LONG-TERM SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES OF SUBJECT-AREA ACCELERATION ON GIFTED LEARNERS

by

Dana Cantrell King

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study utilizing transcendental phenomenology methods sought to understand the long-term social and emotional outcomes associated with subject-area acceleration. The participants were high school gifted juniors and seniors from one rural high school the southeastern United States. Data was collected through surveys, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. The rich details produced by this study enabled the researcher to construct a voice for this population by analyzing overarching themes emerging from surveys and interviews. The results of this study indicated that participants experienced primarily positive social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration including long-term friendships, healthy competition, supportive parents and teachers, and motivation. The study will help guide teachers, parents, and administrators as they seek appropriate placement options for gifted learners.

Descriptors: gifted, emotional, social, subject-area acceleration

DEDICATION

This amazing journey would not have been possible without the continued love and support of my family. Jimmy, I can never thank you enough for all the joy you bring to my life; God truly blessed me with a wonderful husband. Thank you for the countless trips to Virginia and patience during the late night writing sessions. To my son, Jake, you always make me proud to be your mother. Thank you for allowing God to use you mightily. I can only imagine the plans He has for you. Mama and Daddy, thank you for believing in me and encouraging me. I am so blessed to have such wonderful Godly parents.

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"In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." Proverbs 3:6

I must first acknowledge my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who truly directed my paths as I conducted this study. All glory and praise belong to Him. Thank you to my chair, Dr. Karla Swafford, for your guidance and patience. You stood by me and supported me tirelessly; I can never thank you enough. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Toni Stanton and Dr. David Cox, and my research consultant, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding. Your encouragement and feedback were truly appreciated. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Jill Jones for her enduring words of wisdom. Last, I would like to thank Pastor Stephen Cochran and the congregation of Snow Springs Baptist Church for your love, support, and prayers.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Educational leaders continuously search for ways to meet the needs of all learners, especially with increased levels of accountability and high stakes testing established by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The key accountability measures ensured by NCLB are academic content standards, academic achievement standards, and state assessments. The academic content and achievement standards outline what students should know and be able to do proficiently. The state assessments help prove academic success (NCLD Public Policy Staff, 2009).

Administrators, teachers, and parents are always concerned not only with the academic benefits of an instructional model, but also with the social and emotional outcomes as well. This study focused on hearing the voice of gifted students, specifically high school juniors and seniors who began subject-area acceleration in middle school by taking high school level courses in middle school.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the background of the study, the statement of the problem, and the purpose of the study. Specific research questions will be established as well as a list of terms that will be used throughout the study. Also included in the chapter is a justification for the research design and the significance of the study.

Background

According to Coangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004), educational needs were addressed based on a learner's progress during the nineteenth century. Students of varying ages and abilities were grouped together, and the teacher worked diligently to meet the needs of each child. After a child mastered a concept or skill, he or she would progress to the next level. Children worked with older children, younger children, and

children of various intellectual abilities. This model of education rapidly changed with the introduction of the industrial model.

The American educational system of graded schools rose in response to the influx of children to the city during the start of the Industrial Revolution. The one room schoolhouse was quickly replaced with Horace Mann's introduction of graded classrooms in 1848. The model was deemed appropriate to compensate for the growing population. Mann's structure remained virtually unchallenged and is still the most widely used and accepted format for public education in the United States (Daniel & Cox, 1988). Graded schools replaced the one-roomed schoolhouses where children learned at their own pace. Now, the United States is still using graded classrooms as an approach to school organization (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Children who are performing at a level below their chronological age have their educational needs met in today's era through Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) or through Response to Intervention (RTI). Gifted learners, in contrast, are performing at a higher level than same-aged peers. The state of Georgia defines a gifted learner as:

> A student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability, exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities. (Georgia Department of Education, 2010, State Board of Education Rule 160-4-2-.38, p. 1)

Early studies on giftedness became prevalent during the early 1900s as John Dewey's influence challenged the graded school model. Such studies stemmed a movement toward early forms of gifted education (Daniel & Cox, 1988). In the late 1950s, the

Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik sparked a renewed interest in the education of America's brightest students. This interest was fueled by the realization that a foreign power may develop their intellectual abilities and surpass the United States (Kulik, 1992). In the 1970s, programming options for the gifted and talented were expanded and the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act provided grant monies for research and programming. Since the 1970s, major studies in gifted education have been infrequent, and most have been quantitative in nature (VanTassel-Baska, 2006). Reports such as *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and *A Nation Deceived* in 2004 refocused the attention of educational leaders on gifted students.

Subject-area acceleration is sometimes implemented to adjust the curriculum in an effort to bring a gifted learner up to a level commensurate with his or her intellectual abilities (Benbow, Argo, & Glass, 1992). Subject-area acceleration is "instructional flexibility based on individual abilities without regard for age" (Paulus, 1984, p. 98). For example, an eighth grade student with above grade level mathematics skills may be placed in a ninth grade level math course. The placement is based on the student's math ability instead of age.

Problem Statement

Many decisions about acceleration are based upon personal biases of school administrators or incomplete and inaccurate information. Several studies have indicated that while schools hold back America's brightest students for a number of reasons, one of the most commonis the possible negative emotional effects on the child (Wood, Portman, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010; Pyrtt, 1999; Neihart, 2007; Coangelo et al., 2004). Understanding the correlation between self-esteem and subject-area acceleration is difficult. When gifted pupils learn in a general education setting, their academic self-

concepts can become inflated. When gifted pupils are accelerated, they may develop a more realistic self-perception that causes some emotional stress.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the personal experiences of students who participated in subject-area acceleration and explore the long-term social and emotional impact of this gifted service delivery model. Information regarding social and emotional well-being will be the primary focus of the survey and interview questions. The common themes gleaned from this qualitative study will allow stakeholders to make better informed decisions about placement options for gifted students.

Significance of the Study

Education for gifted learners has received mounting attention over the years as teachers strive to meet the academic needs of all learners in America's educational system (Colangelo et al., 2004). As other countries continue to improve their technology, goods and services, and educational programs, researchers admit that if American students are going to be competitive in a global economy that our brightest pupils must be challenged and nurtured to the same degree as students with disabilities (Davidson & Davidson, 2004).

This study examined individual experiences with subject-area acceleration and the social and emotional outcomes related to this delivery model. The impact of this research may become increasingly important as schools strive to meet the needs of all learners during economically challenging times. Acceleration can reduce educational costs for school systems; it is virtually a cost-free intervention. If students graduate from high school earlier, the cost of educating them is less. Some schools are currently adopting

year-round school schedules to accommodate large student populations without having to build additional school buildings. If schools opt to accelerate qualified gifted learners, such schedules could be eliminated (Kulik, 1992). If the long-term emotional and social outcomes of subject-area acceleration are known, teachers, administrators, parents, and stakeholders can advocate for this delivery model when appropriate.

Research Questions

The following key question guided the study:

1. What are the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners?

The following sub-questions guided the study:

1. What are the current attitudes and feelings regarding subject-area acceleration of high school juniors and seniors who were subject-area accelerated in middle school?

2. Do these attitudes and feelings differ from their recollection of attitudes and feelings from their middle school years?

3. What were the significant emotional and social adjustment concerns that began in middle school and persisted into high school that may be directly related to the acceleration?

4. How do gifted learners deal with social and emotional stressors?

Delimitations

Delimitations address how a study is narrowed in scope or how it will be bounded. This study was limited to gifted learners in the eleventh and twelfth grade who were subject-area accelerated in middle school. Only upperclassmen were surveyed and selected to participate due to the passage of time between middle school and upper high school. I sought to pinpoint long-term outcomes, not immediate outcomes.

Additionally, the participant group size was limited to eight due to the volume of data generated from this type of study. A larger participant group would have hindered my ability to develop a close, intimate rapport with each participant. This type of relationship is key to a study of this nature (Seidman, 2006).

Another delimitation of the study was due to the retrospective nature of the research. Participants looked back and reconstructed their experience. This reconstruction was partially based on memory and partially on what the participant now viewed as significant about his or her experience (Thelen, 1989).

Definitions

Before discussing the study in-depth, it is important to provide an overview of frequent terms used throughout the various chapters.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): An IEP is designed to meet the unique educational needs of a child who has a disability as defined by federal regulations. The IEP must be tailored to the individual student's needs as identified by the IEP evaluation process, and must especially help teachers and related service providers understand the student's disability and how the disability affects the learning process (Kamens, 2004).

Response to Intervention (RTI): Response to Intervention is a method of academic intervention used in the United States to provide early, systematic assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. RTI seeks to prevent academic failure through early

intervention, frequent progress monitoring, and intensive research-based instructional interventions for children who continue to have difficulty (Shinn, 2007). The ultimate purpose of the method was to replace the intelligence quotient/achievement discrepancy formula used to identify students with learning disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005).

Gifted learners: A student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability, exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities (Georgia Department of Education, 2010, State Board of Education Rule 160-4-2-.38, p. 1).

Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act: The Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act was passed in 1988 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The Javits Act has three primary components: the research of effective methods of testing, identification, and programming, which is performed at the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented; the awarding of grants to colleges, states, and districts that focus on underrepresented populations of gifted students; and grants awarded to state and districts for program implementation (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT): The SCT describes learning in terms of the interrelationship between behavior, environmental factors, and personal factors. According to the SCT, the learner acquires knowledge as his or her environment converges with personal characteristics and personal experience. New experiences are evaluated using the past experiences. These experiences help to subsequently guide and inform the learner as to how the present should be investigated. A key component of the

SCT is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is based on the idea that learning is a function of the extent to which individuals are able to reflect upon and internalize their own successes and failures. Self-efficacy is achieved when the learner identifies his or her ability to perform (Bandura, 1986).

Enrichment: Enrichment is activities that go beyond the existing standards. It is a model primarily used in grades kindergarten through five (Southern & Jones, 1991).

Acceleration: Acceleration involves progressing through an educational program at a faster rate or at a younger age than is typical (Southern et al., 1991).

Grade-based acceleration: This model shortens the number of years a gifted learner remains in school. Some examples are grade skipping and early admission to college (Rogers, 2002).

Subject-area acceleration: This model involves a rapid progression within a specific subject by placement in a higher grade level. An example is an eighth grader taking a freshman math course (Rogers, 2002).

Phenomenology: A qualitative study designed to understand the meaning events have for people in a particular situation (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative study: A qualitative study derives data that is used to interpret the meaning of a phenomenon, without trying to solve a problem (Van Manen, 1990).

Purposeful sampling: A method of participant selection based on the premise that those selected can "inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 125).

Research Plan

This study was qualitative in nature and employed a phenomenological design. Data was gathered using surveys and individual and focus group interviews. This

approach, “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing” (Seidman, 2006, p.15), employed open-ended questions to help participants reconstruct their experience within the topic of study. This design was fitting because I wanted to capture the voice of the participants in rich detail.

A three interview series was used to help participants “plumb the experience and place it in context” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). The first interview consisted of a focused life history as it relates to the participant’s giftedness and elementary education. The second interview delved into the details of the participant’s experience with subject-area acceleration in middle school. The last interview encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning of the experience and was conducted as a focus group to allow for group reflection and a more authentic re-creation of their experiences.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Subject-area acceleration is one type of delivery model for gifted services. Although studies have investigated the academic benefits of the model, few have been dedicated to researching the social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration. Of the limited research examining social and emotional outcomes, findings are generally positive, yet negative dialogue in the educational realm continues to hinder extensive use of this model. In this chapter, theories underlying acceleration are explored, the history of acceleration and gifted education are outlined, and the advantages and disadvantages of acceleration are examined.

Theoretical Framework

Decisions about subject-area acceleration are often based on personal preferences or biases. Understanding the social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration is essential in addressing this problem. In a qualitative study, theories are "used as broad explanation for behaviors and attitudes" (Creswell, 2003, p. 61). By identifying a theoretical framework, findings can be organized, phenomena explained, and new research stimulated (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006).

Social Cognitive Theory. Albert Bandura (1986) stated:

> Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (p. 81).

The social cognitive theory proposed by Bandura has become one of the most influential theories of learning and development. His theory expounded on behaviorism, which he found a bit too simplistic, to include the belief that direct reinforcement cannot account for all types of learning (Boeree, 1998).

Bandura's social cognitive theory posits that portions of a person's knowledge acquisitions can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences. Bandura may be best known for his 1961 bobo doll study. In this study, he created a film of one of his students beating up a bobo doll (an inflatable balloon creature with a weight in the bottom designed to bob back up when knocked down). Each time the woman punched the doll, she shouted "Sockeroo!" She kicked it, hit it, sat on it, and hit it with a little hammer. The film was then shown to a group of kindergarteners, who thoroughly enjoyed it. The kindergarteners were then led to a playroom with a bobo doll and little hammers. As one might predict, they punched the doll yelling "Sockeroo!" kicked it, sat on it, and hit it with the little hammers. These children changed their behavior without being rewarded. Bandura called this phenomenon observational learning or modeling, and the theory behind it he called the social learning theory (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

From this study, Bandura concluded certain steps involved in the modeling process. First, Bandura established the importance of attention. In order to learn anything, students must be paying attention. Anything that puts a damper on attention is going to decrease learning. Next, students must be able to retain or remember what they paid attention to. Imagery and language play a role in retention; students will store what they have seen the model doing in mental images or verbal descriptions. The next phase is reproduction. Performance of a task improves after one watches a skill being modeled

and then reproduces the behavior. Last, Bandura contended that motivation is also key. He believed that motivation involved past reinforcement, promised reinforcement, and vicarious reinforcement. Bandura did not believe that motivation caused learning, but rather that motivation causes students to demonstrate what they have learned (Bandura, 1986; Isom, 1998).

This study also solidified the idea of vicarious learning or the process of learning from other people's behavior. Vicarious learning asserts that individuals can witness others' behaviors and then reproduce the same actions. Similarly, individuals learn to refrain from making mistakes and perform better if they see others complete the task successfully (Isom, 1998).

Bandura's social cognitive theory is also concerned with another key component of human personality, self-regulation. Bandura taught that self-regulation involved three steps. The first step is self-observation. One must look at himself and his behavior and have an accurate self-image. Judgment is the next step. One must compare themselves with an established standard, such as rules of decorum, or create his or her own arbitrary standards. Bandura's theory suggested that in the judgment phase one could compete with others or with himself. The last step is self-response. Self-response involves rewarding or punishing oneself based on his established standard. Bandura used the term "self-efficacy" to describe a person's belief in his capability of successfully executing a specific behavior. A strong sense of self-efficacy allows one to select, try, and complete behaviors leading to desired outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Isom, 1998).

The social cognitive theory is applied today in many different arenas, such as mass media, education, marketing, and public health. It is also a universally accepted theory. One key element of the theory, self-regulation, has been incorporated into a

therapy technique known as self-control therapy. This therapy has proved to be successful in helping people stop smoking and overeating. Some tactics associated with self-control therapy are behavioral charts, environmental planning, and self-contracts. Behavioral charts may involve something as simple as counting the number of cigarettes one smokes in a day or may be a complex behavioral diary indicating how many cigarettes are smoked, when they are smoked, and how one feels before and after smoking. Environmental planning includes altering one's environment to ensure success. For example, one may stop associating with others who smoke or may throw away all ashtrays in the house. The last example of self-control therapy is self-contracts. This includes a reward plan. For example, one may decide if he smokes less than ten cigarettes in a week, he will go to a movie Sunday night. If he smokes more than ten cigarettes in a week, he will wash the car instead (Boeree, 1998).

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) impacted this study because it is concerned with the learning environment and the social context of learning. SCT describes learning in terms of the interrelationship between behavior, environmental factors, and personal factors. According to SCT, the learner acquires knowledge as his or her environment converges with personal characteristics and personal experiences. New experiences are evaluated using past experiences. These experiences help to subsequently guide and inform the learner as to how the present should be evaluated (Burney, 2008).

Although the SCT applies to learning in general, it is useful for planning curriculum and instructional experiences for gifted learners. Bandura (1986) taught that what people think and feel about themselves has an influence on their behavior. Others in the students' learning environment are considered influential and thus the importance

of the peer or social group is stressed. Observing the performance of difficult tasks can give a student the confidence to try the task. The peer group can also influence a student's self-efficacy, meaning confidence in one's own competence to perform a stated task, and be a motivating force if the student views the peers as similar to himself. Motivation is stronger if one believes he or she can be successful. Likewise, pupils who associate with other highly motivated students are more likely to be engaged in their learning (Burney, 2008).

SCT also stresses the importance of self-regulatory and coping skills. Gifted individuals without adequate challenge will not be able to properly develop adequate self-regulatory and coping strategies, which could have severe ramifications at some point in their educational careers. Academically challenging opportunities must be present for gifted learners so that self-regulatory skills, coping strategies, and self-efficacy skills can be developed (Burney, 2008).

