical criterion against which to judge research strategies” (p. 42).

Understanding, therefore, and being fully appreciative of the magnitude of the paramount obligation to protect my research participants, I sought and was granted IRB permission to conduct this research through the Office of Responsible Research Practices (ORRP). In addition to sending the completed required forms for IRB permission with a copy of my proposal, I had to take the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) on line. Divided into approximately 16 sections that include such topics as History and Ethical Principles, Defining Research with Human Subjects, Privacy and Confidentiality, it also had comprehension questions of between two and six in number that had
to be passed by at least 80%. It completed this exercise in three sessions of about 2 ½ hour blocks. All sample interview and questionnaire questions, including parents’ Spanish translations, were submitted to the IRB as part of the permission seeking process.

I worked simultaneously on securing both IRB permission from the ORRP and the various levels in my school district, from the district office to my school site, before starting my research. I sent letters with accompanying IRB forms in both English and Spanish with self-addressed, stamped return envelopes addressed specifically to parents, but I did tell the identified GATE students informally so they would be aware of my research plan. The parents’ responses arrived at various intervals, between periods of one to two weeks. Some were positive, others were not. I got permission to work with three students for my pilot study, one of whom was Caucasian; and four for my dissertation research, three of whom were Hispanic, and one who was both Caucasian and Asian. For the teachers, after securing permission to do so from our principal, I informed all of them of my research at the conclusion of our first staff meeting of the 2009-2010 academic year and followed up with more formal copies of the letters from my IRB submission packet.

I was also fortunate that the type of permission I had was one that gave me the ability to go anywhere, whenever (Erickson, 1986; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). This was made explicit by the responses I got from both Mr. Essex (the Career Technical Education (CTE) teacher) and Mrs. People’s (the counselor) when I specifically asked them whether I could return to either complete an
interview or observe a class. Mr. Essex told me to “Come back anytime!” And Mrs. Peoples said, “You’re welcome anytime!” Their responses gave me the confidence and comfort that they were comfortable enough with me as both a colleague and a researcher, so much so that I could meet with them whenever I needed to.

**The Participants**

*Ronnie* has two older brothers, one of whom also graduated from our program, who can assist him in paying for college and so didn’t think it necessary to seek out scholarship options. He is the youngest. Parent’s educational level in his cum file lists college graduate, but he informed me during one of our two interviews that his mother cleans homes. District records show that he’s classified as socio-economically in need. His primary language is Spanish. According to the school’s records, he is part of the National School Lunch Program. He was enrolled in the district’s English Language (EL) program in 2000-07-06. On the CELDT scale of 1-5, he was a 4 in his recommended designated EL instructional setting. On his first try on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), he scores were: math --- 411, English --- 417 out of total possible score of 500 on each test. His level on the STAR test was advanced. He is a Redesignated Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) student. He is not Mexican as I had assumed, but El Salvadoran and Guatemalan. His transcript shows that he completely failed 9th grade. He specifically came to ask me at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year to assist in getting him back into our program as a 5th-year senior, even after he had been informed by the office that
5th-year seniors were not being accepted. I was able to do so with the assistance of some of my colleagues whom he had as teachers, and the final input from our superintendent. He completed his credits and graduated WI Qtr. --- March 18, 2011. Ronnie’s problem was his very poor attendance.

**Randy’s** designated primary language is Spanish and he was enrolled in the English Language Learner program in 2001-07-08; redesignated fluent English proficient in 2002-02-02 with an EL instructional level setting of 4. Randy did not do his work because there always seemed to be other things to do, even if they were not “necessarily good things.” But their pull was so strong that he would not pay attention in class regardless of how hard his teacher intervened, as he explained: “I’d go to class and then I wouldn’t remember anything because I probably wasn’t paying attention in class, even though I probably knew it. That’s what happened to me in English class. I’d have my best friend by me and the teacher would separate me and I’ll talk to somebody else and keep on going.” (Focus Group interview, November 16, 2009). Randy rationalized away his behavior by claiming that he was a kid who should be having fun and hanging out with his “cholos” (wrong crowd of people) instead of being in school. Parents’ educational level showed that she was not a high school graduate. He was in Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP), a federally funded grant program that helps local universities establish partnerships between them and surrounding school districts. Its goal is to expose students from low income families from middle through high school to the necessary skills they will need to succeed in college. They also have the
capability of providing scholarships. His CAHSEE scores were: math --- 400, English --- 384; and he passed both on his first try. He was enrolled in the National School Lunch Program. His cum showed that he had irregular attendance problems even from middle school, with a report card comment: “Starts work, but does not finish.” He was SARBed and had conferences on attendance, with one piece of mail that was sent certified return receipt. Teachers’ comments included “Starts work, but does not finish.”

His goal is to study business administration in college so he can assist his family members in running their restaurant business. To that end, he completed most of his 11th grade credits to facilitate his transfer back to his home comprehensive high school so he can finish his 12th grade at that site on Friday, January 8, 2010, and was given his release documents on Monday, January 11, 2010.

**Nate** was enrolled in the English Language Learner (EL) program as of 2000-07-06; CAHSEE: math --- 385, English --- 359; Primary language: English; Other-Asian. Came to Mihigh from the independent study program. The letter of request for admission from his mother stated that he needed the transfer from that program because he was not disciplined enough to succeed there. He also acknowledged same in his accompanying personal statement. And his elementary records show the comment from his teachers that he started assignments but did not complete them. He likes to fix cars. He has two brothers: one older and one younger. He is interested in computer science and the Navy. He likes *Star Trek* --- Spock (Leonard Nimoy) especially.
His mother listens to National Public Radio (NPR). It is the national version of the BBC’s worldwide reach in its attempt to present unvarnished, in-depth reporting on international and domestic news all over the country. Rather than some other media outlets that play commercials at intervals, NPR has underwriters, whose views and influences are minimized as much as possible in their reporting. The fact that she is a public radio listener is worth mentioning because it is a subtle identification of somebody who is interested in more depth and intellectual reasoning in her understanding of world events. She holds a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from a Taiwanese university. At the time of this study, she was enrolled in a private college for an advanced degree and was also working as the manager of a cans and bottles recycling plant. His dad is a machinist, has been with his company for about 34 years, and travels to different states to service machines for his company. Though they now employ people with degrees, his dad is not affected since he’s been with the company for so long.

Mr. Dominguez, our Spanish and health teacher who also fixes computers as a hobby and was one of my teacher research participants, mentioned Nate’s gift with computers during one of our after school discussions. He was Nate’s unofficial mentor. Mr. Dominguez acknowledged the fact that Nate struggled with the English language, but he had advised him to attend junior college upon graduation to work on a technology degree, continue with Spanish so he will have some Spanish language skills under his belt, then and maybe join the Air Force after graduation so he will have his education paid for and will command
more respect and clout with a college degree. Mr. Dominguez felt that Nate would be an extremely successful technology expert with knowledge of both a little Chinese (which he could brush up on since his mother is Taiwanese) and Spanish. Nate expressed the same sentiment of wanting to continue to pursue his interest in computers in his personal essay for his scholarship application. Nate could not cope with the pace at which he was being taught at the comprehensive high school.

Both he and Michelle used to stop by my classroom after school to wait for Michelle’s sister, who also gave him a ride home on the two days when he did not have the Governor’s Challenge program (an after-school fitness program that was instituted in schools to help more students develop regular exercise skills).

Michelle, like Nate, Julian, and Ronnie, also came to the continuation site from the independent study program. Also, like some of them, the description of her work habits was one that noted that she starts assignments, but does not finish them. She was also enrolled in the National School Lunch Program. Her CAHSEE scores were: math --- 382, English --- 395; and her primary language is English. She described herself as “the laziest GATE person ever,” who just chose not to do her work because she did not want to.

Michelle’s father is a milk delivery driver for a major grocery store; her mother is a retired nurse. She is the youngest of three daughters. Her oldest sister went to Johns Hopkins for undergraduate studies and graduated from the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California in May 2011. It was this older sister who ensured that she and her immediate older sister
completed their homework when they were in elementary school. Her immediate older sister, who wants to be a social worker, completed her two years of study at Valley College and transferred to California State University, San Bernardino in 2011.

Michelle admires Alton Brown (one of the professional chefs on The Food Network), whom she regards as her hero and role model in her chosen career field in the culinary industry. To that end, she was enrolled in and completed a semester Restaurant Occupations class in the Regional Occupational Program (ROP). Brown’s shows are packed with information on the chemistry of various foods that are presented in easy to understand, engaging, and very artistic palatable ways. She also likes Lady Gaga because she is artistically creative and politically active (Lady Gaga had the most nominations for the 2010 MTV Music Awards – 13; the first artist to have that many in one year; she also made Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in the World for her creativity --- Time, May 10, 2010); she also admires Hillary Clinton (another Time 100 list honoree).

Michelle blends her appreciation for the scientific and creative manner in which Alton Brown approaches his culinary creations with the provocatively creative style of Lady Gaga’s music and show business persona.

Both Nate and Michelle gravitate towards the “weird” (Michelle’s description). Nimoy, the Volcan in Star Trek is Nate’s favorite character. Lady Gaga and Alton Brown are two of Michelle’s. They both like the computer game Warcraft “because it’s for nerds,” Michelle told me on one of the afternoons.
when they were in my classroom waiting to be picked up. They sometimes hung out in my classroom to watch such shows as Paula Deen’s *Paula’s Home Cooking* and Robin Miller’s *Quick Fix Meals* on The Food Network. She knew the names of most of the dishes, because “I just love food,” she said when I commented on her extensive knowledge.

**Julian** got so apathetic that he did not even want to write his name on his paper. Then he became a “high school dropout” (Interview, October 31, 2008). His mother made him come to Mihigh.

**Efren** did not have a very settled experience growing up. Unlike most students whose lack of credits is due to their own inability to do their assignments, Efren’s situation was because his family moved around a great deal. For his high school education alone, he attended Rally, Zinon, which he left because he got bored working on his assignments at home all by himself, then back to Rally, then to a neighboring school district, before coming to Mihigh.

Those who attended the alternative independent high school (Julian, Michelle, Nate and Randy) were not successful there either. They all ended up at Mihigh. Some of the reasons they gave for their lack of progress at Zinon included distractions at home with various electronic gadgets, other “friends” who called and invited them to do something else/fun, and just a plain feeling of boredom.

**Mr. Essex, Career Technical Education (CTE) Teacher**

Mr. Essex was raised by his mom and grandmother, a nurse and a high school teacher, respectively. He believes that this might have had a great
influence in his life and decision to become a teacher. He was introduced to woodshop in 6th grade and continued with it all through high school. He had taught at five other schools prior to his position as the CTE teacher at Mihigh, with the longest being four years, and the shortest, one. Though he is a product of private school education, he wishes that he had had the opportunity to attend a continuation high school because he “did not fit the mold” of what was perceived as the regular high school student. As such, he has a true appreciation for some of the types of students we have on our campus because, as he put it,

… coming to Mighigh, I see the, the same students that I was, they, they act just as I did, and I LOVE IT AND WE GET ALONG GREAT. And shop was my favorite class, and CNC machining is a shop class, and so here we don’t have to be in our seats, we can get up, we can walk around the room, we can talk, we can MAKE something. I’m a kinesthetic learner, I learn by DOING, and so teaching shop you learn by doing, and of the four personality types, ehhh, this is the active group, the learning temperament and so forth. This is the group I identify with the most when it comes to continuation. (Interview, December 17, 2008)

Mr. Essex works very closely with professors and the administration at San Bernardino Valley Community College (SBCCD) to ease some of our students’ transition into programs in which they are interested. Case in point, after our schoolwide trip to their campus, one of the professors came over to our school on two different occasions to assist those students who were interested with the financial aid process/package and any other questions. He was also instrumental in setting up the concurrent enrollment/articulation agreement between SBCCD and our school.
And on the last day of Winter Quarter, Friday, March 18, 2011, he shared with me the wonderful news that his high school senior son was being recruited by Ohio State, one of about ten schools from which he had received such letters based on his performance on his PSAT test scores. His son is ranked first in his class of 130 students.

Mr. Waverly, Physical Education (P.E.) Teacher

Mr. Waverly has been a teacher for 15 years, 14 at Mihigh. He transferred from one of the comprehensive high schools when he was informed of an opening for a P.E. teacher at Mihigh at the end of the academic year. When he talks, he appears as if he’s yelling because he has a loud voice that carries for more than a few feet. He can sometimes be heard very clearly by those in classrooms with open doors as he gives directions to his students when they are out on the sports field.

Although he appreciates the drive towards the call for more direct instruction, he would much rather have the former system where students could earn their credits based on how diligently they were willing to work so that those who worked faster, could earn their credits faster and move on to the other classes in which they are credit deficient.

Teacher-Researcher: Self as Instrument

Unlike the traditional ethnography where it was more common for the researcher to go to less familiar places to conduct her research (Van Maanen, 1988; Emerson, et al, 1995; Agar, 1996), it is now more common for researchers to work more closely to their home base. My chosen continuation site was selected because it had direct “relevance to [the] theoretical issue” (Spradley,
1979) of the focus of my study --- minority GATE students in a continuation high
school setting. This site was also my own professional work site and so, I
believe, also allowed me access different from what an unfamiliar researcher
might have experienced. I discuss this further in the chapter. One of the crucial
questions I pondered revolved around how I could effectively make the “familiar
strange” and so be able to understand what I was observing with the fresh eyes
of an “outsider” (Spindler and Spindler, 1998).

I started out as self as researcher/instrument in the research
understanding of the description, with the purpose of working solely with those of
my colleagues who had agreed to be my research participants. However, the
further the research progressed, the more it dawned on me that I could also be
part of the research pool as teacher researcher (Somekh et al., 1993), especially
since I am the only one with GATE certification on the staff. As such, I reasoned,
I could use sample descriptions of some of my experiences as both a teacher in
class and the impressions of those student participants who were also my
students to demonstrate how GATE strategies could be applied at a continuation
site.

For me, the phrase “self as researcher” takes on an additional meaning when
read against the critical understanding of the emerging effort of decolonizing
methodologies (Smith, 1999). More than an examination of the researcher’s role
as being the main instrument of data gathering in the study (Piantanida and
Garman, 1999), Smith and others like her (Russell, 2005; Denzin, 2005) want to
take back the research endeavor from what they see as the old style of
ethnographic research where the “native” was gazed upon by the imperialist/colonialist expert and presented as being inadequate. This current wave aims to have the natives take back control of research endeavors about them by posing such critical questions as:

1. What research do we want done?
2. Whom is it for?
3. What difference will it make?
4. Who will carry it out?
5. How do we want the research done?
6. How will we know it is worthwhile?
7. Who will own the research?
8. Who will benefit? (Denzin, 2005, p. 945)

These questions continuously force the researcher to be consistently conversant with the ethical needs and protection of the researched.

Both Smith (1999, 2005) and Bishop (2005) write about how indigenous cultures were devastated by colonial imperialism. Within the broader American educational context that I teach, minority students (African Americans especially) have been taught to believe that their culture is inferior either through the chosen school curriculum or various media (Ford, 1997, 2004). Students from these cultures are thought to have deficit cultures because they do not fit within the norm of IQ test results (Ford, 1997; McDermott and Varenne, 1999). Thus, they are forced to “inhabit” the houses that have been created for them even as the culture decries their lack of achievement.

Some researchers argue that researchers who share the cultures of the people they’re researching might be more sympathetic. Bishop, (2005), however, quoting Smith (1999) and Swisher (1998) recognizes the argument that the common belief that researchers who work as “insiders” are less objective is
erroneous since some of them they are exposed to the same methodology
training as their foreign counterparts who have tended to marginalize those on
whom they have conducted their research. The role of “Insider”/ “Outsider,”
therefore, extends beyond the researcher just being a member of a target group,
but to whether or not she/he appreciates the nuances of the culture under study,
as Bishop (2005) notes below:

Tillman (2002), when considering who should conduct research in
African American communities, suggests that it is not simply a
matter of saying that the researcher must be African American, but
“[r]ather it is important to consider whether the researcher has the
cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate the
experiences of African Americans within the context of the
phenomenon under study.” (p.4)

Into which camp do these arguments place me? A sample of some of the
types of personal questioning with which I wrestle as both an “insider”/ “outsider”
teacher and resident in this community is captured in the following entry in my
dissertation journal:

Had our first Student Council (SC) meeting today. Two of my 5th
period students (both females, one African American and one
Tongan) walk in from the meeting and say: “Ms. Mowoe, we want to
ask you whether you will be willing to serve as our sponsor/advisor
for Black History Month (BHM) celebration.” I was surprised at the
question, because I didn't even know that the afternoon session
students had attended the SC meeting, I asked “Why?” They said
that it was because they had had two events celebrating Mexican
American culture --- Day of the Dead and Cinco de Mayo --- on the
meeting agenda. They wanted something, therefore, for BHM. I
told them that I was flattered that they would consider me, but that
there were also other teachers they could ask. They said, okay, but
that I should also keep it in mind. (I truly felt honored that they had
thought about me, flattered actually. But even as I yearned to do it,
I also wanted to let them know that they could contact other
teachers (African American) on the staff, because I did not want
anyone to accuse me of assuming to know more about African
American culture than the other African American teachers on the faculty, in spite of the fact that I do have a Master’s degree in African American Literature and have been told in confidence by both the counselor and another African American teacher that I know more about some aspects of the African American culture than they did.) (Wednesday, September 17, 2008)

As I briefly alluded to in the introductory portion of this document, being in the position of an “insider”/”outsider” researcher was both thrilling and challenging. While such a foray into this area of my research might appear to some as solipsistic “navel gazing” (Behar, 1996), I would much rather call it the unveiling of my conflicted feelings as an African educator in this culture, so as to try to understand and shed some light on possible biases that I might have since I, as the researcher, am also a research instrument (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990; Piantanida and Gorman, 1999). It is my acknowledged worldview from which I operate as an educator.

But even as I considered myself as a professional “insider,” I was also culturally an “other” because I was an international educator from another country; a human alien, an immigrant whose “teacher authenticity” (Subedi, 2008) is almost always being questioned and examined in subtle and not so subtle ways. In his research with two teachers of Asian origin, Subedi captures some issues with which I am unfortunately familiar still do have to contend as a teacher. He writes about two Asian teachers in American schools who felt that they had to struggle to assert their authenticity as capable, qualified teachers. One, Anita, an ESL teacher, was thought to be both exotic and less qualified because of her discipline as an ESL teacher. The other, Nadia, a fourth grade
teacher, received little respect from some of her students who either commented on her physical appearance or attempted to ignore her when she issued behavior corrections, something that could be easily accomplished by her male Caucasian colleagues. Given their Asian backgrounds, in spite of the fact that Anita and Nadia had spent considerable numbers of years in this country, as seen within the contexts of their schools, they still had “non-mainstream identities” (Subedi, 2008).

However, even with such a reality, I have tried not to succumb to the temptation of “victimry” (Subedi, 2008) of being made to inhabit the description of “the other” because I do play a significant role in various aspects of the successful operation of our school. One area in which this is made manifest are those occasions when we have to present major reports, such as our WASC that is done every six years, with 3-year midterms. Then I am given the role of “editor” in spite of the fact that I “speak English with an accent,” because according to them I “write very well.” And the co-chairs usually show their appreciation by sending me notes of appreciation such as the following:

**From Miriam (Racho):**

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all your hard work in writing and editing our WASC report. Your input proved to be invaluable as we moved closer to our print deadline. In addition, your knowledge clearly provided evidence to the team that our teaching staff is highly qualified.

**From Sarah:**

Thank you for everything you did during our WASC process and the report. Your editing was so much help. Thank you for the classes you took also. Everything was invaluable. Thanks again and God bless.

*(May 7, 2007)*
Racho’s note to one of my edits on the WASC document from February 18, 2010:

Faith, thank you so much for your editing. Always helpful. Applied all your edits, except those Anthony overrode. Mariam.

I was also named one of five Educators of the Year by the East Kiwanis Club of Rubicon in 2002, making me one of five community heroes for the same year, and have received wonderful professional evaluations like the following:

**STANDARD 3 – UNDERSTANDING AND ORGANIZING SUBJECT MATTER FOR STUDENT LEARNING**

**Summary:** Ms. Mowoe’s knowledge of and love for her English subject matter is nothing less than superb. Her lessons are organized, standards based, differentiated, and engaging. She uses a multitude of resources to assist students in drawing connections between topics of discussion and other curriculum content. She is very adept at connecting the “traditional” literature to the concerns and issues of today’s youth.

The fact that I live in the community, a reality that is not common among teachers (Ladson-billings, 1994; Ford, 1996), further complicates the entire “insider”/ “outsider” debate. While Huey (2002) advises that belonging to a community does not automatically translate into the best type of research about that community, that is still addressing those researchers who are from the same ethnic group as those who are being researched. In this case, I am not. One of my main reasons for choosing to buy my home in this community was because I thought I would be able to exert some direct influence in working at various levels in the community for the outcomes of students’ futures in the same district that pays my bills.

Interestingly, this “othering” of teachers is not limited to their native born colleagues and some of their students. It goes as high as the federal level where the Secretary of Education and some prominent African Americans are now
calling for more African American male teachers to teach African American students so they can act as positive role models to counter the negative impact of what some of these students encounter on a daily basis in their lives (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Feb. 1, 2011). The research, however, shows that such beliefs are not 100% guaranteed (Pollock, 2004; Thernstroms, 2003).

