CHALLENGES FACED BY ADULT GIFTED STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED

TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Dawn Nessler

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI). The theory guiding this phenomenological study was Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, with a focus on how the tragedy of various natures impacts the development of an individual's identity. This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI. 12 participants from Strong Minds, Kind Hearts, a Christian counseling and educational office located in Northwest Florida engaged in the study. Stratified sampling was used within the agency where the research was conducted with participants having varying aspects of TBI. Participants were chosen to participate in interviews, observations, and journal prompts, which were conducted and recorded using visual and audio technology. Coding techniques were used to present a composite of my interpretation of the participants' experiences, in addition to the study's findings of life after TBI and not alone, with sub-themes of mental and personality challenges, emotional impacts, personal strengths, and skills from abilities.

Keywords: positive disintegration, traumatic brain injury, anxiety, cognitive development, giftedness, emotional intelligence

Copyright Page

Dedication

It is with genuine gratitude and warmest regards that I dedicate this work to my family and friends, who never ceased believing in me, along with anyone who has encountered a traumatic brain injury or been viewed differently by others. Everyone faces varying challenges in their lives. My hope is this information helps encourage you to persevere and find your personal success. Never cease believing in yourself or your dreams. Follow the path one step at a time and remember to get back up when you fall.

Acknowledgments

This journey has been an interesting and challenging one. There are not enough words to honor or show my true appreciation to everyone, including all the professors. Along with countless professors, I would not have made it through without the guidance of my chair, Dr. Kristy Motte, and my committee member, Dr. Jerry Woodbridge. Thank you, Dr. Kristy Motte, and Dr. Jerry Woodbridge, for driving me towards success while providing encouragement along the way to assist with motivation to complete the process. The unending support and guidance I received have been a blessing I will cherish forever.

During my undergraduate program, Dr. Lynn Kaplan-Null recognized something within me before others did and openly stated, "One day it will be me sitting here with you up there teaching other educators, including myself, and I cannot wait for that day as I will be absolutely honored to be sitting in this chair learning from you." Dr. Kaplan-Null's comments have been a driving force, reminding me not to give up on my dreams or potential. Along the way, multiple professors, coworkers, supervisors, and friends have said similar statements reminding me, "Never settle. You are more than you realize, and more than others think you are. Follow your path, even when the bumps or boulders come along the way; keep pushing forward and see the plans God has for you."

Lastly, and extremely important, I owe my deepest level of gratitude to my husband, Ralph, and my family for the countless sacrifices while I diligently worked towards accomplishing this goal. Without the strong emotional support, encouragement, and laughter, I would have quit a long time ago. Thank you for sitting with me for hours when I was overwhelmed and lacking comprehension of sometimes the most trivial things. Thank you for always believing in me.

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List of Abbreviations

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Exceptional Children (EC)

Gifted and Talented Education (GATE)

Glascow Coma Score (GCS)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Third Edition (KTEA-3)

Multiple Intelligence (MI)

Stanford-Binet 5th Edition (SB-5)

Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)

National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC)

Talented and Gifted (TAG)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Fourth Edition (WIAT-4)

Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-V)

Wechsler Preschool Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI-IV)

Woodcock-Johnson IV-Tests of Achievement (WJ-IV-ACH)

Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities (WJ-IV COG)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Gifted adult students who have experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI) frequently battle inwardly without others being cognizant of the ongoing invisible battle (Gallego et al., 2020). TBI is defined as an interference in the normal function of the brain caused by a significant, abrupt, and intense shock to the skull because of being shaken or striking an item, or when an item penetrates the skull and enters the brain tissue (Werner & Engelhard, 2007). TBI alters the composition of the brain and the way the brain processes information (Williams & Prince, 2017). The effects of TBI on gifted adult students include a diminished focus period, trouble recollecting memories, difficulty resolving problems, and trouble grasping new information (Hurst et al., 2020). This change of ability experienced because of a TBI can impact one's learning, which may be especially difficult for gifted students who were previously recognized for excelling educationally. This chapter will provide an overview of the background of the proposed study, followed by the problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the proposed study, research questions, definitions, and end with a summary.

Background

Successive identification or recognition of gifted and talented individuals is often determined by test results and direct feedback from those who know the individuals on a personal level (Callahan & Hertberg-Davis, 2018). The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, n.d.-a) allows each state to determine the definition of a gifted and talented student, with a few states lacking a concrete definition. In Florida, gifted students are identified as "students with superior intellectual development and are capable of high performance" (NAGC, 2020, p. 2). Gifted adult students focus on their unique abilities, such as their emotional ability to

automatically connect with others while being aware of their natural ability to assist in the situation (Lopes, 2016). When an adult is faced with the potential of a TBI, the results impact every part of the individual (Venkatesan et al., 2021). TBI results from an abrupt, often forceful, jolt or blow to the head or body, causing damage to the brain (Savitsky et al., 2016). Frequently, undergraduate students who have experienced TBI try to overcompensate or lose the drive to remain focused on educational success (Brown et al., 2013). The historical, social, and theoretical contexts of this phenomenon will be discussed in further detail to clarify the impact of TBI on academic success within the gifted program.

Historical Context

Gifted education's history stems back to 1868, when the superintendent of St. Louis public schools, William Torrey Harris, recognized the importance of providing reasonable accommodations within public schools to educate gifted students (Luckey, 2018). In 1869, Francis Galton suggested within his seminal work that intelligence was passed through successive generations. The initial school for gifted children opened in Worster, Massachusetts, in 1901 as a private educational system (Karnes & Nugent, 2002). Based on his work in 1916, Lewis Terman is recognized as the father of gifted education after he introduced the Stanford-Binet intelligence test adapted from the French researchers Binet and Simon (Warne, 2018). Lewis Terman (1921) recognized the multiple talents presented by gifted children while acknowledging the lack of proficient educational opportunities to further assist in the successful growth of these individuals.

Historically speaking, individuals suffering from TBI were limited to the amount of encouraging support available due to the lack of knowledge related to the effects of TBI until 1980, when Dr. Martin and Marilyn Price Spivack assisted in the creation of the National Head

Injury Foundation (Brzuzy & Speziale, 1997). Most of the information related to the experiences of individuals with a TBI was previously obtained from self-reports and medical records, although specific screening tools were not used for further clarification or identification of the overall impact of a TBI on the individual (Dams-O'Connor et al., 2014). Over time, the research identified various aspects of the brain being impacted by the injury and causing varying degrees of challenges within the individual's personality, along with the ability to obtain and retain new information (Fleming et al., 1996).

Social Context

Gifted students face tremendous amounts of pressure to achieve higher-than-average scores. However, much of the pressure is internally placed (Damian et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2021). Perfectionism is one of the dominating traits of individuals identified as gifted, pushing the individual to strive harder to achieve specific goals (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017; Gaudreau, 2018). Gifted students tend to excel in particular areas, including memory and recall. However, they may not necessarily excel in other areas, such as socialization skills (King, 2022). According to the NAGC (n.d.-a), gifted students who enthusiastically participate in gifted educational programs have a higher success frequency within higher education, with approximately 44% of individuals obtaining a doctoral degree, which is substantially more significant than the general population, which reflects a 2% rate of doctoral degrees (Ziegler & Stoeger, 2017).

Students of all ages and capabilities desire to belong within the social context of the educational realm (Granot & Tyler, 2019). Gifted individuals will frequently attempt to undermine their abilities to be accepted by their peers (Cross & Cross, 2015; Wellisch, 2021). In other situations, the gifted feel as though their talents are not being used effectively, and the

individuals are frequently bored due to a lack of a challenge (Mofield, 2020; Thomas, 1973).

Adding in the complication of a TBI only provides additional challenges for the individual,

especially within the educational realm as a gifted student (Turkstra et al., 2014).

Personality adjustment for an adult with TBI is challenging. However, adjusting to

expectations within society can be even more challenging as emotions are equally difficult to

control, and the individual may begin to feel uncomfortable around others or as though they do

not belong (Godfrey & Shum, 2000). TBI frequently results in low self-esteem and depression as

individuals attempt to maintain normalcy while their identity shifts dramatically (Bivona et al.,

2014; Lefkovits et al., 2021). Regardless of the level of TBI, research acknowledges that gifted

individuals with a higher intelligence quotient (IQ) have a significantly higher risk of losing

more knowledge while having a more challenging time overcoming the loss (Mayes et al., 1989).

Determining the most effective manner to educate students with TBI varies as

dramatically as the injury itself and the overall impact of the injury on the student (Harvey et al.,

2020). TBI was added as a special education category to the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 to foster understanding in educators and more inclusive abilities

for students (Rotatori & Burkhardt, 2011). Prior to IDEA, students with TBI were frequently

mislabeled with learning disabilities attributed to birth or early childhood (Kinnunen et al.,

2018). Many educators and students have developed effective adaptation skills within the

classroom through trial and error versus a strict curriculum with specific identifiers or guidelines,

which are not guaranteed to be successful (Mealings et al., 2021).

Theoretical Context

Various aspects of giftedness can be directly connected to the theory of multiple

intelligences (Kornhaber, 1999). As an individual grows and is affected by life situations,

intelligence is developed over time as an individual's ability to remain resilient (Bernardo & Presbitero, 2018). Individuals develop at varying levels based on their capabilities, the resources provided throughout their lives, and the situations they are exposed to (Morris et al., 2017). Individuals within the gifted category also possess extreme amounts of emotion in many cases, as their level of emotional intelligence contributes to success or failure. Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are determined to demonstrate equally high levels of empathy (Sa et al., 2019). When gifted students are challenged empathically or emotionally, they are not able to be as effective mentally or remain focused on the goal without causing additional stress (Winsor & Mueller, 2020). While the theories of multiple intelligence, self-efficacy, and cognitive development provide a theoretical context for this study, the proposed study used the theory of positive disintegration as a theoretical lens. Positive disintegration allowed for the exploration of emotional, intellectual, and behavioral concerns as they relate to gifted students who have experienced TBI.

Problem Statement

The problem is that gifted adult students are faced with a significant loss of self after experiencing various levels of TBI, causing challenging effects on their educational capabilities (Mealings et al., 2021). Gifted students frequently possess additional talents and natural abilities provided by God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 12:6). Gifted students pride themselves on their natural abilities and the effectiveness of each unique gift they possess while being aware of the uniqueness that sets them apart from others (Vogl & Preckel, 2014). TBI alters the mind, regardless of the transpiring events such as a motor vehicle accident or sports injuries that caused the TBI, and the natural abilities individuals possess, forcing adaptive measures to be implemented over time (Ladowsky-Brooks & Chan, 2022). When the victim of

such an injury is a gifted student, the student is left feeling overly anxious and uncertain of their self-identity (Mealings et al., 2021).

Recognizing one's mental and emotional alterations after a TBI can be challenging and overwhelming, but facing the new reality is equally as frustrating and leads to multiple questions within oneself (Hurst et al., 2020). While researchers have examined the nature (Subotnik et al., 2011), severity (Callahan et al., 2015), and impact of TBIs on students who experience TBIs (Gubbels et al., 2014), most research focuses on general education without regard to gifted programs (Mohr & Bullock, 2005). Research on gifted students who have experienced a TBI has found that the journey through the recuperation of living and learning can be construed as complex (McAdams, 2013). However, understanding the complexities of self-identity and personality in relation to their educational experiences is not yet known (Mealings et al., 2021).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. Participants within Strong Minds Kind Hearts, a Christian counseling and educational office providing guidance and support to approximately 75 individuals of various races with TBIs, ranging in age from 2 years to 88 years, were self-identified or identified by neurologists, educators, or counselors. The participants were enrolled in an undergraduate program, ranging in age from 18 to 60 (to cover a range of ages within various undergraduate college programs), and were of both sexes from multiple cultures, allowing for a range of diversification within the research. The participants also had varying aspects of challenges and TBI, preidentified through the agency where the study was conducted.

For the purpose of this research study, educational experiences were defined as any interaction, course, or program where learning occurred (Awidi & Paynter, 2019). At this stage in the research, the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI were generally defined as damage caused to the brain by an abrupt force (Savitsky et al., 2016), causing alterations in individuals with exceptional abilities (NAGC, n.d.-a). The theory guiding this study was Kazimierz Dabrowski's (1964) theory of positive disintegration, as it focused on the growth in an individual's identity after tragedy has struck (Ackerman, 2017).

Significance of the Study

Research has frequently focused on varying aspects of gifted students' abilities and their experiences, with limitations imposed because of heightened anxiety (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020). While research on gifted students who have experienced TBI has explored the effects of TBI (Lefkovits et al., 2021), research on the educational resilience of these students is limited (Todis & Glang, 2008). Essentially, this study may connect research on TBI and research on gifted adult students while uncovering the strategies used by gifted students who have experienced TBI to obtain educational success (Topping et al., 2021).

Theoretical Significance

The study aimed to be theoretically significant by applying Dabrowski's (1964) theory of positive disintegration to a new population. Dabrowski indicated that people can grow in their lives through trials and errors (Ackerman, 2009), as well as anxiety and intellectual pressure (Tieso, 2007), noting that these pressures force people to develop adaptation skills (Bailey, 2011). While the theory of positive disintegration has been used to understand the resiliency of individuals as their faith in their abilities strengthens (McKay & Barton, 2018), this study may

extend Dabrowski's theory by using it to further understand how gifted students use resilience after experiencing TBI to regain a sense of self (Bernardo & Presbitero, 2018).

Empirical Significance

Research has frequently been focused on varying aspects of gifted students' abilities, along with limitations imposed (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020). Additional research has been conducted on the effects of TBI; however, limited detailed results have been included in developing an ability to overcome the challenges to remain successful (Lefkovits et al., 2021). This study linked research on TBI and gifted students while demonstrating the opportunities presented to everyone to achieve success (Topping et al., 2021). The successful solutions and strategies that were uncovered through the proposed study may provide additional options for future endeavors and participants' self-determination to be resolved through active engagement within society without fear of ridicule (Johnson & Ditchman, 2020). Additional research may also provide educational opportunities for families and the community to properly accept the limitations possessed by individuals after sustaining a TBI (Hart et al., 2018).

Practical Significance

Gifted students identify with being ostracized due to their unique capabilities and occasionally conceal the truth to be accepted, which can result in an inner battle against self-identification (Kuzujanakis, 2021). TBI alters the mind, and the natural abilities individuals possess, forcing adaptive measures to be implemented over time (Ladowsky-Brooks & Chan, 2022). Self-identity is also significantly impacted by the effects of TBI, as many individuals who are keenly aware of the situation will intentionally disguise their limitations (Jolly et al., 2020). The research contained within the study provided additional guidance for others to engage or educate gifted adult students who have experienced a TBI. This study may generate new ideas

for educators who encourage and develop gifted students, both young and old. It may also raise awareness of the emotional and psychological needs of gifted students who experience TBIs so that schools and communities can better support these students. The study may also encourage additional educational opportunities for educators to engage in inclusion within all dynamics of the educational process for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

Research Questions

In the following section, the central research question, along with three sub-questions, were identified to assist in obtaining data for this phenomenological study. The central research question was what drove the study by acknowledging students' shared experiences, while the sub-questions were used as supportive information. The questions also guided the research while remaining focused without personalizing or overemphasizing specific areas.

Central Research Question

What are the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI?

Sub-Question One

What are the shared dispositions, values, and intrinsic motivators of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI?

Sub-Question Two

What are the educational support experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI?

Sub-Question Three

What do undergraduate students who are gifted attribute to their ability to tackle ongoing education?

Definitions

1. *Achievement* - Successful completion through determination, audacity, and aptitude (Anderson et al., 2007).

2. *Anxiety* – Unwarranted fear weakening an individual's capability to accomplish matters swiftly and realistically (Morris, 1973).

3. *Cognitive Development* – How a person perceives, thinks, and gains an understanding of his or her world through the interaction of genetic and learned factors (Siegler, 1976).

4. *Emotional Intelligence* – An individual's ability to distinguish, manage, and convey their sentiments while managing relational interactions prudently and compassionately (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

5. *Expectations* – A certainty something will occur in the future (Constantino et al., 2010).

6. *Giftedness* – Individuals with gifts and talents perform or can perform at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains (Winner, 2000).

7. *Intrinsic Motivation* – Partaking or accomplishing an activity out of personal interest, not outside demands (Reeve & Deci, 1996).

8. *Perfectionism* – Motivated for precision with ferocious self-assessments (Hollender, 1965).

9. *Personality* – A mixture of attributes or abilities creating an individual's eccentric charisma (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003).

10. *Self-determination* – Each individual has the legal capacity to ascertain their own future (Vallerand et al., 2008).

11. *Self-Efficacy* – An individual's conviction in his or her scope to achieve deeds essential to create precise accomplishments (Bandura, 1982).

12. *Traumatic Brain Injury* – An interference in the ordinary role of the brain triggered by a significant, abrupt, and intense shock to the skull after being shaken or striking an item, or when an item penetrates the skull entering the brain tissue (Werner & Engelhard, 2007).