Review of the Literature

This qualitative study attempts to understand the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. It was imperative to link subject-area acceleration to gifted learners directly. The following literature review explores types of gifted delivery models, the historical perspective of gifted acceleration, and acceleration research and implications.

Types of gifted delivery models. The two types of delivery models generally associated with gifted education are enrichment and acceleration. The National Association for Gifted Children (2004) defines enrichment as activities that go beyond the existing standards. The enrichment model is primarily used in grades kindergarten through five. In middle and high school, pupils are served through the acceleration

models. Acceleration is progressing through an educational program at a faster rate or at a younger age than is typical (Southern et al., 1991). It means "matching the level, complexity, and pace of the curriculum to the readiness and motivation of the student" (Colangelo et al., 2004, p.xi).

Acceleration can be divided into two categories: grade-based acceleration and subject-based acceleration. Grade-based acceleration shortens the number of years a gifted learner remains in school. These options include: grade skipping, nongraded classrooms, and early admission to college. This study focused on subject-area acceleration. Subject-area acceleration includes: early entrance to school, compacted curriculum, concurrent enrollment, credit by examination, and rapid progression within a specific subject by placement in a higher grade level (Rogers, 2002). Although there are up to 18 different methods of acceleration, the most common are: grade skipping, subject-area acceleration, Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment, and early entrance to kindergarten (Southern et al., 2001).

Historical perspective of gifted acceleration. To understand the development of gifted acceleration practices, one must consider key changes to educational policies, approaches, and materials over the past two centuries. During the early nineteenth century, students were educated in the iconic one-room schoolhouse. Students of various ages and academic levels were in one classroom, and the teacher attempted to meet the needs of all learners. After a student mastered a concept, he or she moved on to more challenging tasks. Students in this setting worked alongside children older and younger than themselves and interacted with them in academic and social settings (Colangelo et al., 2004).

The mid-nineteenth century, however, brought rapid changes to educational structuring. America was changing rapidly and becoming more industrialized. In 1848, Horace Mann advocated a new graded classroom model. Graded classrooms helped the nation meet the demands of growing school populations. Schools, which could support numerous classrooms, found this model to be practical. The graded classrooms structure remained unchallenged for decades and is still the most widespread format for education in the United States (Daniel & Cox, 1988).

The graded school model was reassessed early in the twentieth century under the influence of John Dewey. While defenders of the graded school practice expressed satisfaction of the social benefits of placing students in classes based on chronological age, educators began to express concern about students' individual learning differences and needs. Early studies of giftedness emerged during this era pioneered by Lewis Terman and Leta Hollingsworth. These studies added support to the possible ineffectiveness of graded school structure. Similarly, Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori spawned an interest in the need to challenge children and allow them to progress through learning at their own speed. After the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of Sputnik, a closer examination of America's education system ensued fueled by the realization that a foreign global power might surpass America's advances (Daniel & Cox, 1988; Coleman, 1999; Stewart, 1999).

In the 1960s gifted education received widespread attention and research. Gifted enrichment programs were implemented in many American schools. Such programs offered gifted learners more challenging curriculum in addition to their current grade level curriculum. Acceleration gifted delivery models, however, were not widely used. In 1972, The Marland Report issued the first formal definition of giftedness and

encouraged schools to define giftedness more broadly by including leadership ability, visual and performing arts, creative or productive thinking, and psychomotor ability along with academic and intellectual talent. The United States gave official status to gifted education in 1974 by establishing The Office of Gifted and Talented housed within the U.S. Office of Education (Coleman, 1999; Sayler, 1999).

Gifted education received growing national attention in the 1980s with the release of *A Nation at Risk*. This report raised awareness about the importance of gifted education by reporting how America's brightest students may not be able to compete with international counterparts. In 1988, Congress passed the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education act as part of the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Sayler, 1999; Stewart, 1999).

In 1990, the National Research Centers on the Gifted and Talented were established at the University of Connecticut, University of Virginia, Yale University, and Northwestern University. These institutions helped guide the formation of a report released by the United States Department of Education in 1993 titled *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's Talent*. This report outlined how America often neglects its most talented youth and makes numerous recommendations that influenced the next decade of research in the field of gifted education (Sayler, 1999).

The millennium brought continued emphasis on educating gifted children. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2001which included the Javits program and a definition of gifted and talented students. Finally, in 2004, a national research-based report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, was released by the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa. The sole purpose of

this report was to emphasize the importance of acceleration strategies for gifted learners (Stewart, 1999; Sayler, 1999).

Acceleration research and implications. Research has consistently shown positive benefits of acceleration. The literature reveals many shared benefits such as it is cost effective and convenient to implement and stimulates student motivation (Colangelo et al., 2004). Despite research-based support for acceleration, school administrators, teachers, and parents remain reluctant to implement this practice. James Borland (1989, as cited in *A Nation Deceived*) stated:

> Acceleration is one of the most curious phenomena in the field of education. I can think of no other issue in which there is such a gulf between what research has revealed and what most practitioners believe. The research on acceleration is so uniformly positive, the benefits of appropriate acceleration so unequivocal, that it is difficult to see how an educator could oppose it. (p.29)

Similarly, educators may be unfamiliar with acceleration models, and students may suffer social and emotional effects from acceleration (Wood et al., 2010).

Cost effective. Acceleration can reduce educational costs for school systems and parents. It is virtually a cost free intervention. If students spend fewer years in school, the cost of educating them is lowered. Some schools are currently adopting year-round school schedules to accommodate a large student population without building additional school buildings. If schools opt to accelerate qualified gifted students, such schedules could be eliminated (Kulik, 1992).

Further, if acceleration practices can continue throughout a student's college career, cost savings for parents can be dramatic. According to The College Board, a year of college at a private school increased 6% in 2003-2004. The increase was over 14% for

public colleges. Students who graduate a semester early from high school could shave one-eighth off their tuition expenses. Another way to accelerate students is through Advanced Placement (AP) classes. When a high school student takes AP classes, his parents can save thousands of dollars. In 2004, over one million pupils took over 1.9 million AP exams and saved their parents millions of dollars in college costs. If an acceptable score is made on the AP exam, the student receives credit for the corresponding college course, and parents do not have to pay tuition for the student to take the course (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Convenient. According to Benbow et al. (1992), gifted students living in rural areas are one of the most difficult populations to reach in terms of educational programming. The populations of these schools are small; therefore, the gifted population is extremely small. In Iowa, for example, there are 327 school districts out of 430 with a total kindergarten through twelfth grade population of less than 1,000 pupils. Gifted students in school districts such as these are often underserved. Acceleration is easy to implement even with small numbers. No special facilities or teachers are needed. The convenience of grade acceleration can allow students in rural areas access to challenging academic programs.

Motivating. Students who accelerate are less likely to become bored with school. Gifted students are not normally considered at risk for academic failure. Educators often assume the brightest students will be the most motivated. Many gifted pupils, however, seem to lack motivation (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). In a study of 2,000 middle school gifted students, 37% were averaging a C or worse. More than half of these young people were at risk for dropping out of school due to behavior problems, low grades, and poor attendance. The study sought to determine the causes that put these students at risk. An

interesting relationship was discovered between behavior and grade point average. By lowering the grades of students' who were capable of performing much better, the teachers inadvertently caused the students to misbehave. Pupils with behavior issues received lower grades regardless of their mental ability. This cycle worked against high-risk gifted students. Acceleration might improve students' behavior (Seeley, 2004).

Gifted learners need to be challenged and motivated. Research suggests that many gifted students who stay in inappropriate learning environments will not use their talents fully (Siegle & McCoach, 2005; Porath, 1996). They may also develop ineffective study habits, apathy, and adjustment issues (Reis, 1998). Many of these pupils will even drop out of school altogether (Holt, 2000). In a 2000 research project by Renzulli and Park, 5% of the 3,250 gifted students in the study dropped out of school after the eighth grade. The study cited a general feeling of boredom and disinterest in school as the main cause (Badowski, Rubiner, & Scully, 2004). A general pattern of promising academic effects were obtained, however, when students were allowed to grade skip (Rogers, 1992). This curriculum change can reduce the amount of time a student has to study concepts that he or she already knows thus increasing his/her motivation (Kulik, 1992). The majority of children who have been educationally accelerated have grades higher than other gifted students who are not accelerated. They also compare favorably with the older students in their classes. Additionally, accelerants also report being interested and enthusiastic about school (Lynch, 1999).

On the contrary, many gifted students who are not allowed an acceleration delivery model become bored and frustrated with school and with unchallenging schoolwork (Olenchak, 1999). These feelings even can cause physical symptoms such as stomach issues, headaches, and emotional symptoms. After the same students were

accelerated, however, these symptoms disappeared (Vialle, Ashton, Carlton, & Rankin, 2001).

Rogers (1986) synthesized a range of studies on motivational orientations of gifted learners. Her findings suggests that gifted students in general are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated; preferred to work with intellectual peers; and dislike being given the responsibility for the learning achievements of classmates. This theory supports a study by Gross (1997, 1998) who found that a group of gifted students assigned to an acceleration program were motivated and task-oriented. The group was noted for its peer bonding, affectionate guidance, and mutual encouragement of participants. Many of these students revealed that they were motivated by being with intellectual peers and that collaborative work was now enjoyable.

Innocuous. Many educators believe there are negative emotional and social effects associated with full grade acceleration. Richardson and Benbow (1990) identified over 2,000 students aged 12 to 14 years who scored extremely high on the math portion of the College Board Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). More than half of these students were accelerants. The pupils completed a survey at age 18 with a 91% response rate and a follow up survey was initiated at age 23 with a 65% response rate. According to the data collected from the surveys, acceleration did not seem to deter social interactions or self-acceptance. No social, emotional, or identity issues were noted either. At age 18, only six percent of the accelerants viewed acceleration negatively and only three percent viewed it negatively at age 23 (Colangelo et al., 2004). Additionally, in a 10 year longitudinal study of mathematically gifted pupils who were accelerated, no support could be found for the idea that gifted students may be emotionally or socially harmed by acceleration (Holt, 2000).

Next, some educators feel that students who are accelerated will have a hard time making new friends, resulting in a lowered self-esteem and possibly depression (Cross, 2005; Rimm, 1988). School social settings are very complicated. Some accelerated students may not adjust easily or quickly. Students who already had a hard time forming friendships may need time to develop social skills and confidence and should not be accelerated. Although much of the evidence on social issues related to acceleration is not as clear as the research on the academic benefits, the data is still more positive than negative. Acceleration can help a child broaden his peer group and incorporate friends who are the same age and older. Some gifted children seem to bond best with older children anyway, so making friends after acceleration will actually be easier (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Several studies have found that gifted learners actually prefer the companionship of intellectual peers or older children. This would make subject-area acceleration a socially viable option. As a matter of fact, most children, gifted and non-gifted, tend to choose close friends on the basis of similarities in intellectual age versus chronological age. For example, at ages when their chronological age peers were simply looking for play partners, gifted children were looking for close, stable, friendships (Gross, 2001).

Self-esteem is another issue about which many parents, teachers, and administrators are concerned when discussing acceleration as a gifted delivery model (Cross, 2005; Moon & Hall, 1998). When gifted children are in a general education classroom, their academic self-esteem is often inflated. The curriculum and pacing of the class is geared toward students who are one to three grade levels or more below their ability. When these students are accelerated and placed in a classroom where students know as much as they do, they develop a more realistic perception of their abilities, and

their self-esteem may wane a bit. Usually, this change does not last long, and their confidence returns rapidly (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Gifted students from accelerated classes outperform students from traditional gifted classes by four to five months on grade equivalent scales. Likewise, students who entered elementary school early average six months ahead in achievement when compared to their same age peers (Rogers, 2002). In 1984, Kulik and Kulik concluded that gifted accelerants gained almost nine-tenths of a grade equivalent over their gifted peers who were not accelerated (Rogers, 1992).

Advanced Placement (AP) classes, another form of acceleration, have also proven to be very beneficial academically. For example, college students who have taken at leave one AP class have a 59% change of earning a bachelor's degree; students who have taken two or more AP classes increase their chances to 75%. Participating in these challenging classes prepares them for the commitment necessary to succeed in a college setting (Johnson, 2005).

Although most research evidence indicates positive social and emotional consequences related to subject-area acceleration, some studies reveal some adjustment issues for gifted accelerants that must be considered before placement. One concept is the Big-Fish-Little-Pond effect. This means that for some gifted learners their self-concept is based on being at the top of an unchallenging class. The student meets standards with little to no effort and healthy competition does not exist. In this setting, the learner may become arrogant. A student who has been a part of a learning environment such as this may flounder when placed in a higher grade. He or she may not know how to cope in a classroom with students who are equally as bright. In a 1993 project, Sayler and Brookshire studied a population consisting of accelerated gifted

eighth graders who had either entered school early or skipped a grade, gifted eighth graders, and eighth graders in general education classrooms. Both gifted and accelerated students had better perceptions about social and emotional issues, and they tended to have fewer behavior problems than the regular students did. The non-accelerated students said their peers saw them as popular, smart, important, and athletic more often that the accelerants and the general education group. In another report, Sayler stated that the difference between an accelerant being adjusted or maladjusted was related to the interactions of the schools and parents (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Educators further contend that their greatest fears about acceleration are psychological. Students may become depressed when they leave their friends behind (Badowski et al., 2004). The most common reason cited for rejecting early school entry as a delivery model for gifted students is social and emotional development concerns (Vialle et al., 2001). In a survey by Whan (1993), 23 out of 27 respondents revealed that the socialization process and the ability to communicate with peers is more valuable to a child's education than academics at this early stage of schooling.

Teachers, parents, and administrators have other fears regarding the emotional and social consequences of acceleration. For example, some feel the children will be deprived of necessary childhood experiences and may be involved in fewer extracurricular activities. Some believe that acceleration will make excessive academic demands on the students that will cause undue stress. Low academic achievement is another concern. The low academic achievement is linked to the increase in academic competition. Others contend that gifted accelerates will miss leadership experiences because they will be younger than their classmates; being younger will make it more difficult to assume leadership roles. Another fear is that parents of children who are not

selected for acceleration will become angry causing stress and hardship on the accelerants and their families (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Bland, Sowa, & Callhan, 1994).

Few social disadvantages of acceleration have been documented; however, nonacademic aspects of acceleration have not been studied as extensively as educational ones (Neihart, 2007). A follow-up study of 5,000 top performing students, within the top 1 percentile on the SAT, who participated in the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) in the seventh or eighth grade found that the majority of the participants reported that acceleration helped them to embrace their abilities, form positive relationships with intellectual peers, and increase their self-confidence (Benbow, Lubinski, & Suchy, 1996).

Unfamiliar. Educators in some schools are unfamiliar with the research regarding the benefits of acceleration. They also have not received any training on acceleration and lack the skills and knowledge to ensure a positive experience for all involved. Although this delivery model has been positively supported by research evidence conducted over the past 60 years, it is still used infrequently and met with much uncertainty. The topic of acceleration can bring forth debate in a group of educators quickly; it is easily linked to a teacher's personal beliefs and attitudes (Vialle et al., 2001).

Most teachers see enrichment as a safer option. Enrichment involves pulling students out of their regular education classrooms for a portion of the school day to study more advanced topics with their intellectual peers (Davidson, 2004). They feel like acceleration is a risk. Most parents and administrators may also feel the same way and may respect the teacher's decision because they believed it to be in the best interest of the child (Colangelo et al., 2004). On the contrary, people who specialize in working with

gifted learners or those who have personal experience related to acceleration are typically more positive (Lynch, 1999).

The teacher who receives the accelerant is an important part of the overall success of the intervention. The child's teacher must be knowledgeable and accepting of the idea. The teacher will also need to prepare the other students in the classroom for the transition. Additionally, the teacher may have to make some accommodations for the student. For example, a five year old in a second grade classroom may be able to comprehend the course content with no problems and may be able to participate in class discussions successfully; however, he or she may have some difficulty with lengthy handwritten work because his/her handwriting skills may be less developed than the other pupils (Shoplik, 2000). Gifted accelerants need teachers who are academically demanding but supportive. They thrive with teachers who are self-confident and who have a sound knowledge base about the nature and needs of gifted learners. Most teachers simply are unfamiliar with the process and specifics of acceleration (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Similarly, school counselors are unfamiliar with acceleration as a program option for gifted learners. Most school counselors are expected to assume a role in the academic planning of students. They are also called upon for consultation on the social and emotional development of students and how these dimensions might influence learning. The majority of school counselors, however, has no formal training or familiarity with the research on acceleration and relies on informal information and limited knowledge when advising parents, administrators, and teachers (Wood et al., 2010).