In many private analyses, faculty of color at Columbus argued that race indeed infused their conflicts with students. Speaking privately to me in the hallway on another afternoon, Mr. Vane suggested that being “black” did not lessen the likelihood of racialized conflicts with students, but instead set him up for more such conflicts: He says he feels many black students call him “an Uncle Tom, you see, or an Oreo, white on the inside, black on the outside,” because he makes them “toe the line, and they expect me to give them a break,’ they’ll say.” We laugh. “In so many words they say this?” I ask. “Yes! ‘C’mon, brother,’ they’ll say, and I say ‘I’m not your brother, I’m Mr. Vane, now do your work!’ I’m not going to give them a break, because I know what the world outside is like, and that’s not going to give them a break,” he explains. “They come in with all this anger inside them. It’s not directed at me personally, but they see me as part of the institution, because I follow and enforce the institution’s rules. And they believe I don’t have legitimate power,” he says. “Why?” I ask. “Because I’m black --- they’re used to seeing white males in power --- look around! So they see me as an Uncle Tom,” he says. “They call you this to your face?” I ask. “No, but I can get it,” he says. (p. 64-65)

This is counter to the belief by Ford (2004) and some other researchers, such as Ladson-Billings (1994) and Delpit (2006) over reasons why African American students don’t do well in school. They believe that such reality stems from the fact that the ratio of Black students to white teachers lends ammunition to the disconnection between the two, because most mainstream teachers (Caucasians) do not understand or have not been exposed to the multicultural
worldview maybe in their own personal lives or in their teacher education trainings.

My intellectual/critical wrestling continued with “insider”/ “outsider” questions on an international level, as I read some of the words of advice from Florio-Ruane (2001), Mickelson (2003), Ford & Tyson (2004), and all the researchers who strongly advocate the teaching of more multicultural education courses to pre-service teachers so they can better appreciate their multiethnic students’ cultures. I kept examining my reaction to some of their assumptions as I worked my way through them.

In addition to the above, I was also cognizant of and tried to be sensitive to and be aware of the issue of the power differentials that existed between my student participants especially and me (Brenner, 2006) This was even more pronounced because our situation was the classic fit --- some of my participants were my immediate, direct students in class, so I was ultimately responsible for their final grades. I wrestled with this for a while before approaching them with study request/information. I promised both them and their parents that they could stop participating whenever they so decided and I adhered to all of the guidelines of the IRB to the letter. Brenner (2006) diffused the difference by interacting with her student participants in their natural setting. I used the focus group interview model for one of our interview sessions so the three who participated could feed off one another’s contribution during the conversation.

**Data Collection**

The data collection timeline for this dissertation comprises two aspects: the first, my pilot study, was from the fall of 2008 to spring of 2009; and that for
the dissertation itself was from December 2009 to March 2010. I received my final member check document on May 6, 2010, when Michelle handed me her member-checked copy.

**Participant-Observation**

I did not have special hours designated for observations (Emerson et al., 1995). Rather, I took them up on their invitation to me to come to their classroom whenever I needed and so endeavored to visit one class each, from both the morning and afternoon sessions. I chose to use recycled paper for my jottings (Emerson, et al., 1995) because I did not want to exude the impression of being too scholarly as might have been possible if I had gone into the classrooms with a notebook or yellow writing pad. Since I was on my campus, I did not get too hung up with noting the classroom configurations as much during my observations. While I did engage in some of that, because I knew that I could always go back to the classrooms to fill in those details, it freed me up to give most of my attention to what was actually happening in the classroom among the teachers, the students, and the lessons. This sense of “freedom” made it easier for me to more effectively write down verbatim conversations as they occurred. Being able to do that, however, does not mean that I successfully observed and recorded every other single detail of the occurrences during my repeat observations, since such a feat is virtually impossible given various intervening “interruptions,” as Agar (1996) notes:

> Whether it is your personality, your rules of social interaction, your cultural bias toward significant topics, your professional training, or something else, you do not go into the field as a passive recorder of objective data. During fieldwork, you are surrounded by a multitude of noises and activities. As you choose what to attend to and how
to interpret it, mental doors slam shut on the alternatives. Although some of your choices may be consciously made, others are forced by the weight of the personal and professional background that you bring to the field. (p. 98)

Atkinson and Hammersley (In Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 248) delineate four ways of being a research observer as stated by Gold (1958). They are: “the complete observer,” “observer as participant,” “participant as observer,” or “a complete participant.” My observation roles vacillated among being the observer as participant, participant as observer and complete observer based on the class and on whether or not I shared some of the same students with the teacher whom I was observing. In one of Mr. Essex’s classes, for example, one of our commonly shared students engaged me in a side conversation after I had given them a summary of my research and the reason why I was going to be in their class as often as I would (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2006; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Emerson, et al., 1995). He told me about being a GATE student himself when he was in elementary school, and, confirming what I already knew and the research shows: “You know, not everyone who comes here is dumb. I was in GATE once. I’m here because I got involved in too many fights at the other high school. I started lots of fights. I got beat up a lot. Some students are here because they didn’t have many friends, kept to themselves. We have some very smart kids here.” (2nd Oct. 2009) In another, the afternoon Introduction to technology class, another student actually invited me over to his work station by asking: “Ms. Mowoe, do you want to come help me?” And even though I did not understand what it was that they were working on, I went over to their workspace and watched as they continued working on the “construction” of the outer walls of
a home. Then there were those occasions when I was teacher/researcher/observer/participant in my own classroom.

This practice of determined participant observation resulted in what Agar (1996) calls the “Massive Overdetermination of Pattern” (MOP). Rather than being limited to the process/product method of quantitative research (Erickson, 1986), I was able to experience the cyclical manner of thinking by both the teachers and students and to understand the role of such interaction in their arrival of meaning in the context under observation (Erickson, 1986).

Interviews

Wolcott (p. 102) states: “In the simple act of asking, the fieldworker makes a 180-degree shift from observer to interlocutor, intruding into the scene by imposing onto the agenda what he or she wants to know.” I asked some of the questions during my interviews because I wanted and needed to know; others I raised from what I had observed on different occasions and about which I needed some clarification.

To various degrees, I experienced Spradley’s (1979) three steps of Apprehension: exploration; Cooperation: relationship based on mutual trust; and Participant: teaching the researcher in my process building of rapport between my participants and me. The last was very important in this endeavor because even though I was an “insider,” there were instances when I still needed the emic understanding (Spindler and Spindler, 1998) of my participants. Or, as Brenner (2006, p. 358) writes, quoting Malinowski, “Interviewing has been a staple of ethnographic research throughout most of the history of cultural anthropology,
often used in conjunction with participant observation to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25; emphasis in original)….. I needed to have my interviews resemble “conversation[s] with a purpose” (Patton, 1990), that of setting out to establish a search for “the joint construction of meaning” (Mischler, 1986; Erickson, 1986) between my participants and me, so that I could better arrive at “making the familiar strange” (Spindler & Spindler, 1998) since I had to try not to impose my particular understanding of events from my perspective as a colleague and teacher at my chosen site. In that vein, therefore, there were instances when I let my participants talk for as long as they wished (Spradley, 1979; Brenner, 2006) because they held the knowledge and the power (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992), but I also endeavored to ask semi-structured interview questions based on my literature review and observations.

As an “insider,” I fortunately did not have to search for a space on campus to conduct my interviews (Measor, 1985). There were the issues of time, the willingness of participants, and access (especially with students --- is it okay to take them out of class and interrupt their curriculum? Would it be better to conduct interviews during lunch?). The assistance of my colleagues was invaluable in the resolution of questions surrounding the location and time to conduct my interviews. Some of them agreed to send my student participants over during my prep time. It was actually one of my colleagues who came up with the alternative arrangement of splitting up my assigned students (with their assignments) among a few of them so I could either observe a class or interview
a teacher. I was also fortunate to have had some informal student interviews with my student participants, especially with Nate and Michelle, after school, as they waited to be picked up.

I experienced two different reactions to my use of my tape recorder with two interviewees. When my first interviewee, Julian, my former student, saw my recorder, he asked, “I’m going to be on tape?” I told him yes, because I wanted to ensure that I captured our conversation as precisely as possible, but that I could do without the tape if it was going to be a problem. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said it was okay. After that encounter, I decided to alert my second participant, Mr. Essex, the Career Technical Education teacher, via e-mail, that I will have a tape recorder with me when we met a few days later. He assured me that he was fine with it (Measor, 1985; Brenner, 2006). In fact, he was so comfortable with it that it was he who repeated his responses on two occasions after I thought our interview had concluded and turned off my recorder. He waited patiently as I turned it back on and spoke even louder after it was on.

Mrs. Peoples was my second research participant who expressed a little apprehension when she saw my tape recorder and omni directional mic. (Merriam, 1988; Fontana, 1994). I promised her that I would not use any information that might cause her any type of discomfort, going on to say, “You’re retiring anyway, what do you care?” Upon which she responded with laughter, “Things have a way of coming back to bite you!” I then reassured her that I would not do anything that will cause her harm, promising to turn off the recorder if we got to a subject that she did not want recorded. She was less apprehensive
after that, nodding her head “yes” with a smile. Interestingly enough, she apologized a few times for rambling during that particular interview!

However, even while using my tape recorder, also took a few notes during the interviews, and I tried to balance this necessity to take notes without giving the impression that I was not paying attention to their responses. Among other uses, I used the notes during my transcription to marry the tones of their voices to their body language (for example, smiles, bobbing from side-to-side, hands spread out to the sides, assumes the position of someone taking notes in class). I also noted parts of their responses to which I could ask immediate follow-up questions.

The amount of interview time that I spent with each participant varied from periods of 18 minute intervals to close to one and a half hours over a combined period of multiple days. The sessions included single sittings and follow-up questions as they arose during transcription and in the process of my coding of my data.

The breakdown is: Julian --- 25 minutes; Efren (twice) --- 50 minutes; Mr. Waverly --- 25 minutes, with informal interviews; Mr. Essex --- 1 hour 30 minutes, (thrice) with informal debriefing sessions after class; Mrs. Peoples --- 50 minutes (twice); Ms. Racho --- 40 minutes; Ronnie --- 50 minutes (twice); Randy --- 25 minutes; Michelle --- 30 minutes (twice); Focus group (Michelle, Nate and Randy) --- 25 minutes; additionally, Nate, Michelle and Michael (a student who could very well have been GATE but was not officially identified) spent a lot of time in my class after school.
Both participant observation and interviewing contributed greatly to my success in building rapport with my fellow teachers and student participants as I worked on this dissertation (Measor, 1985; Spradley, 1979; Brenner, 2006). Immediately after my first observation, Mr. Essex engaged me in a series of informal interview questions without any prompting from me. His openness during our conversation made me feel even better about our level of rapport.

Document Analysis

I examined an eclectic collection of documents as part of my data collection exercise. At the school site level, these data included copies of the Parent/Student Handbook, the master schedule of classes, the 2007 Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) self-study (this is the accreditation commission for some schools), copies of the School Accountability Report Card (SARC), copies of participating teachers’ syllabi, samples of students’ work, copies of the scope and sequence for ELA and CTE, and minutes from faculty and staff meetings. I also had access to students’ files in cabinets and electronically that provided me with detailed portraits of their attendance patterns, class performances, discipline histories, high stakes test scores, and their various reasons for becoming continuation high school students.

At the district level, in addition to attending two district organized fact-finding community meetings on issues ranging from multicultural awareness among staff to students’ test scores to the school district’s budget, I also had some of the documents, and copies of the district’s annual GATE conference flyers and programs. For the teaching profession, I read publications by the
National Education Association (NEA) and California Teachers Association (CTA). The city clerk’s provided the city’s demographic and U.S. census data. I also examined and mined my field notes and dissertation/research journal for valuable data from both my participants and my personal thoughts while I was out in the field.

**Researcher Journal**
I used my journal to record my thoughts and impressions immediately after conducting interviews and participant observations. It was also beneficial as part of a preliminary analysis of my data.

**Data Analysis**
I did not wait until the end of my data gathering endeavor to start the analysis of my data. Rather, I commenced a rudimentary analysis (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992) of my empirical data simultaneously with the data collection process right from the time of my pilot study, looking for themes and patterns to place within emerging categories. As they emerged, based on my theoretical frameworks and research questions (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), I immediately started coding, using the emerging patterns as sources for both my pilot study and dissertation research data analyses.

I employed quasi-quantitative analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) for coding students’ degrees of absences by manually counting the number of days each student was absent per quarter and using mathematical equation to compute the percentage.

I chose to do my own transcriptions of all the participants’ interviews without taking any shortcuts in order to familiarize myself with my data (Patianida
While this decision proved to be rather time-consuming and painfully tedious, it was also less expensive and provided me with an in-depth understanding of my data because I typed it all out (Merriam, 1988; Patianida & Garman, 1999). This decision proved to be invaluable for the storage and retrieval of my data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), because as I transcribed, analytic questions were raised that I either took up with my participants again in informal conversations or incorporated into our next interview, for those with whom I had multiple sessions. It also made it much easier for me to conduct early cross-referencing of my literature review and clued me in to the possible need of collecting more interview data as I transcribed and reread the transcripts and continued with the analysis when I gave the participants copies of our interviews as part of member checks. I reworked their editorial choices, most of which were related to their use of such conversational fillers as “hmmm,” into my final representations of our meetings.

I made multiple copies of my transcribed interviews and field notes so I could read them in their entirety against the emerging codes that surfaced during my data gathering and transcription processes. I used certain recurring phrases in the interviews to establish the various categories that emerged during the data collection (Merriam, 1988) and coding sections of the research. As analytic patterns thickened, I made comparative analytic notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) to help strengthen the categories.

I noted these emerging themes with different-colored markers on the margins of my computer paper for easier retrieval (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).
The most popular recurring theme was the perception of this continuation high school, by both students and teachers, as a safety net, as described by the research. While they did not expressly use that description, I was able to code phrases such as “small community,” “teachers know your name,” “get more help with assignments,” under that category. I followed the same scheme in deducing all of the other themes that I discuss in the next chapter. Upon completion of my read-throughs, I used the color-coded sections to cut and paste corresponding data into their more plausible categories on my computer. I still, however, added/deleted/or moved data as my interpretations changed or the usage of my data overlapped within the categories.

**Building Rapport**

Prior to the commencement of my dissertation study, as part of my duties as the campus GATE coordinator, I asked for and received the list of GATE students who were enrolled in our program for the 2009-2010 academic year. Out of the thirteen students listed, five of them were in some of my classes and I had very good rapport with three of them, but not as identified GATE students and not with them knowing that I was the GATE coordinator.

The rapport developed organically with the two who became the main focus of this aspect of my research: Michelle and Nate. Michelle got into the habit of staying behind after school to talk about a variety of issues, ranging from her family to her participation in the restaurant occupations section of the ROP program. Nate often came in just before class started in the morning or stayed a little later after school to discuss questions he had regarding our curriculum of
And that was all we did for a few weeks. I was a little hesitant in trying to broach the subject of my research because I did not want them to shut down. But all of my students were aware of the fact that I was working on a major project for my school. However, the longer I put off specifically telling Michelle and Nate, the more I felt that they might think I was merely leading them on so I could get them to trust me before asking them to participate in my research. But the truth was that I had no idea about their GATE designation until I received the list from our district's GATE office.

The ease with which my student participants appeared to accept their roles in my research contributed a great deal to lifting some of the apprehensions I held at the beginning regarding the manner of response I would get from them. This was displayed mostly in their impatience at the seemingly “slow” pace (between one and two weeks) of the official start of the interviews once I notified them. We had to wait for their parents' returned responses. Michelle wanted me to print a second copy of the IRB letter and consent form for her to hand deliver it to her parents because the original one I sent went to her aunt’s home and had not been delivered to her parents. I had to explain to her that everything had to proceed through a tightly set research protocol, especially since it involved my students. She responded with: “But we were the ones who said ‘yes.’ That’s a stupid procedure.” And Randy wanted me to just pick up the phone and secure her consent as soon as I told him. But I made us all wait until I received their parents' signed consent forms in the mail.
Establishing rapport with my teacher colleagues was as uneventful as it had been with my students, and they showed this by inviting me to stop by their classrooms and/or office whenever I needed to do so.

**Ethical Considerations**

Given the myriad feelings of uncertainty and apprehension that I experienced in the course of trying to obtain the necessary permission from all of the parties involved, I could almost appreciate Michelle’s expressed sentiment. It was one, however, that as a researcher, I had to balance against some of the real life cases of ethical abuses that have unfortunately accompanied some research. Stake (1994) notes that “the value of the best research is not likely to outweigh injury to a person exposed,” and that “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world” (In Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 244). Fontana and Frey (In Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) underscore the absolute need to “protect participants’ wishes and privacy” (p. 372), delineating the process into three distinct parts of “informed consent” (consent received from the subject after he or she has been carefully and truthfully informed about the research), right to privacy (protecting the identity of the subject) and protection from harm (physical, emotional, or any other kind” (p. 372), as does Christians (In Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). And Marshall and Rossman (1995) view “ethical considerations as a critical criterion against which to judge research strategies.” Brenner (2006), for her part, lists five specific requirements that some institutions ask their researchers to fulfill before being granted Institutional Review Board (IRB) authorization. And Lincoln (2005) acknowledges the practice, by classroom teachers, of diligently seeking IRB permission before embarking on any type of
classroom and/or student-centered research. I, therefore, followed the more ethically established precedent.

In addition to sending completed required forms for the IRB with a copy of my proposal, I had to take the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), an online research ethics review course that has been implemented by a collection of research universities. Divided into approximately 16 sections that include such topics as History and Ethical Principles, Defining Research with Human Subjects, Privacy and Confidentiality, it also had comprehension questions of between two and six in number that had to be passed by at least 80%. I completed them in three sessions of approximately 2 ½ hour blocks.

Finally, I assigned pseudonyms to all of my research participants, except for Billy Bob who chose his.

**Reciprocity**

Reciprocity is an aspect of qualitative research especially that is strongly advised because of the great demands that are made on those participants but for whose assistance the researcher would not have been able to successfully carry out the research (Roseman and Marshall, 1995). A persistent question that plagues qualitative research is that of reciprocity (Baca-Zinn, 1979; Behar, 1996). How does one balance the fact that the information provided by one’s participants will result in possible promotion or definite professional growth for the research, while the participants might be left in the same condition in which they were originally met? One possible way of addressing this is that stated by McLaren & Kinchloe (2005) about not forgetting about the poor communities where one conducted research, but to teach them how to continue to apply
praxis in their lives by trying to change their situation (catalytic validity –Lather, p. 324), giving the researched the tools they will need to change their current situation/reality for the better. For my student participants in particular, they moved on academically. I am still a teacher and a member of the community and continue to expose my students to different ways of understanding our world in all of its ramifications (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 2006; Banks, 2007).

Additionally, I gave my primary research colleagues, Julian, Efren, Ronnie, Randy and Michelle gift certificates to Target worth between $20 and $25. For Nate, rather than a gift certificate, I chose to buy him a sturdy shoulder bag/computer case for his future career in college. I also gave Michelle my gently used satchel bag from my last few years at Ohio State. I knew that Michelle and Nate needed those bags from some of the after school informal meetings we had had during the course of the year. Additionally, I was able to lend them my support in their receipt of some monetary scholarships.

**Trustworthiness**

One way for qualitative researchers to try to establish trustworthiness in their collected interview data especially is to ensure that good rapport is established between him/her and the informants so they will be more likely to give truthful accounts to the researcher and not just be putting him/her “put off” (Measor, 1985). I presented the manner in which I developed rapport between my student and teacher/counselor participants above.

My conducted interviews, together with my other data collection methods of participant observation and document analysis already discussed above,
made it possible for me to triangulate my data gathering methods to enhance the validity of the data collected (Lincoln and Guba, 1990).

I also conducted member checks with all of my participants. I provided them with copies of their transcribed interviews in order to ensure that my emerging interpretations were capturing their intended meanings. I also asked that they make whatever additions and/or deletions they so desired. Michelle had actually specifically asked me to “make me look awesomely intelligent” on paper. I did not get any complaints from her when she did her two checks on her interviews. Neither did most of the other participants. Ms. Racho asked that I “clean up” some of her “hums” and “emms” in my final document, Mr. Waverly was a little surprised by the number of “ehhh” in his responses, and Ronnie chose to delete an intensified description that was related to some of the reasons why his school attendance had been so abysmal in 9th grade.

Additionally, as I read through and critically analyzed my corpus of collected data so I could distinguish the themes, I also simultaneously looked for possible disconfirming data.

Finally, I have interspersed the entire document with excerpts of my participants’ own words alongside my interpretations as a way for them to “speak for themselves.”
CHAPTER 4

UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED AND TALENTED MINORITY STUDENTS IN A CONTINUATION EDUCATION SETTING: AN INTERPRETATIVE EXPLORATION OF SOME CLASSROOMS AND THE ACCOMPANYING FINDINGS

This chapter comprises two sections. In the first section I give a snapshot of the school and community in accordance with the advice by Goetz and LaCompte that

Whatever the unit of study – students, schools, learning, curriculum, informal education – an ethnographic case study of a junior high school, for example, would take into account the community at large and its cultural context. The history of the neighborhood, socio-economic factors, the community’s racial and ethnic makeup, the attitudes of parents, residents, and school officials toward education – all would be important components of this ethnographic case study. (Merriam, 1988, p. 24)

Section two provides detailed analyses of my research findings.

The city/community

The school’s site is situated in a city that comprises the area of southern California referred to as the Inland Empire. Its closest cities on Interstate 10 are San Bernardino and Fontana. The 2005 population numbered around 102,000, but it is estimated that there has been a significant decrease since then due to the recent global economic downturn that has resulted in home foreclosures. Housing styles range from apartment complexes to reasonably priced affordable
high-end homes. It is effectively divided into two sections: the older south end and the newer north end. The south was the original settlement that comprised the entire city. The south end is currently the hub of everyday economic activities. It has most of the grocery stores: Ralph’s, Stater Brothers, Food for Less, the city’s only post office, the main fire station, a movie theatre, mid-level and fast food restaurants, the city’s council chambers and civic center, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, churches (both storefront and one that’s more strongly established, with its own K-6 grade educational system), two of the three high schools, three of the five middle schools, and fifteen of the eighteen elementary schools. The north end, on the other hand, is more residential in zoning structure, with the newest of the three high schools, opened in the 2004/05 academic year.