Summary

Gifted adult students who have experienced TBI are impacted within the educational realm as the TBI is exaggerated and the gifted individual attempts to disguise the inability to complete tasks that previously occurred naturally (De Simoni et al., 2018). As they progress through the educational process, gifted adult students are faced with a significant loss of self after experiencing various levels of TBI, causing challenging effects on their educational capabilities (Mealings et al., 2021). Based on the theories of Dabrowski and Piaget, one can develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics a gifted adult possesses (Kohan-Mass & Tal, 2019; Mendaglio et al., 2019; Oppong et al., 2019). The levels of trauma, along with the parts of the brain that are affected, need to be further researched to determine the lasting effects on gifted individuals (Blankenship & Canto, 2018; Shearer, 2020). Due to the stigma placed on disabilities, the research may not be accurate as not everyone reports the trauma, nor do they desire to be recognized as having difficulties (Gelech et al., 2019; Hagger & Riley, 2019).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Completion of an efficient literature review was necessary to assist in identifying the dramatic effect TBI has on gifted students, along with their increased levels of anxiety and additional personal challenges. This chapter provides an overview of previous content on TBI and gifted education while encouraging additional insight to be obtained through the proposed study. The theoretical framework, consisting of Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, was described to help identify various aspects related to the development and education of gifted individuals. The struggles gifted individuals face, TBI, and the effects of the damage on a gifted student's ability, self-efficacy, and awareness were the sections used to examine the literature and identify empirical gaps related to the topic.

Theoretical Framework

The predominant theory, used as a lens to narrow the scope of the study, supports the development of personality as identified through Kazimierz Dabrowski's (1967) theory of positive disintegration. The theory guided an understanding of the impact of varying factors on a gifted individual's ability to perform, along with self-worth or identity (Krafchek & Kronborg, 2019). After the tragic loss of his best friend in college to suicide (Tillier, 2009), Kazimierz Dabrowski created a personality development theory of positive disintegration.

According to Dabrowski (1967), disintegration occurs after tragedy has struck and the individual's previous identity disappears; this creates an opportunity for significant growth (Ackerman, 2017). This growth can be considered healthy or detrimental, depending upon the individual's motivation and continued support from others (Levi-Belz et al., 2021). Dabrowski (1964) believed individuals could grow within their lives through trials and errors, along with

experiencing anxiety and intellectual pressure, noting that these pressures force the individual to learn how to adapt. Dabrowski's theory identified emotions as the guiding force behind an individual's potential to overcome areas within their life and is closely related to the motivator's adult students' experience (Kane, 2009).

Dabrowski (1964) broke his theory into five levels of development while focusing on progressive potential for everyone. The five levels of development within Dabrowski's (1969) theory are as follows: primary integration, unilevel disintegration, spontaneous multi-level disintegration, directed multi-level disintegration, and secondary integration. Dabrowski (1967) also noted that individuals who experience overexcitability intellectually, emotionally, within their imagination, psychomotor function, and sensually are more likely to perceive reality in an intense manner compared to others without hypersensitivity. Dabrowski's description identifies varying challenges faced by gifted individuals and notes that many do not effectively understand how to cope with internal distractions, leading to the potential for further detrimental effects on an individual's growth and development or levels of success obtained (Harper et al., 2016).

During positive disintegration, individuals are forced to face intense negative emotions while intrinsically battling for a resolution (Fusar-Poli et al., 2022; Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006). Individuals become overwhelmed when situations occur opposite of the original expectation, especially if there is a negative impact on them or the situation, leading to the opportunity to adapt their ability to react (Gomez et al., 2019). Dabrowski (1964) stated that individuals could grow in their lives through trials and errors, along with experiencing anxiety and intellectual pressure, noting that these pressures force the individual to learn how to adapt. Biblically, life's varying trials and tribulations are identified as opportunities for building individualized character with an instilled vision of hope (*New International Version Bible,* 1978/2011, Romans 5:3-4).

Throughout all aspects of life, an individual evaluates themselves and develops an understanding of how to adjust to daily situations by noting what works or does not (Bandura, 2018; Harper et al., 2016). Through successful navigation of the varying feelings contributed by the overwhelming sense of loss of oneself, an individual is provided ample opportunity to rearrange their personal beliefs and alter the person they desire to become while using several aspects of their previous abilities (Eiserman et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2016; Vuyk et al., 2016). Over time, through the expansion of positive disintegration, individuals repeatedly demonstrate resiliency as their faith in their capabilities strengthens, regardless of the initial situation or expectation (McKay & Barton, 2018; Scholz & Strelan, 2021).

Related Literature

The development of successful educational programs is essential to promote students' positive experiences throughout all school levels and should include individualized plans as deemed necessary (Jachova et al., 2018). During educational training and meetings, the focus has been on individuals with a disability. However, families continue to advocate for the same focus for gifted students (Subotnik et al., 2021). Gifted students in elementary school may be overlooked or viewed as difficult due to boredom from a lack of significantly challenging and effective coursework (Lakin & Wai, 2020). Assessments have been established to determine which students require additional assistance due to a potential disability or may be more advanced than their peers (Kanaya, 2019).

These assessments should not be the only determining factor for effectively identifying areas of disability or giftedness, as they might be missing the mark for each student's overall potential (Callahan & Hertberg-Davis, 2018). Ultimately, each assessment is geared toward developing an individualized plan for the student's success; however, every state has its

preferences and guidelines for which assessment to use (Benson et al., 2019). Essentially, three assessments are routinely used within the educational realm to assist in the identification of disabilities (Lockwood & Farmer, 2019). Woodcock-Johnson IV-tests of achievement (WJ-IV-ACH), Wechsler individual achievement test, fourth edition (WIAT-4), and Kaufman test of educational achievement, third edition (KTEA-3) are the most used assessments.

Although all three assessments are considered essential and accurate, the KTEA-3 is deemed the most accurate standardized measure to identify the student's authentic ability and knowledge (Power et al., 2021). The WJ-IV-ACH is used to screen, diagnose, and monitor progress within the comprehension, literature, and arithmetic areas of achievement for toddlers through the elderly (Li et al., 2020). The comprehension, literature, and arithmetic areas of achievement include evaluation of basic skills, fluency, and application (Farris et al., 2020). The WJ-IV-ACH also includes knowledge areas for science, social studies, and the humanities (Lockwood et al., 2021).

While the WJ-IV-ACH is primarily provided within the educational realm, the WIAT-4 can be delivered within a variety of realms by various professionals, including social workers and psychologists (Dombrowski & Casey, 2022). The WIAT-4 assists in diagnosing specific learning disabilities, along with dyslexia screening and evaluation (Woodward & Hüppi, 2018). The WIAT-4 focuses on an individual's ability to apply intellectual competencies and acquired knowledge from core subjects (reading, math, written language, and oral language) to grade-level expectations (Beaujean & Parkin, 2022).

Intelligence exams are used to assist in identifying an individual's potential within various realms of academic studies and demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses the individual possesses (Kistyanto et al., 2022). The most prevalent assessments of intelligence include the

following four assessments: Stanford-Binet 5th edition (SB-5); Wechsler preschool primary scale of intelligence (WPPSI-IV); Wechsler intelligence scale for children (WISC-V); and Woodcock-Johnson tests of cognitive abilities (WJ-IV COG). These assessments can be considered ongoing over a lifetime as an individual's potential adjusts within certain situations (Lövdén et al., 2020).

The SB-5 is an assessment used to test the five factors of cognitive ability, including fluid reasoning, knowledge, quantitative reasoning, visual-spatial processing, and working memory (Issarraras & Matson, 2018). The WPPSI-IV is limited to testing intelligence in individuals Ages 2 through 7 and encourages the identification of intelligence through children partaking in game-like activities (Raudenbush et al., 2020). WISC-V comprises assessments for children ages 6 through 16, used to identify verbal comprehension, visual-spatial, fluid reasoning, working memory, and processing speed (Egeland et al., 2021). Finally, WJ-IV COG is an assessment that measures the general intellectual ability and specific cognitive abilities, identified within 18 varying tests, for toddlers through the elderly (Spenceley et al., 2022).

Research has been conducted on the effects of talent or giftedness on students' ability to retain information and essentially succeed (Liu & Xu, 2017; Reis & Peters, 2021). Unfortunately, little has been studied regarding the effects of personal challenges on the success rates of gifted and talented individuals (Mouzon et al., 2017). Gifted people have natural abilities that are ingrained deep within them or that aid in the development of additional abilities (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). Gifted adults focus on their unique abilities, such as their emotional ability to automatically connect with others while being aware of their natural ability to assist in the situation (Lopes, 2016). When an adult is faced with the potential for a TBI, the results are impactful on every portion of the individual (Venkatesan et al., 2021).

An adult's ability to maintain resiliency when faced with a TBI depends entirely on the age at which the incident occurred along with the severity of the trauma (Castor & El Massioui, 2020). Gifted people work hard to keep their reputation and struggle to show others what they are going through after a significant brain injury (Kreutzer et al., 2018). Depending upon where the trauma was located, the gifted individual could lose their unique giftedness and not understand the inability to do things that previously came naturally (Markovic et al., 2020). Relevant research on gifted education and TBI is covered in the sections that follow to provide a foundation for the proposed study.

Giftedness

God designed everyone with specific traits for a unique and divine purpose, reassuring us that no two people are completely identical (*New International Version Bible,* 1978/2011, 1 Peter 4:10-11). Throughout creation, God included within His design a variety of ethnicities and cultures to continue encouraging everyone to use their gifts to their full potential without feeling limited due to their background (Mofield & Mofield, 2022). In all aspects of life, individuals are frequently lost while trying to find their personal identity. However, with appropriate support channels, there is a tremendous opportunity for talents to be brought to life (Milinga, 2021).

Giftedness is often challenging to define as the concept has multiple facets. However, universally, individuals identified as having giftedness generally refer to an exceptional ability of the individual within a specific or multiple areas (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). A generalized definition of giftedness suggests that individuals with gifts and talents perform or have the capability to perform at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment within one or more domains (Preckel et al., 2017; Winner, 2000). Gifted students score higher on intelligence testing while demonstrating increased academic self-

concepts and tend to be intrinsically motivated (Heyder et al., 2017). According to the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, an estimated 6% of students are identified as gifted (NAGC, n.d.-a). Unfortunately, the identified percentage is merely an estimate due to many students being underrepresented or unidentified (Park & Foley-Nicpon, 2022).

Gifted students battle the personal strengths of maintaining extremely high expectations with critical thinking and the associated challenges of the need for success (Webb, 2022). Gifted individuals are known for putting additional pressure upon themselves. However, they also receive tremendous amounts of pressure from those closest to them and often develop various strategies for overcoming the challenges associated with these pressures (Winkler & Voight, 2016). Perfectionism is an aspect gifted students strive for throughout daily activities, causing concern for the student's abilities to maintain focus when perfectionism is not obtained (Grugan et al., 2021). Gifted students cannot be placed into a "one size fits all box" as gifted students are as unique as they are individuals (Peters et al., 2021). Individual personalities and traits play a significant role in identifying gifted students (Cavilla, 2017; Mammadov et al., 2018).

Longevity develops from an individual's perspective on the experience and expectations placed on themselves over the years, which plays a crucial role in understanding the impact gifted students face (Coleman et al., 2015). Studies have been conducted to further assist in successfully identifying gifted students' traits with the assumption of being able to group multiple individuals into similar categories (Wiley, 2020). Studies also assist in identifying loneliness as expressed and experienced by gifted students, along with the relationship between emotions and success (Ogurlu et al., 2018a). Research has repeatedly demonstrated the impact educators have on a student's success, motivation, and fulfillment (Siegle et al., 2014). Research

has been formulated around speculations of perfectionism regarding variation between socially

prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism (Damian et al., 2014).

Identification

God created everyone with a unique plan, and to complete the plan, all individual gifts

need the opportunity to blossom to their full potential. In Romans 12:2, Paul reminds believers

"not to conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"

(*New International Version*, 1978/2011). If individual uniqueness is stifled, God's love and

power may not be fully demonstrated in that person's life (Lindeman et al., 2020). Findings show

that being gifted is not merely in the forms of specific subject areas but also to various extents

including emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006; Mofield & Mofield, 2022).

From a young age, people are all expected to fit into a particular box and essentially

belong to a group of peers (Koivuhovi et al., 2022). Sadly, this is not as easy as many attempts to

make it seem due to individuals being confronted with multiple differences (Low et al., 2019).

Some individuals are left feeling as though they are an outcast because they are not smart enough

or good enough to be part of an exclusive club, while others feel outcast as they are separated

from their peers in varying settings due to being too smart (Szymanski, 2021).

In 1978, Joseph Renzulli developed the "Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness,"

identifying the interaction of three main traits: general abilities, commitment to the task, and

creativity (Sousa, 2009). Over the years, research has been conducted on various subjects to

further assist in accurately identifying and classifying gifted individuals. The research shows that

genetics plays an important role (Simonton, 2020; Sternberg et al., 2021). However, after varying

case studies (Sternberg, 2020), it was found that the environment plays an even greater role in

using the genes. For example, children living in lower-income areas having limited resources for

education were found to be less likely to be considered gifted, although they may be genetically wired for success (Sousa, 2009).

Developing an understanding of the exceptionality of each gifted individual, along with their unique talents, can be overwhelming at times. Nevertheless, the rewards of proper identification outweigh the negative results (Collins, 2017; Kroesbergen et al., 2016). Giftedness does not merely entail academic strengths but also emotional abilities (Abdulla Alabbasi et al., 2021; Ogurlu et al., 2018b; Zeidner, 2017). The abilities gifted individuals possess are considered innate powers engrained deep within or which further assist with the evolution of supplementary abilities (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018).

Regrettably, gifted students are frequently overlooked for their abilities due to demonstrating poor studying skills or immature behaviors, which appear to parents and educators as disruptive (Meyer, 2021; Peters et al., 2020). Often, students are tested intellectually to identify their strengths and weaknesses within an academic realm (Sternberg, 2021; Watts, 2020). Frequently, students are identified through observation concerning their peers and the way gifted students react or engage in various situations (Ronksley-Pavia & Neumann, 2020). Throughout the observations, several characteristics have been identified as particularly strong in gifted individuals (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020). These include experiencing and demonstrating emotional intensity at an early age, having an intensified sense of self-awareness, an increasingly determined level of inquisitiveness, and recollection without additional encouragement (Gubbins et al., 2021).

The variance of giftedness can be recognized as early as infancy through later adulthood (Hodges et al., 2021). Infants who tend to engage in active discovery, require less sleep, and need to be moved to see other things can be attributed to giftedness (Ruf, 2021). Later,

throughout the life cycle, as an individual is identified as being gifted, the individual has the potential to have their personality change while working through the adjustments within their identity or self-awareness (Lindt et al., 2021). According to research, 14.2% of diverse students in the poor sector of society, predominately of Caucasian and Latin origin, are identified as gifted (Ricciardi et al., 2020).

Gifted individuals' personalities mature over time, with specific aspects aiding in determining the amount of success the individual is willing to accept (Csathó & Birkás, 2018). Individuals gain additional benefits and weaknesses as their abilities become more visible to others as they progress through the academic aspects of life (Park et al., 2016). As an individual's self-esteem develops, there will be several specific areas where the individual will excel, while other equally important areas will be unable to prosper (Kirk et al., 2011). Individuals must be willing to adapt to the faltering changes and overcome their weaknesses. However, without a balance of healthy self-esteem, this will be an overbearing challenge (Matta et al., 2019). Individuals with high self-esteem and confidence will strive to accomplish difficult challenges to continue building upon their experience (Siegle et al., 2020).

Researchers have determined that "the human brain is pre-wired for language, mathematics, and artistic capabilities" (Sousa, 2009, p. 6). As research continues to fully understand the power and structure of the human brain, the possibility of gifted individuals being more accurately and quickly identified increases significantly (Shearer, 2020). Researchers hope that with more effective recognition, more education in the best way to promote success within the gifted population will also increase (Reis & Renzulli, 2021; Wai & Lakin, 2020). Providing an opportunity for students to actively participate in gifted programs might allow the individuals

to be exposed to higher quality instruction or engage in complementary achievable interests (Mofield, 2020; Redding & Grissom, 2021).

Many gifted individuals desire to make the world a better place and are considered transformational as these individuals can direct their giftedness toward others (Sternberg, 2021). Transformational gifted people strive to create positive, profound, and long-lasting change (Armstrong et al., 2019). On the flip side, transactional gifted individuals are primarily recognized as gifted yet simultaneously expected to provide something in return (Maker, 2021).

Strengths

Effectively assessing the abilities of an individual can be a multifaceted process leading to the goal of creating and sustaining a motivating atmosphere where the strengths of the gifted individuals are balanced with the limitations the gifted individual possesses (Silverman & Gilman, 2020). Giftedness provides an opportunity for others, such as educators and parents, to identify alternative methods of learning while being provided an opportunity to recognize the abilities within everyone (Ogurlu & Özbey, 2022). The capacity for additional information to be obtained is dependent upon the individual's areas of strength and interests (Glück & Tischler, 2022). Giftedness provides an opportunity for genuinely individualized educational plans and guidance to assist in further growth of the individual, while encouraging additional motivation for extra studies or pursuits of interest (Ruf, 2021).

Developing an understanding of the various aspects of giftedness provides an increased opportunity for obtaining knowledge about diversity (Novak et al., 2020). Giftedness, along with diversity, aids in societal changes and the expansion of cultural growth opportunities (Hu, 2019). Due to the vast array of differences among the general population and those identified with giftedness, additional educational opportunities for parents and educators are strongly

encouraged to continue successfully maintaining individualized educational plans for future success (Stephens, 2019). Attributing rates of success are identified in gifted individuals who are openly willing to share their gifts with others, rather than focus predominantly on what the possessed gift is (Sternberg, 2021).