In a 2010 study conducted by Wood and colleagues, 149 school counselors were surveyed regarding their perceptions of and experience with acceleration as a delivery

model for gifted learners. Over 77% of the counselors surveyed reported having conversations with parents regarding acceleration, over 70% reported discussing the option with students, and 83% discussed the option with teachers. Similarly, over 50% of the participants had recommended acceleration for a student in their building. The majority of the participants indicated they were very comfortable with recommending subject-area acceleration or dual enrollment in high school and college but were not at all comfortable recommending grade skipping or early entrance to kindergarten. The findings of this study are striking. The majority of school counselors who participated reported having no formal training in gifted education yet they were being solicited for expertise advice on acceleration and its effects on gifted learners. Next, the counselors are not only being solicited, they are providing the advice. Then, school counselor expertise regarding acceleration is based on informal training. Next, school counselors are more hesitant to recommend some acceleration delivery models, such as grade skipping. Last, school counselors continue to cite social and emotional development as a primary factor against accelerating gifted students regardless of the research (Wood et al.).

Summary

Research has specifically shown positive academic and practical benefits of subject-area acceleration. It is cost effective (Kulik, 1992), convenient (Benbow et al., 1992), and motivating (Lynch, 1999). These claims are substantially supported throughout the literature. Although these positive claims are prevalent, subject-area acceleration is still frequently avoided as a delivery model option for gifted learners. Teachers, parents, and administrators fear negative social and emotional outcomes of acceleration (Davis & Rimm, 1998) and often hinder students from being subject-area

advanced.

In his book, *Guiding the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Youth* Delisle (1992) stated:

> It's a daunting task, being an educator, being the responsibility for shaping both academics and attitudes…No computer-scanned bubble sheet measures how students feel about learning or their biases toward self and others. These indexes, the true value of learning and education, elude detection and measurement, sometimes for years…So, the brave educators wishing to enhance both students' self-concepts and their achievements must be content with not knowing the immediate or long-term impacts of their actions. (p. 50)

Although educators and other educational stakeholders may not be able to predict the impact of educational decisions on an individual gifted learner, it is undeniable that gifted students whose academic needs are not being met face a concerning dilemma. On one hand, they may chose to stay in the current educational environment and face frustration, irritability, apathy, anxiety, boredom, underachievement, and social isolation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hoekman, McCormick, & Gross, 1999). On the other hand, they may choose to move to a more advanced academic climate and lose chronological age peers and risk the danger of not being at the top of the class (Rogers, 1991). Gifted learners will benefit from having an established voice proclaiming their experiences with subject-area acceleration.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative study sought to understand the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration of gifted learners. Qualitative methods allowed the participants' voices to emerge through rich detail and dialogue, whereas statistical data could not adequately convey the students' thoughts and feelings. Quantitative research may provide valuable numerical data, but it cannot reveal the meaning behind the numbers. When investigating the phenomenon of social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners, meaning was important because it involved a lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). This chapter explains the research design, identifies the research questions, describes the participants and setting, gives information about the researcher, describes the method of data collection and data analysis, and discusses the trustworthiness and ethical issues.

Research Design

A phenomenological design helped provide a voice for subject-area accelerated gifted learners as they shared their personal social and emotional experiences with this delivery model several years later. A phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning events have for people in particular situations (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Creswell, 2007). The design of this study best relates to methods associated with transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology offers a portal of insight into the participants. It is related to developing a voice in order to help those served by the researcher. For this reason, transcendental phenomenology is well suited for studies conducted by teachers, nurses, and counselors. Transcendental

phenomenology is based on the relationship of noema, the experience, and the noesis, the interpretation of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This design was appropriate because I wished to capture the voice of the participants and provide readers with an understanding of the role subject-area acceleration plays in their social and emotional well-being. "Understanding is the primary goal of qualitative research" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.12). A qualitative study is exploratory in nature and was well suited to the research questions as the study sought to "listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas" (Creswell, 2003, p. 30). The data derived from such a study can be used to interpret the meaning of a phenomenon, without trying to solve a problem (Van Manen, 1990). A logical way to gather such data is through interviewing.

The concept of *interviewing* covers a wide range of practices. This study, however, used "in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing" (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). The method combined life history interviews and focused, in-depth interviews using primarily open-ended questions. The goal was to have the participants reconstruct their subject-area acceleration experience from middle school and relate that experience to their present social and emotional well-being.

In-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing involves conducting a series of three interviews. The first interview was individual and established the context of the participant's experience. The second allowed the participant to reconstruct details related to subject-area acceleration within the context. The third interview, a focus group interview, encouraged participants' to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them (Seidman, 2006).

As a former teacher of gifted students and mother of a gifted child, I am acknowledging my position on subject-area acceleration. Before beginning data

collection, I believed that the negative social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration were limited. I gave a voice to the participants, however, without imposing my own biases and interpretations on the data. This position is a general concept from phenomenology called bracketing. Bracketing means inspecting a phenomenon while setting aside presuppositions and interpretations (Ashworth, 1999; Giorgi, 1985).

The following key question guided the study:

> **Research Question 1**: What are the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners?

The following sub-questions guided the study:

> **Research Question 2:** What are the current attitudes and feelings regarding subject-area acceleration of high school juniors and seniors who were subject-area accelerated in middle school?
>
> **Research Question 3:** Do these attitudes and feelings differ from their recollection of attitudes and feelings from their middle school years?
>
> **Research Question 4:** What were the significant emotional and social adjustment concerns that began in middle school and persisted into high school that may be directly related to the acceleration?
>
> **Research Question 5**: How do gifted learners deal with social and emotional stressors?

Setting

The setting was a rural high school in northwest Georgia with a student

population of 626 in ninth through twelfth grades as of 2009. The demographic description of the student population is as follows: 92% white, 6% black, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. Twenty-nine percent of the population qualified for free or reduced lunch and 12% were students with disabilities. Ten percent of the population is identified as gifted based on Georgia's multiple criteria method of determining giftedness, which is comparable to the state's percentage of 9.895%. The target school had consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) but did not make AYP during the 2009-2010 school year due to the academic performance of the economically disadvantaged subgroup. The school is not in the needs improvement status. As of 2009, the school employed 36 full time teachers, eight part time teachers, three administrators, and four support personnel or paraprofessionals. All teachers, administrators, and support personnel are white. In terms of education, 18% of the teachers hold a bachelors degree, 53% hold a masters degree, and 29% hold a specialist degree (*Common Core of Data*, n.d.).

Gifted students in this high school use an advanced content delivery model in the Advanced Placement and honors program classes. This means the pacing of the content delivery is accelerated. Students attend classes on a block schedule and are served a minimum of five segments per week. Students in the gifted program are expected to master the Georgia Performance Standards and Georgia State Gifted Standards in the subject areas of their gifted classes. Gifted students in this high school are also eligible to participate in an academic competition known as the Academic Decathlon, numerous study trips, and an Executive Internship Course their senior year. The Executive Internship Course allows students to explore a career with a local individual or company. All honors and Advanced Placement teachers in this school are gifted certified (*Gifted Education Program Descriptions*, 2012).

Participants

I surveyed gifted juniors and seniors who were subject-area accelerated in middle school. These students were served using an advanced content model insixth, seventh, and eighth grade. . Many of them took advanced content in all four core subject areas and foreign language. In the eighth grade, students may take math, physical science, and Spanish for high school credit. Students in the middle school gifted program master the Georgia Performance Standards and Georgia Gifted Standards. They may also participate in system-wide seminars, an oratorical contest, and an academic quiz bowl competition (*Gifted Education Program Descriptions*, 2012).

From this group of subject-area accelerated students, eight participants were selected through criterion sampling, two males and two females from each grade level. Creswell (1998) supported using five to 25 participants in a phenomenological study. Similarly, according to Morse (1994), researchers must use at least six. Seidman (2006) discussed two criteria for researchers to use when determining how many participants are necessary. First, one must determine if there are sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population. This study only involves one site and eight participants are 15% of the subject-area accelerated population. A participant size of eight does reflect the range of participants because an equal number of males and females were selected, as well as an equal number of juniors and seniors. Due to the limited diversity in the population, socioeconomic status and ethnicity was not a concern of this study. Seidman's (2006) other criterion is saturation of information. The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who have all experienced the same social conditions gives enormous power to the sagas of a relatively few participants. Thus, eight participants seems an adequate number to provide

saturation due to the in-depth interviewing. The selection method of this study was most closely aligned with criterion sampling because the participant sample met predetermined criteria (Patton, 1990). All junior and senior students who were subject-area accelerated in middle school met the criteria to participate in the study if they returned a signed consent form. After the pool had been identified, eight participants were selected using gender and grade level as the criteria. Any student who indicated he or she was not comfortable participating in the interviews was removed from the pool. Participant consent forms were divided into stacks based on gender and grade level. From those stacks, two males and females from each grade level were randomly selected.

Researcher's Role

I am the mother of a gifted child who was subject-area accelerated during sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. In his eighth grade year, he earned three high school credits. As a parent, I frequently addressed questions from colleagues and family members regarding the social and emotional outcomes of acceleration. Naturally, parents wish to ensure the benefits of such programs overshadow any possible negative effects.

As a former teacher of gifted learners, I dedicated over 12 years of my career to ensuring the use of best practices and appropriate placements for gifted students. In my former career setting, students were subject-area accelerated in sixth through eighth grade math, eighth grade science, and foreign language. I did not teach any subject-area accelerated courses, but I did support the use of this gifted delivery model. Because of these placement options, I frequently confronted issues related to the academic, social, and emotional well being of these students. All participants were former students of mine. As noted earlier, however, I did not teach any subject-area accelerated courses. This relationship, therefore, did not interfere with the validity of the study.

Bracketing is of significant importance due to my role as researcher. Bracketing means inspecting a phenomenon while suspending presuppositions (Husserl, 1913; Ashworth, 1999; Hatch, 2002). In transcendental phenomenological studies, bracketing is referred to an epoche. Epoche is described as a clearing of the researcher so the phenomenon can evolve (Moustakas, 1994). I deliberately worked to become aware of my own assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions and then bracketed them in order to be open and receptive to what the participants shared. Before the study, I believed there were no negative social and emotional outcomes associated with subject-area acceleration. Bracketing can also be used to describe a strategy for separating feelings and early interpretations during qualitative data collection (Hatch, 2002). To ensure my feelings and early interpretations were separated, I voice recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim. I relied only on this means of data collection and made no other notes during the interview session that could have influenced data analysis.

Data Collection

When conducting qualitative research, it is vital to use multiple data sources to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. These measures are necessary to promote confidence that my interpretations and conclusions are believable. Data triangulation increases the likelihood that the phenomenon investigated is viewed from multiple points of view (Ary et al, 2006). The combined use of surveys, individual participant interviews, and focus groups were used to triangulate the data. The depth of each of the three data sources increased the credibility of the findings.

Before data collection began, application was made to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University to ensure the ethical integrity of the study and written permission from the IRB was documented (Appendix A). After receiving IRB approval

(January 3, 2012) and local and school system approval (December 16, 2012), I contacted the lead gifted education teacher at the site on January 4, 2012 for a list of juniors and seniors who were subject area accelerated. All students on this list received a copy of the Informed Consent form (Appendix C) in a sealed envelope via their homeroom teachers. Homeroom teachers were given a cover letter with the envelopes stating the nature of the study, a copy of the local school permission to conduct research letter (Appendix B), and directions on returning the completed consent forms in the sealed envelopes to the lead gifted teacher. Parents of participants and participants reviewed an Informed Consent form and signed the form in order to participate in the study (Appendix C). Appropriate documents were also filed in accordance to the school board policy of the site and permission was obtained from the site's principal (Appendix B).

Surveys. Data collection began on January 5, 2012 with the administration of a survey to all gifted juniors and seniors who were subject-area accelerated in middle school. Surveys were only issued to students who returned the parental consent form (Appendix D). The brief surveys (Appendix E) were administered by homeroom teachers at the beginning of homeroom and collected at the end of homeroom. I contacted the homeroom teachers and asked for help with delivering the surveys. The surveys were used to help develop a potential participant pool based on interest. It should be noted that a clear and concise explanation of the study was presented at the top of the distributed survey along with a voluntary participation clause.

Face validity. To ensure face validity of the survey, I created survey questions based on the research design literature and a review of the literature on gifted education. Question number one, simply ensured that the student did participate in subject-area acceleration in middle school. Question number two provided important information

related to the interview process. According to Seidman (2006), in order to give the details of an experience, individuals must reflect upon that experience. Question number three was important to the research design. For interviewing to be successful, the researcher must have a genuine "interest in other individuals' stories" and feel they are worthwhile (Seidman, , p. 9). Similarly, for the interview to be a success, the participant must be willing to share his or her thoughts and feelings. Questions four and question five were tied to developing an appropriate rapport. If a participant feels very uncomfortable or unwilling to participate, it would be very difficult for the researcher to establish the necessary rapport (Hatch, 2002). Similarly, participation in the study was strictly voluntary; therefore, I had to exempt any student who indicated that he or she was unwilling to participate.

Content validity. To ensure content validity of the instrument, I recruited middle school gifted education teachers to review the questions and verify the clarity of the survey. Three teachers were selected from my current school system. All were certified to teach gifted learners according to the guidelines of the state of Georgia and had a minimum of 10 years of experience working with gifted learners. The survey feedback was from all reviewers was positive and no changes were warranted. Fifteen surveys (six juniors and nine seniors) were completed and returned. All participants who completed the survey were considered potential candidates; however, two students were removed from the pool due to indicating on the survey they were uncomfortable about participating in interviews related to this study.

Interviews. The next step in the data collection process was semi-structured interviews of the participants. Both interviews were conducted over a nine-week period from the week of January 4, 2012 until the week of February 29, 2012. Each interview

was approximately 60 minutes in length and was followed by a transcription period. All interviews took place in the media center of the research setting and all occurred after school. There were no other students in the media center at the time of the interviews. Occasionally, the media specialist was in the media center but remained in her office until the interview was completed. The interviewer had a list of open-ended questions but generated questions during the interview as well in response to the participant's responses and the degree of rapport established (Hatch, 2002).

The first interview (Appendix E) was a focused life history. The interviewer's task was to "put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time" (Seidman, 2006, p.18). One of the primary goals of the interview was to develop a rapport with the participants and investigate the participant's elementary education as it relates to his giftedness. I employed interview probes for elaboration and clarification purposes.

Interview two (Appendix F) concentrated on the details of the participant's experience with subject-area acceleration. The interview questions served as a tool to help participants' reconstruct their experiences with as much detail as possible.

Face validity. To ensure face validity of the interviews, I created interview questions based on the literature referenced in Chapter Two. Interview one was a focused life history. This interview served two purposes. The first was to develop a rapport with the participant and the second purpose was to help the participant construct a context for the study. Questions one through seven were developed to get a general picture of the participant's family life. Davidson (2004) expressed the importance of parental involvement in a gifted learner's education. Questions eight through 12 helped

me develop an overall picture of the participant's earliest school experiences such as likes and dislikes and preferences. Question 13 encouraged participants to reflect upon their relationships with elementary school teachers. Gross (2006) expounded that teacher attitudes toward giftedness and acceleration varies greatly and such attitudes do affect the teacher-student relationship. Questions 14 through 16 were developed to gather information regarding the participant's friendships and social activities in elementary school. One of the strongest arguments against acceleration is the negative impact on a student's ability to make friends and participate in extracurricular activities (Cross, 2005; Colangelo et al., 2004); therefore, friendships and other social activities must be investigated. Questions 17 through 24 were developed to allow the participant to express his or her feelings about topics related specifically to being gifted.

Interview two targeted participants' middle school experiences including subject-area acceleration. It consisted of 20 open-ended questions. The purpose of question 1 was to develop a snapshot of the participant's middle school years and compare that educational era to elementary school. Question two sought to determine the participant's relationship with his teachers during middle school. Questions three and four helped me understand the participant's relationship with his parents during the middle school years. Rimm (1988) recognized the importance of parental support during this precarious period of social, emotional, and intellectual development. Questions five, six , seven, and nine gathered information about the participant's middle school friendships and social activities. Porath (1996) suggested that understanding gifted adolescents' perceptions of social acceptance seems to be especially important during middle school. Most gifted delivery models in middle school are very different from models used in elementary school. For this reason, question eight was developed.

Questions 10 and 11 gleaned information about placement considerations, and questions 12 through 14 encouraged the participant to share specifics about the high school level classes taken in middle school. Gifted students may experience social and emotional stress as they balance their own abilities and needs with their academic and social lives (Moon & Hall, 1998; Olenchak, 1999; Reis, 1998). Questions 15 through 20 allowed participants to voice concerns related to such stress.