The community’s racial/ethnic makeup closely parallels that of its schools. In 2005, it was Hispanic: 63%; African American: 28%; Caucasian: 7%; and Other: 2%. The school district is the major employer in the city. The city derives most of its revenue from light manufacturing companies; long-term contracts with national chain stores such as Target, Staples, and Toys “R” Us that operate warehouses in the city, and from retail businesses of various interests and sizes.

The 2000 Census data notes the following about the city in comparison with the state of California’s and U.S. populations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Rubicon Number</th>
<th>CA Number 47,766</th>
<th>U.S. Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population 25 and older</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduates (includes equivalency)</td>
<td>13,198</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, or associate’s degree</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>3,039</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s, professional or doctorate degree</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population 3 years and over enrolled in school</td>
<td>32,932</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool and kindergarten</td>
<td>3,201</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 1-12</td>
<td>24,777</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>4,954</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census; ePodunk

The School

The school was founded in 1981. It currently shares its campus space with the independent study high school, the Adult Education Program, the Regional Occupation Program (ROP), the District’s health clinic, and district child care center. The idea behind having such a concentration of programs on one site was to help in alleviating possible transportation problems in the delivery of these services that are integral to the successful fulfillment of the educational goals of the district’s students, especially those of the teenage parents. In addition to the almost one-stop health service for these parents and their infant children, the district provides bus transportation. The 2008-09 academic year had about 350 students; 2009-2010 year, 332 students; and the 2010-2011 year had 393 students registered prior to the start of the year in August. A school day comprises two sessions: Morning Session: 8:00 AM -11:00 AM, and the Afternoon Session: 11:45 AM – 2:45 PM.

Although some students opt for attendance at this site (their desire to be away from the distracting influences of their friends, for example), the most

http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/educLevel.php?locIndex=10758
common type of students are those who are deficient in credits for a variety of reasons. As such, teachers endeavor to be as academically flexible in their curricular delivery as possible. Thus, students may earn additional credits through such avenues as “individual contracts, concurrent enrollment at a junior/community college, independent study with teachers, the A+ program (a self-guided, self-paced computer-based credit recovery program) and/or by doing extra homework” (2010 WASC Midterm Report). A student must be 16 years old to be admitted here. They get referred through a variety of ways: from the counseling offices of their comprehensive high schools; from the School Attendance Review Board (SARB); from the Child, Attendance and Welfare Office; or from other continuation schools outside the district. And although the school’s educational curriculum closely parallels that of the three comprehensive high schools in that our course delivery is guided by the same scope and sequence guidelines, the pedagogical delivery varies from slow to fast-paced to better accommodate the vast difference in our population. The same district adopted textbooks that are used at the comprehensive high schools are also used at this site.

Like the local community, the school’s largest population is Spanish-speaking, with designated ranges of English comprehension from 1-5, 5 being the most fluent English speaker. The number of students identified English Language Learners (ELL) have steadily increased from 80 in 2006/07 to 88 in 2007/08 to 110 in 2009/10 (38.6%, 44.6%, 51%, respectively). The 2008-09 statistical breakdown by ethnic group was as follows: African American:15.7%;
American Indian: 0%; Asian: 0%; Caucasian: 5.2%; Filipino: 0%; Hispanic or Latino: 77.2%; Pacific Islander: 1.1% and Other: 0.7%.

There are 13 teachers who teach such subjects as Biology, Integrated Science, General math, Algebra 1, Intro to business, computer applications, CNC machining, Introduction to Technology, Spanish 1, Fine Arts, Health, Insight English, U.S. History, Government, Economics, World History, English, PE, Geometry. The staff’s ethnic breakdown for the 2009-10 academic year was 33% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 39% Caucasian, 19% black/African-American/Creole, with 62% female and 38% male.

The school’s current demographics show an increase in both the English Language Learners population and in those who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. In contrast with the 1999/2000 academic year when 41.48% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, 2005/2006 had 61% on free and 9% on reduced lunch programs.

Unlike some other situations where school districts treat their continuation schools like step-children by housing them in run-down facilities (McDermott and Varenne, 1999; Knoeppel, 2002), or placing them “next to harmful locations like the school bus yards” (Ms. Racho, Interview, May 20, 2009), this site is one of the best kept schools in this district.

**Some school functions**

**Movie Night**

Organized by the school’s Leadership team, this activity brings community members onto the campus on chosen screening evenings. The
movies are either shown on the quad area or in a large multipurpose room.
It is such a popular event that some students who are not even directly
responsible for the evening stop by just to “hang out.” Students run
the “concession” stands where they sell hotdogs, chips, soda, and water.
Some of the movies shown included The Little Rascals and The
Nightmare Before Christmas.

Campus visits to surrounding community colleges
On December 4th and 11th, 2008, the entire school, both sessions, went on
fieldtrips to Valley College and Chaffey College. These were not just merely a
fieldtrips, but an important part of their lives since a community college will most
probably be the next step in their educational trajectory (Was so for Nate and
Michelle), since community colleges are the fastest and least expensive avenues
for some minority students to earn marketable skills for better futures (TIME,
December 6, 2010).

At Valley College, the students who went in the morning were able to visit
areas such as the automotive repair shop, the local branch of the National Public
Radio station, the hanger for the building of body frames for airplanes, a larger,
more detailed version of a CNC classroom, the art gallery, and a live college
classroom in progress. The P.M. students went to the admissions office, the
library, the tutoring and public computer center, the athletic field, the Greek
amphitheater, constructed in the form of a proscenium, and the campus
bookstore. At the end of both sessions, students were given from the Valley
College Outreach and Recruitment Office to complete and have our school
return. They, in turn, will send packets of additional information to those students who completed the postcards.

**The classroom settings**

**Mr. Essex, Career Technical Education (CTE)**

The one thing that is automatically noticeable as one walks into the classroom is the configuration. Unlike what might be more common, with desks and chairs arranged in rows facing certain directions, there are eight 18’ by 18” tables, each of which sits three students. There is a smart board behind the teacher’s desk. On one side of the room are four Dell computers. Opposite the smart board, in front of the longer stretch of wall is a cabinet with informational flyers and work spaces. The breakdown of the students was twenty-two males and one female. There were four students working on the four computers on the west side of the classroom that faces the quad area. In front of the opposite side of that wall are two CNC machines.

**Mr. Waverly, PE**

There are no desks in this classroom. It looks more like a mini gym, with a large selection of workout equipments. There are two stacks of ten piece 3” by 4” lockers for students who want to change from their street shoes and clothing into workout attire. There is a hanging banner of Dr. King’s “I have a Dream” speech. There is a poster section a variety of posters, including District notices, one of a frog with an open book with the phrase “Read It” all over its border; another that says, “Some studies suggest teens who choose milk instead of
sugary drinks tend to be leaner, plus the protein helps build muscle.” --- Body by Milk.com; another with the following message:

If you think you are beaten, you are
If you think you dare not, you don’t
If you would like to win, but think you can’t it’s almost a cinch you won’t.

On one wall are nine pictures of how to use weights. Next to it is a poster of the human skeletal and muscular systems. A “Have you got Milk?” campaign poster of Dwight Howard, a member of the Miami Heat Basketball team, with the inscription “Bounce back. Milk is a great choice after exercise, with protein to help build muscle and a unique mix of nutrients to refuel. Body by Milk.” A Win by USA Body by Milk Poster of five female athletes: Leslie Osborne --- soccer, Allyson Felix --- track, Natasha Kai --- soccer, Maritza Correia --- swimming, and Cat Osterman --- Women’s softball. Another poster of a puppy wearing heart-shaped glasses, and the words: “Acceptance is seeing with your heart, not with your eyes.” There is also a poster with the nuggets of wisdom on how to succeed in life by the late legendary basketball coach of the University of California, Los Angeles, John Wooden.

**Competitive Greatness:**

Poise  Confidence  Condition  Skill  Team Spirit

Self-Control  Alertness  Initiative

Intensiveness  Industriousness  Friendship

Loyalty  Cooperation  Enthusiasm

By the door are two grocery shopping carts that are used as storage: one for the different collection of balls for the different sports --- basketball, soccer,
baseball; another one contains sportsball bats. On one table is placed students’ textbooks. On the wall behind Mr. Waverly’s desk is a plaque commemorating his nomination as one of the District’s 2008 Educators of the Year.

Racho, U.S. History, Wednesday, May 20, 2009

At one end of the classroom is a round table and four chairs at which sits three students. There are two big cabinets at the far wall of the room on which textbooks are stacked. The classroom seating is desks placed horizontally by three placed vertically, facing the whiteboard. Above the whiteboard are posters of Rosa Parks, Dr. King, President Kennedy, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Albert Einstein, Amelia Earhart, Miles Davis, maps of the U.S. and of the world, one poster with the title “Electoral College Results.” At the top of the whiteboard are the standards and objectives to be covered in the unit of study. In a 4’ by 5’ rectangular box is the message “Progress Reports go out on Monday, April 20, 2009,” in blue dry erase whiteboard marker pens.

There is a globe of the world on overhead projector stand, World Wildlife Foundation sticker on wall. On the opposite side of the whiteboard are two 6’ by 6’ blue and yellow paper with colored squared borders. Each one has two 8’ by 10’ pictures of outstanding students, with samples of students’ assignments pinned on the other open spaces. A few inches from them is a poster with the question, “Are you on Target?” There are circles with the designations Freshman, Sophomore, Juniors and Seniors and the advice “Check it out with your counselor. To the right of that is another card: Rules for Using School Computers, TRAC cards. On the south side of the room, her space, is another 6’
by 6’ border, but on this one are copies of the Williams Court Settlement in both English and Spanish. (What is the Williams’s Court Settlement?) Immediately behind her are “Thank you” cards, phone, district info., and a large trash can by the main entrance door.

Mr. Dominguez, Spanish class --- Wednesday, March 10, 2010

As soon as I appear at his door, Mr. Dominguez waves me in to go into his classroom. His classroom has a multicultural ambience with masks, dolls from various South American countries, and posters on the walls. There were Eight students: six males, two females: one TA (Michelle), four males (Nate is one of them) who are helping him move his belongings because Mr. Dominguez was in the process of changing classrooms at the time of this observation. On an ELMO projector is Spanish on software with the exercises to the left and pictures of the descriptions to the right. The students were working on Expressions and Impressions, in Spanish --- for example, por favor, gracias, de nada, no hay problema, bueno, etc., which mean please, thank you, not at all, no problem, good, respectively. Mr. Dominguez uses gestures to aid students’ comprehension during whole class direct instruction. Each student says all of the vocabulary words on the list as a set. They then moved on to the names for countries, then to cognates: autobus (automobile in English), banco (bank in English). At about 9:58: Mr. Diaz tells the students: “Okay, now go with a partner and translate, or to the computer.”

Ronnie sits with another student to translate from his sheet. Two female students sit together to work as a pair; three male students move over to the
computers and put on their headphones. I walk over to Steve, one of the students with the headphones. He directs me to one of the other ones (Tyree) because he has the voice recognition program. I put it on and say the words down the list. I am graded on a scale that moves from the left (tourist) to the right (native). About 10 minutes later, Mr. Diaz moves Ronnie over to join him and the other two female students for more oral practice, and sends the other male student who was with Ronnie to the computer to work on the computer to work on individual pronunciation. He then walks over after class and hands me a copy of his handout.

At the end of the period, he tells me that some students have difficulty because the Spanish in the class is Castilian, the "higher/more prestigious type of Spanish." (During one of our interview sessions, Ronnie said he was having problems in that class because the type of Spanish spoken was different from the one he knows.)

At various stages in this class, just like in Mr. Essex’s, I was both an observer and a participant.

**Physical description of researcher’s classroom**

My classroom is one of the eight classes that comprise the D-wing of classes on my campus. It is right in the middle, directly opposite the front gate entrance. There are twenty-four desks, arranged 10 on the left and 14 on the right facing each other with the teacher’s desk and the white board in the middle on opposite ends. Behind the teacher’s desk are plaques from when I was nominated as one of five District Educators of the Year by my union in 2002, a
framed piece of appreciation card from students to all teachers and staff celebrating Day of the Teacher in 2007, pictures of graduated students and some of their babies, pictures of me from vacation sites, such as New York’s Times Square, the outdoor drama Tecumseh in Chillicothe, OH, the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabbazz Cultural Center in NYC. On the other walls are posters of Paul Robeson in his Othello costume, one of Eleanor Roosevelt with the quote: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent,” one of Bob Marley with no props that was given to me by one of my former students whose gifting was on the condition that I put it up just like the others in my classroom, a space of display of samples of students’ work, above the whiteboard are posters of the of the different punctuation signs. Below the posters and samples are four Dell computers on long, slim tables and a shelf of books. To the right of the whiteboard is another shelf, but this one has copies of the Prentice Hall texts that are rotated among 9-12 grades each quarter. To the right of the bookcase are two large cabinets in which I store textbooks when they are not in use. On the door of the cabinet is a full page copy of a Columbus, OH Dispatch newspaper write-up of the adoption of Cesar Chavez’s birthday as a state holiday in Ohio. It is a detailed rendering of his struggle for better working conditions for migrant workers, including his fasts, strikes, etc. Then we get to the side of the classroom that faces the front of the school, that has windows. There are posters, in English and Spanish, assuring parents and guardians that their children have qualified teachers in their classrooms. Then there’s the door. To the right of the door is a section of the wall that is used to highlight the very
impressive achievements of one of my 2005/06 students. There is an 8’ by 10’ picture of her face, below that are printouts of her CAHSEE scores in ELA, 392 and math, 384. (They are remarkable because she took both tests for the first time a few weeks after she discovered that she would be eligible to take them.) Below her scores is a sample comparison/contrast essay she wrote on Rudolfo Anaya’s “A Celebration of Grandfathers” and *Tuesdays with Morrie*. She not only presented a detailed analysis of the two works, but went further to draw a personal connection between them and her own life and that of her grandmother, successfully demonstrating the tenets of Bloom’s taxonomy and her understanding of the GATE strategies of Depth and Complexity. She essentially captured the essence of what I strive to accomplish as a teacher, one especially, at a continuation high school site.

**The Research Findings --- The context**

The guiding research questions for this dissertation were:

1.) How do students understand/interpret their status of gifted and talented?, and 2.) What does it mean to be a minority GATE student in a continuation high school setting? What do minority gifted students make of continuation education, and what does it make of them?

In order to effectively address those questions, I included in this data analysis section combined data from both the pilot study and dissertation research that I obtained from participating minority GATE students, five teachers including myself, and the counselor. Although there were seven students in all, for this study, I focus on two students, Michelle and Nate. They are the central focus of analysis and I integrate, where necessary, observations and interview comments
from other participants to enhance aspects of the research (Merriam, 1988). I also selectively utilize the teacher data in this study. While I included myself as one of the teacher participants because this topic was implemented because I believed there was a problem to be explored (Merriam, 1988; Rossman, 2005), in order to better assist me to serve the needs of my students, it is not strictly in the fashion of action research. The thoughts and feelings of some of my other colleagues were sought, as they assisted me in gaining a better comprehensive picture of what we do at our continuation education site. Therefore, rather than strictly presenting my own personal impression for detailed study, the thoughts of my colleagues during our interview sessions and analysis of my observations of their classes were intermingled with the data of the students in this study and the guiding research questions.

Four (4) major themes emerged during the data coding process.

1. Finding one revealed that most of the participants consider continuation education programs as safety nets. While they might not have used the specific terminology, their description of the actual manifestation of life at a continuation high school site said as much. The safety net belief stems from the flexibility that accompanies curriculum completion in such areas as the delivery of the scope and sequence guidelines, making accommodations for students’ absences, and less rigidity on some NCLB mandates;

2. Finding two revealed the importance of some type of relationship between teachers and students and among students;
3. Finding three revealed a lack of recognition of GATE students and their characteristics among teachers and strong ambivalence about such designation among some students; and

4. Finding four revealed the critical importance of the family’s role and/or circumstances.

These four themes resulted from a combination of the literature review, observations, interviews, and document analysis.

4.1. **Continuation High Schools as Safety Nets**

As noted in chapter 2, safety net programs are designed to meet the needs of students that are not “well-served by large, inflexible, comprehensive high schools…. It is geared to meet the intellectual and social needs of those that the mainstream schools cannot or will not help…. It meets with some measure of success in reengaging students” (Legislative Analyst Office, California, 2007). They provide the type of flexibility that most of these students need.

As I listened to students and teachers, it became apparent to me that they recognized this function of continuation education, though they did not specifically refer to it as such. Instead the terminology they used, such as, “the benefits of smaller class sizes” and “the school feels like a small community,” indicated that they thought this about continuation education. Their various interview descriptions of classroom realities and functions established that that was what they were alluding to. I present the individual themes on flexibility in the following subdivided categories.
4.1.1. Continuation high schools as safety nets: Flexibility in curriculum completion: Homework

Unlike at the comprehensive high schools where homework is a necessary component of students’ grades, there is more flexibility at our continuation site with regard to how this is done. Homework is not as integral a part of students’ grades, a reality that might seem foreign to incoming students that it is clearly stated in the student/parent handbook. It is usually assigned in situations where students need to make up absences, for example. While it is common practice for comprehensive high school teachers to assign homework in order to ensure that students would be able to keep up with the pace of the curriculum, for some students, such a requirement was detrimental to their progress, as two of my research participants explained during a focus group interview session (November 16, 2009). Nate said, “Well, I always listened in class. I always paid attention in class; it was homework that I had problems. Because I’d pass all the tests in all of my classes, but homework would be like 46% of the grade.” Michelle shared a similar homework experience, because although she “listened to the teachers” and “could pass all the tests,” the assigned weight of homework in final grades were problematic. Describing one of her grades in a math class, she explained: “The only reason I got an “A,” you know, for that semester, you know, was because he didn’t give homework. I got “A” on the test.” To which Nate interjected with “That’s, that’s the same thing for me. I did most of the classwork, but homework?” Though not specifically commenting on homework assignments, Ronnie liked the increased number of opportunities he got in completing his assignments at Mihigh:
Here, it’s easier for me here. At the regular high school they give you a lot more work. They don’t give you more chances to turn in your work late. You have to do it on time. You have to do it exactly, move on. But here they give you a lot more chances, ehh, and teachers help you a lot more. Less students most of the time in the classroom. They know you more by your names. Less students [than] in the regular high school. (Interview, January 6th, 2010)

Nate, Michelle and Ronnie all alluded to the role that the lack of a little more flexibility played in their inability to cope with the established/dictated demands of the curriculum accomplishment at the regular high school setting. The immediacy of the continuation high school setting makes teachers better able to offer immediate assistance in the classroom as needed. Therefore there is no need for homework where students might have to struggle through assignments alone. As a result, students at our school do not feel inundated almost to the point of debilitating panic or utter frustration (Race to Nowhere, 2010).

Nate’s chronic inability to follow through with his homework assignments at the comprehensive high school was similar to what he experienced when he switched into an independent study program. Instead of concentrating on his assignments while he was there, he almost always found something else to do. It was actually from that program that he came to our continuation site. The main reason given by his mother for his transfer to our site was his inability to successfully complete his weekly assignments as was required in that program as an independent study alternative where students receive a week’s worth of assignment to complete at home. While this system is technically different from the homework that students get as part of the curriculum at the comprehensive
high school, the reality that they have to work at home does still remain.

However, while the comprehensive high school homework assignment accounts for a portion of their final grade, this is 100 percent of their grade. The students work on their assigned weekly curriculum while at home and meet with their teacher for 30-minute weekly appointments. While some students do thrive within that structure, others, like Nate, do not, as he volunteered:

Oh, Mr. ----- told me, he told me, “You should be spending 12 hours in a week doing homework.” But I got to the point where I’d put it off until the last day, and I had to be there at a certain time and did it all in like two hours. (Focus group interview, November 16, 2010)

A practice which was an exact replica of what Michelle did, as she also admitted:

That’s what I did! I waited until the last twelve hours to do; apparently, it’s 36 hours …. 30 hours of homework that you’re supposed to have? I waited until Thursday and my appointment was on Friday (Laughs). I had to do all that work in one day [because] work at home does not want to be done by me. (Focus group interview, November 16, 2010)

While Michelle does not elaborate on her homework assignments, she notes that she received an “A” in her Algebra 1 class only because the teacher did not require homework. Thus indicating the ways in which homework might have compromised grades in her other classes. Michelle and Nate, like other GATE underachieving students, could also have hated homework because they lacked the necessary assistance they might have needed to successfully complete them. In *Race to Nowhere* (2010), we are shown how some fairly affluent parents invested huge hours of their families’ time to get their children to complete their homework assignments. However, in some instances, even with such dedication, some families still could not accomplish the tasks. Unlike in
Admittedly, the district does operate a Parent Institute where parents are taught and encouraged to offer as much support as they can to their children. But this program can only admit as many as 20 parents for ten week periods and given the city’s demographics, a lot more parents need to have access to such a program. Such a realization is made even more cogent when it is noted that this is the only district with such a program in the surrounding area. A neighbor of mine who graduated from the first ten-week session mused, after conducting extensive Internet searches and finding none like it near us, that it is possible that ours is the only district with such a program because we are the only ones who need it. I nodded my head in agreement and marveled at the uncanny coincidence that that was the exact thought that had crossed my mind as soon as she voiced the result of her futile search. The next sub-category is an immediate possible example of the assumption that parents in this district do not have as many resources to help their children with some of their homework.