Giftedness is spread across varying domains rather than primarily being dominant in only one domain of the individual's life (Renzulli, 2020). Often, giftedness can be seen in the formats of music, art, emotional connections, sports, science, math, craftiness, technology, and a multitude of other areas (Subotnik et al., 2017). It tends to be overly easy for the focus to be on the predominant gift of an individual while desiring to strengthen the gift substantially (Hertzog, 2017). While focusing on the predominant area, an individual can be gratified with a high potential for success in the future within that specific area (Stephens, 2019).

Studies show a direct relation to achievement or success based on the level of interest an individual possesses within a specific subject area (Mammadov et al., 2018; Ritchotte et al., 2016). When an individual finds something of interest or can learn based on their unique interest, the level of interest encourages the individual to strive to learn more and overcome other obstacles (Efklides, 2010; Matheis et al., 2017). As the individual is faced with adversity, the focus transitions heavily to areas of competence versus areas of extreme weakness, using the strengths to persevere (Disabato et al., 2019).

According to Lewis Terman (1921), gifted individuals are more determined to be significantly more concerned with success throughout their educational process than their counterparts in the same grades. Within the research, it was noted that over 70% of gifted men and 67% of gifted women furthered their educational careers to obtain an advanced degree from college. An interesting aspect Terman identified included the motivation of gifted individuals to

maintain mental and physical well-being, along with obtaining proper nutrition, which is perceived to assist in the natural ability to maintain knowledge.

Weaknesses

Learning disabilities, along with diversified upbringings, are associated with distinct intellectual disadvantages (Maddocks, 2020). Unfortunately, focusing on only one area of achievement for an individual can cause tremendous strain on other developmental areas for that individual and limit the full potential for success in the future (Russell, 2018). Identifying individuals as gifted expands the opportunities for others to feel less important and shy away from engaging in a variety of activities while limiting the possibility of growth (Shearer, 2020). Opportunities to be recognized or empowered are not widely available in all areas of society for giftedness (Kuo, 2022). Individuals identified as gifted may purposely underachieve, causing their interests and gifts to be overlooked (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2020). Gifted individuals also tend to be misdiagnosed with behavioral issues or social skills (Bildiren & Fırat, 2020).

When an individual is misdiagnosed, the individual loses interest in striving to do better or demonstrate their giftedness, as they do not wish to be viewed as different (Kuo, 2022). Often, behaviors and emotions are directly intertwined with an individual's strengths and weaknesses, especially when trying to overcompensate for one over the other (Paik et al., 2021). Individuals may perceive themselves as less than perfect if they do not achieve success in an area they were previously identified as gifted (Siegle et al., 2020). As one matures, some strengths are no longer the focus, and one begins to recognize new strengths that were perhaps buried under fear of ridicule or rejection (Wagner, 2019). Individuals develop at various levels based on their capabilities and resources provided throughout their lives, along with situations they are exposed to. Therefore, the identification of giftedness may be significantly delayed (Morris et al., 2017).

Frequently, due to the emotional advancement of gifted individuals, educational processes are regularly challenged to determine the best options for engaging the emotions in a supportive manner as a means of increasing the potential intellectually for the individuals (Cavilla, 2019). Many educators fail to recognize the importance of the direct relationship between the individual's emotional and cognitive development (Zins et al., 2007). Due to a lack of comprehension on the educators' part, the importance of cohesiveness between the academic and emotional aspects of an individual is extremely important to be integrated routinely into the curriculum for the highest levels of success (Hébert, 2010; Peterson & Lorimer, 2011; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2009). The lack of understanding of the importance of the connection results in the social-emotional development of individuals being overlooked as an important aspect of the ability to optimize personal development overall (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Individuals with a specific gift, such as math, may become bored or lose interest as math becomes easier (Karatas-Aydin & Isiksal-Bostan, 2022). Attention is a natural reaction to situations; some would call it a need that we seek in all aspects of our lives (Angela & Caterina, 2020). Sadly, when we receive tremendous amounts of praise in one area of our life, we strive for additional praise in other areas as well (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018). When a person receives negative reactions to other areas of life, it becomes a struggle not to feel as if we are a failure or even rejected (Cross et al., 2019). Individuals who are not provided with the full opportunity to obtain the best possible education will struggle to maintain their individuality, including creativity, over the years leading into adulthood (NAGC, n.d.-b). Everyone has the potential for greatness with significant amounts of creativity. However, if not caught early enough, creativity could be stalled, affecting the future of society (Gonsoulin et al., 2006).

Gifted Education

The initial school for gifted children opened in Worster, Massachusetts in 1901 as a private educational system (Karnes & Nugent, 2002). In 1905, Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon developed a series of tests referred to as Binet-Simon to assist in accurately identifying children of inferior intelligence (Sternberg et al., 2021). Testing was used to separate gifted students from average students in alternative or special classrooms. Lewis Terman (1954) engaged in research to develop an accurate description of the development of gifted individuals while demonstrating a lack of negative characteristics (Bergold et al., 2020).

Lewis Terman became known as the "father of gifted education" after he introduced the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, adapted from the French researchers Binet and Simon (Warne, 2018). Based on his work in 1916, Terman (1921) recognized the multiple talents presented by gifted children while acknowledging the lack of proficient educational opportunities to further assist in the successful growth of these individuals. Interestingly, although Terman became famous for his knowledge of varying natural abilities possessed by individuals, gifted education's history stems back to 1868 (Wai & Worrell, 2021). The Superintendent of St. Louis public schools, William Torrey Harris, recognized the importance of providing reasonable accommodations within public schools to educate gifted students (Luckey, 2018).

Educators are often faced with the daunting task of providing sufficient education to individuals regardless of their level of ability. However, the emphasis is frequently on material challenges rather than an abundance of overachievement and ease within the same medium (Dixson et al., 2020). Without the assistance and appropriate guidance of gifted individuals, they run the high risk of being under-challenged and undereducated throughout their school endeavors (Feuchter & Preckel, 2022). Unfortunately, the idiosyncrasy for recognizing gifted individuals

remains limited and excludes individuals for a variety of reasons, the most common of which is being overlooked due to a stipulation such as excelling in all subjects versus focusing on one area at a time (Bolland et al., 2019).

As intelligence is developed over time, an individual grows and is affected by life situations, along with the individual's ability to remain resilient (Bernardo & Presbitero, 2018). As young children, cognitive development expands with every experience while receiving varying reactions (Lopez Boo, 2016). As children grow older, they strengthen their beliefs about their abilities and how to be empowered (Gaesser, 2018). With the strengthening of self-efficacy, individuals can develop an ability to overcome negative challenges by demonstrating resilience and adaptability (Renati et al., 2016).

Curriculum

The goal of educators is to prepare future generations to continue their dreams and to be the best individuals within society (Moran, 2018). Unfortunately, currently, there are no nationwide criteria or policy to guide the educational system regarding gifted and talented individuals (Lockhart et al., 2022). Without the flexibility or recognition to individualize programs while effectively challenging everyone, the system is failing, and the future is not as concrete (Henriksen et al., 2022). If systems continue to fail to adapt to the needs of individuals, beginning in early childhood education, these individuals will forever feel as though they are enough or fail to obtain their true potential (Koole et al., 2018).

Interestingly, as children grow and engage in social activities, there is a likelihood that giftedness leads to self-esteem concerns as the individual becomes keenly aware of the different treatment received compared to others (Klimecká, 2023). For example, if a middle-school-aged child is in a gifted program and is being teased by peers for excelling in the program while not

having friends or free time, the child might seek normalcy by dropping out of gifted programs (Szymanski & Wrenn, 2019). The child may even demonstrate additional mood swings while attempting to grasp their identity without letting on about the personal struggle with the decision (Gaesser, 2018). Battling with self-identity and self-worth occurs throughout all stages of education without necessarily having a clear focus on the future (Nousia et al., 2022).

Studies show a direct relation to achievement or success based on the level of interest an individual possesses in the specific subject area (Mammadov et al., 2018; Ritchotte et al., 2016). When an individual finds something of interest or can learn based on their unique interest, the level of interest encourages the individual to strive to learn more and overcome other obstacles (Efklides, 2018; Matheis et al., 2017). As the individual is faced with adversity, the focus transitions heavily to areas of competence versus areas of extreme weakness, using the strengths to persevere (Disabato et al., 2019). Various studies report an increased likelihood of sleep disturbances, despair, anxiety, and drug and alcohol abuse to be among the lasting outcomes of TBI (Izzy et al., 2021).

People within all realms of society routinely strive for individuality while being impacted by evolving needs and circumstances (Silverman, 2021). As requirements change and force educators to teach everyone equally based on test standards, individualism can get lost in the shuffle (Strom & Viesca, 2021). Gifted students are repeatedly deemed independent and knowledgeable, with the false belief they do not require additional assistance or support to determine their future educational or career endeavors (Muratori & Smith, 2015). Muratori and Smith identified four areas of optimization through research and evaluation of previous studies to increase the positive effects for gifted students: learning, experience, self-insight, and self-investment.

Gifted students are often faced with significant moments of indecisiveness when presented with multiple choices due to their wealth of abilities, motivation, interests, and opportunities (Muratori & Smith, 2015). The "overchoice syndrome" may cause an individual to delay obtaining their full potential in all aspects of life. According to the research, while students and parents are the primary advocates for the success of gifted students, educators, and counselors also play an important role (Reis & Renzulli, 2021).

Elementary

Research has been conducted to assist in developing a better understanding of the emotional and social development of elementary students identified as gifted (Lockhart & Mun, 2020). Studies were also used to determine if there were any significant variations during the differing ages or within alternate settings with other students (Lindt et al., 2021). The findings helped identify a trend throughout the programs in information provided adequately to the students and parents (Guignard et al., 2021). When information is adequately provided and encouraging support is offered, students tend to be more engaged throughout and develop a higher sense of positivity related to their capabilities or uniqueness compared to their classmates (Warne, 2022).

Often, elementary students are overlooked for proper identification of giftedness due to extreme displayed behaviors ranging from boredom to hyperactivity within the classroom (McCoach et al., 2020). Research has shown that an average of 30% of students identified with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are in fact gifted individuals who are overlooked (Antshel, 2008). A predominant feature in determining the accuracy of a diagnosis of ADHD is whether the behaviors are only occurring within the school environment or also at home (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Upon clarification, gifted individuals who are deemed underachievers can be

treated effectively through educational modifications, providing individual projects, and, when necessary, counseling interventions to assist the children in learning how to divert their giftedness appropriately (Baum et al., 1995; Hua et al., 2014; Siegle et al., 2017).

Secondary

During the middle school years, students often struggle to find their place amongst their peers, within the family, and in society (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Educators and parents play an important role in a child's development, as well as feelings of loneliness (Ogurlu et al., 2018a). When encouraged to assist other students or participate in more challenging activities, gifted students frequently feel separated or different from their peers. Loneliness has been shown to have the significant impact of altering an individual's personality (Palikara et al., 2021), often being affected as early as elementary school as children strive to be socially accepted by their peers (Antonopoulou et al., 2019).

High school students report their lack of focus or belief in their individual giftedness stems from teachers not supporting them or verifying the information obtained (Cavilla, 2015). Teasing from others has a direct impact on the intellectual ability of an individual, regardless of their gifted abilities (Lee et al., 2017). Peer victimization has been found to have a direct correlation with a student's self-concept and self-confidence. Students who are fully motivated academically are more likely to have stronger success in their college and career choices (Siegle et al., 2014). When students find their environment to be supportive and effective, along with the provision of an interesting task, they are more successful.

Higher Education

Reflecting on the educational process, gifted education is frequently overlooked during undergraduate programs, and future educators are frequently not adequately guided toward

adequately preparing to educate gifted individuals (Plunkett & Kronberg, 2021). Unfortunately, future educators' perceptions do not openly allow for further understanding, as many believe gifted students require specialized classrooms that are not inclusive of their advanced needs (Rinn, 2018). Undergraduate gifted students strive towards additional intrinsic success, which is best challenged by providing opportunities for creative and critical thinking skills to be challenged to obtain the individual's full potential (Miller et al., 2018; Spoon et al., 2020).

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been found throughout research to be a positive indicator of success within higher education programs (Parker et al., 2017). Gifted students who actively participate in gifted educational programs have a higher success rate within higher education, with approximately 44% of individuals obtaining a doctoral degree, which is substantially higher than the general population (Ziegler & Stoeger, 2017). Gifted college students have the ability to learn new information rather quickly, have a greater need for achievement, and demonstrate more persistence than average students (Plominski & Burns, 2018).

School Performance

Educational regulation, also recognized as school performance, assists in efficiently discovering impending academic achievements for students (Raza et al., 2021). When a student is fully motivated academically, they are more likely to have stronger success in their college and career choices (Siegle et al., 2014). A primary teacher in the student's life must promote individuality while providing adequate or substantial encouragement to assist in motivating the student. Students frequently attribute their motivation and interest to their individual experiences with their teachers; some were the primary teachers while others were for the electives.

Students who find their environment to be supportive and effective, along with the provision of an interesting task, are more successful compared to students who find the task not

valuable (Siegle et al., 2014). Self-oriented perfectionism is internally motivated, with high standards for oneself, and is overly critical when perfection is not attained (Damian et al., 2014; Walton et al., 2020). Socially prescribed perfectionism is externally driven by a false sense of belief that others demand perfection from the individual (Damian et al., 2014). Perfectionism is determined to have varying forms and characteristics while being considered a multidimensional personality trait (Damian et al., 2014).

TBI

Any injury occurring to the head from an outside force is a cause of TBI, and the extent of the damage is based on the level of injury (Savitsky et al., 2016). TBI alters the composition of the brain and the way the brain processes data (Byom & Turkstra, 2016; Williams & Prince, 2017). As the brain shifts based on the trauma, the lasting effects can either be temporary or permanent, dependent upon the extent of the damage along with the location where the impact occurred (Mouzon et al., 2017; Palermo et al., 2020). Some symptoms individuals experience from TBI include memory problems, loss of consciousness, headaches, fatigue, blurred vision, loss of coordination, depression, and anxiety (Hu et al., 2017). TBI also can cause the impacted individual to experience random mood swings, visual aphasia, speaking disorders, seizures, and extreme sensitivity to lights, sounds, and smells (Armstrong, 2018).

Challenges

TBI has an annual impact on millions of people in the U.S. (Le et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2021). Researchers are still trying to figure out why some people seem more resilient after a TBI while others never seem to regain control of their lives as they were before the injury (Gombay & Andrews, 2021; Lefkovits et al., 2021). An individual's ability to maintain resiliency when faced with a TBI depends entirely on the age when the incident occurred along

with the severity of the trauma (Castor & El Massioui, 2018). Gifted people work hard to keep their reputation and struggle to show others what they are going through after a significant brain injury (Kreutzer et al., 2018).

Depending upon where the trauma was, a gifted individual could lose their unique giftedness and not understand the inability to do things that previously came naturally (Markovic et al., 2020; Wellisch, 2021). TBI alters the mind and natural abilities possessed by individuals, forcing adaptive measures to be implemented over time (Ladowsky-Brooks & Chan, 2022; Lambert et al., 2019). Recognizing the changes is difficult and overwhelming, but facing the new reality is equally frustrating and raises numerous questions within oneself (Hurst et al., 2018).

Family members do not always understand how the impact of a TBI impacts the talent an individual possesses, leading to additional turmoil within the family dynamic, and causing strained communication and relationships (Koshy et al., 2017; Vialle, 2017). Gifted individuals frequently struggle to engage in social interactions on the same level as their peers as they process information and situations differently and are often unable to relax (Peterson & Jen, 2018; Sharp et al., 2017; Wiley, 2020). Stemming from childhood, gifted adults tend to have a challenging time explaining their innate abilities, leaving the individual feeling tired and overwhelmed with the repetitive attempts to communicate their situation (Peters & Engerrand, 2016; Wai & Worrell, 2016).

Despite their best efforts to regain a sense of normalcy in their lives, many people lose friendships after suffering a TBI because they and their peers do not know how to interact with one another without appearing awkward (Douglas, 2020). In addition to the loss of friendships, an increased amount of depression, isolation, and overall loneliness have surfaced (Douglas & Spellacy, 2000; Lefebvre et al., 2008; Salas et al., 2018; Shorland & Douglas, 2010). Throughout

varying studies, the one predominant factor individuals desire the most is for further education to

be provided to the public regarding the impact of TBI and how the individuals affected

desperately yearn to be understood (Downing et al., 2021).

Gifted adults have an increased likelihood of anxiety, along with additional challenges,

due to the additional pressures and desires for perfection, often stemming from childhood

(Francis et al., 2016; Szymanski & Warren, 2019). Individuals who have experienced a TBI also

have an enhanced probability of experiencing seizures within varying timeframes on the journey

of personal change from the TBI (Pingue et al., 2021). In addition to the psychological impacts

on an individual after experiencing a TBI, the individual's life also has the potential to become a

large socioeconomic burden as the cognitive dysfunction continues to increase (Haarbauer-Krupa

et al., 2021). In addition to the increased levels of anxiety, an individual who has experienced

TBI also has an increased likelihood of developing severe migraines and depression (Alosco et

al., 2020; Howard et al., 2018). When the individual suffers from migraines, the ability to

successfully recover in a shorter timeframe is limited (Howard et al., 2018).