Content validity. To ensure content validity of the instrument, I recruited middle school gifted education teachers to review the questions and verify the clarity of the interview questions. Three teachers were selected from my current school system. All were certified to teach gifted learners according to the guidelines of the state of Georgia and had a minimum of 10 years experience working with gifted learners. Teachers were asked to give individual feedback related to the clarity, thoroughness, and relevance of the questions. Feedback indicated the need for two questions, numbers 13 and 14, needed to be added to the school section of the first interview protocol to glean information about the students' relationships with teachers and friends in elementary school. Additionally, I piloted the interview questions by interviewing two students who were not participants. Piloting allowed me to come to grips with some of the practical aspects of interviewing and alerted me to elements of interviewing techniques that supported and detracted from the purpose of the study (Seidman, 2006). As a result of the pilot, I learned which questions students may need additional prompting on. For example, question 18 asks students to give details about learning of their gifted eligibility. Both students in my pilot were not familiar with the terminology and asked for clarification. As a result, I did not change the question, but I was better prepared to answer participants' questions related to eligibility. Additionally, I learned not to rush

through the interview process and to ask questions for elaboration. Both of my pilot interviews were only 30 minutes long. After the pilot, I reflected on possible questions to ask participants in order to capture the rich details I preferred.

Focus groups. The last interview was a focus group interview. The two groups were junior participants and senior participants. The focus group interviews were conducted February 28-29, 2012. The focus group interview questions were related to subject-area acceleration in middle school. The questions required participants to reflect on their feelings about acceleration, their parents' actions and reactions to the model, the role of the teacher, and their peers' reactions or perceptions. The questions encouraged the participants to link their acceleration experience from middle school to their current high school experiences.

Using focus groups is a qualitative interview strategy closely tied to sociology and has been widely used in marketing research (Berg, 1998). Kruger (1994) contended that focus groups are valuable data collection tools because they provide a different kind of information that can be gleaned from individual interviews or from observations. According to Morgan (1997) focus groups explicitly use social interaction to produce data and insights that would be "less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (p. 2).

Colangelo and Peterson (1993) found group counseling settings very effective with gifted learners. They have been used successfully to help them cope with ordinary stressors and career and college planning. Gifted learners naturally tend to prefer the companionship of gifted age peers (Gross, 2001). Focus group interviews, therefore, seemed to be a natural fit for this population and study.

Face validity. To ensure face validity of the interviews, I created survey questions based on the literature referenced in Chapter Two. Questions one through five allowed the participants to reflect once more on their middle school careers and to add any additional thoughts or feelings during this focus group setting. These questions also provided an opportunity for the participants to develop a rapport with each other before proceeding. Questions six through 14 encouraged the participants to explore concepts related to acceleration such as resiliency and stress. Studies of resilient children and gifted children indicate that they share traits such as curiosity, self-efficacy, high moral regard, problem-solving ability, and keen sense of humor (Bland et al., 1994). The last two questions for the focus groups, questions 15 and 16, allowed the participants to offer advice regarding the type of students suitable for acceleration and the skills necessary for subject-area acceleration success.

Content validity. To ensure content validity of the instrument, I recruited middle school gifted education teachers to review the questions and verify the clarity of the survey. Three teachers were selected from my current educational setting. All teachers serving on the panel are certified to teach gifted learners according to the guidelines of the state of Georgia. All teachers had a minimum of 10 years of experience working with gifted learners. Teachers were asked to give individual feedback related to the clarity and relevance of the focus group questions. All feedback was positive; no changes were made from the original questions.

Additionally, I piloted the focus group questions by interviewing two students who were not participants. Piloting allowed me to come to grips with some of the practical aspects of interviewing and alerted me to elements of my interviewing techniques that supported and detracted from the purpose of this study (Seidman, 2006).

During the focus group pilot, I immediately recognized the benefit of this data collection method. The participants seemed more at ease and willing to share. Additionally, the back and forth dialogue between the participants themselves yielded more information. One tip I learned from the focus group pilot is to allow time for such interaction to take place without interruption from the interviewer.

All interviews took place after school in the media center of the research setting. No other students were permitted in the media center during the focus group interviews. The media specialist was in her office during one session but due to location, could not hear or see the interview.

Data Analysis

Before data analysis began, I transcribed all recordings from the interviews immediately following each interview. According to Hatch (2002), early interview transcription can help shape the direction of future interviews and observations and can give researchers a sense of confidence as they continue data collection. Interviewers who transcribe their own recordings come to know the content better (Seidman, 2006).

Epoche. The researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude to truly see what emerges from the participants' recorded words. As Rowan (1981) pointed out, however, no researcher can enter into reviewing interview transcripts as a clean slate. Moustakas (1994), however, described epoche as setting aside prejudices and opening the interview process with a receptive attitude. For this reason, I examined my role as a researcher and highlighted related facets of my biography to make sure my interests were not biased so the interview can come to life (Seidman, 2006).

Horizonalization. Successive views of the transcripts yield a greater knowledge of the phenomenon and an overall deeper understanding (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman,

2006). For this reason, I read each transcript at least three times. Successive views yields the core essence of the phenomenon or the statements or horizons that represent those perspectives that are central or thematic to the experience. Interview transcriptions were reviewed one at a time and I considered each statement with respect to the significance of the social and emotional outcomes of subject area acceleration. All relevant statements were listed verbatim (Moustakas, 1994).

Themes. To help narrow the list of relevant statements gleaned during the horizontalization, I looked for common units of statements that could be organized into themes. I accomplished this by using colored highlighters to sort the statements. This step provided a visual to help me better understand how each of the statements were related. After the color coded statements were categorized, I determined clear and concise titles for each theme. Four themes emerged from this process: peer relations, adult relations, worry and stress, and motivation.

Individual textural-structural descriptions. As I reviewed the relevant statements, I considered how each statement was related or unrelated to other comments made by the participant. These horizontal statements were then knitted together to form a narrative description of the participant based on the invariant themes. The descriptions included both a textural component, describing what the experience was like for the participants, and a structural component, describing how the subjects experienced the phenomenon. Although this step in the data analysis process was narrative in nature, direct participant quotes were carefully woven into the descriptions to promote credibility (Moustakas, 1994). Quotes were vital, as only the participants could truly express their experience with subject-area acceleration (Creswell, 2007). The narratives were also

compared to the original relevant statements list and transcriptions to ensure the rich details were preserved.

Trustworthiness

The aim of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to support the argument that the study's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). Trustworthiness involves a study's credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings present a credible conceptual interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba,). Transferability is the degree to which the findings can be applied beyond the bounds of the study (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba,). Confirmability is the measure of how well the findings are supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba,). Many aspects of this study were considered and measures were implemented in order to establish the overall trustworthiness associated with this study. This study employed the use of transcriptions, feedback, rich data, study pilot, and clarification of researcher bias.

Transcriptions. The confirmability of the study was ensured by the use of transcriptions. All interviews, individual and focus groups, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. I transcribed all interviews. Interviewers who transcribe their own recordings come to know their interviews better (Seidman, 2006). By recording and transcribing the interviews, I ensured all student comments were captured. No portions of the interview were omitted. This was important because it allowed the researcher to start with the whole (Siedman,). Preselecting portions to transcribe was ruled out because it could lead to premature judgments about what is relevant and what is not; such a practice would be contrary to the research design (Hatch, 2002). I was also free to

listen closely to the student responses and was not distracted with tedious note taking during the interview process.

Feedback. I sought feedback on the survey, individual interview questions, and focus group interview questions from three experienced gifted teachers to help promote the credibility of the study. When soliciting feedback, it was important to be specific about the feedback desired (Hatch, 2002). The teachers reviewed the instruments for clarity and relevance. They were asked to be sure each question was written in student friendly language and was relevant to the research questions.

Rich data. Rich descriptive data helped ensure the transferability of the study. The rich data produced in this study would allow others to determine if the findings apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich data means providing data with enough detail to gain a clear picture of the person or phenomenon (Hatch, 2002; Farber, 2006). The three interviews yielded rich details about each participants social and emotional experiences surrounding middle school subject-area acceleration. Exact quotes were woven into the results to produce a clear and convincing voice for each student.

Triangulation. Triangulation helped ensure the credibility of this study. When multiple data collection methods are used, the positive outcome is triangulation (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved in this study by using surveys, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Collecting multiple sources of data provides a deeper knowledge of the phenomenology studied (Hatch, 2002).

Ethical Issues

In 1979, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research established three basic guiding principles for research with human beings. Researchers must maintain a respect for persons. This includes maintaining anonymity.

The next principle is beneficence, which means maximizing benefits and minimizing risks when human subjects are used. Justice is the last principle. Justice includes being equitable in the selection of participants and ensuring that all participants are treated equally (Seidman, 2006).

These guiding principles, set forth by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research, are the foundational ideology of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher expects to gain a "heightened awareness of important ethical issues" (Seidman, 2006, p.60) embedded in the study through the IRB review process.

Informed consent was a part of the IRB requirements and was of particular importance to the proposed study due to the participants being minor children. The informed consent included an invitation to participate with details of the study's purpose and design, risks and benefits, rights of participants, confidentiality concerns, and contact information (Seidman, 2006).

I protected the privacy of the participants. All interviews took place in the school's media center with no other persons present. With the exception of the dissertation committee chairperson, I did not discuss the names, school, or identifying particulars of the participants with anyone. I prepared all interview transcripts. Pseudonyms were substituted in the transcripts and in other written documents for purposes of anonymity. Pseudonyms were assigned to all persons, schools, cities, and other identifying information. The transcripts and digital recordings stayed in my direct physical possession or were stored in a safe in my home (Seidman, 2006).

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the personal experiences of students who were subject-area accelerated in eighth grade and explore the long-term social and emotional outcomes of this gifted delivery model. The following research questions were explored:

Research Question 1: What are the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners? (Key question)

Research Question 2: What are the current attitudes and feelings regarding subject-area acceleration of high school juniors and seniors who were subject-area accelerated in middle school? (Sub-question)

Research Question 3: Do these attitudes and feelings differ from their recollection of attitudes and feelings from their middle school years? (Sub-question)

Research Question 4: What were the significant emotional and social adjustment concerns that began in middle school and persisted into high school that may be directly related to the acceleration? (Sub-question)

Research Question 5: How do gifted learners deal with social and emotional stressors? (Sub-question)

Setting

The setting was a rural high school in northwest Georgia with a student population of 626 in ninth through twelfth grade as of 2009. The demographic description of the student population is as follows: 92% white, 6% black, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. Twenty-nine percent of the population qualified for free or reduced lunch

and 12% were students with disabilities. Ten percent of the population is identified as gifted based on Georgia's multiple criteria method of determining giftedness, which is comparable to the state's percentage of 9.895%. The target school had consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) but did not make AYP during the 2009-2010 school year due to the academic performance of the economically disadvantaged subgroup. The school is not in the needs improvement status. As of 2009, the school employed 36 full time teachers, eight part time teachers, three administrators, and four support personnel or paraprofessionals. All teachers, administrators, and support personnel are white. In terms of education, 18% of the teachers hold a bachelors degree, 53% hold a masters degree, and 29% hold a specialist degree (*Common Core of Data*, n.d.).

Gifted students in this high school use an advanced content delivery model in the Advanced Placement and honors program classes. This means the pacing of the content delivery is accelerated. Students attend classes on a block schedule and are served a minimum of five segments per week. Students in the gifted program are expected to master the Georgia Performance Standards and Georgia State Gifted Standards in the subject areas of their gifted classes. Gifted students in this high school are also eligible to participate in an academic competition known as the Academic Decathalon, numerous study trips, and an Executive Internship Course their senior year. The Executive Internship Course allows students to explore a career with a local individual or company. All honors and Advanced Placement teachers in this school are gifted certified (*Gifted Education Program Descriptions*, 2012).

Participant Selection

Consent to participate in the survey forms were distributed to all gifted juniors and seniors at Model High School (50 out of 275 students), and 30% (15 students) agreed

to participate in the survey for participant selection purposes. All students who consented to participate completed the surveys. Using criteria sampling methods, the students were separated by gender and grade level. From those samples, two junior males, two junior females, two senior males, and two senior females were randomly selected. Consent to participate in the two individual interviews and one focus group interview were distributed to the eight selected participants and 100% agreed to participate in the study.

Table 1 presents a general breakdown of the students who completed the survey. Table 2 displays the students participating in the individual and focus group interviews.

Table 1

Total Survey Participation

Grade	Male (n = 5)	Female (n = 10)	Total (N = 15)
11	2	4	6
12	3	6	9

Table 2

Interview Participation

Grade	Male (n = 4)	Female (n = 4)	Total (N = 8)
11	2	2	4
12	2	2	4

Survey

A survey was used to generate a qualified participant pool. The size of the final pool was 15; two students were removed from the applicant pool due to indicating on the survey they were uncomfortable about participating in interviews related to this study.

Surveys were then separated into stacked based on gender and grade level. Eight students, two junior males, two junior females, two senior males, and two senior females, were randomly selected from each criterion-based stack. Survey question number one required participants to indicate the number of courses they took for high school credit as an eighth grader. Students in the survey only took one or two courses with a mean of 1.355 courses. Survey question number two, reflection frequency, required participants to indicate how frequently they reflected on their experience in these classes. Question three, importance of sharing, required participants to indicate how important they thought it was for gifted learners to share their thoughts and feelings about subject-area acceleration. Question four, at ease with interviewing, required participants to indicate how comfortable they were participating in interviews related to this student. Survey responses for questions one through four were summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Responses as Percentages on Potential Participant Interest Survey

Question	Juniors (n = 6)	Seniors (n = 9)	*M*
Reflection Frequency			
Weekly	50%	33%	41.5%
Monthly	17%	17%	17.0%
Yearly	33%	17%	25.0%
Never	0%	33%	16.5%
Importance of Sharing			
Very Important	33%	33%	33%
Important	50%	50%	50%
Somewhat	17%	17%	17%
Not	0%	0%	0%
At Ease with Interviewing			
Very Comfortable	33%	33%	33%
Comfortable	50%	50%	50%
Uncomfortable	17%	17%	17%
Very Uncomfortable	0%	0%	0%

Survey question five was open-ended and encouraged participants to explain why they would or would not want to participate in the study. Responses to question five were categorized into three themes: students who are genuinely interested in the study, those who wish to help others, and those who feel it is important.

Individual Interviews and Focus Groups

The individual interviews took place from January 4, 2012 throughFebruary 29, 2012 in the media center of the research setting. All interviews were held after school and each lasted approximately one hour. Before beginning the interviews, I briefly reminded each participant that any information shared was confidential. I also reviewed the use of pseudonyms in the study.

The two focus group interviews, one group of juniors and one group of seniors,

took place on February 28 and 29, 2012. A rapport among the participants was immediately established. They chatted before the interview began and seemed excited to be able to share this time together. Before the interview began, I reminded the participants of the use of pseudonyms and assured them that all information gathered was confidential.

All interviews, individual and focus group, were digitally recorded and were transcribed by me to assure credibility. In order to protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Horizontalization was used to determine the core essence of the phenomenon by listing statements relevant to the research questions verbatim. After horizontalization, common units of statements were grouped into themes through color-coding with highlighters. Individual textural-structural descriptions were written based on the invariant themes using direct participant quotes. Last, descriptions were written and organized around each theme. Since the purpose of the study was to capture the voice of the participants, an in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing strategy, consisting of a series of three interviews, was used. This approach allowed me to provide data from three sources in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. The themes that emerged helped answer the research questions.

Themes

After all data was collected, the intense process of interpretation began. The transcripts were read carefully three times to become familiar with the responses of each participant. During this stage, known as horizontalization, significant statements were underlined. Once the noteworthy statements were highlighted based on similarities, themes emerged that represented commonalities among the participants. These themes

helped me better understand subject-area acceleration from the viewpoint of the participants.

1. Peer relations
2. Adult relations
3. Worry and stress
4. Motivation

Each theme will be presented as it is woven into the analysis of the participants and as it corresponds with each research question.

Analysis of Participants

The horizontal statements identified during data analysis were woven together to form a narrative description of the participant based on the themes. The individual textural-structural descriptions below include details about what subject-area acceleration was like for the participants and describe how the participants experienced the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration.

Cole. Cole is a junior in high school and describes his family as "very open, not very uptight about the little things." He says his parents "want the best" for him but "sometimes try to push their decisions" on him. He explains "they try to push" him "because they have been through everything." Cole believes they are supportive because they attend his sporting events and reward him for good grades. Cole's comments supported the theme of supportive parents.

He enjoyed elementary school, especially recess. He struggled in no areas and math was "always his strong suit." Cole had no conflicts with any teachers in elementary school and "loved all of them." He had a best friend and participated in baseball and football. He did not qualify for gifted services until middle school. He stated he "failed

the test" in elementary school because "they gave us a blank sheet of paper and said show your creativity and for every line you draw you get two points." He said he "couldn't think of anything" so he "failed it."

Cole described middle school as "the best years" of his life. To him, it was "great", and he got to "see his friends all the time." He described middle school teachers as "nice" and "just more strict" than elementary teachers. During this era, his parents pushed him to "have good grades to prepare for high school." He did not feel like his relationship with his parents changed very much between his elementary and middle school years.