4.1.2. Continuation high schools as safety nets: Scope and sequence (curriculum pacing guide) applied less rigidly

Because of the expectation that as much of the curriculum must be covered at the comprehensive high school sites, the main focus is on getting as much accomplished as possible rather than on whether or not the students do understand what it is that they are being taught.
An illustration from the District’s ELA 12P (regular English language arts class at the comprehensive high schools) scope and sequence (pacing guide) warrants this assertion (Erickson, 1986). If followed as written, it is recommended that teachers cover, in one week, one of the following: *Beowulf*, sections from *The Iliad*, sections from *The Canterbury Tales*, sections from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, sections from *Morte ‘d Arthur*, and parts of *The Sword in the Stone* (novel).

For *Beowulf* (which I chose to teach), that can be achieved if all a teacher does is read the pages in the textbook and have the students complete the Review and Assess questions that accompany the selection. Though these questions do include some that are a little more challenging, with questions that covered recall, analyses, synthesis, support, and cultural connection, overall, they are not comprehensively critically advanced enough in and of themselves to help the students draw upon their critical analysis and synthesizing skills. The challenge was how to engage students who are already disengaged from the learning process in this lovely, thrilling, exciting medieval gem of world literature.

The pedagogical delivery style suggested on the form used in administering teachers’ evaluation lists method of delivery based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. In teaching this unit, I combined both the district’s standard format for lesson planning with my understanding of Specially Designed Academic Instruction In English (SDAIE) strategies that is used for English Language Learning (ELL) students and GATE strategies to cater to the needs of students at both ends of the educational/intellectual spectrum. Since Nate, Michelle and Randy had the
same English 12 (British Literature) class, the lesson design for its implementation will be used to demonstrate the practical use of this pedagogical style.

Following are the California standards that we are supposed to cover in this Beowulf unit of study.

**Lesson Objectives and CA Correlations**

**Reading 2.5**
Analyze an author’s implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

**Reading 3.2**
Analyze the way a theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, using textual evidence to support the claim.

**Reading 3.6**
Analyze ways in which authors through the centuries have used archetypes drawn from myth and tradition in literature, film, political speeches, and religious writings.

**Literary Analysis:** The Epic  R 3.1

**Connecting Literary Elements:** The Legendary Hero  R 3.6

To understand and apply appropriate writing and research strategies:

Writing Lesson: Response to Criticism W 1.3

**Learning Objectives**
Students will learn to analyze the struggle between good and evil through the literary elements of epic and allegory

(Source: Prentice Hall, 12th Grade Literature Text, 2002.)

We started with (Into) Activities: Frontloading, Anticipatory Set, Vocabulary, Preview, Access Prior Knowledge. For two days, we made whole class trips to the computer lab to conduct research to establish the Biblical connections in the text; we also used the Bible. My announcement that we were going to conduct background research in the Bible raised comments various comments from some of my students. Their questions are in regular font, followed by my responses in italics. “But we’re not supposed to read the Bible in school!” “There’s no way you can get through English 11 and 12 without referencing the Bible. We are going to use it more as research than as a means
of proselytizing.” “What if our parents don’t agree?” “Explain to them why we need to do it.” “I’m a Jew.” “I’m a Muslim.” “My religion doesn’t allow me to read the Bible.” “Then you don’t have to do it.” “My teacher said it’s a waste of time; that he did not understand why he had to teach it.” (This student had transferred from a comprehensive high school so as to try to catch up on her credits.)

“You’re going to have an entirely different experience in this class.” Since I have more flexibility with my implementation of the scope and sequence, I decided to teach this unit a little later in the year.

We spent two days in the computer lab. At the end of the first day, a student asks me: “Ms. Mowoe, is this true? I thought they said we came from monkeys?” I explain to her that that is what science says. What she has just read is the Biblical explanation. I was not telling her which version to believe. All I wanted was for her to read the passages and note the information for our reading of Beowulf.

As we continued our research on the second day, another student (as he read one of the passages relating the Passover ceremony that Christ had with his disciples in the upper room, asks): Passover? I thought that was only celebrated by Jews! Jesus was a Jew? I thought he was a Christian!” I ask him to keep reading and that we will discuss assumption when we got back to class after our research.

Those students who voiced concern about reading the Bible in school were partially right in raising the issue. However, the Bible can be used in school as a literary work, not for religious purposes, when it is pertinent to the subject
under study, as this was. And as the introductory part of *Beowulf* clearly states, this was a piece of literature that has both pagan and Christian influences. In order for my students to truly appreciate the theme, they had to be exposed to the origins of the text --- the Bible, though not with me specifically teaching them about it. And some of the questions that were raised in the course of our research are testimony to how important it was for us to have participated in the Bible research. The majority of my students, it turned out, needed to possess the Bible references as prior knowledge in order to better understand and interpret the poem *Beowulf*. These needed detours are precisely what Nate and Michelle mentioned earlier when they were discussing the hindrance that the stipulation of homework as a larger percentage of their final grade. By taking the time to deal with students’ knowledge gaps and making connections to content their experiences at our continuation site is more meaningful because we have the immediacy of addressing students’ needs, thereby eliminating the possible rise of feelings of frustration/failure leading to lack of motivation.

I had to take my students from where they were (Birdsall and Correa, 2007; Hebert, 2002) to where they needed to be as we read Beowulf. My student’s comment echo the ones that were raised by Asher’s (2003) students who was teaching her college-level students about Islam. In order for her to be able to get her students to where they needed to be in the curriculum, she took a detour and brought them to a better understanding of one of the world’s religions about which they were sorely misinformed. These are some examples of the ways in which flexibility can enhance student understanding of the content to be
presented. It is far more easily comprehensible if they have the prerequisite schema. Actually, also, when it comes to the teaching of Beowulf, the possession of some sort of schema is also beneficial to the teacher, as the comment from the former comprehensive high school student noted above shows.

Opening the discussion

We started by discussing the Language of the Discipline --- GATE terminology (“Focus Terms” in District’s scope and sequence) that may have been unfamiliar vocabulary words, such as Epic and Legendary heroes, Deus ex machina, Oxymoron, Allusions, and Biblical references.

We then engaged in descriptions of contemporary examples of heroes:

Researcher: Who are some contemporary heroes?

Student A: Tupac.

Researcher: Tupac? Why?

Student A: I don’t know.

Researcher: Well, you have to defend your choice.

Student B: Dr. King, Lincoln.

Researcher: Why?

Student B: Because of what he did.

Researcher: Such as?

Student B: Spoke out against segregation through his speeches.
Researcher: And?

Student B: Those marches, like in Montgomery

Researcher: Okay. And President Lincoln?

Student B: He ended slavery.

Researcher: The Emancipation Proclamation. Anyone else?

Student C: Spider-Man.

Student D: He’s sexy.

Student B: Spider-Man or Tobey McGuire?

Researcher: Tobey McGuire as Spider-Man.

Student E: Well, he didn’t start out that way. He started because he wanted to avenge his uncle’s death.

Researcher: What did his uncle tell him? “With great power comes….”

Student E: Great responsibility.

Student F: Superman.

Student E: He’s not a superhero. He was just in it for himself.

Researcher: But he saved Gotham!

Student D: Rosa Parks.

Researcher: Good. Do you know the saying, “She sat down so others could stand up?”

Student D: What?

Chorus of Students: Fought for the rights of blacks.

Student G: Not just blacks.

Student B: Who is your hero, Ms. Mowoe? Why don’t you tell us that?

Researcher: I have lots, but one is Martin Sheen.
Chorus of students’ voices: Who is that?

More students: Charlie Sheen’s brother?

Researcher: He’s his father.

Students: Why is he a hero?

Researcher: Well, because a few years ago, rather than watch his son (Charlie) die from the effects of illegal substances, he called the cops to report him.

Students: That’s a snitch!

Researcher: No. Why else would he have done that?

Student E: To do what was right for his son.

Researcher: Exactly. What he did years ago saved his son’s life. Now he’s one of the highest paid actors on television on his show *Two and a Half Men*. (This was before Sheen’s most recent public problems that started in the fall of 2010.)

Student H: Why don’t we have a Malcolm X Day?

Researcher: Wonderful question! Why do you think?

Student B: Because he supported violence.

Researcher: No. No, he didn’t. All he said was, Don’t pick a fight with me and I won’t do it to you. But if you do, I will come after you. That was the major difference between him and Dr. King. Dr. King followed the Christian teaching of what?

(Silence)

Researcher: What did he say to do if someone slapped you on the cheek?

(Silence)

Researcher: Well, like Christ taught, you turn the other cheek. Malcolm X said, if someone slaps you on one cheek, you slap him back --- twice (my exaggeration).

Student D: Who’s Malcolm X?
Researcher: Dr. King’s contemporary.

Student D: Is he still alive? (Laughter from classmates)

Researcher: No. He was assassinated in 1968.

Researcher: Actually, we could all be heroes. Maybe you helped protect a classmate who was being bullied out on the playground. You don’t have to intervene yourself, but you could tell a teacher or someone in authority about the situation.

This part of the questioning was spurred by the GATE strategy of relating educational topics over time, which makes them more relevant to students’ lives. As demonstrated by their responses, they had their various ideas of heroes and some, again, got to learn for the first time, some more things about which they had been aware. However, the most important part of this lesson was in being able to get them to appreciate the simple truth that we do have heroes among us, even among them as students. Heroes are not the privy of ancient history or older men and women. They themselves can also stop bullies on playgrounds, on the Internet, some of the ugly realities with which some students unfortunately have to deal with. They can safely stand up to those bullies/cowards who pick on their fellow students to the point that they harm themselves irrevocably or, worse, end up committing suicide.

Ford and Harris (2004) employ Bloom’s Taxonomy in a multicultural manner by inserting activities that students should be able to accomplish from various cultures’ points of view at the different stages of the continuum. For example, comparing what obtained during King Hrothgar’s reign when the Danes were in the grip of Grendel’s terror with what people do in our present situation.
Although their comparison focuses more on the differences among the ethnic cultures in the U.S., I am applying it here in a more general sense to include the Scandinavian culture of the time to the general culture of the U.S. at this present time. They advocate for the exposure of GATE in teacher education programs (2004), especially in the area of multicultural education so teachers can better respond to the various/diverse needs of their ever-increasing multicultural population in ways that celebrate and appreciate students’ differences and reduce the stigma brought about by deficit thinking and other handicapping ways of thinking. Ford found in one study (1996) that among underachieving African American students, one of the reasons given for their “lack of interest in school [was] because they could not relate to what was being taught (2004, p. 27). The “into”/ “frontloading” activities showed my students not only people from their culture, but that they too are capable of being heroes.

For the Focus/Instruction, Explain, Model, Demonstrate, Plus Differentiation As Needed (“Through” --- “Modifications for GATE, EL, Special Ed., etc.”) section of the scope and sequence, we read the selection in our Prentice Hall textbook as a class and discussed it as we went along, paying attention to some of its Biblical references and drawing comparisons of sections of it to our contemporary life. The description follows:

(The highlighted biblical passages were those that students researched as part of their “Into” activity) Like the Bible that opens with Genesis and the creation of the world by God, so too does Beowulf. Here, the Danes are celebrating God’s creation --- Genesis 1. The conflict comes in the form of the monster Grendel, who hates these celebrations. And it so happens that his lineage is traceable to Cain, the first murderer in the world, according to Genesis 4. Although the textbook uses a footnote to depict this connection, reading the
entire Genesis 4 placed it within the context of what exactly transpired between Cain and his brother Abel, why God loved Abel more than He did Cain, and what led Cain to become that murderer.

I chose to explore the Biblical allusions in more depth because *Beowulf* was written about pagan Europe coming into Christianity. Some teachers might have shied away from the Biblical allusions --- time, can’t teach that in school, not be aware of the connections, etc., but I latched onto them as great schema/background knowledge-building mechanics and as a way to introduce my students to some truths both on personal levels and spiritually that they might need to know, as some of their earlier questions made clear --- “we were taught that we evolved from monkeys, for example.”

We did research on *Genesis 1 and 2: The Creation Story*; these correspond with Lines 1-14 in the poem. *Genesis 4: Cain and Abel; Lines 15-29* (The Wrath of Grendel, pp. 39-41 --- Allusion to the biblical creation story and that of Cain and Abel, which is the foundation of the creation of Grendel's monstrous, cursed heritage.) *Lines 85-104*: The Danes seek help against the monster from their pagan gods and in all the wrong places, according to the poet. We pause here to make some possible connections just as we did with the definition of hero earlier in the unit.

**Researcher’s question to the whole class:** “What are some comparable contemporary ways in which some people deal with their problems?”

**Students call out:** “Alcohol, Drugs, Food”

**Researcher:** “Mine is chocolate.”

**Students:** “What kind?”

**Researcher:** “Any kind, really. But if I did have a choice, Anthony Thomas chocolates from Columbus, Ohio, then Godiva. If not, then regular M and M’s will do just fine!”
(Laughter)
(I take in pictures from one of my birthday celebrations the following day with me holding a huge box of Anthony Thomas chocolates that was given to me by my friends Ravin and Sharon as one of my presents at the surprise 30th birthday party they held for me in their home when we were all graduate students at Ohio State.)

Whortham (2006) demonstrates how students’ and teachers’ perspectives/experiences can be integrated into everyday classroom curriculum delivery in order to enhance students’ understanding of the concept under discussion. In his detailed analyses of the implementation of the Paedeia system of education in a classroom, he chronicled the gradual way in which two students’ identities were cultivated and even solidified through classroom discussions and students’ and teachers’ understandings of what the culture’s perceptions is of such students. Thus, there were Tyisha and Maurice whose identities effectively deteriorated into being compared to beasts as the class discussed Aristotle’s Politics and as disruptive black students even as they used their little agency to counteract such descriptions.

Unlike in the classroom that Whortham observed for a full year where students became participant examples and where some of their characteristics “thickened” into negative descriptions because of the appallingly skewed manner in which the teachers applied the tenets of the Paedia system of critical thinking in education. My students’ participant examples were outside of them, people outside of themselves that didn’t seek to stigmatize anyone but drew on realities that were enough for everyone to grasp the theme of the curriculum that was under discussion --- definition of a hero. By introducing Sheen, I threw in an argument that would force them to consider their reality from a different point of
view that would, I hoped, raise their appreciation/understanding that is different from what they usually consider the norm, which is quite different from moral consideration. Since Paedeia is aimed at multiple perspectives, this is one that is supposed to get these young minds to start thinking differently so they can have more successful, productive lives in the society.

However, for me, there was no such restriction, albeit a safe participant example. Neither was there with my use of Oprah since she’s often openly and candidly addressed her constant struggle with her weight. Though less frowned upon by society, I used my love for chocolate because it is equally as addictive and almost as destructive as alcohol or drugs in its negative effects on one’s health when taken to the extreme. My integration of myself as an example is also recognized as one of the multiple ways in which teachers “inject” themselves in curriculum compacting in differentiating assignments for their gifted students (Renzulli, 2004).

Teachers can also “inject” themselves into the material through a process called “artistic modification,” which guides teachers in the sharing of direct, indirect, and vicarious experiences related to personal interests, travel experiences, collections, hobbies, and extracurricular involvements that can enhance and make real the subject matter. (p. 90)

Christ’s Passion: His disciples desert him: Matthew 26:58, 69-75; Mark 14:69-72; Luke 22; John 18:15-17, 25-27; (Beowulf’s) Last Battle, Lines 641-649 --- He fights a dragon that is set on the destruction of his people, the Geats, one of whom stole some of the dragon’s treasure.

Christ at Pontius Pilate’s; Lines 685-688: For the first time in his epic life, Beowulf feels a sense of abandonment by fate.

Christ abandoned by His Disciples; Lines 704-713: Unlike Christ who was abandoned by his disciples, Beowulf’s friend, Wiglaf, stays with him.
For the Reteach (ing) phase which is supposed to serve as (Intervention to Align Mastery) and Closure, I developed the notes *Beowulf by the lines* in which I divided the entire poem into sections, with lines, based on mini descriptions to aid my students’ comprehension even more. So as they prepared for their next assignment, in addition to the discussions that we had while reading the poem, they also had accompanying notes, which they used while working on some questions from the Review and Assess questions and the Integrate Language Skills pages that are designed to reinforce their understanding of the stated required California standards that are supposed to be covered in this unit. As such, students who successfully completed the entire exercise up to this point would have demonstrated their mastery. However, there was one final assignment designed for those who wanted to go even further, and that is the Independent Practice [to] (Reinforce Skill, Extend Learning) [going] “Beyond”. The supplemental textbook options that also went across disciplines, included the Grendel Narrative, where students were asked to rewrite the Beowulf story from Grendel’s point of view, and *Beowulf: The Game*, that asked students, either alone or in groups, to produce a board game using excerpts from the poem as questions to which participants had to supply answers. (I actually had three students who went this route; one created a Jeopardy-like computer game, and two developed a board game with cards.)

Their other alternate extension activity choice was to write a comparison/contrast essay on the poem and the movie version of *Beowulf* that
we had watched in class. The three GATE student participants chose the essay option.

Nate’s, Randy’s and Michelle’s Application of Bloom’s Synthesis, Analysis and Evaluation in Beowulf (Their Products ---GATE)

The comparison and contrast essay is one of the most effective ways of capturing students’ understanding of Bloom’s higher thinking levels of synthesis, analysis, and evaluation, and these three students did that in their final essays on Beowulf with varying degrees of depth and complexity.

All three students discussed some aspects of the poem and the movie that they thought were either similar or different. For example, among the similarities, they mentioned the fact that in both genres, Beowulf had gone to Denmark to offer his help in assisting them in destroying the monster Grendel; and that in addition to his desire to help, Beowulf had embarked on this quest for both glory and fame. Their shared differences included the change in the major theme of good versus evil; that unlike in the movie, Beowulf did not sleep with Grendel’s mother in the poem; Beowulf did not become king of the Danes, but of the Geats; and that Wiglaf, Beowulf’s trusted lieutenant, did not become king.

There were, however, some subtle differences between Nate’s and Randy’s approaches and Michelle’s to this assignment. Unlike them, Michelle applied more depth to her analysis by also consciously including detailed research from some of our whole class pre-reading activities and even some of the after-reading aspects.

In his description of the dragons in both the poem and the movie, Randy wrote: “Both these dragons have different origins. The dragon from the poem just
came from a distant land. The dragon in the movie was a child of Beowulf and Grendel’s mom. So at the end, the dragons are completely different from each other.” He was indeed correct, but Michelle included Grendel’s genealogy, as was described in the poem, “Beowulf the poem has a large religious influence. Grendel was descended from Cain, who was cursed by God for murdering his younger brother Abel.”

And while Nate wrote that “The plot and drive behind Grendle remains the same in both the movie and the poem. For example, Grendle’s drive to kill is caused by the Danes music and celebrations,” Michelle described the detailed origin of Grendel’s torture thus: “At the opening of the poem the Danes were singing songs of the creation of the earth and The Almighty. The demon Grendel is a vicious monster that attacks king Hrothgar’s great banquet hall and slaughters many villagers in the kingdom for 12 years [because he was jealous of the joyous sounds that were coming from the hall]. Beowulf defeats Grendel, but with the death of Grendel, the demon’s mother comes forward.”

However, in their final analyses, both Michelle and Nate, regardless of the level of depth they each appeared to have given to their essays, did agree that in both the poem and in the movie, Beowulf was a worthy protagonist. Nate wrote: “Beowulf persona is thrown around a lot in the poem and movie, during the whole play Beowulf never doubted himself once of his capabilities. How ever (sic) in the movie Beowulf realizes at the end that he is no hero, but a man.” And Michelle concluded:

In the poem Beowulf appears as an epic hero near godliness. For example, in the poem during the fight with Grendel’s mother
Beowulf seems to have fate on his side, because when Beowulf seemed to be at his end, he fatefully spotted the giant engraved sword. With the sword, he was able to slay Grendel's mother. In the movie his character is portrayed with more human-like qualities…. The Beowulf character is portrayed differently in both the movie and the poem but he still is an epic hero.

I believe that Michelle was able to arrive at her overall even-keeled evaluation during this final assignment because she was able to balance the grand style of the poem against the more jocular representation by Robert Zemeckis, the director, who had said, in the special features section of the DVD that: "This [his Beowulf movie] has no similarity with the Beowulf that you were forced to read in 7th grade. This is all about eating, drinking and fornicating." This was a quote that Michelle did include in her essay because she took the time to search for it on the Internet as part of her research.

We related our discussion in the unit over time (a GATE Depth and Complexity terminology), connecting the various themes in the epic poem with aspects of our lives with which we were all familiar and which made the unit more engaging and appealing rather than just leaving it stuck in the realm of unattainable medieval fare. At the comprehensive high school, the pacing time recommended was one week. At my site, because I was more interested in having my students understand it instead of just having been introduced to it, we spent five times that time, five weeks, in the following manner: Two days in the lab, two days on accompanying notes, one day on the discussion of the characteristics of heroes, read for nine days, completed selected questions from
the review and assess pages of our textbook, watched the movie for one week, and then concluded with the essay or extension activity for another week.

The reward in being able to teach this way is captured in realities such as the following that Nate made during our Focus Group Interview on November 16, 2009 when explaining the reason why he was switched from an IB English class: “I was getting C’s in GT, then my mom wanted to switch me to regular class to see what I’ll get, and I got straight A’s. It was all easy, not that we already learned it. It’s because we went at a slow pace and I could pick it up.”

**Students’ exit thoughts on my classes**

**Nate, 3/29/10**

(The highlighted questions are follow-up questions to Nate’s original exit piece. I wanted more insight from him. The italicized sections signify those responses that are almost identical to those that were given by two other student participants, Michelle and Ronnie. Also, Nate’s responses are reproduced as he wrote them, without any editing.)