TBI changes the composition of the brain and the way the brain processes information,

resulting in additional challenges for gifted adults to overcome while attempting to regain their

previous abilities (Byom & Turkstra, 2016; Williams & Prince, 2017). While the individual

strives to conceal the damage to others around them, there is an additional battle occurring

within, causing additional personal stress and strife (Durham & Ramcharan, 2018; Ramanathan

et al., 2019). Various dynamics within life shape an individual, and a TBI can occur at any time,

causing significant impairments or alterations, leading the individual to struggle with self-

identity or acceptance of weakness within knowledge-acquiring areas (Milders, 2010). Over

time, individuals may experience significant light sensitivity and begin displaying cognitive decline related to Alzheimer's (Elenberger et al., 2020; Grasset et al., 2020; Hicks et al., 2019).

The pressure gifted individuals place upon themselves stems from intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, often causing additional stress (Kitsantas et al., 2017). As individuals mature, they become aware of stimuli, learning to adapt their reactions to various situations to assist in provisional better outcomes for the individual in various settings such as education or career (Ackerman, 2017). Furthermore, gifted people frequently seek perfection and push themselves to achieve even more (Olton-Weber et al., 2020). At times, it appears as though the gifted individual is not satisfied, especially if they feel they have not been successful in various areas (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2019). The unnecessary pressure frequently results in extreme fear, which is not easily controlled by the individual (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020).

Disappointingly, some gifted individuals have also suffered emotional, physical, sexual, or traumatic pain, causing their brains to rewire in alternating manners (Cicerone et al., 2004). When these individuals suffer the consequences of a TBI, a portion of them continue to strive for perfectionism in areas they had previously excelled in (Affrunti et al., 2016). TBI has long-term consequences, frequently requiring individuals to completely reassess their abilities and methods of obtaining information (Turkstra et al., 2018). The difficulties faced by gifted students are exaggerated while recovering from TBI and attempting to conceal the individual's inability to retain information that had previously come easily to them (De Simoni et al., 2017).

Levels of Trauma

The varying levels of trauma, along with the type of TBI, relate to the type of trauma that occurred along with the severity of symptoms experienced by the individual (Divani et al., 2018). When an individual has experienced a TBI, an MRI and CT scan are usually used to

identify the areas and amount of damage within the brain (Nadel et al., 2021; Rauchman et al., 2022). Physicians employ the Glascow Coma Score (GCS) to evaluate the level of trauma through a series of responses; eye opening ability, greatest spoken response, and peak motor response (Sharbafshaaer, 2018).

Mild TBI is in direct correlation with a drastic change in movement of the head, as in whiplash, shaking, or an impact to the head leading to a concussion (King et al., 2020). This type of damage to the head is considered a closed-head injury (Bodnar et al., 2019). Concussions are difficult to detect on imaging scans and are considered dangerous when multiple concussions occur in a short period or when the previous concussion has not healed completely (Torres Colón et al., 2017; Voormolen et al., 2019). With the increasing number of concussions an individual experiences within their lifetime, the number of potential migraines significantly increases as well (Howard et al., 2018).

Moderate brain injuries tend to involve the individual being unconscious for a few hours with confusion lasting for weeks (Tenovuo et al., 2021). However, the expected level of recovery is optimal with the individual actively participating in additional treatment options such as physical therapy and counseling (Santhanam et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2017). For individuals under 40, recovery time from a mild TBI takes an average of a week to three months without any significant treatment to help the symptoms disappear (van der Horn et al., 2019). Some symptoms identified by individuals with mild TBI include dizziness, memory loss, nausea, vomiting, confusion, headache, sleepiness, and lack of coordination (Cooksley et al., 2018; Emmert et al., 2021).

Acute brain injuries occur from an element permeating the skull or from devastating strikes to the skull and brain, leading to irreversible results (Edlow et al., 2017). This type of TBI

is often referred to as a penetrating or open head injury distinguished by focal damage correlated to the object's path of damage (Keating & Cullen, 2021). Due to the severity of the injury, there is a limited capacity to return to life as it was before the injury, and an individual may suffer through significant personality changes while grasping their new reality (Douglas, 2020; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2020). Brain injuries alter the personality of an individual and have the potential to increase anxiety or encourage the development of anxiety, primarily due to the lack of control and understanding from the individual as portions of the brain are altered (Pavlovic et al., 2019). The lasting impairments after sustaining a TBI might last for a few years or a lifetime or could lead to premature death (Engel, 2019).

Gifted Students Who Experience TBI

Gifted students with TBI have additional stressors, increasing the levels of anxiety they exhibit in varying situations (Burkett-McKee et al., 2021; Oyefiade et al., 2022; Mealings et al., 2020). Based on the theory of Dabrowski (1964), one can develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics a gifted adult possesses (Kohan-Mass & Tal, 2019; Mendaglio et al., 2019; Oppong et al., 2019). Adults who have suffered TBI possess additional anxiety compared to individuals without brain injury (Fox et al., 2016; Mealings et al., 2017; Osborn et al., 2017). The level of anxiety increases substantially if the individual is considered gifted, as they have additional battles to contend with (McKinlay et al., 2018; Thomson & Jaque, 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2017). Anxiety is exemplified when the individual seeks to appear normal without drawing attention to the personal limitations they are experiencing, generally out of fear of ridicule (Hagger & Riley, 2019).

Adult students identified as gifted are faced with a loss of self after experiencing TBI as it dramatically impacts their educational capabilities (Kass & Miller, 2018). Facing the reality of

cognitive alterations is overwhelming and frightening, especially while struggling to maintain

normalcy (Lee et al., 2020; Muller & Virji-Babul, 2018). As young children transition into

adults, their giftedness is more evident and better controlled than in their younger years (Makel

et al., 2016). Adults journey through experiences and develop alternative methods to adapt to

varying or challenging situations, allowing their abilities to shine through while providing

additional resilience (Ryan et al., 2018).

When an adult is faced with the potential of a TBI, the results are impactful on every

portion of the individual (Venkatesan et al., 2021). Fear of failure can be damaging to an

individual's cognitive ability and function. On the flip side, believing in the opportunity for

success allows an individual's cognitive ability to flourish (Bergold & Steinmayr, 2016).

Transitioning through the stages of life while accepting the levels of giftedness one possesses can

cause additional turmoil as the individual strives to balance their emotions concerning others

(Rinn & Majority, 2018; Zakreski, 2018).

TBI changes the composition of the brain and the way it processes information, resulting

in additional challenges for gifted adults to overcome while attempting to their previous abilities

(Byom & Turkstra, 2016; Jolly et al., 2020; Williams & Prince, 2017). While the individual

strives to conceal the damage to others around them, there is an additional battle occurring

within, causing additional personal stress and strife (Durham & Ramcharan, 2018; Ramanathan

et al., 2019). Students receiving limited teacher direction, structure, and feedback acknowledge

feeling more anxious and underappreciated while having to grasp the new information more

independently than initially anticipated (Scager et al., 2012).

Gifted adults have an increased likelihood of anxiety due to the additional pressures and

desires for perfection, often stemming from childhood (Szymanski & Warren, 2019). Research

has shown specific factors contributing to the development of anxiety due to three social-emotional characteristics: heightened sensitivity, analytical attitude, and self-criticism; Mendaglion, 2016). Adults who have suffered from TBI possess more anxiety than individuals without brain injury (Fox et al., 2016; Osborn et al., 2017). The level of anxiety increases substantially if the individual is considered gifted, as they have additional battles to contend with (McKinlay et al., 2087; Thomson & Jaque, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2017).

Anxiety is a mental disturbance as a reactionary response to various stimuli causing stress (Gould et al., 2016; Sugarman et al., 2019). Anxiety can be crippling to the individual without warning of when it will occur (Barker-Collo et al., 2018; Putwain & Symes, 2018). Individuals experiencing anxiety frequently display behavioral changes as well as an increased inability to focus on anything other than their increased worry (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.; Zachar-Tirado & Donders, 2021). Without the proper guidance or tools to overcome anxiety, an individual's mental composition can forever be transformed, causing the individual to succumb to weaknesses (e.g., frustration, failure, embarrassment) rather than strengths (e.g., achievements, talents; Salpekar, 2019; Soo et al., 2020; Wildemuth, 2017).

Research has been conducted over the years with a strong emphasis on developing an understanding of the significant impact of peer response toward academic success, leading to an ongoing concern with the "big-fish-little-pond-effect" (Goetz et al., 2008). Gifted students within a gifted program and among other gifted students have been found to have higher levels of anxiety about the need to perform well (Mammadov et al., 2021). Gifted students who remain with the general population have less performance anxiety and do not report the same levels of pressure placed on them (Goetz et al., 2008; Zeidner, 2017). Often, when a gifted student is

overly challenged, the student will display excessive anxiety and worry (Guthrie, 2020; Mofield & Mofields, 2018).

Summary

Due to the stigma placed on disabilities, limitations on the data might cause discrepancies in the research as many individuals either fail to report the trauma to the brain or fail to be acknowledged as having personal challenges (Gelech et al., 2019; Hagger & Riley, 2019). Many of the studies that have been conducted involve elementary students and vary based on gender, not on the reasons behind anxiety or how the student resolves the anxiety (Lohbeck et al., 2016). Without properly identifying students at risk or successful ways to overcome challenges from TBI, gifted students are at a higher risk of putting higher education on hold or not completing their degree (Armstrong, 2018; Horton, 2015).

Research that has been conducted attempts to gather the data quantitatively; however, there is no indication that this is the ideal manner to determine the effects of challenges, such as anxiety, on a gifted student's higher educational goals (Liu & Xu, 2017). Various theories have been used to engage in data review related to the impacts of TBI on an individual. However, there is limited detail correlating Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, and the impact giftedness has within the realm of sustaining normalcy (Wilde et al., 2022). The gap identified and addressed within this study was that gifted individuals tend to have higher levels of challenges, including anxiety, than their counterparts, and gifted adults with TBIs have heightened anxiety. However, there is unawareness of the life-long consequences of trauma on exceptional adults (Gaesser, 2018; Lefkovits et al., 2021).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Three was to accurately present the research design, procedures, data sources, and analysis steps for the proposed research study. The precise knowledge provided encourages the audience to be cognizant of the accomplishment of research and all aspects throughout the process (Anderson et al., 2020). Accurate accountability of data obtained was effectively documented for further replications of the study to be conducted in the future (Allbright & Marsh, 2022). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. The following content will be discussed in further detail within this chapter: research design, research questions, description of the site used, description of participants, research positionality, researcher's role, procedures, permissions, recruitment plan, data collection plan, data synthesis, trustworthiness, and the summary of the chapter.

Research Design

Within any research design, the researcher initiates the process by identifying various assumptions, which encourages seeking additional information correlating the assumptions (Blaikie, 2018). The chosen assumptions assist the researcher in determining the specific type of research study they desire to conduct or participate in (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). As a social worker intrigued by the underlying situations unique to everyone, I often find myself initially engaged in observations and then fully engulfed with personalized interviews. The observations allow me to see the individual within their natural environment, while the interviews enable the opportunity to hear the story, along with further observing the body language to determine or recognize if it correlates with what is spoken. Qualitative research is beneficial within the social

sciences realm as it encourages the researcher to be physically present inside the participants' world and view the concerns as a societal dilemma instead of an individual one (Englander, 2019). For this study, qualitative methodology was appropriate because it provided valuable insight through the lens of the individual by developing an understanding of personal views, experiences, and perceptions (Moon et al., 2019).

While researchers focus on multiple aspects of information obtained, when conducting a phenomenological study, the researcher can effectively describe the collaborative information obtained from all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Within the research realm, understanding the phenomenon as it is perceived by the individual providing the information is recognizing the truth behind the individual's belief pertaining to the information (Bem, 1967). An important aspect of the phenomenological study was deeply analyzing the experiences of multiple individuals as they pertain to their unique experiences within the gifted world, along with having acquired a TBI (Aguinis et al., 2019).

To develop an understanding of specific behavioral traits, personalized experiences, and opinions related to the effects of TBI, hermeneutic phenomenology within qualitative research was the best-suited approach (Suddick et al., 2020). Hermeneutic phenomenology within this study assisted in the interpretation of identification of each participant's life experiences and how the TBI ultimately impacted their viewpoints (Crowther & Thomson, 2020). As a researcher with personal experience directly related to the study, my interpretation maintained close monitoring, so themes did not become focused on one specific concept (Miller et al., 2018).

Hermeneutic phenomenology was conducted within the study to further develop a grasp of the personalized experiences of all participants, along with an analysis of what each experience means or how they are interrelated to others' experiences (Nigar, 2020). To better

understand the concept of hermeneutic phenomenology, I engaged in further research of literature to gain additional knowledge to separate my personal experiences and perceptions into an organizational, fundamental study. Everyone within society has generalized experiences; however, those experiences are significantly impacted by situational attitudes related to location, personal morals and support, and timeframe (Povidaichyk et al., 2021). The observations, interviews, and journal entries were sorted through to identify themes amongst all participants.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI?

Sub-Question One

What are the shared dispositions, values, and intrinsic motivators of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI?

Sub-Question Two

What are the educational support experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI?

Sub-Question Three

What do undergraduate students who are gifted attribute to their ability to tackle ongoing education?

Setting and Participants

Qualitative research was conducted within participants' natural environments to prevent outside influences from interfering with the results and interpretation of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 181). Participants were purposefully chosen in relation to the research

questions, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, and evidence specific to the selected

study (Sargeant, 2012). Participants were identified with the capability of providing detailed

information effectively while enhancing comprehension within the qualitative study (Bradshaw

et al., 2017). All personal information within this research was provided under a pseudonym to

protect participants while providing the opportunity for the research to be conducted within the

participant's natural environment (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001).

Site

Participants communicated within the agency where the researcher is affiliated to further

assist with time constraints, the familiarity of location, and additional privacy. Strong Minds

Kind Hearts is a Christian counseling and educational office located within Northwest Florida,

providing guidance and support to approximately 75 individuals of various races with TBIs,

ranging in age from 2 years to 88 years. Mental health agencies are regulated by the Department

of Children and Families, as identified in Chapter 394 of the Florida Mental Health Act (2018).

The facility is also accredited by the Joint Commission, which was established in 1969 to

promote safe and quality services for all individuals (Joint Commission, n.d.). All participants

within the program have experienced various intensities of TBI, and some were referred by their

physicians, while others voluntarily sought assistance.

Within the agency are neurologists, social workers, and educators specializing in TBI

recovery. A social worker and neurologist, also the CEO/director, established the agency when

their youngest daughter obtained a TBI, and doctors repeatedly reported she would be required to

adjust to the limitations without an ability to return to a sense of normalcy. All personnel within

the agency adhere to a chain of command identified as follows, with the top leaders listed first:

CEO/director, neurologists, social work manager, social workers, education supervisor, educators, human resources, administrative assistants, and maintenance.

Participants

To offer the most diverse and accurate study, 12 participants were recruited. Participants having experienced TBI were self-identified, identified by neurologists, educators, or counselors. The participants were enrolled in an undergraduate program, ranging in age from 18 to 60 (to cover a range of ages within various undergraduate college programs), and were of both sexes from multiple cultures, which allowed for a range of diversification within the research. The participants also had varying aspects of challenges and TBI, preidentified through the agency where the study was conducted. Purposive sampling was used as it allowed the researcher to obtain a significant amount of knowledge from the data collected and allowed the researcher to determine the impact of the findings on a specific population, not limited to the participants (Campbell et al., 2020).

<center>**Researcher Positionality**</center>

Identification of the specific dissertation theme stemmed from my personal experience after suffering a severe TBI while persevering to obtain knowledge and regain control of my ability to succeed. From an early age, society places specific expectations for individuals to fit into a certain dynamic within the educational realm to broaden peer interaction (Çakır, 2014). Unfortunately, this is not as easy as many attempt to make it appear as individuals face many differences. Often individuals are left to feel as though they are an outcast because they do not possess the intelligence to be considered worthy, while others believe they are outcast due to being overly intelligent.

Interpretive Framework

Everyone has the potential for greatness with a significant amount of creativity; however, if not caught early enough, creativity could be stalled, affecting the future of society (Gonsoulin et al., 2006). God created everyone with a unique plan, and to complete the plan, the gifts of everyone need the opportunity to blossom into their full potential. If we stifle one's uniqueness, we are therefore preventing God from being allowed to demonstrate his love and power. To be successful and honorable in all we do, glorifying God, we must use our gifts with the utmost respect and admiration.

Throughout the study, the research was approached through a transformative framework directly correlating gifted students with various challenges who suffered from TBI. Gifted individuals who experienced a TBI frequently must determine new means to acquire and retain information that was previously considered easy to obtain (Sousa, 2009). The transformative theory demonstrated the ability of individuals, such as me, to adjust their thinking based on new information being received (Mezirow, 2018). Reacquiring the ability to verbally communicate, walk, and identify my children's names challenged me to engage in further education and research to transform my negative experience into a positive one (Savicki & Price, 2021).

