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# Re-conceptualising How We Respond to Secondary Gifted Learners' Needs: A Critical Narrative and ANT Approach Investigating Programming and Placement Within Ontario's Current Public Education System

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# Abstract

In spite of significant scholarly attention paid to the needs of intellectually Gifted students, programming and placement practices in publicly funded educational institutions in North America have remained stagnant in the 21st Century (Gallagher, 2015; see also Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Brown & Stambaugh, 2014; Gallagher, 2000). Critical disability theorists have made significant advancements toward more socially just systems of education for individuals with exceptionalities who have been stigmatized for their impairments by investigating the attitudinal, structural, and political barriers that *create* the disability of one's impairment. This research was poised to address the same social injustice of inaccessibility for a group of marginalized pupils with a *bona fide* exceptionality—Intellectual-Giftedness—in pursuit of *intellectual* accessibility. This social constructionist and interpretivist, *Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI)* focused on the *construction*, *deconstruction*, and *reconceptualisation* of pedagogical responses to the needs of secondary Gifted learners in public education in Ontario, Canada. This study asked: **What can we learn from the experiences of Gifted learners, teachers of the Gifted, and educational stakeholders about the programmatic and placement needs of high-ability learners in the current system? In what ways do their experiences contribute to our understanding of whether programmatic and placement practices have or have not evolved throughout history? How might *ANT* help us identify both the actors and assemblages that produce the current systems so that educators, policymakers, and system leaders are better positioned to respond to their contemporary needs?**

This dissertation is comprised of four chapters and four integrated articles that offer scholarly, methodological, and data discoveries at various phases along my learning journey toward identifying precisely *what* is preventing the intellectual accessibility in our classrooms and schools for our high-ability pupils. Together, these chapters and manuscripts embody my learning as both participant and researcher, from taking issue with the robust stagnation of the field of Gifted education to problematizing our varied approaches to meeting the needs of these pupils, as well as employing a novel methodological approach using complementary "show and tell" methods that drew upon material-semiotics and autoethnography, which gave rise to a more complex, more three-dimensional way of understanding the *topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of this status

quo phenomenon.  A close and meticulous examination of the features, the different terrain, and the contours show exactly *what* and *how* this phenomenon is existing so we may engage in informed debate as to *why* we might be subscribing to a recycling of what Sayer (1992) calls "practically adequate" practices and discourses.

This research contributes meaningfully to this renewed conversation around re-taking responsibility for our high-ability pupils in public education.  I offer four calls to action for educational stakeholders and policymakers that must be implemented in order to disrupt the established status quo of programming and placement practices based on replicated policy that do *not* serve the contemporary needs of high-ability pupils today.  This work has implications for the classroom and school levels, at system and governance levels, as well as for the fields of Gifted education and Disability Studies.

## Keywords

Gifted education, high-ability, secondary, critical narrative, Actor-Network Theory, autoethnography, programming, placement, regular classroom, enrichment, "show and tell" approach, Disability Studies, special education

# Summary for Lay Audience

This research focuses on a group of pupils with the exceptionality of Intellectual-Giftedness in the province of Ontario, Canada.  This research has made visible that we largely understand this label to mean high ability, which is only partially accurate, as it does not represent a singular, superior ability or aptitude across *all* domains of learning that rise to the level of genius, but rather for learners who have a high capacity for learning, inquiry, and curiosity.  This research has also uncovered a systemic and fundamental misunderstanding of high-ability learners as possessing only "assets" or "gifts," implying that they have capabilities *beyond* those same-aged classmates and thus their needs are not considered to be a *deficit* or impairment perhaps like other exceptionalities and disabilities based on the language used to frame these different abilities.  The aim of this critical narrative study was to gather stories of experience about Gifted programs, services, and placements for high-ability learners in public education so we could re-think how we respond to their needs within the current system.  To better understand why education systems continue to subscribe to a status quo, taken-for-granted practice of providing a singular, predictable placement (regular classroom) with programming that continues to be primarily withdrawal-based rather than offering support within the regular classroom, this study used multiple qualitative methods to understand *how* and *what* was happening in order to address *why* we might be continuing to follow this status quo practice.  Phase 1 of the study used a material-semiotic lens to understand the various actors involved within the current system and how, when combined, they enact such power in policy and practice.  Essentially, this phase separated the narrative data into material entities (human and non-human) and used those entities to design several, visual mindmaps that could physically show *how* things were happening in an education system and *what* exactly was involved.  Phase 2 of the study used an autoethnographic lens by way of sharing personal narratives that responded to the significant issues that were identified in Phase 1 by providing greater content and context given my own experiences as an educator that has also held system-level positions within an education system.

# Co-Authorship Statement

I, Melissa D. Gollan-Wills, am responsible for the conceptualization and writing of all the chapters and integrated articles in this dissertation.  In the four manuscripts, the primary intellectual contributions are made by myself as the first author, as I led the design and enactment of the study including ethics applications, conducting comprehensive reviews of the literature, all data collection and analysis for both phases of the study, and led the writing of the manuscripts.  I completed this work under the supervision of Dr. Kathy Hibbert and recognize the extensive contributions in both written and verbal feedback from not only my supervisor but my valued committee members, Dr. Luigi Iannacci and Dr. Melody Viczko.  The contributions of Dr. Hibbert are primarily through supervision of the research, continued guidance and conferencing with regards to study and methodological design, and ongoing consultation and discussion throughout the entire project.  Chapter 3 (Gollan-Wills & Hibbert, forthcoming) is somewhat of a catalyst manuscript for this dissertation, as it (re)examines the narrative findings from an earlier research project (Gollan-Wills, 2014) that was also supervised by Dr. Hibbert.  This chapter focuses on salient findings from this earlier study that are taken up and (re)examined through a temporal lens.  It further highlights the many implications that arose out of this earlier study and addresses the need for further research that employs greater complexity in method to make visible a more *three-dimensional* way of understanding Gifted programming and placement in public education systems that this dissertation fully takes up.

Dr. Iannacci, Dr. Viczko, and Dr. Hibbert are recognized for their ongoing attention throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study, contributing such meaningful feedback on the complementary "show and tell" material, autoethnographic, and narrative methods used in this study, as well as their editorial support in shaping and preparing the selected manuscripts for publication.  Dr. Hibbert introduced me to the work of Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell (2005) that fundamentally shaped the infrastructure of the autoethnographic manuscript (Chapter 7) with living the effects of public policy.  Dr. Iannacci contributed key concepts with regards to the broader *critical narrative methodology* that was equally instrumental in shaping the overall framework of Chapter 7 (Gollan-Wills, Hibbert, Iannacci, & Viczko, forthcoming), as understanding the constructions before deconstructing was essential to be able to reconceptualise what is

possible.  This guidance shaped the tone of Chapter 2 (Gollan-Wills, Hibbert, Iannacci, & Vizko, forthcoming) as a thorough review of past and current practices and understandings that further problematizes our approaches to Gifted education, programs, and services.  Dr. Viczko is recognized for her extensive experience with material-semiotics and her meticulous attention to detail with words and materials used in Chapter 6 (Gollan-Wills, Hibbert, Iannacci, & Viczko, forthcoming) to ensure it reflected the spirit of Latour and Law.  Each are listed as co-authors on versions of the selected integrated articles that have been written for targeted journals for publication, and will be listed as co-authors on additional, forthcoming publications from this dissertation.

# Acknowledgments

When I was a small child, I had sat my father down one day and expressed to him that I knew what I was going to be when I grew up: I was going to be a doctor someday.  Of course, like any small child, I didn't have a solid plan but knew my own strengths even then and knew that becoming a physician was not how I would go about achieving this, as I would go queasy at the sight of a little blood from even the smallest of cuts.  Still, it was a dream, a goal; and I knew that it would be entirely possible for me to embark on a lifetime of learning because of the tremendous love and support of my incredibly patient and loving family.

To those that I hold dear, I weep as I humbly write these heartfelt acknowledgements out of sheer gratitude and know that this dissertation was only possible because of the people whom I have surrounded myself with and the opportunities that have helped shape me.

To my mom, Dianne: you have and always will be my biggest (and loudest) cheerleader and number one fan.  You are the innately positive touchstone in my life who reminds me to always look for the positive light in every situation—even if I don't notice or feel it right away.  Your wisdom and guidance have helped shape who I am.  For my dad, Barry: thank you for valuing this journey and for always reminding me that I *can*.  It has been nearly two decades of consecutive university learning, which you have always and unconditionally supported.  Since I was young, you instilled in me the value of hard work and how to truly value what comes from mistakes, as that's where the real learning happens.  And for my brother, Justin: I miss you always.  I take great comfort in knowing you are always with me and are truly proud of my continued inability to settle for less than my very best.

For my husband, Joel: this is most certainly *our* accomplishment, as it simply would not have been possible to pursue this dream without your dedication and support.  Our unconditional respect for and support of each other's dreams is what makes us so special.  And I will always be eternally grateful for your devotion, love, and unending support of this journey.  For our daughter, Elle: thank you for your patience with mommy as I pursued this big thing in our lives.  I embarked on this journey when you were just a wee baby, and now almost seven years of age, I have so enjoyed growing and learning alongside you.  I will cherish the times we spent highlighting literature,

reading you my drafts until you fell asleep in my arms, and celebrating all the milestones with me. I am madly in love with you both and owe you several family movie nights. And for our girls, Lucy and Gertie: I miss you both all the time. Your love and comfort over the years kept me company and reminded me that you're always on my team—especially with the play breaks you mandated that were always at the time when we needed it the most.

To my supervisor, Dr. Kathy Hibbert, I cannot imagine this experience without you at the helm. You are my mentor and my role model. I continue to be indebted to the late Dr. Robert Macmillan who took my phone call one day when I was considering applying to graduate studies at the Faculty of Education. At that time, I was a full-time secondary educator who was feeling as though I needed something—some place, space, some*thing*—to help me dig deeper, think critically, and ponder longer in hopes of better understanding the students whom I had the pleasure of programming with and for. Bob and I talked about my areas of interest at the time, and he immediately began telling me about you, advising that you could be a perfect fit for me as a supervisor, as your mentorship and experiences in education—in roles very similar to mine—could help guide me along my research journey. He was so right. Fast forward twelve years, another completed Master's and now the completion of my PhD with you by my side, I cannot help reminiscing of those early days when Bob introduced me to the most remarkable supervisor who would continue to support me, challenge me, and guide me through making visible my thinking and honouring the hard work of grappling. You have this unbelievable ability to sense when I am in need of something and in such a timely way—an article to help me make sense of what I'm thinking or send me down the rabbit hole, a book to help me with a framework or structure of an article I'm writing, or a figurative or literary example that is shared in a conversation that completely embodies what I've been thinking about. You have also instilled in me the valuable lesson of focusing deeply and sincerely on my reader. Kathy, your patience, nurturance, and mentorship over the years have helped me grow and take shape as a scholar.

I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Luigi Iannacci and Dr. Melody Viczko—the dream team. Your bodies of work aligned so beautifully with this project, and it has been my privilege to engage with you. Lu, I have learned so deeply from your knowledge and experience in critical narrative work that intersects with disability and neurodiversity. Your

feedback has always been spot-on and timely, and your powerful and emphatic guidance has pushed me further and given me the courage to not only share these stories of experience but communicate in a clear and powerful tone how we *must* reconceptualise what we are doing for our high-ability learners in our schools today.  Melody, I continue to be grateful for your extensive experience with material-semiotic work and have benefited greatly from conversations around living within and between policy.  Your meticulous attention to detail and understanding of *ANT* has only strengthened this work, particularly in seeing everything materially and understanding the consequences of word choice—materially speaking.  You both have had an immense impact on my scholarship, and I am so thankful for your engagement with this work.

To my amazing friends and colleagues whom I have grown up with and met along the way, I thank you for your love and support, and most of all for the memories I carry in my heart.  For my childhood friends, my fellow gladiators in Gifted education, my school family of unicorns, my closest confidants and cherished colleagues, and so many more amazing humans that I have had the pleasure of working alongside—I thank you for the many (many) talks of encouragement and several "you got this"(es) and continuing to support me along this journey.  For my PhD colleagues, as well as my fellow researchers in the narrative mentoring group, thank you for the conversations, advice, and your attentive ears throughout this last decade (and then some).

And last but most certainly not least, I express my sincere thanks and wish to honour the participants: you have entrusted me with your stories of experience, and for this, I remain grateful to have learned from and with you.  For my students in all panels—former, current, and future— thank you for letting me be a part of your learning and for teaching me more than you'll ever know.  And for my fellow high-ability learners and those teaching in Gifted education: it has been my greatest pleasure taking up this research and I remain incredibly hopeful for our futures in public education.

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# Chapter 1

## 1      Introduction

*I want people to understand that as a gifted student I actually have special needs, not just that I have a special ability or talent.*

*—Ben[1], Grade 11*

I can recall the two most impactful exchanges I have had in my professional career as an educator in both public and higher education with extreme clarity, as they, for me, represent this quintessential misunderstanding that many people—professionals, peers, organizations, institutions, government—have about persons who are Gifted.   The first was an exchange I had over fifteen years ago when I was entering the profession.  I was observing and debriefing with an elementary school educator whom I respected greatly, and we were talking about fostering growth in a mainstreamed classroom with such high numbers of pupils and what supports were available for our littles, particularly in the primary years.  This educator intimated to me that the pressure to have all pupils reach a certain threshold in preparation for the following year, particularly for literacy and numeracy, essentially drove what happened for the rest of the class. The way this was communicated to me was very matter of fact, as though *this* was the widely accepted understanding in public education in Ontario, Canada.  After a lengthy discussion on what that looks like, particularly for ensuring satisfactory reading levels, this educator said those 5 powerful words that continue to resurface in nearly every setting—classroom, board office, lecture hall, cocktail party—that I find myself in: "Gifted kids will be fine."  This was, of course, not

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used for all participant responses in this research.

malicious at all and was within the context of utilitarian achievement and preparation of the *entire* class for their next grade, suggesting that this teacher felt compelled to turn their efforts toward the students who cannot (yet) independently read, albeit at the expense of those pupils who may have already entered school as budding readers and whose needs were effectively deprioritized in that regular classroom.

The second exchange was actually a question I received from a university student when I was giving a lecture on examining Gifted education from a dis/ability perspective. About half-way into this lecture, we were having a discussion on what Gifted means, what Gifted education looks like, what these experiences of enrichment programming might be in educational settings. This brave student asked me to come near and uttered another infamous phrase that I continue to hear in my work: "This is a Disability class and Gifted students don't have disabilities." I thanked this student for the comment and made my way to the front chalkboards to draw a bell curve in a short piece of yellow chalk. I asked the class to pause their discussions for a moment and drew two arrows from the middle of the bell curve to each of the ends and responded with Winebrenner (2000): when considering the range of abilities in today's mainstreamed classrooms, both extremes of abilities on a learning curve are equally as far removed from the norm, demanding that *all* exceptional students, regardless of which end they land on the continuum, are deserving of accommodations in public education. Even for a moment I could see that by simply reframing the language of disability as different ability or exceptionality, the lightbulbs were turning on. It was as though they had never actually considered Gifted needs as *bona fide* special education, learning needs. This experience showed me that this fundamental misunderstanding of high-ability learners as not necessarily and intuitively belonging to either the disability community

or the special education community was continuing to be enabled somehow as a taken-for-granted viewpoint.  This was indeed a monumental problem and I needed to better understand how it gained and maintained such hegemonic discourse status.

## 1.1   The Research Problem

A common misconception in public education is that intellectually Gifted learners do not possess any learning difficulties or needs that demand attention (Smith, 2006; see also Reis & Renzulli, 2010), where *needs* have been constructed in society as *deficits* and, in particular, focus solely on academic achievement.  High-ability learners often enter classrooms with prior knowledge of advanced content for their age (Mills, Ablard, & Gustin, 1994), so their learning needs—seldom considered needs at all (Smith, 2006) as they do not require support to bring them *up* to the norm—tend to go overlooked.  Moreover, these enrichment needs are not perceived as urgent in a mixed abilities classroom where the focus is on adhering to the governmental priorities of utilitarian achievement of all learners, which often prioritizes the remediation needs of more academically struggling students and closing the achievement gap (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006).  Likewise, the erroneous assumption that high numerical scores on tests and assessments are somehow synonymous with learning (Winebrenner, 2000) cultivates misunderstanding around the legitimate learning *needs* of children who are intellectually Gifted. Many educators, policymakers, and educational institutions still hold the prejudiced perspective that the Gifted are the "haves" (Davis, 2006) and their enrichment needs are categorized as *above* the regular curriculum.  When such needs are widely considered to be outside the scope of the regular, programmatic curriculum—specifically referring to the standardized, written curriculum documents with provincial, government-approved content (expectations) and performance

(achievement) standards (Ministry of Education, 2010)—those needs no longer become the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher who is already expected to provide dynamic instruction, authentically assess students' work, ensure students reach achievement success, and remediate learners who are not achieving academically (Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991; see also Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Ruf, 2005; Smith, 2011).

Gifted pupils continue to be deprioritized and underserved (Reis & Renzulli, 2010) in what Tomlinson calls the "one room school house" (as cited in Latz & Adams, 2011, p. 781) that is the regular classroom, as providing enrichment programming for those learners who are already at the "ceiling" (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p. 35) is not an urgent priority when compared to the "have-nots" who are unable to achieve a satisfactory level of understanding (Davis, 2006; Ruf, 2005). Critical disability theorists have made significant advancements toward more socially just systems of education (Gable, 2014) for individuals with exceptionalities who have been stigmatized for their impairments by illuminating the culpable oppressors that *create* the disability of one's impairment (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014), including attitudinal, structural, and political barriers. Such is the case for Gifted learners in Ontario, Canada, where hegemonic discourses such as "scarce resources" (Gallagher, 2015), the "deficit" discourse, and the widely understood "medical model" (Gable, 2014; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010) discourse influence educational policymakers with conservative budgets to triage all special education needs for their individual boards. When prioritizing the most "critical" needs (Gallagher, 2015), policymakers often approach the situation using the *deficit* discourse as it pertains to academic achievement, generally resulting in funding and support for exceptional children with various impairments who are perceived to be the most disadvantaged (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006). Systems

that accept this deficit model of special education are deliberately imposing institutional restrictions (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010) on Gifted learners where placement and programming options are overwhelming predictable and singular: placement in the regular, mixed-ability classroom with primarily withdrawal-based enrichment programming (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008; Subotnik et al., 2011; see also Gollan-Wills, 2014).

## 1.2   Statement of Purpose

Despite a century of academic research on the needs of intellectually Gifted learners, our current practices and available programs and placements continue to be held captive by a status quo (Gallagher, 2015; see also Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Brown & Stambaugh, 2014; Gallagher, 2000), which is inadvertently perpetuating the *disablism* (Gable, 2014; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010) of Gifted learners in public education.  This social constructionist and interpretivist, *Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI)* is focused on the *construction*, *de-construction*, and *re-conceptualisation* of pedagogical responses to the needs of secondary Gifted learners in public education in Ontario, Canada.  This study problematizes not only how Giftedness has been constructed by educators and policymakers, but how Gifted programming and placement are viewed within the current institutional model and structure.  Subsequently, those perceptions, discourses, and ideologies that have permeated the current educational system and continue to inform our understanding of Gifted learners have brought us to this impasse where educators, policymakers, and educational stakeholders must be informed of how best to serve this group of exceptional pupils in public education who are deserving of accommodations for their learning.  To answer *why* dominant discourses of withdrawal-based programming and regular classroom placement options for secondary Gifted learners exist as the primary model

within the current educational system in Ontario, Canada, it is imperative that we first understand *how* such discourses and practices come to assemble and *how* they sustain such power and influence over time.  Above all, this research sought to intentionally interrupt (Katz & Dack, 2012) dominant discourses so we may engage policymakers and educators in a critical conversation around re-conceptualising how we respond to the needs of, and re-take responsibility for, our Gifted pupils in 21st Century classrooms, institutions, and educational systems.

## 1.3    Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions:

1. **What can we learn from the experiences of Gifted learners, teachers of the Gifted, and educational stakeholders about the programmatic and placement needs of identified Gifted secondary school students in the current system?**
    a. **How might their experiences help us better understand the construction of Intellectual-Giftedness as an exceptionality?**
    b. **In what ways do their experiences contribute to our understanding of whether programmatic and placement options have or have not evolved throughout history to respond to contemporary Gifted learners' needs in public education?**

2. **How might *ANT* help us identify both the actors and assemblages that produce the current systems so that educators, policymakers, and system leaders are better positioned to respond to the programmatic and placement needs of identified Gifted secondary school students?**

## 1.4     Scope of the Study

This study took place within an educational setting in Southwestern Ontario, Canada, and sought to learn from the experiences of students, teachers, and educational stakeholders in and around Gifted programming and placement practices. It intended to uncover *what* the root cause was of this status quo phenomenon where the overwhelming majority of high-ability pupils experience placement in the regular classroom and receive primarily withdrawal-based enrichment programming. It further intended to make visible *how* this status quo practice has continued to exist within education systems and what the dominant discourses and practices might be that are perpetuating this phenomenon.

Years prior to this study I had conducted a research project to better understand newly implemented Gifted programming in a large public school board in Southwestern Ontario that served rural, urban, and suburban schools through an exploration of the stories of experience from both secondary school staff and students (Gollan-Wills, 2014). This earlier study explored students' experiences in both elementary and secondary school, as well as teachers' experiences designing and delivering enrichment programming at the secondary panel. Participants met at a Board Office of a public school board in Southwestern Ontario for a series of focus group sessions that varied by participant composition including an all-student group, an all-teacher group, and various blended focus groups where they were asked to share stories of experiences in a range of topics pertaining to enrichment programming and Gifted learners' needs. Participants discussed non-credit and for-credit enrichment programming, a recently implemented system vision for approved enrichment programming, advocacy and social-

emotional support, achievement and underachievement, development of individual talents, the identification process and Individual Education Plans, and how the needs of high-ability learners were being addressed and supported in mainstream education.  All student participants held the formal designation of Intellectual-Giftedness as per their established board criteria, and all teacher participants were the designated teacher and/or Learning Support Teacher for their respective secondary schools.  At the time of this original study, findings made visible the varied needs of high-ability pupils in secondary education and provided me with immediate action steps to refine our system vision for enrichment programming in my own board of education.  However, having lived within and among the broader education system in Ontario, Canada, since the study was conducted, I felt the need to (re)visit the raw narrative data to learn more and to interrogate the very design and implementation of the system or board-level programming vision itself, pondering how effective it was at meeting the *many* needs of the Gifted pupils we serve.

This study employed a novel methodological approach poised to get close enough to the status quo mess by way of complementary "show and tell" methods of material-semiotics and autoethnography to finally see *what* and *how* this phenomenon was existing so we may engage in informed debate as to *why*.  Data was collected and analysed within two distinct phases that each drew upon a complementary method.  The focus group data from the earlier study (Gollan-Wills, 2014) was used as the sole data source for the first phase of this study, which employed a meticulous, socio-material analysis on the transcripts of raw, narrative data collected from eight (8) focus groups of students, teachers, and blended groupings.  The second phase of this study employed autoethnographic sensibilities by way of vignettes that were

composed in response to the material findings of various "critical incidents" or episodes that brought to light significant issues within education systems that required additional information to complete a more holistic picture of what had transpired.  This phase of the research was also designed to make visible the *who*, *what*, and *how* we have found ourselves in this perpetual programming and placement impasse in public education, as well as convey information needed to appreciate greater content and context given my own experiences as an educator that has also held system-level positions within an education system.

## 1.5    Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were used as defined:

**Actor** in this study is situated within the context of socio-materiality, specifically *Actor-Network Theory*, which is "an approach that enables us to trace the ways that things come together, act and become taken for granted" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 4).  Actors are *agents*, either human or non-human (e.g. humans, animals, things, and matters), that have the same ontological status to begin with (Müller, 2015) and can exert force.

For the purposes of this study, **assemblage** is also situated within the context of socio-materiality and is akin to an *association* or *network* of actors or *gathering* of materials that when brought or linked together perform a particular enactment (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012). Assemblages are understood in this study to be both relational and heterogeneous, as they contain different human and non-human agents or entities linked together to form a whole (Müller, 2015; see also Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) that behaves, acts, or influences in a particular way, hence *socio*-material.

**Enrichment** refers to the extended, in-depth, and/or broadened programming offered to above average ability students and is also referred to as an instructional accommodation in this study. Enrichment is typically beyond the depth and breadth of what is offered in the regular classroom (Clark & Zimmerman, 1994) and programmatic curriculum.

**Gifted** in this study refers to the designation given to either elementary or secondary students that meet individual board criteria.  According to the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2001) *Special Education Guide for Educators*, Giftedness is an intellectual exceptionality where individuals have "an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated" (p. A 20).

For a complete list of defined terms please see Appendix A.

## 1.6 Organization of the Integrated Article Dissertation



# Roadmap of the Integrated Article Dissertation

**❶ Introduction**

Research Problem:

**Historically, the needs of high-ability pupils have been de-prioritized in mainstream, mixed-ability classrooms in Ontario, Canada.**

**❷ Problematizing Our Approaches to Gifted Education [1]**

This review of the literature focuses on the **state of research** on Gifted education, and **programmatic and placement practices** over the past **thirty (30) years**.

This manuscript **takes issue with the robust stagnation** of past and current practices and identifies **four (4) problems** that question *how* exactly we are meeting the contemporary needs of high-ability pupils today.

**❸ When Storying Becomes the Story [1]**

This is a **catalyst** manuscript. It **(re)examines** the narrative findings from an earlier research project (Gollan-Wills, 2014) through a **temporal lens**.

It highlights the **need for further research that employs greater complexity in method** to get us close enough to experience the features, the different terrain, and the contours of the **topography** (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of our field.

**❹ Theoretical Framework & Methodology**

This chapter details the eclectic **theoretical approach** that draws upon **critical and poststructural theories**. A rich description of the broader **Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI)** methodology follows.

**❺ Study Design & Investigative Procedures**

This chapter describes the **novel methodological approach** employed that could both **"show" (material-semiotics) and "tell" (autoethnography)** to give rise to a more complex, more three-dimensional understanding of this phenomenon.

**3D**

**❻ Phase 1: Making Visible the Complexity of the Status Quo [1]**

This manuscript focuses on the various **material findings** where *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)* was used as a critical method to help **illuminate** the various assemblages and **trace** the translation between human and non-human actors.

*ANT* helped to **identify** *who* and *what* is ultimately **responsible** for perpetuating and enabling a status quo of programming and placement, as well as show **how** exactly this continues to happen.

**Five (5) critical incidents were identified** and were taken up in Phase 2 as vignettes.

**Show and Tell**

**❼ Phase 2: Living the Effects of Public Policy [1]**

This manuscript shares segments of the **five (5) autoethnographic vignettes** that were used to **construct** the narratives.

It then **deconstructs** those narratives and discusses them within **encompassing themes** and further nests them within **the actual public policies** that the participant-researcher lived and enacted.

This manuscript makes visible a **"quiet crisis"** (Chu & Myers, 2015) and offers some *reconceptualised* **considerations for refiguring a future** (Iannacci, 2019) for our high-ability pupils.

**❽ Discussion**

Discusses two (2) **salient findings** and responds to the study's guiding **research questions**.

**Circles back** to the second manuscript (Chapter 2) and **takes-up the problems that were identified** and offers ways to reconceptualise those approaches **informed by** *this* study's findings.

Offers **four (4) calls to action to disrupt** the established status quo.

Addresses various **practical and theoretical implications** at the school and classroom level, system and governance levels, and fields of Gifted education and Disability Studies.

1-A version of this manuscript has been written for publication in a targeted journal.

*Figure 1.1: This figure provides a visual roadmap of this dissertation. Each component of the dissertation is included with a summary of the key points and contents. The four (4) integrated manuscripts are in golden boxes, while the four (4) chapters are in ivory boxes. Arrows are provided to signal progression, as well demonstrate how they are connected to one another.*

This dissertation is presented in an integrated article format that is comprised of four chapters and four integrated articles that offer scholarly, methodological, and data discoveries at various phases along my learning journey toward identifying precisely *what* is preventing the intellectual accessibility in our classrooms and schools for our high-ability pupils. In this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), I opened by briefly introducing a broader audience to what has led me to this research. I discussed the research problem where we continue to see an historic, de-prioritization of the needs of high-ability pupils in mainstream, mixed-ability classrooms in Ontario, Canada. I have outlined the statement of purpose of this research, followed by the research questions that have guided this study, as well as the scope of the research and selected definitions of terms used.

A version of the first manuscript (Chapter 2), *Problematizing our approaches to Gifted education: A call to disrupt the contemporary (status quo) state of Gifted education,* has been written for publication in the targeted journal, *High-Ability Studies*. This manuscript is an extensive review of the literature of both the state of research on Gifted education, as well as programming and placement practices over the last thirty years (late-1980s to the present), as this is the timeframe in which I have been involved in Gifted education as a former student enrolled in an enrichment withdrawal program in elementary school, as a system-level educator responsible for an entire secondary Gifted portfolio, and as a researcher whose body of work is focused on the intellectual accessibility of public education for secondary Gifted learners. This manuscript shares past and current practices and understandings that are largely in place in today's education systems, and then problematizes those approaches in hopes of engaging stakeholders and policymakers in reflection from these various entry points (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005). This paper is intended to invite trouble into the Gifted education discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011) by problematizing our stagnant approaches and questioning *how* exactly we are meeting the contemporary needs of high-ability pupils in our schools?

A version of the second manuscript (Chapter 3), *When storying becomes the story: The elephant in the room,* has been written for publication targeting the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. This paper (re)examines the narrative findings from an earlier research project (Gollan-Wills, 2014) that was undertaken to better understand newly implemented Gifted programming experiences from both secondary school staff and students. This paper focuses on salient findings from the study including various stories that emerged from the data and the relatively organic way in which the analytical structure used to story the data came to *embody*

that very story throughout the process.  Selected findings are taken up and (re)examined

through a temporal lens, drawing our attention to the *elephant in the room* and questioning

*why* we continue to position the needs of Gifted pupils as *beyond* or *outside* the regular

curriculum or classroom teacher's responsibility through the creation and promotion of

withdrawal-based enrichment programming as the *primary* means of meeting their needs?  This

paper further problematizes Gifted education as a field (Borland, 2013), highlighting the many

implications that arose out of this study and addresses the need for further research that

employs greater complexity in method to make visible a more *three*-dimensional way of

understanding Gifted programming and placement in public education systems, which has

typically been researched and understood in more *two*-dimensional ways.

Chapter 4 is largely a discussion on the theoretical framework and methodology that

has informed this study.  This chapter details the eclectic theoretical approach that draws upon

critical and poststructural theories that are driven by the study of social structures, power, and

control (Merriam, 1991).   A rich description of the broader, *Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI)*

methodology follows, detailing the reconceptualisation process that this research aspired to

accomplish so it could offer "alternative ways of thinking, being, and doing" (Iannacci, 2019, p.

15; 2007) for our high-ability pupils in our contemporary, public education systems.

Chapter 5 is a natural extension from the previous chapter, detailing the design of the

research project and describes each of the complementary "show" (material-semiotic) and

"tell" (autoethnographic) methods within the broader *CNI* methodological framework.  This

chapter further outlines the setting, participants, and (re)visiting data protocols and processes

with new lenses, as well as detailed descriptions and procedures of each of the data collection,

analysis, and researcher reflexivity engaged in throughout each of the phases.  Ethical

considerations by way of procedural and relational ethics are discussed, followed by the study's

timeframe.

A version of the third manuscript (Chapter 6), *Using ANT sensibilities to experience a*

*more three-dimensional understanding of the needs of Gifted learners in public education,* has

been written for publication targeting the *Journal of Education Policy*.  The balance of this

manuscript focuses on the various material findings from the (re)visiting and (re)learning from

an earlier study (Gollan-Wills, 2014).  I further detail how *ANT* was used as a critical method that

helped to illuminate the various assemblages between human and non-human actors, follow

the various negotiations, and trace the translation of the most influential actors—the idea of

intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005)—and networks that are fundamentally responsible

for perpetuating and enabling this status quo phenomenon.  The manuscript discusses the

incredible durability (Law, 2009) of the actor-networks discovered in a public education system,

as well as the need for a fundamental shift in both infrastructure and philosophical

understanding of inclusive, regular classrooms.  It ends with a brief highlight of the various

*critical incidents* that have come to light from the material analyses that require additional

information for both content and context, and which are taken up through a series of

autoethnographic vignettes in the subsequent article.

A version of the fourth manuscript (Chapter 7), *Autoethnographic revelations: Enabling,*

*enacting, and living the effects of public policy,* has been written for publication in the targeted

journal, *The Qualitative Report*.  This manuscript is presented in the same conceptual

framework of the broader *Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI)* methodology of *construction*,

*deconstruction*, and *reconceptualisation*, beginning with a synopsis of the five (5)

autoethnographic vignettes that were used to *construct* the narratives.  The majority of the

article concentrates on the *deconstruction* of those narratives through critical reflection that

focuses on the participant-researcher's entanglements within the space of enacting and

enabling public policy, as well as living the effects of these educational system policies.  These

deconstructions are presented through a series of encompassing themes (Haberlin, 2016) that

showcase how the participant-researcher continued to enact public policy with every decision

and subscribe to dominant discourses and practices that perpetuated the very status quo being

investigated in this study.  Themes are further nested within the actual public policies that were

used and referred to within the autoethnographic vignettes for context in hopes of engaging

current policymakers in reflection and subsequent debate from these various entry points

(Neysmith et al., 2005).

Chapter 8 begins with a discussion of the original contributions of this research by way

of two (2) salient findings and offers insights into the significance of this study.  This chapter

responds to each of the guiding research questions and circles back to the problems identified

in an earlier manuscript (Chapter 2) and offers ways to reconceptualise those approaches as

informed by *this* study's findings.  Four (4) calls to action are offered for educational

stakeholders and policymakers to consider in order to disrupt the established status quo for

both programming and placement practices for our Gifted learners, which are further supported

by researchers who also call on education system leaders to ensure programs and placements

best serve the contemporary needs of high-ability pupils today.  Limitations of this study are

addressed, as are the various practical and theoretical implications for work within the

classroom and school level, system and governance levels, as well as the fields of Gifted

education and Disability Studies.  I end this chapter with various recommendations for future

research.

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# Chapter 2

## 2    Problematizing Our Approaches to Gifted Education: A Review of the Literature[2]

*"Implementing gifted education to maximize learning requires all stakeholders—including teachers, administrators, policy makers, parents, and students themselves—to rethink old assumptions about what it means to be gifted, how to identify and serve students who need gifted programming, what those programs are supposed to accomplish, and how to measure their success." (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 25)*

Despite 100 years of scholarly attention toward understanding the needs of high-ability learners, as well as measuring their potential (Pfeiffer, 2013; see also Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011; Ziegler, Stoeger, & Vialle, 2012), the field of Gifted education has, in many respects, changed much less than other fields during this century, such as cognitive psychology (Sternberg, 2012). Theories, paradigms, and methods are not so different from what they were 45 years ago (Sternberg, 2012). Certainly, things are not entirely the same, but we still hear the same debates about pull-out programs versus self-contained or separate classes for Gifted learners, enrichment versus acceleration, and single versus multiple indexes of intelligence (Sternberg, 2012, p. 208), and where Gifted learners continue to be identified by scores obtained on a single IQ test akin to the Terman (1925) studies last century. This paper takes issue with the robust stagnation of the field of Gifted education, as researchers continue to investigate the programmatic and placement needs, standardized assessment and identification practices, teacher education and preparedness, enrichment and acceleration, educational leadership and infrastructure, among others; yet we remain stagnant in our

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[2] A version of this chapter has been written for publication targeting the journal, *High Ability Studies.*

approaches to maximizing the learning potential (Dixson et al., 2021) of our high-ability pupils in public education today.  This review of the literature is intended to invite trouble into the Gifted education discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011) by problematizing our stagnant approaches and questioning *how* exactly we are meeting the contemporary needs of high-ability pupils in our schools?

A considerable number of studies have investigated the state of research on Gifted education over the last sixty years (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020), and this article presents a comprehensive review of the literature organized by the most common topics addressed in publications of Gifted education research around programming and placement. The scope of the literature presented in this article is within a thirty-year span (late-1980s to the present), as this is the timeframe in which I have been involved in Gifted education as a former student enrolled in an enrichment withdrawal program in elementary school, as a system-level educator responsible for an entire secondary Gifted portfolio, and as a researcher whose body of work is focused on the intellectual accessibility of public education for secondary Gifted learners.  Selected literature focuses on established practices of how Giftedness is assessed and identified, scholars' earlier and more recent attempts at understanding the programmatic and placement needs of Gifted pupils, how teacher education and in-service development prepares our educators to support high-ability learners in the mixed-ability classroom, how differentiated instruction is understood and used to support Gifted learners, and how accountability measures impact high-ability students in the age of neoliberal education with this pursuit of utilitarianism over excellence.

It is not enough to demonstrate that the field of Gifted education is saturated with a plethora of findings that take the form of critiques of programming and placement to merely answer *what* is happening, rather than providing a holistic understanding as to *why* we are continuing to subscribe to a recycling (Souto-Manning, 2014) of what Sayer (1992) calls "practically adequate" practices and discourses (see also Gable, 2014).  Instead, this article shares past and current practices and understandings that are largely in place in today's education systems, and then problematizes those approaches in hopes of engaging stakeholders and policymakers in reflection from these various entry points (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005).  The article ends with a call to action that demands we—as practitioners and stakeholders in public education—disrupt the contemporary state of Gifted education that is held captive by the status quo (Gallagher, 2015b), as well as offers suggestions for researchers in the field of Gifted education for more targeted methodological approaches that may give rise to a more complex, more three-dimensional way of understanding the *topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of this status quo phenomenon— the features, the different terrain, and the contours that show us exactly *how* this has continued to happen.  To answer *why* dominant discourses and practices of programming and placement options for secondary Gifted learners exist within the current educational system in Ontario, Canada, we must first understand *how* such discourses and practices have established dominance and compliance over time.

I acknowledge that some readers prefer person-first terminology (e.g. learners who are intellectually Gifted), whereas others prefer identity-first terminology (e.g. Gifted pupils).  Out

of respect for both perspectives, I use the person-first and identity-first terms interchangeably throughout this research (Dare, Nowicki, & Smith, 2019).

## 2.1 "The" Privileged Knowledge within the Field of Gifted Education

When revising or establishing new educational policy, it is commonplace for policymakers to draw on widely cited literature in the field as a form of *best* practice. In their recently published, 6-yearlong study of the fidelity of enrichment programs and their implementation in Singapore, Tan et al. (2020) find that even though schools and administrations were committed to restructuring and solving organizational problems with new policies, they relied on available and existing information and knowledge in the broader field to inform those policies, instead of developing a deeper understanding of their *own* high-ability students and *their* specific learning experiences and needs. As a researcher and practitioner in Ontario, Canada, it has also been perplexing to read so few published studies that include local and national research, as these local findings represent a population of learners that we serve in our schools today. Before we engage in the review and subsequent problematization of the selected literature, it is important to establish *what* we know about Gifted learners and *how* we have come to know that information by examining the production and dissemination of this official knowledge.

Sriraman (2012) examines the journal and publishing culture and the production of official knowledge (Apple, 2014) that is recycled (Souto-Manning, 2014) in scholarly journals. Sriraman (2012) draws on *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)* to "unravel the mechanics of the Knowledge industry" (p. 125) by providing insight into essential factors that interact with one

another to produce and display a piece of knowledge for publication. Outlining numerous

entities that interact within the journal and publishing culture, Sriraman (2012) uncovers the

inherent duality in citations between rhetoric (establish links between bodies of scholarship

and ideas in articles) and rewards (signal credit for those giants in the field). Further, he finds

that very often referees, editors, and other actants within the system "succumb to rewarding

the eminent, or already widely cited, and ignoring lesser-known scholars whose work may be

worthy of citing" (Sriraman, 2012, p. 124). Implications of such practices may lead to dogmatic

(mis)understandings of Gifted learners and Gifted needs that get reproduced and recycled

(Souto-Manning, 2014) through academia with decisions around bibliometric tools that may

"unfairly marginalize, diminish the scope of, and criticize the scholarship of others" (p. 126).

Sriraman problematizes the knowledge industry as regulating, curating, and producing an

"official" knowledge of the field of Gifted education that may not fully represent varying

approaches to understanding the needs of these high-ability pupils, and further questions the

process and decisions that result in why certain articles are included and cited more than

others.

Hernández-Torrano and Kuzhabekova (2020) conducted a bibliometric study of the

most influential journals publishing knowledge on Gifted education across a 60-year span

where they examined, mapped, and traced 5,515 records representing the work of 3,644

scholars from 54 different countries and regions. Results make visible *how* we know what we

know about high-ability learners and *where* the research we cite is most concentrated across

the globe. Findings indicate that the United States of America is the world leader in research

in Gifted education at 71% of all publications, and although Canada was the second-ranked

producer, it only accounted for 3.6% of all disseminated research pertaining to Gifted

education (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020, p. 142). In general, universities seem to

work in isolation in this field, collaborations—particularly international projects—do not

sustain over time, and the largest collaborative network between universities include only

United States universities that, together, comprise *The National Research Center on the Gifted*

*and Talented* (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020, p. 147). Likewise, Ziegler et al.

(2012) argue that research papers on Giftedness have not made it into the top mainstream

educational and psychological journals with high-impact factors, and that empirical articles on

Giftedness are very rarely quoted in those high-impact journals (p. 194). What is more, the

work of researchers specializing in Giftedness does not often contribute to the work of

researchers specializing in the study of expertise and innovations, yet these neighbouring

research fields are able to publish their papers in the educational and psychological journals

with the highest impact factors (Ziegler et al., 2012). Despite numerous scholars taking up the

needs of Gifted students, the hegemony of a few countries or regions (Hernández-Torrano &

Kuzhabekova, 2020) and fields of research (Ziegler et al., 2012) in the production of a

privileged knowledge suggests that the available knowledge may be partially limited and does

not fully represent the approaches to the social construction of Giftedness across the world (p.

153). For our purposes in Ontario, then, we must rethink what research we draw upon to

inform *our* practices and policies for high-ability pupils in *our* schools today.

## 2.2    Constructing and Identifying Giftedness

Giftedness is not something that has been discovered but rather invented (Borland,

2013). Akin to an opera singer, shortstop, or boss, "Gifted" is a constructed concept

(Gallagher, 1996) and "an invented way of categorizing children" (Pfeiffer, 2013, p. 89). Given that social constructs are human creations that reflect our attempts of making sense of our world (Borland, 2013, p. 74), this population of learners only came into existence in the earlier 20th Century when educators and psychologists felt an organizational principle was needed to make sense of observed phenomena, such as variance in scores on mental tests (Borland, 2013). Certainly, there have always been unusually clever, precocious, and academically able pupils, but until this construct came into being in the 1920s (Borland, 2013), there were no students labelled "Gifted." As a field, we have *socially* constructed and invented what it means to be Gifted and of high ability through our *social* interactions—our writing, talking, and our discourse (Borland, 1997, p. 7).

Throughout the last century, Gifted learners have been identified by scores obtained on IQ tests, and where most states in the United States of America still rely, almost exclusively, on this data for identification (Pfeiffer, 2013; see also Subotnik et al., 2011; Ziegler et al., 2012). Schmitt and Goebel (2015) argue that Giftedness is a highly complicated construct, as there is no universal or agreed upon definition or established criteria that is accessed globally. In the United States of America, for example, each state has their own individual definitions and where some states highlight performance, others emphasize potential (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015, p. 429). What is more, Winstanley (2006) raises the alarm on constructions of Giftedness when based on behaviour and compliance, particularly when identification practices are largely based on teacher nomination. When some high-ability children exhibit poor behaviours, which Winstanley (2006) argues often stems from boredom, those pupils are denied access to enrichment opportunities and are

excluded on the grounds that they do not fit the conventional image of 'good

behaviour' (which usually means unquestioning compliance).  Teachers' concern is

often for rewarding conventional behaviour and task completion rather than

encouraging less obviously talented pupils. (p. 23)

Indeed, the field of Gifted education is divided on even the most fundamental aspects of what

it means to be Gifted (Russell, 2018), as well as lacking consensus among researchers on how

best to capture Giftedness within a specific definition (Arrigoni & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2018;

Laine, Kuusisto, & Tirri, 2016; see also Ambrose, VanTassel-Baska, Coleman, & Cross, 2010;

Moon & Rosselli, 2000; Pfeiffer, 2002).

It is a common and easily understandable belief that because Gifted pupils are

identified by meeting some established criteria that outlines some standardized level of

achievement or range of aptitudes, that they are a homogeneous population when it comes to

intellectual needs.  Callahan and Hertberg-Davis (2013) remind us that like all students (and

human beings in general), identified Gifted students "still exist along continua of aptitudes and

achievement…in areas of interest and passion, in preferred learning modes, and in the area of

social and emotional development" (p. 329; see also Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2015, p. 364;

Tan et al., 2020, p. 131).  When critically examining this *social* construction of a relatively small

group of learners with incredible variation, scholars are prompted to take up the identification

process itself as flawed given the identification inconsistencies.  Callahan, Renzulli, Delcourt,

and Hertberg-Davis (2013) caution that a single "snapshot-in-time" process or method such as

teacher nomination or testing alone that qualifies a student for further screening, as many

potentially Gifted students will be missed.  Further, Callahan et al. (2013) take issue with

employing only one type of screener or test—the ultimate gatekeeper (p. 87)—that is used for the purposes of meeting district criteria and thus identifying as exceptional, as it communicates that Giftedness can be captured only once and that this "ticket" (p. 87) or "pass" (Schultz, 2018, p. 192) has no expiry date.  From the field of clinical psychology, Pfeiffer (2013) also takes issue with this "open-ended ticket" (p. 190) for a student to be labeled and thus receive specialized programs and services without following-up on the students' needs over time, as no other classification bestowed upon a student carries that much advantage and unrestricted beliefs including Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, varsity athletic teams, or the orchestra (p. 192).

Finn and Wright (2015) investigate how well the United States education system has traditionally served the needs of high-ability pupils and how well they compare academically to same-aged students globally, as well as how schools around the world educate their Gifted pupils.  They first and foremost problematize how the field of Gifted education is "fraught with definitional challenges" (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 5) and make visible how loose and varied definitions of Giftedness and methods for supporting Giftedness are (see also Arrigoni & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2018).  The eligibility criteria to meet the designation of Giftedness is the sole responsibility of—and is completely constructed by—individual boards of education (Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Finn & Wright, 2015).  School boards and districts do not have access to unlimited funds, but when such definitions and designation criteria are subject to the interpretation of local boards, we must question whether these policymakers can remain committed to developing a representative, working definition and eligibility criteria that captures high-ability students' potential and remain unbiased given the fiscal influence of

annual funding they receive to program for all learners with special education needs.  Within

the policy arena, constructions of what it means to be Gifted—by way of individual school

district definitions—are inextricably tied to resource allocation (VanTassel-Baska, 2006).  To

demonstrate how the policy process for the identification and definition of Gifted learners

evolved at a local system by way of a Task Force, Clarenbach and Eckert (2013) use the

following illustrative conversation:

> Ms. Swiet, a first grade teacher spoke up.  "Wow! That's a lot broader than I would
>
> have expected.  I bet over half of my class could be identified as gifted if we used this
>
> definition.  How is this supposed to help us?"

> Dr. Perez began nodding in agreement as she considered all of the testing that would
>
> result if this were the only vision of giftedness to guide educational decisions […]

> "With the variety of student populations across this state, I can see why legislators
>
> might want to give school districts more freedom with this definition, but placement
>
> decisions for new students can be extremely difficult when definitions are not uniform"
>
> […]

> Ms. Swiet, with an eye on the clock, chimed in.  "I wish that was an issue we could
>
> tackle in this Task Force, but I know that's a larger conversation with many
>
> stakeholders.  I'd like to get back to the task at hand, if we could." […]

> Mr. Washington joined in.  "Speaking of sharing our final definition, let's see what
>
> we've got so far.  As I look at all of these definitions we've collected, it seems like the

closer we get to working with actual students, the policy definition becomes more specific and purposeful.  What I'm saying is that as great as it would be to identify in every conceivable talent area like leadership or kinesthetic learners, we don't have the resources or support to do that well." (pp. 27-29)

This vignette illustrates Schmitt and Goebel's (2015) earlier argument that Giftedness is a "rather complicated construct" (p. 429), as the puzzle pieces that each district is working with are more likely from a mixed bag of pieces that often include pieces (or knowledge and practices from other districts) that got mixed in, are of different sizes, and are not likely to fit together uniformly for all districts to see clearly.  This further illustrates Finn and Wright's (2015) concern with how many students might or might not be identified for Gifted programs and services based on *how* those puzzle pieces go together, as the definitions are loose, the screening processes are problematic, and the policy mandates to serve those who make it through the screening are iffy at best (p. 54).

### 2.2.1  *Problem 1: Our Established Practices and Understandings of High-Ability Potential Have Not Evolved*

The concept of Giftedness must evolve beyond the myth—albeit hegemonic understanding—that high IQ is equated with Giftedness (Borland, 2009), and where the concept of learning has become synonymous with academic development and achievement (Cavilla, 2019).  Over two decades ago, Borland (1997) wrote about his new thinking around assessment: "the field of gifted education is beginning to warm to the notion that we need to augment (not abandon) our use of standardized tests in assessing the needs of bright children" (p. 16).  When we continue to subscribe to the understanding that Giftedness can be captured

on a single test on a single day at a single moment in time, we perpetuate the view that high

ability is merely a score of aptitude.  It is not uncommon for educators to establish these

inflexible IQ cut-off scores for eligibility criteria or admission into Gifted programming, but it

can result in admitting absurdities (Borland, 2009) where a student with a score of 130 on an

IQ test meets criteria but a student with a score of 129 does not.  Owing to the standard error

of measurement, these scores are effectively equal (Borland, 2009, p. 237), further

problematizing our reliance on scores from standardized assessments to identify which

students are Gifted.

Borland (2009) asserts that few experts in the field believe this "giftedness-equals-high-

IQ myth" (p. 237), but his concern is not with the experts but with the educators who cling to

this fiction.  Pfeiffer (2013) echoes this concern that many educators *and* parents still hold this

belief that intelligence can be quantified, and when the score is high, it results in Giftedness (p.

89).  Pfeiffer (2013) further argues that "no single score can ever tell the whole story about

whether a student is gifted" (p. 91).  In his decades of work with high-ability pupils, he has

taken issue with the single-test-and-identify method, recommending and encouraging that

school psychologists view gifted assessment as an ongoing process, and that "it is no longer

acceptable to evaluate a student for gifted classification on only one occasion" (Foley-Nicpon

& Pfeiffer, 2011, p. 296).  Identification based on one measure and based solely on a quotient

is one of the causes of chronic and severe underrepresentation of children with lower

socioeconomic status and children from racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities in the United

States (Borland, 2009, p. 237).  Mun, Ezzani, and Lee's (2020) recent systematic literature

review of culturally relevant leadership in Gifted education calls for the disruption of the

ongoing minoritization of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students,

and find that these *social* constructs continue to pose systemic challenges that manifest in the

form of bias in district-wide policies and practices.  Two decades ago, Baldwin (2002) argued

that such IQ testing engenders systemic bias and prevents education workers and

policymakers from acknowledging the myriad of ways that recognize potential for growth in

CLED students when we continue to understand that a *singular* method in a *snapshot* of time

is the *only* method to capture high-ability potential.  According to Mun et al. (2020), the most

glaring gap in their research was the scarcity of empirical studies in culturally relevant

education leaders and administrators of Gifted education and their role in shaping,

implementing, and fostering policies that improve the identification and services for CLED

Gifted students (p. 134).  There is a need for increased policy research at the state or

provincial and local or district levels (Plucker, Makel, Matthews, Peters, & Rambo-Hernandez,

2017; Subotnik, Stoeger, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2017), as well as the need to critically examine

the beliefs, attitudes, and skills of Gifted program administrators and school leaders (Mun et

al., 2020).