The work was hard at times, **[Which ones?]** For example the essays were difficult simply because I was never good at them and Ms. Mowoe had a lot of them. But the essays seemed to help further my skills in writing. At least I hope it did.] yet the classroom still had a warm welcoming feeling to it. The way Ms. Mowoe teaches is interesting because it makes you feel as if you want to learn, **[How? The way Ms. Mowoe teaches Her class has a luring effect to it, the way she invites you into the lesson will leave you wanting more.]** well that’s how I felt **[More detail. How?]** Ms. Mowoe’s attitude towards teaching is a fresh and lively method, unlike other teachers who just follow the book and teach as such.

**Michelle, Last day of the 09-10 academic year, 5/20/10**

The first time I walked into your class the first thing I noticed was the lighting. It was just bright enough to see the paper in front of you but dark enough for the light to not reflect on it. I loved all of the work we did even though I never really wanted to actually do it. Most of the assignments were easy to do. **I liked most of the movies we watched too.** The only bad thing was the lack of participation
by most, though I guess Matt made up for most of it. Overall, I liked your class, even though it was one of the few you had to do real work in.

Ronnie’s Exit comments --- 3/3/2010:
My experience in this class has overall pretty much been a good one. It has had its flaws, just like everything else in life, like some boring essay concepts and benchmark tests. But the positives outweigh the negatives, which has made this class a good learning experience. I’ve read many different works of literature that has helped my literary skills improve. Also, good movies that made this class somewhere I don’t go for naps. All in all, I move from this class more educated and a step further to my goals in life.

I “lure” students into the lesson at the “into” stage by helping them establish solid schemas on the new topic of study through the utilization of a blend of SDAIE and GATE strategies. Michelle once commented that some of the subject difficulties that GATE students experience stems from the faulty assumption that some teachers “think that you can do it because you are GATE.” I know from experience that such an assumption is detrimental to the intellectual, emotional and overall growth of these students, and that is why I teach the way I do. It was in recognition of my pedagogical style that my African American administrator wrote the following excerpt as part of my evaluation for the 2007-2008 academic year.

STANDARD 1 – ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING ALL STUDENTS IN LEARNING
Summary: Ms. Mowoe consistently exhibits instructional strength in drawing students into her lessons and connecting their prior knowledge, experiences and interests to the topics of her instructions. During her class periods, she employs a variety of teaching strategies to meet the needs and abilities of all her students. She has an extensive background in gifted education, but thoroughly understands the process of differentiating instruction so that she reaches all students in her classes. (Nick refers to this as luring students in; leaving them wanting more 😊)

STANDARD 3 – UNDERSTANDING AND ORGANIZING SUBJECT MATTER FOR STUDENT LEARNING
**Summary:** Ms. Mowoe’s knowledge of and love for her English subject matter is nothing less than superb. Her lessons are organized, standards based, differentiated, and engaging. She uses a multitude of resources to assist students in drawing connections between topics of discussion and other curriculum content. She is very adept at connecting the “traditional” literature to the concerns and issues of today’s youth.

The necessity to spend more time than what might be advised by a subject’s scope and sequence is not limited to ELA, but is also present in classes such as P.E. and electives such as Career Technical Education. Explaining his approach to the teaching of introduction of new sports skills, the P.E. teacher, Mr. Waverly, said:

Before I start a new unit we usually probably spend about two weeks of trying to just learn the basic skills of whatever it is I am teaching (emphasis added to draw attention to the similarity with what I do), I like to teach the skills, because there are going to be some students in my class, believe it or not, that have never played before, that have never had any instruction before, and so every skill that’s a proper technique, I like to try to show them that technique. So, therefore, they get a little bit understanding. It doesn’t mean they’re gonna be good, but at least they get a better understanding of how the game is played, and the techniques that are involved so that they do have the skill level to play the game.

He acknowledges the presence of a pacing guide but teaches his students according to their skills levels and needs at particular times. He knows that he and his students probably do not cover as much as they do at the comprehensive high school and that they do not have a lot of the things they have at the comprehensive high school, like swimming pools, tennis courts, fully equipped gyms, for example, but they make do with what they have. With fewer students, he can afford to spend time on skills, and he has enough balls for his sports. (Personal follow-up communication, Jan. 3, 2011).
The same strategy is employed by the CTE teacher because he has to teach his class CNC class as if it were “a foreign language.” He explained:

I am a believer in discovery education. I do everything I can to set up situations for the students to, to discover, to experience success and experience, you know, whatever we are learning. CNC is a foreign language and it is not in the least bit intuitive. So nobody comes in my room knowing how to do this, and it’s not that I can show you over the course of a couple of days and all of a sudden you’ll get it. It takes quite a bit of study to understand it. Once you understand it, you get it only because you were taught, not because you figured it out. It’s something, it’s a foreign language, it’s just, you can’t figure out how to speak Chinese. You must be taught. It’s not something you’ll just CATCH. And same with machining.

Part of attaining some modicum of success at continuation high schools for students, even for some GATE students, it would seem, is the deliberate slowing down of the pace at which aspects of the curriculum are delivered.

The question could be asked about how my religious beliefs affect the manner in which I respond to those students who are non-Christians/atheists/agnostics as we tackle the curricular demands at the various high school grade levels, especially through 11th and 12th grades. As was captured in one of the class discussions preceding our reading of Beowulf, I do not insist that every single student follow through on the search. My goal is not to proselytize. My goal is working on the best way possible to teach what is in the curriculum and trying to get my students to better understand what it is we are studying by building their schema since some of them do lack the necessary schema, resulting in their total disinterest in the unit of study. My educational exposure as a student, both at home and in school made me the type of teacher and world citizen that I am today. I strive every day to assist my students on their
journeys with an intellectual understanding, I hope, that truly appreciates the fact that there are multiple ways of being, of doing unto other as they would want for themselves. Additionally, I have done a lot of reading and attended enough conferences to know that sometimes the only safe place for some of these students could be within the four walls of a single classroom, as they are rejected and harassed by their parents and those around them for their belief or unbelief based on the culture’s prevailing accepted practice (Lim, 2011).

Does the high school curriculum taken in its totality have some inherent limitations? Yes. The limitation, however, stems not from the teacher(s) but from those who decide on what students get tested on at the end of the academic year. As already noted, especially in southern California, the student population is overwhelmingly Hispanic. However, the language arts curriculum, for example, to which students are exposed because it is what they are tested on at the end of the year, is limited in the selection of minority authors. Thus, although research shows that a large number of minority students do benefit from being exposed to literary works that deal with their cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 2006; Banks, 2007; Sleeter, 2011), in most instances, the year-end high stakes tests do not always have as their chosen selections contributions from these authors.

In recognition of this shortcoming, some school districts try to infuse minority authors’ selections to compensate. One way of accomplishing this, as practiced in my district, is through the use of a course on ethnic literature at the high school level. The one drawback, however, is the fact that this is an elective
course and as such is not recognized as a core course to be taken by every student. Thus, while students will be introduced to more African American, Hispanic and Asian American writers in this course, the entire experience is still treated as being peripheral/tangential to the "real" core courses/curriculum which they are taught and on which they are all tested to determine the school's/district's API and AYP scores that are supposed to ensure that no child is being left behind academically.

And this is again another area where the continuation education setting is a little different from the comprehensive setting. Due to the paucity of available elective offerings at continuation sites, there is more of a likelihood that many more students will probably be enrolled in the ethnic literature class at this site than they might at the comprehensive sites that have larger varieties of elective offerings from which students can make their selections. As a teacher who strongly believes in the benefits of a multicultural education, one way in which I have addressed this shortcoming is, after my students and I have covered the major components of the suggested scope and sequence sections and have prepped for our high stakes tests, we turn our attention to a unit on civil rights leaders across cultures. This way of teaching is in partial fulfillment to the "written" portion of my master's degree. In addition to completing my thesis, one of my advisers gave me an informal "test" of five essay questions on ways in which I intended to integrate what I had learned as a graduate of the then Black Studies department into a possible teaching career. I felt like I was making a promise to him as I wrote my responses, and I have worked diligently, almost
effortlessly, I believe, to keep that promise. That is the reason I teach, in English 11: American Literature, Patrick Henry’s “Speech in the Virginia Convention and Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” in a comparative unit of the reading and discussion of Malcolm X’s and Dr. King’s fight for civil rights during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, for example.

Here, we read about such people as Paul Robeson, Dr. King, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Chief Joseph, very recently, Harvey Milk and many more, through supplemental texts and accompanying videos. For instance, it is in the course of this unit that most Hispanic students understand that Hispanics were also discriminated against just like African Americans and were equally prohibited from attending white-only schools in California until the 1948 Mendez v. Westminster case that was a precursor of the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case. One of the culminating assignments has the students conducting indepth research on a civil rights leader of their choice regardless of ethnicity, but preferably from a minority group, using stipulated criteria on what constitutes civil rights.

Following are additional questions that accompany the requirements for the unit’s completion:

**Think Critically:** Malcolm X compares the oppression of African Americans with that of American colonists under King George III. He believes that “it is only fair to expect” African Americans to react to tyranny as the revolutionaries did. Do you agree?
Connect to Life: Both King and Malcolm X fought for justice for African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. Name political, religious, or social causes that people are fighting for in the United States today. What are the most effective methods used to promote these causes?

Points of Comparison: Based on “Speech in the Virginia Convention,” what do you imagine Patrick Henry might have said about King’s advocacy of nonviolent resistance? (http://staff.tuhsd.k12.az.us/sriddle/jr%20English/Ag)

Although the preceding was mostly a description of my 11th grade pedagogical delivery, I do also appreciate the limitations in the 12th grade (British Literature) curriculum and so do teach the same civil rights leaders across cultures unit to these students in the fourth quarter of the academic year.

4.1.3. Continuation high schools as safety nets: Some students need to be employed

Among the reasons for the establishment of continuation education in California was the need to accommodate those students who needed to be gainfully employed. This reality is also present among GATE students, especially those who are in the SES demographic description in this study. This demographic reality of our students whose parents’ jobs include manager or a recycling plant, grocery store milk delivery truck driver, housemaid, homemaker with a high school education, necessitates some students’ need to work in order to contribute to their family’s financial solvency. This is different from the families of the students in research where students had more affluent parents who were able to mostly provide for their material needs so they could concentrate on their
educational lives. Efren, another one of my research participants, told me during an interview that he was happy to be getting packets even though he was not being intellectually challenged. He was more interested in the fact that he was able to both earn his credits during the A.M. session of the school day and spend the afternoon at work so he could make some money and contribute to the financial needs at home and so did not mind the fact that he was working on “regular stuff” in his Mihigh classes, rather than more challenging curriculum “because I have to work after school” and so is content with getting “extra packets and stuff.” (Interview, December 5, 2008)

Efren fits the description of Hispanic children who are expected to work in order to assist their families. It is ironic that Efren appears to be content with “getting extra packets and stuff” as he worked towards earning his needed credits to graduate. Ironic because one of the fiercest opposing arguments that used to be made against continuation schools was their use of packets that enabled students to work at their own pace. The belief was that those packets were not intellectually demanding enough and were used to warehouse students in classrooms. However, as far as Efren was concerned, intellectual rigor or accountability was not his most important concern at that point in time. His main interest was to graduate, to get his diploma so he could move on to the next phase of his life.

4.1.4. Continuation High Schools as Safety Nets ---Flexibility --- Absences: The bane of students’ success

As I have noted in several sections of this study, one of the most common reasons students end up at continuation sites is because they are credit
deficient. The students in my study had absences that led to serious credit deficiency. Even at our site, their attendance statistics were not stellar, as shown below. Their saving grace is the possibility of earning partial credits. Nate was absent that year because they had to visit their extended family in Taiwan, which his entire American family does every other year; Ronnie had some personal problems that he chose not to discuss. Students have to have good attendance in order to succeed in school. Ronnie’s problem was that he just did not go to school for most of his 9th grade year. And Julian described himself as being “a high school dropout”: “Somewhere down the line I went to Mexico for like a month. And they just said, and I just kind of dropped out of high school for a little bit. I just didn’t say anything, I just kind of left. So I was a high school dropout for a little bit.”

The following is a tabulated summary of their absences for three-quarters during the course of this research:

List of Absences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>1st Qtr 8/3/09-10/9/09</th>
<th>2nd Qtr 10/12/09-12/18/09</th>
<th>3rd Qtr 1/04/10-3/12/10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nate 8/18; Third week into the quarter.</td>
<td>Absent for 4 days, 1st pd.; Abs. 6 days, 8th. Pd. = 12.7%</td>
<td>Five days = 11%</td>
<td>19 days = 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie Was in class from the first day</td>
<td>Out of 47 days, absent 10 = 21.2%</td>
<td>21 days = 47%</td>
<td>23 days = 48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Second</td>
<td>Eight + Two days =</td>
<td>Two days = 4.5%</td>
<td>Nine days = 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week into the quarter</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randy Third week of the quarter</td>
<td>Two absences = 4%</td>
<td>Three days = 6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the above, all of their transcripts showed that they failed 9th grade. During his interview Julian admitted that as a freshman, he was oblivious about the credit system in high school, not versed in the knowledge about how high school works after spending the first eight years of their lives being passed on from one grade to another with just a letter grade and not the accountability of earning credits for college admission/consideration. As Julian explained: “I didn’t know, I really didn’t know about credits and everything. I didn’t know that’s how it worked. I mean, I knew, but I didn’t really know, I didn’t really think of it.” They did better when they came over to the continuation high school site because they could earn variable credits, rather than failing classes outright if they did not complete the required assignments.

Of all the themes that emerged from the data coding exercise for this dissertation, this is one that faithfully captures one of the reasons for the descriptive choice as an interpretive, rather than a qualitative endeavor: the quantitative representation of students’ absences, which was the best way to representatively show the effect that this would have had on their performance at a comprehensive high school. Unfortunately, however, this learned approach to their education does not automatically stop when they become continuation
students. The major difference, however, is that while they are not given too many chances to makeup work at the comprehensive high school (interviews), continuation teachers build the possibility of absences into their curriculum.

More often than not, the ability to make allowances for students’ absences develops organically from forms the relationships some of teachers form with their students which makes them better able to understand and appreciate underlying reasons for some of their absences.

4.2. Building Relationships: Teachers acting as counselors/life coaches/mentors

The safety nets in continuation high schools are strengthened by the relationships that are formed between teachers and students as a result of smaller class sizes which affords them better opportunities to get to know their students and maybe help them in ways that reach beyond academics; they extend into the realms of assisting with students’ social and emotional needs.

After examining the findings of other researchers, Neihart (2002) concludes that, “Noteworthy from these and subsequent studies is the consistent finding that the single most powerful predictor of positive outcomes for vulnerable children is a relationship with a caring adult” (p. 114).

The desire to make some type of caring connections with those around them was a common theme that ran through responses that dealt with students’ impression of the environment at Mihigh. Addressing that perception, Julian said:

The environment is a lot like a normal high school, just on a smaller scale. I mean, like at Rally High there’s like a couple of thousand kids; here there’s like a couple of hundred. I don’t even think
there’s a couple of hundred in this session, you know, so it’s really, a little more friendly here, a little more close. You’re kind of, you’re kind of more like a student with your teachers because there’s not tons of students coming in so you kind of feel like, ehh, I don’t know, accepted around Mihigh, because it’s kind of a little community, I guess, yeah. (Interview, October 31, 2008)

And Ronnie felt the same way, because “here they give you a lot more chances, and teachers help you a lot more. Less students most of the time in the classroom. They know you more by your names. Less students [than] in the regular high school. And it’s really good.” And Efren also liked Mihigh because “teachers, they interact more with students than at the regular school [because] It’s a smaller school [with] about twenty students” in most of his classes.

They felt a sense of belonging because of the smaller numbers of students in their classrooms and on the campus. Having fewer students for whom they were responsible opened up more time for teachers to spend with those in their classrooms, even if it was just in such little ways as knowing their students’ names.

As Mr. Waverly explained in his description of some of the ways in which he tries to reach out to students who are struggling in his classes, he does this by establishing “some type of relationship with that kid to know that you care about him,” because if the kid feels that you care about him, he’s going to care about you and he’s going to try not to disappoint you. So he’s going to try to turn in his work.” (Interview, May 6, 2009)

**Mr. Essex:** I, I try to keep my room very low-key, very relaxed. Fortunately, this year we’re listening to the radio a lot, got the oldies on and the kids seem to, to enjoy it. Relationships? Just very low-key, and I always try to find something of interest that the students are up to that I can talk about with them, just ask about their
favorite car, or if they’re designing something, it tells me a little bit about themselves, if they’re a moviegoer or what, so. I just try to be as relaxed as possible, have a good time, laugh a lot, joke a lot. When students tease me, I just roll with it, it’s, it’s no big deal. We have a good time. Some students tease and then they get into the disrespectful area and some have a really hard time coming back, and I tell them, “Look, teasing’s fine, but disrespect is not.” And so we just try to have a good time. [About a 2-second pause] And I start off easy, when students come in the room, they get to sit down, get to talk, and I take attendance, and then we just go; we get to work.

I actually witnessed this sense of him working at trying to foster a relationship with his students by “keeping his classroom low-key” through having them listen to music as they worked on their assignments during one of my observations (2nd October 2009). On this particular afternoon, the goal of the exercise was dual in nature: it was originally intended as a way for the student to makeup an absence for the week, but in the process, they all learned a little more about him. It was an interview in which the student asked him some personal questions about himself, to which he had the option of either responding or passing on. Following is a transcription of what transpired on this day:

Student: What is your definition of Freedom?

Mr. Essex: Everybody following the rules.

Student: What’s your name?

Mr. Essex: (Gives it).

Student: How many siblings do you have?

Mr. Essex: I have three older brothers.

Student: Of what are you proudest?

Mr. Essex: Spending time with my two kids.
The California CTE Standards mentions how CTE is also designed to help students develop resiliency in order to successfully complete their high school career. Mr. Essex alluded to this in another interview. So, more than just helping students acquire the skills they will need for their future careers, he sees his mission as one of exposing them to possibly positive ventures.\footnote{California CTE Standards and Framework Advisory Group, Career Technical Education Framework for California Public Schools --- Grades Seven Through Twelve, 2007, p. 5.}

As part of his program, Mr. Essex, in addition to the schoolwide fieldtrip that were organized in the 2009/2010 academic year, took a number of particular students to Valley College’s Career Technical Education Day celebration on April 17, 2009. They visited the aviation and manufacturing programs. The trip was sponsored by a grant from the east Valley Community Collaborative that aims to expose students to available educational programs in CTE. The newspaper report on the visit had as its heading: “College Prep: Students See Career Options.” In a manner of speaking, therefore, students who do go this route are both college bound, with the goal of either becoming career ready or transferring to a four-year college. As part of fulfilling interested students’ desires to attend Valley College, Mr. Essex also offers assistance with the completion of FAFSA forms for some government-sponsored scholarships.

The difference which a good relationship with a teacher can have on a student is captured in the doleful manner in which Michelle describes some of her experiences in her fourth grade class. During my transcription of one of her interviews, I noticed that her descriptions of life for her in elementary and middle
school were not very happy, so I asked her about that in a follow-up interview, to get a better sense of what she meant by “mean students.”

Michelle: Yeah. I was made fun of a lot because of my weight, so, yeah

Researcher: I kind of suspected that, you know, because at the beginning, it didn’t really strike me, but the more you talked about, you know, “mean students,” so yeah.

Michelle: (Low voice) Yeah. I don’t know. I had to deal with it for like, because I wasn’t that heavy in my 2nd grade or 1st grade or anything, it’s just third grade. I started to get bigger. It was weird, changing?

Researcher: So what did you do? What did your parents do?

Michelle: Ehmm, they couldn’t really do anything. It’s not like changing schools would really help, because kids are kids and mean little things (soft voice), but, so I don’t know. I just went through school for those three more years and during 5th grade I switched towards the end of the year, ehm, because I had some issues with a teacher, Mr. O. It felt like he always tried to get people to make fun of my clumsiness, because I wasn’t very graceful. And ehm, did not like him.

Researcher: And how do you feel now?

Michelle: People don’t really bring up my weight that much. They’re more accepting. And I have friends. I didn’t have that many friends in 4th grade.