Cole still played baseball and football and also added wrestling to his list of sports. He said all of his friends were "in the gifted program" and described the middle school gifted program as "a lot of fun" and "harder and more challenging." Cole first learned about taking high school classes as an eighth grader after he was already enrolled in the algebra class for high school credit. He also stated that school personnel did not get his input or his parents input about placement, instead "it was just the flow" from one level of math to the next. Cole described this class as "fast paced" and "a little bit harder." He said he did not "stress over it every night" but that some kids were "very emotional" and would get "riled up if they couldn't figure out a problem." Cole was never teased or taunted for being in the class and never felt like dropping out of it. He believed the class helped prepare him for high school by allowing him to see "there would be ups and downs but if you try hard and get the help needed it will help you in the end."

As Cole reflected upon his experience with subject-area acceleration, he presented the experience as very positive. He would have been interested in taking more

accelerated classes so he could have “more freedom” his senior year and not “have to worry about” his credits for graduation. Academically, Cole believed the accelerated classes in middle school helped him better understand the rigor of high school courses. Although he admitted high school classes are rigorous, he confidently added they are “not so hard that you cannot pass them.” Cole reiterated that one can make excellent grades in high school “if you apply yourself”. Cole’s remarks were tied to the theme of peer relations. Socially, Cole believed that being subject-area accelerated offered him no additional preparation for high school. He admitted that most of his friends “were in gifted.” He seemed a bit puzzled as he shared how many of his friends had “dropped out of accelerated classes” in high school, and he no longer had classes with his “close friends” from middle school. Cole further explained,

> My friends got scared at the end of middle school with how the high school program was presented and dropped down to regular ed. They thought it would be too hard and they wouldn’t have time to do anything else.

Cole explained how he enjoys classes with “a lot of hands on and a teacher who is very knowledgeable.” He shared how he learns best from “stories” instead of “just reading straight from the book and rambling off facts”. Cole enjoys learning with all students. He does not mind asking friends from help. He shared, “it makes me feel good to know that if I am really struggling or don’t get what the teacher is saying” they are there to help. Cole shared insight regarding his relationship with supportive teachers.

Cole shared that the accelerated classes helped him cope with the stress of high school. He explained how the classes showed him “there would be a little stress but not so much that I would need to be concerned.” He indicated that “on a scale of one to ten,” his stress level was a four. Cole believed he had a major advantage over other students

because of his acceleration experience and would still participate if he could return to middle school today.

Cole admitted being tempted to drop out of an advanced class this year, chemistry. He stated he pulled through the temptation by changing his "work ethic a little bit". He realized he has to study harder for this class after "an awakening." Cole's favorite class was social studies. He indicated, "that has always been my strong point."

> In connection to the theme of motivation, Cole admitted he was "calm" and "lazy". He tries to get his work done so he will not have "much to do for the rest of the class". He gets angry when he has a hard time grasping a concept. He shared, I do whenever I try to get it over and over but in the end it is, like, not clicking at all. Like, what I am doing in math right now it is hard just to get the concept in my mind.

Cole shared how he usually has a "positive outlook" and rarely gets sad or depressed. He shared, "I know that tomorrow is coming, and it's a new day and that everything can change. I look on the bright side."

Cole would recommend subject-area acceleration to other middle school pupils. He believed it was a "great experience to see what high school is like with your middle school friends". He also believed it was a good experience because it allowed you to get a high school class "under your belt". He would advise pupils in middle school subject-area acceleration to "go with the flow" and not to have "too much pride to get help".

Landon. Landon is a junior in high school. His parents are divorced, and his father is re-married. He is the youngest of one brother and a stepbrother and stepsister. He believes his mother is "a little more lenient" than his father and stepmother. He explains "at my dad's house, it is like do it their way or no way at all." Landon did not

"really enjoy" elementary school but believed he was "good at language arts and science." He had no conflicts with elementary teachers and recalled some were "family friends." Landon did not have a best friend in elementary school but had "friends of all different types" because there were "no cliques." He was tested for gifted eligibility in 5th grade and placed into the program in sixth grade. Landon described the testing process as taking tests "that didn't really have a point." He suffered no teasing or taunting related to his giftedness.

Landon believed his middle school years were "the most enjoyable years of school." He said in middle school students got "a little more freedom." During middle school, his parents "figured out" he was gifted and "pushed" him "harder than before." Landon shared that school personnel sought his input as well as his parents' input regarding placement in subject-area accelerated classes in eighth grade. Landon stated that all of his friends were in the gifted program. He believed his peers "respected" him more after he was enrolled in classes for high school credit. He described the stress level as very low and never felt like dropping the class.

Landon agreed with another participant in the focus group as she shared how she was about to form a closer relationship with her middle school teachers by taking the subject-area acceleration classes. He added that the courses in middle school helped him prepare for high school academically by urging him to "think about school more seriously." Landon adamantly shared the difficulties he experienced socially due to acceleration in middle school by admitting that he had a hard time interacting with students who were not in his classes. He agreed with other participants as they shared how they were socially isolated. Later in the interview, he shared how he had made new friends in high school that were not in the subject-area acceleration program.

Landon believed that subject-area acceleration put him at an advantage because the teachers showed the students "more respect." As far as stress goes, Landon shared how school is not a major stressor. He stated, "it is more my job and at home and stuff like that". Any stress experienced at school, however, he believed had a direct correlation to being subject-area accelerated in middle school and supported the theme worry and stress. He reflected,

> Last week, I asked (name removed) if he would move me into a different math class because I was not doing very well. He was like, why would I move you if you have an A in there? I was like, because that is how I want it to stay; it is stressful trying to keep that A. I would not be in that level of math yet if I had not been accelerated. He doesn't understand that a 91 is not good enough.

Landon enjoyed learning in smaller classes so the teacher can give individualized attention and praise. He also enjoyed learning with his intellectual peers, but he admitted he did not appreciate those who bragged about their intelligence. He found it to be "annoying when they flaunt."

Landon admitted that he gives "everybody a good chance to be a friend" but also has no problem expressing his feelings. Landon struggled with a wide range of emotions including anger and sadness. He reiterated that these feelings were typically not associated with school. He shared how he was trying to "look past all the drama" so it does not "interfere in school work".

Adele. Adele is a junior in high school. She is an only child and both of her parents work in law enforcement. She believes her parents are "pretty trusting to be in law enforcement" and feels "they've always supported the decisions" she has made. She enjoyed elementary school and excelled in reading. She disliked learning cursive "'cause

we don't really ever use it." Adele has maintained friendships from elementary school and liked all of her elementary teachers "for the most part." She was tested for gifted eligibility in third grade and thought the testing process was "pretty easy." Adele believes some of her classmates "were mad" because they were not "chosen" for the gifted program. Overall, she has no regrets about participating in the elementary gifted program.

Adele describes her middle school years as "her favorite" because there was a "little bit more freedom" than elementary school. During middle school, Adele's parents had to "stop helping" with homework, especially math. She participated in dance, cheerleading, cross country, and track and enjoyed "hanging out with friends." She had friends who were in the gifted program and general education. Concerning input about placement into subject-area acceleration classes, Adele believes school personnel sought her input "more than" her parents. She shared that the accelerated classes "helped for high school and they are very similar to how it is in high school." Adele does not remember being teased or taunted because she was in a class for high school credit. She believes the stress level was higher because "you had a lot more studying to do than you normally would," but studying did not cause stress "in middle school." She dealt with her stress by dancing and believed dancing was "like a getaway" for her. Overall, Adele believes the subject-area acceleration "helped a lot for high school."

Adele shared how the subject-area accelerated courses prepared her for high school academically by providing an adequate challenge. She reiterated other focus group participants' sentiments about being "in a bubble" socially due to the acceleration. Overall, she felt the classes put her at an advantage in high school and would still participate if she could go back to middle school.

Adele's peer group has not changed since middle school; she does believe this is related to the grouping in middle school. She did not indicate any concerns about school and felt she had very little stress. Adele enjoyed learning with friends and found any class that permitted this as desirable. Additionally, she had "no problems" working with pupils who were her intellectual peers. She has felt like dropping out of advanced classes but relied on friends to "pull her through." Adele shared that she is a good friend and easy to talk with. She stated she "rarely" gets angry, sad, or depressed.

Adele was willing to encourage others to take subject-area classes in middle school if they could "handle it." She stated they need to be "motivated" and only "those with the skills" needed to participate.

Marley. Marley is a junior in high school and lives with her parents and older sister. She believes she and her sister "are really close." Marley feels supported by her parents and shared they attend her ballgames and competitions. She has fond memories of elementary school and "liked playing on the playground." She feels like she was "really good at science" but "struggled in like reading and spelling." Marley thought her elementary teachers "were all really kind." She had a best friend who was in her grade and was "really sweet and really funny." In her free time, she "liked to draw, just draw little pictures" and talk. She became eligible for gifted services at the end of first grade and started attending gifted class in second grade. She remembered being "really excited" about getting to go to the gifted class to learn "something cool." Marley made new friends in gifted class and most of them she is "still friends with today." She recalls no taunting or teasing related to her giftedness and felt like her teachers were "usually very proud of gifted students." Marley believes the gifted program met needs that could not have been met in the regular education classroom.

Marley believes her middle school teachers "did what they could to prepare" her for high school. She describes her teachers as "stricter." Marley's parents viewed her middle school education as important because some of her classes would go on her transcript and would "help decipher" her future. Marley enjoyed band and soccer and spent her free time reading. Marley remembers finding out about taking classes for high school credit when she was in seventh grade and signing up for math and science. She believes, however, that the science class "was supposed to go toward the transcript" but is not sure if it was ever applied. Marley shared that school personnel sought input from herself and her parents before placing her in the accelerated courses. Marley does not remember being teased due to the acceleration process and believes "the people they would call nerds or whatever were the really cool people." She does believe the classes for high school credit were "definitely more stressful" because "you have to learn certain things by yourself and the teacher won't always teach you everything." She dealt with her stress by playing her flute. Marley stated she never felt like dropping out of the accelerated classes because they made her "feel very proud." Overall, she feels like she has "really achieved a lot" and has a "more in-depth education."

Marley shared how she enjoyed getting to know her subject-area acceleration teachers in middle school. She stated,

> Uhm, well, it occurred to me that since we are in the gifted program we have had The same teachers pretty much every year so we formed a more casual relationship, not a causal relationship, but we are more comfortable with our teachers than someone who has a new teacher every year.

She also believed the classes helped her learn to study better. Socially, however, Marley shared how the classes put them "in like a bubble," because "we were with the same

students all the time." Marley stated her peer group has not changed since middle school as a result of being accelerated.

At the time of the interview, Marley's stress level was "not too high;" she did believe, however, it would go up "closer to the AP exam." She did see a connection between being accelerated in middle school and her current stress level. She also added that she worried about "keeping up a certain GPA and keeping up all the other extra curriculars."

Marley liked small classes. She enjoyed getting to know her teacher. She liked a teacher who really cared and was not "just there to get paid." Marley admitted that she does not enjoy the competition that comes with being in classes with her intellectual peers. She stated, "I can get two points better than you is there all the time from other people." Marley believed she could cope with the competition as long as her classmates did not brag and boast about being "better than everyone else" and "superfantabulous." Marley shared how she relies on friends when she feels like dropping a difficult class. She shared how this rarely occurs because of a strong since of competition with her sister. She believed she had to "live up to what she did."

Marley described herself as "very positive" and occasionally "snappy." She admitted to having a "short temper at times." She believed she was learning to control her anger better. Marley admitted that most of her anger is not school related.

Tripp. Tripp is a senior in high school who currently lives with his father and stepmother; his mother passed away when he was five years old. Tripp lived with his grandparents after his mother died from age five years until age twelve. He describes himself as currently being "secluded from his family because they are always working or doing something else," and he has "school" and his "own interests and stuff." Tripp

believes his father's parenting style is best described as "a hands off approach" and states he developed "his own morals and beliefs rather than them instilling theirs into me." Tripp enjoyed elementary school especially "all the free time with the Legos" and excelled at science. Tripp qualified for gifted services in elementary school and believed that was where he formed many of his friendships. He does not recall any taunting or teasing because he was gifted and believes the class met needs that could not be met in the general education classroom.

Tripp recalls seventh grade as "a really hard year" because he "didn't know anyone" and is "not the quickest to make friends." In eighth grade, however, things improved. He "liked all" of his middle school teachers and made many friends in the gifted classes. Tripp found out about taking high school classes in eighth grade at the end of his seventh grade year and shared how he made the decision to participate in subject-area acceleration classes without input from his parents. He believes his peers "regarded him as more intelligent" but never taunted or teased him about being gifted. He recalls no "stress issues" and never felt like dropping out of an accelerated class. Tripp indicated on the survey he had participated in two subject-area accelerated courses in middle school.

Tripp believed subject-area acceleration put him "at an advantage" academically for high school. In the survey, Tripp shared he believes being in subject-area acceleration classes was "a very integral part" of his life. He shared how it prepared him socially by describing the setting as "traveling in a pod." He stated,

> I don't know if I mentioned this before, but it sort of disconnects you with the rest of the school unless you are involved in sports or extra curriculars or any type of mentoring and things. You are disconnected.

He further stated how difficult it was when friends drop out of accelerated classes in high school. He shared how you "leave them behind" and "end up distancing yourself from them pretty quickly."

Tripp expressed a fair amount of stress that he believed had a connection to subject-area acceleration in middle school since "that is where it all began." He relayed how it was hard to deal with "all the senior project stuff" and apply to colleges. He worried about ACT and SAT scores. He stated, "This year has been very stressful for me."

Tripp enjoyed literature class due to the amount of "open discussion" and because the teacher "does a good job looking at our writing and giving feedback to make us better writers." He does not worry about students being smarter than he is and does not see school as a "competition." He did admit, however, that if he were "lower in the class" he would "work harder."

Tripp does not enjoy distance learning. He said the "other class" does not get their "sense of humor," and the "teacher just hovers over the microphone and goes slide by slide." He stated the "teacher does not have much personality" because he is being "projected" to other schools. Tripp's favorite high school course was AP Biology.

Tripp believed he was "serious and to the point" but also stated that he "tried to be fun". He does not typically get angry over school issues. Tripp gets upset over "interactions with people" and believed his emotions are not really connected to school.

Tripp would promote the subject-area acceleration program to others but feels as if they should "know what they are getting into." He agreed with another participant who shared how middle school acceleration program candidates should clearly understand that the accelerated classes with count towards their high school grade point average. He

shared how students need to have "organization, maturity, and determination for sure" in order to be successful in subject-area accelerated courses at the middle school level. Tripp indicated on the survey that he reflects once a month on his subject-area acceleration experience and feels it is very important for gifted learners to share their thoughts and feelings about this gifted delivery model.

Brad. Brad is a senior in high school who lives with his parents and little brother. He tries to be a "good role model" for his brother. He describes his parents as "great people" who are "very supportive." Brad was very close with his teachers in elementary school and was "very social." He excelled in reading and struggled in no areas. Brad stated he had many friends and "drew all the time" in his free time. He did not worry about taking the "gifted test" but was "concerned about getting in." He began gifted services in third or fourth grade. Brad found the elementary gifted program to be "really cool" and "felt a lot of pride being in the class." He has no regrets about participating in the gifted program in elementary school.

Brad believes he started getting a "stronger sense of personality" in middle school. He did not feel like he had a "strong bond" with many teachers at the middle school level. Brad started running cross-country and "got outside a lot more." He said in seventh grade he "caught wind from friends that some of the classes" he would be in would be for high school credit. Brad shared that school personnel did not get input from himself or his parents about placement in the subject-area accelerated classes. He stated "I think they let my parents know…what was going on, but did they ever ask if that was where I needed to be? No." Brad felt like his peers did not treat him differently because he was scheduled into a class for high school credit. He felt like he had "no stress" in the accelerated classes and never felt like dropping out of the class.

Academically, Brad believed the subject-area acceleration courses "made it easier" for him to "transition from middle school to high school" because he was "use to the workload." He believes the program did not have a negative impact on him socially because he is "pretty social" and "can fit in." He has friends "throughout the whole school," but he admits to being closer to those he "has class with." Emotionally, he believes the program provided skills that helped with stress. Overall, he felt the program gave him an advantage over other pupils.

Brad shared how he does believe some of his stress is tied directly to being in accelerated classes in middle school. He is, however, able to "completely not care about things" which he views as his "problem." This attitude does cause him to "freak out a little bit." Brad shares how he often has to stay up late to "get caught up on schoolwork" due to procrastination.

Brad enjoyed literature class due to the teacher's "laid back" stance. He was motivated by being in classes with his intellectual peers. He wanted to "stay caught up" with them. Brad did not enjoy distance learning courses because he could not "interact with the other class."