In their highly comprehensive and pivotal monograph (Ziegler et al., 2012), Subotnik et

al. (2011) review a century of research in the field of Gifted education and provide a proposed

direction forward that rethinks our existing approaches to both identifying and defining

Giftedness to focus on a more representative understanding of high-ability potential and

learning rather than traits and characteristics.  Borland (1997) cautioned twenty-five years ago

that we had found ourselves at an impasse in Gifted education *then* and needed to rethink our

approach: "I think that our primary task is either to construct the most educationally

rewarding and equitable concept of giftedness we can or to find a way to move beyond the construct altogether" (p. 18).  In his seemingly radical position at the time on Gifted education *without* Gifted children, Borland (2005) identified the problems with subscribing to a snapshot model of a single assessment on a specific day in time when our students are elementary-aged children.  He argues that high(er) scores—all dependent on the district's eligibility and cut-off criteria—subsequently result in the notoriously infinite label of Giftedness where we assume they have the same needs as other identified Gifted learners and move them forward through a lockstep process of being placed in the regular classroom and receive monolithic, outside, pull-out programming for the remaining years of public education.  Instead, he advocates for abandoning the label of Gifted altogether, as it has led to a situation where the field of Gifted education is largely ineffective, of questioning validity, and results in a misuse of resources (Borland, 2005) that are a stopgap or band aid (Russell, 2018).  He does remain hopeful for the pedagogical shift toward highly individualized instruction and differentiated curricula.

## 2.3   Programming and Placement of Gifted Learners

Scholars have taken up the programmatic and placement needs of Gifted students in public education for decades.  What surfaces are often numerous critiques that denounce current programs and practices that leave students in the mainstreamed classroom with age-appropriate, but not necessarily like-minded, peers who must wait to learn (Coleman, 2010).  Various recommendations for greater autonomy, greater resources for enriched programs and self-contained placements, and greater attention paid to these high-ability learners exist.  However, dominant discourses, practices, and programming for and about Gifted students continue to remain in effect, whereby remediation and closing the achievement gap (Reis &

Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006) trumps individualized programming and placement for

learning needs that fall outside the widely accepted understanding of *needs* as impairments or

*deficits* (Smith, 2006; see also Reis & Renzulli, 2010) as they relate to academic achievement.

Literature on programs for and needs of Gifted learners demonstrate that regular classroom

teachers are unable to meet the needs of the Gifted for two main reasons: the lack of

awareness of how to program for Gifted learners in a mixed ability class (Loveless, Farkas, &

Duffett, 2008; see also Delisle & Lewis, 2003; Leroux, 1989; Reis & Renzulli, 2004, 2010;

Robinson & Puk, 1989; Subotnik et al., 2011), and the struggle to differentiate for all learners

in the same space that range in abilities (Loveless et al., 2008; see also Davis, 2006; Mills,

Ablard, & Gustin, 1994; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2011; Subotnik et al., 2008; Vaughn et al.,

1991; Winebrenner, 2000).

Findings and recommendations on Gifted education at the elementary panel are

plentiful with few studies focused on secondary students.  Kim (2016) conducted a meta-

analysis of the effects of enrichment programs on Gifted students' achievement and social-

emotional development in both the United States and internationally.  She examined various

studies between the years of 1985 and 2014 but found that only one study out of the 26

investigated included a high school population of learners.  Kim (2016) found that many pupils

who are Gifted do take college-level courses through Advanced Placement (AP) or other

enriched classes as their enrichment, and few studies have been conducted at the secondary

panel to assess how this form of programming impacts their academic achievement (p. 112).

What is more, the studies that exist focus on types of programs rather than critically examining

their effects on learning (Kim, 2016) and tend to employ greater quantitative methods in

general (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Vaughn et al., 1991; see also Assouline & Colangelo 2006; Kulik, 1992; Loveless et al., 2008; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995).  In their 25-year synthesis of research on the lived experiences of being Gifted in school, Coleman, Micko, and Cross (2015) note that research concerning the personal experiences of children who are Gifted have been, and continue to be, infrequent in contemporary research (p. 359).  Indeed, few studies employ qualitative methodologies and methods such as critical narrative inquiry to learn from the rich experiences of Gifted learners, teachers of the Gifted, and educational stakeholders who are invested in the welfare and success of exceptional learners in the current public education system.  This gap illustrates a need to create a space for learners and educators to share their experiences.

To critically investigate this ongoing concern for high-ability pupils in the regular, mixed-ability classroom, we must first understand what the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings are that our practices continue to draw upon that result in a learning environment that is not conducive to maximizing their learning potential (Dixson et al., 2021). In Goodowens and Cannaday's (2018) case study research on homeschooling, unschooling, and parent perceptions of programming in public school systems for profoundly Gifted pupils, one participant, Eve, shared:

> "A lion is terrible at building nests.  It seems ridiculous to point out such an obvious
> fact.  We accept that a lion is excellent at being a lion.  Children, on the other hand, are
> not given the same dignity.  We corral them through a system where every child is
> exposed to the same content at the same pace and the same age." (p. 179)

Education systems subscribe to *developmentalism* when their placement policies group

children by chronological age.  According to Gross (2006), this grouping practice was a

relatively modern administrative procedure introduced within the last 100 years, as before this

time, children progressed through school based on mastery of the work of different grade

levels.  Today, however, we continue this chronological grouping because it is administratively

convenient and we are accustomed to doing this, but in doing so, we "wrongly assume that

chronological age is an accurate index of academic development" (Gross, 2006, p. 123).  To

illustrate the concept of developmentalism, Gallagher (2015a) references the "tall poppies"

approach of Chinese Communism, which is based on the principle that poppies which grow

more rapidly than others need to be lopped off so that there is a more even development of

the flowers in the field (p. 68).  Subotnik et al. (2011) remind us that the needs of high-ability

pupils and high achievers have not always gone ignored, as when the Soviet Union launched

the Sputnik satellite over 60 years ago and it took the world by storm, there was an

investment in early-college entrance for talented students, as evidenced in the Evaluation

Report Number 2 from the Fund for the Advancement of Education (1957):

> There are those who argue that it is psychologically unsound and politically
>
> undemocratic for one child to proceed faster or to have richer academic diet than
>
> another…But what is too often ignored is the greatest risk of all—the risk of adhering
>
> stubbornly to a clearly imperfect set of practices that are frustrating the development
>
> of young talent at a time in history when this nation urgently needs to develop its
>
> human resources to the fullest. (p. vii)

Certainly, for a moment in time the hegemonic practices in education, underpinned by developmentalist understanding, were suspended for political reasons, and there was a boom of innovation and scientific advancement in the United States of America (Tannenbaum, 1983).  An important lesson from this experience is that there is precedent for designing more flexible approaches to education, although there are, of course, additional operational, organizational, and fiscal considerations for education systems to move beyond the practice of age grouping and focus more on individualized educational pathways and approaches to learning.

The overwhelming majority of high-ability students are placed within the regular, mixed-ability classroom often under the guise of "inclusive" education, which draws on developmentalist understandings that all students in education systems must be grouped by chronological age.  Students have the right in the United States of America to learn within the *least* restrictive environment, which is often considered the inclusive classroom space (Moltzen 2006); however, for students with high-abilities, this regular, mixed-ability classroom is often the *most* restrictive environment (p. 42; see also Gross, 2006).  Schmitt and Goebel's (2015) focus group and interview data on secondary Gifted learners' experiences include comments about their time being wasted in class, claiming that they "spend only 30% of the day genuinely interested and engaged in classroom activities" (p. 441).  Findings from this study show that high-ability pupils enjoy active participation (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015, p. 442; see also Manasawala & Desai, 2019), value their time and do not want their time squandered by frivolous or off-task activities; they grow frustrated when other peers do not take education as seriously as they do; they enjoy learning concepts and skills that are practical and

worthwhile and will become frustrated when they do not see a broader point or real-world connection (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015, p. 442).  The data also shows that high-ability learners do not want to spend their entire day performing stressful, high-intensity activities that classroom teachers may perceive as higher-grade or leveled up work given to them ad hoc.  Rather, they long for their teachers to listen to their opinions and need time with intellectual peers, as "they increase the overall academic atmosphere and rigor of the classroom and likely exhibit a higher maturity level" (Schmitt & Goebell, 2015, p. 442).

Scholars observing academic diversity in the regular classrooms have found that in the average United States public education classroom, academic abilities can span between five (Freedberg, Bondie, Zusho, & Allison, 2019; Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006; Latz, Speirs Neumeister, Adams, & Pierce, 2009) and seven grade levels (Rambo-Hernandez, Makel, Peters, & Plucker, 2020).  Likewise, in Australia, the learning range in these mixed-ability classrooms can spread across five or six years (Ireland, Bowles, Brindle, & Nikakis, 2020; Masters, 2015).  Coleman (2011) summarizes Gifted students' experiences in typical school settings as "advanced academic development clashing with uninteresting, undemanding and slow-moving curriculum" (p. 382).  Coleman et al. (2015) find that the school and learning environments greatly influence the child's perception and feeling of acceptance, and when "gifted children encounter a place where chronological age, not competency, determines educational opportunity, and the group, not the individual, is the focus" (p. 372), the outcome is that high-ability pupils accept that their needs are not a priority, and where we see this phenomenon of "instructional waiting" in class when new content or processes are presented (p. 367).  Likewise, Schultz's (2018) research on recognizing the potential of outliers—those profoundly

Gifted pupils—show that the learner needs lie fallow, and given the profile of profoundly

exceptional children, is it is doubtful that the needs will be met in the mixed-ability classroom

that consists of same age—not necessarily same ability—peers unless prodded by parent

advocates or outside intervention (p. 192). When we look to the secondary panel, Gifted

adolescents have experienced years of this instruction that is one-size-fits-all, slow-paced, and

often inadequate in meeting their unique needs (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015), as many high-ability

children often enter classrooms with prior knowledge of advanced content for their age (Mills

et al., 1994). Scholars like Schmitt and Goebel (2015) caution that years of enduring un-ready

classroom environments may impact the motivation of curious learners resulting in boredom,

apathy, and disappointment in schooling because "it has long failed to challenge and interest

them" (p. 428).

Coleman et al.'s (2015) 25-year synthesis of studies focused on the lived experiences of

Gifted and talented children show that Gifted students are actually different from their

chronological-aged peers in two fundamentally different ways: ability and motivation. High-

ability pupils learn faster, understand more deeply, are more engaged in learning specific

content where they show interest, and exhibit uneven or asynchronous development

(Coleman, 2011; Coleman & Cross, 2005; Coleman et al., 2015). By middle and high school,

some high-ability learners report feeling isolated due to the mismatch between their abilities

and motivation and that of their surrounding environments (Coleman et al., 2015; Manasawala

& Desai, 2019). Given the asynchrony and developmental changes for Gifted adolescents, we

must cease talking about Gifted learners as a homogeneous population (Borland, 2005; Jacobs

& Eckert, 2017) and believing that a one-size-fits-all approach is effective: "A one-size-fits-all

curriculum makes no more sense to me than would a one-size-fits-all shoe" (Borland, 2005, p. 1). Jacobs and Eckert (2017) recommend that educational systems rethink their utilitarian approach to both the regular classroom *and* enrichment opportunities, welcome more individualized programming, and consider multiple ways to support their individual talent development.

As a response to high-ability student need, education systems often adopt some form of enrichment programming and placement alternatives showing compliance with special education programs and services. Moltzen (2006) finds that with a wide range of program and placement alternatives available, they can all really be reduced to three (3) approaches: segregation, acceleration, and inclusion. In many public education schools in North America and across the globe, they have a primary placement or approach, such as the regular classroom, and offer enrichment provisions that "tend to be more supplementary in nature" (Moltzen, 2006, p. 41). These withdrawal-based or pull-out enrichment programs have been the predominant method of delivering services, particularly in elementary schools, for many decades (Gubbins, 2013; see also Cox & Daniel, 1984; Gubbins et al., 2002; Schroth, 2008; Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). This programming phenomenon exists internationally, as investigated by Tan et al. (2020) on designing and implementing enrichment programs that generally exist outside of the regular classroom. This common pedagogical approach we see in Singapore, for example, is not unlike domestic approaches in Canada and the United States, where fostering creativity and developing talents among Gifted learners are offered through after-school enrichment programs. These programs are typically not part of the core curriculum but rather "add-ons" in nature where they are scheduled outside of curriculum

time, are relatively low stakes, continue to be fragmented, and are ad hoc in nature (Tan et al., 2020, p. 130).  Despite offering additional enrichment to foster these talents and creativity of high-ability pupils, their existence is based primarily on convenience.  It is the least disruptive to the core curriculum or regular classroom to schedule and organize out-of-class enrichment models as additional workshops that do not have to connect with the day-to-day instruction.  By positioning these after-school programs as exclusive to supporting high-ability development, they are attractive to parents and teachers (Tan et al., 2020).  However, findings show that this fragmented program lacked depth and breadth and resulted in one-off experiences that did not help Gifted pupils make much sense of their learning and did not contribute to nurturing their talents (Tan et al., 2020, p. 143).

Finn and Wright (2015), in their investigation on how well the United States education system has traditionally served the needs of high-ability pupils in comparison to how schools around the world educate their Gifted pupils, rightly question "what exactly are our children being identified for and selected into?" (p. 51).  Finn and Wright (2015) investigate program availability and access first in the United States.  According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the main source of United States educational data, Finn and Wright (2015) look specifically at Ohio in their Buckeye school system that shows only 1 in 5 children identified as Gifted are provided some sort of Gifted education, as state law only requires that identification numbers be counted, not that those children be served (p. 55).  To illustrate the seriousness of this situation where a population of pupils who have a *bona fide* exceptionality are not being provided with specialized programs and services, Finn and Wright

(2015) compare the situation to another population of students—also with *bona fide*

exceptionalities—who require accommodations to access their education:

> Imagine the uproar if we woke up to read that only one-fifth of children with
>
> disabilities were being furnished with "special education" by their school systems.  All
>
> hell would break loose.  Yet in the world of gifted education, the only pushback comes
>
> from a few parents and a couple of small advocacy organizations. (p. 55)

We observe through their data that education systems are failing to spread support equitably

across the entire population of pupils who have exceptionalities and who are entitled to

specialized programs and services.

One approach to both programming and placement that *is* highly effective for high-

ability pupils is acceleration (Colangelo, Assouline, & Marron, 2013; Dare et al., 2019; Kulik,

2004; Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, 2001; Lubinski, Benbow, Webb, & Bleske-Rechek,

2006; Rogers, 2010), for both individual subjects (content-based) and grades (grade-based)

(Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration [IRPA], National Association for Gifted

Children [NAGC], & The Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [CSDPG], 2009).

The goal of acceleration—which is akin to principles and features of Gifted education at its

core—is to provide appropriate and equitable education for high-ability students by matching

their level, pace, and needed complexity of the curriculum with individual levels of cognitive

and academic development (Colangelo et al., 2013, p. 164).  Acceleration, as a practice, existed

far before we began grouping children by chronological age for schooling (Gross, 2006).  To

accelerate was a common and accepted procedure that ensured academically able pupils were

presented with schoolwork that was timely and was appropriate to their readiness and

developmental needs (Gross, 2006, p. 123).  Even mid-20th Century, academic acceleration was

used as a simple, effective intervention that allowed high-ability pupils to progress through an

educational program at a rate faster or at an age younger than typical (Pressey, 1949), as the

philosophy of education was to develop mastery rather than stay with the same age and for a

fixed period of time.  Longitudinal studies of academic acceleration provide consistent,

reassuring, and optimistic findings about accelerated students' futures (Colangelo et al., 2013),

including Lubinski et al.'s (2001) ten-year follow-up of profoundly Gifted pupils and Lubinski et

al.'s (2006) tracking of pupils over two decades.  Findings show that over a longer term,

accelerated students attain advanced degrees, contribute professionally at rates that are well-

above societal baselines, as well as produce scholarly work (Lubinski et al., 2001, 2006).

Despite decades of evidence that acceleration is an effective strategy for Gifted

learners, the practice of implementing is infrequent in traditional education settings

(Colangelo et al., 2013).  Concerns about acceleration stem, in part, from various

misconceptions that are often sustained by developmentalist underpinnings that subscribe to

chronological-aged groupings to ensure age-appropriate development and readiness.

Misconceptions that acceleration refers exclusively to grade-based acceleration (Colangelo et

al., 2013) continues to fuel the debate that it is not developmentally appropriate for a student

to skip a grade, as it may be harmful to their social and emotional development (Dare et al.,

2019; Gross, 2006).  O'Reilly's (2006) synthesis of historical acceleration studies shows an

overall message that acceleration contributes to achievement (see Daurio, 1979; Gallagher,

1975; Kulik & Kulik, 1984), and in terms of social and emotional development, no harmful

effects were found (see Daurio, 1979; Hobson, 1963; Keys, 1938; Pressey, 1949).  Other

reasons for this less than enthusiastic take-up of acceleration interventions involve operational

items such as scheduling, timetabling, and other logistics (Jacobs & Eckert, 2017; Subotnik et

al., 2011; see also Gollan-Wills, 2022b).

*2.3.1   Problem 2: Fragmented, Ad Hoc, and Part-time Programming Solutions are Not Robust Enough to Genuinely Meet the Day-to-Day Needs of High-Ability Pupils*

Students who demonstrate high-ability potential and exceptional academic ability are

not appropriately challenged by their schools' curriculum (Loveless et al., 2008; National

Science Foundation, 2010; Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010; see also Colangelo et al., 2013).

Given contemporary classroom dynamics with learners of varying abilities and interests

together in one classroom space and the responsibility to provide sufficient programming for

all abilities (Loveless et al., 2008), enrichment opportunities and programming for most high-

ability students are understood to be above and *beyond* the regular curriculum and thus

typically not the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher but of external, "expert"

personnel and offered *outside* of that regular class.  The design, implementation, duration,

frequency, and quality of these programs vary significantly (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Subotnik &

Olszewski-Kubilius, 1997; Tan et al., 2020; see also Gollan-Wills, 2022a).  It is then incumbent

upon us to evaluate in what ways these programs foster creativity, individual talents, and

actually improve the educational experiences of these pupils rather than simply distracting

them from what the rest of their regular classroom peers are learning while they are removed

for ad hoc workshops that are typically disconnected from and lacking both scope and

sequence from their core curriculum (Borland, 2013; Tan et al., 2020).  We must problematize

how we respond to the needs of high-ability pupils when it comes to program and placement offerings, but to do so requires a two-pronged approach of not only rethinking the format or model of enrichment programming we provide, but in questioning why we need to have these programs in the first place if we are truly able to meet their needs in the regular, mixed-ability, inclusive classroom space.

First, should we currently subscribe to withdrawal-based methods of enrichment program delivery, we owe it to our students to evaluate their design, delivery, connection to core curriculum that is the primary credit attainment and thus graduation requirements for our secondary students, as well as how they improve their educational experiences in public education. Gubbins (2013) shares that program developers spend considerable time reflecting on questions of who the Gifted and talented students are in their respective school districts and what are the most effective screening methods and identification processes they should use (p. 176). However, she argues that once we know and understand the educational needs, we must then ask the most important two questions: "How do we serve them?" and "Where do we serve them?" (Gubbins, 2013, p. 176). Researchers maintain that pull-out programs or ability groupings *alone* yield few, if any, achievement differences, and that high-ability pupils must be provided with multiple and varied opportunities to engage with intellectual peers in accelerated content (Assouline, Blando, Croft, Baldus, & Colangelo, 2009; Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2010; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2009) and challenging curricular alternatives through independent studies and interest-based investigations (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). Moreover, it is important that these alternatives satisfy core curricular strands and are used in *place* of rather than on *top* of regular class work.

When taking up Gubbins' (2013) latter questions of where and how best to serve our pupils who are intellectually Gifted, we should further problematize what our enrichment programs are actually focusing on.  Pfeiffer (2013) recounts lessons he learned from observing Gifted children grow up and where not all were able to successfully navigate the difficult waters of adolescence into adult life (Pfeiffer, 2003).  He goes on to tease out the difference between *head* strength and *heart* strength (Pfeiffer, 2013), and that we must include both in our programming to help develop the entire child.  He argues that all Gifted students possess high levels of intelligence and an abundance of creativity (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010), which he calls *head* strengths (Pfeiffer, 2013, p. 93), and believes that some high-ability students are lacking in *heart* strengths, which include humility, persistence, self-discipline, kindness, enthusiasm, playfulness, and gratitude (Pfeiffer, 2013, pp. 93-94)—the things, Pfeiffer (2013) argues, we learn and foster in Kindergarten (Fulghum, 1988) but not in later years in formal schooling.

Secondly, Gifted pupils spend a fraction of their time in enrichment programming, specifically enrichment withdrawal or pull-out programs, with the bulk of their time spent within the regular, mixed-ability classroom (Borland, 2013).  Pull-out programs are not a panacea for meeting their diverse needs, but rather a partial solution (Gubbins et al., 2013) to this full-time problem (Cox et al., 1985; Hertberg-Davis, 2009) of not believing the needs of high-ability pupils ought to be met within the regular classroom (Gollan-Wills, 2022b).  As Schultz (2018) finds, many educators in both general and special education assume that Gifted pupils are a relatively homogeneous group of learners in both regular and self-contained classes, which leads to the assumption that educational treatments such as differentiated

instruction for "the" Gifted learner is relatively straightforward and simplistic, such as

providing enrichment tasks by way of additional work (p. 191). In the regular, mixed-ability

classroom, however, Schultz (2018) finds that classroom teachers also believe that offering

differentiation is unnecessary, as students can understand, complete, and achieve well with

the current work provided to the entire class, which results in them remaining focused on the

needs of the students who are not achieving (pp. 191-192). We must be mindful that we are

not subscribing to an "impoverished pedagogy" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 34) for our more capable

learners that can include anything from Xeroxed worksheets of advanced content and

problem-solving tasks to ad hoc enrichment activities that are completely disconnected from

the core curriculum and are meant to keep them busy—albeit disengaged from the rest of the

learning in the class.

The idea of seamlessly transforming our mixed-ability classrooms into inclusive

classrooms relies largely on the undertheorized assumption that this transformation happens

by virtue of physical location (Hibbert, 2012). According to Gross (2006), decisions regarding

placements have, all too often, been based on political expediency, administrative

convenience, and a concern of optics for equity that "confuses equal opportunity with equal

outcomes" (p. 134) rather than educational and psychological principles. Should inclusion

mean placing a high-ability pupil with other pupils who share his/her/their abilities and

interests and with differentiated curriculum in response to their learning needs and abilities—

even for a few hours each week—Gross (2006) asserts she would be an advocate of inclusion.

However, if inclusion means educating Gifted learners full-time in the mixed-ability classroom,

all the while ignoring what the research has shown us about the inadequacies of such a

placement for both learning and socialization, Gross (2006) argues, in the words of the late

Samuel Goldwyn, to "'Include me out!'" (p. 134).  For our regular classrooms to truly

transform, it requires educators and policymakers to engage in a sophisticated shift where *all*

student needs are to be programmed for and met *within* this classroom space.  We must

remind ourselves that we have done things differently in the past, including Sputnik times

where education responded to a global need and shifted its approach toward opportunities for

excellence.  This deep, philosophical shift in both infrastructure and understanding of the

varying needs extends *far* beyond geographical location and will require the ongoing

investment and support of educational systems. What is encouraging, however, is that

Coleman et al. (2015) find that when Gifted children meet schools oriented to their needs,

their lived experiences change: they no longer describe feelings of worry about being different,

respond more positively to classroom discussions and tasks that are differentiated, and

demonstrate a passion for learning (p. 373).

## 2.4   Teacher Preparedness for High-Ability Pupils in the Mixed-Ability Classroom: Is Differentiated Instruction the (Board) Answer?

Researchers continue to report that schools need school leaders and teachers who are

knowledgeable about educating high-ability learners, are aware of the intellectual strengths

and know how to provide appropriate programming to help these learners flourish, just like

schools need staff who have expertise in other targeted skills, special education, math

specialists, and others (Finn & Wright, 2015; Tan et al., 2020).  Despite this recognition, the

majority of veteran and novice in-service, as well as pre-service, teachers report knowing very

little about the unique learning needs of high-ability pupils and feeling ill prepared to support

them in the regular, mixed-ability classroom (Brigandi, Gilson, & Miller, 2019).  According to

Loveless et al.'s (2008) national teacher survey on the attitudes toward how academically

talented children fare in public schools today, two-thirds of surveyed teachers report that their

pre-service teacher preparation programs focused either very little or not at all on how to

program for and educate academically advanced students (p. 62).  Nearly six in ten (58%) in-

service educators surveyed said that they had no professional development over the past few

years that specifically focused on teaching high-ability students (Loveless et al., 2008, p. 62).

Brigandi et al.'s (2019) longitudinal case study research investigated the relationship between

participation in professional development and how it affected knowledge and practice of an

educator, revealing that professional development did increase the participating educator's

knowledge of Gifted education, attitude toward change, and repertoire of instructional

strategies, but did not alter her underlying beliefs or approach to Gifted education.  The

researchers note that time was the largest barrier to shifting both practice and pedagogy; time

to design differentiated content and activities, time to "get around to everybody in a timely

manner" (Brigandi et al., 2019, p. 384), and needing more time to go deeper and broader in

her own understanding.  Experiencing effective and informative professional learning has been

shown to improve practice, as Brigandi, Weiner, Siegle, Gubbins, and Little (2018) find that

teachers with advanced training in Gifted education pedagogy and practice are better able to

implement curriculum that is rigorous and intellectually challenging, as well as create

emotionally safe learning environments.

Fisher (2019) investigates the training, preparation, and confidence of secondary Art

teachers in working with high-ability visual artists.  Those educators interviewed felt as though

their ability to work effectively with these exceptional pupils was almost entirely because of

their own efforts in self-directed investigation (p. 28).  Respondents indicate that the need to

self-teach was a result of having no federal guidelines in place for goals, service delivery,

learning outcomes, or curricular materials.  What is more, 40% of respondents shared that

they had no pre-service training regarding the needs of high-ability pupils; 46% answered that

they did not receive any training while in-service; and only 1% of all respondents reported

working at a school where frequent professional development was offered regarding the

needs of high-ability visual artists (Fisher, 2019, p. 33).  Equally important to professional

development for skills and strategies to support high-ability pupils is prolonged professional

development and education that seeks to shift beliefs about supporting different abilities.

Arrigoni and Tatalović Vorkapić (2018) case study research from Croatia focuses on attitudes

toward Gifted students from perspective of pre-service teacher education students in

early/preschool and elementary.  Generally speaking, they find that there is a direct

correlation between pre-service teacher education and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) when

it comes to educating high-ability pupils.  Those respondents who took the elective course on

educating Gifted children expressed positive views toward Gifted learners, were

predominantly of the opinion that schools do not satisfy the needs of high-ability pupils,

regarded acceleration practices as positive, had a more critical attitude toward teachers who

believed that Gifted learners endangered their authority, and believed that "society should

invest in the gifted as it does for children with disabilities" (Arrigoni & Tatalović Vorkapić,

2018, p. 34).  Results from this study confirm that the education of pre-service teachers in

their university programs represents an important step toward developing ownership over the

needs of high-ability learners (Arrigoni & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2018, p. 25) and that well-trained teachers is a prerequisite for a quality educational system for Gifted children (p. 19). Also, looking outside of the classroom and into the arena of support and professional services, Foley-Nicpon and Pfeiffer (2011) find that few school psychology programs provide any exposure to issues that pertain to Gifted and high-ability pupils despite their clear presence in all populations and schools (p. 294).

Freedberg et al.'s (2019) research seeks to better understand how United States Math and Science teachers perceive and support the learning needs of high-ability learners in inclusive classrooms. When teachers were asked to describe strategies that were helpful for learners who were Gifted, over half mentioned differentiated instruction for increasing challenge and allowing them to pace their own learning. However, the data reveals that teachers faced several challenges in meeting those needs in their classrooms including trying to challenge the high-ability pupils without frustrating other students, and not being able to give adequate time and attention to their high-ability learners, as most of their time was devoted to students who were performing below grade-level and needing higher levels of support (Freedberg et al., 2019, p. 247). Researchers share that the greatest challenge teachers faced was in not experiencing their own differentiation as though they were a Gifted learner and completing the activities themselves, which was a direct result of not being able to find the time (Freedberg et al., 2019, p. 250; see also Brigandi et al., 2019) in the busyness of the classroom today. Moreover, Freedberg et al. (2019) find that regular, inclusive classroom teachers are overwhelmed with the range of academic diversity in their classrooms and report often leaving high-ability studies alone or finding ways for them to engage in independent

work or grouping them with other Gifted learners. Findings show that teacher participants are not always skilled at finding appropriate independent work and are "largely ignoring these students in favor of working with low-ability students" (Freedberg et al., 2019, p. 252). Goodowens and Cannaday (2018) discuss the lived experiences of a parent participant with a profoundly Gifted child who felt compelled to seek out alternative educational practices such as homeschooling and unschooling. Drawing upon Winstanley (2009), key reasons why families of Gifted children leave traditional schooling environments to homeschool include the lack of challenge, inflexible pace of curriculum, testing and assessment, children's dis-synchronous development, and socialization concerns. Frustrations were shared through rich, case study data illustrating how traditional schooling does not begin to meet the unique learning needs of profoundly Gifted pupils where the workload is disproportionate to their learning gains and is mere busywork that is designed to distract them from their boredom (Goodowens & Cannaday, 2018, p. 175). The parent participant, Eve, cautions that parents often do not recognize that they are advocating within the confines of a system that has structures, processes, and policies that are inflexible: "The solutions [schools provide] are based on traditional education construct…it's a gesticulation to bend the child through the small openings of a model that was never designed to address their needs" (p. 178).

When pondering whether the intellectual and social-emotional needs of Gifted pupils can be accommodated in the regular, mixed-ability classroom, Pyryt & Bosetti (2006) answer with an "unequivocal 'maybe'" (p. 141). In the province of Alberta, Canada, Giftedness is viewed as a multidimensional construct that recognizes potential or performance in areas of general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, artistic ability, social ability, musical

ability, kinesthetic ability, and creative thinking (Alberta Learning, 2000). School jurisdictions, however, have the choice of serving all types of Giftedness or only one, and where Giftedness here is largely defined as a score that is two standard deviations above the mean on an individually administered test of intelligence that results in roughly 2 students out of every 100, or in a school of 1000 students, approximately 20 students (Pyryt & Bosetti, 2006) would meet criteria for Giftedness. Consequently, with so few identified as Gifted to justify a special program or placement, the majority of high-ability learners are placed in regular, mixed-ability, inclusive classrooms. Researchers in the field of Gifted education find that with the heterogeneous, "remarkably diverse" (Tomlinson, 2013) population of high-ability pupils, differentiation is especially well-suited for unrecognized capacity (p. 297), but caution that it must be thoughtfully designed, implemented, and done well so as not to be treated like an add-on. Likewise, VanTassel-Baska (2021) agrees that differentiation can work very well in the regular classroom environment provided there is an optimal match between the level of the learner and the level of the curriculum (p. 45). Despite support and positive views from stakeholders for differentiation as an intervention and pedagogical approach, VanTassel-Baska (2019) finds that limited differentiation is being used in the regular classroom due to external, influential factors such as pacing guides that align with district curriculum in very specific ways. Specific to the United States of America, many districts withhold differentiated instruction in favour of these pacing guides, as they guarantee the focus on particular curricular topics at given times throughout the year opposed to alternative materials and methods that are difficult to execute because they are not aligned to the standards in the same way as the district-adopted pacing guides (VanTassel-Baska, 2019, p. 166).

*2.4.1   Problem 3: Differentiated Instruction and Assessment Can Work for Gifted Learners and*
*Classroom Teachers, But Not Under the Current Conditions of How We "Do School"*

Here we problematize how education systems download the responsibility of

programming for high-ability learners without investing in our regular classroom teachers or

rethinking organizational items such as class size, additional personnel support, or robust

professional learning—all of which impact teachers' ability to provided individualized

programming.  Differentiated instruction (DI) is one of the hottest reforms on the planet (Finn

& Wright, 2015, p. 62).  Taken at face value, DI is hard to argue with (Hertberg-Davis, 2009), as

it is a holistic approach to educating that many stakeholders can get behind.  It also satisfies

two bureaucratic purposes: marketing and cost-savings.  DI communicates an incredibly strong

and convincing message for providing challenging and appropriate curriculum that fosters

optimal growth, which garners broad support of the educational communities and districts

served (Mun et al., 2020).  Districts also enjoy the cost-saving measures by cutting back on

additional Gifted programs in favour of mandating DI in the regular classroom (Hertberg-Davis,

2009).  Finn and Wright (2015) argue that it is the teachers who are tasked with tailoring their

instruction so that administrators and policymakers can "declare with straight faces—and

perhaps authentic conviction—that their classrooms are diverse *and* inclusive and that every

child's singular education needs are being satisfactorily met" (p. 63).  The reality is that the

way we currently "do school" with large class sizes and ranges of academic abilities spanning

five (Freedberg et al., 2019; Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006; Latz et al., 2009) to seven grade

levels (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2020) in a single class, makes it incredibly challenging for our

already stretched classroom teachers to provide individual programming and differentiated

instruction for all pupils while feeling the pressure of pass rates, class averages, and

standardized tests that ultimately shape the day-to-day curriculum (Hertberg-Davis, 2009).

The broader question in this shift to inclusive classrooms built on pillars of differentiated

instruction and assessment is whether reliance on *individual* teachers to meet all pupils'

educational needs is robust enough "to bear the enormous policy and professional weight

that's being placed on it today, particularly for the high-ability pupils"? (Finn & Wright, 2015,

p. 66).

It is not enough for administrators and policymakers to declare that mixed-ability,

inclusive, differentiated classrooms are *policy*; as according to Borland (2013), they must

provide the support, resources, and possess the patience that is required for this paradigm

shift of differentiation to become *practice* (pp. 73-74).  Russell (2018) finds in his research on

high school teachers' perceptions of Giftedness and Gifted education that what is noticeably

absent in the field are studies that focus on the educational leaders and administrators,

specifically what their knowledge of Giftedness is and how they effectively model, contribute,

and share expertise with those at the classroom level (p. 295).  It is incumbent upon districts to

evaluate their existing programs (Jacobs & Eckert, 2017; VanTassel-Baska, 2015), whether it be

differentiation or enrichment withdrawal, as programming must reflect and represent the

current needs and interests of the students who are receiving the programming in *today's*

contemporary classrooms.

The first step toward investing in our classroom teachers, should differentiation be the

goal, is to understand the dynamics of their mixed-ability, inclusive classrooms where Finn and

Wright (2015) argue that teaching is akin to—although in no way are the scholars suggesting

that students are ill and in need of treatment, but rather using this analogy for comparison in

job dynamics—the job of

> a physician with two dozen patients who manifest different symptoms, differing
>
> degrees of illness, and, upon further examination, many different ailments.  It's unlikely
>
> that any one doctor can do a great job with all of them, especially when strapped for
>
> time and resources.  He's apt to engage in a form of triage, focusing mainly on those he
>
> can readily help and giving less attention to the mildly ill.  The sickest may be sent to
>
> the hospital and others referred to appropriate specialists. (p. 65)

Hertberg-Davis (2009) finds that teachers in heterogeneous classrooms tend not to include

high-ability learners in the group of pupils they believe need differentiation; when they do

provide differentiation, they tend to focus their efforts on the pupils who are struggling to

access the curriculum and achieve, believing that the Gifted pupils already understand the

material and do not need such interventions (p. 252; see also Brighton, Hertberg, Callahan,

Tomlinson & Moon, 2005).  Ireland et al. (2020) investigate the potential of curriculum

differentiation—or differentiated instruction—to extend the learning of Gifted pupils in

secondary mixed-ability Sciences classrooms in Australia, finding that teachers need stronger

educational support regarding designing and implementing Gifted education.  Findings also

suggest that even though curriculum differentiation is an excellent pedagogical tool, it may not

be as effective in providing extension for high-ability students, suggesting that acceleration,

whole-school Gifted programming approaches to supplement beyond the in-class

differentiation, and more robust teacher extension training be mandatory to support these

learners (Ireland et al., 2020, pp. 55-56).

VanTassel-Baska (2021) echoes the multidimensional approach and suggests that teaching Gifted pupils should involve a mosaic of different instructional strategies, and that to do differentiation well, one must consider variety, effective questioning, and real-world or problem-based scenarios (p. 45). Likewise, Finn and Wright (2015) believe that differentiation can work for many children but that it must be done with finesse, be accompanied by thoughtful planning, include the versatile use of diverse instructional materials, be supported by districts and administrators to better prepare our teachers, and include the sophisticated and frequent review of students' performance (p. 64). Although Finn and Wright (2015) do not share the belief that professional development can "cure every education ill" (p. 232), they do strongly recommend that all stakeholders get involved, including policymakers, and model this investment in our Gifted learners. Hertberg-Davis (2009) supports the need for thoughtful and ongoing professional development to make differentiation a viable option for high-ability learners, as most classroom teachers are expected to differentiate instruction and assessment without receiving adequate training or support beyond a single-day, "drive-by" workshop (p. 252). Likewise, it is necessary to continue thoughtful reflection into the service model for this group of pupils, as Jacob and Eckert (2017) suggest that it be an integrated effort across school personnel rather than the responsibility of only a few (p. 112): "high-quality programs must provide ongoing, coordinated training and professional growth opportunities for all members of a secondary school staff" (p. 113) who should share responsibility for ensuring an appropriate level of academic challenge and support for a population of learners who are in our care.

## 2.5 Influences of Accountability: The Neoliberal Pursuit of Utilitarianism over Excellence in Public Education

Widely endorsed and accepted practices of high-stakes testing in the United States of America under the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act (2002) and the standardized assessments for literacy and numeracy under the *Education Quality and Accountability Office* (EQAO) in Ontario, Canada, tie the hands of educators and administrators through the threat of sanctions for non-compliance and public scrutiny for poor performance (Delisle, 2014; Fuhrman, Goertz, & Duffy, 2003; Pyryt & Bosetti, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Accountability measures and this utilitarian or greatest-good-for-the-majority phenomenon of teaching to the middle—or level 3 in Ontario which "represents the provincial standard for achievement" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 16)—is perpetuated in education by mistakenly equating mastery in learning with numerical grades.

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* (2002) places a focus on minimum competency with the goal of raising achievement levels to a basic level of educational achievement for lower performing pupils to shrink achievement gaps (Rutowski, Rutowski, & Plucker, 2012). Further, it demands increased accountability and requires school districts to focus more on struggling performance levels and academic proficiency (Gallagher, 2004; Gentry, 2006; Hodges, 2018), which has led to more negative implications for Gifted education programs and services (Hodges & Lamb, 2019). Gifted education scholars have predicted that this end result of the NCLB would be detrimental to learning outcomes of Gifted pupils (Gallagher, 2004; Gentry, 2006; Kaplan, 2004; Mendoza, 2006). Preparation for standardized, high-stakes testing has rendered the regular, mixed-ability classroom even less hospitable than it was

previously, as teachers are compelled to concentrate their efforts on the preparedness and

achievement of lower performing students, causing them to resort to drill-and-kill techniques

over more student-centered approaches (Hertberg-Davis, 2009).  These test scores are deeply

connected to funding and allocation of resources and can even result in governmental

sanctions that increase in severity upon successive failures.  According to the U.S. Department

of Education (2002), should a school fail to meet the adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two

consecutive years, students in that district are given permission to transfer to other schools,

and should this go to five years, schools can face closures.  At the district level, should schools

not make their AYP, federal funds can be withheld, and administration is left scrambling to re-

evaluate how resources and personnel will be allocated across their entire district.  This

legislation thus communicates that entire districts will face consequences when students do

not perform adequately on those tests (Hodges & Lamb, 2019).  In their national survey of

teachers in the United States of America, Loveless et al. (2008) found that the enactment of

the NCLB caused administrators and educators across the nation to completely shift focus, as

81% of teachers surveyed reported they were more likely to attend to the needs of lower-

achieving students than higher-ability (p. 4): "In short, the needs of low-achieving students

became the focal point at the neglect of high-ability students" (Hodges & Lamb, 2019, p. 286).

These systems of accountability essentially create disincentives for states to support

Gifted education programs and services, as these programs are not aiding in the overall AYP

goals (Hodges & Lamb, 2019).  Since these programs are typically funded at the state and local

levels, it leaves school administration to make the difficult choices of resource allocation.

Pyryt and Bosetti (2006) find that school jurisdictions have reduced the amount of funding and

number of resources for more challenging and enriching material for Gifted students, and

Hodges and Lamb (2019) find that resource allocation tends to focus more on remediation

rather than enrichment to boost up those AYP scores. Hodges and Lamb (2019) recently

investigated historical data to find associations between changes in policies, funding, and

accountability stemming from the NCLB and provisions of services offered to pupils who are

identified as Gifted in Washington state. Findings tell an interesting story that has policy

implications. When accountability measures were enacted, the number of schools reporting

Gifted programming declined, and of those schools that continued to report on having

programming, the number of program options in those schools also declined (p. 295). Hodges

and Lamb (2019) also note that an existing relationship between increased accountability

measures and school districts changing their programming offerings, as it resulted in some

schools eliminating programming and others expanding by virtue of receiving or not receiving

sanctions. This suggests that programming options available to high-ability students are more

related to how their school as a whole is performing on state standardized testing rather than

the individual student needs (Hodges & Lamb, 2019, p. 297).

Often, yet incorrectly, referred to as the "asset" exceptionality, intellectually Gifted

learners are not typically viewed as having a *deficit* or impairment (Finn & Wright, 2015; Reis &

Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2006)—based on the deficit and academic achievement discourses—so

their needs do not require support to bring them *up* to the performance norm. According to

Winebrenner (1999), in the event that Gifted learners encounter difficulty, the assumption is

that they can overcome said obstacle or adversity with innate intellectual prowess. The field

of Social Work has recently taken up the Gifted and talented population in schools,

acknowledging their duty to provide counselling and service assistance, as the Gifted, like any

other vulnerable or marginalized group, "need advocates who can push the educational

establishment to remove barriers and expand access to appropriate educational

opportunities" (Chu & Myers, 2015, p. 45).  Gifted learners are not typically viewed as having a

disability or learning exceptionality (Reis & Renzulli, 2010) nor do they intuitively fall into the

category of vulnerable and socially diverse students who receive assistance from social

workers, but they *do* meet the standards of an oppressed identity group that is politically,

socially, and intellectually marginalized (Chu & Myers, 2015), and are thus in need of attention.

However, Gifted learners fail to perform *so* far outside the norm that their performance runs

the risk of endangering the reputations of educational institutions in the public eye.  They are

therefore not seen as a liability that are deserving of vocal crisis status; rather their situation is

deemed a mere "quiet crisis" (Chu & Myers, 2015, p. 43).  Gifted learners benefit the

education system yet fail to be recognized as an exceptional group of peoples deserving of

attention in public education.  Gifted programs have come under fire throughout history as

being costly, cultivating elitism (Loveless et al., 2008), and fostering the development of those

already at the ceiling (Subotnik et al., 2011).  As such, funding for enrichment—above the

regular curriculum—is often reallocated to serve the needs of those wishing to be closer to the

ceiling, as this is a more strategic decision by policymakers and stakeholders when considering

the *entire* student performance in the public eye.

Indeed, the accountability movement in public education is a significant barrier to

achieving appropriate education for intellectually Gifted learners (Pyryt & Bosetti, 2006) who

require learning accommodations in the form of cognitive stimulation to help them reach their

fullest potential (Delisle & Lewis, 2003; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Smith, 2011). In addition to

prepping students for a month prior to state-mandated testing, completing worksheets akin to

previously released versions of those tests, providing instruction on test-taking strategies

specific to such tests (Pyryt & Bosetti, 2006), and omitting curricular material not on

standardized tests from term work, Moon, Brighton, and Callahan (2003) find that instruction

in fine and performing arts, enrichment, and topics not covered in state-mandated testing

were omitted from the regular classroom. Loveless et al. (2008) also find that 73% of teachers

surveyed report that electives, humanities, and the arts are being shortchanged because

schools are putting greater focus on the basics (p. 52). What is more, Loveless et al. (2008)

find that more than seven in ten teachers agree that "too often, the brightest students are

bored and under-challenged in school—we're not giving them a sufficient chance to thrive" (p.

52), and over eight in ten teachers (81%) believe that advanced students need special

attention, as their talents will enable the nation to compete in a global economy (p. 57).

Neglecting or underserving groups of high-ability and high performing students has the

potential for negative, economic consequences long-term (Dillon, 2010; Rindermann &

Thompson, 2011; see also Rutowski et al., 2012).

### 2.5.1 *Problem 4: We Must Stop Using Achievement Standards or Proficiencies as the Only Barometer of Success to Guide Our Pedagogical Approaches in Public Education*

Finn and Wright (2015) urge lawmakers to stop settling for a measure of national

achievement that does not fully represent the learning and engagement of our youth in public

education. Instead, policymakers continue to enact their status quo practice of drawing a line

in the sand marked "proficiency" and then tying school accountability to how many kids can

get across that line (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 226).  Accountability measures based solely on

achievement are constraining mainstream classroom teachers and making it increasingly more

difficult to teach *beyond* the regular curriculum in greater depth and breadth.  Under duress

from these accountability goals and threats of performance sanctions (Schultz, 2018), the

learning of our Gifted pupils is often sacrificed in pursuit of the hegemonic, utilitarian mantra

of improving the majority.  Here we must problematize this hegemonic approach of educating

based on acceptable levels of proficiency and achievement in mainstreamed, public education,

as it is not about equity where every student is getting what they need.  In fact, accountability

discourses provide no incentive to challenge students who have met the limited expectations

of proficiency (Tomlinson, 2002).  Tan et al. (2020) find in their 6-year long study of the

intricacies of designing and implementing enrichment programs that even when school leaders

and teachers heed the calls to meet the educational needs of pupils who are Gifted through

school-based curriculum, the data shows that teachers generally need help to shift their

deeply engrained, pedagogical practices, as they tend to resist change due to the ongoing

pressures of high-stakes examinations (p. 136).  Tan et al. (2020) plead for schools to face the

reality that perfection in academic performance does not give rise to "lifelong, life-deep, and

life-wide learning" (p. 149).

The NCLB was not written or enacted with the goal of undermining Gifted education

and enrichment programming (Hodges & Lamb, 2019), but the unintended consequences of

this policy enactment have created a situation where districts, administrators, and educators

must choose between meeting the needs of one population of pupils over another.

Accordingly, we must problematize any practice and policy that demands we choose which

group of learners will receive these public goods (Stout, 2001) of resources, attention, programming, and support.  Researchers in the field of Gifted education are not advocating that educational resources be shifted away from pupils who are struggling to access curriculum or reaching targeted achievement levels, but instead are urging a "balance so that education is not a zero-sum game in which raising low performance comes at the cost of ignoring high performers (and vice versa)" (Rutowski et al., 2012, p. 164).  Further, Hodges and Lamb (2019) denounce such positions that remain satisfied with meeting an established achievement threshold rather than cultivating deep and rich learning, further demanding that policymakers decide whether the needs of children who are intellectually Gifted and talented are important to them and their establishments (p. 298).  Scholars call for supporting and re-focusing on our highest ability students beginning with rekindling the policy debate on how we can prize both excellence *and* equity and "strive ceaselessly to calibrate the balance" (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 225).  They further call for re-investing in a deeper understanding of Gifted pupils' needs so we may deliberately cultivate their talents (Subotnik et al., 2011), as well as amplifying the research agenda and strengthening our data systems so we can ensure our current policies and practices are working for the high-ability pupils (VanTassel-Baska, 2015) in our care.  This re-focus will require educational stakeholders to raise the educational ceiling while we lift the floor (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 225).

## 2.6    Stop Xeroxing: A Call to Disrupt the Contemporary (Status Quo) State of Gifted Education

*"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." (Maslow, 1966, p. 15)*

Scholars in Gifted education have continuously provided practitioners and policymakers with recommendations that maintain the use of curriculum enhancement or enrichment, differentiation, and fluid programming practices including subject-specific or full-grade acceleration will result in higher academic achievement for high-ability learners (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; see also Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Gavin, Casa, Adelson, Carroll, Sheffield, & Spinelli, 2007; Kulik, 1992; Tieso, 2002).  Likewise, Gifted learners who are able to find like-minded or intellectual peers through enrichment programs or appropriate placements generally feel less pressure to conform and report greater freedom to pursue their academic interests (Reis & Renzulli, 2004).  Assouline and Colangelo (2006) find that there is a direct relationship between unchallenging or inappropriate curricular content in elementary school and underachievement in middle or secondary school, suggesting that if such programming or placement practices in elementary are not addressed, underachievement, disengagement, and even feelings of apathy may manifest in secondary classrooms.  Patrick, Gentry, and Owen (2006) further caution that if identified Gifted students genuinely value learning, they may become turned off from school-based learning from perpetual rote tasks that are both disengaging and beneath their cognitive levels (Subotnik et al., 2011).  Indeed, such inappropriate hoop-jumping or busywork (Patrick et al., 2006) negatively impacts the academic performance of and motivation to learn for our highest-ability pupils.  Simply put, should we keep doing what we have always been doing with no plans of disrupting the largely

withdrawal-based model of programming or our beliefs of where their needs are positioned in our education systems (Gollan-Wills, 2022a), we will continue to stifle their talent development, deprioritize their learning, and waste their time (Winstanley, 2006).

Hegemonic programming and placement practices in publicly funded educational institutions in North America have indeed remained stagnant in the 21$^{st}$ Century (Gallagher, 2015b; see also Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Brown & Stambaugh, 2014; Gallagher, 2000). Equally unacceptable are the infrequent and limited placements for high-ability learners that are often part of a much larger discourse—specifically the scarcity of resources discourse—as specialized placements for Gifted learners are often determined on the basis of available space (Subotnik et al., 2011), resulting in decisions being made that were not about whether students meet established criteria but whether boards have space for them. As a result, it has become common practice for Gifted learners to have their cognitive stimulation needs met *outside* the regular classroom or through withdrawal programming (Loveless et al., 2008; Subotnik et al., 2011; see also Gollan-Wills, 2014, 2022a, 2022b) by itinerant staff or club leaders. This failure to recognize high-ability learning needs as *bona fide* needs (Finn & Wright, 2015) rather than additional requests can be traced back to this neoliberal educational agenda that is driven by the construct of achievement as a binary of winners and losers (Goodley, 2014) that quantifies learning—specifically with government-approved content (expectations) and performance (achievement) standards that materialize in numerical value (Ministry of Education, 2010). This dominant discourse in education regards intellectually Gifted learners as innate winners who can achieve academically without additional learning support (Finn & Wright, 2015; Smith, 2006; Subotnik et al., 2011; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006).