Unfortunately for Michelle, she had to endure the social and emotional torture of those years the best way she could, maybe by overeating to compensate for the cruelty, which would have exacerbated her weight condition. She was in a catch-22 cycle, especially as a GATE student whose sense of justice tend to be even more intense for those who are so inclined, sometimes leading to bouts of depression. While it might be a stretch to attribute a large percentage of her improved outlook on life to Mihigh, quite unlike what she experienced during those “mean” years, she did have friends here.
If the lack of a relationship with their teachers and school curriculum is affecting most high school students at comprehensive sites, it is even more imperative then that this not be the case at continuation schools, where research has shown that the vast majority of students are dealing with vexing issues that range from academic traumatic to personal and socially debilitating. And the teachers in this research realize that too. Add to that the tough reality that some of our students face, as Ms. Racho notes:

Yeah, there’s a couple of bad eggs, but, you know, for the most part, it’s just, truly, I’m just amazed that these kids come to school sometimes, because I’m telling you, if it was me? I was saying to -- last night, I said, “It’s just amazing these kids come to school, because if it were me, I’m just such an independent person, but I, I, just, I would have run away. I would have worked at night and gone to school during the day and tried to make, scratch out a living. But I’m just amazed sometimes with the families these kids have, that they come to school (laughs with wonder). Truly. I just am amazed, ’cause just the things that I hear and the things that I see, you know, Sarah had a --- class and she tells some, I’m just amazed that these kids stay in these families, and they come to school. (Interview, May 20, 2009)

Because our students come to our schools with so many underlying issues, educators now have to wear many hats as they also dispense the knowledge they were trained to impart and hired to do. They are now psychologists, spiritual counselors, motivational speakers, and whatever else they need to be for their students. In the course of this dissertation research, teachers themselves acknowledged as much. Mr. Essex recounted a conversation which he had with a group of students:

I was talking to some students on the bus coming back from the fieldtrip (one of the schoolwide fieldtrips to one of the two
surrounding community colleges) and there were four girls and they were all mothers, and I talked to them about being mothers and about being role models and I talked about myself as a role model. I said, “Everything I’ve just told you about going to school, getting a career, looking out for yourself, finding happiness not in who you’re with. I talked to them about relationships. It’s important when you’re in a relationship to be happy, but not to have your happiness depend on the other person. That’s asking too much, to give your, the responsibility of your happiness to someone else. I said, “So, as I say all this, you know, I have to practice it myself too. And you have to practice it, because your children are watching what you do, and they’ll do exactly what you do, not what you say. So you’ve got to try to make sure that what you say and what you do are the same. More is caught than taught. (Interview, December 17, 2008)

The ever present need to build students’ self-esteem. Most of our population comprise students who have very limited understanding of what healthy relationships look like. Some of them are caught between their parents’ religious belief systems of abstinence and the more permissive culture of television and the entire media. Most are more familiar with Jersey Shore on MTV than they are with Masterpiece Theatre on PBS. This almost perpetual need for teachers to serve in those roles was unfortunately demonstrated very vividly during one of our guest speaker presentations, as captured in my dissertation journal:

Had a former student of ours (mine and Mr. Essex’s) as a guest speaker today. Was okay, until he seemed to give a tacit nod of approval to the selling of drugs as a last resort for a parent who wants to provide essential needs for her/his child/ren. I disagreed with his line of reasoning, while some of the students saw it as “being real.” I went back at lunch time and continued the conversation, stating that for a parent who wants the best for her/his child/ren to do that to someone else’s, is worse than criminal. Selling drugs to someone else’s child in order to feed your own child and put clothes on his/her back is immoral! (From my dissertation journal entry, April 10, 2009)

Mr. Essex revisited the piece on the drug segment today. Not very happy. Tried to revise by letting our students know that we do not endorse such behavior. (April 13, 2009)
I seized this opportunity especially to address this because there have been occasions when discussions about *Scarface* have come up in a few of my classes. For most students, the rise of Tony Montana, the poor Cuban immigrant who rises from being a street thug to become one of the wealthiest, brutal cocaine thugs in Miami, constitute the fulfillment of the American Dream. What they always fail to grasp, and which I point out to them, are the subtle ways in which Oliver Stone, the screenwriter, has injected into this story elements of criticism/condemnation of that lifestyle. For example, although Tony Montana had a blimp that circled his mansion with the words: “The World is Yours,” (he had money, cars, ran a cocaine cartel, etc.) he was never able to get the most important thing he wanted in his life --- a child. The woman he loved most in the world and with whom he wanted to create this miracle was incapable of having one --- her womb had been destroyed partially by her ingesting of the cocaine her husband sold. Tony Montana’s own birth mother detested him and could not stand the mere sight of him. The sister whom he loved unconditionally was tragically killed because of his own irrational act that was brought on by the effects of his cocaine habit. And finally, he himself met his own tragic end in a blaze of gun fire because he was too high on cocaine to have been able to notice a little earlier that the grounds of his cocaine-financed mansion was being swarmed by assassins from a rival cartel. I watch the rapt attention on my students’ faces as I speak. There is usually some few seconds of dead silence after I point out these subtleties and they mull them over. Did I win them over?
Maybe not. But it is also possible that there just might be someone (maybe a few?) who cease to glorify the movie and approach it from a different perspective. As one of them said, "I will watch it again." (The movie is rated "R," but most of our students have seen it, so I did not belabor the point of whether or not it was appropriate for this particular student to "watch it again." He had apparently seen it anyway. This time, if he does "watch it again," it will be with a better understanding than that with which he saw it originally. I hope.)

We were presented with a teachable moment on that day. And as a teacher (mentor, role model) of these students who are trying to get their lives back on track on various levels, I seized it and spoke out against what was the general consensus over illegal drugs as it affects our students and maybe some of those they know.

And this issue was doubly highly important at this time because Mr. Essex had described the terrible influence the abuse of various types of illicit drugs were having on some of our students, even those classified as GATE:

We had ---. Yeah. Nice as the day is long, and nothing to do with him being GATE, but he’s very lazy. Now, I have other students who are very lazy, I don’t attribute the laziness and GATE together at all, but not to his capacity, and I contend that it was the drugs with ---, just loaded ALL THE TIME. So he was just kind of mopey dopey, in a happy state of mind, I suppose, but it didn’t take him anywhere. Is --- GATE? Researcher: I nod “yes.” I’d have loved to have asked him, I wish I had, what, why he thought he didn’t graduate last year. Because he defended drugs with me to the end, how wonderful they are. Researcher: Really???? OH, YEAH. And then, you know, --- was that his reason for not graduating? [Voice gets higher] I FIND IN MARIJUANA, IT’S NOT MYSELF, I UNDERSTAND IN STUDIES THAT MARIJUANA TAKES AWAY YOUR DRIVE FOR SUCCESS. THE USE OF MARIJUANA TAKES AWAY EMOTIONAL PAIN, BUT IT’S ONLY THROUGH EMOTIONAL PAIN THAT WE GROW. SO EVERY TIME THERE’S
The continued pull of illicit drugs.

I will use my students’ impressions here to express how they understood my application of relationship building with them. As the researcher, there were indeed certain aspects of myself as a teacher that I could not really appreciate. Additionally, using this strategy, I think, is less likely to result in an impression of self-bias. In my research journal, I write the following:

Received a lovely vase of flowers and a beautiful card from Julian today. He dropped it off during my 8th period class. The card reads, on the outside with a picture of two pink roses:

There are some very thoughtful people in this world …
(The inside)
… people who seem to enjoy making life a little nicer for others – people like you.

Thank You So Much

Then he wrote:
May God bless you always,
Julian
(Research Journal --- Tuesday, February 02, 2010)

When I called to thank him, we talked about his continued plans. He was still attending Riverside Community College (RCC), but might have to put off attending this semester so he can get a job as a dialysis technician because he needs to have health benefits as an adult. This would not be such a problem if he had the assistance of the president’s proposed health care bill that would have made him eligible to be covered under his parents’ plans until he turned 26.
Michelle wrote the following in my yearbook on the last day of the 09-10 academic year:

I’m so glad I met you this year. I’m glad you were my teacher. You were one of the few people I could trust anything with. You’re one of the nicest people I’ve ever known. I’m glad to call you my friend and teacher. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. (5/20/10)

And I wrote the next in my research journal within the first month of the next academic year:

Ronnie was here during lunch today! Really happy to see him --- looking so good too! 😊 Was told by Anthony Villa (our principal) that he can’t return to Mihigh because he’s a 5th-yr. senior, but is sure won’t do as well as home with Zinon’s program --- too many distractions, he said. Then he asks, “Could you write me a referral, Ms. Mowoe?” Surprised, because I know just how difficult it must have been for him to ask. But there was no doubt in my mind that I will do my best.
(Thursday, September 09, 2010)

I believe that Ronnie took this step with me even though he was totally done with my English class because he felt safe/confident enough to discuss it with me. He did not let his problems stand in his way. He did not become a statistic, but came back to ask our assistance with his desire to come back and complete his high school education and receive his diploma, even if he was a year late in doing so.

4.3.1. A Lack of GATE Recognition/Idenification: Among Teachers
Of all of the themes, this is the one that parallels the research questions most of all, and it is the one whose discovery has proven to a little more worrisome. For the most part, continuation education teachers do not distinguish between the GATE and regular students in their classrooms, though they can sometimes make educated inferences about students’ more pronounced intellectual abilities. They teach all of them at the same level without specific
regard to particular differences, and since more students now graduate, which makes it possible for us to meet one of the ASAM requirements, the specific needs of GATE students are left to the purview of the comprehensive high school (additional personal communication with the principal of another continuation high school, Thursday, October 28, 2010).

Out of all the professional participants, Mrs. Peoples, the counselor was the only one who agreed with definite certainty that she could identify the GATE students. As for the teachers, they gave the impression that their immediate focus was on other aspects of just making these students productive and not to necessarily cater to their higher intellectual skills. And at this stage in their educational careers, it seemed as if the students wanted it that way, too.

When I asked Mr. Waverly whether he knew his GATE students, he responded with

I, I know my GATE students because we have an outstanding GATE coordinator here at the school (smiles) who gives us a list of names (I laugh). But to tell you the truth, for the most part, ehhh, I wouldn’t know unless I got the list. Every once in a while, though, when you give me, when I get the list, I’ll look over the list, of course, and then I’ll say, “Yeah, I expected that.” (Interview, May 6, 2009)

Ms. Racho played the “guessing game” when she got the list from me, as she explained:

I just really, just really appreciate that you identify these kids. It’s almost like a guessing game, because I see that list and I always try and think to myself before I look at the list, “Which ones do I think are,” you know? And then I like to see how many I got (we both laugh), you know?” (Interview, May 20, 2009)
And Mr. Essex says that he knows “just a little bit,” but “unfortunately
couldn’t tell you off the top of my head. I just remember a couple of things I’ve
seen from you about GATE students.” (Interview, November 4, 2008)

While Mr. Waverly was sometimes surprised by some of the names on the
lists, because those students are not as “meticulous” with their notebooks,
among other things, Ms. Racho was more surprised by the omission of those she
thought should be on them; for example, Matt. [She] “thought, ‘For sure, Matt
was going to be on that list.’ ” But for both of them, there were those occasions
when their assumptions were proved right, like it was for Ms. Racho when she
correctly identified Jay. She elaborated in a tone of voice that went up a few
decibels higher:

I knew Jay Lopez. God! I told him, I said, “Jay, you know, you got
to make your mark in this world.” I said, “You’re so talented, but
you just, you just lack the discipline. And he said, “I just don’t want
to work.” [Michelle!] And I said, “Jay, you’ve got all the tools in your
tool belt, but they’re all shiny and brand new; they have not been
used. They need to be old and marked on and used because you
have so many tools, you know. Hardly anyone has the level or the
amount of tools that you have, so….. The kid is more articulate than
some elected officials that I’ve, you know. (Interview, May 20, 2009)

I did know. In fact, after one of our class discussions on the 2008
presidential elections a few months earlier when we were discussing the role of
lobbyists, about them being wonderfully gifted and talented communicators who
work in Washington to lobby the White House for good or ill, I had advised Jay
that he could be a successful one someday. However, the more I thought about
it over the weekend, the more I asked myself why he could not be the president
himself so other people would have to lobby for his attention. So I called him at
home the Sunday of that weekend, talked with his father, and then told Jay that he did not have to shoot for the position of a future lobbyist. Why not have him try to become a Bill Clinton or a Barack Obama?

Also, like Ms. Racho, I always wondered why Matt was not identified GATE. Nate made the same observation during our focus group interview session, and Michelle’s comment in her final review of my class on just how much Matt contributed to class discussions, though made tongue-in-cheek, was a close enough description. Matt could be a good example of how some students are “missed” during the identification process --- which is not surprising. And that is exactly why I teach the way I do --- from the infusion of Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies that are geared towards introducing students to the bare essentials/building blocks of the proposed unit of study to GATE because I realize that I am always catering to the needs of a diverse body that comprises various levels of intellectual development and interests. In their defense, I was almost as ignorant as they were until I met Pete. Sometimes, though, even with the availability of the lists of names, there are still occasions when there is a lack of recognition that might stem from the student’s gender or appearance, as Michelle discovered:

Michelle: “Mr. Dominguez said that I’m surprisingly smart.”
Researcher: “Why did he say that?”
Michelle: "Because we were having some discussions.” He said, “Looking at me, no one would think that I’m that smart.” He was helping Nate and said, “Do you know that he’s one of the few GATE students we have on campus?” I said “yes, and I’m one too.” “I was offended, Ms. Mowoe. But I don’t think I’m smarter than Nate. I’m more together than Nate.”

(Thursday, April 22, 2010: 2:55 p.m.)
This lack of recognition of GATE-identified students is not only common among the teachers. Although Mrs. Peoples, the counselor, did acknowledge that she was able to identify some of them, she also sometimes needed “a list.” But like Ms. Racho, she knew that they were GATE because of some of the characteristics they displayed:

GATE students, when you get to know them, you get to know how articulate they are, how higher, they have higher level thinking, and you can almost compare them to other students, and you want to say, “Wow! Wow! Why are they at a continuation?” You almost can pick them out. If you sit down with them at meetings, you can almost say, “Ah, you’re GATE!” (Interview, April 28, 2009)

Like Ms. Racho said of Jay above and I recognized with Pete all those years ago, Mrs. Peoples zeroed in on the incredibly articulate gift that some GATE students possess and on their higher level of thinking skills.

4.3.2. Outright refutation of the label/ambivalence among students

For most of the students, the GATE designation appeared to be more of a burden than something to be celebrated. While some of them seemed to almost vehemently reject it, some others had an almost detached ambivalence about it. Billy Bob never considered himself a GATE student after his father took him out for being disruptive in his honors classes. As he explained: “Well, I’ve never considered myself a GATE student…. Because my dad took me out a long time ago. So, I just never thought I was, after he took me out.” (Interview, March 3, 2009) When I asked Julian how it felt to be a GATE student, he said, “I’ve never felt gifted so I can’t answer the question.” (Interview, October 31, 2008) And at the conclusion of our first interview session on January 6, 2010, when I asked him whether there was anything else he wanted to talk about that I had not asked
him, Ronnie seemed to blurt out in frustration: “It doesn’t matter that I’m in GATE. I just want to be, like, a regular person. I can do my work in regular classes, you know. I don’t really like all that attention. I like to be quiet and just do my work and turn it in. Doing what I have to do, getting my A’s, graduate. I don’t like being labeled, you know? I just do my work.” And Nate: “I don’t need to prove anything to anyone. I don’t need to prove that I am smarter than anyone, that I’m GATE. I see people not in GATE and I think they’re smarter than me. Like Matt, he’s not in GATE, but I think he’s a very smart person.” (Focus group interview, November 16, 2009)

Nate, like Julian, did was not very appreciative of the label because he felt that there were other students who were more deserving. Julian was conflicted about being used for him personally, making him into someone special, but appreciated that there are indeed some distinguishing characteristics of being GATE, that do make some students a little more intellectually sophisticated than most others. He struggles to balance his conflicting thoughts on the issue this way:

I really don’t see, ah, gifted students as being much different from any other students. I mean, there’s some differences from the regular student, the average student…. Not to say that gifted students are any better or anything, just, ehh, you know, different way of thinking, different way of looking at things, so…. I don’t know. Sometimes you just might take a little more, ehh, for certain things, you just might build a little more logic, kind of think it through, and really see the big picture. And other things you might think completely different from any way that you, you know, that first comes to mind, to see it in a different point of view, and so things make sense. So it just depends, you know, on what you’re doing. Well, there’s differences, I guess. (Interview, October 31, 2008)
His description of the manner in which GATE students tackle problems is not just almost uncannily similar to Mrs. Peoples’ summation above, but his phrases, such as “big picture” and “different point of view” are two of the major themes that are ideal goals in the effective implementation of GATE strategies.

Unlike the others, however, Randy and Michelle were not as nonchalant about the designation. Although Randy did not know until a few months prior to this interview that he was “still GATE,” that knowledge made him feel proud, that he could do something with his life (Focus group interview, November 16, 2009). And he chose to return to Eagle High School in the second semester of his 11th grade year so he could take advantage of the college preparation guidance necessary for direct admission to a four-year college to read business administration. On the other hand, while Michelle liked the designation of being a GATE student, if there was the slightest chance for her not to perform at the level commensurate with her talent, she would rather take that route, as she pointed out: “I was in Honors English…. I didn’t stay very long. I stayed two days…. I heard the amount of work that we had to do. I looked at the syllabus and all that and I’m like, “No.” (Focus group interview, November 16, 2009) But she showed that if she was duly challenged, she could rise to the occasion, as she noted in her exit comment for my class:

I loved all of the work we did even though I never really wanted to actually do it. Most of the assignments were easy to do. I liked most of the movies we watched too. The only bad thing was the lack of participation by most, though I guess Matt made up for most of it. Overall, I liked your class, even though it was one of the few you had to do real work in. (May 20, 2010).
Unlike the majority of the students in this research, both Michelle and Randy felt proud to know that they were still GATE students. As Randy put it, “It made me feel like I was bright. I was smart. I just wasn’t going at my full potential. It made me feel like I had what I needed, I was not using it” (December 14, 2009). And the realization that he was still GATE at this stage of his educational career must have been a psychological boost to his overall image of himself, not necessarily in a pompous, arrogant way, but because now he knows that he is still a higher intellectual contender. He did return to his home comprehensive school from where he has a better chance of gaining direct admission to a four-year university in the fulfillment of his goal of earning a business degree.

Hwang (2003) notes a situation where in a classroom at a continuation high school where she was conducting an interview with a teacher, one of his students made reference to the fact that she (the student) “used to be GATE.” The implication in that comment seems to be that since she is at a continuation site, she has ceased being GATE. That assumption is supported by the principal of one of the continuation schools we visited as faculty and staff in the spring of 2009 as we sought to revamp our school setup. She acknowledged the fact that while there are GATE students at her continuation site, there really are no programs geared towards them (Personal interview, March 4, 2010).

No matter how they felt, these students all saw continuation school as offering them an opportunity to continue with their educational careers. As Randy put it:
[Mihigh] offered the chances for me to graduate and it would give people second chances, which was what I was looking for --- and I knew that I had to come here to Mihigh because it would give me a chance to finish. (Interview, December 14, 2009)

Another possible interpretation of my student participants’ ambivalence to their GATE designation could also be linked to their cultural milieu. Unlike the overall competitive culture about which McDermott and Varenne write, these minority students, if understood better in the multicultural sense, are members of minority cultures that researchers believe to be more cooperative, which is counter to the more competitive nature of the dominant culture (Bennett, 1990; Delpit, 2006; Stix, 2010).

4.4.1 Parental Intervention

The role played by parental intervention in the lives of students who are identified as GATE cannot be underestimated. Less challenging work in lower grades makes it difficult for some students to meet the more highly intellectual demands of higher grade levels (Branch, 2008). They do not perform as well when challenged. For the parents, there arises the tension of whether to leave students in the program or to take them out when the academic demands get tougher. For some of the students in this study, their parents chose the latter choice, as was revealed when I tried to find out their perception of the academic rigor (or lack thereof) of their experiences at Mihigh.

Nate was in honors classes in which he “just got along with a “C”/ “D”. But in his IB (International Baccalaureate) classes, as he said,

I had to work really hard. That class was way too hard for me. Other people, like the highest grade I think that somebody achieved in that class was a 79% out of 30 students. The class was hard,
but it was worth it, because I think you get college credits. (Focus group interview, November 16, 2009)

And as has already been discussed earlier, his grades improved when his mother took him out of his GATE/honors classes and put him in regular classes:

I was getting C’s in GATE, then my mom wanted to switch me to regular class to see what I’ll get, and I got straight A’s. It was all easy, not that we already learned it. It’s because we went at a slow pace and I could pick it up. (Focus group interview, November 16, 2009)

Michelle dropped her honors English after two days because she feared that it was going to be too demanding, saying, “I heard the amount of work that we had to do. I looked at the syllabus and all that and I’m like, ‘No.'” (Focus group interview, November 16, 2009).

Sometimes these students did not even know that they were still designated GATE students who could have been receiving more challenging instruction models. And their parents could not help because they were not aware themselves. Ronnie said he knew that he had GATE in elementary and middle school, but did not have it in high school because in 9th grade, he just “had honors English [and] after that semester, I got an ‘F’ and they made me change the class.” (Interview, January 6, 2010)

Unlike more affluent parents, Billy Bob’s requested that he be dropped from his GATE program because he was being disruptive. Nate’s mother took him out of his IB and honors classes at the comprehensive high school because he was struggling academically in them. This is counter to the situation among wealthier parents who pull all the stops to ensure that their children get into
GATE/honors programs. More affluent parents would ferret out more challenging programs for their children. Could it be that they did not understand the benefits of such enrichment programs? That they were just interested in having their children graduate from high school?

But even with their interventions, the students did not experience as much improvement as they hoped for, so Nate was transferred to the district’s independent study program, where matters deteriorated because he lacked the necessary discipline to needed to thrive in such an environment (Mother’s note in cum folder; Nate’s comment during focus group interview.) He needed the flexible structure of a continuation high school classroom. An examination of his cum records point to the possibility of an English proficiency problem. His CST scores for English Language Arts hovered between Below Basic and Far Below Basic, and his CAHSEE score was 359. Could those scores be attributable to his partially Asian heritage and the reality that most Asian students gravitate towards the sciences and not English because of the language barrier with which some of them have to contend? (Tan, 2002). While the assumption is that English learning students in our schools are mostly immigrants, the reality is vastly different. Nate’s cum shows that just like some immigrant students, he was indeed enrolled for a period of his education life in the EL program. However, while he struggled in English classes, he thrived when he had to work on computers, making his TA teacher, who also served as a mentor, advice him to pursue higher education options that would provide him with the opportunity to join the Navy and work in the field of computer sciences. Maybe if his parents
had been in the higher income brackets of those in the Csikszentmihalyi et al (1997) study, they might have secured the services of a tutor to help him cope with his possible language proficiency issue. In the end, he took a longer route to get where he wants to be, but he’s there now.