As a gifted individual suffering from a severe traumatic injury, I continue to demonstrate pragmatism daily while acquiring additional skills to maintain obtained knowledge and maintain the fortitude to never give up (Stratton & Gregory, 1994). Struggling through the process of relearning everything; including the names of my children and the ability to walk correctly, demonstrated a higher ability and capacity to recognize the loss of self (Byom & Turkstra, 2016). With the support of my family and close friends through countless tears and fears, I regained

control of my abilities to an extent acceptable and became determined to identify techniques to further assist others in a similar situation.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions within qualitative research are the initial ideas and personalized beliefs that guide the research in a specific manner (Bleiker et al., 2019). While the overall research was founded upon the initial concepts stemming from the researcher, these concepts or assumptions had additional avenues to review for the research to be considered valuable. Assumptions are not always accurate or correct and should be reviewed for errors before documenting the information as factual within the research (Barrett et al., 2019). Ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions will be discussed in further detail to aid in the clarification of the effective research process.

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions within research are when the researcher believes a specific behavior or attitude will occur or has occurred without obtaining evidence prior (Bednarek et al., 2021). My ontological assumptions within the study included individuals experiencing anxiety and depression at higher levels than others, negative self-talk, or desire to quit; feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, uncertain; and wondering about the future. While interacting with others through the interview process and review of journals, I acknowledged my preconceived assumptions by maintaining a tracker in a notebook when the thoughts of personal knowledge merged with the information received from others, related directly to their experiences.

Growing up as a military brat who relocated more frequently than I can accurately count, I always questioned why I was processing information differently than others. Frustration frequently arises when reflecting upon the lack of support obtained within the educational system

due to my giftedness including emotionality and creativity, not merely talent within specific curriculum. Early on, it became evident I possessed certain quirks not easily explained to others and I was exhausted from defending my differences. Overall, I became natural at hiding my abilities or even my nervousness, while believing I blended into the population better.

Fast forward several years to the midway point of my graduate program where my self-identity was challenged, and my anxiety exemplified in unimaginable ways. Suffering a life-threatening severe TBI compelled me to drive harder towards success without being labeled as a stigma in society or incapable. Resonating deep within, I was keenly aware of abilities I previously possessed that suddenly disappeared as I attempted to overcompensate so others would not be aware of the situation. Continuing through the healing process is a daily challenge as the injury forever has the power to force the learning to cease and others to acknowledge the damages that have occurred.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological assumptions are when a researcher uses a subjective viewpoint to understand how an individual or group of individuals are impacted by a specific topic such as TBI (Willig, 2019). Throughout the study, the use of quotations was critical in identifying personal realities for the individuals, while conducting the study within a natural environment for the participants (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). My epistemological assumption remains to be aware of the reality of God, the multiple impacts in life everyone will experience, and the power behind knowledge. Working as a Christian social worker, I strive to maintain the "golden rule" by beginning each tentative interaction for the day with the following personal statement: "One positive interaction has the ability to alter the situation."

Reflecting upon my personal journey, the best philosophical assumption to bring into my research was epistemological with a participatory paradigm as the driving force due to the overwhelming desire to hear personal experiences from others without attempting to adjust their opinions while effectively demonstrating empathy (Heron & Reason, 1997). Empathic comprehension allows for the acceptance of the uniqueness of everyone and how varying situations such as TBI alter a person, especially within the educational realm (Yilmaz, 2013).

Axiological Assumption

Axiological assumptions involve the researcher being part of the study, providing a subjective viewpoint while adhering to values (Shan, 2022). Within the research realm, the researcher is not afraid to make personal values or morals known and is open about any personal biases. My axiological assumption was easily identified with a personal quote: "Integrity guides the path for development of the character of a well-established spiritual, humble individual. No matter the inequities in life, never forsake your morals." Throughout my personal journey of overcoming challenges from a TBI, my morals have remained strong and have not wavered, even when times were extremely tough.

Growing up as a military brat who relocated frequently throughout childhood, I often found myself frustrated within the educational system for the lack of support received due to being gifted in a variety of subjects, creativity, and emotionality. Every school district and every state seemed to have a different set of standards; however, they frequently blocked all the gifted students into one category and expected everyone to react in similar fashions. Throughout my educational experience, I was always compared to my older brother and rarely looked at for my abilities. I continued challenging the system in many ways and if I was not interested in a subject, I did not apply myself.

As I began my search for further education, I realized I also stopped trying when the teachers limited my potential by forcing me to do things only one way. Immediately upon deciding upon the initial topic for my dissertation, I reflected upon the experiences my youngest daughter had and the challenges she faced due to multiple relocations from the military, along with the schools not providing the proper testing in adequate time to determine her abilities. I soon began recognizing the significant impact the lack of suitable support for all students had on individuals and their educational experience while questioning myself as a social worker and educator if I was advocating appropriately for individuals. Initially, as I began the research, I was primarily focused on the immediately recognizable challenges of gifted and talented students; however, as the research deepened, I began to recognize there were often underlying issues that may be causing a significant amount of blockage within the individual's success.

Researcher's Role

As the researcher, I served as the human instrument for this study. A personal reflection journal was used as it was the inspiration behind the specific topic of choice for the research with a recognition of the lasting impacts faced after experiencing a severe TBI. The personalized reflection journal provided an opportunity to grasp lived experiences and the importance of accurately interpreting data from participants within the hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Suorsa et al., 2021). While conducting the research, there were guidelines in place that guaranteed the research remained unbiased and the focus remained on the participants' feedback, without having expectations of reactions or responses. With the assistance of the neurologist of the proposed center, along with the CEO and director, all efforts were made to guarantee individualism and no prior connection to the participants, to allocate fairness within the research (van de Graaf, 2021).

Procedures

Data collection was documented within a spreadsheet and journal from observations, motivational interviewing techniques, interviews, and journaling (Polkinghorne, 2005). Motivational interviewing was used to learn the participants (Lundahl et al., 2019). Interviews were recorded with participant participation along with proper documentation of all responses, including the body language of participants (Holler & Levinson, 2019). Internal and external motivators of participants were identified using journals, along with feedback from the interviews (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Member checking was also used to provide participants an opportunity to validate all information provided for accuracy (Dodgson, 2019).

Permissions

Within all aspects of research, the researcher must obtain permission from specific entities, such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), before conducting the research. Qualitative researchers are also required to obtain consent from individuals who might be involved in the research (Cypress, 2018). Researchers must also obtain specific permission from an organization if desiring to use their location for the research or to have research conducted on their property (Irani, 2018).

Once the proposal was successfully defended, I submitted the IRB application for review and approval, along with obtaining permission from the site used for the research. Upon approval from IRB (see Appendix A), I began to implement my research, after receiving consent forms from all participants (Byerly, 2009). I presented the proposal with a PowerPoint presentation and handmade flyer to the CEO and director at Strong Minds Kind Hearts, requesting permission to present the presentation to all staff members and requesting the flyers be handed to all participants within the agency. Staff members submitted the flyers to their clients and provided

additional education, including the option to view PowerPoint. I also obtained permission from Strong Minds Kind Hearts to use their facility (see Appendix B).

Recruitment Plan

After receiving site permission from the CEO and director, I was responsible for educating the staff members about the upcoming study. I encouraged fellow staff members to submit flyers to all potential participants and provided a link for the participants to view a PowerPoint presentation. Participants were self-identified or identified by a neurologist, educators, and counselors. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 (to cover a range of ages within various college programs) and were of both sexes from multiple cultures, allowing for a range of diversification within the research. The participants also had varying aspects of anxiety and TBI, preidentified through the agency where the research was conducted. A description of the research, along with its process, was given to the participants. After all, clients had the opportunity to obtain information about the research study (see Appendix C), consent forms were provided and required to be returned within two weeks. The clients who had consent forms completed and received (see Appendix D) within the requested time were the chosen ones for the study.

After participants were identified, I arranged a time to complete the individual's observation at Strong Minds Kind Hearts during the week while everyone was engaged in activities within the facility where they were working on varying aspects of personal experience and transitions in recovery from the TBI. This observation was video recorded to allow for the opportunity to transcribe extensive notes later without additional distractions and to be certain all details were properly identified. While transcribing the recordings, behaviors such as anxiety, excessive talking, stuttering, fear, and uncomfortableness were observed.

After each observation, I worked with the participant to set up a time for the individual interview, which took place in the family conference room within Strong Minds Kind Hearts. Each interview lasted about 30 to 40 minutes or until no additional feedback was obtained. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Lastly, each participant was provided with the journal prompts to complete via the provided journal, on the computer, or in another journal of their choice. Participants were given the chance to video and voice record their answers to the journal prompts. Journal prompts were provided at the end of each interview session. Participants had two weeks to complete the prompts and return them to me either in person or via email.

All data collected were analyzed using a phenomenological method to determine the feeling. Each transcript identified specific phrases, encounters, and feelings directly correlated to the experience of TBI with their educational goals. The phrases, encounters, and feelings were grouped into various themes which assisted in properly identifying common themes from all the participants. A narrative description was provided upon completion of the successful identification of all emerging themes which assisted in clarifying the phenomenon. Finally, my interpretation of the participants' shared experience of the phenomenon will be presented.

Throughout the entire process of the study, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was conducted to provide clarity, concrete, viable, and touchable interpretations of the experiences of each participant (Lindseth & Norberg, 2021). Interpretations are often subjective while demonstrating a significant piece of information (Kalu, 2019). The recordings from the interviews were transcribed, observations were denoted, and journals were evaluated for similarities, along with differences to provide ample time for themes to emerge and be properly coded (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Data Collection Plan

The specific order chosen for data collection provided the ability to gather a deeper comprehension of the extensive challenges TBI has on participants, while also allowing plenty of time for reflection and the ability to delve deeper for further information. The data chosen was also based on the best manner to answer the proposed research questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The primary formats of data collection within phenomenological studies include observations, interviews, and journaling (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Observations are considered a subjective viewpoint using the participant's natural environment to obtain information correlated to the study (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018). This study used observations, interviews, and journals for data collection. The timeframe for completing all portions of the study was dependent upon the participants' engagement and schedules; however, each was completed within less than two months. The two-month timeframe included conducting observations, interviews, and journaling, and analyzing all data obtained.

Journals were used to encourage participants to narrate personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Oftentimes when individuals with TBI have been attending counseling and developed coping skills, they may not recall all the challenges they experienced; however, in their writings, there may be additional details available from the beginning of the experience (Lefkovits et al., 2021). Throughout the study, journals and sketchbooks were provided to participants to encourage documenting in first person the experiences incurred from TBI, although some participants were more focused on the past while others were focused on the moment (Lefkovits et al., 2020). Participants were encouraged to bring journals from all stages of the TBI, if available, and with permission from participants, the data was compared. The primary reason for obtaining various journaling techniques from the past and present was to

assist in deciphering areas of growth or challenges participants may still be experiencing. Each participant was encouraged to return the journals within a month to allow ample time for participants to reflect on their experiences. While the journals had prompts and were encouraged to be used daily, the reality was the journals were written at the participants' discretion.

Observations

Observations were used to acknowledge verbal and body cues that the participants may not be aware were present (Johnson et al., 2020). Participants within the study were aware of observations being conducted, both scheduled and unscheduled, allowing for an accurate perception of experiences participants incurred throughout various daily interactions documented accordingly. During the interview process, observation was also included as oftentimes there were additional signs that may be symptomatic to the participants' TBI (Martini et al., 2020). The observations assisted in the identification of similar behavioral traits or verbal cues provided by the participants. The observations also helped identify various motivators while addressing the primary research questions as the observation included routine interactions with others within the facility, including the counselors and educators.

Observation Data Analysis

Much detailed information related to the observations of each participant was documented and broken down further into categories for coding purposes to identify reoccurring themes amongst participants (Voormolen et al., 2019). Successful coding provided the opportunity to organize the similarities into various themes and represent the obtained data more concisely (Lester et al., 2020). The conciseness of the data assisted in deeper comprehension by the reader (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Successfully transcribing, coding, and

organizing themes of data obtained provided a more functional manner for the researcher to accurately interpret all the gathered data (Locke et al., 2022).

Individual Interviews

      Before delving into research that includes participants, the researcher needs to develop a set of questions to present in interview format with the participants as an opportunity to be heard (Crawford et al., 2021). Open-ended interview questions were used throughout the research to encourage open dialogue between participants and the researcher, providing an opportunity for the researcher to understand the participants' experiences (Gidugu et al., 2021). All interviews were recorded using visual and audio technology. Interviews occurred within the agency in a large, private conference room. The researcher also encouraged feedback or questions from participants throughout the process. Upon successful completion of the interviews, all data was gathered and documented accordingly to effectively explain the participant's story as pertinent to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe the type of traumatic brain injury you sustained, along with your current level of education. (CRQ)

2. How do you feel the injury has impacted your ability to obtain and retain new knowledge? (SQ1)

3. How long ago was your diagnosis? (CRQ)

4. What challenges have you experienced within yourself to include your behaviors, communication, and abilities? (CRQ)

5. What challenges or attitudes have you experienced with how others interact with you, especially within your educational studies? (SQ2)

6. How have you overcome the educational and personality challenges you personally experienced? (SQ3)

7. How did you overcome the challenges or attitudes presented by others towards you? (SQ1)

8. What advice would you provide to someone else with a TBI who desires to engage in higher education opportunities? (SQ2)

9. How do you explain to your educators any limitations you have? (SQ2)

10. How do you personally describe your experience with TBI? (SQ1)

11. How has the experience adjusted your self-confidence? (CRQ)

12. What made you decide to participate within this research as it relates particularly to higher education? (SQ1)

13. What stigmas have you faced throughout the educational process due to your TBI? (SQ2)

14. How long do you feel it has taken to adjust to the changes from the TBI or to accept the changes you have experienced? (SQ3)

Questions 1 through 3 are questions geared to obtain basic data pertaining to the experiences related to TBI as identified by the participants. The questions encouraged deep thought with room to expand upon the answers (Crawford et al., 2021). The questions allowed for additional questions to be asked based on the answers provided and were asked at the opportune time. Questions 4 and 5 focused on the personal challenges the individual faced including behaviors, education, and personality. Personal reflection provided a unique challenge within itself as an individual had to be prepared to be critical of self to persevere forward (Fook & Askeland, 2007).

Identification of outside viewpoints and the effectiveness of personality were reflected in Questions 6 and 7 (Tabibnia & Radecki, 2018). Providing an opportunity to educate fellow students with a TBI to continue pursuing their education was the focus of Question 8 (Mealings et al., 2021). Questions 9 through 11 focused on personal experiences related to discussing limitations with educators and the impact on personality the individual experienced or experiences (Fisher et al., 2019). Questions 12 and 13 encouraged the participants to embrace the educational experiences after experiencing a TBI, while identifying positive and negative aspects (Mealings et al., 2021). The final question encouraged reflection on recovery and transitional timeframes (Anderson & Cockle, 2021).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Although there were varying techniques employed within the data collection and analysis, there were specific guidelines that must be adhered to by the researcher (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Upon completion of the interviews, each interview was precisely transcribed by reviewing the recordings (Cassell & Bishop, 2018). The interviews were transcribed into narratives to be more easily understood when placed within the research (Nasheeda et al., 2019). By having the interviews recorded and transcribed precisely, there was less room for error and inaccurate information relevant to personal experiences (Johnson et al., 2020). After all the interviews were accurately transcribed, coding techniques were used to identify the varying emotions and experiences notated (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Journal Prompts

Journaling provided an opportunity for experiences to be more personalized while engaging the participants to reflect on various thoughts, feelings, and emotions experienced in connection with the research study (Thille et al., 2022). Additionally, there were specific

questions provided for the participants to journal. Journaling allowed the participant to remain in control of their experiences without feeling prejudged or pressured (Morrell-Scott, 2018). Interestingly, when individuals were engaged in thought-provoking journaling, there were frequently additional pieces of information that may have been overlooked by the participants during an interview; therefore, this allowed for additional accuracy in the details the researcher received (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019).

Determining when the most opportune time to distribute the journal prompts in personalized journals was challenging, as was determining the anticipated collection timeframe. As a diligent researcher, while providing education to the participants there was information provided related to the journals, and feedback was encouraged to be provided. The journals were updated for each participant based on some of the information received and observed during the educational process of the conducted research. Within the second or third visit with the participants, additional information was provided to the participants as it related directly to the journals, including the encouragement of video and audio recordings of their responses. The entire process, with good planning, was less intense and encouraged honesty from the participants.

Journal Prompt Questions

1. Describe your personality and life, to the best of your ability, prior to the accident leading to traumatic brain injury. How has your personality and life changed since the traumatic brain injury? Are you able to pinpoint why? (SQ1)

2. How can your personal experience assist others to be successful in adapting and accepting the situation? (CRQ)

3. Document your experience related to the traumatic brain injury and explain how your emotional, mental, and physical feelings have been impacted. Provide as many details as possible. (CRQ)

4. What have you learned about and through this experience? Positive, negative or both, please be honest. (SQ2)

5. How does the traumatic brain injury impact you currently and how do you feel it will impact you in the future? (SQ3)

6. What areas of self-awareness have you gained? What techniques have you implemented to overcome challenges? (SQ3)

Journal Prompt Analysis

All the journals were returned to the researcher within a specified timeframe, with two participants needing an extra amount of time of two additional weeks due to scheduling conflicts and personal situations. Each participant had the opportunity to have their data returned to them if desired and the researcher received permission to use information obtained as part of the research. The journals were received by the researcher within a 2-to-3-week period, which provided the participants with ample time to reflect on the questions. The additional timeframe allowed participants to return to the questions at times that were convenient for them or if there was additional information to add later.