When achievement is constructed within discourses of accountability and *deficits*, it perpetuates the myth that Gifted learners will be "fine," as they possess intellectual prowess (Winebrenner, 1999) and will thus meet or exceed provincial or state standards of achievement without needed intervention. The lack of opportunity for Gifted students to learn and thus achieve beyond a universal standard for the grade level they are in continues to be justified through a utilitarian approach that remains laser-focused on pass rates and credit accumulation for the *entire* class of pupils.

Notably, Ontario, Canada, *has* established infrastructure to support—in theory—the needs of *all* exceptional pupils in publicly funded educational institutions throughout the province, where *all* students, including exceptional individuals, in Ontario schools:

> [R]equire consistent, challenging programs that will capture their interest and prepare them for a lifetime of learning. They require knowledge and skills that will help them compete in a global economy and allow them to lead lives of integrity and satisfaction, both as citizens and as individuals. (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 3)

However, akin to our southern neighbours in the United States of America, resources for such programs, services, and placements are the responsibility of *local* boards to allocate based on individual boards' needs. Herein lies the problem in Ontario, as although infrastructure exists, intellectually Gifted learners make up only 1-2% of the overall population (Finn & Wright, 2015). Within an accountability discourse, such a small population of learners who are thought to have *above* regular curricular needs are often deprioritized (Subotnik et al., 2011) when, by comparison, a larger group of learners have needs that are positioned as *deficit* that

require support to bring them *up* the norm: "as in the United States, there's plenty of interest in getting kids up to a standard but not much attention paid to those already above it" (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 199). Gallagher (2015) asks the same scholarly community *why* there is a muted response with America's "peace with the status quo" (p. 80) when study after study predict a "national disaster in one way or another if America ignores the education of its 'best and brightest'" (p. 80).

Discourses of accountability measures, constructs of achievement, scarcity of resources, and the fundamental belief that high-ability learners' needs are *beyond* the regular curriculum and *outside* of the classroom teacher's scope continue to be recycled (Souto-Manning, 2014) day after day and year after year through our policies, our established practices, and our actions that largely go unchecked. Similarly, when education system leaders continue to enact replicated policy on an annual basis, they reinforce collective belief systems around educational priorities and effectively nurture and engrain this understanding in their educators where it is more important to ensure maximized achievement rather than maximizing the learning of all pupils (Dixson et al., 2021). It is therefore incumbent upon educational stakeholders to pause and reflect on how we are currently serving our Gifted pupils in public education, then actively take up the decades of local, national, and international research recommendations so we may rethink our conceptions about what Gifted education could do (Borland, 2013) in our buildings, communities, and more globally. School leaders need the appetite to take more calculated risks in making real curriculum and programmatic change possible that reconfigures the existing working structures, models, and processes to promote deeper, more engaged learners at any achievement level (Tan et al.,

2020, p. 147).  Gallagher (2015) further identifies two necessary ingredients to promote

effective change that is lacking in contemporary educational systems: the will to act and the

mechanism to implement.  What is needed is a critical discursive approach to begin honest

and thoughtful reflection on our inequitable practices that sacrifice the learning of one

exceptional group for another in the name of equity, and further engage other stakeholders in

critical dialogue that pushes them beyond what *is* to envision what *could* be (Souto-Manning,

2014).

Despite a century of scholarly attention and research on the needs of intellectually

Gifted learners, the field of Gifted education is still porous and fragmented (Ambrose et al.,

2010), and as a whole has been criticized for producing piecemeal results (Lo & Porath, 2017).

Problems appear when Gifted education practices are not informed by theory and empirical

evidence (Dimitriadis, 2016), and research continues to highlight the gap between practices in

schools and the developments of Gifted research (Boyes, 2004; Cox et al., 1985; Freeman,

Raffan, & Warwick, 2010; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993; Westberg &

Daoust, 2003).  Our models of programming to meet those needs have become fixed,

unchanging, and are regarded as a "hodgepodge of activities" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012), yet

educators remain dogmatic in their beliefs that they are implementing the accepted model

established by their employers and respective districts (p. 169).  Research in the arena of

effective and thriving programming and placement is skimpy and inconclusive (Finn & Wright,

2015, p. 56), and the literature is still lacking empirical studies to provide guidance for both

policy and practice to *best* serve their heterogeneous, high-ability learning needs (Plucker &

Callahan, 2014; see also Kim, 2016).

This review of the literature intended to invite trouble into the Gifted education

discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011) by first taking stock of our historical and more recent

approaches to meeting the programmatic and placement needs of high-ability learners then

effectively problematizing those approaches for being antiquated, ineffective, not

representative, and incomplete.  Further, researchers continue to find that established

programming and placement practices rely on widely cited, existing information and

knowledge in the broader field (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020) rather than

drawing upon local data and developing deeper understandings of the high-ability students in

their own communities (Tan et al., 2020).  This paper has hopefully made clear that despite

this abundance of scholarly attention, recommendations, and critique, we as a field still do not

have a way to capture the hearts and minds of policymakers and help them engage in honest

reflection on *why* we keep subscribing to a status quo for Gifted learners.  Researchers in the

field of Gifted education may consider using more novel approaches with multiple, qualitative

methods to give rise to a more complex, more three-dimensional way of understanding the

*topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of this status quo phenomenon.  Drawing upon

material-semiotic sensibilities, specifically *Actor-Network Theory*, as a critical method could

help *show* the various influential actors that are present and involved in enacting this status

quo in an education system, as well as tracing their interactions, negotiations, and ways in

which these entities are able to exert force, change, and be changed by each other (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2010, 2012).  A precise, *socio*-material approach may make visible the *who*, *what*,

and *how* we find ourselves in this perpetual programming and placement impasse in public

education, which could encourage policymakers to pay attention to the influence of various

non-human agents (Burm, 2016) at work, such as publications, established practices, memoranda, staff meeting agendas, scheduling and timetabling, among others.  Material-semiotic methods are not often taken up in studies of Gifted education in the context of programming, placement, or at the secondary panel in general, and there is great enthusiasm for this approach that may make visible the various features, the different terrain, and the contours of the *topography* that show us exactly *how* this has continued to happen so we may engage in collective conversation about *why* we comply with these practices and beliefs over time if they are not genuinely meeting the needs of our high-ability pupils today.  A new approach may help us see the problem more clearly so we may rethink our conceptions about what Gifted education really *does* and what it *could* do (Borland, 2012).

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# Chapter 3

## 3    When Storying Becomes the Story: The Elephant in the Room[3]

*When there's an elephant in the room introduce him.*

*—Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture, 2008*

Contemporary classroom teachers have the monumental responsibility of not only

providing engaging lessons and activities for a variety of subject areas in the regular

classroom but authentically assessing student work, offering constructive feedback,

providing instruction to a wide range of students, remediating struggling learners, and

providing enrichment for above average ability students all in one space (Vaughn, Feldhusen,

& Asher, 1991).  Given contemporary classroom dynamics with learners of varying abilities

and interests together in one classroom space and the responsibility to provide sufficient

programming for all abilities (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008), enrichment opportunities

and programs for most above average ability students are largely understood to be above

and *beyond* the regular curriculum and thus typically offered *outside* of the regular class by

external, "expert" personnel.

Teachers believe that Gifted learners require a wide range of experiences that are

beyond the depth and breadth of the regular curriculum, are deserving of a greater focus on

individual talent development, and ought to receive authentic learning opportunities that are

often self-directed (Renzulli & Reis, 2008); however, they are struggling to differentiate for all

learners in their classes where the balance of their efforts are spent on supporting those

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[3] A version of this chapter has been written for publication targeting the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*.

learners who require remedial assistance (Loveless et al., 2008; see also Davis, 2006; Mills, Ablard, & Gustin, 1994; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2011; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2008; Vaughn et al., 1991; Winebrenner, 2000).  Likewise, in their extensive review of research in the field of Gifted education throughout the last century, Subotnik et al. (2011) found that teachers believed that they had a social responsibility to all students in the class, but would often begin with those who were most visibly disadvantaged and vulnerable, "those viewed as most likely to 'fall through the cracks' without special attention" (p. 8), where characteristics of "disadvantaged" and "vulnerable" are understood within a "satisfactory achievement" discourse only.  A contributing factor to this inequitable distribution of teacher resources and support is the inaccurate assumption of the "ceiling effect" (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 35), where Gifted pupils are not viewed as an educational priority because it is assumed that they are more capable than their mainstream peers of learning the regular curriculum under most conditions (Subotnik et al., 2011), and are at a perceived advantage because they often enter classrooms with prior knowledge of advanced content for their age (Mills et al., 1994).   When needs are framed *and* understood within a deficit discourse, the needs of high-ability pupils tend to be ignored as they are not perceived as urgent in a mixed ability classroom, thereby perpetuating a lack of programming for an entire population of exceptional pupils (Reis & Renzulli, 2010).  It follows that to better comprehend how it is that Gifted students have special *needs*, not just special *abilities* and *talents*, we must listen to their stories of experience in mainstream education today so we as educators in the 21st Century can best meet those individual learning needs, opposed to assuming they will be *just fine* because of their intellectual prowess (Winebrenner, 1999).

Acceleration and enrichment programs often satisfy the academic or *cognitive* needs of

Gifted students but are not designed to foster *affective* development, as students accelerate

in relative isolation.  In a quantitative study using questionnaires with numerical scales,

Marsh, Chessor, Craven, and Roche (1995) found that the majority of self-contained or

designated Gifted classes at the elementary panel have no substantial effects on students'

global self-esteem, which is strongly influenced by non-academic components such as social

peer relations.  Since 1977, Renzulli has argued the importance of supporting the Gifted child

holistically, fostering not only the academic abilities and individual talents, but motivation

and social-emotional development.  Specifically, he claims that psychological characteristics

including creativity, motivation, and task persistence are as important as intellectual and

academic abilities and ought to be cultivated in educational programs (Subotnik et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Subotnik et al. (2011) found that students who have had more well-rounded

development will stand out apart from their high-achieving peers who have not had their

affective skills fostered:

> Qualities such as the willingness to take strategic risks, the ability to cope with
>
> challenges and handle criticism, competitiveness, motivation, and task commitment
>
> will differentiate those students who move to increasingly higher levels of talent
>
> development from those who do not. (p. 40)

Effective programming must provide opportunities for high-ability learners to realize their

potential and emerge as confident, social, positive leaders and problem-solvers (Reis &

Renzulli, 2004).  Studies conducted on social-emotional development would certainly yield

new findings if investigated through narrative methods where "reality is shaped largely by

the way in which we perceive it, know it, interpret it and respond to it" (Shlasky & Alpert, as cited in Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 212). This study emphasized the need to hear from the voices of those participants who could provide rich context to their emotional well-being that may not be able to be quantified on a Likert scale of sorts, as well as including participants at the secondary panel who can speak to their growth from programming in the elementary panel.

This paper (re)examines the narrative findings from a research project that was undertaken to better understand newly implemented Gifted programming in a relatively large, local public school board through an exploration of the stories of experience from both secondary school staff and students (Gollan-Wills, 2014). As a participant-researcher in this study, I possessed a unique positionality that provided me with particular insight into experiences as both an educator and student, as I was a former student in an elementary enrichment program, as well as a current system-level educator who was responsible for the entire secondary Gifted program. At the time of the original study, findings made visible the varied needs of high-ability pupils in secondary education and provided the researcher with immediate action steps to refine the system Vision[4] for enrichment programming. However, having lived within and among that education system since the study was conducted, I have felt a tension with the data almost as though there is some unfinished business with the stories. What is more, this draw toward the data signals a need to (re)visit, to learn more,

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[4] A Secondary Gifted Vision for system-wide programming options was implemented during the 2012-2013 school year, one year before this study took place.

and to interrogate the very design and implementation of the programming Vision itself,

pondering how effective it is at meeting the *many* needs of the Gifted pupils we serve.

The balance of the paper will focus on salient findings from this study including various

stories that have emerged from the data and the relatively organic way in which the

analytical structure used to story the data came to *embody* that very story throughout the

process.  What emerged from the original analysis was a collection of stories of experience

from the participants that mirrored the moral of the parable, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*

(Saxe, 1873), providing us with great and long, overdue insight into Gifted programming

through experiences shared.  This insight included the need to shift our focus as researchers

in the field of Gifted education toward how instruction and assessment are differentiated

*within* the regular, mainstreamed classroom opposed to evaluating the design and

implementation of *outside* enrichment programming.  Selected findings are taken up and

(re)examined through a temporal lens, drawing our attention to the *elephant in the room*

and questioning *why* we continue to position the needs of Gifted pupils as *beyond* or *outside*

the regular curriculum or classroom teacher's responsibility through the creation and

promotion of withdrawal-based enrichment programming as the *primary* means of meeting

their needs?  This paper closes with a discussion that problematizes Gifted education

(Borland, 2013), highlights the many implications that arose out of this study, and addresses

the need for further research that employs greater complexity in method to make visible a

more three-dimensional way of understanding Gifted programming and placement in public

education systems, which has typically been researched and understood in more two-

dimensional ways.

## 3.1 Methods

*3.1.1 Methodology*

This constructivist interpretive narrative inquiry study was designed to gather the voices of secondary Gifted students and teachers who implement their programming to learn from their experiences in not only enrichment programming throughout their mainstream educational career, but with the initiatives that were introduced in their 2012-2013 school year. The purpose of this study was to inform and improve secondary Gifted programming by gathering the stories of experience of those we program for, reflecting on those experiences in the programming, and providing opportunities and initiatives in response to their articulated needs and interests. It must be noted that even with the best intentions put forth, this Vision that was developed and implemented into the secondary schools was solely crafted with the voices of adults—specifically educators—so this study was designed to include those rich and contextual narratives from the students themselves who provided valuable insight into the needs of today's Gifted adolescents.

Narrative methods suggests that we understand ourselves and the world around us by way of interpreting processes and sharing our narratives of experiences (Spector-Mersel, 2010). With the goals of this study rooted in understanding personal experiences to achieve "progressive collaborative refinement" (Goldszmidt, Dornan, & Lingard, 2014) of the program offerings, this narrative inquiry provided me with a way to learn about those experiences of individuals in relational ways (Caine, 2010) through their stories. As Spector-Mersel (2010) explains, if social reality is a narrative reality, then it follows that narratives are the most natural channel for studying it on its many levels such as the personal and the collective.

Since experience happens narratively and individuals live "storied lives on storied landscapes" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 24), a narrative method was the best fit for the purpose of this study. A narrative approach gave participants the opportunity to share their rich, individual experiences in story-form about the programming provided, as well as raise questions about any concerns or suggestions for improvement, and collectively co-create new meanings (Beattie, 1995) about enrichment as it pertains to students in today's secondary schools. This was especially important as I sought to use narratives "as a personal channel for listening to silenced voices" (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 207) of those students with less visible needs.

### 3.1.2 Data Analysis

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) specify, "each study has its own rhythms and sequences, and each narrative inquirer needs to work them out for her or his own inquiry" (p. 97). Narratives were analysed for varied constructions and interpretations of participant perspectives to showcase any patterns in and between the stories to come to a better understanding of students' experiences in a way that allows us to continue to respond to their needs. Each narrative was analysed by conventional techniques such as categorizing and coding of content including, but not limited to, the following: thematic analysis and topic-grouping to include specific programs, motivation, academic achievement, creative and critical thinking skills, social-emotional development, and both dominant and counter narratives for the same issue; revisiting the research questions of learning outcomes and behaviours, affective skills, barriers, needs, and ownership; and concept building around what students view and what teachers view as not only important to enrichment

programming, but what the challenges are around gifted programming in today's regular

classrooms and secondary schools.  A comprehensive analytical chart was developed to

include the themes, questions, and issues of each focus group, as well as the placemat

organizer artefacts where participants shared stories in written form.  Salient quotations

were included in each of the columns to allow for easy mapping of where the issues were

discussed and in which contexts.  Two phases of analysis followed the initial thematic

analysis to include the use of a parable to figuratively story the data by way of the various

parts of the elephant.  In-depth analysis of dominant and counter narratives was conducted,

as well as revisiting the research questions: *What story(ies) are being told about the*

*program(s) from the perspectives of the students and teachers?; What can be learned from*

*these stories?; Do their stories reflect that their needs are being addressed?; Do their stories*

*suggest that they have ownership in the design of their enrichment programming?; Do their*

*stories express barriers to fulfilling their learning outcomes and behaviours?; and Do their*

*stories express barriers to their affective skill development?*

## 3.2  Conceptual Framework: The Parable of *The Blind Men and the Elephant*

Originating in India, many forms of the fable or parable of *The Blind Men and the*

*Elephant* have been crafted and shared for centuries.  A loose interpretation of the many

versions of the parable begins in a village in India where six blind men live—blind since

birth—and a raja, an Indian monarch, advises the blind men that an elephant is in the village

and offers to bring them to experience this animal.  When they arrive, the raja gives each one

of the blind men a part of the elephant to touch, ranging from the body, tusk, and trunk to

the legs, ear, and tail.  The raja then asks each of the men to share his interpretation of what

the elephant is like, and he finds himself with rather different descriptions, depending on the

experience each one of the blind men had with his part.  The man with the body equates this

section to a wall; the one with the tusk finds it to be like a spear; the gentleman that had the

trunk finds it to be like a snake; the legs as tree trunks; the ear as a fan; and finally, the tail as

a rope.  According to John Godfrey Saxe's (1876) 19th Century poem based on the parable,

"Though each was partly in the right/And all were in the wrong" (lines 47-48), the speaker

showcases how each of the blind men described their part of the elephant based on their

personal experiences and interpretation of the animal.

Overall, the blind men were unable to agree on what the exact description or holistic

vision of the large animal was, as they were all given different parts of the same being.

Naturally, all of the blind men were correct, as each one of them was given a different

section of the same elephant to experience, but it was because of their personal

understandings that they were able to describe the elephant in its entirety from individual

experience.  The moral of the parable is that one's truth is based on individual experience,

and even if the blind men were unable to come to a collective understanding of exactly what

the elephant looked like, their individual descriptions and interpretations provided a rough

outline of what the elephant *could* be.  Likewise, the stories of experience of secondary

students and educators is described in a similar structure to the parable, as everyone

provided vivid descriptions of Gifted programming based on their individual experiences.

The findings are discussed in six parts throughout the next section, where stories of

experience with Gifted programming have been conceptualized in each part of the elephant,

embodying the animal—or Gifted programming—in its entirety (see Table 3.1).  Salient

quotations from the participants' own words and lived experiences are shared in both

epigraph format at the beginning of each section, as well as throughout the findings section

to help flesh out the encompassing themes that were experienced by many of the

participants throughout various focus groups.

Table 3.1: Stories of experience detailed in direct relation to the parable.

| Section of Findings | Selection from the Parable[4] | The Story of Experience Captured |
|---|---|---|
| **3.3.1: The Trunk** | "The *Third* approached the animal,<br>And happening to take<br>The squirming **trunk** with his hands,<br>Thus boldly up and spake:<br>'I see,' quoth he, 'the Elephant<br>Is very like a snake!'" (lines 19-24) | A story of fostering social-emotional development |
| **3.3.2: The Ear** | "The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the **ear**,<br>Said: 'E'en the blindest man<br>Can tell what this resembles most;<br>Deny the fact who can,<br>This marvel of an Elephant<br>Is very like a fan!'" (31-36) | A story of like-minded peers and interest-based programming |
| **3.3.3: The Body** | "The *First* approached the Elephant,<br>And happening to fall<br>Against his broad and sturdy **side**,<br>At once began to bawl:<br>'God bless me!—but the Elephant<br>Is very like a wall!" (7-12) | A story of resources |
| **3.3.4: The Legs** | "The *Fourth* reached out his eager hand,<br>And felt about the **knee**.<br>'What most this wondrous beast is like<br>Is mighty plain,' quoth he;<br>' 'Tis clear enough the Elephant<br>Is very like a tree!'" (25-30) | A story of teacher education |
| **3.3.5: The Tail** | "The *Sixth* no sooner had begun<br>About the beast to grope,<br>Than, seizing on the swinging **tail**<br>That fell within his scope,<br>'I see,' quoth he, 'the Elephant<br>Is very like a rope!'" (37-42) | Competing narratives of identity and stereotypes |
| **3.3.6: Moral** | **"Though each was partly in the right,**<br>**And all were in the wrong!**<br>**So, oft in theologic wars**<br>**The disputants, I ween,**<br>**Rail on in utter ignorance**<br>**Of what each other mean,**<br>***And prate about an Elephant***<br>***Not one of them has seen!"* (47-54)** | **The elephant in the room** |

[4]*Source:* Saxe, J. G. (1873). The blind men and the elephant. In *The poems of John Godfrey Saxe* (pp. 259-261). Boston, MA: James R. Osgood and Company.

## 3.3 Findings

### 3.3.1 *The Trunk: A Story of Fostering Social-Emotional Development*

> Ben[5], Grade 11, shared the same concern throughout the three focus groups he was
> in about classmates not being aware of what "Giftedness" is, which led to greater
> distance between him and his peers: *"it's just simply a disconnect between what it is
> and what people think it is."*
>
> He further shared with a teacher-participant the social drawbacks of being Gifted
> which come from a lack of awareness: *"at some point there should be an awareness
> over what Giftedness is for other students."*
>
> In a third group he opened-up about having real needs, not just elite abilities: *"I
> want people to understand that as a Gifted student I actually have special needs,
> not just that I have a special ability or talent."*

When asked about their needs being met in the regular class, the discussion within the

student focus group manifested into how their social needs are as important to foster as their

enrichment needs in school, particularly by **bringing awareness** to other students and staff

about the needs Gifted students have.  Several student-participants found themselves to be

outliers in the regular, mainstreamed classes, not always because of the often-prescribed

academic content from the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum that generally failed to

provide adequate academic challenges, but because the peers in the class were often unaware

or misinformed of the intellectual differences and the special needs that Gifted learners have.

Similarly, this disconnect was also evident with the Gifted pupils themselves in understanding

what their own exceptionality means.  Kennedy, Grade 10, shared that Gifted students are not

well-informed of what their own designation is, which perpetuates the ignorance of the

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[5] Pseudonyms have been used for all participant responses in this study.

unique learning needs Ben spoke of: "a lot of kids are told they're Gifted—like I don't even know what it is—and then think it's for very smart people."

This misinformation about the special needs of high-ability pupils was also identified outside of the school system with parents/guardians and adult interpretation or understanding of what it means to be a Gifted child.  Ray, Grade 9, spoke of misinformed adults stereotyping him: "my parents' friends are kind of confused […] well, I'm in a Gifted class, 'oh, it's cause you're super smart,'" which Kennedy echoed with the same experience of being tagged as a "super smart" person and not appreciating the label because it does not take into account the individual talents; rather it misinforms others that Gifted kids are good at everything academically and are seemingly separate from, or not alike to, their regular classroom peers.  Ben explained how powerful knowledge is for understanding and how it helps to minimize ignorance so as not to lead to further misunderstandings that spillover into social difficulties: "being identified helped give the students the areas in which they are Gifted so they can explain it to people," showcasing how adults—whether within or outside the education system—need to make a conscious effort to share in the identification process, explaining what Gifted means, and how it can be understood for each person.

Here we problematize how Giftedness has been constructed by educators and policymakers as *beyond* the mainstream curriculum and *outside* those duties performed by the regular classroom teacher.  These findings remind us of our duty to share and co-create knowledge and understanding with all our students about themselves as individual learners. Figuratively speaking, the collection of stories detailing the importance of fostering social and emotional needs of high-ability pupils is represented by the *trunk*, which serves as the primary

function for this animal to be able to *breathe*.  When in the regular classroom, it is imperative

that all students feel safe, supported, and available for learning.  By incorrectly positioning

intellectually Gifted learners as having only an *asset* exceptionality and equating it with

academic achievement, it minimizes their agency as individual learners with individual

interests and bona fide learning needs, and further marginalizes them in the mixed ability

classroom.  Findings also make visible how singular our understanding of Giftedness is when it

is constructed as a cognitive need only.  Participants' stories remind us how they are learners

too, and when they are positioned as intellectual beings and brains only, their social,

emotional, and relational needs suffer, and they find themselves unable to breathe easy.

### 3.3.2   The Ear: A Story of Like-Minded Peers and Interest-Based Programming

> Jax, Grade 12, commented on how individual programming is essential when
> fostering the interests of individual students, as one *"cannot look at the Gifted
> population as a collective; you have to look at each person's interests."*
>
> Ramona, Grade 12, explained how Gifted programming by design should be
> interest-based and not ability-based or even homogeneous in design, articulating
> how frustrating it was when opportunities were created for her based on her
> strengths and not her interests: *"I don't want to go to a cluster session or a class
> and do more Math work just because I'm good at it."*

Detailed field notes illustrate two very important needs that were satisfied by bringing

together a group of identified Gifted secondary students: first, that bringing like-minded peers

together established a dynamic environment where students could learn from one another

and share stories of experience that others could appreciate; and second, how students felt

that even though they may share different experiences or have different areas of interest, they

needed to be with others who could appreciate the level of passion they had for something, as

there was a mutual respect for learning and engaging.  Cal, Grade 10, articulated how important it was to create space and provide time for like-minded peers to be together: "it doesn't have to be toward a common goal; just building interpersonal relationships between like-minded people is important."  Indeed, student-participants voiced the importance of like-minded grouping but with the caveat of how vital it was to ensure programming was for **individual students' interests** and not homogeneous in design for "the" Gifted learner.  Randy, a secondary school teacher, expressed in various focus groups that there was a need to provide sustained Gifted education that made available a space and a peer group of like-minded students to learn and engage with one another, rather than piecemeal Gifted opportunities offered sporadically.  Further, he argued that Gifted education is not only flexible and agile but provides a place where the pressure is off and students could be engaged in their own interests, as "being Gifted is as much a difficulty as people at the other end in the spectrum."

Stories of experience shared here represent the *ear*, figuratively describing the need to not only hear but *listen* to our students.  Findings were originally used to support the professional development of Gifted teachers and regular classroom teachers in a series of sessions that explored the needs of Gifted pupils, signaling how important it is to listen to and support those individual needs and interests, as well as provide various strategies for implementation.  Upon reflection, the strategies included were presented as universal and ones that could work for *all* high-ability students, dangerously walking that line of overgeneralizing the needs of this population of students as collective, identical, and homogeneous.  Callahan and Hertberg-Davis (2013) remind us that it is a common and easily

understandable belief that Gifted pupils are a homogeneous population when it comes to intellectual needs, but like all students (and human beings), "identified gifted students still exist along continua of aptitudes and achievement […] in areas of interest and passion, in preferred learning modes, and in the area of social and emotional development" (p. 329).

Having spent years implementing a system Vision for programming and supporting *outside* personnel to develop and offer these withdrawal-based program opportunities, it causes me pause when (re)visiting this data, as I now question *how* differentiated and *how* heterogeneous some of the programs were.  Borland (2013) argues that there is a curious paradox with enrichment programs, as they exist to provide students with differentiated experiences, but are often designed for a monolithic population that "experience the same enrichment at the same time" (p. 71).   We can further problematize the quintessential enrichment "pull-out" or withdrawal program itself, as this very program that exists to provide much-needed enrichment opportunities may also—and unknowingly—be subscribing to a singular understanding of enrichment needs for "the" homogeneous, Gifted learner as well.

### 3.3.3    The Body: A Story of Resources

> Ray, Grade 9, highlighted a typical experience in a regular class where there were multiple abilities in the same space:
>
> > *I don't speak up, not because I feel bad, but because I know that if I speak up they'll be like "oh, but the majority, there are way more people who are below average than people who are above average and we need to do what's better for more people," so we don't matter.*
>
> Caitlyn, Grade 9, offered criticism about the regular classroom dynamic by sharing her experience with teachers attempting to close the achievement gap at the expense of the above average ability learners:
>
> > *I find that they're trying to bring up the people who are below average [...] they're trying to even out everything so that we don't get focused on as much. They just want everyone to be the same.*

Student- and teacher-participants shared numerous stories about available **resources** and how those resources (of lack thereof) impacted their overall experience in secondary school.  Kennedy expressed how she needed to be with like-minded peers on more of a consistent basis than the available enrichment withdrawal program that was only offered a handful of times in a semester.  Specifically, she believed being in a class of like-minded peers working toward credit would be an ideal solution, such as an enriched course of study.  After signing up to take an enriched course in Grade 10—her current year—she came to find out that the course was cancelled, as there were not enough students who signed up.  Ben experienced the same disappointment, as he had registered to take an enriched course for a compulsory subject but found himself in the regular academic counterpart with not so much as a conversation or letter from a Guidance counselor or administrator as to why the enriched course failed to run.  When sharing stories of disappointment, students seemed to go through

the motions and were not surprised, only disappointed that the school chose not to run a section that had fewer students in it—likely the result of staffing and fiscal accountability—even though it would have provided a direct accommodation for their learning needs. Likewise, teacher-participants shared stories of disappointment and frustration with the **inconsistent funding** for Gifted programming that was allocated on an annual basis. Patricia shared stories that illustrated her school's often static state where the difficulty in moving forward and the fear of taking too great a risk with programming were directly influenced by the funding model that allocated additional staffing annually and never on a long-term basis. Naturally, with inconsistent allocations, Patricia's administration did not want to commit to programming that may not have been sustainable without the guaranteed funding. She shared that this was not her view, but felt powerless in front of the masses, as the voice of the unknown funding was far louder and stretched further than hers within the school.

A common thread in the stories shared by all participants was that the focus in the **regular classroom** was seldom about meeting the needs of the high-ability learners and rather about closing the achievement gap and meeting the remedial needs of students who were struggling: "we work so hard with the ones who struggle but I haven't heard very much discussion about how do we help those in the masses" (Patricia). Accountability measures and this phenomenon of teaching to the middle— level 3 in Ontario which "represents the provincial standard for achievement" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 16)—is perpetuated in education by mistakenly equating mastery in learning with numerical grades. Numerous stories shared make visible the priority in the regular classroom, which is the achievement of all students collectively, suggesting that the learning needs of high-ability pupils are often

sacrificed in pursuit of the hegemonic, utilitarian mantra of improving the majority.  Dominant

discourses and practices continue to remain in effect, whereby remediation and closing the

achievement gap (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006) trumps individualized programming

and placement for learning needs of Gifted pupils that fall outside the widely accepted

understanding of *needs* as impairments or *deficits* (Smith, 2006; see also Reis & Renzulli, 2010)

as they relate to academic achievement.

Stories of experience shared here represent the *body*, figuratively describing the largest

part of the animal and representing the sheer weight of the issues identified.  Findings

illustrate how resource availability and funding are fundamentally impacting the experiences

of staff and students in secondary education.  Here, resources represent opportunities to

experience enrichment *in place of* the regular classroom, such as enriched classes, or offering

these withdrawal opportunities to engage with like-minded peers or even accelerate a course

through curriculum compacting, again, *outside* the regular classroom.  Borland (2013) takes

issue with why resources are allocated outside of the regular classroom to fund a separate

enrichment program that serves to remove or circumvent the regular classroom altogether.

He further argues that our focus should be on "the proper education of gifted students, not

the creation or preservation of gifted programs" (Borland, 2013, p. 69) as the ultimate goal

here.  We can further problematize Gifted education through these *body* stories shared where

the system Vision for Gifted programming not only articulates primarily withdrawal-based

programming but allocates resources and funding for said programming that is located *outside*

the regular classroom and curriculum.

### 3.3.4   The Legs: A Story of Teacher Education

> Criticism of the enrichment withdrawal framework was shared through Jackie's experiences as a Learning Support Teacher, as she believed that *"Gifted is everyone's responsibility"* and classroom teachers should be *"owning the learning of all students."*
>
> Jackie stated numerous times that enrichment programming should never be a snapshot model where only an outside person comes into the school to program. By releasing that responsibility onto an outside individual, it only perpetuates the message that regular classroom teachers do not have to concern themselves with enrichment as *"somebody else will look after it."*

Teacher-participants shared stories of frustration with the misconceptions of enrichment and lack of **ownership** of enrichment needs in their schools.  As an LST, Patricia would field many concerns from classroom teachers of the Gifted students who were not performing at the achievement level those teachers would stereotypically expect from our brightest, suggesting that the inability to assist the students or appropriately program for them came out of both ignorance and a lack of teacher training for intellectual needs.  Patricia shared how the education profession does a disservice to high-ability learners as "I don't think our teachers really understand what Gifted is"; moreover "not all teachers are confident in how enrichment looks."  In a separate focus group with students, she shared that "Gifted maybe isn't understood by even classroom teachers."  Her stories make visible how system leadership and administration does not highlight the importance of Gifted programming as an area of need: "it's not part of their language," which is evidenced in *where* the enrichment programs are located: *outside* the regular classroom and thus beyond the scope of the regular curriculum and classroom teacher.

Equally important, some students in the mixed focus groups shared their positive stories with appropriate and enjoyable enrichment when they felt they had teachers who were well-educated in Gifted learners' needs and felt confident to meet those needs *within*. Ray shared a story of his enriched Grade 10 Math class and how his teacher was mindful of the level of homework that needed to be done and the level of challenge required, often assigning critical thinking questions and omitting more basic level ones. Likewise, Caitlyn recounted her experience with a dynamic enriched teacher in her elementary self-contained Gifted class for seventh and eighth grade, where students felt that their individual interests were considered, and that the teacher was knowledgeable and well-read in the field of Gifted education. Jacob, Grade 11, frequently voiced how he enjoyed when his teachers would go off-topic in their classes, as rich discussion often ensued that would create an enriched learning environment, but would be disappointed when teachers would immediately collect themselves and revert back to the constraints of the Ontario curriculum that must be taught out of fear of not covering it all for all learners: "sometimes teachers are scared to stray away from the curriculum."

Stories of experience represent the *legs*, figuratively describing the mobility of the animal and mobilizing enrichment either forward or backward in the regular classroom. Findings clearly position the regular classroom as the primary space where high-ability pupils want to be, but stories also show how the regular classroom teacher does not have to own the responsibility for enrichment programming within, as outside personnel have both resources and additional funding to design and implement that programming. This further problematizes how Gifted education is understood within educational institutions, as this

system does offer support to schools, but it is primarily located outside the regular classroom

placement.

### 3.3.5 The Tail: Competing Narratives of Identity and Stereotypes

Caitlyn, Grade 9, expressed how she felt judged by classmates as being:

*The standard that everyone will compare themselves to or if they're better or they do better than us on something then they're smarter than us, but if they do not do as well as us, then it's the teacher's fault for being a bad teacher.*

Kennedy, Grade 10, echoed this stigma and shared how peers would often gauge their academic success in direct relation to her performance on an assessment: *"oh, of course you did, you're smart; of course you did well."*

Ramona, Grade 12, shared that her peers were aware that she had a Gifted designation and often misused the term when trying to compare themselves to her, inaccurately equating high academic achievement with what it means to be Gifted: *"oh, I did better than Ramona; I must be Gifted too."*

There were other stories shared that provided additional insight into how Gifted

learners navigate around the many **stereotypes** of being "Gifted" and how this additional

performance impacted their individual **identities**.  Caitlyn, Grade 9, expressed how she felt

judged by her classmates as she, along with other Gifted pupils, were always positioned as the

"standard" for academic achievement, and how "beating them" academically was somehow a

big achievement.  Many of the stories shared demonstrate how one's academic achievement

or performance in a regular class compounds their social issues and relational development, as

the achievement was often visibly different between the Gifted students and some of their

peers.  Jacob, Grade 11, described how he would dread the class that would directly follow the

administration of a test, as it was often spent taking up each answer fully and collectively as a

class.  The feeling of listening to others' mistakes and perhaps being judged by others by *not*

getting those questions wrong did not help to minimize the distance between him and his

classmates and continued to have a negative, relational affect with his same-aged peers.

Ramona, Grade 12, echoed this relational struggle when she would not achieve her "usual"

grade on a test, which almost always resulted in ridicule from classmates who would proceed

to label themselves as "Gifted" because they did better than her on that particular

assessment.  Likewise, Jackie, Learning Support Teacher, noticed that students in her school

were acutely aware of the competitiveness in academic performance.  Academically strong

students would come to her and contend that their marks were better than the Gifted

students' marks and believed they should have been in the enrichment group, which was a

direct result of how Gifted programming was positioned in that environment and what

ultimately led to the misunderstanding of enrichment as reward versus enrichment as

accommodation.  This fundamental misunderstanding of needs and abilities only serves to

perpetuate the stereotype that Gifted is synonymous with high performance and academic

achievement.  Furthermore, it reinforces the "us" versus "them" mentality that will continue

to create further distance between the Gifted students and their peers in the regular class.

Stories of experience here represent the *tail*, figuratively describing an integral part of

the animal that is often responding or reacting to various stimuli.  There were many stories of

identity shared that served as competing narratives, akin to the tail that moves from side to

side of the animal in response to or navigating the various stereotypes and pressure.  Ray,

Grade 9, shared his experience with facing stereotypes from family friends about being "super

smart" and the pressure that a label such as that puts on a child.  He also shared a story of his

transition to secondary school out of a self-contained Gifted class where he felt humbled by

being in a class of highly intelligent peers: "going to the self-contained class helps deter arrogance [...] going there and realizing that there are so many other people who have been told by their parents 'you're the smartest person.'" He was not disillusioned about his abilities nor his identity, as he was exposed to many other bright students whom he had respect for. On the other hand, Jacob, Grade 11, and Jax, Grade 12, shared stories of the insecurities experienced from high achievers when their marks do not always reflect their reputation of being a Gifted student. Jacob shared how "they're losing kind of their identity as a person because everyone knows them as the kid who's supposed to be getting a hundred on every test"; moreover, Jax voiced how "it's like you've totally lost your identity. You don't know how to feel anymore. It's like you're not who you were and it's an overwhelming feeling."

These stories of stereotypes were quite visible, which raises important issues around proper education and awareness of special needs. Caitlyn shared an experience in a single-section self-contained Gifted class in a mainstreamed elementary school where a label clearly divided students socially within the school: "you were labelled. You were the 'Gifties' and the 'non-Gifties,' and then it was weird to socialize with the non-Gifted ones." Ben also described his experience in a self-contained class in elementary school—one he attended for a brief stint before returning to the regular classroom—and spoke of the lack of like-minded peers and support to bring all abilities together socially: "we had no connection with the students—we went to a different school, as we were the only class of Gifted—and there was no connection at the school for us." More broadly speaking, findings suggest that there is more work to be done with awareness of and acceptance for all learning needs in an educational setting. Gifted pupils do have distinctively different learning needs (Moon, 2009; Tieso, 2003; see also Chu &

Myers, 2015) from their mainstream classmates, which must stop being characterized as assets rather than true areas of need. Students who are intellectually Gifted are not precluded from problems such as personal insecurities (Gross, 2002), intellectual underachievement (Siegle, 2013), and ostracism (Peterson & Ray, 2006). They are children in our schools and in our care who are deserving of programming and placement that fosters their overall wellbeing.

### 3.3.6   *The Moral of the Story: Acknowledge the Elephant in the Room*

The parable of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* was originally used as an analytic tool to story the narrative data. By storying those experiences that had emerged from the data and structuring by way of the separate parts of the same animal in that parable, it provided us with individual explorations of programming from personal perspectives, as well as a holistic vision of what Gifted programming *could* be when the parts were brought together. With the moral of the parable being that one's truth is based on individual experience, and even if the blind men were unable to come to a collective understanding of exactly what the elephant looked like, their individual descriptions and interpretations provided a rough outline of what the elephant *could* be.

The most significant findings, however, came as a result of the synthesis of the animal parts coming back together, forming a figurative elephant. Only then was it clear that after all the individual pieces were explored and brought back together, the image—albeit somewhat distorted—was now *the elephant in the room* demanding to be addressed. Through close and respectful examination of the stories of experience in all parts of the animal, it became clear that there will never be a seamless bond of parts or a flawless image of the elephant that

represents a universal experience of Gifted programming and that Gifted learners are not a

homogeneous group.  Moreover, the original intention of the study was to learn from

experiences with the newly implemented programming and how it was addressing Gifted

students' needs, but through the careful analysis of the elephant mosaic it unveiled how those

parts, when brought back together, were *less* about their evaluation of the programming and

*more* about them sharing their individual needs in the regular classroom that must be

addressed and problematized, as their needs are being deprioritized in that learning space.
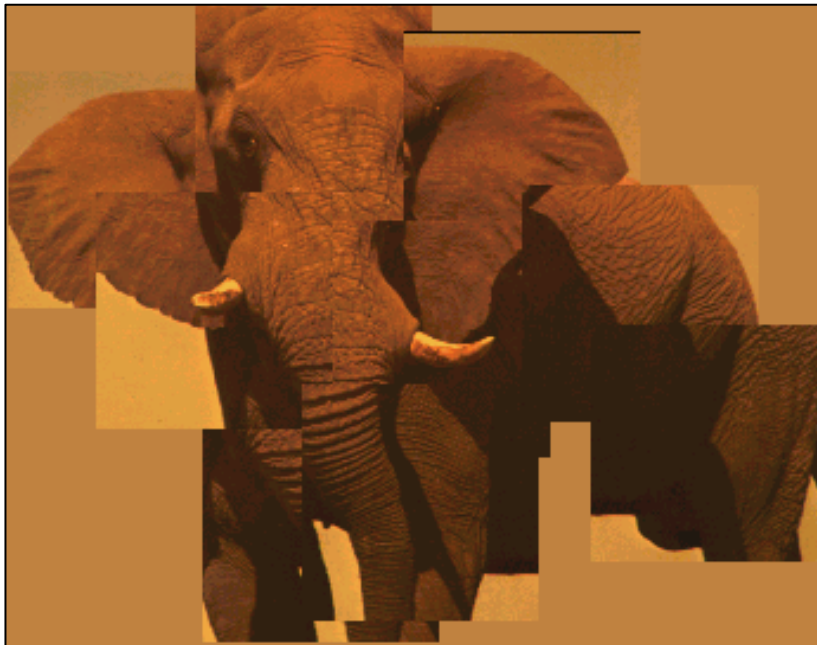


*Figure 3.1: (Wang, 1995). This image is meant to demonstrate the "Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant" when the individual pieces of the elephant are put back together.  It more broadly embodies the findings of this study with regards to a general idea of the image, although it is not a seamless bond of parts.*

## 3.4   Discussion

The telling and retelling of these stories of experiences from Gifted students and

teachers of Gifted learners have reaffirmed historical difficulties with ineffective

programming that fail to meet their needs.  The central goals of this paper were first to share

the findings from this narrative study by way of detailing how the parable that was originally

used to story the data came to *embody* that very story throughout the process, which gave rise to the second goal of the paper, the opportunity to acknowledge the elephant in the room of contemporary Gifted education. By (re)visiting and (re)examining the data in a temporal sense, having lived within the education system in the years since the study was conducted, findings have unearthed new questions about *what* we learned then and now, signaling *where* we must go from here and *why* it matters. These new questions compel us to problematize Gifted education as it relates to *how* it is designed and *where* it is primarily delivered in our education systems. As Borland (2013) argues, there is considerable benefit in stepping back to see more clearly, pondering what we ought to be doing and how we ought to be doing it. As a field, Gifted education researchers need to problematize why our field continues to exist, why it is needed in the first place, and where we should be researching, as problematizing involves,

> bringing to the surface and identifying certain, often implicit, assumptions and beliefs
> and asking whether they really make sense […] I think we, as a field, would benefit from
> problematizing many of our beliefs and practices because we have grown too
> comfortable with certain "taken-for-granted" ways of thinking, and this has limited our
> vision and hampered our effectiveness as educators. (Borland, 2013, p. 69)

Having used the findings from the original study to "progressively and collaboratively refine" (Goldszmidt et al., 2014) the system Vision for Gifted programming, it is now clear to me that the findings may have been used in a way that perpetuates a status quo of programming that is fundamentally located *outside* of the regular classroom, which happened to be the most important area that participants were wanting support *within*.

Critical disability theorists have made significant advancements toward more socially just systems of education (Gable, 2014) for individuals with exceptionalities who have been stigmatized for their special needs by illuminating those oppressive structures and actors that *create* the disability of one's impairment (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014), including attitudinal, structural, and political barriers.  Narratives identify various attitudinal (needs are *beyond*) and structural (needs are to be met *outside*) barriers that exist and directly impact the learning environments and day-to-day experiences in public education.  We must further problematize the way in which Giftedness has been constructed within our education systems and educational policies, as these findings make clear that high-ability pupils have been positioned as having needs that are *beyond* the regular curriculum and whose needs must be met *outside* of that regular classroom space and by *external* personnel.  What is more, we may be subscribing to an "impoverished pedagogy" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 34) when it comes to providing necessary accommodations for this group of pupils who have bona fide special needs (Finn & Wright, 2015), which are acknowledged by the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2001) *Special Education Guide for Educators* (p. A 20).

Additionally, the field of Social Work has recently taken-up the needs of high-ability pupils.  Chu and Myers (2015) find that little attention has been given historically to this population of learners, as their needs represent a "quiet crisis" (p. 43) where they fail to perform *so* far outside the norm that their performance runs the risk of endangering the reputations of educational institutions in the public eye and thus not seen as a liability that is deserving of vocal crisis status.  Within an achievement discourse, high-ability pupils often perform well, which has continued to fuel the (mis)understanding that Gifted needs are not

needs as understood as *deficits,* but are viewed as needing opportunities that are *above*

what the regular curriculum requires. Likewise, Chu and Myers (2015) argue that Gifted

pupils do not intuitively fall into the category of vulnerable and socially diverse individuals

who would receive assistance from social workers, but they *do* meet the standards of an

oppressed identity group that is politically, socially, and intellectually marginalized, and are

thus in need of attention in our education systems.

Emerging from a desire to (re)visit a former study with more experienced eyes and

within a temporal space, this (re)learning has made visible a de-prioritization of high-ability

pupils in an education system. Despite the existence of a system Vision for Gifted

programming at the secondary panel, the stories shared suggest that these program

opportunities are a compromise, as first, they are not robust enough to support the regular,

day-to-day learning of our Gifted students, and second, they are primarily offered outside of

their regular classroom. This paper has effectively invited trouble into the Gifted education

discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011) by problematizing our very existence in public education,

questioning *how* exactly we are meeting the needs of high-ability pupils in our schools?

When asking ourselves why there is such little response or intervention (Gallagher, 2015)

from the system around reconceptualising the program offerings, perhaps it is because we

do not know how we have come to be at this impasse and are perhaps not aware that there

is a real issue with how Gifted education is designed, implemented, and located. Mun,

Ezzani, and Lee (2020) find that educational actors can "halt or propel the momentum of

systemic change" (p. 129) suggesting the importance of future research that employs a

comprehensive methodological approach, such as material-semiotic sensibilities, that can

identify *who* and *what* are involved in this creation of a status quo of programming, as well as determine *how* exactly it is come to be perpetuated over time.  This composite approach may also make visible a more three-dimensional way of understanding Gifted programming in public education systems including the very *topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of this status quo phenomenon—the features, the different terrain, and the contours that show us exactly how this is happening, answering the call to problematize the way Gifted education as an outside, extra endeavour is positioned, enacted, and perpetuated.

## 3.5   Summary

This paper examines the findings from a narrative inquiry in a narrative way, strategically demonstrating how a story—a parable—that was originally used to *story* the data then embodied the findings themselves.  Key findings are illustrative in nature, whereby we capture selected findings that figuratively represent each part of the elephant parable, sharing those original findings thematically, then taking those findings up in a more temporal, experienced way having reflected on the study and lived with its practical implications for the last several years.  Narratives account for the way we think, feel, and conduct ourselves in the social world (Spector-Mersel, 2010), which drive shifts in thinking and provide the power to change social understandings.  Using a narrative approach provided participants with the opportunity to share their rich, individual experiences in story-form about the newly implemented programming, as well as raise questions and collectively co-create new meanings (Beattie, 1995) about what the needs and desires are of this group of exceptional pupils with less visible needs that are certainly deserving of attention and support.

This research adds to a growing body of work that recognizes the need to problematize how education systems design and implement Gifted programming, questioning first and foremost where it is positioned and who is responsible for meeting the needs of these pupils. Through the (re)visiting of stories of experiences shared in a previous study, student and teacher participants tell stories of being acknowledged in a system but having a fundamentally separate program that is often offered outside of their regular classroom experience and is largely undifferentiated, as the enrichment offered was shown to be typically workshop-style and designed for a homogeneous group of learners. Future studies might explore the infrastructure of Gifted programming within education systems, as well as examining policies, documentation, and practices that serve as structural, attitudinal, and political barriers (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014) to accessing responsive programming for students with special needs. Further research that employs a comprehensive methodological approach to understand the intricacies of these systems and institutions and get closer to a phenomenon (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012) may also be considered, as these methods can identify *who* and *what* are involved in this creation and perpetuation of a status quo of programming, as well as determine *how* exactly it is come to be perpetuated over time.

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# Chapter 4

## 4    Theoretical Framework & Methodological Approach

*"It is clear that participants—narrators—stand at the center of narrative studies; not as informants, as seen in some qualitative traditions, but as active agents, inseparable from the phenomenon under inquiry." (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 217)*

Crotty (1998/2015) posits that the justification for methodology and methods is not as straightforward as it may seem; exploring questions involves critically challenging the assumptions about reality and the nature of knowledge that we bring to our work.  It requires the researcher to explore what human knowledge *is*, *how* we know what we know, and what *kind* of knowledge we believe will be attained in research (Crotty, 1998/2015, p. 2).  The theoretical perspective, then, is taken to mean the philosophical stance lying beneath a methodology and subsequent methods (Crotty, 1998/2015).  Therefore, when one examines the methodology—such as this *critical narrative inquiry (CNI)*—one then discovers the assumptions buried within, including various critical and poststructural theorists (e.g. critical disability theorists, critical pedagogy, and socio-material theories) that may assist in the pursuit of identifying hegemonic discourses or exploring various assemblages of actors and networks that might be influencing current policies and practices.  For this research I am specifically drawing on social constructionist and interpretivist epistemological positions, informing critical and poststructural perspectives to investigate dominant discourses and practices that exist in today's 21$^{st}$ Century public educational systems.

## 4.1 Theoretical Framework

This social constructionist and interpretivist, *critical narrative inquiry (CNI)* embraces an eclectic theoretical approach drawing on critical and poststructural theories that are, as Merriam (1991) argues, driven by the study of social structures, power, and control. In addition to drawing on critical pedagogy, dominant discourses and practices of Special Education, and critical disability theory, it further draws upon material-semiotics—specifically Actor-Network Theory—and autoethnography as complementary "show and tell" methods, which come full circle to support the critical spirit (Crotty, 1998/2015) of the epistemological positioning embedded within social constructionism.