He described himself as "lackadaisical" but "capable." He believed his teachers would agree that he is "capable" but does not always do his work. Brad admitted to having a temper; he did confirm that most of his anger is school related. He feels like he gets angry when he does not meet his own "expectations." He stated, "School is where a lot of my frustration comes from." He also shared how the only time he gets sad is when he "disappoints himself."

Brad would recommend subject-area acceleration to other middle school pupils. He shared "organization" as the one skill crucial for success in accelerated courses. He

also believed there should be some "consideration and planning" before a student enrolls in the acceleration program in middle school. Brad indicated on his survey that he feels it is important for other students to understand everything that is involved in subject-area acceleration courses; he feels this will help eliminate stress.

Kristy. Kristy is a senior in high school who has a twin sister and older brother. She describes her sister as her "best friend." Kristy believes her parents make her "take responsibility for everything." She "loved elementary school" and excelled in math. She said her parents noticed early on that she was "ahead of the other kids." Kristy describes herself as a "tomboy" who "played outside all the time." She remembers a "project about dinosaurs and Egyptian stuff" from the elementary gifted program. Kristy feels like some of her friends in "regular classes were kind of jealous" because she attended gifted class. She believes the gifted program was necessary for her because she "needed to move on faster than the other kids could."

Kristy enjoyed middle school and viewed eighth grade as her "favorite year ever." She was involved in cheerleading and "gained another best friend." Kristy did not realize the Spanish course she took in eighth grade was for high school credit until she was already enrolled in the class. Similarly, school personnel did not get input from Kristy or her parents about accelerated course placement. She feels like many of her peers "were jealous" when they found out she was earning a high school credit for the class. Kristy found the class to be more stressful than other classes but would not drop out of the class because her "friends were in it." Overall, Kristy found the accelerated class to be "beneficial" and felt like she "needed to be in it."

Kristy believed the middle school subject-area acceleration program allowed her an easier academic transition into high school. Socially, however, she felt she was at a

disadvantage. She stated, “We have been in the same group, forever”. She believed she matured faster emotionally because of the acceleration and that she is better able to deal with stress. Kristy described her current stress level as “up there” but believes there would be stress in high school with or without accelerated classes in middle school. Kristy’s survey responses also indicated a high level of stress. She stated, “I would participate in this study to express my feelings about how I think accelerated classes have completely stressed me out all through school.”

Kristy is challenged by being in classes with her intellectual peers and feels like she “cannot be in a regular class” because it “advances slower” Her favorite class was AP calculus because she is “good in math”. Kristy described herself as “mature” and stated she was “fun when it is time to be fun and serious when it is time to be serious”. She also admits to having a temper that is aggravated by school.

Kristy would recommend the subject-area acceleration program to other students, but feels they should “know what they are getting into first.” She stated, “They should be told that the class will count on their GPA and what the advantages and disadvantages are”. Kristy’s survey revealed she had an interest in “hearing others thoughts and feelings” and “helping other students be more successful” in the program.

Jaylyn

Jaylyn is a senior in high school. She has four older brothers and one younger sister. Her father died when she was eleven. Jaylyn believes her “mom works really hard because she is a single parent and she’s widowed” and is “really relaxed about discipline stuff.” Jaylyn participated in a “K-3 family;”; this means she was with the same group of students for kindergarten through third grade. She feels like she was “decent at a little bit of everything” when it came to academics and “never really struggled.” Jaylyn admitted

having “more friends outside of school” due to “those little cliques.” She “was closer to the friends” from her neighborhood. Jaylyn qualified for gifted services in fifth grade and enjoyed analogies and vocabulary in the gifted program. She had no close friends in gifted class but does not regret participating in the program.

Middle school was hard for Jaylyn because of losing her father. Academically, middle school was not hard, but she “just didn’t like it.” She admitted that she was “friends with a bunch of different people, but wasn’t like best friends with anybody.” She described her middle school teachers as very “focused.” Jaylyn shared how her mom was “real proud” of her for being in advanced classes and “never punished” her for “getting a bad grade or anything.” She first found out about taking high school classes in eighth grade during her seventh grade year. She does not remember if school personnel sought input from her mom about placement. Jaylyn enjoyed cheerleading during middle school and found it easy to deal with any stress the advanced classes caused. She believes her overall experience with subject-area acceleration to be “pretty good.”

Jaylyn does not believe the subject-area acceleration program helped her prepare for high school socially but does feel that she was at an overall advantage because of the program’s rigor. Jaylyn’s survey revealed she is a social person who does not mind sharing her thoughts and feelings or “speaking in front of other people.” Jaylyn spent some time describing her current stressors including “two jobs, accelerated classes, and a college class” and “trying to figure out where I want to go to college.” She further indicated she felt like “people were throwing stuff” at her. Later in the interview, however, she revealed that high school would be stressful even if she had not been accelerated in middle school.

Jaylyn enjoyed literature class the most this year. She believed her teacher

"cares" and did a "good job teaching." She enjoys learning with her intellectual peers but sometimes feels like she has to "work harder to keep up." She has never considered dropping an advanced class. Jaylyn does not like distance learning because she cannot have the "openness with the teacher."

Jaylyn described herself as "mature" and saw herself as a "leader" outside of school. She also admitted she "takes things very seriously" and "to heart." She admitted to being sad "outside of school" and added that the stress of school "made things worse."

Jaylyn would recommend subject-area acceleration courses to others. She believes, however, they should be "mature" and able to understand that the course "counts." Jaylyn would participate in subject-area acceleration herself if she could go back to middle school.

Question Data Analysis

A standard interview protocol with open-ended questions was used for each individual interview and the focus groups. Then, each set of interview questions was given to a team of experienced gifted teachers for feedback. Minor adjustments were made and the revised interview questions were used in the brief pilot study. Each interview was divided into three parts: warm-up questions, research questions, and closing questions. Establishing a positive rapport with each participant, ensuring that all responses are confidential, and clarifying the goal of the interview were critical steps followed in each session (Farber, 2006). The warm-up questions helped establish a rapport and allowed for a smooth transition into the rest of the interview questions.

The remainder of Chapter Four involves a detailed analysis of the responses gleaned throughout the study which answer the key research question and the sub-questions. The level of repetitions, or thematic saturation, found in the participant's

responses brings validity to the data provided and allowed me to solidify emerging themes (Hatch, 2002). The purpose of the study was to identify the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners; therefore, the noted responses reveal the consistent input of all the students that participated in the study.

Key Research Question

What are the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners?

Student responses from the individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys were analyzed using horizonalization. After analyzing and highlighting common statements, four themes emerged: peer relations, including social isolation, long-term friendships, and competition, adult relations, worry and stress, and motivation.

Peer relations: Social isolation. During both individual interviews and focus group interviews, participants shared feelings of social isolation as a social outcome of subject-area acceleration. Marley stated, "We were put in like a bubble; we were with the same students all the time." She went on to add she was unfamiliar with the "way the other students acted." Marley viewed this isolation as a hindrance. She revealed, "We were at a disadvantage by having the same people in our classes the whole time."

Tripp shared how he ended up "distancing" himself from his friends who were not accelerated and claimed to know "basically our little trailer" referring to his homeroom classroom in middle school. Tripp further shared how subject-area acceleration "sort of disconnects you with the rest of the school unless you are involved in sports or extracurricular or any type of mentoring."

Cole and Adele felt like subject-area acceleration contributed to social isolation by not preparing them socially for high school. Cole explained, "It didn't prepare me

socially because most of my friends were in gifted." He wrote on his survey, "I would like to participate to explain how it is hard with most of your friends reside in normal classes and you are isolated." Adele stated, "Most of my friends were there already; I had a few that weren't. I didn't really talk to them." Landon shared, "I wasn't really good at talking to regular ed. students cause they are just different.". Kristy summed it up by adding, "we have been in the same group forever."

Peer relations: Long-term friendships. The second emerging theme, long-term friendships, may be viewed in stark contrast to the first, social isolation. Many participants shared in the interviews and focus groups how being with the same students helped them form long-term friendships. For example, Adele shared how she was still "friends with the same people" from middle school. Marley indicated that she made new friends after being enrolled in subject-area accelerated courses, and she is "still friends" with those individuals "today." Brad described a similar relationship by stating, "At first we were acquaintances, but we have become really good friends." He also believed he had "strong relationships with friends" because of subject-area acceleration in middle school. Tripp sums up the theme of long-term friendships by adding, "I have really gotten to know my friends over time."

Peer relations: Competition. Competition among peers was another theme gleaned from the rich data of the interviews and the focus groups. Marley revealed, "There is always that competition. I can get two points better than you is there all the time from other people." She also shared how her peers sometimes show their competitive nature by "bragging and boasting about how they are superfantabulous and better than everyone else."

Kristy and Tripp were both challenged by the competition present in accelerated

classes. Kristy shared, "it challenges me and makes me want to try harder." Tripp stated he would "work harder" if he were "lower in the class." Landon and Brad both found the competition to be troublesome. Landon called it "annoying," and Brad was "aggravated" by it.

Adult relations: Supportive teachers. Participants shared many responses to related to supportive teachers in the focus groups and interviews. Jaylyn expressed how she felt like her subject-area acceleration teacher cared and really "knew" her class. Tripp revealed how his teachers gave "more attention" and shared "it was definitely a positive thing."

Cole stated he "loved" his teachers and knew they were "open to a little extra help" if they needed it. He also explained how his teachers showed him he "shouldn't get too stressed" but rather take his time and "do things right." Marley expressed she knew her teachers cared about how she was doing and was "not just there to get paid."

Adult relations: Supportive parents. Participants consistently focused on the idea of supportive parents in the interviews and focus groups. Jaylyn shared how her mom was supportive and "real proud" of her "for being in the advanced classes." Tripp stated, "My dad is there for moral support like in education and anything else that I do, academically, or anything I achieve, really, he is there to support." Cole shared how he knew his parents "want the best" for him, and Brad stated his parents were "great people" who were "very supportive."

Marley and Kristy revealed their ideas about parental support by discussing their extracurricular activities. Marley shared, "like when I wanted to do band, they got me a flute." Kristy shared, "if I wanted to do cheerleading, I did cheerleading" and then added, "they support me."

Worry and stress. Another common theme gleaned from the individual interview and focus group transcriptions and the surveys is worry and stress. Kristy shared, "my stress level is up there." She later adds, "I think there would be stress no matter what in high school." Kristy also shared that "gifted classes have always caused stress" for her. Jaylyn expounded, "My stress level is way up there" and "when I have a big project due, my mom knows to stay away because I'll just bite peoples' heads off for no reason." Marley revealed, "It is definitely more stressful than the regular classes." She adds how she is concerned with maintaining a certain GPA and keeping up with other activities as well. Marley also admitted to being very "snappy" when she is "stressed." Cole shared on his survey, "I would like to participate to inform you of how hard it is to cope with an advanced class schedule."

Landon revealed the stress he feels is associated with grades. "It is stressful trying to keep that A. I would not be in that level of math yet if I had not been accelerated," he shared. Brad shared, "when I do start thinking that things really do matter, like my grades, I freak out a little bit." On her survey, Adele wrote, "I would like to participate because I want to be able to help others with how to handle stress from school and these classes."

Motivation. Motivation is another theme prevalent in the participants' statements. Tripp revealed, "Once they realized I had an inner motivation to get good grades anyway, they kind of laid back on it." He also stated he was dissatisfied with lower level classes and "needed those high school classes in middle school" Kristy shared many comments related to motivation. She revealed how she "was thankful" she "was getting to move on" after being placed in the acceleration program. She noted, "I had learned all of that stuff. I complained the first day that I had to be moved; I said I

couldn't handle that." Kristy also revealed her level of motivation by adding, "It wouldn't work. I knew that. They advance slower."

Cole also made several statements related to motivation. He shared how he does not have "too much pride to get help." He also stated how he was motivated by the rigor of the courses. He shared,

> I think now that I realize that it is not as easy as I thought it would be, it changed my work ethic a little bit. Now, I know I have to study a little harder, and I know I can.

Brad stated he "still had motivation" and that he was "capable." He also shared his thoughts about motivation by adding, "I don't mind doing it...there is no point in not doing it."

Research Sub-questions

What are the current attitudes and feelings regarding subject-area acceleration of high school juniors and seniors who were subject-area accelerated in middle school?

Student responses from both individual interviews and the focus groups were analyzed using phenomenological methods. During data analysis, three common themes emerged related to this sub-question. First, participants' attitudes toward academic preparation were positive. Attitudes and feelings toward social preparation were generally negative. Attitudes and feelings overall toward subject area acceleration were positive.

Academic preparation. Participants revealed how subject-area acceleration positively influenced their academic preparation for high school. Tripp shared, "Uhm, I think that compared to other students, it put me at an advantage." Brad believed his "transition" to high school was smoother because he was "used to the workload." Marley

believed the program helped her gain a "more in-depth education" and helped her learn how and when to study. Marley also shared on her survey, this program has yielded "countless rewards" academically. Landon believed the subject-area acceleration classes helped him "think about school more seriously," and Cole stated the classes showed him that the high school classes were not going to be as easy as the traditional middle school classes.

Social preparation. The data reveal that the participants did not believe subject-area acceleration in middle school helped them socially prepare for high school. For example, Cole shared,

> It didn't really prepare me socially because most of my friends were in gifted. My friends got scared at the end of middle school with how the high school program was presented and dropped down to regular ed. It is hard because I don't really have classes any more with my close friends.

Marley stated how the subject-area acceleration classes did not prepare her because the students had been put "in a bubble." Kristy stated, "We have been in the same group forever." Tripp shared, "you are with that same group" and "you are disconnected."

Overall positive attitudes and feelings. Participants willingly shared their overall thoughts and feelings about subject-area acceleration. Many of them expressed positive attitudes and feelings. For example, Jaylyn shared,

> It was pretty good. I wish I could have continued in math. Georgia math standards changed. We all started in the Math I class. There was no way to move from geometry to algebra II like I had planned to do.

Tripp stated, "it was definitely better than being in the normal classes," and Marley

shared, “I feel like I really achieved a lot”. Kristy expressed the classes were important to her because she “really needed to be in them.”

Adele and Cole both expressed how the classes helped them better prepare for high school. For example, Cole said they “kind of helped” him prepare for high school by “knowing that there would be ups and downs.” Similarly, Landon and Marley agreed that they were “at an advantage” because they were accelerated.

Do these attitudes and feelings differ from their recollection of attitudes and feelings from their middle school years?

Individual interview two, which focused on the middle school years, and the focus group interview were analyzed in reference to this research sub-question. Student responses to the question, “How do you feel about your overall experience in the accelerated class?” from individual interview two was compared to various questions from the focus group interview related to the participants attitudes and feelings about subject-area acceleration.

In interview two, Brad stated the accelerated class “made it easier for me to transition to high school. It really did.” Similarly, in the focus group he replied, “It made an easier transition from middle school to high school and like he said, to those upper level classes. The transition was easier; I was use to the work load.”

Tripp, in interview two, shared, “Uhm, it was definitely better than being in the normal class. Mainly because you are in those smaller classes, the teachers can give you more attention, and I think it was a positive thing.” Tripp gave a similar response in the focus group; he shared, “An advantage. I just think the teachers gave us more respect.” He also wrote it was an “integral part of his life” on his survey.

In interview two Kristy revealed, “They were beneficial because I really needed

to be in them. I was learning faster than the other kids…" In the focus group interview, she confirmed her feelings by stating, "I needed the higher class."

Cole, in interview two, expressed, "It was good; it kind of prepared me for high school. Knowing that there would be the ups and downs, but if you try hard and get the help needed, it will help you in the end." He confirmed his thoughts in the focus group by saying, "It was a major advantage because I learned exactly how high school is going to be."

In interview two, Jaylyn's attitudes and feelings about subject-area acceleration in middle school were mainly centered on the change in the math curriculum. She stated, "It was pretty good. I wish I could have continued math. I had to start over with Math I in ninth grade; I feel like I took geometry and algebra and had to re-do geometry and algebra, and it was pointless for the first year. I knew all of Math I." In the focus group interview, she stated she felt like the subject-area acceleration classes in middle school put her at an "advantage" and did not offer additional comments about her disappointment with the math curriculum change.

Marley, in interview two, commented, "I feel like I have really achieved a lot." Her feelings changed a bit in the focus group interview as she revealed, "We were at an advantage because we were accelerated, and we were at a disadvantage by having the same people in our classes the whole time." She indicated on her survey how the classes had "meant so much to her."

In interview 2, Landon expressed he "liked" the subject-area accelerated course and found to be only "a little harder." His comments in the focus group interview somewhat confirmed his thoughts and feelings from interview two. He stated, "It made me think about school more seriously" and agreed by saying "yes" when other students in

the group indicated they were at an advantage by taking the classes for high school credit.

Adele, in interview two, shared, "I feel like it helped a lot for high school." In the focus group, she agreed with others by saying "yes" when they indicated they were at an advantage by taking the accelerated classes.