After receiving permission from the participants to have some of the details from the journals used within the research the following items were obtained for data analysis. Although the participants had varying stories and experiences, there were identifiable keywords, experiences, and feelings within each journal (Thille et al., 2022). These fundamental and similar identifiers were placed into a chart to further assist with the coding process (Creswell & Poth,

2017). Coding the obtained information assisted in the ease of comprehension of similarities and differences while the researcher accurately documented the varying or reoccurring themes (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Data Synthesis

Codes from all three sources of data were clustered and combined to create themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Comparing and representing all three sources of data ensured triangulation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Consistent with van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology, the study's themes and participants' narratives were interpreted to form a composite description of the participant's experience with the phenomenon of being a gifted study who experienced TBI. Hermeneutic circle was used to help develop the interpretive narrative of the phenomenon's shared experiences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Hermeneutic Circle: Interpretive Narrative of Shared Experiences

Coding techniques to identify emerging themes from data (observations, interviews, journal prompts)

Themes and participants' narratives interpreted to form composite description of experience

Hermeneutic Circle

Integration/Critique interpretation of research findings

Connection of data with literature

Grouping themes into main themes and illustration of the phenomena

Preconceived assumptions and understandings

Trustworthiness

Qualitative case studies vary based on the information received and perceived as the research is obtained, requiring additional steps to guarantee credibility and to obtain the trust of participants (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Trustworthiness requires a researcher to be considered dependable and honest while demonstrating data analysis has properly been conducted with precision (Connelly, 2016). Researchers are also obliged to guarantee the details within the analysis provide sufficient data to validate the research as credible (Glaser & Strauss, 1966).

Credibility

Credibility is an essential characteristic of qualitative research acknowledging all information to be depicted as plausible and applicable (Johnson et al., 2020). Credibility is also an agreement between the researcher and participants with an understanding the researcher will precisely link the findings with reality to accurately demonstrate the truth (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Member checking is a technique used in research to assist with the credibility of results obtained by sending information to participants to confirm the truthfulness and significance of their respective events (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking allowed for the opportunity for each participant to validate their responses while eliminating biases established by the researcher and allowing for accurate accountability (Dodgson, 2019).

Reflexivity entails the researcher examining self as an individual and a researcher and identifying the personal effect of the data obtained (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity was used to prevent biases from occurring and for the researcher to be honest, while not adjusting the narratives to benefit the researcher's personal story. As an individual who suffered a severe TBI while completing my graduate studies, I allowed ample time to reflect on how additional information obtained was impacting my own experience or how I could use the information for further growth. Verification of credibility through various techniques such as member checking and reflexivity leads to the dependability and confirmability of the research (Morse et al., 2002).

Transferability

Transferability within qualitative research is a form of peripheral validity where the data obtained for a single study could be relevant to other perspectives, conditions, occasions, and populaces (Maxwell, 2021). As a researcher, it is imperative to effectively describe the methods of obtaining data, along with accurate accounts of experiences within the research to allow others

to reproduce the study for further improvements (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Within this specific research, individual experiences played a significant role in obtaining further information from others with similar experiences while being responsible for remaining unbiased. The results of this study altered my personal experience while providing a deeper understanding of the overall impact of the TBI in relation to my studies.

Dependability

Dependability implies the uniformity and consistency of the research discoveries, along with the scale at which research techniques are recorded while affording prospects for outsiders to efficiently review, follow, and evaluate the entire research process (Stenfors et al., 2020). To verify the dependability of the study, I had a supervisor review my documentation as an inquiry audit (Carcary, 2020). All aspects of the study were also thoroughly reviewed by my chair and committee member. The details of the study were documented so that it could be replicated in the future.

Confirmability

Confirmability in a qualitative study substantiates the research and is objective throughout all aspects of the study (Nassaji, 2020). Confirmability also provides validity during data collection and analysis to verify findings are solely based on narratives from participants without biases from the researcher (Huttunen & Kakkori, 2020). To assist in demonstrating dependability and confirmability, an audit trailing was used. An audit trail is an exhaustive methodology used to validate records centered around participants' accounts, depicting how the stories were accumulated and scrutinized while demonstrating total transparency (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). An audit trail also delivers prominence to effortlessly and precisely evaluate the data acquired to support similarities in the research (Lester et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Effective research adhered to specific ethical guidelines while protecting the participants willing to actively engage in the study. The guidelines were discussed with all participants before the start of the research, throughout it, and at the study's conclusion (Dodgson, 2019). Ethical boundaries could be tarnished by using actual names instead of pseudonyms to protect the privacy of all participants (Bussu et al., 2021). No harm shall be done to anyone and maintaining awareness of emotions that could have been triggered through reliving experiences while providing time for participants to process their thoughts or feelings without judgment (Ogden, 2019). Informed consent was obtained from all participants by providing detailed information regarding the specific research and the reason behind the necessity of the proposed research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Throughout all aspects of this research, pseudonyms were used for the names of the participants, any identifying information from individual experiences, the specific agency, and the location of the agency (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Within the consent form, there was an acknowledgment noting all confidential information would be retained in a secure location, such as a locked filing cabinet (Albrechtsen, 2007). All recorded information and data obtained will be destroyed within 5 years as an extra layer of protection for confidentiality (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). With the consent of the participants, their personalized statements were paraphrased to maintain confidentiality while allowing their statements to be valuable. Communication also occurred confirming the conversations were only to be used for the research project and not be brought into a counseling session or team talk with other coworkers.

Summary

In conclusion, the detailed methods provided within Chapter Three provided an understanding of the various processes I engaged in to successfully conduct the research. Due to the topic of individuals facing challenges after experiencing TBI, most information was obtained through observations, interviews, and individual journals. Once all the data was obtained, I properly documented the information and completed charts for comparison to recognize similarities or differences from all participants, in hopes to relate it to other individuals within other regions. The proposed study identified the importance of the information and personal experiences provided by the participants with TBI within the gifted realm (Lohbeck et al., 2016).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. The research questions' results are included in this chapter to better understand the educational experiences, shared and unshared, of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. The research questions are: What are the shared dispositions, values, and intrinsic motivators of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? What are the educational support experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? What do gifted undergraduate students attribute to their ability to tackle ongoing education? In addition to the results of the research questions, this chapter also includes identifying themes from the analysis of observations, interviews, and journal entries. Tables and narratives from the individual interviews and journals are present throughout the chapter to present thorough code and theme data to address the research questions.

Participants

The research study intrigued 15 individuals; however, due to personal scheduling conflicts, only 12 individuals could commit to the time required for active participation in the study. The 12 participants experienced a TBI and were actively enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. These participants were self-identified, identified by neurologists, educators, or counselors, and actively engaged in the research for this study. Table 1 provides the demographic

information used for this study, based on the participants' personal data. 50% of the participants were Caucasian, 25% were African American, and the other 25% were Asian.

Brandi is a 23-year-old African American female with acute TBI. Brandi is a junior in the Animal Science undergraduate program. Brandi is active within her sorority, frequently volunteers within the community at animal shelters and often fosters animals weekly or monthly. Brandi obtained her TBI from a motor vehicle accident involving a drunk driver causing Brandi's car to veer off the road into a tree. Brandi notes she was always viewed as "the sensible, easy-going one" amongst her friends and family.

Lakesha is a 19-year-old African American female with moderate TBI. Lakesha is an assistant coach for youth travel soccer. Lakesha sustained a severe concussion after a collision with another coach while warming up prior to travel soccer practice. Lakesha is actively pursuing an undergraduate degree to become an elementary school teacher and full-time soccer coach. Lakesha reports her peers describe her to have "a heart of gold who gives without question."

Lisa is a 42-year-old married Asian female with mild TBI who loves her coffee. Lisa and her husband have two children, three dogs, and help provide care for Lisa's parents within the home. Lisa enjoys having a cup of coffee early in the morning while listening to the peaceful sounds of nature. Lisa sustained her TBI while walking one of her dogs who seen a squirrel and pulled Lisa into a telephone pole.

Jon is a 56-year-old married Asian male with moderate TBI. Jon originally began his undergraduate journey with the desire to be a civil engineer and is transitioning to a history major. Jon enjoys fishing, kayaking, and building things. Jon notes his wife frequently refers to him as "Macgyver." Jon sustained his TBI while working independently on projects around the

house when a wooden fence pole which was leaning against the fence hit him on the head. Jon notes he tripped over a tree stump which caused him to fall into the tools at the base of the fence which caused the pole to fall over.

Carl is a 48-year-old married Caucasian male with acute TBI sustained from falling on freshly mopped floors while Carl was coming around the corner rather quickly in his socks. Carl enjoys reading, hiking, boating, and traveling. Carl is working towards a Psychology undergraduate degree.

Greg is a 31-year-old Caucasian male with acute TBI with a fiancée. Greg sustained his TBI while preparing to propose to his fiancée on a hike where Greg lost his footing and hit a large rock. Greg enjoys hiking, axe throwing, archery, hunting, and swimming. Greg is working towards an undergraduate degree in Pharmacy.

Gina is a 60-year-old widowed Caucasian female with mild TBI. Gina enjoys crocheting, traveling, photography, and learning new crafts. Gina is a volunteer at the library and local nursing homes where she engages in teaching crocheting to others. Gina sustained her TBI while visiting her grandchildren and fell on the ice-skating rink, hitting her face on the ice and blacking out. Gina reports her family has always viewed her as "strong and able to handle anything without getting overly worked up."

Helena is 49-year-old divorced Caucasian female with moderate TBI sustained from being hit in the head by a spiked volleyball. Helena enjoys spending time with her friends, cooking, church, and playing sports for charities. Helena's friends refer to her as "the life of the party" and "the one who owns the room when she walks in."

Steven is a 28-year-old married African American male with two young children. Steven is working on a Criminal Justice degree and is a volunteer fireman. Steven sustained his

moderate TBI while out celebrating and being bumped into by several people before losing his balance, falling and hitting the back of his head on the floor. Steven is known for his sense of humor, dedication to his family, peacefulness, and encouragement to others. Steven is well-known within the community and is also working towards pastoral studies for the future.

Frank is a 58-year-old married Caucasian male with three adult children and 4 young grandchildren. Frank sustained a mild TBI after hitting a wood beam within his shed while putting tools away. Frank loves playing golf, playing with his dogs, spending time on the lake, camping, and drawing. Frank is working on obtaining his art degree and is a senior in the program.

George is a 22-year-old Caucasian male who has recently wed his high school sweetheart. George is working on a social work undergraduate degree while working as an assistant football coach at the high school. George sustained his acute TBI while coaching the team and being tackled unexpectedly. George enjoys volunteering, spending time with friends and family, cooking, baking, puzzles, board games, and singing.

Annabelle is a 34-year-old married Asian female with three children who sustained an acute TBI from an altercation with a friend's spouse, where Annabelle was attempting to stop the spouse from hitting her friend. Annabelle is known for her selfless behavior and always wanting what is best for everyone. Annabelle is working towards obtaining her degree in literature with the hope of becoming a professional writer in the future.

Table 1

Undergraduate Adults with Traumatic Brain Injury

Participant	Age	Race	Gender	TBI Level
Brandi	23	African American	Female	Acute

Lakesha	19	African American	Female	Moderate
Lisa	42	Asian	Female	Mild
Jon	56	Asian	Male	Moderate
Carl	48	Caucasian	Male	Acute
Greg	31	Caucasian	Male	Acute
Gina	60	Caucasian	Female	Mild
Helena	49	Caucasian	Female	Moderate
Steven	28	African American	Male	Moderate
Frank	58	Caucasian	Male	Mild
George	22	Caucasian	Male	Acute
Annabelle	34	Asian	Female	Acute

Results

The central research question which guided the study was: What are the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? Observations were used to gain insight into the routine interactions of participants with others and to identify any recurring themes from body language or verbal language. Observations were partly helpful within the context of the study; however, the primary themes emerged while transcribing the interviews and studying the responses within the participants' journals. After obtaining the data from observations, interviews, and journals, the researcher documented the data for everyone for the coding process to begin. Any additional researcher memos from the observations, interviews, or journals were placed within a section of the paper to review later within the coding process to determine any additional similarities or differences among participants. The researcher created a simple form for reference while conducting the observations with everyone (see Appendix E). The body language, context, verbal language, interactions, and mood of the participants were observed by the researcher (see Figure 3).

Table 2

Researcher Notes During Interviews

Verbal cues	Context	Body language	Environment	Mood
happy	active	crossed arms	music playing	Reserved
scared	engaged	pacing back & forth	people coming & going	Loud
uncertain	limited	tapping foot	people talking	fast speech
frustrated	open	pulling hair	note-taking	Acceptance
content	closed	Stuttering	praying	Focus
fearful				Alone
helpful				limited capability

Initially, the observations were coded to identify contributing factors or cues that could be useful. Next, the researcher precisely transcribed each interview with keywords being circled throughout the transcriptions. Finally, the journals were transcribed on another piece of paper by each question and circling keywords. Table 3 identifies the keywords from the interviews and observations circled and identified by the researcher.

Table 3

Keywords

Observations	Interviews		
Stuttering	anxiety	coping	frustrations
tapping foot/fingers	identity	resilience	support systems
fast speech	challenges	learning	Learning
quick emotional response including tears.	learning	perception	relying on others
delayed interactions with others	peace	struggles	invisible injuries

Observations	Interviews		
Confusion	prayer	disbelief	overwhelming
Notetaking	simplicity	reflection	increased time
Embarrassment	personality	retention	memory loss
helping others	focus	counseling	depression
walking with a limp and not in a straight line	shock	shame	Educators
pounding fists on the table	confusion	guilt	

The use of the hermeneutic circle provided the ability for the interpretation of the findings to be critiqued and effectively broken down into themes and subthemes. After all the primary identifiers were notated, the coding provided the themes and subthemes that emerged. The study confirmed the participants shared similar experiences and thoughts while learning new adaptive manners for themselves, in addition to comprehending additional personality traits that strengthened through the healing process. After all the data were analyzed, synthesis resulted in the following themes: Life after TBI and Not Alone (see Table 4).

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub-themes
life after TBI	mental & personality challenge
	emotional impacts
not alone	personal strengths
	skills from abilities

Life after TBI

A central theme that materialized throughout the analysis was the challenges participants encountered accommodating or accepting their brain injury. To adapt or accept a brain injury, eleven of the twelve participants struggled with symptoms of anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. Brandi noted, "I struggled with understanding the connection between my anxiety and frustrations with an intense desire to identify any triggers which made my symptoms significantly worsen." Frank similarly said, "Doing simple things such as identifying my children by name was an internal battle causing additional frustration and uncertainty in the ability to overcome the disability." Throughout the interviews and journal prompts, participants conveyed the impact of the challenges their injuries rendered and how they attempted to adapt to their symptoms.

Throughout the process, participants revealed their desire to return to their previous level of functioning, where every task appeared to come quickly and logically. All participants denoted various aspects of challenges and experiences encountered throughout their journey and are identified throughout the paper with quotes. Annabelle stated:

> I found myself becoming overly annoyed when I struggled with spelling, especially since this was the area I previously breezed through without thinking twice about a word. Initially, I could not connect the TBI with the logic behind lack of ability and knowledge retention.

Jon noted, "Who would have ever thought a mathematician such as me would struggle with simple multiplication techniques?!"

Helena noted, "As my journey progressed, I was willing and able to adapt to the new version of myself while facing multiple challenges, such as stuttering and walking difficulties."

George also acknowledged a significant challenge that evolved while attempting to accommodate the TBI within various aspects of his life, in addition to the educational aspects. Due to the complications of the TBI and developing strong adaptation skills, George, Steven, Gina, and Lakesha noted an uncanny need to rely on others for assistance with their intellectual obstacles, physical symptoms, and effective coping mechanisms for their emotions.

During the recovery stages, participants observed that not everyone was receptive to the invisible injuries experienced from having TBI and acknowledged feeling overwhelmed through the process. Brandi summarized the generalized feeling by stating:

I found myself becoming easily annoyed when I would explain what I was experiencing, yet others would be in disbelief as snide comments such as, "But you seem fine to me and you're excelling at everything you do. It is all in your head. Nobody else sees what you try to say you have going on." Sometimes it was simpler to just pretend as if there was nothing wrong and no changes occurring rather than attempt to explain it.

Jon admitted, "Many of the feelings I observed from others was what I was perceiving their feelings and thoughts to be. In reality, my friends and family were trying to figure out how to assist without making me feel worse." Steven noted, "Adjusting to and incorporating to the new, undesired version of myself was a greater challenge than I dreamt it would be." Subthemes from the theme of life after a TBI emerged. They included mental and personality challenges, along with emotional impacts.

Mental and Personality Challenges

A predominant subtheme that developed from the theme of accommodating the TBI was mental and personality challenges and the ability to adapt accordingly. Lisa noted, "Simple tasks such as making a cup of coffee turned into a chore as I struggled to recall each step. Thinking

upon this conversation is a task too as the wording does not come naturally." Frank, George, Anabelle, Gina, and Helena shared similar struggles with worsening memory issues due to the severity of the TBI. Annabelle noted:

> Staring at my three children blankly and not recalling their names left me with a strange feeling inside. I could feel myself battling with knowing who the children are yet struggling to understand why their names were not producing in my brain.