### 4.1.1 *Critical Pedagogy*

Critical pedagogy transforms traditional educational approaches into critical and democratic ones, whereby teachers and students repeatedly question their beliefs and practices, challenging "hegemonic discourses of normalcy" (Britzman, 1995, p. 154) and social institutions that govern us. Further, critical pedagogy gives rise to the "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 35) of individuals through the reflexive process of thinking and rethinking, "negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state" (McLaren, 1999, p. 51). This research draws upon critical pedagogy to investigate the agency of identified Gifted secondary school students in today's current system, seeking to disrupt the ableist discourses and further problematize hegemonic practices that are positively undemocratic in 21st Century schools. Moreover, when teachers, administrators, and educational stakeholders continue to make

decisions about appropriate placement, programs, and services available—as based on individual budgets of local boards (Finn & Wright, 2015)—they, in fact, speak *to*, *for*, and *about* the learners, rather than welcoming the voices, ideas, and lived experience of these exceptional children in our school systems.  This archaic, top-down approach to educating undermines the importance and power of the lived experience and student voice, willfully abandoning learners by speaking *to*, not *with* them.  It is Dewey (1902/2001) who reminds us: "The child is the starting point, the center, and the end…To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth" (p. 107).  As such, this research enters the scholarly conversation about seemingly fixed programming design and placement as first and foremost a call to action for not only policymakers and pundits (Finn & Wright, 2015) to raise their consciousness, but all education workers in publicly funded education: "Gifted is everyone's responsibility" (Gollan-Wills, 2014, p. 79).

This study draws upon the work of Michael Apple, a modern-day critical pedagogue who fundamentally believes that politics are entrenched in traditional education and that current systems often further the interests of those in power (Nganga & Kambutu, 2013). Apple (1975) calls for research that examines beneath the bureaucratic surface (see also Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008) and seeks to interrogate *what* and *whose* knowledge has been legitimized or deemed official (Apple, 2014).  This modern day critical pedagogical understanding highlights how neoliberal influences are not only failing to accommodate (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winebrenner, 2000) but sacrificing the learning (Smith, 2011) of exceptional pupils by reforming education through accountability measures.  Moreover, such undemocratic education in 21st Century schools is perpetuated under the guise that educators

are adhering to the "accepted" model of enrichment programs and services for which their

districts, states, or provinces dogmatically defend as appropriate (VanTassel-Baska, 2012).

Critical pedagogues, such as Apple (2014), bluntly remind education workers that a focus on

achievement as the *only* quantifiably measurable for public transparency, coupled with the

erroneous assumption that numerical values are an accurate measure of success, actually

"creates a situation where only that which is tested is considered important knowledge to

teach" (p. xiii). Likewise, educators become what Giroux argues are "'semi-robotic' technicians

rather than 'engaged intellectuals'" (as cited in Barto & Whatley Bedford, 2013, p. 61) when

they continually recycle such institutional discourses (Souto-Manning, 2014) of utilitarian

education that exalt low-level skills and "credentialing" (Keddie, 2012, p. 160), all of which are

at the expense of real learning (Latz & Adams, 2011).

On the other hand, critical pedagogy's limitations for this particular study lie in the

promotion of *false consciousness* in modern educational practices and its need to redefine

such liberation movements for oppressed identity groups in more privileged spaces (Allen &

Rossatto, 2009). More specifically, Giftedness is often understood within a *deficit* discourse

whereby this exceptionality is not considered to be an impairment or deficit (Finn & Wright,

2015; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2006), but rather regarded as assets that possess these

innate gifts and have some advantage over other pupils (Finn & Wright, 2015; Reis & Renzulli,

2010; Smith, 2006; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011; Winstanley, 2006). Despite

significant infrastructure in Ontario, Canada to support the learning needs of exceptional

pupils, many programs, services, and placements are inadequate and fail to meet the unique

needs of high-ability students (Borland, 2013; Finn & Wright, 2015; Gubbins, 2013; Lo &

Porath, 2017; Manasawala & Desai, 2019; Moltzen, 2006; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Schmitt &

Goebel 2015; Tan et al., 2020; VanTassel-Baska, 2012). Full decision-making autonomy is

granted to local boards (Finn & Wright, 2015) who are tasked with allocating resources

equitably across those systems for *all* the special needs. Educational policymakers with

conservative budgets are expected to triage all special education needs and when prioritizing

the most *critical* needs (Gallagher, 2015), policymakers often approach the situation using the

*deficit* discourse as it pertains to academic achievement. This generally results in funding and

support for exceptional children with various impairments who are perceived to be the *most*

disadvantaged (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006). Accordingly, Gifted learners may not

feel empowered to challenge those agents who oppress them without appearing to be the

oppressors themselves (Allen & Rossatto, 2009); in other words, the Gifted *appear* to be

coming from a place—albeit constructed within a dominant, *deficit* discourse—of privilege and

are subsequently perceived as the "haves" (Davis, 2006) seeking supports that are categorized

as *above* the regular curriculum. One might concede that the privileged can appear as or

become the oppressors, meaning that Gifted learners in the body of all exceptional pupils

*appear* as the privileged over the "have-nots" (Davis, 2006). A critical discursive approach was

necessary to disrupt dominant discourses that limit our understanding of individual learning

needs, which has given rise to various re-conceptualisations for our collective response to

providing individualized programs and services that meet the individual needs of all learners

with *bona fide* exceptionalities (Finn & Wright, 2015).

What is more, Freire (1997) believed in the power of the educator to make significant

advancements toward more socially just classrooms and schools: "what I have been proposing

from my political convictions, my philosophical convictions, is a profound respect for the total autonomy of the educator" (p. 307). With the movement toward commodification of education and productivity as its gauge, neoliberal ideologies, as Apple (2010) argues, turn educational institutions into products for market that must meet certain standards for competition. With educational policies that promote standardized testing, assessment, and evaluation practices that quantify success in the name of preparing students for their futures, educators are unable to achieve what critical pedagogy seeks to do, unless they transgress. Further, critical pedagogy calls for democracy in both educational institutions and respective classrooms to promote and develop the critical consciousness of students and educators alike. However, through the medical model discourse of current practices in Special Education, democratic education is relatively achieved for only those with identified exceptionalities that are of a *deficit* nature, opposed to exceptionalities that also transgress the norms of ableism but are not viewed as impairments that require supports to bring them *up* to the norm. It is here where a false consciousness is produced—and consequently overlooked—as educational institutions group *all* special needs together and celebrate a collective advancement in programs and services that provide necessary (and legal) supports for those students with exceptionalities. By investigating *how* enrichment programming is viewed within the current educational system, this research de-constructs such alleged democratic practices so we may re-conceptualise our pedagogical responses to the needs of these high-ability learners.

Lastly, critical pedagogy began as a liberation movement where the oppressed could enact social change. Oppressed in this context is understood to include those who are marginalized, specifically those who are prevented from fully participating in society or

excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political, cultural, and educational life of their communities (Padhi, 2016). Arguably, critical pedagogy promotes the liberation of any oppressed identity group. Nevertheless, recognizing intellectually Gifted individuals as oppressed is not a widely accepted or understood argument in a society that subscribes to a *deficit* understanding of dis/ability (Goodley, 2014). This research draws on critical pedagogy to promote democratic education for *all* pupils in hopes of theoretically reinventing itself in a more privileged—albeit perceptually privileged—space around how identities are formed within oppressed identity groups. Likewise, Allen and Rossatto (2009) posit that there must be a greater willingness for teachers, students, administration, and other education workers and stakeholders to engage in such critical unpacking of what attributes or conditions may be privileging and what circumstances may be oppressing all individuals. At the heart of critical pedagogy is an implicit understanding that power is negotiated constantly (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015) between individuals and systems.

### 4.1.2 *Hegemonic Discourses and Practices of Special Education*

Current Special Education policies in Ontario, Canada, are deeply rooted in a bio-medical, individual, or deficit model that exists to diagnose and document impairments of students in order to provide these exceptional children with available supports, curative treatments (Gable, 2014; Malhotra & Rowe, 2014), and placements for their learning in publicly funded institutions. These policies and subsequent procedures are informed by genetic, chemical, and biological understandings (Gable, 2014) of students' performance in relation to the bell curve and, more specifically, where students fall within the normative range based on chronological age. What follows the identification process is the development

of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), often known as a working document that is legal,

helpful, and designed to support an exceptional student with various accommodations for

accessibility to reach and satisfy programmatic curricular expectations.  On one hand, Ontario,

Canada does have infrastructure to support the different abilities of learners in public

education; however, students must subject themselves to being pathologised—reduced to

body parts, function, and intellect—and literally identified as *Othered* (Kumashiro, 2002) to

access such supports.  Meanwhile, the identification of high-ability learners in Ontario is often

in vain, as the placements for Gifted students are most often fixed, offering only the regular

classroom opposed to self-contained or specialized programs with like-minded peers, and the

programs provided are often sporadic and withdrawal based.  As Westberg and Daoust (2003)

remind us that Gifted students are Gifted every day, not just during key times in the week (see

also Brown & Stambaugh, 2014).

Such lagging policies remain in effect due to what Sayer (1992) calls "practical

adequacy" status, which occurs when knowledge—often limited or antiquated—has been able

to make some type of contribution to our understanding of the world and is collectively

adopted as "fit for purpose" (p. 88) for the foreseeable future until something more

appropriate and widely accepted trumps it.  Gable (2014) further argues that such constrained

knowledge, like that of the bio-medical model, often remains as *the* established practice and

continues to govern current policies in the absence of a more holistic theory of disability that

has yet to be implemented and, most importantly, given widespread acceptance.  Critical

disability theorists argue the importance of the *social* model of disablement (Malhotra &

Rowe, 2014) that places an emphasis on attitudinal and "structural barriers as the

fundamental cause for the marginalization and oppression of disabled people" (p. 1). In this

light we understand disability as less of a noun and more as a verb: it is the barriers,

impositions, and restrictions that *create* the disability of one's impairment.

### 4.1.3   Critical Disability Theory

Established since the late 20th Century with roots in grounded theory and critical

perspectives, critical disability theorists draw on the theoretical framework of an

interconnected and recursive web of rights, identity, and advocacy (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014, p.

56). Drawing on the important contributions of Engel and Munger (2003) who find one's

*disability identity* to be shaped over a lifetime, these distinguished scholars have contributed a

deeper understanding of how to provide researchers with incredibly rich and undistorted

insight into the lived experiences of exceptional individuals by accessing one's consciousness

and meaning in its full context (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014). In the hopes of "redefining the

meanings of disability and to foster participation of people with disabilities in the exercise of

power" (Biklen, 2000, p. 337), critical disability scholars take up accessibility for individuals

with disabilities ranging from physical and intellectual impairments to both severe and

multiple learning and developmental disabilities, often illuminating how the hegemonic

discourse of ableism and ableist assumptions shape understanding and govern knowledge

production in society. Indeed, the dominant discourse is most certainly founded upon the

"neoliberal-able, complete, civilized, responsible, able, normative, self-serving individual

citizen…disability unhinges ableism" (Goodley, 2014, pp. 37-38). This suggests that those

individuals who not only fail to comply with the dominant understanding but noticeably

deviate from and threaten the status quo are subjected to Othering, which certainly includes

those who are *too* able or far *too* abstract, as they still deviate from the norm that is the mid-

range of the bell curve of able, rational, and fit.  Likewise, Goodley (2014) argues that when

disabled children enter mainstream education, they disrupt the ableist ideals; I would further

argue that when intellectually Gifted children enter those same classrooms, they, too, disrupt

the mainstream average and face hardships and marginalization akin to those with

exceptionalities for impairments.

According to Thomson (1997), to be granted full human status by "normatives,"

disabled persons hold the burden of proof to satisfy non-disabled persons of their ableism by

using charm, humour, entertainment, ardour and intimidation: "students with disabilities

historically have had to demonstrate that they could benefit from the regular class before they

were given a place…they must prove themselves against normate standards" (Biklen, 2000, p.

341).  Several critical disability scholars take up this social injustice of inaccessibility for

individuals with exceptionalities, arguing against the social construction of ableism for those

who have difficulty reaching that normative range from underneath it.  This research was

poised to address this same injustice of inadequate accessibility—specifically *intellectual*

accessibility—arguing against the normative range as dominant and privileged in society from

a dis/ability stance for the intellectually Gifted.  As Finn and Wright (2015) remind us:

"prosperity depends on raising the education ceiling as well as lifting the floor" (p. 225).

Consider Regulation 181/98 of the Ontario *Education Act* that specifies that an IEP be

developed for each and *every* student identified as exceptional by an Identification, Placement

and Review Committee (IPRC) with *exceptional pupil* defined as: "a pupil whose behavioural,

communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is

considered to need placement in a special education program" (Ministry of Education, 2001,

A3). In view of individuals with exceptionalities now considered to be an oppressed and

marginalized identity group deserving of accommodations (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014; see also

Chu & Myers, 2015), it follows that students with *any* exceptionality—Giftedness included—be

recognized as equally deserving of accommodations: "The role of schooling cannot be to level

the playing field of society's inequalities, but to help pupils achieve to the best of their ability"

(Winstanley, 2006, p. 37). Most importantly, this research does not seek to discriminate

against nor condemn the progressive work of critical disability scholars, but rather build on the

shoulders of social model thinkers (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010). By applying similar

poststructural arguments to another group of exceptional pupils—Intellectually-Gifted—we

can unpack and de-construct hegemonic educational practices that have *disabled* these

exceptional students through the imposition of institutional restrictions (Goodley & Runswick-

Cole, 2010).

As a final point, many critical disability scholars posit that narratives are the ideal fit for

purpose to learn from the stories of experience disabled persons share (Biklen, 2000; Engel &

Munger, 2007; Malhotra & Rowe, 2014) about their ontological understandings of being in the

world as individuals with impairments who do not necessarily fit society's definition of

normative—a social construction largely based on the hegemonic discourses of ableism. In

fact, such scholars emphasize the "importance of hearing the voices of the marginalized

people" (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014, p. 1) in order to affect change and social transformation. It

is through narratives that unfamiliar experiences for many become real, as such "emotive

richness and authenticity" (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014, p. 7) is voiced: "Narratives serve a

purpose that cannot be easily filled by dry quantitative analysis, especially when attempting to

challenge engrained stereotypes, by making the vivid immediacy of the situation crystal

clear…it brings a human face to the problem" (p. 7). By drawing upon critical theories such as

critical pedagogy and critical disability theory to frame this investigation, I was better

positioned to address the discursive gaps in understandings that are impacting our profession

and practice. Further, this critical discursive lens was helpful in disrupting the misnomer that

sees Giftedness as an asset exceptionality that is only privileged, rather than a *bona fide*

exceptionality (Finn & Wright, 2015) in public education that is equally deserving of the

commitment to "consistent, challenging programs that will capture [students'] interest and

prepare them for a lifetime of learning" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 3).

### 4.1.4    *Material-Semiotics—Actor-Network Theory*

This study draws upon *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)* as a sensibility or way to sense or

become closer to a phenomenon (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012). Widely understood as an "array

of practices" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. x) or collection of varying approaches to employing

material-semiotic tools, methods of analysis, and sensibilities, *ANT* "[treats] everything in the

social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within

which they are located. It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of

those relations" (Law, 2009, p. 141). The focus here is on the *socio*-material and how minute

relations among objects—both human and non-human—bring about the world (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2012). *ANT* approaches examine *how* these heterogeneous entities come together

and *how* they sustain or "cement" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2019, p. 2) their interrelations that

form assemblages that make things happen. Materiality, then, is critical to understanding

what appears to be happening socially, as *ANT* researchers examine *how* these material and

social relations are negotiated, changed, fortified, or even dissolved (Fenwick & Edwards,

2019, p. 2).  For the purposes of this research, I specifically draw upon *ANT* for a socio-material

analysis of the stories of lived experiences from Gifted students, teachers of the Gifted, and

educational stakeholders to help trace how various human and inanimate actors come to be

assembled (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012) and uncover the forces these heterogeneous entities

have when combined in particular ways within an educational institution.

Originally derived from the Social Sciences, *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)* emerged in

and around the 1980s and is predominantly associated with the enduring work of Michael

Callon (1986), Bruno Latour (2005), and John Law (1999, 2009).  Since the turn of the 21$^{st}$

Century, *ANT* has been taken up more frequently in educational research (Fenwick & Edwards,

2012, 2019).  Latour looks more at the social than the natural science, defining societies as

"associations" or "actor-networks" comprised of stabilized relations between human and non-

human entities (Rudy, 2005, p. 109).  *ANT* focuses on these heterogeneous entities and

practices of association and translation—when entities *act* on and around one another,

resulting in some form of enactment—between human and non-human actors that "together

engineer worlds" (Cadman, 2009, p. 1).  What is more, *ANT* prioritizes the identification of *all*

materials that are present in a social practice through meticulous analysis and subsequent

tracing of negotiations, collisions, and ally formation.  It is through this practice of de-

constructing and re-assembling that researchers can visibly see the incredible agility and often

understated suave handling of certain actors—whether they are human or non-human—that

hold power and are able to mobilize sometimes entire assemblages and networks toward a

particular enactment.  By incorporating *ANT* sensibilities and approaches to materially analyse

data, the everyday dynamics are made visible and thus provide a unique opportunity for the

researcher to acknowledge the very presence of these entities that matter; to track the

connections they all make, trace their interactions, negotiations, and enactments, and

(re)frame all materials as "*equal* in their ontological status" (Kamp, 2018, p. 780) thus

possessing agency.  This is especially important, as the human subject tends to be privileged

and positioned as powerful and capable of influence and agency, and where the material is

assumed to be separate, background, artefact, and almost always *non*-human (Fenwick,

Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011).

***Drawing Upon Poststructuralism***.  Regarded as a counter to structural-functionalism

that adopts system views of society or behaviour as patterned and fixed (Cohen, Manion, &

Morrison, 2011), poststructural perspectives do not subscribe to viewing phenomena as

singular or fixed.  Rather, they are best viewed as having *multiple* truths or a multiplicity about

them (Law, 2009) and as "combinations or patterned networks of diverse elements and

relations that are coordinated, arranged, combined, or patterned to *appear* as a convergence"

(Bacci & Goodwin, 2016, p. 14).  *ANT* claims that things and situations are real in their

consequence and relations, alleging that the *real* is neither constructed in human minds, nor a

fixed reality; instead, what are real are the "dynamic ever-changing networks of relations"

(Stangeland Kaufman & Idelström, 2018, p. 99).  Intellectual concerns of *Actor-Network Theory*

include: "precarious relations, the making of the bits and pieces in those relations, a logic of

translation, a concern with materials of different kinds, with how it is that everything hangs

together if it does" (Law, 2009, p. 145) suggesting that *ANT* can also be understood as an

empirical version of poststructuralism (p. 145).  If the task of poststructuralism is to

deconstruct, such as exposing the layers of meanings and privileging of meanings (Cohen et al.,

2011), then discourse matters; texts matter; things matter; all *matter* matters.

    ***Performance and Network Ontologies.***  *ANT* research is enacted from both a network

ontology (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012) and a performative ontology (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013).

Law (2009) reminds us that the world is *relational,* and it is these relations that produce and

re-assemble all entities into various arrangements that have the power to enact.  Likewise, he

argues that if the world is relational, so too are all *things* within it: "they come from

somewhere and tell particular stories about particular relations […] comes from somewhere,

rather than everywhere or nowhere" (Law, 2009, p. 142).  Crucial to a material-semiotic

approach is *performativity*, as the approach tells us that entities achieve their form as a

*consequence*—either directly or indirectly—of the very relations in which they are located

(Law, 1999).  It further tells us that they are performed within, through, and by those relations

(Law, 1999), and that "if relations do not hold fast by themselves, then they have to be

performed" (p. 4).  As an example, Law (2009) suggests that to understand markets, we must

trace *how* the webs of the various heterogeneous materials and social practices produce them.

It is these acts, these networks, that are *performative*.  In a heterogeneous world, every*thing*

plays a part in a relational sense, reminding education researchers utilizing *ANT* sensibilities

and methods that we are no longer dealing with construction but rather enactment or

performance (Law, 2009, p. 151).

    ***ANT as Method.***  Posthumanism may seem intellectually radical (Law, 2009, p. 147)

with the obsession over the nuanced and minute.  However, there is significant value in a

precise, socio-material analysis on a larger, institutional or macro-level context (Elkad-Lehman

& Greensfeld, 2011), which has proven incredibly beneficial in this study to magnify the

intricate or intertextual connections and details that go unnoticed when applying only

thematic analyses to narratives.  Whereas existing findings in the field of Gifted education

research in the form of critiques of programs and services are only able to hold things in place

and perpetuate their stagnant *being*, *ANT* can assist in peeling back the layers, as it is meant to

represent, to intervene, rather than totalize (T. Fenwick, personal communication, February

10, 2016).  Of course, *ANT* would not be able to, nor does it protest to, address *why* a

phenomenon exists (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012; Latour, 2005), but rather it allows us to get

close enough to the material mess to finally see *what* and *how* this phenomenon is existing, so

we may be poised to finally address *why*.

For the purposes of this study, I specifically draw upon *ANT* as a sensibility and method

of analysis rather than as a methodology.  Here, *ANT* is employed as a new lens for analytical

purposes that complements the broader critical narrative inquiry (CNI).  *ANT* as a method has

provided me with a fresh and unique way to engage with and (re)enter both stale and ongoing

conversations about *why* we find ourselves in this status quo practice of regular classroom

placement with primarily withdrawal-based enrichment programming.  Further, *ANT* analyses

have allowed me to investigate more precisely *what* holds things together and *how* these

assemblages influence policy and practice, as well as making a conscious effort not to ignore

the material practices that are generating the social and resisting the desire to move (too)

quickly to a non-material version of the social (Law, 2009).  Whereas sociological approaches

are often interested in the *whys* of the social, material-semiotics explore the *hows* (Law, 2009, p. 148) so we may then *address* the whys.

## 4.1.5   Autoethnographic Sensibilities

This study draws upon autoethnographic sensibilities that asks at its core: "How does my own experience of my culture offer insights *about* this culture, situation, event, and way of life?" (Patton, 2015, p. 101).  In autoethnography, the researcher *is* the subject (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and uses one's own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture of which one is apart (Patton, 2015).  Autoethnography, then, is an autobiographical genre of academic writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and approach to research that "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 1).  Autoethnographers actively engage in reflexivity, bring personal insight, and devote themselves to systematic introspection through intentional and sustained focus on the researcher's experiences, emotions, insights, and memories to gain a fuller understanding of the interactions between themselves and the broader world (Poulos, 2021, p. 16).  What is more, autoethnographic approaches to research *need* the researcher to be vulnerable, intimate, and show passion, struggle, and embodied life that evokes the reader "to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433).

Autoethnography has been in circulation for at least four decades (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) yet is still considered an emerging approach (Patton, 2015) that draws upon one of the earliest qualitative approaches of ethnography that has roots in anthropology and the study of

culture.  The primary method of ethnographers has traditionally been participant observation

that requires extensive fieldwork where the researcher is completely immersed in the culture

under study (Patton, 2015), and where ethnography becomes not just observation but a new

way of seeing (Wolcott, 2008).  *Auto*ethnography, then, integrates ethnography with personal

story (Patton, 2015) and relies on various methods of data gathering tools that are common to

other forms of qualitative social research including focus groups, personal narratives,

interviews, participant observation, artifacts, journaling, field notes among others, as well as

analytical techniques that draw upon narrative, archival, thematic, description, context, and

storytelling (Poulos, 2021).  This "observational data-driven phenomenological method of

narrative research" (Poulos, 2021, p. 5) endeavours to craft and share compelling and

evocative narratives as a primary data source (Patton, 2015) that captures the lived

experiences of the researcher in relation to the phenomenon under investigation.

Accordingly, the most important questions to autoethnographers are: "who reads our work,

how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (Ellis et al., 2011, p.

11).

Pioneers in autoethnography, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's (2006) enthusiasm for

this approach was inspired by the desire to "move ethnography away from the gaze of the

distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement,

engagement, and embodied participation" (pp. 433-434).  In an earlier publication in the

*Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain how autoethnographers

display multiple layers of understanding that connect the personal to the cultural:

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens,

focusing outward on social and the cultural aspects of their personal experience; then,

they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through,

refract, and resist cultural interpretations.  As they zoom backward and forward,

inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred.

(p. 739)

Autoethnography is not "just" a story but rather a story with a purpose (Poulos, 2021, p. 13)

that opens up conversations about how people live and what they have experienced (Ellis &

Bochner, 2006) in rich, evocative, and thick descriptions of personal narratives (Ellis et al.,

2011).  It is also an approach to research that acknowledges subjectivity, the emotionality, and

the researcher's influence on the inquiry rather than hiding from these matters or assuming

they do not exist (Ellis et al., 2011).

   ***Autoethnography as Method.***  For the purposes of this study, I have also employed

autoethnography as a sensibility and method to complement the broader *critical narrative*

*inquiry* (CNI) methodology.  An autoethnographic approach provided me with a frame, a lens,

where I could insert myself at the center of the research to deeply explore my own

experiences (Haberlin, 2016) within an education system.  This autoethnographic approach

was a way to get a critical perspective on educational experiences (Grumet, 1981) that earlier

material-semiotic analyses showed have become "taken-for-granted" practices and

understandings.  When using personal narratives, it is important to nest these personal

experiences within the broader cultural understanding, as these forms of autoethnography

can be met with criticism from traditional social scientists when they are not accompanied by

more traditional analyses, connections to scholarly literature, or cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011).  In this study, I further nested my stories of experience within the broader cultural context and conversations occurring at that time in history, making visible how personal histories were influenced and shaped by contemporary policies and institutional processes.  It invited me to dig deeper for answers by connecting my experiences in an education system to the bigger picture of a social and cultural context (Haberlin, 2016).  Further, this autoethnographic method helped me to make sense of what I had experienced and how my actions and practice were influenced by external public policies.  It is my hope that these experiences can encourage policymakers to use what they learn from these personal narratives to reflect upon, understand, and engage in educational policy debate from these various entry points (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005).

## 4.2   Critical Narrative Methodology

Located in a social constructionist and interpretivist epistemological position that believes social reality is fluid, multifaceted (Spector-Mersel, 2010), and created out of interactions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), this *critical narrative inquiry (CNI)* has provided both the participants and the researcher the opportunity to share rich experiences, raise questions, and co-create new meanings (Beattie, 1995) using personal narratives as a "channel for listening to silenced voices" (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 7) of those with less visible needs. Through the telling and retelling of stories of experience (Beattie, 1995), narratives can reveal what is meaningful to individuals, can capture the complexity of the human condition, and, in this study, can help policymakers and educational stakeholders see *how* the gap between the *intended* and the *enacted* programming and placement for Gifted learners continues to exist

and understand the affects of this gap on their lived experiences in our 21st Century classrooms today.

### 4.2.1   Narrative Inquiry

The narrative approach to qualitative inquiry largely focuses on stories (Patton, 2015) and examines human lives through a lens of narration that honours lived experiences as a source of substantial knowledge and understanding of our human condition (Clandinin, 2013). The contemporary field of narrative inquiry draws largely on the work of pioneer scholars including Catherine Riessman (1993, 2008), and both Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000).  It is Clandinin (2006) who reminds us that narrative inquiry is an old practice where our lived and told stories and further talk *about* those stories are the ways in which we create meaning in our lives (p. 44), which reveals our quintessentially social nature (Patton, 2015). We collect stories and both observe and participate in the ways in which they unfold in particular situations, contexts, and circumstances (Patton, 2015).  Narrative inquiry, then, as both methodology and method can help capture how people make sense of the world around them by observing and analysing this thinking *through* and *with* stories that is often presented in the recording of events and extent of detail that is given, including, for example, who is mentioned, who is absent, and the roles they all have (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 230). Storytelling is a natural and common form of human communication that can provide a means for investigating issues that are relevant to our human activities that more traditional methodologies are not likely to uncover (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 111).

The primary focus of narrative inquiry is trying to understand *experience*, which

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue happens narratively (p. 19) and within our own collections

of stories.  When considering our memories and experiences that we recall, we share them

through storytelling orally with other humans, visually through artistic expression, or in writing

through various mediums.  Regardless of how they are shared, they often represent a

wholeness of an individual's life experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17) in a *temporal*

way (p. 19) that could also be considered "work in progress" (p. 60) at a particular time, and in

a particular space or place.  Indeed, "narrative is not an objective reconstruction of life—it is a

rendition of how life is perceived" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3).

Narrative inquiry satisfies the need for a methodological response to positivist and

postpositivist paradigms (Clandinin, 2006) and has become largely interdisciplinary (Riessman,

1993), cross-pollinating with a range of different disciplines that represent various ways and

purposes that stories can be utilized (Mertova & Webster, 2020).  In fact, various fields have

used narrative approaches to "provide a more holistic picture of the issues of their concern, to

help them reveal and better deal with the complexities of those issues…they also highlight the

human centeredness of professional practice and research" (Mertova &Webster, 2020, p. 57).

Looking toward educational research, narrative inquiry is not only interested in exploring such

complexity from a human-centered approach (Mertova & Webster, 2020), but is best

positioned to and highly capable of addressing educational research needs that incorporate

culture, examine social structures (Patton, 2015), and "capture the 'multiplicity of voices'

involved in creating the plotlines of stories" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 30).  Whereas

traditional, empirical approaches attempt to develop *certainty* and simply cannot sufficiently

address the multiplicity of perspectives and human complexity (Mertova & Webster, 2020),

narrative inquiry captures contextual influences in ways that other research methods may not

(Bold, 2012).  What is more, the postmodern interests that narrative inquiry draws upon

include "'who is doing what to whom' (character, plot and time); multiple voices (truths);

relationships between disciplines; practical concerns; personal voices; and social, ethical and

cultural responsibilities" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 28), highlighting what Riessman (1993)

calls the "situatedness" and "interconnectedness" of narratives within social, cultural, and

institutional discourses and contexts.

Tired of the misnomer that science is real knowledge and narrative research is mere

storytelling or interpretation and thus *not* real, Hendry (2010) calls for a repositioning of

narrative inquiry toward narrative *as* inquiry, as at the heart of any inquiry is the asking of

questions, determining how best to respond to those questions, then engaging in deep

exploration of the phenomenon followed by generating more questions (p. 73).  An important

distinction must be made here where stories are to be viewed as data, and narratives as

analyses (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Patton, 2015), as story and narrative are analytically

different (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 227).  Stories are at the center of narrative analysis.

> Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language—*how* and *why* incidents are
>
> storied, not simply the content to which language refers.  For whom was *this* story
>
> constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured in that
>
> way? What cultural resources does the story draw on, or take for granted? What
>
> storehouse of plots does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are there gaps

and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative, or counter-narratives?

(Riessman, 2008, p. 11)

These narratives are then research products *of* analysing and interpreting those stories, adding

further insight into these "contexts of practice" (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 229) and nesting those

dominant and even counter narratives within the broader social, political, cultural, and

institutional contexts in which they are shared.  Narratives are then used to generate

knowledge and understanding in local, national, and global contexts, and are often compared

to other narratives (Patton, 2015) and scholarly literature for understanding research trends

more broadly.

### 4.2.2  Critical Narrative Inquiry

Barone posits that "narrative is used to challenge taken-for-granted ideas and to raise

disturbing questions about educational issues, asking all involved to reconsider and reorient

their thinking" (as cited in Latta & Kim, 2010, p. 139).  Likewise, critical disability scholars often

draw upon narrative approaches, as they have tremendous power to shape our understanding

of the world: "'narratives can help to breach the barriers of detachment, doctrinal technicality,

skepticism, and even irony that often separates legal scholars from the actual life experiences

on which they should draw when they write about disability" (Engel & Munger, 2007, p. 85).

However, when narrative researchers seek to investigate a phenomenon critically, the

*criticalness*—the examination of issues of power—must be explained in detail to distinguish it

from storytelling (Iannacci, 2007, 2019).  Interpretivism cannot account for political and

ideological contexts with regards to social behaviour (Cohen et al., 2011), as it is considered an

"uncritical form of study" (Crotty, 1998/2015, p. 112).  With the goals of this research rooted

in both *understanding* and *explaining* the status quo phenomenon under investigation, this

thoughtful marriage of interpretivist epistemological approaches with both social

constructionist and critical approaches is complementary, commensurable, and has allowed

for a more thorough and holistic investigation of programming and placement practices for

Gifted learners in Ontario, Canada.

This study sought to learn from the experiences of students, teachers, and educational

stakeholders in and around Gifted programming and placement and intended to first uncover

*what* the root cause was of this status quo phenomenon where the overwhelming majority of

high-ability pupils experience placement in the regular classroom and receive primarily

withdrawal-based enrichment programming.  It further intended to make visible *how* this

status quo practice has continued to exist within education systems and what the dominant

discourses and practices might be that are perpetuating this phenomenon.  Subscribing to a

*critical narrative inquiry* methodology, this research underwent a reconceptualisation process

that is critical in nature so it could offer "alternative ways of thinking, being, and doing"

(Iannacci, 2019, p. 15; 2007) for our high-ability pupils in our contemporary, public education

systems.  According to Iannacci (2019), reconceptualisation is realized through a process of

*construction*, *deconstruction*, and finally *reconstruction* (p. 14), which draws on French

philosopher, Paul Ricoeur's (1992, 1990) "threefold mimesis" that refers to three domains of a

past, a present mediating act, and a future (Herda, 1999, p. 76).  Ricoeur emphasizes that

language is not just a system, but can articulate lived experiences.  This theory of narrative and

interpretation considers language, reflection, understanding, and the self (Ricoeur, 1976,

1990), and through analysis and interpretation of lived experiences can new recognitions of "being-in-the-world" (Simonÿ, Specht, Anderson, Johansen, Nielsen, & Agerskov, 2018, p. 1) be achieved.  More specific to this study's framework, Iannacci (2019) articulates how *mimesis 1* is understood as the world presented in narrative form (construction of stories or "what *was"*); *mimesis 2* occurs through reflection about and distancing from pre-understandings (deconstruction or "what *is"*), and is often referred to as contextualising or nesting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); and *mimesis 3* applies these insights to a "refigured future" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 15) (reconceptualisation or "a vision of what *can be"*).

An emerging genre of qualitative research (Iannacci, 2009, 2019), *critical narrative inquiry (CNI)* extends narrative analysis that is focused on how people make sense of their experiences in society, to include its deep concern with language, culture, and issues of power (Souto-Manning, 2014; see also Moss, 2004)—including our participation in those issues—that is in need of unpacking and rethinking.  Further, it is the commitment to interrogation (Burm, 2016) and the need to not only make visible but disrupt what has been taken-for-granted in institutional discourses and practices that draws me to *CNI*.  The *criticalness* (Iannacci, 2007, 2019) is further employed through the use of varied methods in this study, including narrative, material-semiotic, and autoethnography that not only provide separate lenses with which to view the data but complementary in how they each highlight the voices that are present, as well as absent, and ponder not only why but question what the implications might be.  As Moss (2004) argues, by drawing attention to what is there and not there, it

> broadens the picture of "what is going on" in a setting where the voices of the
>
> dominant ones are already situated, often unquestioned, in decision-making.  Adding

the marginalized voice to the picture of "what is going on" democratizes the dominant

voices rather than downsize them. (p. 366)

Critical narrative research proposes that when individuals make sense of their experiences

through narratives, they bring together what Souto-Manning (2014) calls the micro (personal)

and the macro (social and institutional) (p. 163), which allows for the critical analysis of

narratives within the context of dominant discourses that may be influencing policy and

practice.  Further, as Souto-Manning (2014) points out, discourses are only powerful when

they are recycled in stories that people share.  This illustrates how appropriate this critical

narrative approach is to investigating the status quo phenomenon that continues to exist in

public education for high-ability learners by first understanding how the stories have been

constructed, followed by deconstructing those narratives through reflecting, contextualizing

and nesting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which can then give rise to a reconceptualised

understanding of the phenomenon and alternative ways we might design a "refigured future"

(Iannacci, 2019, p. 15) of what *can* be.

## 4.3   A Novel "Show and Tell" Approach

The field of Gifted education is saturated with findings that take the form of critiques of

programming and placement to merely answer *what* is happening, rather than providing a

holistic analysis as to *why* we are continuing to subscribe to a recycling (Souto-Manning, 2014)

of "practically adequate" (Sayer, 1992) practices and discourses that position the needs of

high-ability learners as *beyond* or not *as* important as those pupils who are perhaps not

achieving to the current standards established by a governing body.  To answer *why* dominant

discourses of withdrawal-based programming and regular classroom placement options for

secondary Gifted learners exist as the primary model within the current educational system in

Ontario, Canada, it is imperative that we first understand *how* such discourses and practices

come to assemble and *how* they sustain such power and influence over time.  It was then

necessary to employ a novel approach that combined methods that could both "show and tell"

to give rise to a more complex, more three-dimensional way of understanding the *topography*

(Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of this status quo phenomenon—the features, the different

terrain, and the contours that show us exactly *how* this has continued to happen—so we may

intentionally disrupt our current programmatic and placement practices and impoverished

pedagogical position (Iannacci, 2019, p. 34) around where the needs of Gifted students are

located in public education systems across Ontario, Canada.

### 4.3.1   *"Show" with Material-Semiotic Sensibilities*

I drew upon material-semiotic sensibilities, specifically *Actor-Network Theory*, as a

critical method to "show" the various actors that were present and involved in enacting this

status quo, as well as tracing their interactions, negotiations, and ways in which these entities

were able to exert force, change, and be changed by each other (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010,

2012).  This *socio*-material approach made visible the *who*, *what*, and *how* we find ourselves in

this perpetual programming and placement impasse in public education.  Attention to

materiality further complemented the narrative data and analyses, which was precisely the

argument for utilizing *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)* as a data analysis tool rather than a

methodology.  More specifically, *ANT* was not able to, nor does it protest to, address *why* a

phenomenon exists; *ANT* can only determine *what* the assemblages might be and *how* the

various actors come to assemble and perform a particular act (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012;

Latour, 2005).  In what has only enhanced and provided a more complete or holistic

understanding of a phenomenon is that *ANT* acknowledges that what participants might share

are not only stories of experience, but stories of *effects* (Fenwick, 2010) of various actors that

when brought together perform a particular enactment that influences education (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2012; Latour, 2005): "The focus is on how things are enacted rather than attempting

to explain why they are the way they are" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, p. xi).  Indeed,

incorporating a socio-material analysis provided a complementary analytical approach to

understanding dominant discourses and practices identified through the shared stories of

experience in a rich and visual or graphic way, extending the prior narrative analyses and

corroborating dominant and counter narratives of experience.

### 4.3.2   *"Tell" with Autoethnographic Sensibilities*

This methodological approach needed a way to respond to the material findings,

complete the stories, and share the effects of living with public policy (Neysmith, Bezanson, &

O'Connell, 2005).  The previous "show" (material) phase of analysis gave rise to the

identification of various "critical incidents" or episodes that brought to light significant issues

within education systems that required additional information to complete a more holistic

picture of what had transpired.  These critical incidents made their way to the surface and

spoke to me, the participant-researcher, given my unique positionality as not only a former

student in an enrichment program and researcher in the field of Gifted Education and

intellectual accessibility, but as a seasoned system staff responsible for a Secondary Gifted

portfolio for a relatively large school board.  Inspired by these critical events, a series of

autoethnographic vignettes were composed as part of this novel approach to "tell" more

about the enacting of these influential public policies, as I hold a collection of stories that could help flesh out and pick up where the material analyses left off.

Autoethnographic sensibilities were used as a method to "tell" my stories of enacting, enabling, and living the effects of public policy.  Viewing myself as the phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 7), I felt compelled to provide "multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37) and report on my own experiences and introspections to "garner insights into the larger cultural or subculture of which you are a part" (Patton, 2015, p. 102).  Using autoethnography as a method of "telling" a series of stories to convey information needed to appreciate greater content and context further complements this study's novel approach of "show and tell" methods.  It further invites a broader audience to enter the participant-researcher's world and use what they learn there to reflect upon, understand, and perhaps engage in educational policy debate from these various entry points (Neysmith et al., 2005).  The spirit of this approach was to nest these personal experiences of enacting, enabling, and living the effects of educational policy within those specific policies so as to promote "an understanding of that experience and perhaps providing insights into our judgements and the need for new types of practices in a changing society" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 9), such as how and where we position the needs of high-ability learners in public education today.

### 4.3.3   Addressing Commensurability with Approach(es)

This study is located within the social constructionist worldview that social reality is constructed based on our interactions with surroundings (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).  It draws upon critical and poststructural theories that are driven by the study of social structures,

power, and control (Merriam, 1991), which come full circle to support the critical spirit (Crotty, 1998/2015) of social constructionism.  I do recognize the apparent ontological and epistemological conundrum with locating this research within the in-between space of construction and subjectivism that calls commensurability into question.  Briefly, constructionists and subjectivists expect multiple interpretations of a phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 28) and multiple truths in the development of knowledge but can differ slightly depending on the perspective operating *within* the subjective epistemology, such as postmodernism, which rejects any attempt to establish objective Truth or truths.  Accordingly, it is then suggested that social constructionist (Critical Narrative Research, Autoethnography) and subjectivist (Material-Semiotics) epistemological positions are *not* fundamentally incommensurable, as "CNR encourages the researcher to pay attention to the human relationships, while ANT reminds the researcher not to ignore the non-human and what they are capable of" (Burm, 2016, p. 62).  This combined approach is highly complementary and is akin in design to the widely recognized classroom activity of "show and tell."  We have come to expect that socio-material studies show not only diverse material enactments themselves but *how* they perform.  When combined, critical narrative inquiry not only harnesses the power of telling and sharing stories of experience, but also uses the "fine-grained tracing of detail" (Fenwick & Landri, 2012, p. 5) from *ANT* to provide a more complete, holistic, and enhanced understanding of this status quo phenomenon.  Here, *ANT* acknowledges that what participants might share are not only stories of experience, but stories of *effects* (Fenwick, 2010) that most certainly support critical narrative researchers in deconstructing and

challenging the dominant narratives and practices, allowing new and more comprehensive

storylines to emerge (Iannacci, 2007).

Combining the *how* of material-semiotics and autoethnography with the broader

methodology of critical narrative inquiry as an approach to getting closer to a phenomenon

has demonstrably allowed us to problematize *why* we find ourselves in a situation where the

status quo of programming and placement for Gifted learners remains stagnant.  Indeed,

various lenses of *ANT* and autoethnography have enabled us to make explicit the potential and

point to the limitations (Stangeland Kaufman & Idelström, 2018, p. 98) so we may engage

policymakers and educators in a critical conversation around re-conceptualising how we

respond to the needs of our Gifted pupils in 21st Century classrooms, institutions, and

educational systems.

## 4.4   Summary

Despite significant scholarly attention, we as a field of Gifted education have not had a

way to capture the hearts and minds of policymakers and help them engage in honest reflection

on *why* we keep subscribing to a status quo of programming and placement practices for

Ontario's Gifted learners in public education.  This chapter details the social constructionist and

interpretivist, *critical narrative inquiry (CNI)* methodology of this research that is poised to get

close enough to the status quo mess by way of complementary "show and tell" methods of

material-semiotics and autoethnography to finally see *what* and *how* this phenomenon is existing

so we may engage in informed debate as to *why*.  It further provides a comprehensive overview

of the eclectic theoretical framework of this research including critical pedagogy, dominant

discourses and practices of Special Education, and critical disability theory that draw upon critical

and poststructural theories that are driven by the study of social structures, power, and control

(Merriam, 1991).  We look specifically at how the critical and complementary "show and tell"

method approach is able to bring us close enough to the phenomenon to experience the depth

of understanding as evidenced in the features, the different terrain, and the contours of the

*topography* of our field that we have not been able to see so clearly using approaches that have

given us a more two-dimensional understanding of programming and placement.  This novel

"show and tell" approach as part of a broader, *critical narrative inquiry* has shown us exactly *how*

we have come to be at this impasse so we may finally engage policymakers and educational

stakeholders in what we must now do to disrupt these institutionally disabling practices and re-

envision what *can* be.

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# Chapter 5

## 5      Study Design & Investigative Procedures

*The magic is in the mess.*

*—Brené Brown*

This chapter details the design of this research project and describes each of the complementary "show" (material-semiotic) and "tell" (autoethnographic) methods within the broader *critical narrative inquiry* methodological framework.  This two-phase study takes a critical approach to investigating a status quo phenomenon that continues to exist within Ontario's public education system that overwhelmingly places high-ability pupils within the regular classroom and provides largely withdrawal-based enrichment programming as the only available option.  This study design was in direct response to the saturation of findings in the field of Gifted education that take the form of critiques of programming and placement to merely answer *what* is happening, rather than providing a holistic analysis as to *why* we are continuing to subscribe to a recycling (Souto-Manning, 2014) of "practically adequate" (Sayer, 1992) practices and discourses that position the needs of high-ability learners as *beyond* the scope of the regular curriculum and regular classroom.  By investigating the types of programs in education systems rather than critically examining both their effects on learning (Kim, 2016) and what structures and belief systems might be influencing current policy and practice, we are perpetuating a situation where we are continuing to inform our field in more two-dimensional or *surface* topography ways that do not bring us close enough to experience the features, the different terrain, and contours of the phenomenon.  Drawing upon critical and poststructural theories that are driven by the study of discourses, language, culture, and issues

of power (Souto-Manning, 2014; see also Moss, 2004) and control (Merriam, 1991), this study

sought to uncover *what* the root cause was of this status quo phenomenon and further make

visible *how* this status quo practice has continued to exist within education systems, as well as

identify what the dominant discourses and practices are that are perpetuating this

phenomenon in public education.

## 5.1   Setting, Participants, and (Re)visiting Data with New Lenses

This study, more broadly speaking, took place within an educational setting in

Southwestern Ontario, Canada.  Having been involved within the field of Gifted education for

upwards of thirty years as once a former student in an enrichment program in elementary

school, a researcher in the field of Gifted Education and intellectual accessibility, as well as a

seasoned system staff responsible for a Secondary Gifted portfolio for a relatively large school

board, I found myself reflecting on how similar my experiences were as a student to how my

students were experiencing enrichment programming today and pondering *why* that might be.

Years prior I had engaged in a research project to better understand newly implemented

Gifted programming in a large public school board in Southwestern Ontario that served rural,

urban, and suburban schools through an exploration of the stories of experience from both

secondary school staff and students (Gollan-Wills, 2014).  At the time of that original study,

findings made visible the varied needs of high-ability pupils in secondary education and

provided me with immediate action steps to refine our system vision for enrichment

programming in my own board of education.  However, having lived within and among the

broader education system in Ontario, Canada since the study was conducted, I have felt this

tension with the data almost as though there was some unfinished business with those stories.

The draw toward the data signaled a need to (re)visit, to learn more, and to interrogate the very design and implementation of the system or board-level programming vision itself, pondering how effective it was at meeting the *many* needs of the Gifted pupils we serve.

### 5.1.1   *Setting and Participants from (Re)visited Data*

The focus group data that was (re)visited included student and teacher participants that were selected from twenty-six secondary (26) schools within a large, local public school board in Southwestern Ontario that ranged in population from 200 to 1,800 enrolled students and were within a large, immediate city, as well as the surrounding counties, small cities, and towns.  With public education, socioeconomic status ranged from lower class to upper class and included student participants selected from Grades 9 through 12, ranging from 13 to 17 years of age at the time of the study, in addition to the adult participants who ranged in age from 24 to 60.  This study did not predominantly target a select cultural population, so it followed that the general demographics included a diverse cultural population and fairly balanced distribution of participants that identified as both male and female.  Selected students and Gifted teachers or Learning Support Teachers participated in a two-phase study from October 2013 to June 2014.

The study population included all formally identified Gifted youth in Grades 9 through 12 that were registered as day students at one of the 26 secondary schools in the participating public school board as of October 1, 2013.  There were 421 students and 59 teachers invited to participate in an initial survey.  A total of 85 student participants and 19 teacher participants from 17 secondary schools returned the demographic questionnaires resulting in a 21.7% return rate.  Of the 104 participants, 44 students and 14 teachers consented to participate in

the second phase of the study.  A smaller sample was selected for maximal diversity, which

included 13 participants who were invited to participate in the follow-up focus groups.  A total

of 12 participants from 8 secondary schools were in attendance for the second phase of the

study including: one Grade 9 male, one Grade 9 female, two Grade 10 females, one Grade 10

male, two Grade 11 males, one Grade 12 male, one Grade 12 female, two female teachers,

and one male teacher.  The sample of student participants was culturally and ethnically

diverse, and students often made reference to their extended and even immediate families'

experiences in European, Asian, and Eastern countries, as well as a range of languages spoken

in the home.  The sample of teacher participants was less culturally diverse with three

Caucasian adults who made little reference to their culture or ethnicity throughout the focus

groups.

*Inclusion Criteria for Student Participants*.  Prior to receiving the initial questionnaire,

students were first selected based on their designation listed on their Individual Education

Plan.  Precise numbers of those students who were identified Gifted was determined at the

beginning of the fall semester—October 1, 2013—through a system-specific report where

information was up-to-date with regards to diagnoses and special needs in each building.

Inclusion criteria for student participants indicated that they held a designation of

Intellectual—Gifted that met the local public school board's criteria for Giftedness, including a

score of 130 or above in the Full Scale of General Abilities Index (98th percentile/very superior

range) on the Weschler Intelligence Scale (WISC IV), as determined by a specialist including,

but not limited to, a psychologist/psychometrist/psychiatrist, and documented on the

students' Individual Education Plans.  Seeking maximal diversity, male and female participants

across all grades were fairly balanced, and the original aim for an equal distribution of gender

and age in the sample was successful.

**Inclusion Criteria for Teacher Participants**.  Inclusion criteria for teacher participants

included being the designated teacher for Gifted needs at their respective secondary schools,

which ranged from Learning Support Teachers to Department Heads and Classroom Teachers

who may or may not have had additional staffing provided to them or their schools for the

purposes of providing enrichment programming and services.  One to four designated

educators from each of the 26 schools were asked to participate in the first phase of the study,

which were those adults responsible for delivering, coordinating, and/or programming for the

Gifted students.  Department Heads of Special Education or Learning Support Teachers that

develop the students' Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and perform more administrative

duties but do not program for them in any capacity were not invited to participate in the

study.

### 5.1.2  Setting and Participants for Broader Study

As indicated earlier, this research project, more broadly speaking, took place within an

educational setting in Southwestern Ontario, Canada.  Data was collected and analysed within

two distinct phases that each drew upon complementary methods.  The focus group data from

the earlier study (Gollan-Wills, 2014) was used as the sole data source for the first phase of

this study, which employed a meticulous, socio-material analysis on the transcripts of raw,

narrative data collected from eight (8) focus groups of students, teachers, and blended

groupings.  The second phase of this study employed autoethnographic sensibilities in

response to the findings from this material-semiotic phase of the research.  Although I am the

lone research participant in the second phase of the study, I believe I represent a broader

population of educational stakeholders who have held system-level positions within a public

board or broader field of education that services high-ability pupils.  With regards to

participant selection and inclusion criteria in an autoethnography, the researcher views herself

*as* the phenomenon under investigation (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 7).  As such, the

participant-researcher is at the center of the investigation as both the *subject* (researcher who

is performing the inquiry) and *object* (participant who is investigated) (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, &

Chang, 2010, p. 2; see also Ellis & Bochner, 2000).  As method, autoethnography attempts to

"recenter the researcher's experience as vital in and to the research process" (Poulos, 2020, p.