What were the significant emotional and social adjustment concerns that began in middle school and persisted into high school that may be directly related to the acceleration?

Social adjustment: Isolation. The participants expressed feelings of social isolation throughout the individual interviews and the focus groups. Landon shared how he "wasn't really good at talking to the regular ed. Students." Marley vividly shared, "we were put in like a bubble; we were with the same students all the time." She continued, "We were not used to seeing other people, like the way other students acted." Marley believed the accelerants were at a "disadvantage" because they were with the same students all the time.

Cole complained about not getting to see his friends who were not accelerated and shared how the "group divided after we got into middle school." Adele also shared how she rarely talked to her friends who were not in the program. Similarly, Brad revealed how he has friends that he had "distanced away from" and that he "don't really even talk to anymore."

Tripp shared how the isolation occurs rather quickly by stating, "you end up distancing yourself form them pretty quickly." He also remarked, "It sort of disconnects you with the rest of the school unless you are involved in sports or extracurricular or any type of mentoring." He ended by adding, "I knew basically our little trailer."

Stress. In the focus group interviews, participants were asked, "Do you think

your stress level is influenced in any way by your involvement in subject-area acceleration in middle school?" Data analysis revealed some participants linked their stress directly to subject-area acceleration in middle school, and some shared there was no real connection.

Direct connection to acceleration. When reviewing the statements related to stress, some participants did express a direct connection between their current stress levels and subject-area acceleration in middle school. On a positive side, Cole shared, "they showed me that I shouldn't get too stressed." Brad also revealed a positive connection; he stated, "it helped me, though, learn skills that would help me avoid stress in some ways." Other participants believed the connection was negative. Marley shared it did add "a little more stress," and Landon revealed that he would not be experiencing stress in his current math course if he had not been accelerated in middle school. Tripp also shared that the stress was somewhat related because "that is where we started on the advanced class track".

No connection to acceleration. Two participants shared who their stress was not connected to their subject-area acceleration experience in middle school. Kristy shared, "I think there would be stress no matter what in high school." Jaylyn simply confirmed her answer by adding, "me too."

How do gifted learners deal with social and emotional stressors?

Analysis of individual interviews one and two revealed extra-curricular activities as the most common way participants dealt with stress. For example, Adele revealed how dancing helped her deal with stress because it was "like a get away" for her. Marley shared how "playing her flute" or just "playing music" calmed her stress levels. Cole played basketball, football, and wrestled.

Other participants shared more self-coping strategies. Jaylyn and Kristy indicated they would "just do their work." Jaylyn shared how she would simply "get done with it and move on." Kristy added she would "be efficient, and get it all done"

Summary

Chapter Four began with an analysis of each participant via a textural-structural description. Each description was carefully crafted using data gleaned from the series of interviews. The textural-structural descriptions helped develop a personalized voice for each participant.

The interviews analyzed in Chapter Four revealed the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. The analysis revealed four themes: peer relations (social isolation and long-term friendships, and competition), adult relations (parents and teachers), worry and stress, and motivation. Based on this study, there are both positive and negative social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration. Social isolation and worry and stress were unconstructive outcomes; whereas, long-term friendships, motivation, and parent and teacher relationships were noted positive outcomes. In regards to the theme competition, participants' perceptions were equally divided between competition as a healthy outcome and as a detrimental outcome. Participants felt socially isolated from the rest of the school due to their confined scheduling. Additionally, participants revealed multiple examples of increased stress linked to subject-area acceleration. On a brighter note, participants were satisfied with the long-term friendships that grew out of the confined scheduling. Friendships that began in the subject-area accelerated courses in middle school grew and flourished in high school. Most participants also revealed a strong motivation to do well in school that began in middle school and continued. Participants confirmed positive adult relations

with teachers and parents. They viewed their teachers as helpful and caring, and their parents as supportive and understanding. Lastly, participants' responses were equally divided on the subject of competition. Some viewed the competiveness as annoying, and others viewed it as a healthy motivator.

Chapter Four also analyzed the data as it related to the four research sub-questions. The first sub-question explored the current attitudes and feelings toward subject-area acceleration. Participants generally supported the academic preparation provided by the courses but gave more negative comments regarding the social preparation. Overall, the current attitudes and feelings toward subject-area acceleration were positive. The next sub-question studied compared current attitudes and feelings to the participants' recollections of attitudes and feelings in middle school. Surprisingly, the participants' current attitudes and feelings were very similar to their recollections. Another sub-question explored the significant emotional and social outcomes that persisted into high school. The data revealed two themes addressing this question: social isolation and stress. Stress, however, was viewed as positive, negative, and neutral. Some participants believed the subject-area accelerated classes helped them cope with the stress of high school easier. Others believed their stress was a result of the subject-area accelerated classes. Still others revealed that the acceleration really had no bearing on their current stress levels. The last sub-question explored ways the participants coped with their stress. Most participants shared how their extra-curricular activities, such as band and baseball, helped relieve stress.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, will further discuss the five themes linked to the key research question. Current literature will be woven into the discussion. Finally, implications of the study along with recommendations for future research will be

explored.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Overview

The purpose of this study was to identify the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. Subject-area acceleration, for the purpose of this study, was taking high school courses in eighth grade. Two individual interviews and one focus group interview were used to elicit responses from four high school seniors, two males and two females, and four high school juniors, two males and two females. This phenomenological inquiry revealed the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners.

Chapter Four provided a detailed analysis of the responses received from the participants on all three interviews. Data to support the key research question and all sub-questions was reported. This chapter, however, will focus on the five themes that emerged during data analysis in response to the key research question and purpose of the study. Literature on subject-area acceleration and the theoretical framework undergirding the study will be interwoven throughout the discussion. The chapter will conclude by commenting on the implications and limitations of the study along with recommendations for further research.

Discussion of Findings

The primary research question explored the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. Educational leaders continuously search for ways to meet the needs of all learners, and subject-area acceleration is one gifted delivery model readily used in America's schools to meet the needs of gifted learners (Colangelo et al., 2004). Gifted students have needs that cannot be met in the general education classroom just as students with disabilities have needs

that cannot be met (Davidson & Davidson, 2004). Although studies have investigated the academic benefits of subject-area acceleration, few have been dedicated to researching the social and emotional outcomes of the model. This phenomenological inquiry has attempted to probe the subjective experiences of eight high school students who were subject-area accelerated in middle school.

The overall social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration were positive. All of the participants agreed they would still participate in the program if they could repeat middle school. After carefully analyzing the participant responses from all three data sources, five overarching themes emerged. The themes were prevalent in all data sources and provided an overview of the social and emotional outcomes. Not all of the themes, however, are purely positive.

Peer relations. The first emerging theme, peer relations, was divided into two sub-themes: social isolation and long-term friendships. Participants consistently shared their thoughts and feelings regarding social isolation as an outcome of subject-area acceleration. This isolation was directly tied to the acceleration due to the scheduling of the courses for high school credit in middle school. The tracking continued into high school as students took honors and advanced placement classes. This isolation continued into high school. Students voiced their concerns of being "in a bubble," "in the same group forever," and "disconnected." The theme of social isolation seems to support a commonly held notion that students who are accelerated will have a hard time adjusting socially or making friends (Cross, 2005; Rimm, 1988).

The next sub-theme, long-term friendships, however, seems to counteract first glance fears of social maladjustment. Participants further revealed that they have developed long-term friendships due to subject-area acceleration in middle school. For

example, in the senior focus group interview, Tripp revealed, "Since we have traveled in a pod, we have gotten to know the people we are around more." In an individual interview, Kristy shared, "…I gained another best friend who is still my best friend." Participants may have lacked a larger circle of friends but clearly had a close-knit group of friends. The results of the study, therefore, are consistent with Gross' (2006) long-term study. In this study, Gross found accelerants formed warm, lasting, and deep friendships. Similarly, in a 2001 study by Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, students attributed these warm, lasting and deep friendships to the fact that their schools placed them with their intellectual peers whom they tended to gravitate toward naturally.

The social cognitive learning theory relates to the theme of peer relations because it is concerned with the learning environment and the social context of learning. The participants revealed how their social context of learning experienced very little change. For some participants, this allowed them to develop lasting friendships; others, however, expressed how they felt socially isolated from other students in the school.

Competition. Data analysis revealed a second theme, competition. Participants were ability grouped in the subject-area acceleration courses in middle school. This means they were grouped with their intellectual peers, and in this case, other gifted students. Coleman and Cross (2001) provided evidence that gifted students need opportunities to learn with their intellectual peers. Half of the participants in this study, however, expressed some annoyance and mild stress over the competiveness of their classmates. For example, Landon shared, "…it is kind of annoying when they flaunt…" Similarly, Marley revealed, "There is always that competition. I can get two points better than you is there all the time from other people." Marsh's (1987) Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect suggested that bright students who are surrounded with equally intelligent or more

intelligent students may suffer severe blows to their self-concepts. This means that for some gifted learners their self-concept is based on being at the top of an unchallenging class; the student meets standards with little to no effort and healthy competition does not exist. When these students are accelerated, such as the participants in this study, research reveals they develop a more realistic perception of their abilities, and their self-esteem may wane a bit. Usually, this change does not last long, and their confidence returns rapidly (Coangelo at al., 2008).

The other participants, however, revealed the competition as healthy. For example, Kristy shared that it "challenges" her and encourages her to "try harder." Tripp also revealed how if he was "lower in the class," he "would work harder." To dispel any concerns about the negative impact of this sense of competition, a couple of follow-up questions were included. Students were asked if they enjoy learning with students who are as smart as they are and to explain how they feel if some of the students are smarter. Almost all students noted they enjoyed learning with students who are their intellectual peers, and many saw smarter students as allies. For example, Cole shared, "It makes me feel good to know that if I really am struggling or don't get what the teacher is saying that there are many who can help me understand it." Gross (1998) found that gifted learners who were ability-grouped swiftly developed a cohort effect characterized by healthy competition, peer bonding, and mutual encouragement.

The theme of competition is directly tied to the social cognitive theory. Bandura (1986) revealed how a student's peer group can influence his self-efficacy. This influence can serve as a motivator if the student perceives his or her peer group similar to himself. Another element of the social cognitive theory, vicarious learning, also supports this theme. Vicarious learning asserts that individuals can witness others' behaviors and

then reproduce the same actions (Isom, 1998).

Adult relations. Theme three, adult relations, was divided into two sub-themes: supportive parents and supportive teachers. Participants revealed positive support from parents and teachers. As with all children, gifted learners need a strong network of support (Moon & Hall, 1998). Jaylyn expressed her mom was "proud of her accomplishments." Tripp described his father as "there to support." Marley and Kristy both discussed their parents' involvement in their extracurricular activities. All participants revealed their parents' views on the importance of education at all levels. Similarly, participants shared evidence of supportive teachers. Tripp described a teacher who "does a good job looking at our writing and giving feedback to make up better writers." Landon believed his teachers "respect" him. Marley believed her teacher "cares how you do", and Cole felt comfortable asking "the teacher for help." Parent and teacher support was a positive outcome revealed in this study.

In a 1982 study, Parsons, Adler, and Kaczala found that "successful teenagers" were more likely to come from families who were "warmly engaged" with one another, and at the same time, maintained high expectations for their children. Literature has long recognized the importance of supportive families that promote responsibility and expect children to do their best from an early age (Parsons et al., 1982).

Many of the participants' responses confirmed Parsons et al.'s (1982) findings. For example, Cole revealed that his parents "want the best" for him and his family is "close knit." He revealed his parents "press upon" him the importance of doing well in school. Brad stated his parents are "great people" who are "very supportive." He shared how his parents promoted responsibility by helping him learn from his mistakes and not "bash" him.

The necessity of supportive teachers was a theme gleaned during data analysis. The teacher is critical in the life of each gifted student, even if the child has supportive parents. Teachers must be ready to help recognize gifted children, provide new challenges, inform a child's parents about acceleration, minimize teaching children what they already know, and make school a positive experience for all students (Coangelo et al., 2004). Gross (2004) contends that possibly the greatest gift one can give a gifted child is a teacher who recognizes his or her gift, who is not intimidated by it, but rejoices in it and works to foster it. Participants in this study shared how their teachers have helped make school a positive, supportive environment. For example, Tripp shared "there is a lot of open discussion" and "we can throw ideas around…" Jaylyn stated she "feels like she cares and does a good job at teaching." Cole revealed his teacher promotes a positive environment by being "very knowledgeable" and using "stories to relate" to content. Marley is not afraid to ask "teachers to help."

Bandura's social cognitive theory posits that portions of a person's knowledge acquisitions can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions and experiences (Bandura, 1986). For this reason, it was encouraging that the theme of supportive parents and teachers emerged.

Worry and stress. Worry and stress was a negative category that emerged from all three interviews. It is interesting to note, however, that the intensity of the worry and stress increased during the senior year. Most of the worry and stress was related to maintaining a high GPA, completing the senior project, applying to colleges, managing the work load of advanced classes. To investigate the correlation between the participants' levels of worry and stress and being subject-area accelerated in middle school, the focus group interview included the question: *Do you think your current stress*

level is influenced in any way by your involvement in subject-area acceleration in middle school? Landon commented, "…it is stressful trying to keep that A." He further explained how his stress was associated with subject-area acceleration by explaining, "I would not be in that level of math yet if I had not been accelerated." Marley commented that at the moment her stress level was "not too high," but she indicated it would go up as the AP exam drew near. When asked if her stress level was influenced in any way by her involvement in subject area acceleration, Marley added, "Sure; it adds a little more stress. I worry about keeping up a certain GPA…" Tripp agreed with other participants in the focus group interview as they shared their current stress levels. He agreed that he is currently stressed. When asked if his stress was directly related to subject-area acceleration in middle school, he added, "In some ways, that is where we started on the advanced class track." Other participants in the study, however, revealed how subject-area acceleration helped them learn to manage their stress and worry less. For example, Cole revealed how the courses showed him that he "shouldn't get too stressed, just take my time and do things right." Last, two participants shared that their worry and stress was simply tied to high school in general and not to subject-area acceleration. Both participants felt like high school was just generally stressful.

Bandura's social cognitive theory is concerned with self-regulation. Self-regulation is directly tied to the ideas of worry and stress. Bandura taught one must look at himself and his behavior, compare himself with an established standard, and respond. The last step, self-response, could include a reward or punishment based on the standard (Bandura, 1986). Participants in this study revealed self-regulation strategies and coping skills for stress.

Motivation. Motivation was a positive theme that emerged during data analysis

of student responses for all three interviews. Participants expressed a strong sense of motivation. Kristy revealed that she could not "be in a regular class", and Tripp shared "it goes back to me taking my own desire to do good [sic]." Kulik (1992) cites subject-area acceleration as one way to increase motivation. This research certainly supports the participants' responses. Similarly, Lynch (1999) reports accelerates are typically challenged which also promotes motivation. If gifted learners are not provided with a challenging learning environment, they may become underachievers and lack motivation (Rimm & Lovelace, 1992).

Bandura's social cognitive theory relates to the theme of motivation. The peer group, such as the group of accelerants, can influence self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the confidence in one's own skills to perform a task. Self-efficacy can be a motivating force if the student views the peers as similar to himself. Motivation is stronger if students believe they can be successful. Likewise, pupils who associate with other highly motivated students are more likely to be engaged in their learning.

Implications from Study

This phenomenological study portrayed the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration through the eyes of the students. The qualitative nature of the study allowed me to capture the participants' voices through rich detail and dialogue. The results of the study brought forth several practical recommendations for the parents, teachers, and administrators of middle and high school gifted learners who are being considered for subject-area acceleration or who have experienced the program.

Promote school connectedness. When considering subject-area acceleration as a delivery model option for students, school administrators must make a concerted effort for the students to avoid social isolation. School, second only to family, is the most

important stabilizing force in the lives of young people (Wilson & Elliott, 2004). In order for students to succeed, they must feel like they belong in their school (Osterman, 2000). Through creative and deliberate scheduling techniques, school counselors or administrators can ensure the students who are subject-area accelerated are integrated into other learning settings, such as exploratory classes, as appropriate. Additionally, every effort must be made to help subject-area accelerated students feel a part of the school as a whole. It should be noted that people connect with people before they connect with institutions. For this reason, relationships formed between students and school staff members are key to school connectedness. All adults, janitors, coaches, office assistants, counselors, are critically important to this dynamic (Osterman, 2000; Wilson & Elliott, 2004).

School administrators and teachers must also ensure subject-area accelerated students are represented on student advisory boards and other student leadership organizations. By having a voice in such venues, these students will hopefully feel more connected to the overall school program. Other strategies to enhance connectedness include cross-age and peer-led tutoring activities, new student welcoming programs, and peer mentoring. Parents and community members can also help promote school connectedness by serving as mentors, providing opportunities for community service to promote team building, and provide opportunities for service learning (Osterman, 2000; Voelkl, 1995).