However, in spite of the fact that my student research participants’ parents might not have fully understood the implications of their actions with regard to their children’s academic growth, they showed some degree of persistence in ensuring that their children do stay in school, even if it was to a continuation high school, as explained by Julian:

My mom brought me here --- against my will, I did not want to come here. She’s like, “No, you’re just gonna come here and get your stuff done.” I was like “Ehhhh, I don’t want to come here.” I fought it with every part of me, but came here, because, you know, I did not want to leave my friends.

He was fighting against his negative perception of the type of students who attend continuation high schools.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

At the end, we arrive at two polar opposites of the argument. On the one hand, there are McDermott and Varenne (1999) who criticize the culture for labeling its students and forcing them into inhabiting those labels. On the other hand, we have minority researchers (Ford, 1996, 1998; Ford and Thomas, 1997; Ford and Harris, 1999; Ford and Milner, 2005) who believe that minority students who are gifted and talented (GATE) must be so identified so that they can be taught in ways to best attain their highest intellectual potential.

This research, for its part, mostly shows that most continuation high school teachers are not very particular about GATE designations. Like most of their GATE identified students who end up at continuation sites, some teachers are more interested in getting their students to earn their required credits so they can graduate and move on to their next goal in life. High school graduation, then, is the goal, especially since there are still some students who will not make it, still, including those designated GATE. What, therefore, do we do? As part of my conclusion, I propose some possible points for consideration based on the existing research and on the findings of this dissertation exercise.
1. Improved Communication Between Schools/Teachers and Parents

The research on California’s continuation high school population show that most of the students come from low-income minority homes (Hill, 2007; Perez & Johnson, 2008; Ruiz-Velasco, 2008). Especially because the demographics show that these students and their parents need as much assistance as possible, one sign of which is the necessity for the provision of a summer feeding program for our students, more emphasis needs to be placed on effectively assisting these parents and their children throughout their educational endeavors so that they do not end up as part of the national dropout statistics.

An argument can be made for regarding these students as being marginalized through lack of communication and the provision of services. The research shows that most dropouts are from low SES (Fine, 1987; Hamilton, 1987; Time, 2006). And Clark’s (2007) quote below breaks it down even more:

Low socioeconomic status (SES) homes tend to have restricted environments both in terms of learning materials and opportunities available and in practices of child-rearing. Larger percentages of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and American Indians grow up in low SES circumstances than do Anglo-Americans and Asian-Americans. Low SES students are generally much less likely to be high academic achievers than high SES students. This is true in all industrialized nations.

Their educational cum data showed that most of the students in the study failed 9th grade. The main reason they gave for that fact was that they were unaware of the credits system of accountability at the high school level when
they move from middle to high school as freshmen. Maybe their parents would have been able to offer them more help if they had known themselves.

This lack of information was compounded, in some cases, by the fact that these students’ parents had very demanding jobs that they needed in order to make ends meet. In Michelle’s case, her oldest sister became a surrogate mother to her and her immediate older sister. So in addition to working her way to her goal as a future medical doctor, she also had to cater to the educational needs of her two younger sisters as best she could. And when she left home, Michelle’s grades deteriorated drastically and she was able to drop out of classes that she considered too challenging, in one instance, in as little as “two days.” There was no guidance/counseling to advise her otherwise.

Some of my student participants did not know that they were still GATE students until I sent copies of the list of GATE students at our site to all members of the faculty and staff --- when these students were already in their junior and senior years. In the meantime, they had floundered their way through the educational system for all those intervening years wondering what was wrong with them, as were their parents and teachers who might not have known the characteristics of GATE students. Most of their parents were unaware of this information and about how they might have been able to support their children.

Billy Bob masked his feeling of inadequacy in some of his honors classes by becoming the class clown. His father thought that his best solution was to have Billy Bob taken out of those classes because he didn’t think that Billy Bob deserved to be in them. He also believed that Billy Bob’s classmates deserved
to have access to an educational environment free from his son’s disruptive behavior. While his father’s concern for his classmates’ well-being was commendable, in so doing, though, Billy Bob’s father unwittingly hampered his own child’s intellectual growth because he was unaware of ways in which he could have offered a more productive alternative.

One key factor in the overall success of GATE students is the appreciation of the importance of their social and emotional needs (Neihart, et al., 2002; Boothe and Stanley, 2004; Castango and Brayboy, 2008). I have already discussed the hugely important negative role which the students’ school absences played in their academic debacle, but a few of them need a little more detailed insight.

Ronnie’s attendance at Mihigh was as bad as it was, it turned out, because he was very sensitive about his acne problem. His saving grace was his ability to come to school as little as he could, “do his work and earn his A’s” and not be among the school crowd for another few days. Because I was aware of this information, I was able to use it in buttressing my support among my colleagues, our then principal and our superintendent to give him a special waiver to come back to our campus as a 5th-year senior.

Billy Bob was on medication for ADHD even up to the time that he was at Mihigh, making him a twice exceptional GATE student, and which might help to explain his disruptive behavior in class and the fact that he got suspended almost every other day in elementary school (I know this because he advised me to read his cum during our interview session).
Mr. Essex believed that some of our students, including three GATE-identified students, needed some type of drug counseling because of some of the discussions they had in some of his classes. These students, he said, resorted to such practices to try to have a better grasp of their problems, failing to realize that successfully tackling difficulties in life is part of full human growth (Interview, November 4, 2008). It was the same sentiment that was voiced by Elaine Kwon, the 5-time U.S. National Tae Kwon Do Champion, when she told a group of Australian young adults who are on a quest for their futures after graduating from college: “If there were no stress or difficult situations, you would be half a person.”12 Without the necessary support, some students resort to a variety of negative solutions including becoming dropouts or using their innate talents in illegal ways (Kerr, 1997). At our site, of the three students about whom Mr. Essex was concerned, one graduated. That is one of the most important reasons for the utilization of the services provided by the district’s Parent Institute, designed to assist parents with some of their struggles of school-age parents.

The strong desire that these parents have in the educational attainment of their children can be gleaned from the fact that they have never turned down the school district’s request for a school bond measure in the last two election cycles in which they were placed on the ballots.

By the time most of these students get to us, they have traversed a gamut of problems that are both educational and emotional. Some of them find some modicum of success; others do not, not at this stage anyway. The best way to

12 Elaine Kwon, 5-Time U.S. National Tae Kwon Do Champion, PBS: Roadtrip Nation, June 18, 2011
combat the debilitating effects of such a reality is to identify them before it gets to this stage. Some do make it, eventually, but we cannot continue this way if we do not want to lose even more intellectual capital in our ever growing competitive interdependent world.

2. Maintain Smaller Class Sizes

After examining the findings of other researchers, Neihart (2002) concludes that, “Noteworthy from these and subsequent studies is the consistent finding that the single most powerful predictor of positive outcomes for vulnerable children is a relationship with a caring adult” (p. 114). It is a similar observation that is made by Hebert (2002) when he writes about the relationships between some teachers and their students, and Branch (2008) also found that students who had adults who showed an interest in them did well. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the experience that pushes students out of school:

There’s a host of reasons why teens quit school: apathy, laziness, the desire to hang out with friends.” But even more than these are students who drop out because they feel that there’s a disconnection between what they’re being taught in class can get them closer to their goals of wanting to become “doctors, lawyers and executives.” Angelique, a student, “felt utterly isolated from teachers and administrators --- “There was no one I could talk to. The grown-ups really didn’t seem to care about me at all.” According to the Gates Foundation survey, 43% of kids said there wasn’t a single adult at their school with whom they felt a connection. Bridgeland says the dropouts he spoke with often began to disengage from school when instructors didn’t learn their names or take time to figure out their interests. “Many kids view their teachers as just trying to get through the day…. They read from textbooks or talk to the blackboard and can’t be bothered getting to know their students. (Family Circle, June ’10, p. 56)

Connection, forming relationships with their teachers. That was one of the main findings of this study, one that confirmed what some other researchers
have already noted --- that both students and teachers believed in the positive
collection of such connections make to the educational experience for both of
them. Both students and teachers felt that they had achieved that to a large
extent because of the school’s smaller size when compared to the surrounding
comprehensive high schools, as Mr. Essex noted when he said, “smaller class
size, smaller number of teachers, everybody is focused on learning, NOT THAT
THEY ARE NOT AT THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL, we’re just a
smaller setting. It’s more family-like here.” And Mr. Waverly proclaimed as he
explained why he will never return to a comprehensive high school:

Just the sheer numbers…. I believe we’re at a benefit, we have a
big benefit of having smaller numbers here, you know. PE at a
regular high school, you could have anywhere from 50 to 60 kids
per teacher…. I can’t see how much teaching I can really do if I’ve
got 60 kids, whereas here at a continuation high school, I might
have anywhere from 15-20 kids in a class, maybe 15-25, and I can
get each student a ball in their hands. I tell other teachers, “If you
really truly want to teach, men, especially in the area of physical
education, if you really want to teach, I think there’s more teaching
going on at the continuation high school than there is at a
comprehensive high school, strictly because of the numbers.”
Unfortunately, a lot of people don’t value education, you know? It’s
not important enough. To me, that starts, you know, in the family.
The family’s really got to tell the kids how important it is, school,
how important school is, you know? It’s not preached in the house.
And they’ve really got a disadvantage. So then you really need,
ehhh, smaller classes, you know, to try to reach those kids, you
know. I hear these horror stories about Rally, you know, math
class with 45/50 kids? Come on! It’s ridiculous!

It is easier for teachers to reach more students, especially those
from homes where the pursuit of an education is not given much
importance, when they have more manageable student/teacher ratios in
the classrooms.
Under the NCLB law, “failing” school districts are mandated to pay for private tutoring services to students who do not pass the state’s stipulated high-stakes tests that are used to determine a school’s API scores. These services, usually provided by outside private tutoring companies, claim to give individual, intensive instruction to students. And that is where the problem with such thinking is made more glaring. Those private companies take the money from school districts that have between 30 and 36 students in classrooms so they can provide better individual instruction to “failing” students. The befuddling question then arises: Why not use that money to reduce the class size so more students will get more of that individual attention with the teacher in the public school setting?

In spite of the belief held by such researchers as Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2003) who believe that class size does not have an effect on the quality of education that goes on in a classroom, the students and teachers who participated in this study were all in support of smaller class sizes. This is especially necessary given the multiple needs of our student population. For us, smaller class sizes are not a necessity just for the practical act of teaching but also for all of the other peripheral areas of our students’ lives for which they might need either professional or simply friendly help from an unrelated adult.

This point follows directly from the one raised above. The NCLB Act was supposed to measure students’ annual academic growth. However, its implementation has very little or nothing to do with well-rounded intellectual academic growth, but more with how effectively teachers can “teach to the high-stakes test,” as Stix writes:

The open classroom philosophy of the late 70s and early 80s encouraged creative problem solving and critical thinking. However, concerns over a lack of proficiency in basic skills resulted in an about-face. Under the Bush administration, NCLB legislation pushed for wide-scale testing that emphasized reading ability and arithmetic competency instead of critical or creative thinking.

Because it is beneficial to everyone, gifted education strategies is one of the best ways to promote the teaching and acquisition of creative thinking skills (Winebrenner, 2001) because every pedagogical method used with gifted kids and sometimes considered state-of-the-art, can be applied to all students --- portfolios, projects, self-directed learning, etc. This does not mean that gifted students’ learning needs are not being met in heterogeneous classrooms. It means that when we provide what gifted students need, all other students are likely to benefit as well (Lindsey, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997; Renzulli, 2004.).

While educators decry the disastrously chilling effects of the NCLB law on creativity in education (Rose, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Stix, 2010), journalists laud it as something positive for raising test scores (Time, September 20, 2010; Los Angeles Times). Some schools and school districts are praised for “Making the
Grade,” (Time, March 2010) by teaching to the test. The sad reality, though, is that most students do not take the annual California Standards Tests (CSTs) seriously because it neither bears any direct connection to their grades and credits, nor does it affect their graduation possibilities (Dray, 2010). Personally, I have tried to raise some interest by informing them about the achievement gap and how that is calibrated. That information has led some of my students to call the practice racist, unfair, biased, created by whites, but the vast majority still do not take it seriously. Some of the complaints include the claim that the chosen reading selections are too long and that there is too much reading involved. The most crucial realistic problem, however, is the fact that most of the students do not possess the vocabulary to comprehend the selections at the chronological grade level at which they are tested. Thus, an eleventh grade student who ideally should do well on tests that are developed for eleventh graders, might be reading, more realistically, at a much lower grade level, as I detailed in one of my dissertation journal entries:

Reading one of the books by the Southern Poverty Law Center on Teaching Tolerance. Saw that two students were talking instead of following along as I read. Stopped and called on them to take over from where I stopped. It was an agonizing realization --- they can’t read. Didn’t realize until today that you guys can’t read. What can we do? Do you guys read at home? No. (Laugh) You don’t? Who does? Only the nerds. No, you don’t have to be a nerd. But who else does? Students start coming into my room to eat their lunch. Asks the first one, D., who reads and possesses cards to four public libraries. Do you read outside of school? Yes. Another comes in, B. I read at the 5th grade level (Laughs). Do you read outside of school? Yes. What are you going to do when you can’t read at this stage? I just want my diploma and then get a job. But it won’t be worth anything if you can’t read! I don’t have to read as much on my job (Ravitch --- disservice to them with social promotion. One of them spent 30 minutes on our most recent ELA
CST test that comprised 80 questions based on several reading comprehension passages, multiple choice questions, and grammar skills. What happened in class today confirmed that the test was way out of his league. And for someone who does no outside reading, it’ll be difficult indeed for him to pass CSTs at this level --- 11th grade. And yet our “progress” is based on his performance on them. And we gloss over this huge discrepancy among our different ethnic groups during staff meetings and in such an important document as our WASC write-up!\(\text{\textit{(Wednesday, April 28, 2010)}}\)

Ravitch’s (2010) chronicle shows that the movement to perpetual testing has had as its goal the eventual elimination of public education, as these tests continue to weed out the most capable students from the public system to the more selective programs, as the majority of students “successfully failed.” It is the same belief that is shared by Ross (2009) who sees public education/schooling as quite different from the testing factories into which they are being made. As one of the architects of the NCLB law, Ravitch was privy to the machinations that resulted in its birth.

Private organizations such as the Broad Foundation that train CEOs and others from various walks of life at their Broad Superintendent’s Academy to become superintendents of urban schools after intense six-week classes (The Broad Center, 2002), or business leaders who play principal for a day or week and believe that they have all of the solutions to most of the problems that plague our public school system miss the point. Even within the small number of students in this research we see just how different are the needs of the population of the students who comprise the majority of our public school demographic. Quite unlike private or publicly-financed charter schools that can
either select or impose strict codes of conduct and behavior on their students and their families, traditional public schools do not have such luxury. The motto for these schools could be “All Are Welcome.” And the doors of all public schools are open to students of all stripes.

NCLB is more quantitative than qualitative in its implementation and final representation. It foregoes the qualitative aspects of students’ lives that they have to contend with as they struggle through life at every level. Some of these students do not do well on high-stakes tests, as Banks (2007) points out:

Students from diverse regional, social-class, religious, ethnic, and racial groups often achieve at different levels in the schools. Students from some groups tend to score better on standardized achievement tests and to experience more success than students who belong to other groups. For example, urban students in the Northwest tend to score better on standardized tests than rural students in the South; Mexican American youths have much higher school dropout rates than White mainstream youths. (p. 123)

4. English Learner (EL) Students Are Also Native-Born U.S. Citizens

The common belief is that “The majority of secondary English language learners (ELLs) are “foreign-born immigrants with a variety of educational experiences ranging from no formal schooling to grade-level equivalence” (Faltis, 1993, p. 93; quoted in Rance-Roney (2004), p. 74). That is the common belief. The reality, however, is much different because, in actuality, quite a considerable number of EL students are native-born American citizens, as shown in this research, and by research that was conducted by the National Education Association. The perception is that most EL students are immigrant foreigners.

from other countries who have just come into the American education system and so are “deficient” in their grasp of the English language (Rance-Rooney, 2004). This, however, is not the whole story, as demonstrated by the participants in this particular research. A few of them (3) were in fact originally designated as English language learners even though they were born in the United States. And this is not a misnomer. A vast majority of first generation American children who are born to immigrant parents constitute our EL population, not fresh immigrants.

Laws such as California’s Unz Initiative (1998) which demand that EL students must be taught “English by teaching them in English” are counterproductive, especially in its stipulation that students “be placed in classes with same level of English proficient students for a period of no more than one year.” A significant number of California’s EL students are not as successful in school because of their command of the English language (Public Radio International’s (PRI) *The World*, September 7, 2010), which is captured in district and state test results. These are students who were born here and speak “fluent” English but cannot understand academic English. Or as some of my students say, “They use BIG words,” referring to Patrick Henry’s “Speech in the Virginia Convention” and “The Declaration of Independence” by Thomas Jefferson, both of which are staples of the 11th grade American literature curriculum.

The sample essays from Michelle, Nate and Randy showed varying degrees of sophistication. While Michelle’s came across as being effortlessly done, Randy’s and Nate’s were not so much, and Nate’s had more grammatical
missteps that though they did not hinder one’s understanding of his argument, showed that he could have been an EL student at some point in his educational career. However, even if his delivery was not quite as smooth as Michelle’s or Randy’s, they showed the complex thought processes that he employed and that he had total grasp of the integral information to write critically analytic essays on the topics. But they also showed that more time is needed for EL students to learn English than the Unz Initiative suggests, especially if these students are expected to do well on high-stakes tests. As some researchers note,

> To be a competent and successful learner, a student must have the necessary language skills to manage the cognitive demands as well as those needed to interact in a wide variety of social situations in a classroom setting. The development of oral language skills in interpersonal situations precedes the ability to handle decontextualized material that has no face-to-face cues to aid understanding. Thus, learners may demonstrate oral language skills (listening and speaking) in a second language that far exceed their ability to handle complex academic tasks in writing and reading comprehension. It is critical that educators be aware of this developmental process in the acquisition of the target language. It is very common that erroneous presumptions are made regarding an individual’s degree of language proficiency and the individual’s ability to complete academic work requiring abstract thought and cognitive operations in English. (Fletcher and Massaalski, 2004, p. 161)

Ironically, the people who should know better than anyone else the importance of acknowledging and tackling the problem of the achievement gap within the educational system head-on are choosing instead to bury their heads in the sand, preferring to stay in a state of denial. This was no more evident than at one of the faculty meetings on the comprehensive analysis of the previous test scores that we had as part of our school’s WASC mid-term evaluation visit. Most
of the participants, including the principal, chose to be color-mute (2004) in their
disaggregation of the test scores. They were uncomfortable discussing race
when it pertained to students’ achievement. They did not want to call the
achievement gap for what it was and how it is reported, as being a gap among
different racial groups, but chose instead to go with “achievement gap between
subgroups.” They did not want to tackle the issue of race in test scores, even
though that is what features most prominently in the attacks on public education
and teachers (Thernstroms, 2003; Pollock, 2004). As long as those who have
immediate knowledge of the complexities involved in understanding the problem
continue to be color-mute (Pollock, 2004) in their discussion of possible solutions
in the struggle to close the achievement gap, there will continue to be the
unsuccessful half-measures to reverse the problem.

The research on the performance of continuation high school students in
the various high stakes tests that are administered in California have been noted
to be dismal (McLaughlin & Ruiz de Velasco, 2008). This study has shown that
most students, even those classified as gifted, are more likely to perform much
better on assignments if they have been provided with enough time to fully
understand whatever concept/unit that is being taught. Gone are the days when
we can assume that most students share comparable schema that they can
access because they have all been exposed to them (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

5. Who Is More Qualified To Teach Minority Students?
Can it be argued that minority students in general and those in this study in
particular fall/fell behind because they do/did not have minority teachers who
understood their cultural needs? Black teachers for black students. What about
a situation where most of your students are Hispanic? And just how black is black? As Pollock (2004) demonstrates, the black hue of an authority figure does not automatically translate into unquestionable acceptance by students of the same color. The arbitrariness of such reasoning could not be more glaring. E Pluribus Unum is the motto and reality of this country. Though not perfect, it is what makes it a beacon of hope for the world. Just as effective teachers need to be exposed to more multicultural practices, so, too, do their minority students need to learn and be taught how to fit within the larger society outside of their own smaller worlds so they can have a better shot at success in their lives.

Delpit notes that more minority teachers are leaving the profession. We need to ask why that is the case. One issue that plagues public schools collectively is that of discipline. Ladson-Billings discusses this in passing, in the last few pages of her book. Delpit provides situations in which this is displayed between how a Black teacher would respond to an unruly student with the stern directive to “sit down now!” She then goes on to describe how other teachers “demand discipline” from their students. There is a fine line between what will be tolerated from a Black teacher and those who are considered “other,” especially Caucasian. They could be accused of being racist, rude and insulting to the student because he/she is black and therefore not deserving of the teacher’s respect. And it is not too farfetched to assume that if something such as that were to happen, some of these same researchers would be among the first to condemn the teacher for behaving in that way. It is almost similar to the argument regarding the use of the “N” word, where some Blacks claim that they
have more legitimacy in the use of the word among themselves than a
Caucasian ever would.

Ms. Lewis, one of the teachers who worked with Ladson-Billings on her
research,

Knew she still loved being in the classroom. Further, because of her
reputation as an excellent teacher, many parents requested (and even
demanded) that their children be placed in her class. Thus
administrative attempts to stack her class with “troublemakers” were
thwarted by these concerned parents who saw that Lewis offered a
special intellectual opportunity for their children. (P. 106:)

Why the quotation marks around troublemakers? Where did these students go?