4), observing varied participatory and self-reflective methods that connect the self to others

and "illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural

praxis" (p. 5).  Circling back to the inclusion criteria for this autoethnographic phase, it is

important to introduce myself for background and to nest my experiences within the broader

educational discourses and context.  To avoid repetition, however, I have shared my

background information through a series of summaries of the autoethnographic data that was

collected from documents, artefacts, reflexive journaling and responsive vignettes in the

seventh chapter, more specifically *7.2 Constructions: Autoethnographic Vignettes*.

## 5.2   Phase 1 "Show": Data Collection and Analysis

For this *critical narrative* research, voluminous qualitative data was collected through

six (6) methods: focus group interviews (revisited), material-semiotic mindmaps (visual maps),

artefacts, retrospective field notes, reflexive journaling, and written vignettes.  This first

section of investigative procedures will detail the first phase of the study that draws upon

material-semiotic sensibilities, specifically *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)*, as a critical method to

"show" the various actors that were present and involved in enacting this status quo, as well

as tracing their interactions, negotiations, and ways in which these entities were able to exert

force, change, and be changed by each other (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, 2012).  In what

follows are procedural details for in-tandem collection and analysis of socio-material data *on*

the revisited narrative data (Gollan-Wills, 2014) that was designed to make visible the *who*,

*what*, and *how* we have found ourselves in this perpetual programming and placement

impasse in public education.

*5.2.1   Concurrent Data Collection and Analysis for "Show" Phase*

The simultaneous process of data collection and material-semiotic analysis using *ANT*

was completed in four stages, which I will explain in the singular, as it was repeated for each of

the eight (8) focus groups in the order that they occurred.  First, I (re)read the transcript of the

focus group numerous times with the support of an audio recording, as well as referred to the

visual recording that accompanied it to tease out who may be speaking, or various gestures

used and so forth.  Each time I revisited a transcript, I highlighted with a different colour:

primarily yellow for salient information, red for non-human actors, and green for human

actors.  Second, I used several tangible materials to begin the lengthy and tedious process of

arranging and building a material mindmap for each focus group.  Materials included a colour-

printed copy of the transcript, dark pink and green 2"x2" post-its for the actors (one for human

and one for non-human), yellow and teal scalloped post-its for assemblages, an oversized

magnetic white board, and white board markers.  As I would review the transcript line by line, I

would write each actor on a single, corresponding post-it and place it on the mindmap.  As I

would plot the actor post-its, I would use the assemblage post-its for preliminary analysis as the focus group was unfolding.  It was also a great way to begin tracing what and who went where.  Third, tracing began.  Significant attention was paid to the clusters of actors who found themselves together and the process of tracing connections, determining how they came together and the nuances surrounding the precarious placements was made visible through different colours of whiteboard markers and line styles that would signify a different network, side effect or connection.  Eventually, patterns emerged and assemblages were identified as multiple networks occurring within the same global network of each focus group. The fourth part was focused on analytically engaging with four questions or processes: *(1) Who are the actors and what are the processes? (2) What do they do? How are they affected by one another? Who/what are they affecting? What are the effects? (3) Trace the assemblages and identify how things have power in enactment; and (4) Identify the "critical incidents" that need additional content and context for holistic understanding*, which were used in the subsequent "tell" phase of the study with autoethnographic methods.

As Fenwick & Edwards (2012) indicate, *ANT* is not applied like a typical, theoretical approach nor is it lockstep in execution; researchers may choose to follow a particular actor or assemblage and trace the ways in which it negotiates, overlaps, collides, changes, and is changed by other actors or networks.  Other approaches may include meticulous examination of a particular segment of a network or space where there is high traffic that demands further attention to tease out what exactly is happening and who or what is involved.  Given the parameters of a dissertation, and the importance of cutting the network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, p. xiv) for scope, I chose to present the material findings in a way that the broader

audience of educational stakeholders and policymakers could both trace and connect with by

identifying and explaining a handful of the most influential actors.  I accomplished this by

tracing and identifying the most powerful *intermediary* or "black box" (Latour, 2005) and

identified the three most remarkable *mediators* that were *performed* to exert significant force

in the ongoing perpetuation of the status quo of programming and placement for high-ability

learners in public education systems.

## 5.2.2   Identifying the "Critical Incidents"

This phase of the research gave rise to a number of "critical incidents" or episodes that

brought to light significant issues within education systems that required additional

information to complete a more holistic picture of what had transpired.  What was initially

conceptualized as a distilled set of themes that presented themselves as "the right mix of

ingredients at the right time and in the right context" (Woods, 1993, p. 102) throughout the

socio-material analysis phase of the study, five (5) *critical incidents* were identified through the

impact they had on the storytellers.  Several of the critical incidents identified existed within

an organizational structure and were subject to its governance, authority, performance

expectations, and operational procedures (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 69).  They were

unplanned, unanticipated, were intensely personal with strong emotional involvement, had an

impact on the people involved in the focus groups, existed within a particular context—

specifically within an educational institution (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 68)—and were

centered around various policies and discourses.

The identification of the critical incidents began as questions, comments, or recurring

themes that were written on additional post-its and placed around the whiteboards or written

in reflexive journaling after daily analysis. It was not uncommon to have an entire mindmap shift in composition from the day before given new learning and further material analysis on the narrative data, which necessitated additional post-its and even interconnected post-its on the walls between the visual mindmaps by individual focus group data. I was also looking at the frequency of materials across focus groups that were shared by many storytellers, which had great overlap when it came to individual programs and placement—particularly the lack of placement options and the dominant "regular" classroom. I would find myself for weeks on end staring at the thousands of colour-coded post-its on virtually every flat, vertical surface asking the same questions to myself: *What are the materials telling me? What is the broader story here that the materials are enacting? What does this mean in an education system? Why does this [process/event/program/placement] decision matter in the larger system for high-ability learners? How does this show that a status quo does/does not exist?*

The answers to those questions came about through the meticulous and patient observing of the interactions between human and non-human actors, which I would trace through the individual mindmaps paying particular attention to how they negotiated, formed allies, and pivoted around other actors or assemblages within certain contexts. I would then step back to see the broader network(s) and what story(ies) that data was telling me. As an example, I will describe the identification of the critical incident in two of the blended focus groups, 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, which occurred at different times but had the same teacher participant, so it was mapped together using different colours of post-its to distinguish which focus group shared what. The mindmap took shape as more of a flowchart and felt progressional with the materials and topics shared, such as outside enrichment opportunities

and personnel who made them happen.  Upon tracing, it was discovered that the non-human actors were positioned as "acting on" the human actors, even though at face value it appeared that the human actors were simply "taking up" the existing infrastructure for programming purposes.  The non-human actors such as available programming options, the system vision of approved programming, additional staffing lines that were allocated specifically to offer those programs listed on the vision; all of which were highly active upon one another and were reinforcing the cycle of withdrawal-based programming as the only available format for high-ability pupils.  To describe the findings in live time, I had often written along the lines on the whiteboards as I was tracing the materials and power.  I was particularly interested in the line direction between the human actors that surrounded several non-human actors and assemblages of various programs, as it appeared as though responsibility was being redirected from all of the human actors in these two mindmaps.

Take the assemblage for "curriculum compacting," which included non-human agents of curricular documents, scheduling, timetabling, assessment, online course bank, as well as human agents of classroom teacher, Gifted teacher, and system educator responsible for Gifted.  What was most interesting was how the lines between the human agents were directional but away from themselves and pointed toward another human agent.  This phenomenon was also present in other areas of the mindmap, including the "regular classroom" assemblage where the enrichment programming within the classroom also had directional arrows pointing away from individual human actors and toward other human actors, indicating that someone else was responsible, yet no one was taking that responsibility. What resulted from this analytical finding was that there was confusion around who or what is

fundamentally responsible for meeting the needs of high-ability pupils, which was representative of the fable, "The Story of Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody." Through material analysis, I could see what materials were responsible for this perpetuation of outside, withdrawal-based enrichment programming as the primary delivery, as well as the shifting or even abdicating of responsibility among the human actors involved.  This last finding, however, required more information about the development and enactment of policy for available programming, which I sought to provide in the second phase of the study.  It was here where I shared my own complicity in how my programming design efforts to bring awareness to enrichment needs *as* bona fide needs led to a system-wide assumption that someone or something else was responsible.  This assumption was the result of not only the creation and subsequent perpetuation of outside enrichment only, but the unclear messaging of the programming vision and additional staffing itself.

### 5.2.3  *Researcher Reflexivity throughout "Show" Phase*

As part of a broader *critical narrative* research methodology, it was important to engage in researcher reflexivity throughout all data collection and analytical phases regardless of method or sensibility employed.  Critical narrative research explores the connections between the researcher and her research (Iannacci, 2019), further demanding that researchers remain "autobiographically conscious" (Viruru & Cannella, 2001, p. 168) throughout the process.  Iannacci (2019) argues it is essential for critical narrative researchers to "fully implicate themselves within their inquiry" (p. 13), ensuring they examine and present their storied constructions of lived experience as *pluralistic* (see also Miller, 1998).  What is more, being committed to this critical methodological approach, researchers must make explicit their

research observations and interpretations, further fostering *multivocality*—the honouring of many voices and questioning of previous assumptions of empirical authority that subscribe to a single "truth."  This can be accomplished when drawing upon Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber's (1998) "three voices" that must all be heard and reconciled, which include the narrator, the theoretical framework, and the voice(s) that emerge from a "reflexive monitoring of the act of reading and interpretation, that is, self-awareness of the decision process of drawing conclusions" (p. 10).

I specifically refer to Iannacci's (2019) wisdom here in that "reconciliation does not necessitate cohesiveness or validation of my voice and theoretical proclivities, but rather is intended to foster multiplicity within the narrated accounts" (p. 14).  To honour my commitment to this methodological approach throughout the entirety of the collection and analytical phases, I engaged in daily reflexive journaling where I would summarize what I had learned from the visual mapping; asked questions about what things meant, what was/was not there and why that mattered; as well as my own interpretations of the findings, situations, organization of materials, and moments of mess that the material analysis had made visible each day from my own experiences.  Given that the broader context of this research was within multiple education systems, I further engaged in *margin notes* where I would reflect on and wonder what larger, educational policies or structures may have been influencing the material entities or interactions between the human and non-human actors in the networks, that the human participants in the focus groups may not have referred to specifically.

## 5.3   Phase 2 "Tell": Data Collection and Analysis

This section of investigative procedures will detail the second phase of the study that draws upon autoethnographic sensibilities as a way to respond to the material findings, flesh out the stories from where the material findings left off, and share the effects of living with public policy (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005).  In what follows are procedural details for the collection and analysis of autoethnographic data.  This phase of the research was also designed to make visible the *who*, *what*, and *how* we have found ourselves in this perpetual programming and placement impasse in public education, as well as convey information needed to appreciate greater content and context given my own experiences within an education system.  Reporting on my own experiences and introspections to "garner insights into the larger cultural or subculture of which you are a part" (Patton, 2015, p. 102) further complements this study's novel "show and tell" methods to get close enough to the phenomenon for a more *three*-dimensional understanding.

### 5.3.1   Data Collection for "Tell" Phase

Inspired by various *critical incidents* identified in the previous phase of the study that drew upon material-semiotic sensibilities, five (5) autoethnographic vignettes were composed from ongoing reflexive journaling, retrospective field notes, revisiting artefacts when I was in a system role including reports, presentations, policy development and documents, among others, as well as daily writing with "rereading what I wrote the day before, then filling in new memories" (Ellis, 2004, p. 117).  In responding to those critical incidents, I had nine years of system-level and post-system-level experience when I had gone forward to the classroom (rather than returned, as I have certainly grown from when I left), as well as my time as a

classroom teacher and special educator in those years prior to my system assignment, and those years as a student within a public education system.

The process of generating autoethnographic accounts in written form was not easily formalized in the beginning, as I was overwhelmed by years of memories and did not believe that I could simply sit down and craft fully, fleshed out vignettes in their entirety, as I was sure I would be forgetting important and nuanced details if I began writing in this manner.  My process of (re)membering was a multipronged approach, whereby I would engage in different ways of memory-mining in a simultaneous manner.  First, I would describe moments, details, and experiences in retrospective field notes in jot form on paper—one page for every specific event or memory, as I could chronologically re-order them when I reconciled dates with my other artefacts, such as my comprehensive calendar.  I would try to place these stories in respective piles that corresponded to each of the critical incidents so as not to repeat stories. Second, I would continue to jot down memories on post-its that would come to me throughout the entire data collection process and place them within my field notes in context. Sometimes these were people, courses, conversations, reflections, and even questions of things to look up—anything that I wanted to capture so as not to forget to circle back.  Third, I spent a significant amount of time revisiting years of artefacts such as presentations, reports, email correspondence when planning policy, my highly detailed calendar, among others, although I would not sit down to review months of correspondence at once, but rather refer to those post-its as prompts to jog my memory of specific details, engaging in this interwoven and interconnected (re)search process.  Lastly, when composing each of the five vignettes digitally, I would write daily and remain focused on a specific event or experience with as

much detail as I could recall that helped to expand our understanding of each of those critical incidents.  I also began each day with the practice of re-reading what I had written the day before and then filled in (Ellis, 2004) additional details or new sections of stories to share.

### 5.3.2  Data Analysis for "Tell" Phase

Donald Polkinghorne (1995) differentiates between two types of analysis for narrative inquiry: narrative analysis and analysis *of* narrative—or as Bochner and Ellis (2016) call "narrative *under* analysis" (p. 184).  In narrative analysis, we see ourselves as the storytellers, and where our research product *is* a story that represents the event or issue studied.  What is more, the storyteller wants the listener to get into the story to experience a truth, which is accomplished through the composition of stories with rich details that represent characters, events, and issues studied (Ellis & Bochner, 2016).  In narrative *under* analysis, we see ourselves as the scientists, treating stories as data, and are most interested in what we can get out of the story (Bochner & Riggs, 2014).  We reduce the stories to content then analyse them, arriving at themes, categories, patterns (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).  Accordingly, in narrative analysis, the story is already complete and there is no need to go beyond it; whereas in analysis *of* narrative, we apply more traditional analytical measures to advance a theory (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).  In deciding the analytical approach that best fit this method, as well as the broader methodology of critical narrative, I decided to combine the two types.  Given that the previous phase of the study was subject to material analysis, as well as critical narrative analysis, I felt it was prudent to apply more conventional narrative analysis to the autoethnographic data as well.  The vignettes were personal narratives that responded to a series of critical incidents that were identified *through* analysis in the previous phase of the

research.  Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest that to combine these two analytical approaches, one could treat oneself as a contributor (p. 187) to the stories by asking oneself the same questions or sharing stories about the same issues other participants shared.  This was accomplished through the vignettes themselves, as they responded *to* the critical incidents to add to a more complete picture of the phenomenon being investigated, as well as through added thematic analysis on public policies and how the vignettes showed the lived effects *of* those policies.

For added rigour to the project, I incorporated more traditional analysis to the autoethnographic data by way of Bochner and Ellis's (2016) analytical sandwich analogies—which are analytical approaches in figurative sandwich variations that combine traditional framing at the beginning, theoretical connections and the end, narratives in the middle, or as double-decker or layered sandwiches, or even as stews that mush all the parts together in a seamless, effortless way (pp. 202-209).  This analytical sandwich approach allowed me to both nest and situate my stories within particular interactions, as well as within the broader social, political, and institutional discourses (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 30), such as public policy. Autoethnographic vignettes were analysed using conventional narrative techniques of categorizing and coding of content including open coding (attributes, location, themes) and thematic coding (various public policies that were discussed, effects of public policy).  A comprehensive analytical chart was developed to include the themes, policies, and salient quotations of each of the vignettes to allow for easy mapping of where the issues were located and in which contexts.

### 5.3.3   *Researcher Reflexivity throughout "Tell" Phase*

Autoethnography utilizes data about the self and its context to gain understanding of

the relatedness and connectivity between the self and others within the same context, making

it distinctly different from other methods as it is self-focused and context-conscious (Ngunjiri

et al., 2010, p. 2).  It is further grounded in active self-reflexivity, referring specifically to the

"careful consideration of the ways in which researchers' past experiences, points of view, and

roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretations of, the research

scene (Tracy, 2020, p. 2).  To further honour my commitment to this methodological approach

of critical narrative research, as well as autoethnography, I continued the practice of reflexive

journaling where I would summarize and even nest what I had learned from narrative analysis

on the vignettes in broader contexts to remind myself of my positionality in that experience.  I

would also revisit the vignettes to add notes and questions about policies and broader issues,

which were in italicized font to distinguish them as after-the-fact notes.  It was also important

for me to step back from the personal narratives as participant to look at the data as

researcher and pose additional questions of what things meant or what was shared and not

shared and perhaps why.  Knowing that I was providing the data, as well as analysing the data,

I needed to be mindful of how my interpretations of the data would be impacted by my past

experiences, which I made every effort to make explicit, as the broader methodology further

demands that researchers remain "autobiographically conscious" (Viruru & Cannella, 2001, p.

168) throughout the process and "fully implicate themselves within their inquiry" (Iannacci,

2019, p. 13).

## 5.4   Ethical Considerations

### 5.4.1   Procedural Ethics

In compliance with procedural ethics protocols, approval to conduct this research was obtained from Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A). Part of the approved data collection for this study was revisiting raw, narrative data from an earlier research project, where approval was obtained from both Western University's Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (see Appendix B), which operates under the authority of Western University's Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, as well as the participating school board.  Before any data was collected for this earlier study, all participants received a detailed letter of information, which explained the purpose of the study, all procedures involved in the study should they agree to participate, measures taken to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality, the risks and benefits of participation in the study, as well as a signed consent form.  Participants were invited to ask questions and seek further clarification on any details pertaining to the study at any time.  Focus group interviews were video and audio-recorded using both BLUE® Snowball microphones and GoPro® cameras. Transcripts were returned to participants to be member checked for accuracy, omissions, deletions, or enhancements.  All data was securely stored.  All digital files were stored on an external hard drive and kept inside a locked filing cabinet alongside other hard copy, paper data that was also collected.  To ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality was maintained, pseudonyms were used.  A master list of pseudonyms was stored in a locked filing cabinet separate from the study data for added security.  Further, for the purposes of this research project, as well as any future public presentations and publications, no personally

identifiable information was or will be used.  When using direct quotations from participants, pseudonyms have been used in place of participants' names.

Before any data was collected for this research project, the participant-researcher provided informed consent to the parameters outlined in this study's letter of information (see Appendix C).  As outlined in the letter of information, this study received approval to conduct a third phase of interviews with educational stakeholders that were also video and audio-recorded.  Remaining focused on the broader goals of this study and its research questions, this third phase of research was not included in this dissertation for scope.  In adherence with Western University's Ethics Protocol, data collected during this study will be retained for five (5) years and then destroyed.  Only researcher team members that are associated with this study will have access to this information.

### 5.4.2   Relational Ethics

Procedural ethics, as detailed above, outline the steps taken to obtain approval from a research ethics board and informed consent from participants during an earlier or more preliminary stage in the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).  Commonly referred to as "ethics in practice" or "situational ethics" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), *relational* ethics are those unanticipated situations and dilemmas that arise in the course of conducting research with human participants that demand immediate attention (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), but are often neglected by review boards (p. 139).  To ensure we are conducting ethical research, our mindfulness of our ethical conduct must extend beyond ourselves as researchers to our participants and to the communities in which they live (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), ensuring that

we are responding appropriately to these "ethically important moments" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 265).  Doing research ethically involves this process of continual monitoring and circumspection (Frank, 2004), which is further heightened for autoethnographers (Ellis, 2007) as when we conduct and write research, we implicate others in our work (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 8).  Further, researchers do not exist in a vacuum (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; see also Ellis et al., 2011); rather, we live connected to others including family, friends, coworkers, students, institutions, community organizations, among others, so even when we share our own personal stories of experience, we may speak on behalf of others who, by virtue of being mentioned, are now implicated, and even participating in the broader research.

Written as a story of a fictional workshop—albeit based on similar sessions led by the authors—Bochner and Ellis (2016) share an exchange with students around ethical quandaries in autoethnographic research to help navigate these potentially "ethically important moments" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 265).  Ethical issues in autoethnography can certainly have greater consequences for our personal lives as participant-researchers, as well as those we write about who may recognize themselves or be recognized by others in our communities despite every approved ethical step as outlined in procedural ethics.  As an example, Betty (fictional participant) asks:

> "I'm still confused about our responsibilities to people who are characters in our personal stories.  They are in our lives, but they haven't consented to being participants.  So how do we think about including or implicating [them] in our autoethnographies?" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 147)

As the authors note, there is no formulaic or set-in-stone solution, as researchers must think

deeply about why we include others and to what purpose sharing details about others are

integral to our stories.  Although an acceptable practice, it is not necessary to send

autoethnographic data to others (outside of participation in the research) who may have been

included—although not named—to read.  To weigh in, Bochner and Ellis (2016) discuss Lopate

(2013) who firmly believes he does not want nor need to give another person the power to

decide what gets included in *his* story.  Likewise, Chase (1996) makes the point that even

though the participants—if stories are shared from their perspectives—should have some say

as to what details they wish to be included through member checking, researchers have the

interpretive authority to frame, reframe, and analyse the data.  Bochner and Ellis (2016) then

offer ways to more deeply engage with the relational elements in the autoethnographic data

by way of interrogating one's own role and motives, to imagine how other people may feel

and respond to the stories.

Ultimately, writing autoethnography makes the participant-researcher vulnerable

(Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 151).  What is more, we cannot always anticipate the effect our

words may have on another.  What we must do, then, is everything in our power to minimize

any discomfort (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), which is exactly what relational ethics requires by

going *beyond* ensuring anonymity and confidentiality to include statements and signposts that

clearly state that stories shared are from personal accounts and are reproduced in ways that

preserve the reality we, as autoethnographers, recall and are seeking to depict for the reader

(p. 152).  Other ways this research takes care in ethics in process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004)

include taking the focus off of any specific identity or who or what I was writing about, as well

as leaving various characters nameless and within roles (e.g. teacher, systems). This included

my deliberate use of the plural for education systems, as my experience within and around

education systems was cross-provincial and I wanted to ensure that the identity of the actor I

was referencing was unclear but remained specific enough to point to *a* system level. Lastly, I

feel confident that this research is mindful of relational ethics issues, particularly with

autoethnographic data, as I have weighed the potential risks and rewards and determined that

the work has something important to offer others "by putting meanings into motion" (Bochner

& Ellis, 2016, p. 153) through these stories of experience.

## 5.5   Timeframe

Although recently adjusted over the course of the last year and a half to respond to the

unanticipated delays and changes that have arisen from the ongoing, global pandemic of

COVID-19, the overall timeline for this research project was thirty-six months. All phases of

data collection and analysis were completed within eighteen months. I began with the ethical

approval process immediately following a successful proposal presentation on March 20, 2017

and received subsequent ethical approval on September 06, 2017. Following this approval, I

completed an application to seek ethical approval for external research from a selected board

of education in Southwestern Ontario, which was denied on December 18, 2017 citing that the

research study was not aligned with that board's current priorities. Research studies are

certainly living things that must respond and adapt to life's changes. After some nuanced

revisions to the phases of the study, data collection thus began in July 2018. Throughout the

timeframe of July 2020 and August 2021, the participant-researcher was compiling all of the

data from the "show" (material-semiotic) and "tell" (autoethnographic) phases of the study,

consulting with the faculty supervisor and committee members, and crafting the eight

chapters of the final integrated article dissertation, which included four manuscripts written

for publication.  In the months that followed, the participant-researcher was preparing for the

public defense and examination that was originally planned for Fall of 2021 and subsequently

rescheduled for February of 2022.

## 5.6   Summary

This chapter details the design and investigative procedures of the research project

that was devised in direct response to the saturation of findings in the field of Gifted education

that have historically taken the form of critiques that simply answer *what* is happening rather

than critically examining the effects of these programs and placements on learning (Kim,

2016).  To get close enough to this status quo mess required a novel approach of

complementary "show and tell" methods that drew upon material-semiotics and

autoethnography to finally see *what* and *how* this phenomenon is existing so we may engage

in informed debate as to *why*.  This study drew upon raw, narrative data from an earlier study

(Gollan-Wills, 2014) where student and teacher participants shared their experiences with

newly implemented enrichment programming and placement in a series of eight (8) focus

groups.  Phase One of this study employed a meticulous, *socio*-material analytical method to

this data to "show" the various actors that were present and involved in enacting this status

quo, as well as tracing their interactions, negotiations, and ways in which these entities were

able to exert force, change, and be changed by each other (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, 2012).

The section describes the simultaneous data collection and analysis procedures, as well as how

various "critical incidents" were determined through this material analysis of the actor

networks, which is demonstrated through the identification of the incident, "The Story of Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody," from two of the blended focus groups.  The subsequent section details Phase Two of the study that draws upon autoethnographic sensibilities as a way to respond to the material findings, flesh out the stories from where the material findings left off, and share the effects of living with public policy (Neysmith et al., 2005).  It further describes the analytical approach for this "tell" phase that blends narrative analysis with narrative *under* analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995; see also Bochner & Ellis, 2016), honouring both the data *as* complete story that is representative of an issue, as well as more traditional analytical methods applied to arrive at broader themes, categories, and patterns (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) akin to the analysis for Phase One of this study.

As part of a larger *critical narrative inquiry* (CNI), the varied methods employed in this study, including narrative, material-semiotic, and autoethnography, aid in achieving the broader goals of a reconceptualisation process that must be undergone to develop research that is critical in nature so as to offer "alternative ways of thinking, being, and doing" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 15; 2007) for our high-ability students in our public education systems today.  To honour my commitment to this methodological approach, as well as the complementary methods employed, this chapter outlines the necessary inclusion of researcher reflexivity, demanding that researchers remain "autobiographically conscious" (Viruru & Cannella, 2001, p. 168) throughout the process and "fully implicate themselves within their inquiry" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 13) to ensure they examine and present their storied constructions of lived experience as *pluralistic* (see also Miller, 1998).  Procedural ethics are described, as well as the added relational ethical considerations that this research design requires, as when we conduct

and write autoethnographic research, we implicate others in our work (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 8).

The chapter ends with a brief description of the study's overall timeframe, which was

impacted by unanticipated delays and changes that arose from the ongoing, global pandemic

of COVID-19.

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# Chapter 6

## 6    Using *ANT* Sensibilities to Experience a More Three-Dimensional Understanding[6] of a Status Quo Phenomenon

*Matter matters.*

—*Tone Stangeland Kaufman and Jonas Ideström, 2018*

A considerable number of studies have investigated the state of research on Gifted education over the last sixty years (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020).  Results from various content and bibliometric analyses show that in general, the most common topics addressed in publications of Gifted education research around programming and placement include: cognitive characteristics and measures for the identification of Gifted pupils (Carman, 2013; Dai, Swanson, & Cheng, 2011; Rogers, 1989); curriculum quality and instruction of Gifted pupils (Hays, 1993; Rogers, 1989); types and delivery of program services (Coleman, Guo, & Dabbs, 2007; Hays, 1993); and achievement and underachievement (Dai et al., 2011; Ziegler & Raul, 2000).  The studies investigating programming for Gifted pupils have also focused on *types* of programs rather than critically examining their *effects* on learning (Kim, 2016).  Little has changed in terms of the classroom lives for students who have been identified as cognitively advanced through a variety of approaches dependent upon the geographic and global location, financial resources, various infrastructure, social-political contexts, and so forth.  To gain different insight into the persistent problem of what to do for these exceptional pupils, it became necessary to take a

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[6] A version of this chapter has been written for publication targeting the *Journal of Education Policy*.

novel approach to studying the problem of seemingly static programming and placement for high-ability pupils in public education systems.

This article seeks to disrupt the hegemonic and perpetual programming and placement practices for Gifted learners within education systems in Ontario, Canada by making visible exactly *how* we have come to find ourselves in this status quo predicament. Using a socio-material method to more precisely investigate the minute relations among human and non-human objects and entities, *Actor-Network Theory* has provided this study with the material tools to better understand the intricacies of these systems and institutions and get closer to this phenomenon (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012). This paper begins with an overview of the current state of Gifted Education in North America, specific to programming and placement options and practices. It then explores the need for a novel approach to investigate the status quo problem by way of drawing upon a material sensibility, *Actor-Network Theory (ANT)*, to aid in analysing the data and make visible the *who, what*, and *how* we find ourselves in this perpetual programming and placement impasse in public education. The balance of the paper will focus on various (re)learning from (re)visiting an earlier study (Gollan-Wills, 2014). *ANT* has been employed as a critical method illuminating the various assemblages between human and non-human actors, following the various negotiations, and tracing the translation of the most influential actors—the idea of intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005)—and networks that are fundamentally responsible for perpetuating and enabling the status quo practice of providing regular classroom placement as the only available option for the majority of high-ability learners combined with primarily withdrawal-based enrichment opportunities rather than programming that is provided within the regular

classroom. The paper closes with a discussion around the incredible durability (Law, 2009) of the various actor-networks discovered within a public education institution, as well as the need for a fundamental shift in both infrastructure and philosophical understanding of inclusive, regular classrooms. This paper ends with a brief highlight of the various *critical incidents* that have come to light from the material analyses that require additional information for both content and context, which are taken up through a series of autoethnographic vignettes in the manuscript that follows.

## 6.1  The Current Status (Quo) of Gifted Education

Despite significant scholarly attention paid to the needs of intellectually Gifted pupils, programming and placement practices in publicly funded educational institutions in North America have remained stagnant in the 21st Century (Gallagher, 2015; see also Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Brown & Stambaugh, 2014; Gallagher, 2000). Most often, the findings include numerous critiques that denounce current programs and practices that leave students in the mainstreamed classroom with age-appropriate, but not necessarily like-minded, peers who must wait to learn (Coleman, 2010). Various recommendations for greater autonomy, greater resources for enriched programs and self-contained placements, and greater attention paid to these high-ability learners exist. However, dominant discourses, practices, and programming for and about Gifted students continue to remain in effect, whereby remediation and closing the achievement gap (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006) trumps individualized programming and placement for learning needs that fall outside the widely accepted understanding of *needs* as impairments or *deficits* (Smith, 2006; see also Reis & Renzulli, 2010) as they relate to academic achievement.

In Ontario, Canada, *Regulation 181/98* of the *Education Act* specifies that Intellectual-

Giftedness is a *bona fide* exceptionality, and as such, learners are entitled to have an

Individual Education Plan and appropriate placement to meet their unique learning needs

(Ministry of Education, 2001, A3).  The governing body in Ontario, Canada clearly mandates

that all exceptional pupils "require consistent, challenging programs that will capture their

interest and prepare them for a lifetime of learning" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 3).

However, resources for such programs, services, and placements are the responsibility of

local boards to allocate across the schools and based on individual board needs.  When

considering placements for high-ability learners, the availability and process must be

understood as part of a much larger discourse—specifically the "scarce resources"

discourse—as specialized placements for Gifted learners are often determined on the basis

of available space (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011) rather than the most

appropriate placement for students to have their needs met and to flourish, as is outlined by

the Ontario Ministry of Education's mandates (Ministry of Education, 2001, 1997).  Likewise,

it has become common practice for Gifted learners to have their cognitive stimulation needs

met *outside* the regular classroom or through withdrawal programming (Loveless et al., 2008;

Subotnik et al., 2011; see also Gollan-Wills, 2014) by system staff or additionally funded

personnel at the school level, such as Learning Support Teachers (LSTs) or Resource Teachers.

With intellectually Gifted pupils accounting for only 1-2% of the overall student

population (Finn & Wright, 2015), and where their needs are widely understood to be *above*

or *outside* of the regular curriculum as they are often viewed at the "ceiling" (Subotnik et al.,

2011, p. 35), providing a proportionate number of enriched class placements for the number

of identified Gifted pupils and/or appropriate and representative enrichment resources for

programming within the regular classroom are simply not prioritized (Subotnik et al., 2011).

What is more, the criteria established that must be satisfied to first receive the designation

of "Intellectual-Giftedness" and subsequent access to special education supports is also the

sole responsibility of—and is completely constructed by—individual boards of education

(Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Finn & Wright, 2015).  Such definitions and designation

criteria are then subject to the interpretation of local boards, which cannot remain unbiased

given the fiscal influence of annual funding they receive to program for high-ability learners.

Hegemonic discourses such as "scarce resources" (Gallagher, 2015) and "deficit"

discourses influence educational policymakers with conservative budgets to triage all special

education needs for their individual boards.  When prioritizing the most *critical* needs

(Gallagher, 2015) with a finite amount of funds, policymakers often approach the situation

from within a *deficit* discourse as it pertains to academic achievement, generally resulting in

funding, support, and specialized placements for exceptional children with various

impairments who are perceived to be the *most* disadvantaged of all pupils receiving special

education (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006).  When achievement is constructed

within discourses of accountability and deficits, it perpetuates the myths that Gifted learners

do not possess any learning difficulties or needs that demand attention (Smith, 2006; see

also Reis & Renzulli, 2010) as they do not require support to bring them *up* to the norm, and

that they will be "fine" because they possess intellectual prowess (Winebrenner, 1999).

Systems that continue to subscribe to this model of special education that positions Gifted

pupils outside or beyond the realm of *deficit* needs are imposing institutional restrictions

(Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010) on high-ability learners by continuing to provide a stagnant

and curated model of enrichment consisting primarily of the regular classroom placement

with withdrawal-based or *outside* programming (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008; Subotnik

et al., 2011; see also Gollan-Wills, 2014).

The field of Gifted education is saturated with findings that take the form of critiques of

programming and placement to merely answer *what* is happening, rather than providing a

holistic analysis as to *why* we are continuing to subscribe to a recycling (Souto-Manning,

2014) of "practically adequate" (Sayer, 1992) practices and discourses that position the

needs of high-ability learners as *beyond* or not *as* important as those pupils who are perhaps

not achieving to the current standards established by a governing body.  To answer *why*

dominant discourses of withdrawal-based programming and regular classroom placement

options for secondary Gifted learners exist as the primary model within the current

educational system in Ontario, Canada, it is imperative that we must first understand *how*

such discourses come to assemble and *how* they sustain such power and influence over time.

## 6.2  (Re)searching a Phenomenon: Using Material-Semiotic Sensibilities to Make Visible the "Who, What, and How?"

*Actor-Network Theory* (*ANT*) is widely understood as an "array of practices" (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2010, p. x) or family of material-semiotic tools, methods of analysis, and

sensibilities (Law, 2009) that focus on the *socio*-material, paying particular attention to the

nuanced, minute relations within, between, and around human and non-human entities, and

tracing how these heterogeneous entities "come to be assembled, to associate and exercise

force, and to persist or decline over time" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. x).  Moreover, *ANT*

"[treats] everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located.  It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations" (Law, 2009, p. 141).  *ANT* engages with the idea of exploring the full range of entities and actors that are present in a social practice (Kamp, 2018) rather than assuming or even ignoring the often *non*-human actors that may be observed and understood as static, insignificant, or most often lacking in agency and thus influence.  *ANT* helps us to see that what may appear as immobile, inactive, and static practices are composed of highly active entities that are continuously networking underneath this façade of stability.  More specifically, looking at seemingly static practices of programming and placement for high-ability pupils, *ANT* argues that various actors are continuing to be enrolled in particular ways with other entities and are working hard to support that surface appearance, reinforcing the need to employ a precise material analysis to better understand the clandestine operations that are continuing to enact this status quo phenomenon.

Everyday things and parts of things are assumed to be capable of joining together with other entities and exerting force, changing, and being changed by each other (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, 2012).  Consider a "school board" that is often regarded as a singular, non-human entity, an institution, a building of sorts.  *ANT* helps us see that this school board is a much more complex, dynamic entity, as it can be viewed as an actor itself that has agency and can exert force, or as an assemblage or network of things comprised of continuous interactions and collisions with a plethora of actors including: human employees, various offices and physical spaces in the building, machines, routines, timetables, safety rules,

staffing, contracts, policies and procedures, payroll, technology, colleagues, administrators

and managers, supplies and so on.  Materiality plays an important and active role both

implicitly and explicitly.  The human and non-human entities are legitimate actors in this

ongoing performing and reshaping of a social collective, as they "carry meaning by and

through their very coexistence and interaction with other actors" (Stangeland Kaufman &

Idelström, 2018, p. 100).  Thus, *ANT* as a method can help show *how* the everyday entities

that we frequently interact with in education systems are coming together in various ways in

often precarious networks that require constant maintenance and ongoing work to sustain

their connections, and that this myriad of things is what orders and governs current

educational practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013).

### 6.2.1 Using ANT as a Sensibility Rather than a Theory

Law (2009) believes it best to view *Actor-Network Theory* not as a theory but as

material-semiotics to better capture the "openness, uncertainty, revisability, and diversity"

of the social (Law, 2009, p. 142).  *ANT* is not applied like a typical theoretical approach but is

considered more of a sensibility or way to get closer to a phenomenon (Fenwick & Edwards,

2012).  Theories, Law (2009) suggests, usually try and explain *why* something happens, which

is absolutely not the intention of *Actor-Network Theory*.  Instead, *ANT* is descriptive rather

than foundational, focusing not on what things *mean* but on what they *do* (or do not do).  In

fact, it is best understood as a method that "attempts to show rather than tell" (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2012, p, 27), which "is useful, but not definitive" (Hamilton, 2012, p. 56).  Naturally,

this material, analytical approach is a "disappointment for those seeking strong accounts.

Instead, it tells stories about 'how' relations assemble or don't" (Law, 2009, p. 141).  What

*ANT* does offer, however, is the affordance to more holistically investigate the layers of

*topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) of a phenomenon—the features, the different

terrain, and the contours that are perhaps not as visible without a different approach: "In

tracing what things do and how they come to be enacted, ANT analyses offer a method for

picking apart assumed categories and structures in education, some of which appear to exert

power across far-flung distances and temporal periods" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, xxi).

### 6.2.2 Translation: Intermediaries and Influential Mediators

A key assumption in *ANT* analyses is "symmetry" (Latour, 1987), where human and

non-human entities are not treated any differently and where all things are assumed to be

able to exert force, join together, change and be changed by other entities (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2010, 2012). Thus, all materials, all actors, have potential and are capable of action

or inaction. "Translation" is the term Latour (1987) uses to describe what happens when

these entities actually come together and enact some*thing*; the negotiating processes, the

overlaps, the folds, collisions, and shifts. At each of these connections, it is not necessarily a

large band of actors where all exert some type of overt force or influence on the other, or

that it is blatantly obvious as to what the enactment is and what the most visible fault line is

that will immediately interrupt it. Meticulous, *ANT* analyses focus on a multitude of

connections and examine how entities—even the seemingly powerless or insignificant

object—work upon one another to translate or change in some way to either become or

maintain a position within a coordinated network or interconnected, multiple "network of

networks" of things and actions (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012). When translation has been

successful, the entity(ies) being worked on are now mobilized for a particular role in the

enactment (process of doing of something) where they will perform as an actor with agency.

No actor is inherently strong or weak; rather it may only become strong and more durable by

assembling allies (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012) and putting in the ongoing work to sustain and

maintain.  In the same way, all it takes is for a single translation to fail for the entire web to

unravel (Callon, as cited in Law, 2009), as they hold themselves together in such precarious

ways.

According to Law (2009), translation is about making two words equivalent, but since

no two words are equivalent, it is then viewed as *shifting*, moving terms around, linking, and

changing those words (p. 144); a process of *articulation* (Hamilton, 2012) and even *tension*

(Law, 1999).  Translation, then, is achieved through what Callon calls a number of moments

(Hamilton, 2012) that *ANT*ian methods and sensibilities can almost freeze in time, allowing

researchers to identify, magnify, and witness not only *what* or *who* is involved, but *how* that

translation is unfolding.  Likewise, Latour's (2005) distinction between types of actors—

intermediaries and mediators—is perhaps the most accessible and concrete way of

understanding *how* entities assemble and act upon one another.  Both types of actors are

present and active, circulating through a network and performing particular functions

(Fenwick & Edwards, 2010), and it is through these means that the social is produced

(Sundström Sjödin & Wahlström, 2017).  First, **intermediaries** are the rarer (Kamp, 2018)

form of actors that "transport meaning or force without transformation" (Latour, 2005, p.

39), simply ferrying or transferring meaning without acting on it to alter it in any way

(Fenwick & Edwards, 2010); the output is the same as the input (Sundström Sjödin &

Wahlström, 2017).  Interestingly, Latour (2005) argues that these intermediary actors can be

considered "black boxes" (p. 39) that count as a *single* entity regardless of whether that

entity is comprised of several parts, and that they exert no influence whatsoever by their

presence or inclusion in a social network (Kamp, 2018).  Further, like actual black boxes,

these intermediaries conceal all the negotiations that brought them into existence in the first

place (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 11).  Both literally and figuratively speaking, these "black

boxes" are anything *but* singular and one-dimensional, as they are often regarded as the

information-holders—a complex system viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs (and

transfer characteristics, for that matter) "without any knowledge of its internal workings"

("Black box," 2021).  This term is often used to refer to several inner workings of complex and

dynamic systems such as engines, human brains, algorithms, and institutions ("Black box,"

2021).  Consequently, when understood as a singular thing and positioned as simply being

without acting, these black boxes come to be associated as incredibly low maintenance

(Harman, as cited in Kamp, 2018), and thus fall within the realm of the "stable" (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2010) and "taken-for-granted."

On the other hand, **mediators** are found in abundance, and these actors can transform,

distort, translate, and modify meaning in the elements that they are to carry (Latour, 2005, p.

39).  There are an endless number of mediators at work in any given network.  What is more,

they cannot be counted as just one, as Latour (2005) argues that they could be one, none,

several or infinity (p. 39).  Additionally, they can become complex, lead in multiple directions,

and be involved in various networks simultaneously (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 11).  Given

the complex tradecraft of some mediators, such as a process or piece of equipment perhaps,

they can actually metamorphose into intermediaries where they *become* black boxed and

institutionalized "in ways that prevent tinkering and experimentation" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 12).  It must also be noted that intermediaries are not immune from transformation either, as they can break down and become a complex and multifaceted mediator as well (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010).  Additionally, neither of these forms of actors are associated with a single type or material, such as human or non-human; as such, humans can act as intermediaries and black boxes in a network as well as non-humans (Kamp, 2018), and non-humans can act as overt or covert mediators that act upon, within, and between other entities for a purpose.  To summarize, actors—regardless of *type*, meaning human or non-human—are involved in the process of translation or enactment, but it is the teasing out of the *forms* of actors—intermediaries and mediators—that help researchers trace *how* things come to be, *how* messy and complex social practices are, and *how* realities in education are enacted (Sundström Sjödin & Wahlström, 2017).

## 6.3  Presentation of the Material Findings

In what follows is a series of material findings from my (re)learning when (re)visiting an earlier study (Gollan-Wills, 2014).  Here, *ANT* has been employed as a critical method to help illuminate the various assemblages between human and non-human actors and follow the various negotiations.  I further trace the translations of the *most* influential actors—the idea of intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005)—and networks that are fundamentally responsible for perpetuating and enabling the status quo of regular classroom placement as the only available option with primarily withdrawal-based enrichment opportunities instead of within.  As Fenwick & Edwards (2012) indicate, *ANT* is not applied like a typical, theoretical approach nor is it lockstep in execution; researchers may choose to follow a particular actor

or assemblage and trace the ways in which it negotiates, overlaps, collides, changes, and is changed by other actors or networks.  Whereas other approaches may include meticulous examination of a particular segment of a network or space where there is high traffic that demands further attention to tease out what exactly is happening and who or what is involved.  Given the parameters of a dissertation and the importance of cutting the network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, p. xiv) for scope, I have chosen to present the material findings to **make visible the *most* influential actors** by way of tracing the most notable **intermediaries** or "black boxes" (Latour, 2005) and the most remarkable **mediators** that are *performed* as powerful and appear to exert the most force in the ongoing perpetuation of the status quo of programming and placement for high-ability learners in public education systems.

Eight (8) focus groups comprised of either students who are Gifted, educators of Gifted learners, or blended focus groups of both populations were (re)visited in hopes of more holistically investigating the many layers of *topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) involved in this decade-long stalemate.  By analysing narrative data with material sensibilities, I have been able to get closer to this phenomenon and examine the different features, terrain, and nuanced contours not visible from a single angle or approach.  Not only have I identified who or what the actors are that continue to exert power over educational policy, but I have illuminated *how* they come to assemble—often in nuanced ways—in the first place, thus making visible *in what ways* education systems are continuing to subscribe to or reinforcing the dominant discourses such as "scarcity of resources," "achievement," and the "deficit" or medical model discourse (Gable, 2014; Malhotra & Rowe, 2014) that has resulted in this impasse.

Through a series of descriptions I hope to make visible for the reader the incredibly complex and interconnected networks of materials that I can see and trace including, but not limited to: different coloured post-its that correspond to human actors, non-human actors, and assemblages that vary in size and shade based on individual focus groups; line variations in colour, width, style, and direction; and as displayed on numerous surfaces including my own non-human materials of walls, filing cabinets, and endless magnetic whiteboards that display these material stories that have helped me to understand how *exactly* we got here in the first place.

### 6.3.1 Providing an Anchor: Tracing the Four (4) Ways Mediators Act and Exert Power

To ensure that a broader audience can get as close to this phenomenon as I have, it was imperative to find the best approach to make these extensive, visual maps accessible, and so others may trace the influence and power as I have had the opportunity to. My approach is two-fold: displaying these findings by way of identifying and tracing the most powerful **intermediaries** or "black boxes" (Latour, 2005) and the most remarkable **mediators** that exert the most force; and second, by demonstrating how these actors—especially the mediators, as there are so many—manage to change and be changed in the process. For the purposes of sharing these findings in this manner, I refer to these few actors as the *most* powerful or remarkable for emphasis, but do not imply a hierarchy amongst them. Additionally, these entities have been selected from each of the focus groups, as they are *performed* as the most influential and powerful within those networks. I will also refer to their force and power as exerted by them—again, for emphasis—though fully recognizing

that they *appear* to be powerful by virtue of the ongoing work of other entities within the network that help to sustain and maintain that power that is so prominent.

Largely influenced by Latour's (1993) differentiation in the ways in which mediators make actors act, and specific to Kamp's (2018) process in taking up these four meanings in her work on notions of collaboration and leadership in policy development, I have modelled my dissemination of material findings after the following four ways that mediators act: *interference, composition, black boxing,* and *delegation*. In presenting the mediators this way, it is my hope that in tracing the extent of their involvement and influence I can visibly "show" precisely *how* we find ourselves in this current situation today. I have further provided a Table at the beginning of each of the (re)learning sections that identifies and summarizes the powerful entities as an anchor or reference. Intermediaries are named and briefly described for reference, and the mediators are summarized, in brief, by each of the four (4) ways in which they have been shown to exert influence over other actors. All are described in greater depth in the subsequent sections.

First, **interference** is where any agent interferes with, or translates, the original goal of another actor or entity. For example, when an education system provides funding (including discretionary funds, time for release, among others) for a collaborative network or taskforce to address policy priorities, and that system (mediator) sets a few parameters such as the budget itself—which then determines how much release time thus how often the group can meet—then this mediator is interfering with the work of the taskforce. As Kamp (2018) finds, only by removing all forms of funding and accountability measures from the mediator can the group have a space to actually network and grapple with the bigger issues of policy

priorities.  Second, mediation as **composition** is where the composite goal becomes *the*

common achievement of each of the agents.  Similar to the act of interfering, composition

can be identified by way of accountability measures.  Using the same example of the

taskforce, if the system—mediator—determines that the best way to write up the

recommendations is to use a template provided, that structure will influence the process in

some way.  For some, a template provides structure, talking points, and ways to begin

framing an action plan.  For others, a template thwarts all creative energies, as the outcome

has already been determined in some way.

The third is the process of **black boxing**, suggesting that the more successful something

is, the less it can be understood as attention is focused solely on inputs and outputs rather

than "the complexity that inheres between the input and output" (Kamp, 2018, p. 781).  To

move closer to, or metamorphose into, a taken-for-granted entity or black box, an influential

mediator works diligently to divert attention away, conceal inner workings, and deflect from

what might really be happening—the complexity within—by making any action or movement

seem rather humdrum with the illusion of inputs equaling outputs.  When considering the

funding, accountability, and template decisions, we can see that the mediator has set

parameters and expectations that make the entire process, materially speaking, look like one

gigantic lockstep process.  One can suggest that the mediator has great agency and is capable

of both clever and strategic planning as it demonstrates the ability to shine the spotlight on

the *other* actors involved in the taskforce, leaving itself in a dimly lit area that no one is

paying any attention to.  This "partnership" play is no more than a "join-the-dots exercise"

(Kamp, 2018, p. 785) that actually serves to perpetuate the power of the more stable

entities, as they are empowered to continue acting on other entities without being in the spotlight: "Individual black boxes do not need to be opened; what is actually going on is rendered invisible by its increasingly efficient operation" (p. 785).

Lastly, the fourth and most important meaning according to Latour (1993), is *delegation*, which is the way both meaning and expression are delegated to non-human objects: "In this use, mediation sheds light on those actors who are not present, yet are fully active" (Kamp, 2018, p. 785).  Most notable in this case would be examples of accountability for the participants: those actors who were chosen *by* the mediator, given parameters *by* the mediator, and then told to report back in a specified way *by* the mediator, suggesting that the system is "'steering' from a distance" (McCarthy, Miller, and Skidmore, as cited in Kamp, 2018, p. 785).

## 6.4 (Re)learning from the Students

Table 6.1: Summary of (re)learning findings from the student focus group. The most influential entity from this data set is listed below along with a brief description of the ways in which this mediator made other actors act[7].

| Powerful Entity | Interference | Composition | Black Boxing | Delegation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Numbers (Mediator)** | Administering the board-approved "testing" of intellectual ability; the **number** or percentile received determines one's eligibility for programming and placement; interference is evident with the infrastructure built and maintained (perpetuated) | The regular classroom experience (topics, pace, assessments) is influenced by the overall class average or achievement levels (**numbers**); teacher must ensure all students are meeting the provincial achievement standard (number); composite goal becomes numerical class average/pass rates, which dominates the day-to-day experience | "Black boxing" as accepted infrastructure; attention is diverted away from the primary focus of the regular classroom (**numbers/ achievement** of all pupils) by offering additional, enrichment withdrawal programming with outside, expert personnel; this is a distraction from the problem of not programming for *above* average needs within the regular classroom | Education system directives (e.g. Ministry, local board) delegate and influence the regular classroom experience from afar by way of demanding compliance with achievement discourse and policies that pertain to **numbers** (grades, test scores, pass rates) |

### 6.4.1 Students' Stories: Organizational Decisions

I begin with (re)visiting the student focus group data from an earlier study (Gollan-Wills, 2014). This focus group was comprised of 9 student participants from 8 secondary schools including: one Grade 9 male, one Grade 9 female, two Grade 10 females, one Grade 10 male, two Grade 11 males, one Grade 12 male, one Grade 12 female. Individual materials from this focus group were initially plotted one by one as they chronologically appeared in the transcripts. I initially organized the materials by proximity assemblages as they were

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[7] Largely influenced by Latour's (1993) differentiation in the ways in which mediators make actors act, and specific to Kamp's (2018) process in taking up these four meanings in her work on notions of collaboration and leadership in policy development, I have modelled my dissemination of material findings after the following four ways that mediators act: *interference, composition, black boxing, and delegation.*

found in the narrative conversations, such as discussions around placement in elementary school that detailed how they arrived in the Gifted program (via an assessment) and what placements were available (such as the choices presented to them), which became additional or peripheral assemblages in the network. Through numerous readings of the materially-analysed transcript, many of those materials present in the mindmap were discovered to have networked and acted upon (or been acted on by) other agents and in other assemblages across the network. This necessitated various shifts in position and location of actors and sometimes entire assemblages themselves or directional links with other materials. Additional tracing and notations around the mindmap were needed to signal what had occurred and where, as many materials were present in multiple assemblages and exerted different levels of strength and influence. Upon completion of this actor-network mindmap, the materials were arranged into two wings of organizational decisions (placement and programming) that behaved as more of a flowchart from one source (placement) to the next (programming).