Gifted education training. School counselors need specialized training on the nature and needs of gifted learners. This study revealed the element of worry and stress associated with subject-area acceleration. School counselors are crucial in helping all students learn coping strategies and self-regulatory strategies for stress. In a recent study

by Wood et al. (2010), 61.1% of school counselors indicated they had no formal training in gifted education; however, 77.8% had discussed acceleration options with parents and 70.4% had discussed the options with students. If school counselors are going to counsel gifted learners and make delivery model recommendations, they must have formal training in the area of gifted education.

If school counselors lack formal training, gifted teachers must be willing to play an active role in guiding course offerings and accelerated classes for gifted students. Gifted teachers have formal education and typically stay up-to-date on their specific district policies and acceleration options employed by their district. Gifted teachers who specialize in working with gifted learners or who have personal experience related to acceleration are typically more supportive of acceleration (Lynch, 1999).

Promotion of subject-area acceleration. Although positive and negative themes emerged during data analysis, the consensus among the participants was their overall experience was positive, worthwhile, and necessary. Students voiced opinions regarding their genuine need for subject-area acceleration in middle school. For example, Kristy shared she was "antsy" in her classes because she "learned faster than other kids." She further revealed she was "thankful" she "was getting to move on." Tripp shared he "needed those high school classes in middle school." For this reason, schools must be more open to this delivery model option for gifted learners. Stakeholders must lay aside the myths of the devastating social and emotional effects of subject-area acceleration and embrace the benefits of the model.

One benefit of subject-area acceleration that is frequently overlooked is the ease of implementation and nonexistent financial impact (Kulik, 1992; Benbow et al., 1992). Subject-area acceleration is a viable delivery model in the face of the current economic

crisis in America's schools.

Limitations & Future Research

The purpose of the study was to determine the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration. The study is not without limitations. For example, the research findings are specifically relevant to the unique demographics of the research setting. The thoughts, feelings, and attitudes documented and analyzed are only those of the participant groups and cannot be generalized to include all gifted learners who were subject-area accelerated in middle school. Delimitations are also evident. The study was limited to eight participants from one high school. Another delimitation of the study was the retrospective nature of the research. Participants were required to reflect on an experience and reconstruct their thoughts and feelings about it.

This study could serve as a springboard for further research in the area of emotional and social outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. This study was qualitative and sought to construct a voice for gifted learners who were accelerated. The primary data collection tools were interviews and focus group interviews. A larger quantitative study based on a survey with questions similar to some of the interview questions would provide information from a larger participant group and might allow the findings to be generalized. This larger study would also allow more geographic and demographic diversity.

Data analysis yielded several interesting topics for future research. For example, the majority of the participants could not explain the gifted eligibility or evaluation process. All of the participants experienced the evaluations, but few could recollect the process. This gap in understanding could yield an interesting qualitative study into how the gifted eligibility and evaluation process is explained to gifted candidates.

Additionally, participants were very vague on the subject-area acceleration selection process. They did not know how they were selected and only a few revealed that school officials had obtained their input or their parent's input on the placement decision. Another qualitative study could investigate the selection process in multiple settings. Last, senior participants referenced a senior honors project multiple times. The project seemed to be a source of stress and confusion for most. Several participants noted they were only completing the project in order to get the honors seal on their high school diplomas. A qualitative study could be used to capture the attitudes and feelings of seniors towards the senior honors project.

Conclusion

The long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on the gifted learners of this study are a mixed bag at first glance. The participants provided rich details and were sometimes very animated about a part of their lives that they still vividly remember. Peer relations, for example, was a twofold theme. On one hand, participants felt socially isolated from the school as a whole. On the other hand, however, the smaller classes, which traveled "as a pod", helped them foster strong long-term friendships. The theme adult relations, including teachers and parents, revealed the importance of genuine support and guidance.

Some participants expressed annoyance, for lack of a more polished word, over the competiveness of their subject-area accelerated classmates. The competition theme, however, did not yield any hard evidence that it was detrimental to the emotional wellbeing of any participant, and some saw the competiveness as motivating.

The participants also tied their current worry and stress levels directly back to subject-area acceleration in middle school. One student even revealed she wanted to

"just be regular" when she went to college meaning she did not want to take advanced level courses. Of all emerging themes, perhaps worry and stress was the most troubling.

The last theme, motivation, was positive. Almost all participants expressed a strong sense of intrinsic motivation that helped them cope with their rigorous academic and extracurricular schedules.

In conclusion, although participants expressed some negative outcomes associated with this delivery model, all agreed that they would take the classes again if they could go back to middle school. The benefits of subject-area acceleration truly outweigh any negative outcomes. In a 10-year follow-up study, Lubinski et al. (2001) found adult surveys of gifted individuals revealed they have no regrets about their acceleration experience; they regret, however, not having been accelerated more. Although one may not be able to fully predict the impact of subject-area acceleration on an individual gifted student, it is clear that gifted students whose academic needs cannot be met in a grade level course can benefit from being accelerated without risking detrimental emotional and social consequences.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY
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The Graduate School at Liberty University

January 3, 2012

Dana King
IRB Approval 1202.010312: Long-Term Social and Emotional Outcomes of Subject-Area Acceleration on Gifted Learners

Dear Dana,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
IRB Chair, Associate Professor
Center for Counseling & Family Studies

(434) 592-5054

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.
40 Years of Training Champions for Christ: 1971-2011

APPENDIX B: DISTRICT PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Model High School

3252 Calhoun Highway, N.E.
Rome, Georgia 30161-9678
706/236-1895 • Fax: 706/802-6750

GLENN WHITE, ED.D
Principal

Assistant Principals
STEVE CUNNINGHAM
SARAH YOUNG

Counselors
KAY WHITE
JAN MENDENCE

December 16, 2011

Dana Cantrell King, doctoral candidate of Liberty University, has my permission to conduct research at Model High School related to her study entitled "The Long-term Social and Emotional Outcomes of Subject-area Acceleration on Gifted Learners".

Sincerely,

Dr. Glenn White
Principal

APPENDIX C: POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT INTEREST SURVEY PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

The Long-term Social and Emotional Outcomes of Subject-area Acceleration on Gifted Learners

Dana Cantrell King, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University: College of Education

You are invited to be in a research study designed to explore the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. Please read this form in its entirety and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Dana Cantrell King, Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to understand the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. Subject-area acceleration is currently used in many school systems as a delivery model for gifted students. An example of subject-area acceleration is taking ninth grade physical science in the eighth grade. Understanding the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners will help school leaders make informed placement decisions about gifted learners and provide appropriate social and emotional support.

Procedures:
If you agree to be a part of this study, your participation at this point will involve completion of a brief, confidential survey. The survey will be completed in homeroom. The survey questions will be geared toward hearing your thoughts and feelings about this gifted delivery model.

If you choose to complete the survey, it will take less than 15 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks involved in this study are no more than the participant would encounter during a typical day at school.

The benefits of this study include the opportunity for your voice to be heard regarding your thoughts and feelings on the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration. Your input may be used to help administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders make informed decisions about the nature and needs of gifted learners who are subject-area accelerated in middle school. Your input may also influence gifted program development and teacher training. Your responses will be used to help the researcher select a pool of candidates interested in participating in further aspects of the study.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The names of all students involved in the study will not be used. Fake names (pseudonyms) will be used in the summary of findings to protect the privacy of the students involved. If chosen to participate in a focus group interview, the researcher cannot assure that the other participants in the group will maintain the same privacy and confidentiality noted above. Upon completion of this study, the researcher will make available the results of this study if requested.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the researcher. If you decide to participate in the study, you may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships aforementioned.

Contacts and Questions:
Provided below are the names of the committee members overseeing this project:

Dr. Karla N. Swafford/Committee Chair Assistant Professor, Liberty University	kswafford@liberty.edu
Dr. Toni Stanton/Committee Member Assistant Professor, Liberty University	tlstanton@liberty.edu
Dr. N. David Cox/Committee Member Board Member, Floyd County Schools	ndavidcox@comcast.net

Please direct any questions or concerns regarding your participation by calling Dana King at 770-773-9418 or by e-mail at dcking@liberty.edu. If you have any questions regarding this study and would like to talk with someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Liberty University, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd., Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email fgarzon@liberty.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____
Signature of parent/guardian: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D: PARENT/STUDENT CONSENT LETTER

CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS

The Long-term Social and Emotional Outcomes of Subject-area Acceleration on Gifted Learners

Dana Cantrell King, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University: College of Education

You are invited to be in a research study designed to explore the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. Please read this form in its entirety and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Dana Cantrell King, Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to understand the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. Subject-area acceleration is currently used in many school systems as a delivery model for gifted students. An example of subject-area acceleration is taking ninth grade physical science in the eighth grade. Understanding the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners will help school leaders make informed placement decisions about gifted learners and provide appropriate social and emotional support.

Procedures:
If you agree to be a part of this study, your participation will involve a confidential interview with me. You may also be asked to participate in a focus group interview, where you will sit with a group of your classmates and answer questions about your subject-area acceleration experience in middle school. Each of these interviews will be geared towards hearing your thoughts and feelings about this gifted delivery model.

If chosen for an individual interview or focus group interview, you will be meeting after school hours in the Model Middle School media center. The individual interviews will last approximately a half hour each, and the focus group interview will last about an hour.

The researcher will record the interviews using a digital recorder. All recordings will be transcribed, and you will be able to review the transcriptions to make sure they are what you meant to say.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks involved in this study are no more than the participant would encounter during a typical day at school. If chosen for an individual or focus group interview, you will have to sacrifice some of your afterschool time to participate. Every effort will be taken to work around extracurricular and work schedules.

The benefits of this study include the opportunity for your voice to be heard regarding your thoughts and feelings on the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration. Your input may be used to help administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders make informed decisions about the nature and needs of gifted learners who are subject-area accelerated in middle school. You input may also influence gifted program development and teacher training.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The names of all students involved in the study will not be used. Fake names (pseudonyms) will be used in the summary of findings to protect the privacy of the students involved. If chosen to participate in a focus group interview, the researcher cannot assure that the other participants in the group will maintain the same privacy and confidentiality noted above. Upon completion of this study, the researcher will make available the results of this study if requested.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the researcher. If you decide to participate in the study, you may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships aforementioned.

Contacts and Questions:
Provided below are the names of the committee members overseeing this project:

Dr. Karla N. Swafford/Committee Chair Assistant Professor, Liberty University	kswafford@liberty.edu
Dr. Toni Stanton/Committee Member Assistant Professor, Liberty University	tlstanton@liberty.edu
Dr. N. David Cox/Committee Member Board Member, Floyd County Schools	ndavidcox@comcast.net

Please direct any questions or concerns regarding your participation by calling Dana King at 770-773-9418 or by e-mail at dcking@liberty.edu. If you have any questions regarding this study and would like to talk with someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Liberty University, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd., Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email fgarzon@liberty.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of parent/guardian: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E: POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT INTEREST SURVEY

Dear student,

My name is Mrs. Dana King, and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am conducting a study on the long-term social and emotional outcomes of subject-area acceleration on gifted learners. An example of subject-area acceleration is taking high school math in the 8th grade. You are being contacted because you experienced subject-area acceleration in middle school, and your parents have given written permission for you to complete a survey. My study includes interviewing juniors and seniors, individually and in small groups, about their experiences with subject-area acceleration. If you are interested in participating in this study further and possibly being selected for interviews, please complete the short survey below. A total of 8 students will be selected to participate. I will contact you if you are selected. There are additional steps that will need to be taken including obtaining parental permission for your participation. Please note that all responses on the following survey will be kept totally confidential and your participation in the survey is completely voluntary. Thank you for your help.

Dana King
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

Student Name _____ Grade _____
Homeroom Teacher _____

Please circle your response.

1. How many high school courses did you take as an 8th grader?

   0 1 2 3 4

2. How often do you reflect on your experience in these classes?

   Once a Week Once a Month Several Times a Year Never

3. How important do you think it is for gifted learners to share their thoughts and feelings about subject-area acceleration?

   Very Important Important Somewhat Important Not Important

4. How comfortable are you about participating in interviews related to this study?

   Very Comfortable Comfortable Uncomfortable Very Uncomfortable

5. Briefly explain below why you would or would not want to participate in the study.

Thank you for your time. You will be contacted within 2 weeks if you have been selected as a potential candidate.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW ONE: FOCUSED LIFE HISTORY

The first interview will be semi-structured. The basic format of the questions is listed below but the order may change, and the interviewer may digress, as the course of the interview evolves, to other related subjects.

Family

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Where did you grow up? Describe your community.
3. Who did you live with growing up?
4. How many siblings do you have? What is your birth order? Tell me about your siblings and how you all get along with each other.
5. Did you feel different from your siblings?
6. How would you describe your parents/guardians?
7. Tell me about your parents' parenting style. How did they discipline? How did they support you?

School

8. Tell me about your earliest memories of school.
9. What did you enjoy about elementary school? What did you dislike?
10. When it came to learning, what were you really good at? Did you struggle in any areas?
11. How did your parents regard your elementary education?
12. How old were you when you started school? Was that Pre-K or K?
13. Describe your elementary school teachers. Did you have any conflicts with teachers? How were they resolved?
14. Describe your relationship with friends in elementary school. Did you have a best

friend? Describe this person.

15. Describe what you did in your free time in elementary school.
16. Were you involved in extracurricular activities at school?
17. Were you in the gifted program in elementary school? Describe the testing process. How was it explained to you?
18. Do you remember learning of your eligibility for gifted services? How did you feel?
19. Tell me about your elementary gifted program experience.
20. Did you make new or different friends in the gifted program? Were any of your close friends in gifted?
21. How did your classmates react to your giftedness ?
22. Do you remember any taunting or teasing related to your giftedness?
23. Do you remember any significant incidences with teachers related to your giftedness (positive or negative)?
24. Do you regret participating in the gifted program in elementary school? Do you believe the program met needs that could not have been met in the regular classroom?

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW 2 QUESTIONS: MIDDLE SCHOOL AND SUBJECT-AREA ACCELERATION EXPERIENCE

The second interview will be semi-structured. The basic format of the questions is listed below but the order may change, and the interviewer may digress, as the course of the interview evolves, to other related subjects.

General questions

1. Tell me about your middle school years. How did middle school compare to elementary school?
2. Tell me about your middle school teachers. How did they compare to your teachers in elementary school?
3. Describe your relationship with your parents during this time. Did it change? If so, how?
4. How did your parents view your education during this era?
5. Tell me about any extracurricular activities you were involved in. Were these school related or outside of school?
6. How did you spend your free time?
7. Tell me about your friends in middle school.
8. Describe the middle school gifted program. How was it different from your elementary years?
9. Were your friends in the gifted program?
10. When did you first find out about being in accelerated classes, high school classes, in middle school?
11. Did school personnel get your input or your parent's input about placement decisions in these classes?

12. Tell me about the accelerated classes you were in.
13. How did these classes compare to other gifted classes? To general education classes?
14. Did anything happen in an accelerated class that really stands out?
15. How did your peers treat you after you were scheduled into these classes?
16. Do you remember being teased or taunted because you were in these classes?
17. How would you describe the stress level associated with these classes?
18. How did you deal with the stress?
19. Do you ever remember a time when you felt like dropping the accelerated class? What prompted this reaction?
20. How do you view your overall experience in the accelerated class or classes?

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW 3 QUESTIONS: FOCUS GROUPS

The last interview will be semi-structured. The basic format of the questions is listed below but the order may change, and the interviewer may digress, as the course of the interview evolves, to other related subjects. Time will be allowed for the pupils to introduce themselves if they do not already know each other.

1. Now that you all have had some time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings about being subject-area accelerated in middle school, is there anything else you'd like to add that you might have remembered after we last met?
2. How do you think your acceleration in middle school prepared you academically for high school? How did it prepare you socially? Emotionally?
3. Do you feel you were at an advantage or disadvantage because of your acceleration?
4. If you could go back to middle school, would you still participate in the acceleration program?
5. How has your peer group changed since middle school? How is this related to the acceleration process or is it?
6. How would you describe your stress levels currently? Do you think these stress levels are influenced in any way by your involvement in the acceleration process?
7. Describe an ideal learning environment.
8. Do you enjoy learning with students who are as smart as you are?
9. How do you feel if many of the students in your class are smarter than you?
10. Have you ever felt like dropping an advanced class? Did you? What pulled you through?
11. What is your favorite class and why?

12. If I could ask your friends to describe your disposition, what would they say?
13. Do you ever get angry? Would you say it is mainly school related?
14. Do you ever get sad or depressed? Would you say it is mainly school related?
15. Overall, would you recommend that all students in the gifted program be accelerated in 8th grade?
16. What type of student do you need to be to be successful in an accelerated program?