Frank agreed and shared, "I could not remember how to return home from the grocery store, literally right around the corner from my house."

> Greg noted:

> I remember vividly looking at my shoes and trying to figure out why I could not recall how to tie them. I knew this was a task I had completed for years without thinking twice about it, yet here I was looking at the shoestrings as if they were a foreign object. I was beyond frustrated with myself and wanted to scream because I felt I was going insane, especially not knowing how to tie my shoes.

Brandi described the experience of accepting the TBI in the following manner, noting:

> At times it was as if I was part of a silent black-and-white film, everything was in slow motion and on repeat. While working through the silent black-and-white film, I had to decipher what I was trying to do or say.

> Lakesha shared in her experience, "I was no longer the loving and polite person I was

known for. Instead, my family frequently referred to me as the Hulk due to my drastic mood changes and quickness to become angry over nothing." Carl reported similar experiences explaining that "hearing loud sounds and smelling different fragrances would cause me to become fidgety and sometimes yell." Jon noted, "When I began to realize I was stuttering and

not able to easily focus, I reverted to being almost invisible by not engaging in conversations or socializing with my friends and family." The personality shifts, in addition to the mental challenges, caused further emotional impacts on the participants.

Emotional Impacts

The second subtheme of life after TBI was emotional impacts. Emotional impacts included things like frustration, fear, anxiety, depression, confusion, shock, and shame. Participants noted a sense of shock with the emotions they felt with the TBI and an inability to focus on their giftedness abilities. Many described varying frustration, fear, anxiety, depression, confusion, shock, and shame. George noted:

> My biggest fear was looking weak and stupid. When I became frustrated, I was worried I
> was looking like a crazy man because I was displaying anger while yelling at myself for
> not grasping the concepts being taught in calculus. I had to get a tutor, which was an
> absolute embarrassment for me as I have never had to ask for help, especially not in
> math.

Participants noted a lingering effect is depression and anxiety from the TBI, although many could not pinpoint why they felt this way. Lisa noted:

> The best way I can explain depression and anxiety is I lost who I was. Now I am trying to
> determine who I am, yet there is a large part of me who still clings to the old me. I think
> depression is just losing myself and the anxiety is the fear of not knowing as much as I
> should. Also, it is still difficult to look at my family and see the sacrifices they went
> through to help me, but I should have been able to do more.

Gina also explained:

I am constantly worried about how others see me and hoping I do not have to ask for help

in my educational program yet realizing that I have to do things differently and it is okay

to let people know.

As the researcher, I observed several emotions throughout various interactions among

participants with one another in addition to during the interview process. Steven was seen to

display frustration while communicating throughout the interview as evidenced by his pounding

his fists on the table and verbalizing out loud to himself: "Stupid, stupid, stupid. You know this.

Stop being so stupid." Lakesha showed fear and anxiety while with others and shared her

experiences as evidenced by tears in her eyes, along with fast talking. George demonstrated

confusion and embarrassment while engaged in conversation with the researcher, noting "I am

not very good at doing things anymore without my notes."

Not Alone

A secondary theme that emerged from the analysis was the reality that participants were

not alone in their experiences, along with their way of coping with the changes or challenges

they were experiencing. While conducting the research and engaging in conversation with

participants, Lakesha noted "I had no idea how many others were experiencing similar things I

was experiencing." Sharing stories and engaging in conversations allowed my eyes as the

researcher to be opened to the reality that there are others in similar or worse situations and

together there is healing. Three sub-themes emerged from within this second theme of not alone

which are personal strengths, skills from giftedness abilities, and motivation for success to

further assist with pursuing educational goals after sustaining a TBI.

Personal Strengths

Participants confirmed recognition and use of their individualized or personal strengths significantly impacted the recovery process. Carl summed up the consensus noting, "Without my spiritual beliefs and the power of prayer, resilience would have been tough, but I knew deep within, I had it in me." Personal or inner strengths are seen as motivators or a hidden drive encouraging one to continue, even when feeling as though all hope is lost.

Steven noted:

Every day is an opportunity to learn something, even if I have learned it a thousand times before, I may have to continue to relearn it every day for the rest of my life and I am okay with that.

Leaning on personal strengths encouraged participants to focus on their skills from abilities.

Skills from Abilities

Gifted individuals tend to have an innate drive for continued personal transformation and improvement, along with an increased ability to adapt to situations). A shared consensus by the participants was noted in Frank's journal prompt:

A challenge quickly turned into a strength when I knew deep within there remained a desire for healing and completion of my education. Although every step appeared to be a bigger challenge, the minute rewards were the benefits worth waiting for.

Gina also noted:

Some supporters encouraged me to take time to heal and not beat myself up over not learning things or returning to the university immediately. Unfortunately, I learned rather quickly there must be a fine balance between limiting the number of things I am doing

with not doing anything as they both are overly challenging, causing the brain to slip

further into an inability to learn.

Relying on skills and abilities while persevering led many of the participants to recognize their

desire to belong versus being hyper-focused on regaining all their previous abilities.

Limited Desire to Return to Full Capabilities Prior to TBI

While participants openly shared their experiences directly related to how the TBI

impacted their educational goals and giftedness, they noted a stronger sense of belonging after

the TBI. Participants noted:

Through losing a piece of me or who I always identified with, I learned there was a

bigger piece of me hiding underneath. I am lucky to be alive for sure. But I am grateful to

have the opportunity to meet others in a similar situation while understanding we always

could learn something. I think I like me better now than before because I am more

understanding with others and less demanding on their educational needs. I also learned it

is okay not to know everything.

Through the data obtained, participants chimed in on the fullness of their lives now in

comparison to before the TBI as they noted, "We actually feel more like we belong than we did

before, because everyone has something different about them and we are not considered super

freaks because of our giftedness."

Research Question Responses

Additional insight into the research is presented within the following section through

concise responses to the research questions provided while focusing on the themes and sub-

themes previously discussed. The participants' responses throughout the interview process,

journal prompting, and observations were used to help form this section. The researcher used all obtained information to provide precise data for the research.

Central Research Question

What are the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? The themes of life after TBI and not alone were used to help answer this question. Participants notated on multiple occasions that their ability to recognize or lean on previous giftedness or talents was a tremendous driving force in the desire to continue forward towards further educational pursuits. As the participants reflected upon their educational experiences, a resounding thought was recognizing the need to allow additional time to complete mundane tasks. For example, Helena noted:

> Initially, I became upset when I was unable to instantly recall what I had read moments earlier, as this had never been a problem before my TBI. I found myself being overly upset with myself, and it was only after I adapted my way of learning by adding notes to what I read did I realized I was no longer able to learn in the same manner. Now that I have adjusted my thought process, I can be more successful and accomplished in my education.

Helena's example demonstrates resilience through change while adapting previous skills for future success.

Participants also frequently questioned their abilities before the TBI while obtaining new procedures to learn more effectively. Frank's response provided clarity and uniformity in the overall experiences of all participants: "I struggle with the inability to quickly determine the correct wording at the correct times. I often wonder if I was truly gifted prior to the incident or if it was all imagined." Initially, participants struggled with memory loss and personality changes

from the TBI. As they began to accept their TBI and its impacts, they felt overwhelmed, scared, frustrated, and experienced angst. As their ability to cope and progress towards success, participants shared a sense of belonging and gratitude with the overall experience.

Sub-Question One

What are the shared dispositions, values, and intrinsic motivators of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? To assist in answering this question, the themes of life after TBI and not alone were used. Participants acknowledged on several occasions a sense of "being set apart from others due to intellectual abilities and emotional gifts." Participants also noted their resilience from the TBI stemmed from a personal drive to "overcome and be better than before." The researcher best identified an overwhelming consensus from the participants through a quote by Lakesha, who noted, "I do everything at a slower pace than I previously recall but I also want to be certain that I do not overlook something simply because it should be easy." Participants shared the abilities to survive the challenges through intrinsic motivators, friendship, and personal strengths. Some of the shared internal strengths noted include prayer, recognizing and accepting change, and the ability to learn or adjust the way learning occurs.

Sub-Question Two

What are the educational support experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? Assistance in answering this question was formed with the two themes of life after TBI and not alone. Annabelle noted, "Honestly, my student advisor has been a blessing and very helpful in encouraging me to speak up about any limitations or ask questions if I feel the need. All my professors have been amazing as well." Participants agreed with the amount of support received throughout the healing process and continue to receive, noting family and friends have also played a crucial part in the success. Frank also noted, "Learning there are

additional support groups with other individuals who have experienced similar challenges has been extremely helpful."

Sub-Question Three

What do gifted undergraduate students attribute to their ability to tackle ongoing education? Life after TBI and not alone were the two themes used to help answer this question. "Perseverance and perception. Reflection, prayer, family, friends at home, and my team of doctors." Steven noted very calmly:

> Everything is a matter of perception, and everyone's perception might be different. My folks always taught me I could do anything I set my mind to, even if my mind was not always right or where I felt it should be, I always accomplished my goals.

Many participants also generalized the importance of furthering education without having an alternative option. Carl noted, "After all we are all given gifts for a reason, and we need to learn to use them effectively."

<center>**Summary**</center>

Twelve gifted undergraduate students actively participated in the study to share their personal experiences and challenges with varying levels of TBI. Throughout the process, themes and subthemes were identified, which demonstrated aspects of the participants' daily lives that were impacted. A consensus amongst the participants was the ability to pursue further and continuing education due in part to the giftedness possessed by each participant, as the giftedness provided skills for resilience to be developed and strengthened over time by the participants. Gina provided clarification of the consensus through her statement, "Although I felt I was losing my mind and my identity, over time I relied upon my gift of empathy and compassion to push through and overcome negative self-talk." The developed themes were supported through

observations, journal prompts, and individual conversations throughout the interview process. The themes, Life after TBI and Not Alone, and the sub-themes that developed were discussed in detail throughout the chapter. Chapter 5 discusses the interpretations and implications of the findings while providing additional recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. The study focused on the experiences of twelve gifted students with varying levels of TBI and how the TBI impacted their educational endeavors, interviews, journal prompts, and observations assisted in data collection within the study. I analyzed the collected data through coding for themes to evolve phenomenological reflective descriptions. Chapter Five provides an interpretation of the findings and correlates the research questions to the study. The chapter also discusses the implications for policy and practice, along with the theoretical and methodological limitations and delimitations of the research, in addition to the recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. This hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted with 12 gifted undergraduate students with varying levels of TBI participating who shared personal experiences and challenges they encountered throughout their personal journeys. Through the analysis of observations, journal prompts, and individual conversations throughout the interview process, the following themes were identified: Life After TBI and Not Alone. Following will be five major subsections as identified accordingly: Interpretation of Findings; Implications for Policy or Practice; Empirical and Theoretical Implications; Limitations and Delimitations; and Recommendations for Future Research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Twelve gifted undergraduate students participated in the study to share their personal experiences and challenges with varying levels of TBI, while I obtained the data to help effectively develop the study's themes. Personal interpretation assisted in providing clarification of the obtained results from the phenomenological qualitative study. A central theme that materialized throughout the analysis of data obtained from observations, journal prompts, and individual conversations throughout the interview process was life after TBI and the challenges participants encountered accommodating or accepting their brain injury. A predominant subtheme that developed from the theme of life after TBI was mental and personality challenges and the ability to adapt accordingly. The second subtheme of life after TBI was emotional impacts and included things such as frustration, fear, anxiety, depression, confusion, shock, and shame.

The second theme that emerged from the analysis was the reality that participants were not alone in their experiences, along with their way of coping with the changes or challenges they were experiencing. Personal or inner strengths are seen as motivators or a hidden drive encouraging one to continue, even when feeling as though all hope is lost, and demonstrates the initial subtheme that developed under the second theme of not alone. The second subtheme of not alone was identified as skills from abilities and is best attributed to the notion of gifted individuals having an innate drive for continued personal transformation and improvement, along with an increased ability to adapt to situations.

An individual's ability to maintain resiliency when faced with a TBI depends entirely upon the age at which the incident occurred along with the severity of the trauma (Castor & El Massioui, 2020). Gifted people work diligently to maintain their reputation and struggle to show

others the challenges they face after a significant brain injury (Kreutzer et al., 2018). Depending upon where the trauma was, the gifted individual could lose their unique giftedness and not understand the inability to do things that previously came naturally (Markovic et al., 2020). Gifted students battle the personal strengths of maintaining extremely high expectations with critical thinking and the associated challenges of the need for success (Webb, 2020). Gifted individuals are known for putting additional pressure upon themselves. However, they also get tremendous amounts of pressure from those closest to them and often develop various strategies for overcoming the challenges associated with these pressures (Winkler & Voight, 2016).

TBI alters the composition of the brain and the way the brain processes data (Byom & Turkstra, 2016; Williams & Prince, 2017). As the brain shifts accordingly based on the trauma, the lasting effects can either be temporary or permanent, dependent upon the extent of the damage along with the location where the impact occurred (Mouzon et al., 2017; Palermo et al., 2020). Some of the symptoms that individuals experience from TBI include memory problems, loss of consciousness, headaches, fatigue, blurred vision, loss of coordination, depression, and anxiety (Hu et al., 2017). TBI also can cause the impacted individual to experience random mood swings, visual aphasia, speaking disorders, seizures, and extreme sensitivity to lights, sounds, and smells (Armstrong, 2018).

Research has found adults who have suffered from TBI possess additional anxiety compared to individuals without brain injury (Fox et al., 2016; Osborn et al., 2017). The level of anxiety increases substantially if the individual is considered gifted, as they have additional battles to contend with (McKinlay et al., 2018; Thomson & Jaque, 2018). Anxiety is exemplified when the individual seeks to appear normal without drawing attention to the personal limitations they are currently experiencing, generally out of fear of ridicule (Hagger & Riley, 2017).

Interpretation of Findings

The following section will include a personal interpretation of the themes that developed from the research within this study. After carefully reviewing the obtained data, the initial theme identified was Life After TBI, along with the challenges encountered by participants while accommodating or accepting their brain injury. Eleven of the 12 participants noted an ongoing struggle with symptoms of anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. Participants also expressed a lack of compassion and understanding from others as the participants were dealing with the invisible injuries from the TBI. A second theme that developed from the study was recognition of not being alone in their experiences. Within the next few paragraphs, a summary of the interpretations I found pertinent will be provided with more information.

Self-efficacy is a Struggle

Self-efficacy is one's personal belief of personal capacity to execute necessary behaviors required for specific performance attainability and is necessary for personal growth, along with success (Bandura, 1982). Participants identified various areas within their personal lives where the sustained TBI significantly altered their cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being, causing an alteration of self-worth and internal drive. Participants repeatedly acknowledged interpersonal struggles, along with the internal conflict of determination while grasping at the ability to successfully return to their prior level of functioning.

Gifted students battle the personal strengths of maintaining extremely high expectations with critical thinking and the associated challenges of the need for success (Webb, 2020). Gifted individuals' personalities mature over time, with specific aspects aiding in determining the amount of success the individual is willing to accept (Csathó & Birkás, 2018). Individuals gain additional benefits and weaknesses as their abilities become more visible to others as they

progress through the academic aspects of life (Park et al., 2016). As an individual's self-esteem develops, there will be several specific areas where the individual will excel, while other equally important areas will be unable to prosper (Kirk et al., 2011). Fear of failure can be damaging to an individual's cognitive ability and function. On the flip side, believing in the opportunity for success allows an individual's cognitive ability to flourish (Bergold & Steinmayr, 2016).

Life is Forever Altered After Sustaining a TBI

Although participants were eager to regain their previous level of functioning, the hard reality presented that their lives are forever altered due to the TBI, which was something I often felt; however, struggled to verbalize or even acknowledge until the completion of this study. The participants frequently discussed the grief experienced in losing themselves while battling an invisible disease to others as the symptoms from the TBI predominately impact various areas of the brain which can be overlooked by others due to the lack of physical impairment. Several participants confirmed experiencing the following internal challenges: memory, perception, mood disorders, inability to properly plan, lack of impulse control, attention disorders, and comprehension (Coetzer, 2004; Lefebvre & Levert, 2006).

Working through the study demonstrated to me the uniqueness of the situation and how although the individuals are all gifted, sustaining a TBI was not anything they had ever anticipated or the challenges they would encounter. Interestingly while engaging in the study to learn more, I found myself reflecting upon the lack of support on multiple levels which is available for anyone who has encountered a TBI. I can also recall the relief I felt upon learning other students were suffering similarly and could provide some additional support or guidance toward success based on their resilience.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The phenomenological study presented me with the opportunity to explore the personal experiences of gifted adult undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI. Implications for policy and practice have been deemed necessary from the obtained data. In the following paragraphs, information related to the implications for policy and practice is discussed. Implications for policy and practice are essential for success in the future for others who have experienced a TBI, while demonstrating various areas of data previously overlooked.

Implications for Policy

The first implication for policy is for policymakers to strive to develop a more concrete and concise understanding of the impacts of TBI on individuals as they participate in undergraduate programs. Local, state, and national policymakers include governors, legislators, board members, education agency leaders, and representatives of nonprofit and profit policy support agencies (Burke et al., 2020). Policies also should be adjusted accordingly, based upon the research within this study, to reflect the needs of gifted individuals.