Secondary students shared several stories of experience from their elementary school days, classrooms, enrichment experiences, and "the test" that catapulted them into the world of enrichment programming and placement. Likewise, they shared stories of different placements in both panels, namely the regular classroom or self-contained classrooms, pressure from others and oneself often around achievement, as well as this noticeable *shift* in attention in their schools by staff who were suddenly advising them of available programming options, which were offered as withdrawal opportunities. Materials show that

this shift was influenced by a system directive[8] or policy change that the students were

aware of.  Stories of the dissemination of information of enrichment opportunities were

shared, and how for some, there was a communication breakdown or messages were

incomplete.  What is more, materials suggest that the infrastructure of communication in a

school system is archaic and inefficient, whereby students are either not getting the

information due to the timing and delivery of school announcements, or that they are being

delivered in ways that are en mass and offered at lunch or after school, which is not

accessible for all.  Materials also suggest that availability of programming, and

communication means for that matter, are dependent on other organizational decisions such

as scheduled prep periods for teachers or whether they are staffed with a designated period

or additional personnel for learning support.

It is evident that both human and non-human entities are active and engaged in this

network of programming and placement (the two wings), which are generated from the

same source: **organizational decisions.**  Stories framed "they" as this highly influential

presence across the entire actor-network, with the greatest visibility at what could be

interpreted as the beginning of the flowchart itself with how the stories of enrichment

programming and placement began.  "They" are positioned as powerful human actors in a

broader system that make *the* decisions about what high-ability students "get to do," so to

speak.  The first assemblage is around the catalyst for special education with the "test,"

which students spoke of the same school ability test that many of them took in Grade 4, and

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[8] A Secondary Gifted Vision for system-wide programming options was implemented the year before the
focus group took place.

some students received private testing from a Psychology Services professional.  Regardless

of the timing of the assessment, the significance of this "test" was evident in that *it* was what

started this enrichment or Special Education journey for them.  Narratives included different

versions of who "they" are, such as classroom teachers *("they didn't have much information

about it"* 3.1.150), or resource and administration *("they made me do a series of tests"*

3.1.122), or a student herself advocating for testing, as she transferred boards and did not

get the chance to write that "test" (*"they finally let me in"* 3.1.122).  The outcome of this test

led to the next assemblage of documentation, including non-human actors such as the

identification process and paperwork, the designation of "Intellectual—Giftedness," and the

development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Only through an intimate examination of the negotiations within and between the

entities can we make visible that it was *not* human actors acting upon or using the non-

human agents to perpetuate the process, but rather the human actors acting at the *pleasure*

of the non-human actors, suggesting that the human actors were actually carrying out the

will of the non-human entities that perpetuated this curated pathway of testing,

identification, placement decision, and programming options that every student participant

seemed to resonate with.  This also suggests that "they" may represent the broader system

or decision-makers, or an assemblage of its own best described as infrastructure.  It appears

this network is a rather well-oiled machine, as the same cast of agents behaves with one

another in an almost muscle-memory or lockstep kind of way.  Other notable negotiations

that may be adding to or enabling this enactment include conversations involving the

support personnel or regular classroom teachers in the elementary panel.  Analysis shows

that these human actors position the placement of self-contained as a first choice, with the regular classroom placement as a second choice.  Self-contained placements, however, were found to be limited in this education system, resulting in a greater number of pupils placed within a regular classroom.  With the positioning of a more homogeneous group of learners as the ideal placement, the system then provided enrichment withdrawal programming to supplement the learning needs of the majority of identified Gifted pupils placed in the regular classroom.  Of note, this withdrawal programming was found to be offered a handful of times throughout the year and was delivered by outside personnel (Itinerant teachers) that were hired by the system.

*6.4.2 Tracing and Teasing Out: The Power of Numbers*

The assemblage richest in materials, connections, collector lanes, and negotiations with other assemblages and highways seems to orbit around the everyday regular classroom experience, their marks and grades, and how Gifted students at the secondary panel are continuously navigating and negotiating how to have their needs met within that regular classroom and school.  At first glance it reads as though the regular classroom is this powerful agent; this non-human actor that wields such great power over the educational experiences of these students.  Upon further teasing out it reveals that the regular classroom is actually part of a much larger and very powerful assemblage that includes the regular classroom teacher.  And with that classroom teacher comes a whole host of additional materials including various subject content, lessons, teaching and delivery style, assessments, evaluations, grading, feedback, accommodations, pace, and marks.  What is also interesting is the extraordinary power that marks seem to have on that assemblage, suggesting that this

value, these **numbers, are the most influential mediator** in perpetuating this status quo of programming and placement for Gifted pupils. To distinguish, grading (or marking) and grades in general could function as an intermediary or phenomenon that is certainly taken-for-granted and without question in an educational setting (Sundström Sjödin & Wahlström, 2017). However, the *specific* grade is actually a powerful mediator, because it "translates the materiality of a letter to a value," (Sundström Sjödin & Wahlström, 2017, p. 104) and connects to a larger network of student, educators, school statistics, administrators, board of education, employer, accountability, government, Ministry of Education, parents, larger community, postsecondary educational institutions, among others. It also has tremendous influence on what is designed, delivered, and experienced for the *entire* class in the regular classroom.

To demonstrate this power of numbers we apply Latour's (1993) four meanings or ways in which mediators reign. First, the ***interference*** occurs at the very beginning of the network with the "test" of intellectual ability. The materials present suggest that the system being investigated has well-established infrastructure for testing, identifying, and subsequently placing students in a lockstep format. The number, the percentile, received on that test dictates whether the student is eligible for that next step of identification and so forth. The interference, then, is evident in the very *infrastructure* that this system has built and maintained as the curated option for Gifted pupils in public education. It must also be stated that neither the process nor the eligibility criteria are universal across all boards in Ontario, as they are poised to change depending upon funding.

***Composition*** is when the composite goal becomes the common achievement for all of the agents in a network, which is evident in *academic achievement*. Teachers are held accountable for the achievement of pupils by way of reporting to their direct employer and beyond to the Ministry. In the event that students are not successful numerically, a record must be kept of all interventions and opportunities for additional support, recovery projects, among others. With a composite goal of all students achieving satisfactory marks and earning credits toward graduation, marks and grades increase in value and thus importance. Most influential is **how marks or grades affect the regular classroom experience**, which is two-fold. I will address the first point here, and the second in the next section as it pertains to black boxing.

First, the material entities within the actor-network show that the regular classroom is tailored to meet the needs of those students who are below average, and those seeking to meet the acceptable provincial standard specific to grades. Materials further show that the classroom teacher is influenced by the class's collective achievement levels, suggesting that the approach to curricular design, lessons, activities, assessments and evaluations are focused on doing *"what's better for more people"* (Ray, 3.1.569) and *"trying to bring up the people below average"* (Caitlin, 3.1.553), which directly impacts the experience of Gifted learners in the class who have already demonstrated satisfactory understanding and may need opportunities to go beyond the depth and breadth of the material or require flexibility in pace. High-ability pupils find themselves negotiating with the classroom teacher as a last resort, as they understand that the teacher has to meet the needs of all students, and since they understand the material and are achieving (as based on the discourse and parameters

of successful achievement), it appears that they do not have urgent needs.  Unpacking the

negotiations further illuminates how the students try to alleviate their boredom either by

disengaging or becoming a Teacher's Assistant (TA) of sorts, where students *"line up at the*

*smartest person's desk"* for help (Ramona, 3.1.693).  High marks are also coveted, according

to the materials, suggesting that to some degree Gifted students compromise or sacrifice

their engagement for the high marks. Further tracing reveals that they are not prioritized in

the regular classroom, which is a direct result of their achievement level.  This includes

behaviours and practices of being talked at (Jacob, 3.1.498), allocating an entire period to

taking up a test that was aced (Jacob, 3.1.503), learning a new concept and spending the

entire week reviewing it (Leanne, 3.1.509), which detracts from their learning (Jacob,

3.1.664) or leads to *"absent-minded learning"* (Jax, 3.1.613).

*Black boxing* is the strategic action of an agent to divert attention away so as to fade

into the background as a non-influential, singular entity—meanwhile concealing the power

that is within.  The second part of the previous argument focuses on how the marks or

numerical values of the entire class influence the *system's response* to meeting their

enrichment needs by offering a compromise: enrichment withdrawal programming that is

offered outside the regular classroom and provided by system personnel.  This positioning as

support outside the regular classroom suggests that the needs of high-ability pupils are not

the responsibility of the subject or classroom teacher, as the needs are beyond the regular

curriculum.  Likewise, the programming provides a solution to the problem of pace, perhaps

redundancy, and the need for enrichment in the regular classroom.  However, its very

existence, from a material lens, signals that it is only needed *because* the regular classroom's primary focus is on achievement, which does not seem to target high-ability learners.

Lastly, **delegation** is when both meaning and expression are delegated to non-human actors, such as *systems* or *"they" as an organization*.  Here, mediation shines a light on the actors who are not present, such as infrastructure, Ministry directives on accountability measures, among others, who continue to be fully active in the regular classroom without being present (Kamp, 2018).  Numbers, grades, test scores—numerical values are *the* most powerful mediator in this complex and dynamic actor-network, as the myriad of negotiations taking place to "black box" the pathway and very infrastructure that Gifted pupils have as the only available option is stunning.  Here, education system directives from the broader governing body (Ministry of Education) and individual administration (local boards) delegate and influence the regular classroom experience from afar by way of demanding compliance with achievement standards, policies, and discourse that pertain to numbers, such as grades, test scores, and pass rates.  In sum, these numbers *interfere* by way of testing, which opens the door to a curated path or singular experience for Gifted pupils.  These numbers influence the *composite* goal in the regular classroom by way of collective achievement, which dominates the lessons, assessments, and day to day experience of Gifted learners, as well as attempting to *black box* the infrastructure by distracting with outside programming as a compromise or concession.  And finally, the numbers *delegate* what the focus is and what the outcome will be, which is widespread achievement and credit attainment for all Ontario students.

I will briefly circle back to one of this study's research questions, particularly [2] How might *ANT* help us identify both the actors and assemblages that produce the current systems so that educators, policymakers, and system leaders are better positioned to respond to the programmatic and placement needs of identified Gifted secondary school students? A focused and sustained material analysis on the narrative data has made visible *who* and *what* is responsible for the current framework for programming and placement. By revisiting the raw data from a previous study (Gollan-Wills, 2014) with an innovative methodological approach, we can more confidently engage in thoughtful conversation so as to truly (re)think how best to support this group of exceptional pupils. Further, attention to materiality has helped level-up our understanding of the needs of Gifted pupils by way of visibly demonstrating *how* those needs are deprioritized, as well as providing context for decision-makers that should the system continue to subscribe to infrastructure that places solutions to meeting the needs *outside* of the regular classroom, we will forever continue to perpetuate the status quo.

### 6.4.3 Critical Incident

The multifaced methodological approach of this study was strategically designed to determine *how* Ontario's public education system subscribes to and enables a status quo infrastructure for high-ability learners, but also to investigate whether or not the programming and placement practices of Gifted learners in today's classrooms are meeting their needs and evolving with contemporary research. As such, the methodological approach combines critical narrative inquiry, material-semiotics, and the inclusion of autoethnography as a way to respond to the material findings, complete the stories, and share the effects of

living with public policy (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005). The material phase of analysis has made visible a "critical incident" or episode that brings to light a significant issue that requires additional information to complete a more holistic picture of what has transpired. These critical incidents have made their way to the surface and spoken to me given my unique positionality as not only a former student in an enrichment program and researcher in the field of Gifted Education and intellectual accessibility, but as a seasoned system staff responsible for a Secondary Gifted portfolio for a relatively large school board. I hold a collection of stories that can help flesh out and pick up where the material analyses have left off. The findings from this focus group have made visible that more information is needed on who "they" are and what "they" do for secondary Gifted pupils. As such, the critical incident and subsequent autoethnographic vignette explores **"Am I 'they'?"** It is here where I flesh out my own complicity—albeit unintentional—in perpetuating this status quo of programming and placement by way of designing and implementing a Secondary Gifted Vision.

# 6.5 (Re)learning from the Educators

Table 6.2: Summary of (re)learning findings from the teacher focus group.  The most influential entities from this data set are listed below along with a brief description of the ways in which the mediator made other actors act[7].

| Powerful Entity | Interference | Composition | Black Boxing | Delegation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Staffing (Mediator)** | Interference by way of infrastructure; a system Vision of approved programming options established parameters and positioned meeting the needs of Gifted learners outside the regular classroom by outside personnel (those who received additional **staffing**) | Composition was demonstrated through the additional **staffing** budget lines that were used to enact the approved programming on the Vision; the goal was for additional personnel (funded by additional staffing) to program outside the regular classroom for Gifted pupils | Additional **staffing** became a "taken-for-granted" practice through the annual process of applying for additional budget lines; this process distracted from and reinforced the intermediary ("The Model") where the needs of Gifted pupils continued to be met outside and the entire process was perpetuated through annual funding | The mediator (**staffing**) controlled the outcome and experiences for Gifted pupils in schools, as programming was able to be offered when additional staffing was allocated to those schools |
| **"The Model" (Intermediary)** | The "Model" has become a taken-for-granted, standard programming and placement practice that many education systems subscribe to.  It includes the regular classroom as the preferred placement and offers primarily enrichment withdrawal programming that is typically offered outside the regular classroom by outside personnel | | | |

## 6.5.1 Teachers' Stories: Infrastructure

This focus group was comprised of 3 teacher participants from 3 secondary schools including two female teachers and one male teacher, and all of whom were considered to be Gifted Teachers according to their school organization and staffing.  Teachers shared detailed stories of experience as educators and as parents about teaching and navigating the education system.  They engaged in thoughtful discussion about the needs of Gifted pupils and how they learn and process the world so differently.  The teacher participants spent a great deal of time teasing out what the difference is between enrichment and Gifted education, which gave rise to critique about the system's very infrastructure for

programming that they are currently responsible for.  Likewise, they shared stories of the

identification process, labelling, and access; about the different types of programming that

their board had recently solidified through a vision of programming; and about their

vulnerable and precarious positions as resources for staff and support teachers for Gifted

students, and who fully rely on annual funding from that board to continue this work.

Materials show that their work with Gifted pupils is highly contingent upon additional

staffing to be able to offer outside enrichment opportunities, as well as network with a

system-level educator that oversees and supports all of the secondary schools across that

board and mobilizes large-scale enrichment opportunities.

It is evident that both human and non-human entities are active and engaged across

this remarkably busy yet noticeably clear network that has organized itself into two sides of

the same coin: "The Model" of the board and "Leadership and Decision-Makers," which flow

from the same source: **infrastructure.**  Materials in this mindmap were especially challenging

to organize, as each actor and assemblage kept acting on other agents with every line of the

transcript.  It led to materials organizing themselves or associating themselves with one

particular assemblage, only to shift lanes or even carpool toward another assemblage,

making visible that the once powerful assemblage was not the starting point, so to speak.

Teachers shared such important stories from their careers in public education that jumped

from present to past and even toward the future, which meant hypervigilance was required

when teasing out what actors were acting upon others, changing, and being changed, and

when.  This was most evident when teachers discussed the identification process, as it was

split into three directions and perspectives: first, one participant spoke as both a Learning

Support Teacher with responsibilities of Gifted programming and what that meant within a school, as well as being a parent of two children where one went through the Gifted identification process and the other refused the label and anything that came with it.  The third direction was most curious, as it sounded the alarm on what that process actually gets students, which is either a limited number of enriched classroom placements in secondary— as not all schools offered enriched or extended classes—or largely experiencing enrichment outside of their regular day-to-day classes.  Jackie shared that Gifted pupils *"are looking for something different […] focused within the classroom environment, not within the extended learning opportunities"* (3.2.75-76) that only exist *outside* their regular classes.  It was this assemblage that helped to tease out and reorganize the actors as taking direction from the very infrastructure, "The Model," that the board constructed, which was regular classroom placement with outside enrichment programming.  Further, the Secondary Gifted Vision then shifted underneath "The Model" as a vehicle that "The Model" was using to *keep* that established practice in place.

Equally interesting was how the second branch of the infrastructure came to be.  What began as a space issue to place the second branch, "Leadership and Decision-Makers," on the whiteboard turned into a fascinating hierarchical positioning at the end of the analysis, as it made its way, unintentionally of course, to the very top, above the almighty "infrastructure" itself—almost as if it were overseeing that very infrastructure all along (see Figure 6.1). Humans were also positioned as holding these non-human jobs (e.g. Senior Administration) that were fundamentally responsible for enacting this very infrastructure in the first place. Even more interesting, was that the only assemblage that had a direct connection between

the first branch, "The Model," and the second, "Leadership and Decision-Makers," was

"accountability measures" that addressed reporting, responsibilities and who was

responsible, and evaluation of teacher performance. In employing *ANT*, we are reminded to

view how the materials enroll, assemble, and act, which reinforces that these structures and

actors are not powerful by virtue of title or position, but by the ongoing work and

maintenance of several other entities that are working on their behalf.
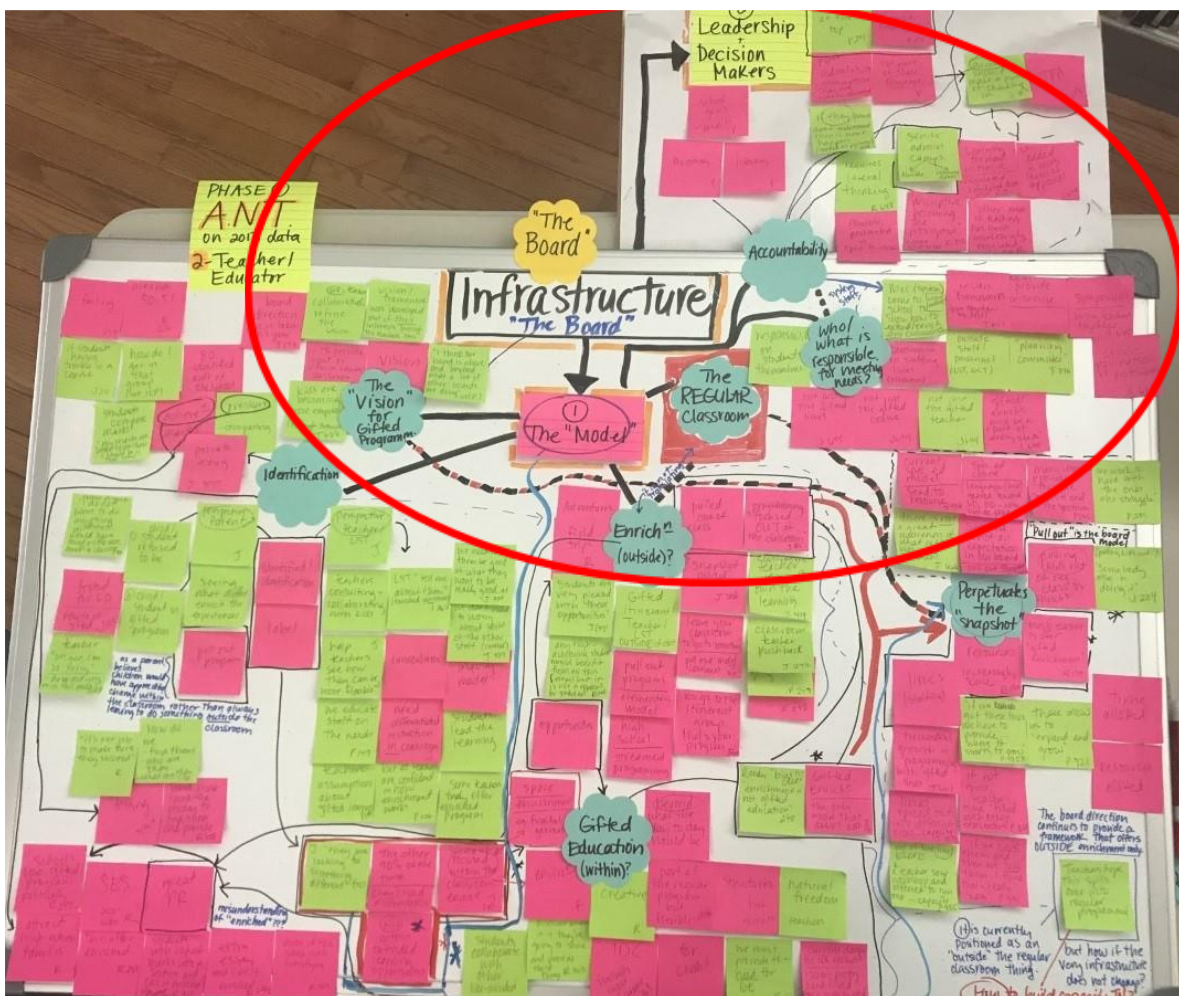


*Figure 6.1: This image shows the actor-network (mindmap) from the educator focus group. Both human (green post-its) and non-human (pink post-its) entities are active and engaged across this remarkably busy yet noticeably clear network that has organized itself into two sides of the same coin: "The Model" of the board and "Leadership and Decision-Makers," which flow from the same source: infrastructure. The red circle is to draw attention to how the second wing, "Leadership and Infrastructure," was originally placed above due to a space issue, but more broadly represents a revealing hierarchical position that has been determined once fully analysed. It also shows the intermediary, "The Model," as a black box, which is performed as powerful through the ongoing work of several assemblages.*

*6.5.2 Tracing and Teasing Out: The Board "Model" and Staffing*

A significant material finding from this data set was the identification of the most prolific intermediary that had virtually become "black boxed" (Latour, 2005, p. 39) to the point where its existence was so stable, so taken-for-granted, that it hid in plain sight.  The ***most powerful intermediary is "The Model"*** that the board subscribes to, which is the essence of the programming and placement infrastructure that has largely remained unquestioned.  Being placed in the regular classroom and offered outside enrichment remains the standard practice.  Teachers shared countless stories that included the term or variations of the term, "The Model," referring to how things are organized or done in a highly stable sense.  The first few material analyses incorrectly positioned "The Model" as the "Vision" for Gifted programming and vice versa, and only through tracing other actors, such as "opportunities" did it become clear that "enrichment programming" was fundamentally positioned as *outside* the assemblage of the regular classroom, thus visibly separating the assemblages of "regular classroom," "outside enrichment," the "Vision," and "identification" as now underneath "The Model" itself.  This suggests that this intermediary continued to exist as a *singular* entity that operated in a taken-for-granted space and was accepted without question as a direct result of the ongoing work of the assemblages it gave rise to. What is more, the ongoing negotiations between identification, placement in the regular classroom, outside enrichment, and the Vision that guided what the outside program offerings were, all of this maintenance is what continues to perpetuate this status quo of regular classroom placement and outside enrichment programming.

When teasing out which actor exerted the most power, there was a runner up that

needs to be acknowledged.  A powerful mediator, the *regular classroom*, temporarily held a

space as an intermediary; a taken-for-granted actor that existed without much influence.

That is, when it was referred to as a *singular* space or place.  Upon further unpacking it

became clear that the regular classroom was a powerful *mediator* attempting to black box by

concealing all those negotiations and other actors within its network, including the classroom

teacher, curriculum, schedules, assessment and evaluation, accountability measures, among

others.  When looking at what Kamp (2018) refers to as actor-"net-working" (verb), I

followed this actor's most important connection, which took me to the "perpetuating the

snapshot model" assemblage, where "staffing" was the most powerful actor of all.  To

demonstrate how **"staffing" is the most powerful mediator**, we will again address Latour's

(1993) meanings.

First, **interference** by this mediator came in the form of infrastructure, the "Secondary

Gifted Vision," and was difficult to identify at first, as it was positioned as a positive

framework designed to meet the needs of Gifted students.  Stories shared by participants

reveal that this framework was a commitment to all secondary schools and secondary Gifted

students that programming existed and was available for them.  This vision, according to

educators, was a welcomed addition to not only bring consistency in program availability

across nearly thirty schools, but was a way to solidify our commitment to their enrichment

needs: *"I think our board is above and beyond what a lot of other boards are doing"* (Patricia,

3.2.55); *"kids are becoming more empowered […] because they are getting to do these special

things"* (Jackie, 3.2.688-689).  It was not until I traced the connection with staffing that it

became visible that this framework was actually maintaining the status quo of having

enrichment needs met outside of the regular classroom and by outside personnel—the

Gifted Teachers that were this study's teacher participants.  In essence, the interference

came from the parameters that the system established, and the Vision was created *within*

those established parameters and was unknowingly circumventing the regular classroom by

offering primarily *outside* enrichment such as curriculum compacting, enrichment withdrawal

sessions, large-scale enrichment conferences, College Board program mentoring, among

others.

Likewise, **composition** piggybacks on the interference of the Vision with maintaining

the board "Model" view that additional staffing is provided to ensure that the enrichment

needs of Gifted pupils are met, which just so happen to be outside the regular classroom.

The *"board direction"* (Jackie, 3.2. 173) that the teacher participants reference includes

additional staffing lines (how full-time equivalency is determined for secondary staffing) to

be able to enact these programs as outlined in the Vision.  The composite goal, then, is to use

those additional staffing lines as part of a Gifted Teacher's day to withdraw students and

provide said programming, which then honours the commitment to meeting enrichment

needs within a public education system.

Material analysis shows that **black boxing** for this mediator is attempted annually and

is deeply connected to the ways in which it (staffing) delegates, which then reinforces the

process of annual additional staffing as a "taken-for-granted" practice that we all must do

because it is what we have always done.  Teacher stories include voluminous reference to

non-human actors that orbit around the assemblage of "perpetuating the snapshot" and

include some of the following agents: applications, paperwork, lines/staffing, timetables, time allotted, resources, among others.  These actors net-work on one another and manage to influence the actions of human agents, including teachers and administrators.  What has come to light is just how influential this application is on practice, indicating that the process of applying for lines and receiving said lines fundamentally determines what they can do for Gifted students year by year: *"tremendous growth in programming with Gifted lines"* (Jackie, 3.2.661); *"these allow us to expand and grow […] if we got these lines we have to provide this, and that's where it starts to grow"* (Patricia, 3.2.726-753); and *"if the lines aren't there, the time that we spend doing Gifted I think would get filled with other expectations […] if we have them and lose them, I think that's scary, I really do"* (Patricia, 726-732).  This mediator operates in a clever and strategic manner, as the reciprocal process it creates does have positive implications and benefits for students and staff.  Further, it engages in a relationship with the schools whereby schools submit the application to the system and are often rewarded with time via staffing, which fundamentally diverts attention away from the fact that this very application continues to perpetuate the status quo by providing staffing for *outside* programming rather than focusing some of the allocation of resources and efforts on the regular classroom.

Lastly, **delegation** is deeply connected to the attempts at black boxing, as it focuses on controlling the outcomes with the number of staffing lines allocated.  When addressing what can be done in schools to meet the needs of Gifted pupils, the system—who is seemingly positioned as outside the individual schools—always remains highly active and influential, as "their" decision for a staffing allocation directly impacts what Gifted Teachers and

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administrators believe they can do.  Additional materials positioned around the

"perpetuating the snapshot" assemblage show that it is accepted—almost black boxed—

practice to seek the support of someone outside the regular classroom, which inadvertently

takes responsibility and ownership away from the regular classroom teacher:

> *I don't think Spec. Ed. is an expectation in our board […] it's still very much they pull out*
>
> *and part of it is because of the way we've set it up for gifted education, you go to the*
>
> *itinerant group; that's going to be your program and they're going to come once a*
>
> *month and take you for three days.* (Jackie, 3.2.625-629)

Materials also show that all special needs in general follow a similar withdrawal model

whereby any students with exceptionalities are sent to resource to have their needs met,

reinforcing that "The Model" is about a regular classroom placement and anyone with

additional needs must remove themselves to receive support from an outside figure, such as

the Learning Support Teacher.

In sum, staffing is a powerful mediator that certainly *interferes* by translating the

original goal of another agent, namely the Secondary Gifted Vision.  Originally designed with

noble intentions to bring consistency and awareness for staff and students, it appears—

materially speaking—to have been acted upon by *staffing* and then used as a distraction for

the broader issue of failing to address the needs of Gifted pupils in the regular classroom.

*Composition* is where the goal becomes the common achievement of all agents, and where

the additional staffing budget lines found themselves complicit.  If the goal is to meet the

needs of Gifted students in schools, the lines are then used to provide programming

anywhere in the school—including outside the regular classroom—which is still technically

meeting the enrichment needs. *Black boxing* was attempted on an annual basis through the

act of applying for those additional staffing lines that would be used to provide enrichment

programming and thus both distract from and reinforce "The Model" of regular classroom

placement with outside programming as the only available option. This is directly connected

to how the mediator *delegates* or has control as well, which was through the number of lines

allocated to each school.

### 6.5.3 Critical Incident

The findings from this focus group have raised more questions about the Gifted line

application process in general. Further information about what goes into the application and

how budget lines are allocated could clarify how schools are providing enrichment

programming. As such, the critical incident and subsequent autoethnographic vignette, **"A**

**crumb to feed a flock,"** explores the application and allocation processes, as well as shares

stories of various negotiations that will help enhance those accounts and materials shared

from the teacher focus group. It is also here where I flesh out my own complicity yet again in

unknowingly perpetuating this status quo of programming and placement through my

involvement in the application process.

# 6.6 (Re)learning from the Blended Groups

Table 6.3: Summary of (re)learning findings from the blended focus groups.  The most influential entities from this data set are listed below along with a brief description of the ways in which the mediator made other actors act[7].

| Powerful Entity | Interference | Composition | Black Boxing | Delegation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Regular Classroom Teacher (Mediator)** | The **regular classroom teacher** interferes by changing the original goal of the student actors, such as shifting the focus of subject acceleration or denying a request to program above the regular curriculum due to unavailable resources or other operational items, such as timetabling, scheduling, timelines, contracts | The composite goal of the regular classroom is influenced by the **regular classroom teacher** by way of a utilitarian focus on collective achievement (negative outcomes) or by way of engagement (positive outcomes); regardless of the infrastructure or demands bestowed upon the teacher, the power to act (or not act) still rests with the regular classroom teacher | The **regular classroom teacher** "black boxes" established infrastructure and reinforces the processes as stable and stoic conditions and "taken-for-granted" practices such as sending a student with special needs to an outside Resource Teacher to receive additional support | **Regular classroom teachers** delegate who will meet and where the needs of Gifted pupils will be addressed, as the current infrastructure (including Vision) provides the mediator with options to have those needs addressed outside of their domain; this is further communicated as acceptable through annual, additional staffing process (another mediator) |
| **"The Model" (Intermediary)** | The "Model" has become a taken-for-granted, standard programming and placement practice that many education systems subscribe to.  It includes the regular classroom as the preferred placement and offers primarily enrichment withdrawal programming that is typically offered outside the regular classroom by outside personnel | | | |

## 6.6.1 Shared Stories: A Series of Transactions

The raw data from the six (6) blended focus groups were (re)analysed using *ANT* sensibilities.  Consisting primarily of 1 teacher-participant and 3 student-participants each, the format of the blended focus groups was more of a forum to share their stories orally in more intimate groups, and where participants were largely provided with the space to connect and share their experiences without direct questions from and involvement with the researcher.  Each focus group was provided with at least two (2) discussion prompts throughout the focus group session to help generate conversation and further discussion.

These prompts consisted of probing questions, snippets of interesting findings from current

research in Gifted education, or quotations from pressing issues or concerns that arose out

of the initial questionnaires from both student and teacher participants in a previous phase

of data collection in the study (Gollan-Wills, 2014).  The format also involved recording key

issues that arose in their groups through a placemat activity (Hibbert, 2012), and where

those written accounts on the graphic organizers provided additional texts to materially

analyse.

The six focus groups were organized into three mindmaps using different shades of

post-it colour (e.g. dark pink for non-human actors in focus group 3.1.1 and light pink for

3.1.2) to visually differentiate the materials identified from the separate student-participants,

as the mindmaps each contained only one teacher-participant as a constant.  Given the

jigsaw format of the blended focus groups, there was some overlap with student participants

at times, which provided a unique opportunity when materially analysing the data to trace

the individual stories and material entities that individual participants shared in their

different focus groups.

Different shades of pink and green were noticeable throughout all three mindmaps,

suggesting that different groups of student-participants shared stories about similar actors,

and where those actors had multiple points of intersection and collision within and around

the assemblages in the networks.  As an example, focus groups 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 both engaged

in discussions around **testing** and access to programming.  In what can only be described as a

*competing* assemblage, both focus groups identified human and non-human actors that were

involved in the testing process, but the different post-it shades make visible that the material

findings from each focus group gave greater power to different actors within the testing

assemblage that negotiated what that test could do, or did do, for them after completion.

The dark pink and green post-its (3.1.1) show that the first focus group discussed how

important the "test" is in Grade 4 that leads to meeting criteria for designation,

identification, Individual Education Plan, and Gifted programming and placement.  It also

shows that human actors (primarily teachers) have great influence over *how* the test is

perceived by students.  If teachers downplay the test so as not to increase students' anxiety

(Randy 3.1.1.308), they may inadvertently influence less effort or not have it taken seriously.

Likewise, a student-participant shared that teachers should make clear that it is an important

test, but that nothing will change if one does not do well on it (Ray, 3.1.1.314).  Interestingly,

the teacher-participant positioned the test as the first step toward being able to access

enrichment programming: *"really cool things can come out of it if you'd blow this test away*

*and do a good job, I mean there's stuff riding on this test"* (Randy, 3.1.1.312-313).  Materials

identified by the other focus group (3.1.2), however, show that the test and subsequent label

should result in various opportunities to pursue enriched activities or courses but should

*primarily* be about individual interests and passions rather than a singular placement: *"I don't*

*think that just because they're gifted means they would want to do some of the enriched*

*courses"* (Jax, 3.1.2.645).  It appears this is a competing assemblage around what access

means, suggesting that the human actors involved are constantly negotiating with the non-

human actors such as staffing, timetabling, funding, among others, to determine what that

access is.   Findings from these blended focus groups connect back to material findings from

the student focus group that made visible how *numbers* are the most influential mediator

when it comes to the curated pathway for programming and placement.  Here, materials

clearly show that there is a transaction involved in doing well on the "test," which then

results in being identified as Gifted, and being given access to enrichment programming.

Next, participants shared several stories of ways in which they had to **sacrifice**

something about their education to access enrichment programming.  Material analysis

shows that the current infrastructure does provide enrichment programming, but it is

positioned as *outside* of the regular classroom.  Subject acceleration, or curriculum

compacting, is one such program that is offered and accessed by many of the student-

participants, and all of whom completed their compacting outside of their classroom and in

relative isolation, *"often solitary, so you're just by yourself"* (Ray, 3.2.2.585); *"you choose

between boredom and aloneness"* (Ray, 3.2.2.787).  Likewise, materials show that the

decision to have students access this program outside may change their learning behaviours,

as the only available space to satisfy the enrichment need is outside the regular classroom

and thus comes at the cost of all those social and intellectual experiences learning alongside

peers: *"I've learned to work separately from people and I don't like working with people now"*

(Caitlyn, 3.2.2.594).

There was also a clear transaction of French Immersion programming *for* entrance into

an elementary self-contained Gifted placement, which includes only Core French—

programming that begins in junior grades.  The assemblage of "elementary infrastructure"

shows very clear transactions within and around the network, as students are only provided

with one of two choices should they be in French Immersion prior to the test: either stay in

the regular French Immersion classroom—a placement since Kindergarten—and access

outside Gifted programming through Itinerant staff, or attend a self-contained placement

with Core French, which begins four years after French Immersion students start to learn the

language: *"I had to switch back to English and then they were sticking me in the core French*

*class […] we were learning our numbers from one to ten and we spent a week on that"*

(Leanne, 3.2.1.415).  I did take note of the various negotiations taking place in primary

education with various human actors (parents, educators, administrators, students), as well

as non-human actors (enrolment, application deadlines, busing, changing schools) when

deciding on whether to place bright, primary-aged pupils in French Immersion to access

some form of enrichment while waiting for this "test" that does not occur until Grade 4:

*"that's often a strategy if your kid is really strong, have you considered French Immersion?*

*And I don't know if it's because we think it's a great strategy, or that we think that the system*

*isn't doing it best"* (Jackie, 3.2.1.388-390).  A material analysis has made visible how the

system infrastructure—the incredibly influential *intermediary*—continues to be taken-for-

granted as simply the way things are, as illustrated above by the various transactions—not

negotiations—that must take place when deciding on individual priorities to have one's

needs met.

*6.6.2 Tracing and Teasing Out: Who or What is Responsible for Gifted Learners?*

(Re)learning from the stories of experience that Gifted pupils and educators of Gifted

learners have shared through a material lens has provided a means to visibly see, trace, and

notice the numerous negotiations that are taking place within and around the actor

networks.  Material analysis shows *how* Gifted learners are attempting to negotiate with

both human and non-human agents to increase their agency in their learning.  **Agency**, in this

context, is understood as *beyond* the capacity, ability and potential to act.  For the purposes

of this study, I draw upon Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson's (2015) more *ecological* approach

that sees agency as "emerging from the interaction of individual 'capacity' with environing

'conditions'" (p. 22).  Viewing agency as something that people possess individually and

because of their personal characteristics and abilities is incomplete and not particularly

useful when looking at a visible display of materials that are interconnected and constantly

acting upon, within, and between one another for a multitude of purposes.  Likewise,

Hamilton (2012) reminds us that according to *ANT*, agency "emerges through the

relationships that come into being through actor networks" (p. 55), signaling that agency,

from a material-semiotic understanding, is essentially negotiated.  Thus, agency in this study,

"is not something that people can *have* or *possess*; it is rather to be understood as something

that people *do* or *achieve*" (Biesta & Tedder, as cited in Priestley et al., 2015, p. 22).

When tracing responsibility through the various actor-networks it led me to rather

interesting redirections at times, suggesting that there was some confusion around who or

what is responsible for the needs of Gifted pupils within this education system.  A deep trace

of influences on this confusion ensued, resulting in the identification of the Secondary Gifted

Vision as playing a key role in adding to the various redirections in the mindmaps.  Various

negotiations around for-credit decision-making were taking place—many of which involved

the students themselves—either within the regular classroom with other actors (e.g.

timetable, curriculum, assessment, IEP, classroom teacher) or taking place outside of the

regular classroom with their Gifted Contact Teachers or System Staff (e.g. Secondary Gifted

Itinerant).  It was noticeable that the students were having to navigate the inner workings of

system infrastructure to have their needs met, especially as it related to regular classroom assessment options and flexibility for credit attainment.  I had anticipated that the mobility in net-working and thus responsibility would have been from the teachers themselves, but chose to trace the student actors as well, as I was curious to see what was motivating them when they mobilized themselves toward other actors—mainly outside staff—virtually circumventing the regular classroom altogether.  As a result, this led to a more sustained tracing of the involvement of the regular classroom environment and regular classroom teacher.

The influence unfolded materially once I began to trace the regular classroom and teacher's responsibility and involvement in meeting the needs of high-ability pupils, thus rendering visible that the **most powerful *mediator* in this series of actor-networks is the regular classroom teacher**.  To demonstrate the influence of the regular classroom teacher, we again apply Latour's (1993) four meanings or ways in which mediators wield power.  It must also be noted that this examination will focus on the incredibly positive influence that regular classroom teachers have, as well as make visible the ways in which responsibility for students' learning is shown to have been abdicated at times, forcing students to go outside of their regular classroom to have their needs met.

First, *interference* is when an agent translates or interferes with the goal of another entity.  In this actor-network, interference was challenging to pinpoint, as it was a joint-venture with the regular classroom teacher and the much larger network of employer, accountability, Ministry expectations, among others, that was influencing the many decisions of the classroom teacher.  The Ontario Ministry of Education mandates that credit courses

must be 110 hours in length, but it was shown to have collided with other Ministry

documentation and legislation of Special Education, which has the affordance to provide

learning accommodations for environment, instruction, and assessment.  Credit or

curriculum compacting is an accommodation that was accessed often by high-ability pupils in

my role in the board, which is where a 110-hour course is redesigned and compressed to

approximately half of the credit hours while providing enriched lessons that still meet all the

curricular strands and expectations.  When a student sought the support of the regular

classroom teacher for a credit compacting solution to a pace issue in the class, the teacher

did support the request but only within the established structure of the course.  As an

example, under the assemblage of "different learning needs" was a series of materials that

were negotiating compacting within a regular class.  Material analysis shows that the acute

decision to allow the student to do the next level/Grade material was welcomed at the time,

but now that the student is in the next Grade, he is essentially repeating his last year of

English (Jacob, 3.2.1.329-334) but with a different educator.  Likewise, a student was

registered in a senior Science course that was taken for pleasure rather than as a prerequisite

course for post-secondary.  She connected with the classroom teacher about a potential

compact and was denied.  Tracing the materials suggests that the translation of both non-

human and human actors influenced the decision of the classroom teacher to deny the

student.  The combination of the teacher not having previous experience with compacting,

not having a readily available course pre-compacted or template available, not having a valid

reason, no support from the Department Head, along with timetable, attendance and

reporting barriers, and the misunderstanding of what the left-over time was to be used for

resulted in her withdrawing her request and subsequently dropping the course (Ramona, 3.1.2.735-742).  Thus, the *interference* of the regular classroom teacher was in changing the original goal of the student actors.  Both students were seeking subject acceleration, and although one was provided a version of this opportunity, it led to great disappointment the following year when essentially repeating a course; and in the second case, the student was denied the entire opportunity, thus changing the goal of compacting to withdrawing completely.

*Composition* is when the composite goal becomes the common achievement for all the agents in a network, which is evident in the regular classroom teacher's *response to Gifted pupils' needs in the regular classroom*.   When tracing the composition, it was evident that there were two ways in which it occurred.  First, and most often as illustrated in the mindmap, the common achievement for all agents in the regular classroom network (including additional students, curriculum, assessment, evaluation, accountability, report cards, among others) is achievement (passing grades, earning credit) for all.  As indicated in the mindmap around the "regular classroom" assemblage, if and when Gifted learners seek out the support of their teacher for different work, they are given more work (Kennedy, 3.1.1.215), and that in some cases the student will not approach the regular classroom teacher for fear of receiving a utilitarian response that the focus is on all learners to understand the material, thus prioritizing the learners who are perhaps having difficulty accessing the material.  The second, and highly positive, way that this mediator (regular classroom teacher) exerts great influence and fundamentally changes the goal for all agents in the regular classroom is by shifting the priorities and structures to include passion projects

or more self-directed, interest-based learning.  The material analysis further shows that the regular classroom teacher changes the goal of all agents when the approach is on engagement of all pupils in the class: *"he'll be like, 'you're getting me off topic,' and we'll be like 'that's okay, keep going!'"* (Jacob, 3.2.1.151); *"I just find it makes the class more enjoyable […] teachers who are involved and excited […] courses that are more self-directed"* (Ramona, 3.2.1. 153-162).  Regardless of whether the goal of the regular classroom is pass rates or engagement, it is the regular classroom teacher that exerts the *most* significant influence, as all teachers are governed by organizational items, assessment and evaluation, curricular documents, among others, but it is the teacher who has the power to act (or not).

Again, **black boxing** is the strategic action of an agent to continue operating as if it were a two-dimensional, singular thing that does not exert any influence.  Here, the regular classroom teacher exerts great influence by continuing to black box the governing *infrastructure*.  Akin to interference, the regular classroom teacher may be willing to provide enrichment or extension within the regular class to replace the current curricular work, but the materials show two additional responses that continue to validate infrastructure as the way things are, hence *black boxed*.  First, when the teacher is unable to provide enrichment or curriculum compacting, it is the response to shift the student to outside personnel, such as the Gifted Teacher or Resource Department who can provide that accommodation; and second, should the teacher be willing and able to provide the compacting or enrichment, it is still contingent upon other structural materials such as the semester end date, timelines, student information systems, and other administrative rules that have been positioned under broader policy and practice as "the way things are" and cannot be deviated from.

Lastly, **delegation** is deeply connected to black boxing when it comes to infrastructure. The actor-network shows that powerful mediators, such as regular classroom teachers, can delegate responsibility onto other non-human actors, such as the Secondary Gifted Vision that positions outside enrichment programming as both available and supported by additional staffing.  When regular classroom teachers shift Gifted pupils to those additional staff, it is not seen as negligent or abdicating responsibility, as the infrastructure and understanding to have needs met outside that space was established by "The Model" and is widely accepted.  What this analysis has given rise to is this visible network of redirection and abdication of responsibility at the hands of the infrastructure itself, as it is unclear who has the primarily responsibility for the needs of Gifted pupils in this education system.

In sum, the regular classroom teacher as an influential mediator *interferes* by changing the original goal of the student actors, such as shifting the focus of subject acceleration or denying the request due to unavailable resources.   This powerful actor can also influence the *composite* goal of the regular classroom by way of a utilitarian focus on collective achievement or by way of engagement—both examples show that regardless of the infrastructure or demands bestowed upon the teacher, the power to act (or not act) still rests with the regular classroom teacher.  As a powerful mediator, the regular classroom teacher is able to *black box* the established infrastructure, which can be achieved as a flowchart of responsibilities (e.g. when students with special needs require support, they are sent to Resource for said support), or should the actor demonstrate great eagerness to meet the needs of students, the *black boxing* continues in positioning the parameters of timetables, staffing, contracts, timelines, among others, as stable and stoic conditions as

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non-negotiable in school systems.  And finally, regular classroom teachers as influential

actors *delegate* who and where the needs of Gifted pupils will be addressed, as the current

infrastructure—including the Secondary Gifted Vision—provides the mediator with options

to have those needs addressed outside of their domain, which appears to be communicated

as acceptable through the very infrastructure of Special Education within the broader

education system.

Circling back to agency, the materials and assemblages displayed in the mindmaps

suggest that there is a much deeper and broader negotiation between human actors around

responsibility, which was easily identifiable when tracing the negotiations within materials

for agency.  Agency in this study is defined as emerging through relationships that come into

being (Hamilton, 2012), and when witnessing a student (human actor) negotiating with other

human actors (teachers, Department Head) and non-human actors (timetables, timelines,

format of compacting, credit accumulation) we can see that agency is certainly sought for the

sole purpose of having one's needs met.  We also see that building or achieving agency is

highly influenced by the environmental conditions (Priestley et al., 2015) or network, and

when the conditions are favourable, students can negotiate having their needs met.  The

more interesting finding from this discovery is identifying how problematic it is that the

students are the ones negotiating in the first place, giving rise to questions around whose

responsibility is it anyway?

Lastly, the most influential *intermediary* is again "The Model" of regular classroom

placement with outside enrichment programming that the board subscribes to.  This format,

this infrastructure, this taken-for-granted "way things are" has been enabled to become

"black boxed" (Latour, 2005, p. 39) to the point where its very existence is akin to a latent

fingerprint—where traces of oil or sweat on the skin are present but not ordinarily visible to

the naked eye.  It is only through the process of dusting where the print can it be made

visible ("Latent fingerprinting," 2021).  What the blended focus groups have highlighted are

the abundance of redirections and thus abdications of responsibility that occur within the

networks.  What is more, as a response to either not having one's needs met in the regular

classroom and/or ensuring one's needs can be met in public education, materials show that

students have taken over the responsibility and are negotiating greater agency in decision-

making with other actors for a particular purpose, such as subject acceleration.

Through a series of material dusting, so to speak, we have made visible that the reason

*why* we continue to do what we have always done—overwhelmingly place Gifted pupils in

the regular classroom and provide outside enrichment programming—is because of the very

foundation this education system is built upon, where we have general education as the

primary placement and special education as the outside support.  Our education system has

given rise to this *parallel* system of education with two distinct groups of students who are

"often separate physically by way of special education classrooms and schools, but separate

also in teacher preparation and educational administration" (Sullivan & King Thorius, 2010, p.

96).  This influential *intermediary*, "The Model," that the education system subscribes to

continues to perpetuate this "General—Special Education chasm" (Sullivan & King Thorius,

2010, p. 96), which is now evidenced in the many negotiations and redirections that are

present in the actor-networks.  This intermediary, "Model," will continue to exert power over

the entire education system should it be allowed to continue operating as a black box.  And if

so, educational systems will continue to subscribe to the belief that the needs of Gifted pupils are fundamentally *beyond* the regular curriculum and thus are to be met outside that regular classroom space because programming and additional staffing has been provided by this *black box* actor.

*6.6.3 Critical Incidents*

The findings from these blended focus groups have made visible that more information is needed on what programming was made available, and in what ways the system staff was responsible for ensuring those needs were addressed and met, more broadly speaking.  As such, the critical incident and subsequent autoethnographic vignette **"WANTED: Agency; A Story of Unending R.A.F.T.s"** (where R.A.F.T. is a writing strategy that is designed to control outcomes by deliberately selecting several of the categories—role, audience, format, topic— and often leaving only one as choice for the pupil), explores how the programming for secondary Gifted pupils was operationalized across a large number of schools, and how those programs were taken-up within the schools as well.  The blended focus groups have also signaled that there seems to be confusion around who or what is fundamentally responsible for meeting the needs, which has also necessitated the autoethnographic vignette, **"The Story of Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody."** It is here where I share my own complicity again in how my programming design efforts to bring awareness to enrichment needs *as* bona fide needs led to a system-wide assumption that someone or something else was responsible.  This assumption was the result of not only the creation and subsequent perpetuation of outside enrichment only, but also the unclear messaging of the Secondary Gifted Vision and additional staffing itself.

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## 6.7 Matter Matters: Tracing the Durability of the Status Quo

Law (2009) reminds us that there are relatively straightforward ways in which some

materials come to exist and last longer than others.  Consider Callon and Latour's example of

the durability of the incarceration network: it is easier to imprison someone if there are

prison walls.  First, *material durability* is achieved by way of joining various materials

together in a relational web of effects, such as looking at the prison walls as existing as part

of a broader actor-network including guards, penal bureaucracies, structural building

elements, among others (as cited in Law, 2009, p. 148).  Here we see that the durability of

the incarceration network is a direct result of the inclusion *and* configuration of the materials

within the actor-network itself, suggesting that the stability comes not only from materials

themselves, but in *how* those materials assemble and act on/within/between the webs.

Likewise, *strategic durability* can be achieved in an actor-network by way of strategically

building and positioning it that way, such as bringing in additional components (actors,

assemblages) that act at the pleasure of the mediators and serve to enhance the stability.