Why do we not have more information about these students in the study? What
did they become as older students? What about the teachers who put up with
these troublemakers because they don’t have any choice whatsoever? Even
Ladson-Billings’ teachers sent their children to private schools. Delpit sent hers
to an almost exclusive private school. Public school teachers are left to deal with
“Other People’s Children” in the public school, some of whom are troublemakers
and try to be disruptive. Julian, one of my research participants, talked about
how he chose to do other things, talking with his friends, for example, instead of
working on his class assignments, including passing on the completion of his
homework. He also gave a description of the environment in some classes at the
comprehensive sites:

You know, when you’re around, like, you know, the class in regular
high school at least, people don’t really care, people think you’re,
but in the regular high school, I don’t know, it’s like, there’s certain
class where the whole class is kind of, like, rebellious against the
teacher, like, the teacher just has no control over that class, so it’s
kind of like a free period? So when your whole class is kind of, like,
doing whatever they want, talking, it’s loud? You really don’t want
to sit there and do your work, you know? You don’t want to be the only one doing your work, so you kind of join in. And if they were all working, I’m sure I’d have just went (assumes the position of someone taking notes in class) --- worked too, but they didn’t, so I guess I kind of let my peers influence me a lot more than they should have. I like to think that’s pretty normal. Maybe it’s not.

In the meantime, while teachers and school administrators try as best they can to not notice the racial divide in the achievement gap, the federal government, for its part, is testing out various remedies to try to fix the problem by, among other things, making pitches to encourage African-American men to get into the teaching profession so they will act as mentors to young African American male students. At a joint function with African-American movie director Spike Lee, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, addressing the projected shortage of teachers in the next ten years as baby boomer teachers retire from the profession, said:

Teachers should look more like the people they serve. While more than 35 percent of the nation’s public school students are black or Latino, less than 15 percent of the teachers are black or Latino, according to federal figures…. Something is wrong with that picture. We’ve got to fix it. We’ve got to fix it together." (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Feb. 1, 2011).

It is not necessarily the teacher's/mentor’s skin color that determines students' willingness to accept their education, but their overall attitude to the educational system which makes them believe that as people of color in the society, their success is automatically limited. With such mindset, they end up sabotaging their futures by engaging in behavior that does end up shortchanging their futures (Whortham, 2006; Mickelson, 2003). Other researchers and this study have shown that one major reason for gifted students’ underachieving
performance is the lack of time given to complete required assignments
(Jackson, Sharonda). The students in this study did better when the pedagogical
delivery was slowed down and they were exposed to the necessary background
schema to assist their comprehension. Those findings expose more glaringly the
flaw in the assumption that gifted students can tackle whatever assignment they
are given because they are GATE.

And teachers are not unaware of the fact that some of them do inhabit
different cultural milieu from some of their students’, as Mr. Essex described in
an interview:

I live in a different world than I teach in, and it’s taken me years, years to get used to it. My culture that I live in, my wife and I,
ehm, we have two children, we have chosen to send them to private school, and they come home and they do their homework,
and they do a loooot of homework, and they each play two musical instruments, they each play the piano, and my son plays the drums,
and my son plays the saxophone, and so every night they do their practicing of the saxophone, piano and drums. And I’ll leave school
knowing that many of my students are going out to steal paint cans and do graffiti, and I’ll go to a violin concert that my nephew’s
involved in, and everyone in the audience is wearing suits and ties and it’s Tuesday evening and it’s just, it’s taken me years to get
used to the shift. So it is two different cultures, and I don't know, as I say it's a difference in valuing of education or a different way of
seeing it? There’s a lot of factors. (Interview, December 17, 2008)

His son, who will be a senior in the 2011-2012 academic year, is being fiercely
recruited right now by a variety of research universities. Mr. Waverly, for his part,
understands the very important role he can play in helping his students
appreciate the importance of an education.

Unfortunately, a lot of people don’t value education, you know? It’s not important enough. To me, that starts, you know, in the family.
The family’s really got to tell the kids how important it is, school,
how important school is, you know? It’s not preached in the house. And they’ve really got a disadvantage. (Interview, May 6, 2009)

The decision on who is the best teacher for our students should not be based so much on the skin color or culture, but on values that will help them succeed. While I do acknowledge that no teacher is value-free in her/his pedagogical delivery, there is no denying the fact that a teacher who has a son who is being courted by top research universities is more of a positive role model than a Tony Montana in the movie *Scarface*.

This study has shown that it is not so much a difference in cultural learning styles that should be the focus of our attempt to close the achievement gap among the different ethnic groups. Multiple intelligences address that for the most part. What is missing is a collective lack of foundational schema. In a culture that is largely based on Judeo-Christian leanings, most students lack the assumed exposure from their families. Unlike those times when teachers in Ladson-Billings’ study saw their students in church, such practice is not as common in the times in which we live. And teachers stay away from this because they do not want to be sued or for other various reasons. But the curriculum is packed with Biblical references. Examples include, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life,” Patrick Henry’s “Speech in the Virginia Convention,” and President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, and so on. We need to teach all students like they’re gifted and talented (USA Today, the NPR piece). And GATE strategies employ the same tenets proposed by multiple intelligences. And as Yvette Jackson, the former executive director of instruction
and professional development of the New York City public schools, and current head of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education points out, the incorporation of GATE strategies into the pedagogical delivery does not have to cost more money. The most demanding piece in its successful implementation is that it does demand “a shift in focus” (NPR, 2011). And it takes a little more time upfront in its design, which pays off in the future.

The successful practice of GATE strategies will provide our students with the missing schema they need to be able to understand the curriculum to which they are exposed, and teach them the skills they will need to tackle issues that are “new” to them in any situation. While the following might be difficult to comprehend, it really happened in one of my American Literature classes last year. It was not until we watched Sally Hemings as part of our unit on The Declaration of Independence that some students became aware of the fact that Thomas Jefferson was once a President of this country.

6. The Necessity to “Denaturalize” (Whortham, 2006) Our Definition of Success

As a result of the economic stress of the Great Recession that started in 2008, junior colleges have risen to positions of significant prominence as many more people are enrolling in their programs to fulfill divergent career goals. For younger students, some of them are taking this path because of overcrowding in four-year colleges and its accompanying increase in tuition that has put it out of reach for some families for now. For older, more mature non-traditional students,
quite a few of them have gone back to these settings in order to take advantage of the courses they offer so they can embark on career changes as they switch from their former areas of employment to more marketable areas (McWhorter, 2010; NPR, April 28, 2010; Doane, CBS News, October 5, 2010). Given the current grim reality, some people are asking one pertinent question: “Is a college degree worth it?” (CNN, Monday, June 13, 2011; Time, May 2011). It is now almost unnatural to have success be so narrowly defined as to limit it to just the acquisition of a college degree. It is time for us to turn from our intense negative scrutiny on the presumed shortcomings of students because of our entrenched cultural acceptance of what constitutes mainstream success. We need to broaden our outlook and acknowledge the multiple ways in which students attain fulfilling lives. And that is the reason why the Obama administration is proposing a revision in the NCLB law that mandates annual yearly progress in a few select core subjects to standards that include both college and career readiness (Paulson, The Christian Science Monitor, February 2, 2010). Indeed our educational culture is not cast in stone. It can be changed (McDermott and Varenne, 1999).

Is this dissertation study a claim that continuation education is the perfect panacea for all that ails underachieving gifted minority students? Most definitely not. Three of my research participants --- Julian, Michelle, and Nate graduated from our school and are now attending our three nearby community colleges --- Riverside Community College, San Bernardino Valley College, and Chaffey
Community College, respectively, and Randy returned to his comprehensive high school.

However, while some are able to pull themselves out of the hole they seem to dig for themselves in 9th and 10th grades, some others, unfortunately, do not make it, even at continuation education: Billy Bob dropped out. And there are times when this continuation high school site, unfortunately, could be considered as fulfilling the role of either a cooling out bin or a safety valve. This was captured in a comment Mr. Essex made on how much reflection he was forced as a result of having me in his classroom as a researcher/colleague. He said:

In terms of, of how I, it has caused me to analyze how I teach and why I do what I do. And one of the things that I am not proud of is how many kids sit and appear to do nothing. But at the same time, I’ve given that a lot of thought over the years, because I will have students sit and do nothing and still earn credit. I feel very fortunate to teach an elective class where I don’t necessarily have a battery of assessments that I must get them through. And so I’m happy. They appear to be doing nothing, but yet they’re looking at a book on the seven wonders of the world, or two hundred great places to visit before you die, or, ehm, the one hundred largest yachts in the world. And I’m happy the student’s sitting there doing that, and so I’ll issue them credit for that day. When (unintelligible) this kid’s doing nothing, but I just wonder what they are thinking. And then I go over the books with them, the visiting places because I’ve done traveling and I show them pictures of where I’ve traveled to. I show them the map of the world, and I’ve got a saying above it, “Where in the world do you want to live? Work, and play and travel?” And so, having you come in my classroom, and it appears like just a bunch of kids just doing nothing, well, maybe they are and maybe they’re not. So it’s helped me really look at that....

Come on in. (Interview, December 17, 2008)

McDermott and Varenne argue that we as a culture set up our students for failure. As we have seen, some of these students would have been “failures”
had they not been presented with alternative ways of eventually reaching their goals.

In their introductory section of the latest edition of their co-edited handbook on qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln note:

> The second edition said we need to address issues of social justice. Now, in the third edition, we want to be even more explicit politically. We agree with Ginnie Olesen (2000, p. 215), “Rage is not enough.” We want you to help lead the way. How do we move the current generation of critical, interpretive thought and inquiry beyond rage to progressive political action, to theory and method that connect politics, pedagogy, and ethics to action in the world…. We want the new edition to advance a democratic project committed to social justice in an age of uncertainty. (p. x:)

Various theorists in this study share the same goals as Denzin and Lincoln. So do I. From my position as both a teacher and researcher, the issue is not solely a lack of equitable funding. The students’ appreciation or lack thereof of an education is partly responsible. As the various research studies on the differences among continuation programs show, discrepancies do exist. However, I would include my site in the category of those that are not as hard pressed as are some others.

Like Banks, Delpit, Florio-Ruane, and Ladson-Billings, among the many others, I, too, am a strong advocate and practitioner of multicultural education. The reality, however, the one with which I and thousands of other teachers like me have to battle through every single day, is one that sadly has to admit that the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s and its nostalgia for Africa and the civil rights era of the 1960s and its message of Black pride and Black Power that made connections with the African continent are now almost things of the past.
These days, teachers have to contend with Black students who seethe with anger if someone dares call them “African.” To them, to be called African is akin to having a Mexican American being called a “Wetback.” While I had sensed this for a few years, I got concrete proof when we had a discussion about this subject in one of my American Literature classes on Friday, September 16, 2011. This is also a climate where as I teach about the Cherokee Trail of Tears and Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, I have to wrestle with the shocking news that the Cherokee Nation has decided to expel their Black members, descendants of slaves owned by Cherokees (NPR’s Morning Edition News, Wednesday, September 14, 2011). The very minorities that multicultural education is supposed to promote are sometimes more harmful to their fellow minority members. And still we teach because we hope for a better world for ourselves and our descendants. And there are some people who appreciate the sacrifices we face as teachers. There are some who do appreciate the difficulties experienced by teachers, people such as Matt Damon, who recently attended a Washington, D.C. teachers’ rally. He sums up his support for teachers thus:

My mother is a professor of early-childhood education. At the rally, I just wanted to boost teachers’ morale because they’ve been taking a real beating. How many young people are not going into teaching who would have if there was more prestige or if the public treatment of teachers was better? (Matt Damon, “10 Questions,” Time, September 12, 2011.)

Continuation high schools are mostly populated by minority students. Some of these students are GATE. They need to be known so their talents do not just go down the drain. Other continuation high school researchers just mention these students in passing. While it is possibly the case that some of
these students would rather blend in with the other population at the continuation sites, my research shows that their talents do still need to be challenged and developed so they can achieve even more in their future endeavors. It is also the case that some of these students as well as their parents are unaware that they are still GATE and so can do even more than they have settled for. They can do better, even if they are minorities. They must not be lost in the fog of crippling, debilitating underachievement.
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### Appendix A: Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AERA</td>
<td>American Educational Research Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAHSEE</td>
<td>California High School Exit Examination</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDE</td>
<td>California Department of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELDT</td>
<td>California English Language Development test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CST</td>
<td>California Standards Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTE</td>
<td>Career Technical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAFSA</td>
<td>Free Application for Federal student Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>Fluent-English Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GATE</td>
<td>Gifted and Talented Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEAR-UP</td>
<td>Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSLP</td>
<td>National School Lunch Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Professional Learning Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-FEP</td>
<td>Re-designated Fluent English Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROP</td>
<td>Regional Occupational Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSP</td>
<td>Resource Specialist Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARB</td>
<td>School Attendance Review Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDAIE</td>
<td>Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English</td>
</tr>
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SES  Socio-Economic Status

STAR  Standardized Testing and Reporting (comprises the CSTs and the CAT/6)

WASC  Western Association of Schools and Colleges
Appendix B: Recruitment Letters
Letter to parents

March 10, 2008

Dear Parents/Guardians:

My name is Faith O. Mowoe. I am an English/Language Arts teacher here at Mihigh Continuation High School. The East Rubicon Kiwanis Club recognized me as one of four District Educators of the Year in 2002, and the City of Rubocon as a Community Hero. I am also the only teacher with a Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) certificate on both the Mihigh and Zinon campuses. In addition to being a teacher in the school district, I am also a Ph.D. candidate at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. I write this letter to you in all of the above capacities.

I write to ask your permission to use our experiences (your child's, yours as parent(s), and mine) as the subject of my dissertation research. My research aims to study how GATE students navigate their way through alternative education settings. Such a study will be doubly beneficial: it will strengthen my practice with the GATE strategies for our students through my reflective process and the input of my students while at the same time helping me fulfill my Ph. D. requirement. Students may decline to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. Please indicate your preference of participation or non-participation by signing the appropriate space below. Upon completion, I will place a copy of my dissertation in the library of the district's GATE office. I have been given permission by the District's Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, Mrs. ---, and our site principal, Mr. Villa, to conduct this research. Additionally, my research proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Responsible Research Practices of my school, The Ohio State University. This is the office that ensures the full protection of all research participants' rights. Participants will be given a modest compensation. They will also be assigned pseudonyms. As has always been my policy, Mihigh parents, you are welcome, at any time, to come visit or spend some time with us in our classroom if you so desire. Zinon parents, please feel free to contact me at any time with any questions you may have at (909) -------.

I hope my request will result in a favorable response.

Sincerely,

________________________
Faith O. Mowoe
English/Language Arts Teacher
GATE Coordinator

________________________ Yes, I want my child to participate in this study.

________________________ No, I do not want my child to participate in this study.

Name: ________________________________
March 18, 2008

Ms./Mr. ______________:
Mihigh High School

Dear ___________________________:

I am currently in the process of conducting my dissertation research on Gifted and Talented Education students in alternative education settings. Existing research (Ford, Rimm, Reis and McCoach) shows that underachieving gifted and talented students have high dropout rates at the high school level. As a teacher in the alternative education setting, you appreciate the fact that our programs in both the continuation and independent study paradigms were established, in part, to help curtail the high incidence of general high school dropout rates. As part of my study, I intend to ask questions of students; parents; you, my fellow teachers; our counselors; and some District administrators, in order to better understand the possible relationship between alternative education and GATE in the education of our students.

My research aims to study how GATE students navigate their way through alternative education settings. I will conduct the study using the qualitative case study research design and the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. This is where you come in. I will ask you, as my colleagues, on various occasions, to respond to questions on questionnaires and maybe conduct interviews. Upon completion, I will place a copy of my dissertation in the library of the district’s GATE office. I have been given permission by the District’s Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, Mrs. --------, and our site principal, Mr. Villa, to conduct this research. Additionally, my research proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Responsible Research Practices of my school, The Ohio State University. This is the office that ensures the full protection of all research participants’ rights. You will all be given pseudonyms. I hope for a research data collection period of about two quarters.

Please advise me on your decision regarding your willingness to participate, or not, below.

Thank you very much!

Sincerely,

___________________________
Faith O. Mowoe
English/Language Arts Teacher
GATE Coordinator

Yes, I will be one of your research participants:___________
No, I can not participate in this research:____________
Letter to the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction

March 19, 2008

Mrs. -----  
Assistant Superintendent, Instruction

Dear -----------:

I am currently in the process of preparing to conduct my dissertation research on Gifted and Talented Education students in alternative education settings. Existing research (Ford, 1996; Reis, 1998; Reis and McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2004) shows that underachieving gifted and talented students have high dropout rates at the high school level. As a teacher in the alternative education setting, I appreciate the fact that our programs in both the continuation and independent study paradigms were established, in part, to help curtail the high incidence of general high school dropout rates. As part of my study, I intend to ask questions of students, parents, teachers, and some District administrators, in order to better understand the possible symbiotic relationship between alternative education and GATE in the successful (or otherwise) education of our students. My research aims to study how GATE students navigate their way through alternative education settings. I will conduct the study using the qualitative case study research design and the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. Participation is voluntary.

I write to you in your capacity as the Assistant Supt., Instruction, to ask your permission to conduct my research with the GATE population at both the Mihigh and Zinon sites. Mrs. -----, our superintendent, did grant me permission to do this a few years ago, but my research focus has changed, so I need to renew my request. Upon completion, I will place a copy of my dissertation in the library of the district’s GATE office. I have submitted my research proposal to the Office of Responsible Research Practice of my school, The Ohio State University. This is the office that ensures the full protection of all research participants’ rights. I hope for a research data collection period of about two quarters.

You may contact me at the above address or at (909) ------- if you have any questions.

I hope your response will be favorable.

Sincerely,

Faith O. Mowoe  
English/Language Arts Teacher  
GATE Coordinator
Letter to the District’s Alternative Education Director

March 19, 2008

Ms. ------:
Director, Alternative Education Programs

Dear Ms. ------:

I am currently in the process of preparing to conduct my dissertation research on Gifted and Talented Education students in alternative education settings. Existing research (Ford, 1996; Reis, 1998; Reis and McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2004) shows that underachieving gifted and talented students have high dropout rates at the high school level. As a teacher in the alternative education setting, I appreciate the fact that our programs in both the continuation and independent study paradigms were established to help curtail the high incidence of general high school dropout rates. As part of my study, I intend to ask questions of students, parents, and some District administrators, in order to better understand the possible symbiotic relationship between alternative education and GATE in the successful (or otherwise) education of our students. My research aims to study how GATE students navigate their way through alternative education settings. I will conduct the study using the qualitative case study research design and the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. Participation is voluntary.

I write to you in your capacity as the Director of Alternative Programs, to ask your permission to conduct my research with the GATE population at both the Mihigh and Zinon sites. I have received permission from ------, Assistant Superintendent, Instruction. Upon completion, I will place a copy of my dissertation in the library of the district’s GATE office. I have submitted my research proposal to the Office of Responsible Research Practice of my school, The Ohio State University. This is the office that ensures the full protection of all research participants’ rights. I hope for a research data collection period of about two quarters.

You may contact me at the above address or at (909) ------- if you have any questions.

I hope your response will be favorable.

Sincerely,

Faith O. Mowoe
English/Language Arts Teacher
GATE Coordinator
Letter to Administrators and Teachers at Mihigh

Mr./Mrs./Ms. -------:
Mihigh High School

Dear -------:

I am currently in the process of conducting my dissertation research on Gifted and Talented Education students in alternative settings. Existing research (Ford, 1996; Reis, 1998; Reis and McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2004) shows that underachieving gifted and talented students have high dropout rates at the high school level. As a teacher in the alternative education setting, you appreciate the fact that our programs in both the continuation and independent study paradigms were established, in part, to help curtail the high incidence of general high school dropout rates. As part of my study, I intend to ask questions of students; parents; you, my fellow teachers; and our counselors; in order to better understand the possible relationship between alternative education and GATE in the education of our students.

My research aims to study how GATE students navigate their way through alternative education settings. I will conduct the study using the qualitative case study research design and the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. This is where you come in. I will ask you, as my colleagues, on various occasions, to respond to questions on questionnaires and maybe conduct interviews. I will also visit your classrooms as part of my participant observation requirement. Upon completion, I will place a copy of my dissertation in the library of the district’s GATE office. The Assistant Superintendent, Instruction, Mrs. -------, and Mr. Villa, our principal, have given me permission to conduct this research. The Office of Responsible Research Practice of my school, The Ohio State University, has also approved my research proposal. This is the office that ensures the full protection of all research participants’ rights. You will all be given pseudonyms. I hope for a research data collection period of about two quarters.

Please advise me on your decision regarding your willingness to participate, or not, below.

Thank you very much!

Sincerely,

___________________________
Faith O. Mowoe
English/Language Arts Teacher
GATE Coordinator

Yes, I will be one of your research participants:___________
No, I can not participate in this research:___________
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Students’ Interview Questions

• How do you classify yourself racially/ethnically?

• About self and family --- Parents, siblings, etc.

• When were you identified GATE?

• How do you define GATE? Understand by it?

• What does being a GATE student mean to you?

• Describe your typical school day at Carrie/Eagle/Rally High.

• Did you participate in the honors program there? Yes? Describe it.

• No? Why not?

• Why did you transfer to Mihigh?

• Working at your potential?

• Mean to be a minority GATE student in a continuation high school?

• Do you feel that you’re challenged enough in your classes?

• Go back to the comprehensive high school?
Tell me about your post-graduation plans.

- College?

- Felt that you were treated differently because of the perceived ethnic group to which you belong?
Teachers’ Questionnaire

- For how long have you been teaching?

- Been an alternative education teacher?

- What are your overall impressions on being an alternative education teacher?

- Describe alternative education.

- What are some of the benefits of continuation education?

- What are some of the problems?

- Describe the student population at your site.

- How are your classes structured, compared with what obtains at the comprehensive high school sites?

- Are you familiar with GATE and the characteristics of GATE students?

- Do you know who your GATE-identified students are?

- Describe their academic performance.