Educators need to be provided the opportunity to obtain further knowledge and research on varying topics such as those within this study; however, the additional need for funding to be provided through policy change for the educators is necessary. With changes within policy, the public would develop a better understanding of relationships with gifted individuals and individuals with a TBI.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study will assist educators, mental health professionals, and researchers in gaining new insights from the participants' perspectives of the varying challenges experienced by an individual who has sustained a TBI. Developing a clearer understanding of the

personal sacrifices and challenges experienced by participants will assist in further treatment options to further assist with the future personal growth of the individual. These results should be used to develop more effective educational models within the upper educational realm and develop more effective counseling techniques for the individual, along with interpersonal relationships.

The first implication for practice is to focus on the ethical guidelines for gifted individuals with a TBI to successfully and effectively live, along with participate within their community (Hawley et al., 2019). Educators, mental health professionals, and researchers must adhere to insurance policies directly related to the treatment and research of those impacted by the TBI. To properly provide gifted individuals with a TBI within the community, financial awareness needs to be addressed as many individuals might not have the means readily available to properly afford their ongoing needs (Kusec et al., 2023).

The second implication for practice is an acknowledgment of changes within the cognitive abilities and skills of impacted individuals, along with receiving proper education or educational updates to properly provide adequate education. Individuals with a TBI have a significantly more challenging time focusing due to additional stressors such as over-exemplified noise, overly crowded classrooms, or areas, and too much data coming at once. Individuals with a TBI also take longer to process all the information and to properly gather their thoughts which often leads to emotional distress (Chasnoff et al., 2023).

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

Research has been conducted on individuals with a TBI, along with challenges faced by gifted individuals; however, limited research has been conducted on both together. This study demonstrated the significance of correlating research of gifted studen with TBI demonstrating

varying opportunities for continued success (Topping et al., 2021). The individuals in the study demonstrated significant self-determination with limited fear of ridicule within society and provided additional opportunities for further research (Johnson & Ditchman, 2020).

Going through the process of the study and before reviewing all the results, it was apparent that all the individuals, including myself, learned valuable lessons throughout the healing process and the adjustment process of accepting limitations within gifts that were previously automatic. I often reflect upon the childhood story of *The Little Engine that Could* as the strength and perseverance that was pursued after sustaining the TBI, and all the individuals within the study shared similar stories. The study also demonstrated the flexibility in understanding that asking for assistance and slowing down throughout every process is not a sign of weakness, but rather of strength and resilience.

Theoretical Implications

The predominant theoretical implication which guided this study was Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (1967). While many researchers would venture to use the theory of self-efficacy, through this study it is apparent how the theory of positive disintegration provides for the ability of a gifted individual to overcome the intrinsic challenges of having a TBI. Dabrowski's theory guided a deeper comprehension of the full impact of the varying factors on each participant's ability to perform, along with self-worth or identity (Krafchek & Kronborg, 2019). Throughout positive disintegration, individuals are forced to face their intense negative emotions head-on while intrinsically battling to obtain a healthy resolution (Fusar-Poli et al., 2022; Mendaglio & Tiller, 2006), all evident within the participants' stories.

Empirical Implications

All the participants were forced to reevaluate their identities along with their individualized strengths and weaknesses while coping with the impact of the TBI. As time went on, the participants were able to successfully navigate the process of healing while relying heavily upon several strengths and adapting weaknesses into strengths (Bandura, 2018; Harper et al., 2016). With the effective use of positive disintegration, participants were able to successfully acknowledge and demonstrate how their capabilities guided them toward success (McKay & Barton, 2018; Scholz & Strelan, 2021).

Limitations and Delimitations

When it came time to engage in the interviews, observations, and retain journal prompts, scheduling was a major constraint due to personal scheduling conflicts and the availability of willing participants. Being qualitative with a personal interest in the study, remaining objective and not subjective, also was demonstrated as a challenge. Another limitation denoted from this study is the geographical region, and participants were specific, therefore, a generalized consensus of other gifted individuals with a TBI is construed based upon the region and may not accurately describe other regions. A final limitation is the subjective nature of the participants' responses based upon the level of TBI, what stage of recovery each participant is in, and the mannerism in which the situation is viewed by each participant.

Given the direction of the university, the primary focus of the study had to be as narrow as possible without being overly constrained. The primary delimitation for this study was determining how to bring light to the topic of TBI within the educational realm and not merely with PTSD survivors, focused on war or abuse. Although I began the process within my own personal lived experiences, I was uncertain if a narrative thesis would provide enough depth for the readers to recognize the importance of the topic. Collaborating with other individuals who

had been in a similar situation and realizing there are programs available guided me to narrow down the study's topic. As a social worker and educator, most of what I do is in the form of observations, which made qualitative design an automatic choice for this study; however, I knew I needed to be more specific. While the focus of the study relied on specific behavioral traits, personalized experiences, and opinions related to the effects of TBI, hermeneutic phenomenology with qualitative research was determined to be the best approach (Suddick et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of the study findings, limitations, and delimitations placed on the study, as the researcher, I would make the following recommendations for future studies related to this study. An initial recommendation would be to study professors or educators in relation to the challenges they witness from a gifted individual with a TBI within their classroom. Upon studying or questioning professors or educators, further guidance would be provided to verify the best educational opportunities are equally provided among the professors and educators. Due to the limitations of the qualitative study, it is recommended to conduct a quantitative study for clear statistical data and procedures, a means to obtain further clarity correlated to the experiences of the educators (Strassfeld et al., 2023).

A secondary recommendation would be to focus on one or two individuals from the study and make a longitudinal study. A longitudinal study provides the opportunity to follow the participants over a specific timeframe to determine if there are any changes within the individual over time, as it directly relates to their giftedness and TBI symptoms (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). By focusing on the individuals over time, there is more accountability and the ability to reflect upon areas where changes need to occur within society for future success.

A third recommendation would be to use the format for this study in other studies of individuals with a TBI in various settings to learn how it is possible to overcome the challenges and persevere. Some individuals might have developed a sense of resiliency from childhood merely by repeatedly being told never to give up regardless of the situation. Other individuals might have developed the sense of perseverance as a protective factor and not desiring to feel like a failure, even without additional pressure placed upon them.

A final recommendation would be to study family members, close friends, and peers to further determine the impact TBI has on an individual's character. Although this study focused on the gifted students themselves, there was not additional concrete evidence provided to demonstrate struggles that might have been perceived by those closest to the individual or even the family's struggles in adapting to the challenges being faced by the gifted individual. Through further investigation, additional educational support could be provided to those closest to the impacted individual to allow the process of success and healing to be more seamless, and possibly take significantly less time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI. The theory guiding this phenomenological study was Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, with a focus on how tragedy of various natures impacts the development of an individual's identity. This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI. Twelve participants from Strong Minds, Kind Hearts, a Christian counseling and educational office located in Northwest Florida, engaged in the study. Stratified sampling was used within the agency where the research was conducted

with participants having varying aspects of TBI. Participants were chosen to participate in interviews, observations, and journal prompts, which were conducted and recorded using visual and audio technology. Coding techniques were used to present a composite of my interpretation of the participants' experiences.

The study answered the central research question: What are the shared educational experiences of gifted undergraduate students who have experienced a TBI? Three sub-questions provided additional support. Data confirmed each participant could use various aspects of their giftedness to further assist with resilience through the educational process with a TBI. The data presented throughout this study demonstrate the ability of educators, mental health professionals, and researchers to provide further assistance in guiding individuals toward resiliency for success.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

Dear Dawn Farmer, Kristy Motte,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data-safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2. (ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.
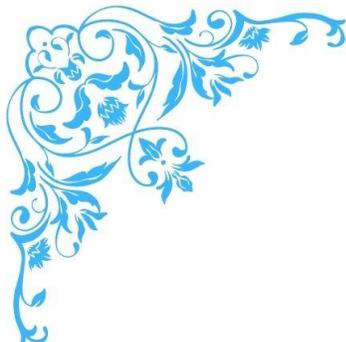
Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Site Permission

October 12, 2022

Dawn Nessler
School of Education Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

Dear Mrs. Dawn Nessler,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Challenges Faced by Adult Gifted Students Who Have Experienced Traumatic Brain Injury, I have decided to grant you permission to access our faculty and participants receiving services. You may invite the participants to participate in your study and you may conduct your study at our facility.

I grant permission for Dawn Nessler to contact staff members and participants within Strong Minds Kind Hearts who have experienced varying levels of traumatic brain injury who are actively pursuing an undergraduate degree to invite to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

Debbie Andrews
Director

Appendix C: Study Information

Research Participants Needed

Challenges Faced by Adult Gifted Students Who Have Experienced Traumatic Brain Injury

- Are you between the ages of 18 and 60?
- Are you currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program?
- Have you or do you continue to experience challenges related to your education due to a traumatic brain injury?

If you answered **yes** to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced TBI.

Participants will be asked to provide detailed information related to their injuries and educational experiences after the traumatic brain injury. Participants will be observed during routine interactions within the agency and be asked to participate in interviews with the researcher. All interviews will be recorded for the researcher to accurately reflect upon the information and transcribe into a form for further identification of similarities or differences among participants. Participants will also be provided with a journal with specific questions for further information. All journals will be requested to be returned to the researcher within two weeks to allow the researcher time to gather all the information.

If you would like to participate, please contact the researcher at the phone number or email address provided below. You may also notify your counselor, educator, or neurologist within Strong Minds Kind Hearts.

A consent document will be given to you two weeks before the observations and interviews.

Dawn Nessler, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Appendix D: Informed Consent

Consent

Title of the Project: Challenges faced by adult gifted students who have experienced traumatic brain injury.
Principal Investigator: Dawn Nessler, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be between the ages of 18 and 60, experienced a traumatic brain injury, and are currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the educational experiences of gifted adult students who have experienced traumatic brain injury.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Allow the researcher to observe you during routine interactions with facility staff. All observations will be audio and video recorded. The observations will take place during the week while you are engaged in activities within the facility where you are working on various aspects of your personal experience and transitions in recovery from the TBI.
2. Participate in an in-person, audio and video-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
3. Participate in personal journal documentation. A journal with 6 prompts will be provided to you upon completion of the individual interview. The researcher will request the completed journals be returned within a 2-week timeframe either by email or in person.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include connecting with other individuals who have experienced similar situations with their personal journey, learning additional healing techniques or growth opportunities through interactions with others, adaptability in communicating with others to help provide education of the possibilities available, obtain additional resources for further success, and identification of triggers you may have suppressed since the incident.

Benefits to society include obtaining beneficial strategies for success in overcoming TBI, developing an understanding of how to be successful or reengage in society after a TBI, learning more about the impact of TBI on an individual, how to be more proactive with interactions without limiting the potential of an individual, how resilience guides individuals towards a goal, learning about additional opportunities and resources when a loved one is impacted by a TBI, and raising awareness of the varying needs of gifted students, along with individuals who have been impacted by a TBI. Society might also receive additional education related to the importance of inclusion of all individuals regardless of abilities or limitations, to provide the best possible educational experience for everyone.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The risks involved in this study include the possibility of psychological stress from being asked to recall and discuss prior trauma. To reduce risk, I will monitor participants, discontinue the interview if necessary, and contact the participant's counselor.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Dawn Nessler. You may ask any questions you have now. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Kristy Motte.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix E: Observation Protocol

The following spreadsheet was used to help with effective observation documentation.

Observation Tool			
Participant:	**Date:**	**Start Time:**	**Stop Time:**
Body Language:			
Context (anything else occurring at the same time within the environment):			
Verbal Language:			
Interactions:			
Mood:			
Additional Notes:			

Appendix F: Interview Guide

1. Please describe the type of traumatic brain injury you sustained, along with your current level of education. (CRQ)

2. How do you feel the injury has impacted your ability to obtain and retain new knowledge? (SQ1)

3. How long ago was your diagnosis? (CRQ)

4. What challenges have you experienced within yourself to include your behaviors, communication, and abilities? (CRQ)

5. What challenges or attitudes have you experienced with how others interact with you, especially within your educational studies? (SQ2)

6. How have you overcome the educational and personality challenges you personally experienced? (SQ3)

7. How did you overcome the challenges or attitudes presented by others towards you? (SQ1)

8. What advice would you provide to someone else with a TBI who desires to engage in higher education opportunities? (SQ2)

9. How do you explain to your educators any limitations you have? (SQ2)

10. How do you personally describe your experience with TBI? (SQ1)

11. How has the experience adjusted your self-confidence? (CRQ)

12. What made you decide to participate in this research as it relates particularly to higher education? (SQ1)

13. What stigmas have you faced throughout the educational process due to your TBI? (SQ2)

14. How long do you feel it has taken to adjust to the changes from the TBI or to accept the changes you have experienced? (SQ3)

Appendix G: Journal Prompt Guide

1. Describe your personality and life, to the best of your ability, prior to the accident leading to traumatic brain injury. How has your personality and life changed since the traumatic brain injury? Are you able to pinpoint why? (SQ1)

2. How can your personal experience assist others to be successful in adapting and accepting the situation? (CRQ)

3. Document your experience related to the traumatic brain injury and explain how your emotional, mental, and physical feelings have been impacted. Provide as many details as possible. (CRQ)

4. What have you learned about and through this experience? Positive, negative or both, please be honest. (SQ2)

5. How does the traumatic brain injury impact you currently and how do you feel it will impact you in the future? (SQ3)

6. What areas of self-awareness have you gained? What techniques have you implemented to overcome challenges? (SQ3)

Appendix H: Personal Reflection Journal

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) can occur to anyone at any time, generally with little to no warning. The level of education and knowledge one has does not measure up to the multitude of challenges one will face while adjusting to life after a TBI. As the researcher within the study, I find it important to be upfront and honest while identifying the significance of the study. To do this, I must divulge private information that I recognize as important to share for others to recognize they are not alone and there is success in various aspects. Sometimes we just must be pushed a little harder or look a little further to find success but remember that everyone's success is different and unique to them as an individual.

For this study's purpose, I will share a short autobiography with you and hope it guides others into researching how to overcome challenges from a traumatic brain injury. I have always been viewed as the "helper and comforter" within my family and circle of friends. I have always attempted to remain as humble as possible, so I often did not see what everyone saw in me, and I did not always understand how or why I was deemed a "helper and comforter." Interestingly, as I began delving into the research, I realized emotional intelligence has also been identified as a form of giftedness.

Upon accepting my talents to assist others emotionally, I decided it was best to pursue a career in something where I was significantly helping others and making a difference, even if just for one person or child at a time. In pursuing my education, I continued to push myself as far as I could possibly go, and then I would push myself just a bit further. Strangely, as I was pursuing my education, I never fully felt satisfied or as if I was truly pursuing my purpose in life and always thought there was more or that I could do more. My educational journey began with

the focus of being a kindergarten teacher, as I strongly believed this is where all the change could and should begin.

I successfully received a Certificate of Mastery in Child Development and an Associate of Science (AS) in Early Childhood Education within months of each other due to the order I completed my coursework. Little did I know at that time, neither of those degrees would get me very far or close to my dream of being a Kindergarten teacher. I pursued continuing my education to obtain a Bachelor of Science (BS) in Social Psychology, and I had no idea what I was going to use this degree for. I decided to pursue and obtain a master's in social work (MSW) as I realized I could impact change in people's lives while offering hope.

During the middle of my MSW program, I encountered a severe traumatic brain injury with an equally severe concussion. However, I did not realize the severity of the situation until two weeks after the accident, when I went to see a doctor. I am certain most of the delays in visiting the doctor were out of fear and inability to effectively communicate the situation. Interestingly, it appeared as though different aspects of my brain were impacted instantly, while others appeared to be unchanged initially. While attempting to figure out what was happening and what needed to be done, I recall that giving up was not an option at that time for me.

Losing the ability to walk and talk effectively was devastating to my identity. However, I believed I could retrain myself to walk and talk as I was hopeful that some aspect of my brain was not impacted. Unfortunately, the most challenging aspect was not being able to recognize my daughter completely or say her name. I recall thinking it was like living in a dream or watching someone else's life. Anger, frustration, disappointment, and fear consumed me while I acknowledged this was going to be a long road to walk down. Throughout the entire process, I

refused to request additional time for anything, as I did not want anyone to look at me differently or as if I was helpless.

Looking back on the journey, I realize how much better and easier it would have been if I had asked for some assistance or gone to an occupational or physical therapist. While pursuing my doctorate, I am seeing many areas in my life where I continue to struggle and cannot easily hide the challenges as I had previously. Instead of being embarrassed by the situation, I have learned to embrace it while using it to assist others as the opportunity presents itself.

In everything I do, I remember God put me here for a specific reason, and there is a purpose for the challenges I face daily. Never give up or stop believing. Simply because you are faced with a challenge, find your determination, remain persistent and pray for guidance and strength to overcome the challenge with a better version of yourself. As I conduct my research, it will be challenging to not put myself in the middle of the research or data obtained, but I must challenge myself to make certain the information is factual and not merely what I desire others to see. There may be many similarities between me and the research as I seek answers for others, but also for myself for further success. The similarities are mere coincidence and will not be the driving force of the study.