Law (2009) uses the example of the Portuguese maritime network where they experimented

with innovative designs for exploration vessels, as well as creating a system of celestial

navigation.  When combined, these strategies capitalize the network in a way, adding

strength and thus durability by filling out the network with additional actors that work on

behalf of a more influential presence.  All of this is akin to building an empire of loyal and

interconnected materials that add great strength and durability to a phenomenon.  Finally,

Law (2009) presents *discursive durability* that borrows from Foucault's modes of organizing

mini-discourses (p. 149).  Here, an organization holds itself together using various discourses

that set their own limits and thus bring order and stability to a robust network. To illustrate, Law (2009) uses a case study from his ethnography of a large scientific laboratory in 1990. He found that the managers all subscribed to and worked within different discourses, which complemented the actor-network by providing boundaries and order, resulting in greater durability and stability because the lab needed different modes (e.g. bureaucracy, problem-solvers, charisma) to function optimally.

When considering the durability of this education system network, we can visibly see how the status quo phenomenon has continued to not only exist but thrive within this actor-network. First, the many materials add to the durability, especially those highly influential mediators (achievement, numbers, testing, grades; staffing; regular classroom teachers) and the dominant—albeit concealed—power of the *black box* intermediary ("The Model" of infrastructure). Importantly, however, we cannot look at these materials as the sole reasons for the perpetuation of the status quo, as Law (2009) reminds us that it is a combination of the materials *and* the composition of the net-working (Kamp, 2018) that results in *material durability.* Take the transaction that occurs in elementary school where the intellectual ability testing results are exchanged or transacted for a designation and access to programing and placement; or the negotiations that take place within the regular classroom between the classroom teacher and the class grade average as influencing lesson design, curriculum, pace, assessments, among others, as well as the outside influence of the broader employment and accountability network *upon* that mediator (classroom teacher) to perform and report satisfactory achievement of all pupils in that placement. The forces exerted by the materials present in (or within the material realm of) the regular classroom are circulating through the

teacher's practices, suggesting that the teacher's actions, intentions, and desires are "not

determined by the network, but emerge through the myriad of translations that are

negotiated among all the movements, talk, materials, emotions and discourses making up

the classroom's everyday encounters" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, p. xvi).  Material things,

then, are performative; they come together, engage in some form of translation, and exert

some form of influence on other materials for a particular enactment, reminding us that

"they are matter and they matter" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, p. 53).  Indeed, the materials

have demonstrated how they can build an exceptionally durable network that continues to

produce a curated experience for Gifted pupils in public education.

Next, we consider *strategic durability*, which is witnessed in the creation of the

Secondary Gifted Vision for outside programming, which was further joined by additional

staffing, education personnel, and an annual application.  To build the infrastructure empire,

strategic decisions had to be made and implemented to secure all sides of influence.  The

mindmaps make visible the reach that the intermediary, "The Model," has on all corners and

highways within the various actor-networks.  By strategically providing outside enrichment

programming as *the* means to meet the needs of high-ability pupils, "The Model," manages

to shine light upon the solution rather than the problem, which is the continued existence of

the regular classroom placement as an isolated space and where resources are not deployed

but rather redistributed to outside personnel within the schools or system.  What is more,

"The Model" then rewards schools with additional staffing to help facilitate those outside

programs and demands that school personnel document and justify their efforts to request

the additional staffing on a year-by-year basis.  Materially and strategically speaking, this

network is a well-oiled machine that manages to increase its stability and durability with every school year that passes.  As is with every successful run-through, it helps to create muscle memory; the more that something is experienced and performed, the more "taken-for-granted" it becomes.  By focusing great attention on strategically building a tightknit process, the intermediary, "The Model," manages to fade into the background and takes the regular classroom space with it.

Lastly, the strategies employed by this system give rise to the *discursive stability* of the network.  The Secondary Gifted Vision (a strategy) outlines the various programs available for all secondary schools and positions the responsibility for those programs as outside the regular classroom and primarily with additional personnel or Special Education personnel.  This strategy has generated different discourses that visibly separate the responsibilities for Gifted pupils' education.  First, to name only a few, the regular classroom teacher has responsibilities for curriculum, assessment, evaluation, pedagogy, and credit within the classroom space.  Next, the Learning Support Teacher, Resource Teacher or Gifted Teacher has the responsibilities of developing students' Individual Education Plans, creating opportunities for enrichment, curriculum compacting, organizing College Board program mentoring and subsequent examinations, liaising with system staff for large-scale enrichment, among others, demonstrating that the personnel (actors) have different discourses and thus boundaries when it comes to educating Gifted learners.   As noted by Law (2009), the different discourses contribute to stability, as the actors are given parameters or separate job descriptions (literally) that together, provide balance and durability to the network.  Additionally, because the materials are given their own discourse,

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no agent is taking over the responsibility of another agent, which would result in over or

under working and creating an imbalance that threatens the stability of the entire network.

Interestingly, it is Latour (1988) who reminds us that to increase the durability of a network

and spread far and wide, "an actant needs faithful allies who accept what they are told,

identify itself with the cause, carry out all the functions that are defined for them, and come

to its aid without hesitation when they are summoned" (p. 199).  This further illustrates how

meeting the needs of Gifted pupils have come to be reinforced as outside and beyond the

regular classroom, as those needs have remained within the outside personnel's discourse

over time.  And the process itself has largely gone unquestioned.  Until now.

## 6.8  (Re)flecting: Using a New Language for Intervention

Since *ANT* emerged and became independent, it has travelled widely; likewise, it has

affected and has been affected by many fields of research (Landri, 2021).  That said, *Actor-*

*Network Theory* was not terribly familiar in the field of education research (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2010) and the number of *ANT* in education studies (ANTiES) is relatively small when

compared to other fields (Landri, 2021).  However, as the awareness of these material

sensibilities grew, providing education researchers with a method, a tool, that could

contribute to thinking critically and intervening in the current dynamics of education,

Fenwick and Edwards (2019) found that the number of studies employing *ANTi*ES doubled in

the new millennium (Landri, 2021).  What is more, socio-material approaches offer

researchers different ways of engaging with and intervening in education issues (Fenwick &

Landri, 2013), as "*ANT* is not interested in deconstructing and debunking but in disentangling

and recomposing.  The approach is not aimed at unveiling and destroying but studying

differently and critically and in interfering with the phenomenon" (Landri, 2021, p. 13).

Additionally, *ANT*'s language has given rise to new questions (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012) and

has provided this study with the tools to investigate the layers of *topography* (Hamilton &

Pinnegar, 2013) of this status quo phenomenon, allowing the researchers to experience a

more *three*-dimensional demonstration of the various features, the different terrain, and the

contours that are often not as visible within a *two*-dimensional display.  Whereas findings in

the form of critiques of Gifted programs and services are only able to hold things in place and

perpetuate their stagnant *being*, *ANT* can assist in peeling back the layers, as it is meant to

represent, to intervene, rather than totalize (T. Fenwick, personal communication, February

10, 2016).

Greater attention to *symmetry,* which acknowledges *all* material entities as valid,

capable, and equal in agency, rather than privileging only the human action (or inaction),

provides education researchers with ways to make visible the entanglements of everyday

things that are fundamentally involved in everyday practices that may go unnoticed.  And by

drawing upon *socio*-material tools, it allows the researcher to shift attention away from the

personal and (re)focus on the social, asking questions such as:

How they move, and how they produce what may appear to be distinct objects,

subjects, and events.  How and why do certain combinations of things come together

and exert particular effects? For example, what knowledge is produced through

patterns of assemblage? How do some assemblages become stable, and what force do

they wield? (Fenwick & Landri, 2013, p. 3)

This new vocabulary provides us with a fresh and unique way to engage with or (re)enter

stale, ongoing or even new(er) conversations about *why* something is happening in

education.  Of course, *ANT* would not be able to, nor does it protest to, address *why* a

phenomenon exists (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012; Latour, 2005), but rather it allows us to get

close enough to the material mess to finally see *what* and *how* that phenomenon is existing,

so we may be poised to finally address *why*.

This study sought to intentionally interrupt (Katz & Dack, 2012) dominant discourses

and practices so we may engage policymakers and educators in a critical conversation around

re-conceptualising how we respond to the needs of our Gifted pupils in 21ˢᵗ Century

classrooms, institutions, and educational systems.  By applying a precise material-semiotic

sensibility to the narrative data, we have uncovered *how* this status quo pathway of regular

classroom placement and outside enrichment programming continues to be enabled, which,

consequently, is *dis*abling our Gifted learners by imposing this singular and universal pathway

in secondary public education.  As an approach that is precisely about intervention (Fenwick

& Edwards, 2010, p. 60), we can more thoughtfully engage in raising our critical

consciousness (Freire, 1970/2006) and disrupting the hegemonic discourses and practices

that continue to deprioritize the needs of these exceptional students.  Above all else, *ANT*

has provided this study with a rich and intimate understanding of *how* power is exerted and

*how* it privileges certain kinds of knowledge and practices (Fenwick, 2010).  Indeed, *ANT* has

made possible a way to thoughtfully intervene in this education issue by visibly

demonstrating to policymakers *how* we got here in the first place, and *why* it matters that we

disrupt this practice.

## 6.9 Summary

The central goals of this paper were to first present an innovative material approach that could go beyond the two-dimensional, surface findings that saturate the field of Gifted education to make visible the *who, what*, and *how* we find ourselves in this perpetual impasse in public education.  Second, this article endeavoured to share key findings experientially through an *ANT-like* tracing of the translation of the *most* powerful actors— intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005)—and networks that are fundamentally responsible for perpetuating and enabling the status quo of regular classroom placement as the only available option with enrichment opportunities as primarily withdrawal-based.  The combined "show and tell" approach of this broader *Critical Narrative Inquiry* encourages us to pay attention to the relationships between humans, and specific to this phase of the study of employing a precise socio-material sensibility to that narrative data, we are further reminded *not* to ignore the power of non-human agents (Burm, 2016).  Material-semiotics have been very fruitful in tracing and pinpointing exactly *how* programming and placement practices in this education system continue to be enabled through the sustained efforts of the **infrastructure** or "The Model" itself (intermediary), as well as the ongoing work of the most powerful and connected mediators within the broader actor-network: **numbers** (grades, marks, percentiles), **staffing**, and **regular classroom teachers**.  Given that *ANT* "is useful, but not definitive" (Hamilton, 2012, p. 56), this paper has also presented a series of *critical incidents* that require further explanation, content, and context for a more complete picture of *how* some of these practices have been enabled in an education system.  Findings from this phase of the study have informed the second phase and subsequent manuscript

where I respond to the critical incidents through a series of autoethnographic vignettes that

serve to continue exploring this phenomenon in a three-dimensional manner by picking up

where the material analyses have left off.

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# Chapter 7

## 7 Autoethnographic Revelations: Enabling, Enacting, and Living the Effects of Public Policy[9]

> *"Traditional policy analysis ranges from focusing on predicting policy outcomes to assessing the ways in which institutions are responsible for certain policy outputs in particular policy sectors during specific temporal periods. Another approach focuses on the role of ideas: how they shape worldviews, articulate our interests, form associations and devise courses of political action […] How people experience policies in their everyday world often remains peripheral to these models." (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005, p. 198)*

Capturing the lived experiences of changing social policy (Neysmith, Bezanson, &

O'Connell, 2005) can help engage policymakers in reflective practices when creating new

policies or revamping existing ones. Articulating how individuals live within, between, and

beyond those public policies throughout time, space, and place helps us to not only see but

better understand the intersections and complex relationships between private issues and

public policy (Neysmith et al., 2005). This article attempts to show the broader and long-term

effects of enacting, enabling, and living public policy—specifically policies pertaining to Gifted

education in Ontario, Canada—and endeavours to engage in policy debate from various entry

points (Neysmith et al., 2005) throughout the participant's experiences in an education

system.

I begin this paper with an overview of the novel "show and tell" approach that was

undertaken to investigate the status quo problem of both programming and placement that

exists within public education systems for high-ability students. I drew upon material-semiotic

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[9] A version of this chapter has been written for publication targeting the journal, *The Qualitative Report*.

sensibilities, specifically *Actor-Network Theory*, as a critical method to "show" the various

actors that were present and involved in enacting this status quo, as well as tracing their

interactions, negotiations, and ways in which these entities were able to exert force, change,

and be changed by each other (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, 2012).  This *socio*-material approach

made visible the *who*, *what*, and *how* we find ourselves in this perpetual programming and

placement impasse in public education.  Further, it gave rise to the identification of various

*critical incidents* that had a profound impact on the participants and required further

explanation, content, and context for a more complete understanding of *how* some of the

practices of enacting and perpetuating the status quo were carried out.  Inspired by these

critical events, a series of autoethnographic vignettes were composed by the participant-

researcher as part of this novel approach to "tell" more about the enacting of these public

policies.  This combination of "show and tell" methods was used to give rise to a more

complex, more three-dimensional way of understanding the *topography* (Hamilton &

Pinnegar, 2013) of this status quo phenomenon—the features, the different terrain, and the

contours that show us exactly *how* this has continued to happen—further problematizing the

way Gifted education as an outside endeavour continues to be positioned, enacted, and

perpetuated.

As part of a larger *critical narrative inquiry* (CNI), the varied methods employed in this

study, including narrative, material-semiotic, and autoethnography, aid in achieving the

broader goals of a reconceptualisation process that must be undergone to develop research

that is critical in nature so as to offer "alternative ways of thinking, being, and doing" (Iannacci,

2019, p. 15; 2007).  According to Iannacci (2019), reconceptualisation is realized through a

process of *construction*, *deconstruction*, and finally *reconstruction* (p. 14), which draws on

French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur's (1992, 1990) "threefold mimesis" that refers to three

domains of a past, a present mediating act, and a future (Herda, 1999, p. 76).  Ricoeur

emphasizes that language is not just a system, but that it can articulate lived experiences.  This

theory of narrative and interpretation considers language, reflection, understanding, and the

self (Ricoeur, 1976, 1990), and through analysis and interpretation of lived experiences can

new recognitions of "being-in-the-world" (Simonÿ, Specht, Anderson, Johansen, Nielsen, &

Agerskov, 2018, p. 1) be achieved.  More specific to this study's framework, Iannacci (2019)

articulates how *mimesis 1* is understood as the world presented in narrative form

(construction of stories or "what *was*"); *mimesis 2* occurs through reflection about and

distancing from pre-understandings (deconstruction or "what *is*"), and is often referred to as

contextualising or nesting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); and *mimesis 3* applies these insights to

a "refigured future" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 15) (reconceptualisation or "a vision of what *can be*").

Findings from this autoethnographic phase of the study will be shared in the same

conceptual framework of *construction*, *deconstruction*, and *reconceptualisation* beginning with

a synopsis of the five (5) autoethnographic vignettes that were used to *construct* the

narratives. The balance of the article will concentrate on the *deconstruction* of those

narratives through critical reflection that focuses on the participant-researcher's

entanglements within the space of enacting and enabling public policy, as well as living the

effects of these educational system policies.  These deconstructions are presented through a

series of encompassing themes (Haberlin, 2016) that showcase how the participant-researcher

continued to enact public policy with every decision and subscribe to dominant discourses and

practices that perpetuated the very status quo being investigated in this study. Themes are further nested within the actual public policies that were used and referred to within the autoethnographic vignettes for context in hopes of engaging current policymakers in reflection and subsequent debate from these various entry points (Neysmith et al., 2005). What follows is a discussion of the "show and tell" approach to investigating this phenomenon, as well as how these findings help to flesh out this study's research questions about better understanding how Gifted is constructed as an exceptionality, as well as how these experiences contribute to our overall understanding of whether programmatic and placement options have or have not evolved throughout history to respond to contemporary Gifted learners' needs in public education systems. This paper ends with the consideration of some *reconceptualised* understandings of the purpose, design, and implementation of Gifted education programs, services, and placements in education systems, further providing some insights that may help us to "reconfigure a future" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 15) for our high-ability pupils in public education today.

For the purposes of this article, the term "system-level" is synonymous with the broader management level at a Board of Education that houses policymakers, senior administrators such as superintendents and directors, and specialized teachers that support or coordinate various portfolios throughout the broader "education system" that encompasses all schools, staff, and facilities within a specific geographical area. The provincial governing body, the Ministry of Education, is also referred to as an education system where individual Boards of Education are positioned within this all-encompassing hierarchy of education.

## 7.1    (Re)searching a Phenomenon: Using Autoethnographic Sensibilities to "Tell"

> "Regina's hand goes up.  'So even though you are writing a personal story about having a lisp, you also are an ethnographer looking around to see how stigmas might occur for others.'
>
> 'And you also are an analyst looking for patterns and common properties that reach beyond the particular story,' says Jennifer." (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 208)

Autoethnography is never solely about the personal or the author in isolation; rather it always includes its relationships to culture and with other people (Ellis, 2004).  According to Riessman (1993), narrative is a snapshot in time, pointing to the situatedness and interconnectedness of the method where "individuals' narratives are situated within particular interactions but also within social, cultural, and institutional discourses" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 30).  Drawing from established ethnographic methods of data collection including narrative and evocative writing, autoethnographic researchers recognize that they themselves are embedded within the social milieu they are studying (Poulos, 2021) and strive to share "stories with a purpose—the practice of cultural analysis and critique" (p. 13).  Specific to research in education, Grumet (1981) sees autobiography as a way to get a critical perspective on educational experiences that might otherwise be considered taken-for-granted practices and understandings.  By nesting those stories within the broader contexts and conversations occurring at that time in history, the researcher can make visible how these personal histories are influenced and shaped by contemporary policies and institutional processes.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and approach to research that "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*)

personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams, &

Bochner, 2011, p. 1).  With philosophical and epistemological roots in narrative theory and

social constructionism, we expect multiple interpretations of a phenomenon (Cohen, Manion,

& Morrison, 2011, p. 28) and multiple truths in the development of knowledge.  A researcher

thus uses principles of ethnography and autobiography to do and write an autoethnography,

which illustrates new perspectives on personal experience, and both finding and filling various

gaps in related storylines (Ellis et al., 2011).  Researchers produce rich, evocative, and thick

descriptions of personal experiences by discerning patterns of cultural experience (Ellis et al.,

2011) as evidenced in artifacts, field notes, reflective journaling, among others, which is a

strategy of "telling" as it "provides readers some distance from the events described so that

they might think about the events in a more abstract way" (p. 5).

### 7.1.1  *Critical Incidents and Autoethnographic Vignettes*

This study used autoethnographic sensibilities as a method to "tell" stories about the

participant-researcher who did view herself as the phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011) of enacting,

enabling, and living the effects of public policy.  Using autoethnography as a method of

"telling" a series of stories to convey information needed to appreciate greater content and

context further complements this study's novel approach of "show and tell" methods.  The

previous phase of data collection in this study drew upon material-semiotic sensibilities to

"show" how the status quo phenomenon was enacted.  It further illuminated various *critical*

*incidents* or events that lay between the "flashpoint incidents and the long-term

consequences" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 69) that the participant-researcher felt

compelled to provide "multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37) and report on one's

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own experiences and introspections to "garner insights into the larger cultural or subculture of which you are a part" (Patton, 2015, p. 102).

Initially conceptualized as a distilled set of themes that presented themselves as "the right mix of ingredients at the right time and in the right context" (Woods, 1993, p. 102) throughout the socio-material analysis phase of the study, five (5) *critical incidents* were identified through the impact they had on the storytellers. Several of the critical incidents identified existed within an organizational structure and were subject to its governance, authority, performance expectations, and operational procedures (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 69). Moreover, they were unplanned, unanticipated, were intensely personal with strong emotional involvement, had an impact on the people involved in the focus groups, existed within a particular context—specifically within an educational institution (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 68), and were centered around various policies and discourses. As a participant-researcher collecting these stories (Gollan-Wills, 2014), I experienced a change of understanding throughout the analytical process (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 60) that inspired me to share additional stories of experience to discover, inquire, and explore ways in which my actions were complicit in perpetuating the very status quo under investigation, as "writing personal stories thus makes 'witnessing' possible" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 8).

## 7.2   *Constructions*: Autoethnographic Vignettes

> "'As advertised, I've chosen to focus in this class on qualitative methods that connect social science to literature.  We'll view ourselves as part of the research—sometimes as our focus—rather than standing outside what we do.  Instead of starting with a hypothesis, we'll emphasize writing as a process of discovery.'" (Ellis, 2004, p. 3)

Writing, for me, has been a process of discovery, as "'we write to find the truths of our experiences, some painful, some not'" (Ellis, 2004, p. 111).  In constructing the narratives for this phase in the study, I used autobiographical data, documents, artefacts, and reflexive journaling to respond to the *critical incidents* that had a significant impact on both the participants, as well as myself, and where I felt these events needed further details to flesh out a more complete understanding of *how* our processes, policies, and actions continued to enable this status quo phenomenon.  Each of the five (5) *critical incidents* were responded to through an autoethnographic vignette that drew together the experiences, artefacts, and documents that were part of my learning journey within an education system.  To support the reader's engagement in this article, I have provided a summary of stories shared along with written sections of each vignette below as an anchor for subsequent sections in the article where I deconstruct them through critical reflection.  Where I incorporate snippets of these vignettes to disrupt the commonplace (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) or hegemonic understandings and practices within the deconstruction section of the article, there has been enough of the constructions or stories shared for the reader's reference.

*7.2.1   Vignette 1: Am I "they"?*

This vignette was written in response to the *critical incident* identified in the student

focus group around **who "they" are** that were positioned as the decision-makers who seemed

to wield such great power over the experiences of Gifted students.  To add context and flesh

out a response, I felt I needed to address who "they" are.  *I* was part of "they" at the system-

level and thus had first-hand knowledge of the inner workings of this curative experience

students in secondary had in our Gifted program.  This vignette detailed my first year in a

system role, as well as the creation and early implementation of the Vision of program

offerings that was intended to bring programming consistency to and support for our students,

staff, and schools.

> "It all started on the first day of school in September of 2012 when I began my new
> job as the (only) Secondary Gifted Itinerant Teacher at the Board Office […] we were
> all housed at an elementary school on the second floor […] I entered in just after
> 7:00 AM to my new shared office space—a classroom with six desk spaces
> surrounded by short filing cabinets, a large, communal table space in the middle, a
> kindergarten kitchenette with sink only, and I could tell where my desk space was as
> it was the only desk without a chair.  My desktop was empty but there was a single
> paper document push-pinned on the Bulletin Board beside my desk.  It was an
> allocation of [additional] staffing lines by school.  Just numbers of 1-3 beside school
> names.  And some schools didn't have a number beside them. […]
>
> I had met with my supervisor, who was amazing.  She reminded me that all of
> secondary was my responsibility and that I was hired to bring some consistency to
> the programming and support all the schools.  There were 28 schools.  And there
> were thousands of students.  So, I needed a plan.  I went on a fact-finding and
> people-finding mission to first locate WHO at each school would be a designated
> person who would be supporting Gifted learners, and then what staffing allocation
> (if any) they had, then what were they doing with that, and finally, what they
> needed from me.  […]

For some reason I thought that each school would have had a plan, personnel, and a program, just like the school I had come from.  I suppose I had some insider (student) knowledge that perhaps was skewing my perception into what all schools offered, as I had years of memories and experiences at this school.  I had taught at other secondary schools in the board, but as a classroom or subject teacher, not in Special Education.  I was also a student in an enrichment program in elementary school, so I was 'used' to having a resource teacher or someone outside of my classroom teacher facilitate this enriched workshop-style of learning sporadically throughout the year.  All these experiences led me to believe that all schools had the same infrastructure.  They did not.  And that was ok. […]

During my time in the schools, I gathered an incredible amount of data that they shared with me.  I found that there was a mix of credit and non-credit programming, and where some schools had well-established programming and others did not yet have the chance to, as they did not have any additional staffing. […] Needless to say, we had a very large, mixed bag of programming options that fluctuated in delivery, frequency and duration. […] I felt that a collective Vision would help not only with our shared language, but also with accountability so that [staffing] lines were allocated based on programming needs for current Gifted pupils. […]

After completing all my school visits, I had started to piece together what types of programming were being offered and started the beginning of what is known today as the [Vision] of programming.  At the time, I thought I was taking the information I had gathered from the ground-up, using the programs in place to build a vision for what we could offer as a Board and what was available to students.  I also knew from the research that students benefitted from choice and flexibility, so I used current literature to inform the vision as well.  Crafting this vision was a great starting point for all of us to come together for a shared approach, and it was also a way to help schools be accountable for their additional staffing lines, and it became a guide for us when it came to the Gifted Line [staffing] applications. […]

That first school year I had accomplished what I set out to do: (1) build relationships and trust with stakeholders, and (2) establish infrastructure.  And from there we kept making progress toward a common goal: everyone speaking to and with the Vision and building awareness of 'our' programming and how 'our' program had it all: transition support, in-school programs for credit and non-credit, as well as these outside enrichment opportunities that I would organize based on student interest.  I remember feeling proud and humbled that we (educators, administrators) were coming together for a common goal and speaking the same language.  I also remember rather vividly a similar feeling of fluttering in my stomach followed by accelerated heart pumping and a nearly immediate, happy smirk whenever I would

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hear a student or staff or admin or community member or parent mention ANY of these programs, as I knew that because of our efforts, we had that program for that student. We were doing it together […] I know that this infrastructure was the catalyst for change at the time. And now it was in all of our secondary schools in some capacity. And that became the next phase of work…helping to build the programming in all of the schools. […]

I didn't realize *how* exactly I had been complicit in perpetuating a status quo of programming until I revisited the narrative data through a material-semiotic lens and uncovered that the very infrastructure was what was perpetuating. […] The Vision itself was comprised primarily of 'in-school' programs that were ironically positioned 'outside' the regular classroom. All of them. And all the staffing decisions were made around these programs or variations of them. […]

And why did I manage to perpetuate it? Because that was my job. And like I said earlier, I did that job really well. But believe me, it wasn't intentional. Hindsight is 20/20. I truly did not know I was doing this until years later—almost a decade. I also didn't question the place of where these programs were located, as it has been my experience as a student leaving my elementary regular classroom to go to the Library or Resource room with a different teacher to do enrichment activities. It was 'normal.' And when I was at the [high school] where we had established programming, it was withdrawal format too. Like I was used to. I also gathered lots of data from the schools, and the programming was akin in placement…specialized teachers withdrew students from their regular classrooms to offer these workshops, programming, or even had them sign out for the day to attend one of my large-scale [enrichment] conferences that I offered [multiple] times a year at various locations and that were based on different student interests. So, when designing the Vision that would also be used as a guide for [staffing] line allocation, I didn't think twice about where the programs were offered. Not twice. Not again while I was in that role. I wasn't even aware of the position of these programs as all being outside the regular classroom […] and that it was this very infrastructure that was perpetuating the narrative that Gifted needs must be met outside the regular classroom because their 'needs' are beyond the regular curriculum. Mind. Blown. Heart. Ache. But I accept responsibility for it now that I know."

The entire vignette details the process of enacting the "Vision" from conception to implementation, as well as what the effects were. My ongoing, reflexive journaling makes visible that coming to the realization of my own complicity in this status quo phenomenon was

a process.  Entries read as defensive at times, as I believed I was doing the best I could with what I had.  I was tasked with building infrastructure and providing greater consistency between our schools for programming offerings, and by creating a vision for programming, we achieved that; and it thrived.  We had a shared common language, understanding, and infrastructure to ease students' mobility and increase access to programs between schools.  To this day I still receive comments and questions about programming options, as this was my wheelhouse.  I know now that the vision was incomplete; it was a work in progress.  And like all visions and goals, they must be revisited.  They must also be unpacked to better understand the underpinnings of knowledge (whose knowledge is privileged), and question whether or not they include responsive programming that truly meets the needs of the students.

### 7.2.2   Vignette 2: A crumb to feed a flock

This vignette was written in response to the *critical incident* identified in the teacher focus group around the **allocation process of additional staffing** that was given to schools for the purpose of providing enrichment programming for high-ability learners.  The vignette details the established timeline and process of the annual line application and makes visible how this taken-for-granted process helped to perpetuate the status quo we find ourselves in when it comes to programming and placement.

> "The [staffing] line application process began in December of a current school year for the following school year with receiving the approximate line allocation that I was to be working with.  Certainly, this number would guide my discussions with schools when looking at what they could be applying for.  I would revise the digital application […]  which was a multistep process.  In January of that current school year, schools would receive an email with four attachments: a memo indicating some background about the application, what programing strategies would be

eligible for additional staffing, instructions for completing the different sections, and deadlines and contact information; the [additional staffing] application itself; an exemplar application (composed by me); and the [programming] Vision for reference. Schools were to complete some demographic and contact information at the beginning of the application including personnel, number of students identified as Gifted by grade, the number of those pupils attending programming, how many enriched classes were offered and enrolment for each course (# of Gifted/Total Number of Students), course codes and number of students completing curriculum compacts, and [program] course exam names with the numbers of students who wrote and levels of achievement from the previous year.

Following this, they began their systematic justification of their offerings of enrichment both inside and outside including names of [enrichment] conferences they attended and with how many students, as well as various [enrichment withdrawal program] information, including session titles, a calendar of events, and numbers of attendees. The application asked for a detailed outline of how many lines they were seeking and what they planned to do with those lines including the service, implementation strategies, and indicators of success. […]

The accountability came when schools had to explain and showcase exactly what they did with the lines they received the previous year. They were asked to fill in a chart with the usage and progress/outcomes of the lines they had, as well as list the next steps to continue fostering the growth of the programming. […]

Schools would submit their applications in or around mid-February, as this is when overall staffing processes were underway. […] I combed through all the applications and made a highly comprehensive spreadsheet of data that would include my anecdotal notes and rationale for individual school line [staffing] allocation recommendations, all of which were designed to present to decision-makers. I would take the data shared with me and then fact-check. I would write down the data schools provided (e.g. number of [formally identified] Gifted students, how they were using the programming lines, what was offered, frequency etc.), then I would gather all the supplementary data with exact numbers on students by accessing all the [system] reports, as well as provide my insights into what the schools were offering. This was in the spirit of truth and reporting what was happening from multiple perspectives. This also meant bulking up some school's applications, as if they were too thin, I would add in what I witnessed at their schools, which fundamentally strengthened their applications. Again, it wasn't about catching them doing something wrong, but in providing the most accurate account of each school. I was their advocate. But I also had an obligation to the system to provide recommendations of allocating our limited resources to the best of my ability."

This vignette, in its entirety, details the annual process of additional staffing, as well as the many negotiations that took place with colleagues, administration, and system leadership when advocating for the growing needs of this population of learners. With the increased awareness of and access to programming options, requests for support increased from schools, as they wanted to ensure that their staff could program sufficiently for their students' needs. Reflexive journal entries share the inner conflicts when faced with what felt like impossible decisions when providing recommendations for allocating limited resources, knowing that these decisions—which were ultimately not mine to make—would let some schools, staff, and students down, as we were working with a finite number that never increased but rather decreased during my time in the role. This inner struggle of knowing that resources were limited, and yet asking schools that trusted me/us to continue building the programming knowing that we could not guarantee that funding long-term, was reflected in the entries and read as feeling responsible, blameworthy, and at fault for something that was outside the scope of my role. Reflections also included the ongoing need to pivot when annual funding would be status quo or shrink the following year, as the needs still existed across the system, but we needed to get creative in the application process to make earning those lines more robust, as they were precious and scarce.

### 7.2.3   Vignette 3: WANTED: Agency—A story of unending R.A.F.T.s

As a response to the blended focus groups of Gifted learners and educators of these high-ability students, this vignette was written in response to the *critical incident* of **agency** and where students shared stories of trying to negotiate with teachers and administrators around how to meet their needs, which was often met with organizational or infrastructural

resistance.  I knew why this was happening, as it was directly connected to, and a byproduct

of, not having adequate staffing on a consistent basis to build and maintain the Gifted

programming at individual schools.

"When students would share stories that were fundamentally about agency and
them trying to get a teacher to see their point or bend or adapt and they were met
with resistance, I often knew the back story.  I knew that I could provide them with
the answer as the person who was running the portfolio.  I also knew that the root
of their anger and frustration wasn't with the teachers all the time, but with the
programming that was available.  Every school was at a different place.  Some
schools had more lines than others.  This should not have driven availability, but it
did in some places. [...]

When students would talk about their great experiences with their Gifted teachers, I
knew who and what they were referring to.  Likewise, when they shared stories of
frustration because of 'not being allowed' to do something, I knew exactly why they
were denied.  I knew because I was in the loop.  Administrators or staff would call
me and ask for assistance.  In Ramona's[10] case, she wanted to compact a [course].
She was taking the course as an elective, not a compulsory for her post-secondary
program.  I also knew her Gifted teacher [...].  And I remember this teacher
intimating to me that she was coming up against a wall when advocating for [her] to
compact this course.  The Vision itself was only a year old and we were actively
building awareness across the schools, but it was in its infancy.  Many regular
classroom teachers and administrators did not know or understand 'what we did'
and what their roles or responsibilities would be when it came to these 'additional'
Gifted accommodations that somehow felt new, as though they've never really
been asked to program for high-ability pupils like this before.  In this case, the [staff]
were resistant, and the root of this resistance was not because they didn't think she
was capable.  They simply didn't have the time to do it, they had never done it
(compact) before, and there wasn't an exemplar compacted course to use. [...]

I had been in the role for only a year and a bit, and the focus for the portfolio was
building capacity at all schools, consistency in program offerings, using a shared
language…broader stuff.  I was also laser-focused on making it 'easier' for staff to
implement the programming and lessening the workload of the busy classroom and
Gifted teachers when it came to curriculum compacting, so I had spearheaded
creating a digital bank of fully compacted and enriched courses that I housed in my

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[digital] platform.  The second part of that first year I had spent months of my own time, every night, weekend, and entire summer break designing compacted courses to have available for September of the following year.  […] They were enriched and compacted, so they could be accessed at students' homes (provided they had internet access), completed in half the amount of credit hours/days, and all the assignments were super-stacked with curricular expectations, so teachers wouldn't be marking a ton.  I still believed I was helping to this day.  But I was only one person.  And this was a large portfolio.  […]

We needed a reasonable scope for compacted courses and thus an informal policy. So, I met with my supervisor and shared my plan with her.  I proposed that we only offer enriched/compacted intermediate courses (Grades 9 and 10) for all secondary pupils in the Gifted/enriched program for two reasons: broader buy-in from administrators and teachers who were on the fence with compacting in general, so offering lower grade compacts were less threatening for those concerned with credit integrity […] and second, because courses in the senior grades were more in-depth, had more content, and would be challenging for students to take a year early after completing a compact. […] it would make perfect, justifiable sense in providing students the opportunity to compact Grades 9 and 10 courses only. […]

So, students had their needs met when it came to pace of the regular classroom in the intermediate grades, and teachers were more likely to implement the program if they had a course already to go.  Win, win.  Right?

Wrong.  This initial 'policy' around curriculum compacting was initially implemented to help bring that awareness to schools so that they could grow in their capacity with offering curriculum compacting because the work was already done for them. It was also a way to get greater buy-in from administrators who were laser-focused on the [mandatory] credit hours for each course, which seemed somehow more justifiable with the intermediate courses rather than the senior ones when reducing them to [half the amount of] hours or days.  By going above and beyond with accountability and credit integrity in the design of each of those digital, compacted courses, people began to see that these courses were an accommodation for high-ability pupils needs of pace, flexibility, and choice.  It was also a way for me to manageably create courses and add to the bank while still doing my multifaceted job during the day, as compacting and curricular design fell to nights and weekends and holidays.  But what happened was that administrators and teachers began to take this 'policy' as firm, believing that it was not an option to compact senior courses.  Of course it was, if students needed that!  But because the awareness was initially around intermediate courses that 'didn't 'count' on provincial transcripts,' some teachers who were really tied to their curriculum and credit integrity did not feel that it was 'possible' to compact a senior level course.  I heard and felt

significant resistance from many staff (admin and teachers) that I can only imagine came from a place of ignorance (not understanding the potential of Gifted pupils) or fear (never designing a compacted or enriched course before). I heard things like: 'No way'; 'Not possible'; 'It's too much work' (for both student and staff); 'Students would not be able to grasp the material in such a short time'; 'They will not be prepared for postsecondary,' among others.

In Ramona's case, I felt for her when she was sharing those experiences in the focus groups. And I feel for her now, as I knew why she was denied. I couldn't say it then because it wasn't the place [...] I was also trying to protect the system decisions and my colleagues (professional duty and responsibility). But I knew that we were failing her because I could not compel my colleagues to do what needed to be done. I was in a position of confer but not in a supervisory capacity to compel. I was trying to build relationships by truly supporting, helping, doing, so that more people would see how 'easy' and accessible it was to adopt this mindset and approach to meeting these enrichment needs. It would have also been too soon in the portfolio to 'demand' they do it, and I remember worrying that pushing too hard too soon may have jeopardized future growth and acceptance of compacting for future students. [...]

 I can see so clearly now that the many stories shared like Ramona's were really about students responding to their environments and relationships and trying to achieve true understanding, appreciation, and respect for their learning needs. It was about building agency, negotiating their place, and not trying to take 'it' away from the teachers but rather have the teachers collaborate with them and see what they are capable of. The voices of these pupils were not given the respect they deserved because they were kids, and the antiquated perspective that adults know more than students is still present today. The students wanted choice, to be heard, and for their needs to be recognized as actual needs rather than just 'wanting' something more 'advanced.'

Instead, we (adults) at the system(s) create various, figurative 'R.A.F.Ts' [...] there was always something that was fixed, whether it was timetabling or course availability or 'sure, choose a new book but you need to compare it to the core book in this course.' Seldom were students able to have autonomy and agency over their education. And even if the systems in place were R.A.F.Ts, these stories show that students were never afforded the opportunity to choose all four components, as some were selected for them in the regular classroom, in selecting courses, in availability of compacted courses, among others. There was always a R.A.F.T. in their way."

This vignette was comprised of many stories of negotiations with students, staff, and administrators around meeting needs, which varied from program access to additional staffing and timetabling.  It was clear in the journaling that the concept of a R.A.F.T (a writing strategy that controls outcomes and is inspired by differentiated instruction pedagogy, representing role, audience, format, and topic) was a larger metaphor for many experiences with this programming Vision for Gifted learners.  More specifically with a R.A.F.T. approach, teachers select at least one fixed category, leaving the remaining categories as choice for students.  For example, if a teacher wants students to practice writing a certain structure, the category of "format" can be solidified as a letter or persuasive paragraph, so students must write in that format but can choose (again from a list of ideas within the R.A.F.T. chart) the role, audience, and topic.  The substory of Ramona's ongoing negotiations to compact a senior level course was a result of the infrastructure being a R.A.F.T. itself, as her school did not have the programming in place, which was compounded by not having adequate staffing to build that programming framework in the first place.  Personal responsibility for this failure was reflected in the entries, as her request came within the early stages of implementation.  Should I have pushed for this accommodation to happen, I feared that it would have a negative impact on the acceptance and materialization of this program for future students in future years.  These stories further reflect how personally I took these missteps as a system staff responsible for meeting the needs of our students, even though I played but one role of many in the grand scheme of this unfortunate enactment.  Likewise, they included my own reflections on how the role I had was itself a R.A.F.T. within a broader education system, and where I found

myself in a similar position to Ramona where I was negotiating for my own agency as an

educator within this established frame.

### 7.2.4   Vignette 4: "The story of everybody, somebody, anybody, and nobody"

> "This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody.
>
> There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it.  Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job.  Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have." (Daskal, n.d.)

In response to the next *critical incident* identified within the blended focus groups, this

vignette addresses issues of **responsibility,** and the great confusion as to whose responsibility

it was to meet the needs of Gifted pupils in a publicly funded educational institution.  Stories

shared outline the genuine confusion around who had the ultimate responsibility to meet the

needs of Gifted pupils, as the programming Vision was marketed as "the" (entire) program for

high-ability learners, which was located *outside* of the regular classroom and included *outside*,

"expert" personnel who received additional staffing to facilitate these programs.  From the

classroom teacher's perspective, those programs *were* the way that Gifted students' needs

were to be met, as the system positioned them that way.  From the Gifted teacher's

perspective, they had the responsibility for those outside programs, but they were only

offered a fraction of the time, as they were primarily withdrawal-based, and the regular

classroom teacher had the responsibility for programming daily within the regular curriculum

to meet the students' daily needs.

"I recall rather vividly presenting to a full staff at [a high school].  The principal wanted me to come in and share in the pilot project the school's Gifted teacher and I had been working on for a couple years with curriculum compacting and the [Interdisciplinary Studies] courses.  I remember framing the presentation in a way that showcased the programs and that these opportunities were available to any school, and that there were additional staffing lines that could be applied for and given to schools to make these programs happen.  People seemed genuinely excited at the possibility, but when asked how many [additional staffing lines] annually each school could get, I pivoted in my position and made it more about using the [additional staffing] to start a program, build a program, then the school's regular [staffing] complement would assume that responsibility and the school could use that [additional staffing] for a new initiative!  I never answered that question about line numbers.  In fact, I never disclosed that information to any school.  […]

In that moment at that after-school staff meeting, I (regrettably and accidentally) made it clear that Gifted programming was something that was "rewarded" with lines; extra; optional.  At the time, I did not mean to suggest that it *wasn't* the responsibility of regular classroom teachers to provide appropriate differentiated instruction and assessment, but *that* wasn't my scope at the time.  I was running this system-wide enrichment program for all of the secondary schools, and I was focused on the [Gifted programs] when it came to schools.  I wanted the schools to be excited for these programs and then apply for [additional staffing] to bring these programs to the schools so that students could register for them and get the enrichment they needed.

Looking back, it was here where I positioned *Everybody* as not having responsibility.  Even though I was talking about the [Gifted programs] that were within my scope and under my control, those programs were placed *outside* all those teachers' classrooms.  Therefore, I may have given the impression (or permission) that meeting the needs of Gifted learners were *our* (outside) responsibility.  And at that time, I was focused on getting into as many schools as I could to spread the news and build awareness about these programs, as that was my role.  I was not aware of how my intentions could have been misunderstood at the time.  It wasn't until years later after I had left the portfolio and was engaging in this research did I see how the very infrastructure was enabling me to enable them to continue sending their Gifted students away from their regular classroom and thus their responsibility for providing enrichment because we (the system) gave those schools and those outside personnel lines and told them to do that exact thing.  It's just so clear.  Now.  […]

Everybody in the school system including regular classroom teachers, Gifted teachers, and the system-level support (Gifted Itinerant) believed that it was somebody else's responsibility to program.  The regular classroom teacher believed that the person who had the [additional staffing], the Gifted teacher, had the responsibility to program for and meet the needs via outside enrichment.  The Gifted teacher believed that it was first and foremost the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher to program, as they had the student on-roll and had them every day.  And both regular classroom and Gifted teachers believed that it was my role as the system person to oversee and program for the students.  But I refer back to the Vision and job description, as this infrastructure was to guide the process. […] None of the students were attached to me in [student management system], and regular classroom teachers had a responsibility for all pupils in the classes to provide appropriate programming, and that the Gifted teacher also had additional [staffing] to provide the outside [Gifted programs].

Regardless of how I explain it now, *Anybody* could have done it, but *Nobody* did it. And here is the danger of assumptions and unclear messaging.  When no one takes the lead or no one feels they must take responsibility because they believe it's someone else's job, then nothing gets accomplished, and we end up in a tangled mess where personnel around the student are all pointing fingers at each other.

### 7.2.5   Vignette 5: Afterword—Sisyphus
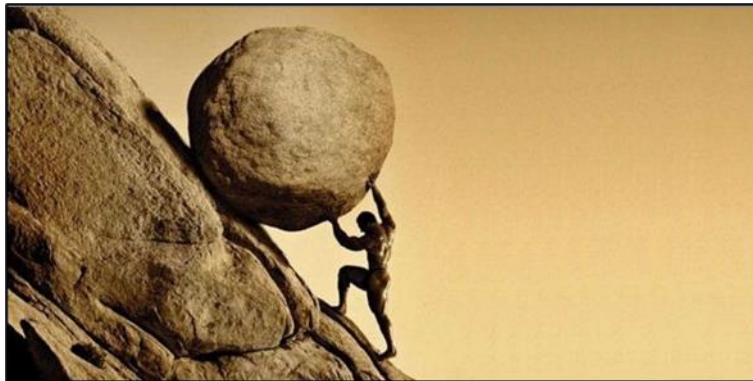


*Figure 7.1: (Salas, n.d.). This image represents the figure of Sisyphus.  In Greek Mythology, Sisyphus was punished for cheating death twice by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill only for it to roll down again every time he neared the top, which was repeated for eternity.  Modern interpretations of this fable and image represent perseverance, dedication, and responsibility.*

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the founder and king of Ephyra ("Sisyphus," 2021).

He was punished for cheating death twice by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill

only for it to roll down every time it neared the top, repeating this action for eternity. This

afterword (vignette) was focused on a more positive interpretation, and what we may learn

from Sisyphus and the boulder, as argued by Kumar (2017):

> Sisyphus was unstoppable, he pushed the rock unabated every time it rolled down. He
>
> refused to surrender to gravity…We must learn to embrace our purpose (the rock) in
>
> life. And once we accept it as the objective of our being, we should give in everything it
>
> takes to achieve it. Sisyphus teaches us to never give in to circumstantial
>
> disappointments or try to escape from the failures, rather accept failures the same way
>
> we accept our achievements. And most importantly, no matter how much we lose in
>
> our quest, we must never back down till we fulfill our potential. (para. 4, 7-8)

Unlike the other vignettes, this collection of experiences was not me responding to a critical

incident that required further explanation to flesh out *how* something was enacted. Rather,

this afterword was a collection of lived experiences within a system-level job and what it felt

like to push that boulder up the mountain day after day.

"I find myself after all these years still trying to push forward that boulder even
though I am no longer in the role. In fact, the role I once had no longer exists. But
I am still connected to this rock, and I feel its weight on my shoulders and
throughout my body. […]

I have had amazing experiences that I have shared with colleagues and students
and community partners. My time in the role was highly positive overall. But
there were really challenging times that were not only professionally devastating,
but personally. […] I am reminded of how great it was when it was great, and how
much it hurt to see that growing and thriving portfolio disappear. There is no
longer a Secondary Gifted Itinerant. There is no longer anyone at a central level
supporting the development of those [Gifted programs] or networking with

community partners to create large-scale enrichment conferences for kids and bringing all those Gifted teachers together for professional networking to the extent it was.  There are still [staffing] lines.  But everyone and every school is an island again. […]

I must also address *Sisyphus*.  I do not believe that I represent Sisyphus in every detail according to Greek Mythology, but I do see similarities in the way that Kumar (2017) takes up the lessons we can learn.  I am stubborn and can sometimes take issue with […] and struggle when [systems] make what appear to be incomplete, flippant, and reckless decisions without consulting those people who are actually on the front line and can speak to what is really happening (or at least the implications of action).  I accept that my desire to do right by these pupils may have gotten me into trouble by being that advocate that just wouldn't concede or go away, as I believe that we *can* do better in public education.  And I proudly carry this albatross around my neck.  I also take responsibility for this boulder that does weigh me down, but I keep pushing it up the mountain day after day.  Sometimes I need to sit with it and take a break, as it's too much to push myself.  But I acknowledge the purpose; my purpose; my life's work in bringing intellectual accessibility to the forefront and reaching the hearts and minds of decision-makers to consider all needs when allocated resources and framing where disability or natural difference is positioned in systems.

We must learn to embrace our purpose, our boulder, in life; to accept our failures in the same way that we accept our achievements.  I know more about the Vision now than I did nine years ago.  And I grieve the loss of the program, as even though it was not perfect, it was a place to start.  I can only hope that through this research the findings will resonate with decision-makers to see the opportunity in the current situation and re-deploy and invest in meeting the needs of our high-ability pupils.  Because they deserve our support and care."

The limited sections of this afterword that are included in this article focus on the lived effects of public policy changes, particularly those experiences around job restructuring and the impact of significant cuts to provincial funding for education.

## 7.3 *Deconstructions*: Living the Effects of Public Policy[11]

"People experience policy at the personal level" (Neysmith et al., 2005, p. 19). Our

personal experiences within and around these public policies are often embedded within the

larger stories, broader contexts, and normative structures that permeate society (Neysmith et

al., 2005). The experiences shared by other storytelling participants in the study inspired me

as a participant-researcher to also share personal narratives that make visible the various

entanglements I found myself in while enacting, enabling, and thus living the effects of public

policy. As the lone participant-researcher in this phase of the study, I have a unique

positionality that has provided me with particular insight into experiences as both an educator

and student, as I was a former student in an elementary enrichment program, as well as a

former system-level educator who was responsible for an entire secondary Gifted program for

a large public school board in Ontario, Canada.

Inspired by various *critical incidents* identified in the previous phase of the study that

drew upon material-semiotic sensibilities, five (5) autoethnographic vignettes were composed

from ongoing reflexive journaling, retrospective field notes, revisiting artefacts when I was in

the system role including emails, presentations, policy development and documents, among

others, as well as daily writing with "rereading what I wrote the day before, then filling in new

memories" (Ellis, 2004, p. 117). Autoethnographic vignettes were analysed using conventional

narrative techniques of categorizing and coding of content including open coding (attributes,

location, themes) and thematic coding (various public policies that were discussed, effects of

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[11] Neysmith, S., Bezanson, K., & O'Connell, A. (2005). *Telling tales: Living the effects of public policy.* Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

public policy). A comprehensive analytical chart was developed to include the themes, policies, and salient quotations of each of the vignettes to allow for easy mapping of where the issues were located and in which contexts. In what follows is a series of encompassing themes (Haberlin, 2016) that have emerged and showcase how I continued to enact public policy with every decision and subscribe to dominant discourses and practices that perpetuated the very status quo being investigated in this study. For greater context, themes are further nested within the actual public policies that were enacted. The goal in situating these personal narratives within the broader social, political, and institutional discourses and practices is to engage current policymakers in reflection on contemporary policy to ensure we are responding to the needs of our Gifted learners in public education systems.

### 7.3.1   The Construction of Giftedness as an Exceptionality

**Location of Gifted Learners' Needs.** The term *Gifted* is problematic within education systems and dominant discourses around learning needs, as the exceptionality name itself suggests that learners who are Gifted have various *gifts* and talents rather than possess various learning difficulties (Smith, 2006; see also Reis & Renzulli, 2010). The language around *needs* has been constructed in society as *deficit-oriented* within special education discourses that subscribe to a more medical model (Gable, 2014; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010) understanding of *needs*. Current special education policies in Ontario, Canada, are deeply rooted in a bio-medical, individual, or deficit model that exist to diagnose and document impairments of students to provide these exceptional children with available supports, curative treatments (Gable, 2014; Malhotra & Rowe, 2014), and appropriate placements for their learning needs in publicly funded institutions.

> **From vignette:** *A crumb to feed a flock.*
>
> "The dominant understanding was that Gifted students are more advantaged and have assets; providing them with a program was a courtesy, almost, as they were simply fine (achievement-speaking)." (2.491-492)

Various vignettes included the term **"assets"** when incorrectly referring to intellectually Gifted learners and were always used within the context of misunderstandings, myths, and negotiations of the needs of high-ability pupils. Despite Ontario Ministry of Education funding and local board allocations earmarked for Gifted programs and services, conversations with leadership, community members, and colleagues from across the province were often met with confusion when discussing these learners as a vulnerable and disadvantaged group of pupils in public education, as they were largely understood to be the nation's brightest, strongest, and highly achieving group of learners. This illustrates how singular the collective understanding of Giftedness is when constructed as only a singular, cognitive need that does not require support to bring them *up* to the performance norm. A large part of the system role was focused on building awareness of *all* the needs a Gifted pupil may have—not just academic or cognitive, but social, emotional, relational, among others—and took years of pivoting around the often-stereotypical understandings of their needs and respectful conversations around reframing Gifted as a *bona fide* exceptionality. Throughout my time in the system role, I witnessed a shift in discourse from Gifted pupils have *assets* to Gifted pupils have learning *needs* that must be met. However, to prove our commitment to this group of learners, our focus at the system then became formalizing responsibility for those needs and

designing an entire Vision of programming options, which we happened to (unknowingly)

locate completely *outside* of the students' regular, everyday curriculum and classrooms.

> **From vignette: *WANTED: Agency—A story of unending R.A.F.T.s.***
>
> "I was never really asked about placement, as it was assumed the regular classroom was the only available option system-wide, with the decision to run enriched classes left to the individual schools and based on enrolment and staffing allocations."
> (3.834-836)

For six (6) years I had carriage of the secondary Gifted portfolio as a system itinerant

staff.  When hired for the role, I was tasked with supporting all Gifted learners, special

education departments, educators, and administrators at the secondary panel with

programming support, as well as the responsibility of bringing consistency to the portfolio

across all secondary schools, which manifested in a system Vision of programming options.

For years we built awareness around the Vision, various credit and non-credit programs,

withdrawal opportunities, subject acceleration, and enriched classes.  We networked with

community partners to host large-scale enrichment conferences and made significant efforts

to bring school-based staff together across the board for cross-pollination and professional

learning opportunities.  It was not part of the job description to address the issue of secondary

**placement** from a system perspective.  Our current infrastructure did not include any

placements at the secondary panel other than the regular classroom.  We provided

programming support and additional staffing to satisfy programming needs, and any decisions

to run enriched class placements were outside of my system scope and were the responsibility

of local schools based on their own needs and enrolment.

> **From vignette: *Am I "they"?***
>
> "I was also a student in an enrichment program in elementary school, so I was 'used' to having a resource teacher or someone outside of my classroom teacher facilitate this enriched workshop-style of learning sporadically throughout the year. […]
>
> Through this Vision, I was perpetuating where Gifted was positioned, which was completely outside the regular classroom. How? The Vision itself was comprised primarily of 'in-school' programs that were ironically positioned 'outside' the regular classroom. All of them. And all the staffing decisions were made around these programs or variations of them (e.g. bundles)." (1.71-233)
>
> **From vignette: *The story of everybody, somebody, anybody, and nobody.***
>
> "When it comes to Gifted program, we (system) had an entire program that was located *outside* of the regular classroom. And I perpetuated this narrative with every crash course PD I offered or staff meeting I spoke at when I would try and bring awareness to 'the' Gifted program at secondary." (4.982-985)

These snippets make visible just how influential our experiences throughout our lives can be on our understanding of the world. The **enrichment withdrawal** program is a common model used to support Gifted pupils, which is something that I had experienced as a student, witnessed in the school I had taught at prior to the system role, and observed in many secondary school settings when beginning the role. For myself, it was a common experience to be withdrawn from the regular classroom by **outside** personnel to offer an enrichment session or workshop, which was also commonplace infrastructure at many boards across the province and country. From witnessing this model repeatedly across schools and other districts, as well as having access to additional staffing funds to design and enact these

workshops and sessions, it was undisputed to include enrichment withdrawal as a preferred

model of programming.

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**From vignette: *The story of everybody, somebody, anybody, and nobody*.**

"Even though I was talking about the [programs] that were within my scope and under my control, they were placed outside all those teachers' classrooms. Therefore, I may have given the impression (or permission) that meeting the needs of Gifted learners were our (outside) responsibility […]

Everybody in the school system including regular classroom teachers, Gifted teachers, and the system-level support believed that it was somebody else's responsibility to program. The regular classroom teacher believed that the person who had the [additional staffing], the Gifted teacher, had the responsibility to program for and meet the needs via outside enrichment. The Gifted teacher believed that it was first and foremost the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher to program, as they had the student on-roll and had them every day. And both regular classroom and Gifted teachers believed that it was the responsibility of the system person to oversee and program for the students. […]

This assumption of the needs being someone else's responsibility was the result of not only the creation and subsequent perpetuation of outside enrichment *only*, but also the unclear messaging around the [programming] Vision and additional staffing process." (4.925-970)

</div>

The Vision for Gifted programming underwent a rigourous approval process with

various presentations to key stakeholders including senior leadership, groups of administrators

at the system level, and the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). Further, the Vision

showcased our commitment to providing various programs and supports, kept an appropriate

scope of what was feasible for the board, and reflected the current infrastructure of program

delivery. Findings from an earlier phase of this study made visible the problematic nature of

the Vision when it came to providing program options that were largely withdrawal-based, as

Westberg and Daoust (2003) remind us that Gifted students are Gifted every day, not just during key times in the week (see also Brown & Stambaugh, 2014).

The programming options were designed by the system in a visually appealing, organizer format and were marketed across the schools and communities repeatedly for awareness.  The system further allocated additional staffing to schools through an application process for the purpose of offering these enrichment withdrawal opportunities that were endorsed by the system and included within the Vision.  However, this model was primarily focused on programming that existed *outside* of the regular classroom and thus positioned the needs of Gifted learners as outside or ***beyond*** the scope of the regular curriculum or regular classroom teacher and communicating that outside, expert personnel would then be responsible for designing and delivering these enrichment opportunities.  Unknowingly, the Vision and subsequent process of allocating additional staffing created the conditions where many staff (regular classroom, special education, system) were unclear as to **whose responsibility** it was to program for the needs of Gifted learners all the time.  These "expert" teachers within the school were not responsible for the day-to-day instruction and assessment of the regular curriculum, as the students were not on their class roll, but they were receiving additional staffing to support those pupils at the school level.  There was also a system staff supporting all schools and managing the portfolio.  These unclear roles and responsibilities did result in some confusion around whose responsibility it was to be supporting these learners every day, which resulted sometimes in no one taking on that responsibility because it was believed that someone else was spearheading it.

***Living with the Effects of Public Policy: Gifted Needs "Beyond" and "Outside."*** In

Ontario, Canada, the provincial Ministry of Education governs policy, funding, curriculum

planning, and provides direction in all levels of public education. The Ministry's definition of

Giftedness as an exceptionality is "an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability

that *requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally*

*provided in the regular school program* [emphasis added] to satisfy the level of educational

potential indicated" (Ministry of Education, 2017b, p. A16). This definition communicates that

the needs of Gifted learners are *beyond* what the regular curriculum and perhaps even the

regular classroom teacher can provide, necessitating the need for outside personnel and

programming. The same document articulates the referral process for accessing specialized

services and programs: "The in-school team may decide to do one or more of the following [...]

*provide specific supports in the classroom or withdraw the student from the classroom for*

*limited periods of time (e.g. for remediation or enrichment)* [emphasis added]" (Ministry of

Education, 2017b, p. C24). This guidance from the governing body signals that to provide

enrichment within the regular classroom is something that requires a formalized process of

referring the student to an in-school team to review the data and decide whether that student

could benefit from enrichment within the regular classroom or through a withdrawal program.

By framing enrichment as *beyond* the scope of the regular curriculum and regular classroom

teacher, it serves to perpetuate the hegemonic discourse that Gifted needs are not *deficit*

needs that demand attention (Finn & Wright, 2015; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2006) but are

*assets*, as their needs go *beyond* the ceiling (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011).

Ontario school boards continue to provide special education programs and services for all exceptional learners, which are documented within individual board Special Education Plans that are required annually and approved by the Ministry of Education. Plans across the province outline what programs and services are provided for Gifted pupils, which range from additional staffing to offering core enriched classes, enrichment withdrawal, specialized programs and self-studies for credit beyond secondary school, as well as subject acceleration. Several of these sections that pertain to the programming and placement options for Gifted pupils at the *secondary* panel are lean in terms of description and are visually smaller sections when compared to other exceptionalities such as Behaviour, Autism, and Intellectual Disability, as well as many of the programming and placement options available at the *elementary* panel. It has also become common practice for Gifted learners to have their cognitive stimulation needs met *outside* the regular classroom or through withdrawal programming (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008; Subotnik et al., 2011; see also Gollan-Wills, 2014) by itinerant staff or club leaders.

A number of school boards in Ontario with similar numbers of secondary schools offer a range of programming within their publicly available Special Education Plans that are posted on their websites. One school board offers primarily withdrawal programming by a Special Education or Resource teacher: "Supports for students with the identification of Giftedness in secondary school are designed to provide appropriate enrichment opportunities both in the classroom and through co-curricular activities which are facilitated by a special education teacher." Another school board offers designated enriched classes within a partial-integrated placement model where some time is spent in the regular classroom and other time is spent in

a self-contained placement for some subjects where the "Gifted credit program provides an opportunity for students with a Giftedness exceptionality to access learning in certain core subjects to a greater degree of depth and breadth." Another board model does not specify the programming or placement options but does commit to additional staffing "Through Gifted lines at the secondary level. Secondary schools with Gifted students are given extra staffing allocations to address the needs of identified Gifted students." Further, placements for high-ability learners are often part of a much larger discourse that surrounds available resources, as specialized placements for Gifted learners are often determined based on available space (Subotnik et al., 2011) resulting in decisions being made that are not about whether students meet established criteria, but whether boards have space for them.

*7.3.2   Dominant Discourses of Achievement, Scarcity of Resources, and Accountability*

**Dominant Discourse of Achievement.**  Policies and practices surrounding achievement made frequent appearances within the autoethnographic vignettes.  As a classroom teacher I can recall several staff meetings and professional development sessions that focused almost exclusively on the practice of "bumping-it-up," where "it" was synonymous with a numerical grade and where the goal was to raise that number to a higher achievement level.

> **From vignette:** *WANTED: Agency—A story of unending R.A.F.T.s.*
>
> "I also look at policy, school goals, and system initiatives that are often focused on achievement, particularly the achievement of those failing or needing to be 'bumped-up.'  As a classroom teacher during the 'bump-up' years, we would create Bulletin Boards with student work (with their permission, of course), showing exemplars of Levels 1-4 and with visual feedback on how to 'bump-it-up' a level.  As a classroom teacher, I put a great deal of effort toward my students who were not achieving (or passing), because it was our job to help them achieve

a satisfactory level. And there were repercussions and added steps to take when a student was not successful including more documentation and paperwork when students are not successful in earning a credit. Should a student fail a course, we (classroom teachers) must complete a failure form and recommended placement of either recovering the course (completing a few missed assignments to earn a 50%) or repeating the course. We must document all the interventions, all the communication with student and home, and provide a printout of the achievement throughout the entire course *and* the steps we took to mitigate. But should a student receive a 70% who was perhaps capable of receiving a 90%, there is no paperwork. There is no paper trail or follow-up required because they 'passed' and 'achieved.' But did they learn? […]

Never once do I recall at a staff meeting focusing on how to raise the floor and lift the ceiling, where we turn our efforts to 'bumping-it-up' from a 98% to a 108%. Never. Because achievement has been constructed as a numerical value between 0 and 100. Not more. So, when students are achieving (not necessarily learning) in the 80s and 90s, they are not our focus or our priority; the ones in the 40s and 50s are because we can 'bump-them-up' to the next category." (3.789-810)

The concept was sustained over time and my practice continued to focus on constructive feedback on student work that was geared toward "bumping-it-up" to the next level. For students who earned higher grades initially, they still received detailed feedback on ways to compose written arguments in more sophisticated ways or perhaps go deeper or broader with an issue, although the idea of "bumping-it-up" was considered moot by many when the students had clearly demonstrated exceptional work and where 100% was the numerical boundary.

Where this policy became problematic was how it constructed achievement to be primarily focused on credit attainment rather than learning. There was additional administrative paperwork and accountability measures that came when a student was not achieving a satisfactory grade. The forms that were to be completed required detailed

accounts of all interventions, all the communication with the student and parents/guardians at home, to provide a printout of the assignments with the individual and class achievement throughout the entire course for comparison, as well as the steps a teacher took to mitigate these unsatisfactory grades.  With increasingly larger class sizes, such a short time in a semester for instruction and assessment, where final, cumulative assignments were due around the same time as final examinations, and the quick turnaround time between those exams and report card deadlines—a matter of days—these combined pressures often resulted in a shift in focus in a course toward those students who were in jeopardy of not getting their credit.  This practice, which was influenced by the current policy and procedure of assessment and achievement, did impact my ability to split myself and provide the "bumping-it-up" of students who were already achieving satisfactory grades, although they may not have been reaching their fullest potential.

Findings make visible how remediation and closing the achievement gap (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006) took priority over individualized programming for those learning needs that fall outside of the target population at the time, as the governing policy and practice was focused on quantitative data such as pass rates, credit attainment, and class averages.  Within an achievement discourse where high numerical achievement is the barometer of success, high-ability pupils often perform well overall, which has continued to fuel the fundamental misconception that Gifted pupils do not intuitively fall into the category of having needs as *deficits* (Finn & Wright, 2015; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2006), but continue to be positioned as needing opportunities that are *above* what the regular curriculum requires.

***Living the Effects of Public Policy: Numbers Matter***.  A neoliberal educational agenda

has constructed achievement as a binary of winners and losers (Goodley, 2014) by quantifying

learning through government-approved content (expectations) and performance

(achievement) standards that materialize in numerical value (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The Ministry of Education's (2010) official policy on assessment, evaluation, and reporting in

Ontario schools, *Growing Success,* canonizes what achievement and thus success is, which is

visually reinforced in the document's achievement charts and descriptions.  *Figure 6.2* outlines

the current and approved descriptions that differentiate the levels of achievement for

students in Ontario, which is "a standard province-wide guide and is to be used by all teachers

as a framework within which to assess and evaluate student achievement of the expectations

in the particular subject or discipline" (p. 16).  *Figure 6.3* more clearly demonstrates the

performance standards in Secondary English, Grades 9-12, as well as showcases the provincial

standard of achievement, Level 3, in a visibly distinct, coloured column.  The achievement

charts further communicate that the ceiling of learning is 100% that is demonstrated with

"thorough" knowledge and skills with a "high degree of effectiveness," which cannot

numerically be "bumped-up."

## Levels of Achievement

The achievement chart also identifies four levels of achievement, defined as follows:

**Level 1** represents achievement that falls much below the provincial standard. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with limited effectiveness. Students must work at significantly improving learning in specific areas, as necessary, if they are to be successful in the next grade/course

**Level 2** represents achievement that approaches the provincial standard. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with some effectiveness. Students performing at this level need to work on identified learning gaps to ensure future success.

**Level 3** represents the provincial standard for achievement. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with considerable effectiveness. Parents of students achieving at level 3 can be confident that their children will be prepared for work in subsequent grades/courses.

**Level 4** identifies achievement that surpasses the provincial standard. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with a high degree of effectiveness. *However, achievement at level 4 does not mean that the student has achieved expectations beyond those specified for the grade/course.*

Specific "qualifiers" are used with the descriptors in the achievement chart to describe student performance at each of the four levels of achievement – the qualifier *limited* is used for level 1; *some* for level 2; *considerable* for level 3; and *a high degree of* or *thorough* for level 4. Hence, achievement at level 3 in the Thinking category for the criterion "use of planning skills" would be described in the achievement chart as "[The student] uses planning skills with *considerable* effectiveness".

*Figure 7.2: (Ministry of Education, 2010). This figure outlines the current and approved levels of achievement for students in Ontario, Canada. Level 3 represents the provincial standard for achievement.*

## ACHIEVEMENT CHART: ENGLISH, GRADES 9–12

| Categories | 50–59% (Level 1) | 60–69% (Level 2) | 70–79% (Level 3) | 80–100% (Level 4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Knowledge and Understanding** – Subject-specific content acquired in each course (knowledge), and the comprehension of its meaning and significance (understanding) | | | | |
| | The student: | | | |
| **Knowledge of content** (e.g., forms of text; strategies used when listening and speaking, reading, writing, and viewing and representing; elements of style; literary terminology, concepts, and theories; language conventions) | demonstrates limited knowledge of content | demonstrates some knowledge of content | demonstrates considerable knowledge of content | demonstrates thorough knowledge of content |
| **Understanding of content** (e.g., concepts; ideas; opinions; relationships among facts, ideas, concepts, themes) | demonstrates limited understanding of content | demonstrates some understanding of content | demonstrates considerable understanding of content | demonstrates thorough understanding of content |
| **Thinking** – The use of critical and creative thinking skills and/or processes | | | | |
| | The student: | | | |
| **Use of planning skills** (e.g., generating ideas, gathering information, focusing research, organizing information) | uses planning skills with limited effectiveness | uses planning skills with some effectiveness | uses planning skills with considerable effectiveness | uses planning skills with a high degree of effectiveness |
| **Use of processing skills** (e.g., drawing inferences, interpreting, analysing, synthesizing, evaluating) | uses processing skills with limited effectiveness | uses processing skills with some effectiveness | uses processing skills with considerable effectiveness | uses processing skills with a high degree of effectiveness |
| **Use of critical/creative thinking processes** (e.g., oral discourse, research, critical analysis, critical literacy, metacognition, creative process) | uses critical/creative thinking processes with limited effectiveness | uses critical/creative thinking processes with some effectiveness | uses critical/creative thinking processes with considerable effectiveness | uses critical/creative thinking processes with a high degree of effectiveness |

*Figure 7.3: (Ministry of Education, 2010). This figure is provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education to illustrate the consistent characteristics of performance standards across all subjects, disciplines, and grades. The above Figure is an example Achievement Chart for Secondary English, Grades 9-12.*

**"Scarcity of Resources and Funding."** When I was hired into the system role, I was

made aware of the resources I had and what the established infrastructure was that I was

working within.  The largest portion of funding that was allocated to the secondary portfolio

for Gifted programs and services was primarily used for additional staffing that was allocated

across the secondary schools in our district and it also included the staffing for my job at the

system.  This finite number was determined by policymakers at the system on an annual basis.

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**From vignette: *WANTED: Agency—A story of unending R.A.F.T.s.***

"The system had funding and allowed me to build the infrastructure to 'prove' we
had a plan and a program to meet their needs.  It was also my way of ensuring that
our schools took responsibility for enrichment. […]

I made recommendations for additional staffing allocations around what was
available, not what was needed.

"I would often protect the system decisions by pivoting around the concerns of the
schools when they asked why they didn't get 2 lines [additional staffing allocation]
but rather 1 by citing the system perspective and equitable approach.  It was as
though I had a degree in PR (public relations) or political science.  I would spin the
narrative trying to get them to see beyond their individual school, asking them to be
grateful to have received something given a time of tight budgets and fiscal
constraints, so let's work with it rather than dwelling on what they didn't get.  Did
they need 2?  Yes.  But there were only so many lines to work with." (3.782-859)

---

I was always grateful for the funding, as it allowed us to have dedicated time to focus on the

needs of high-ability pupils in our schools.  Throughout my tenure in the portfolio, however,

the awareness grew, the registration and participation grew, the requests for programming

grew, and despite data-driven recommendations, the funding number did not increase to a

more representative allocation; rather, we experienced a decrease in the funding allotment.

From vignette: *A crumb to feed a flock.*

"Applications would almost always include 'super-stacking' of lines [combining programs together for more staffing] for 2 lines to be able to run all year long. The rationale would often include reaching more students, being more accessible, and having it sustained throughout the entire school year. Some admin felt that they would be 'wasting' a line application if they requested [a line for an Interdisciplinary Studies Course], as they might only reach a small number of students, and if they went broader, the system might understand their motivations for reaching more students. What I still find interesting about this is that [the enrichment withdrawal program] was offered at some schools a couple times a week to once a month or even bi-monthly depending on the capacity of the school, and yet [an Interdisciplinary Studies] course was enriched learning every day in a designated period in the timetable. […]

The real accommodation here is in the [Interdisciplinary Studies] class, but because administrators wanted to get those lines (and make them more competitive in the applications) [they] felt this was the most strategic approach to get them [additional staffing lines]." (2.528-543)

It was a conditioned response to protect what we had, as we had experienced both an increase in participation and need, as well as a decrease in overall allocation. This circumstance did impact the negotiations I would have with schools and system leadership, as we only had so much available staffing to go around. What this meant for the allocation process was that we needed a strategy to help stretch the lines across the system, which resulted in the need for "super-stacking" of programs. We would market reasonable scenarios to combine program offerings. With most of the programs designed as withdrawal-based, they could all be offered periodically throughout the semester rather than one program more frequently, which maximized the additional staffing and ensured that students would not miss their credit-bearing, regular classes to attend non-credit enrichment.

This shift in allocation also had an impact on the application for additional staffing, which asked the schools to justify their requests by submitting additional documentation outlining their use of the previous years' allocation, as well as the upcoming needs. There was a noticeable shift in the level of risk that some schools took, meaning that they strategically applied for "super-stacked" lines with the intention of meeting a larger number of students and broader needs with enrichment withdrawal-like programming. There was an option for facilitating an enriched, interdisciplinary course in the timetable where students would design their own course of study. This option was by far the most extended and enriched learning model we had available, but very few schools applied for this option, as many intimated that they felt they stood a better chance of receiving a higher allocation if they justified program offerings that would reach a broader audience rather than a smaller number of pupils who would register for a single course. Within a "scarce resources" discourse, it is conceivable that schools felt compelled to be strategic, as they were not simply requesting the number they needed to meet the needs in their respective schools, but rather found themselves in a competition for available resources.

**Accountability and Managing the Portfolio.** The inspiration behind the creation of a collective, programming Vision was originally organizational, as part of my skill set was operationalizing change through a collective approach, which I had experience in previously when leading a department in a past role.

Having spent a significant amount of time within the many schools we had, it was clear that we had some amazing things happening in isolation, which could benefit students across our entire board. It was also evident that past allocations were not being revisited, as some schools were using programming lines for purposes other than providing direct support to Gifted learners. To connect these islands toward a common goal, a collective Vision seemed appropriate. And given the scarce resources we had available to us, we needed to be accountable to one another for these staffing lines. The approach of genuinely wanting to bring consistency in access to programming was tempered with the system need to be accountable for these public goods (Stout, 2001).

I would take the data shared with me and then fact-check. I would write down the data schools provided (e.g. number of [formally identified] Gifted students, how they were using the programming lines, what was offered, frequency etc.), then I would gather all the supplementary data with exact numbers on students by accessing all the [system] reports, as well as provide my insights into what the schools were offering. This was in the spirit of truth and reporting what was happening from multiple perspectives. This also meant bulking up some school's applications, as if they were too thin, I would add in what I witnessed at their schools, which fundamentally strengthened their applications. Again, it wasn't about catching them doing something wrong, but in providing the most accurate account of each school. I was their advocate. But I also had an obligation to the system to allocate provide recommendations of allocating our limited resources to the best of my ability." (2.402-422)

Operating within a system-level of an educational institution fundamentally changed my perspective from a single-school focus to looking at all the needs across the twenty-eight (28) secondary schools I was supporting. There was also a tremendous amount of responsibility to be accountable for our "system-level" decisions, particularly those around policy and money. Part of the system role that I was rather skilled at was managing the entire portfolio, which required my ongoing commitment to understand the needs of the students, staff, and schools, invest my time to get to know the people involved, and be present in their buildings and school communities. And even though this commitment was genuine to best serve them, this deep, institutional knowledge was also paramount from a "system" perspective to be able to make informed decisions when it came to those public goods (Stout, 2001) that were always presented to us, and internalized by us, as precious and limited. The above journal entry makes visible how accountability passively influenced how I supported the schools. I positioned myself as an advocate, a colleague, an extension of the schools, and was honoured to have worked alongside some of the finest, most dedicated and innovative

educators and administrators who were committed to making a difference for high-ability

learners.  I also positioned myself as a manager of the broader portfolio, as I felt I had a duty

to the system to be transparent, to "fact-check," be reasonable, and be held accountable for

the decisions we made.  This resulted in an assumed identity of a "double-agent."  I would

advocate strongly for the school needs at the system level by way of additional funding,

perhaps resulting in a status quo of or reduction in funding allocation, which I would then

internalize in private as *just the way it was.*  I would then pivot in public and continue to lead

the portfolio with the resources we had available in a more positive light, constantly reframing

discussions and negotiations with colleagues around being grateful for what we had during a

time of fiscal constraints.

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**From vignette: *A crumb to feed a flock.***

"I did petition my supervisors to consider a more equitable approach and cap the number of lines [additional staffing] at 2 per school." (3.398-399)

**From vignette: *Am I "they"?***

"To further streamline how much [staffing] support schools would get, I created a three-tier [program] guide.  When mining my experiences to determine why exactly I did this, it was from an accountability lens.  We only had a finite number of staffing lines, and I felt it was prudent to have a system to gauge the level of intensity and that would be provided with the appropriate amount of staffing for that initiative. [...]

I also remember marketing to schools that this program 'wasn't enough' to get a line for it because it wouldn't be possible to run it daily, as students would be missing their classes to attend.  I told them (which was backed up by the system) that it needed to be 'super-stacked' with another program such as curriculum compacting to justify a line.*" (1.234-275)

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Part of effectively managing the portfolio was anticipating trends and being able to respond to issue with solutions.  A chronic criticism we faced from the schools was that the system was not providing enough additional staffing to ensure they were able to meet the needs of Gifted learners effectively.  I did not disagree with them.  But I knew that resources were limited, and I was certain that the system leaders were exhausted from hearing from me about staffing.  The solution, then, was to raise the bar by asking our schools to do more with less, which was not a solution I was proud of, but it seemed to be the only avenue to help schools see that resources were scarce, and we all needed to do our part.  As a result, I petitioned my supervisors to cap the number of additional staffing for individual schools so that the allocation could be more equitable across the board.  I also introduced a more detailed, tiered approach when schools were looking at offering a specific program that did vary in levels of intensity for support.  It seemed prudent at the time, and I suppose the rationale for the decision was always about supporting the entire system, spreading the wealth, and maximizing those public goods (Stout, 2001).

***Living the Effects of Public Policy: Special Education Funding***.  The Ontario Ministry of Education provides the majority of operating funding to its 72 school boards through several grants or "envelopes" (Shaker & Tranjan, 2019) through a funding formula (Ministry of Education, 2020a).  In addition to other Grants for Student Needs (GSN) funding, the Ministry provides school boards with Special Education Grants (SEG) for additional costs of programs, services, and equipment that students may require (Ministry of Education, 2020a).  The Ministry continues to provide funding for all exceptionalities—Intellectual-Giftedness included—by way of the *Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA).*  However, "school

boards are given flexibility to use special education and other funding to support their special

education policies and priorities because school boards have the greatest knowledge of their

students and communities" (Ministry of Education, 2020a, p. 5).  What this means is that local

school boards have autonomy to use *any* of the allocations for the Special Education Grant,

including the per pupil funding for special education, to allot to whichever programs and

services they see fit within the entirety of special education needs in their respective boards.

This flexibility, although welcomed, can be problematic when the decisions to allocate funding

equitably for all portfolios rests with individual boards' interpretations of the highest needs.

Educational policymakers with conservative budgets are expected to triage all special

education needs, and when prioritizing the most *critical* needs (Gallagher, 2015), policymakers

often approach the situation using the *deficit* discourse as it pertains to academic

achievement, generally resulting in funding and support for exceptional children with various

impairments who are perceived to be the most disadvantaged (Reis & Renzulli, 2010;

Winstanley, 2006).  Herein lies the problem in Ontario, as although Intellectual-Giftedness is

represented as an exceptionality in current policy, these learners make up only 1-2% of the

overall population (Finn & Wright, 2015).  Within an accountability discourse, such a small

population of learners who are thought to have *above* regular curricular needs are often

deprioritized (Subotnik et al., 2011).

The Ministry of Education composes an annual *Education Funding: Technical Paper* that

outlines specific information on the funding provided by each grant along with an explanation

of the major allocations, description of the calculations, as well as new or upcoming changes

to funding (Ministry of Education, 2020a, p. 4).  The Special Education Grant (SEG) is comprised

of six (6) allocations in total, and where two (2) of these allocations would theoretically be used to provide for programs and services for Gifted pupils: *Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA)* to assist with the costs of providing additional support to students with special needs; and *Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA)* to address the variation among school boards with respect to their population of students with special education needs.  A review of the last ten (10) years of technical papers—which happened to be the total time elapsed since I began the system role supporting Gifted—reveals that the per pupil SEPPA funding for *secondary* students with special education needs has increased $56.37 since 2012 (on average, $5.64 per pupil/year) for a total of $529.29 per pupil for the 2021-22 school year (Ministry of Education, 2021b, 2020b, 2019, 2018, 2017a, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012).

What is more, the DSENA funding is made up of a number of amounts including measures of variability (MOV), special education statistical prediction model amount (SESPM), among others.  The statistical prediction model estimates the likelihood of students in a school board needing to access special education programs and services and considers "neighbourhood profiles" (Ministry of Education, 2020a, p. 6), which draws upon anonymous data from the federal government's long-form census that includes parent level of education, family income, unemployment, and recent immigration to Canada (p. 6).  The measures of variability (MOV) use an additional seven categories of information that reflect the differences in each school board's populations of students with special education needs and their ability to respond to those needs.  Each category has an assigned percentage with multiple factors that are also allotted a percentage of the category total.  Represented in a rather complex table

with sub-tables, statistical weights, and algorithms, the allocation is provided to boards and not published within the technical paper.

Three of the most curious categories within the measures of variability (MOV) that help make up that number of DSENA funding include: (1) the number of students reported as receiving special education programs and services; (2) participation and achievement in the mandated, province-wide standardized tests from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) by students with special education needs; and (3) the credit accumulation and participation in locally developed and alternative non-credit (K-courses) by students with special education needs.  Participation and achievement on the EQAO standardized tests would most likely not include a large number of unsuccessful scores for learners who are intellectually Gifted.  Additionally, locally developed courses can be credit-bearing, are designed at the local (school) level to support students who may need additional remedial support for literacy and numeracy, and are part of an essential-level, streamed pathway intended for students who are working toward their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (O.S.S.D.) and are being prepared for the workforce (Ministry of Education, 2004).  Further, non-credit courses are often timetabled for students who are accessing alternative programming and are not working toward their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (O.S.S.D.), which are often students in our self-contained or partially integrated programs that are primarily focused on life skills and have highly individualized programs.  Should allocations be determined based on the level of need, where need is understood through a *deficit* discourse and specifically related to *achievement*, out of those three categories that help determine the additional funding for exceptional pupils under DSENA, conceivably only the first category—

the number of students accessing special education programs and services—would include high-ability learners.

The most recently publicized data, as reported by schools in the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS) is from September 2020, indicates that 17.7% of Ontario's 2,053,036 students in publicly funded school system were receiving special education programs and services (Ministry of Education, 2021a). Further, the Ministry of Education's (2021c) enrolment by exceptionality data set includes the overall total for each exceptionality for all public education and by panel. For the *secondary* panel in 2019-20, the total Gifted enrolment was 12,185 students and accounting for approximately 8.4% of all exceptional pupils at secondary (Ministry of Education, 2021c). Despite commitments and transparent educational funding models from the Ministry, access to programs and services for high-ability pupils are varied. Giftedness, as an exceptionality, is largely socially constructed (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014), as there is no universal or agreed upon definition of Giftedness. What is more, the identification process itself is flawed, as the criteria to meet the designation of Intellectual-Giftedness is also the sole responsibility of—and is completely constructed by—individual boards of education (Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Finn & Wright, 2015). Thus 8.4% of the total reported exceptional learners at secondary may be a skewed figure, as it is completely dependent upon how each board establishes their criteria for that designation.

What this data and current education funding process illustrates is that the Ontario Ministry of Education continues to provide specific funding amounts for special education needs, both per pupil and as demonstrated through board profiles that primarily include participation in remedial or non-credit programs, as well as achievement levels in standardized

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tests for the province.  It is conceivable that since funding is allocated per pupil, there would

be an amount allotted to support the needs of high-ability pupils, even though they may not

access the locally developed programming nor K-courses.  Given the inconsistency in

identifying Gifted pupils across the 72 boards in Ontario, Canada, it is further conceivable that

there may be more pupils who are Gifted but perhaps did not meet their board's higher

criteria.  Regardless, over 8% (Ministry of Education, 2021c) of all exceptional pupils at the

secondary panel as of 2021 hold the designation of Intellectual-Gifted and are deserving of a

commitment to provide "consistent, challenging programs that will capture [students']

interest and prepare them for a lifetime of learning" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 3).

### 7.3.3   Enacting Poli(tics)cies: Perpetuating the Status Quo

**The Lockstep Process of Staffing.**  The process of staffing is largely taken-for-granted.

It is also common practice to begin the staffing process for the following school year

throughout the current school year.  In my own experience with system staffing, this cycle

commenced once I received the funding amount from my superiors about a third of the way

through the school year.

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**From vignette: *A crumb to feed a flock.***

"The [staffing] line application process began in December of a current school year
for the following school year with receiving the approximate allocation that I was to
be working with.  Certainly, this number would guide my discussions with schools
when looking at what they could be applying for. […]

In January of that current school year, schools would receive an email with four
attachments: a memo indicating some background about the application, what
programing strategies would be eligible for additional staffing, instructions for
completing the different sections, and deadlines and contact information; the

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Gifted line application itself; an exemplar application (composed by me); and the [programming] Vision for reference." (2.377-386)

**From vignette: *WANTED: Agency—A story of unending R.A.F.T.s.***

"This entire time I was still maintaining a status quo of programming, as we continued to send out the Gifted line applications, allocate additional staffing for outside programs, and I continued to speak to parent groups and Special Education Advisory Committees across the province about what 'we' did in our board to meet the needs—many of which asked for support in implementing a similar Vision—and this entire time I was enabling schools and regular classroom teachers to send their Gifted students out of their classrooms to have their needs met by either myself or my expert colleagues." (3.843-849)

These journal entries illuminate how system processes become taken-for-granted practices, as they continue to operate rather robotically on an established schedule that has been enacted consistently over time. Organizational items such as timelines, paperwork, and deadlines are an assumed function of this lockstep process of staffing. The process of securing additional staffing for Gifted programs and services was also a well-oiled machine that operated on a similar timeline and cycle year after year. The approved model that we operationalized allocated additional staffing to schools based on an annual application that each school would complete, which was released at the same time every year and included relatively similar documents for reference. There was not a time I can recall where we looked beyond our own process, as it was a well-established and understood operation that we would occasionally receive inquiries about from other boards looking to model their programming after our established infrastructure. In my own experience, I abided by the timelines and processes as a school-based staff and then continued to enact this policy when I entered the system role, never questioning its existence, effectiveness, or purpose in the broader organization; it truly

was a taken-for-granted practice.  This research intended to uncover what the root cause(s) were of perpetuating what Sayer (1992) calls "practically adequate" practices (see also Gable, 2014).  The above journal entries make clear that the familiar, lockstep, accustomed staffing processes that are often unquestionably followed as commonplace play a significant role in the ongoing perpetuation of the status quo through an *apply-review-allocate-repeat* process.

**"Doing the Job Well."**  The second way that established policy and practice were responsible for perpetuating a status quo of programming and placement was through human efforts, where the cumulative entities of competency, passion, diligence, and hard work resulted in doing the job (as prescribed) extraordinarily well.  Progress at a system level is measured through reports that include hard (albeit quantitative) data to inform and support system decisions.  There was always something growing within this portfolio that we could speak to in both formal or informal reports to our superiors.

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From vignette: *The story of everybody, somebody, anybody, and nobody.*

"We could solve their problems because our Vision showed us how.  We taught students to leap-frog around their regular classroom teachers and access 'our' program because we were building it.  So, the more they accessed it, the larger it grew.  And the more I shared in my reports to my superiors of students accessing the program.  More requests from students meant greater numbers of compacted courses being accessed and completed.  This was a win for us at the system. […]

Our reports that were presented to our superiors were glowing, as we had data to back up all of our allocation decisions; we had letters from community partners that demonstrated their appreciation for these partnerships […] and we always had something new on the docket.  We were building.  But, in doing so, were we taking away?  Were we communicating to the regular classroom teachers that (a) they weren't able to meet the needs of Gifted students, and (b) that we were skilled and able to meet the needs outside?  Did we even give them a chance?  Looking back, I now see that we were fundamentally circumventing the regular classroom

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> altogether and perpetuating the status quo that we find ourselves in today.  But (like I keep saying), we were doing our jobs the way they were described and where they were positioned in the board.  And we were doing 'them' really well." (4.999-1033)

A notable example of this growth pertained to our curriculum compacting (subject acceleration) initiative, whereby we established a policy, process, and made available thoughtfully crafted, compacted courses that students could access immediately.  This process was supported by the system, entrenched within the system Vision, and praised as a foundational program offering for Gifted pupils.  We also allocated additional staffing to schools to facilitate these curriculum compacting requests, and the more awareness we generated, the more students accessed the program, and the more robust our data became to justify this program offering at this particular system.  We were incredibly successful in building and enacting this program; however, the research continues to show that the combined efforts of the selected "in-school" programs that were offered (that were ironically located outside of the students' regular classrooms), the annual staffing and allocation process, and continuing to generate interest and participation in the secondary Gifted program as based on the Vision largely perpetuated the status quo phenomenon that is being investigated in this study.  By offering programs that are fundamentally located *outside* of the regular curriculum and largely withdrawal-based, by positioning additional, external personnel as the appointed people to meet those needs that are positioned *beyond* the regular classroom, by providing the additional staffing allocations to schools for these *outside* people and for these *outside* programs, and all the while perpetuating this entire *apply-review-*

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*allocate-repeat* cycle through the established infrastructure is exactly *how* we have managed to perpetuate this status quo of programming and placement practices for Gifted learners.

***Living the Effects of Public Policy: Disrupting Established Infrastructure.*** It must be acknowledged that these experiences within a school system and working alongside colleagues in various schools was an incredible part of my journey, and that the tremendous amount of work on behalf of the collective was certainly not a bad thing. The Vision was also not inherently bad; rather it was incomplete. Drawing upon the adage that we cannot know what we do not know or have yet to discover, through the research we can see that our Gifted learners have varying needs that exist within the regular classroom and do not exist only when an enrichment workshop is offered. Further, instead of accepting a withdrawal model to have their learning needs satisfied by someone else, we must reconceptualise how we can support their learning *within* the regular curriculum and classroom.

As articulated earlier with the lockstep process of staffing by a single board, the broader governing body, the Ontario Ministry of Education, also subscribes to a similar cyclical process that continues to be enacted and has become routine, mechanical, and taken-for-granted. Provincial funding for education systems is complex but is relatively transparent in process. The funding allocations that all 72 public school boards in Ontario receive are determined through various modeling, algorithms, data from various sources, but the subsequent framework that the Ministry has established discharges all responsibility for allocating said funding toward local priorities within special education programs and services that are determined by individual boards only. It is then conceivable that the staffing allocations I was privy to throughout my tenure at an education system perhaps did include a

predetermined allocation from the Ministry originally, but the actual allocation was the product of annual administrative prioritizing of student needs, which may or may not have included additional or reduced funding based on all local priorities.  The research has uncovered the processes of establishing and enacting both local and provincial policies that continue to impact the frequency, duration, and quality of available special education programs and services.  When combined, these *provincial* policies that allocate funds primarily based on numerical data (numbers of students on Individual Education Plans, reported numbers of exceptionalities, achievement) and *local* practices of reviewing school-based applications and allocating additional staffing (based on numbers of identified students, participation in various programs) are in synergy, as the broader funding informs what the individual systems can use, which is continually enacted year after year.  The hope of this research is to engage policymakers in taking-up these operational findings, as without an intentional interruption (Katz & Dack, 2012), we will continue to perpetuate a status quo for high-ability learners where we continue to place an overwhelming majority in the regular classroom and provide primarily withdrawal support from external personnel.

### 7.3.4   Living the Effects of Job Restructuring

> "'The power of the story is that it happened to you,' Laurel replies. […]
>
> 'The heart is a muscle that needs to be worked to thrive.  A muscle tear or strain usually heals over time,' says Laurel, 'and I think time is an important issue. Sometimes we can only write about events after time has passed.'" (Ellis, 2004, pp. 175-177)

**There and Back Again.** J.R.R. Tolkien's (1937) fantasy novel, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, follows the incredible quest of Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit from the Shire, who is persuaded by the wizard, Gandalf, and tasked with joining a group of dwarfs to recover their stolen treasure that is being guarded by the dragon, Smaug. The story chronicles the many challenges the group face along their journey, adversities they encounter, fellow mates they meet and network with toward a common good, and the significant growth of the protagonist throughout this expedition that was certainly far outside the comforts of his rural Shire. Bilbo evolves throughout this quest, gains greater competence in his skills, and acquires wisdom along his journey. However, when he returns to the Shire, he is completely changed, but his surroundings have virtually remained the same.

Throughout the time of this study, I have undergone a similar quest and transformation, and have found myself in a similar predicament to Bilbo. Thematic analyses of the autoethnographic vignettes make visible various quest-like elements in my personal narratives that detail overcoming adversity, building resiliency, networking with colleagues toward a common goal, feeling an incredible sense of collective achievement, and gaining wisdom in practice (Hibbert, 2012). After six (6) years at the system-level of a Board of Education that I worked within, I experienced a restructuring of my role that would see my job classification shift from a permanent itinerant staff to a temporary system staff where I would be on a special assignment that was subject to annual funding. Boards of education reserve the right to review and restructure, and all positions were subject to reorganization to best represent the population of pupils we serve. That role—my role—was converted the following school year and filled by another educator for a period of months, as I had moved into a

different portfolio at the system.  In the spring of that same school year, and with a newly

elected Conservative government, public education systems in Ontario experienced a

significant reduction in educational funding.  All system staff were served notice that we were

being declared redundant and were to make plans to return to the classroom for the following

school year.  All public school boards would experience job cuts for educators and support

staff, and with hundreds even thousands of system staff being redeployed back into schools,

this ripple effect would also result in greater teaching redundancies with more junior teachers

being declared surplus at the school level.  This further meant that as of the 2019-2020 school

year, there would be no system-level staff to support the schools based on the provincially

allocated funding.

In the months that followed, some of the funding envelopes were returned to the

school boards but with significant reductions in the allotted amounts.  Some boards were able

to rescind some of the redundancies and offer some system roles back in a limited capacity.

Although I had the opportunity to return to my role, as I had only just begun that second

portfolio, I elected to go forward to the classroom.  With education systems experiencing such

strain financially, this did impact the ability for systems to continue staffing teams, roles, and

personnel at the system level.  In June 2020, the only remaining system-level staff who were

solely supporting the needs of Gifted pupils at the elementary panel experienced job

restructuring and were deployed back into schools.  Cuts to education funding meant that all

system-level teams supporting various groups of exceptional learners were to be eliminated.

The above journal highlights repeatedly living the effects of public policy.  The catalyst

for the system restructuring was the reduction in education funding from the provincial

government, which did profoundly impact the level of support that the system staff could

provide to schools, as the same number of portfolios and needs continue to exist, but with

only a fraction of the available staff to support.  Significant reductions in education funding

meant significant restructuring of schools and systems.  In this case, additional staffing

continued to be offered to schools to support the needs of Gifted learners at secondary, but

was virtually eliminated to combat an additional funding controversy during the global

pandemic of COVID-19 where schools were mandated to cut large numbers of regular

classroom staffing to accommodate the creation of a local, virtual school, which was not

appropriately funded by the Ministry of Education in the first place.

*Living the Effects of Public Policy: Cuts to Education and Restructuring*.  I joined the

teaching profession in Ontario during a fifteen-year reign of a Liberal government that had

been elected in 2003 after a rather tumultuous term for public education under the previous

Conservative government that saw over $1 billion in cuts to education spending.  There were,

of course, challenges in education throughout this time including Bill 115, *Putting Students*

*First Act*, 2012, S.O. 2012, c. 11, which gave the Minister of Education unprecedented powers

to impose terms, remove the right to strike, and severely restrict the collective bargaining

process in the education sector (Mancini, 2020).  In 2016, education federations won a major

court decision through their *Charter* challenge where the judge ruled that the process the

government had engaged in "substantially interfered with meaningful collective bargaining"

(Jones, 2016) and infringed upon workers' rights under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

However, the depth of funding cuts, bargaining turmoil, and blindsiding attacks on the

educator sector (Hepburn, 2019) experienced at the hands of the subsequently elected

Conservative government in 2018, led by Doug Ford, was unprecedented.  To provide an

accurate accounting of the cuts to public education in Ontario, the Canadian Centre for Policy

Alternatives (CCPA) investigated the operating allocations for public school boards, comparing

funding received for the 2017-2018 school year (Liberal government) with estimates for the

2019-2020 school year, which is the timeframe where entire education systems were

redeploying all system-level education workers back into schools.  All school boards

experienced cuts in total operating funding and per pupil funding.  The Ontario government

transferred $430 million less to school boards than the amount transferred in the 2017-2018

school year, which was a total operating funding cut of 2%.  Approximately half of the annual

budget for public education is allocated on a per pupil basis (People for Education, 2017), but

the total average funding per student dropped in 2019 by $375, which was a 3% overall cut

(Shaker & Tranjan, 2019).  These cuts impacted several funding envelopes, including a 36%

reduction to the *Learning Opportunities Grant* (Shaker & Tranjan, 2019), which is allocated on

a board-by-board basis and intended to support early intervention programs, withdrawal for

individualized support, guidance programs, parental and community engagement, among

others (People for Education, 2017).

The experiences documented in my journal make visible living the ongoing effects of

public policies including teaching in public education during the Ford Conservative reign, as

well as through a global pandemic.  It further articulates the genuine concern for supporting

our high-ability learners whose needs ought to be met within the regular classroom.  However,

with the never-ending restructuring of systems and classrooms, constant pivoting between

learning models, and changes to both instruction and assessment, regular classroom teachers

have experienced a voluminous increase in workload and may not have the time, experience,

or resources to program for our Gifted learners who have traditionally—and up until very

recently—had their needs met *outside* of those regular classrooms and by *outside* personnel.

Within this unprecedented time in education in Ontario where our education systems have

been forced to restructure due to the significant cuts to education funding from the

government, as well as pivot around the ever-changing direction of the government's

response to the pandemic for education systems, the broader concern for high-ability pupils

here is that they may continue to go overlooked in the dynamic, regular classroom where their

needs are not perceived as urgent in a mixed abilities classroom when the focus is on

remediation and closing the achievement gap (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006).

## 7.4   Discussion: Making Visible the "Quiet Crisis"[12]

To gain a more descriptive, contoured, and three-dimensional understanding of *how*

some of the policies and practices in public education systems were enacting and perpetuating

a status quo of programming and placement for Gifted pupils, this paper shares selections

from autoethnographic vignettes that were composed by the participant-researcher in

response to the various *critical incidents* identified in an earlier phase of the study.  To engage

policymakers and practitioners in reflection and debate on current policies supporting the

needs of Gifted pupils, this paper unpacks selected, encompassing themes (Haberlin, 2016)

that show the enacting, enabling, and living of public policies that are contributing to this

status quo phenomenon being investigated, and further nesting those experiences within the

actual policies lived for greater context.

Findings show that the established infrastructure that outlined board-approved

programming for Gifted pupils at both the elementary and secondary panels no longer exists,

which was an effect of both system restructuring and the more recent education funding cuts

from the provincial government.  However, this research has made visible the problematic

nature of the program infrastructure and its Vision itself at the secondary panel, as it was

largely comprised of withdrawal-based supports and opportunities that were provided by

[12] Chu, Y. H., & Myers, B. (2015). A social work perspective on the treatment of Gifted and talented students in American public schools. *School Social Work Journal, 40*(1), 42-57.

external personnel and located *outside* of the regular, day-to-day classroom experience.

Findings thus invite trouble into Gifted Education discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011) and compel

us to further problematize how other systems position the needs of high-ability pupils.  The

data demonstrates that the needs were positioned as *beyond* the scope of the regular

curriculum and classroom teacher and communicated that those needs were to be met

*outside* of that classroom space and by *outside,* expert personnel who were receiving

additional staffing.

Various effects of living public policy were addressed including how discourses of

achievement continue to drive practice in the regular classroom, which is evidence in the

official policy on assessment, evaluation, and reporting, *Growing Success* (2010).  Chu and

Myers (2015) find that little attention has been given historically to this population of learners,

as their needs represent a "quiet crisis" (p. 43) where they fail to perform *so* far outside the

norm that their performance runs the risk of endangering the reputations of educational

institutions in the public eye and thus not seen as a liability that is deserving of vocal crisis

status.  Within an achievement discourse that equates success with high, numerical

achievement, high-ability pupils often perform well overall, which continues to perpetuate the

myth that Gifted needs are not needs as understood as deficits but are viewed as needing

opportunities that are *above* what the regular curriculum requires.  Likewise, Chu and Myers

(2015) argue that Gifted pupils do not intuitively fall into the category of vulnerable and

socially diverse individuals, but they *do* meet the standards of an oppressed identity group

that is politically, socially, and intellectually marginalized, and are thus in need of attention in

our education systems.

Findings from this phase of the study employing autoethnographic methods help to answer this study's research questions, including how these lived experiences help us to better understand the **construction** of Intellectual-Giftedness as an exceptionality. From provincial legislation to government publications and local policy documents, Gifted, as an exceptionality, continues to be largely constructed and positioned as an asset exceptionality and (mis)represented as having only a *singular*, cognitive need that exists *beyond* the scope of what the regular curriculum and classroom can provide, and does not require support to bring them *up* to the performance norm. Likewise, this collective, *singular* understanding of Giftedness is often translated into "a" universal approach and presented as ways to meet "the" (singular) Gifted learner's needs, as though all high-ability learners are a single entity or homogeneous population. Callahan and Hertberg-Davis (2013) remind us that it is a common and easily understandable belief that Gifted pupils are a homogeneous population when it comes to intellectual needs, but like all students (and human beings), "identified gifted students still exist along continua of aptitudes and achievement […] in areas of interest and passion, in preferred learning modes, and in the area of social and emotional development" (p. 329). Guidance from the Ministry of Education identifies how providing enrichment within the regular classroom is not part of the daily pedagogical approach of educators in Ontario. Rather, enrichment is considered to be a tiered, intervention approach and requires a formal referral process to an in-school team that reviews data and makes a determination of whether the student could benefit from said programming within or outside the classroom through withdrawal. Various hegemonic discourses were present in the stories shared, particularly scarcity of resources, achievement, and deficit discourses, which work in tandem to continue

(mis)constructing the needs of these exceptional pupils. The language reflected in various

provincial and local policies construct the term "need" as *deficit-oriented* within special

education discourses that subscribe to a more medical model (Gable, 2014; Goodley &

Runswick-Cole, 2010) understanding of *needs*, further excluding and positioning high-ability

pupils as not intuitively belonging to the disability community. As Roeher (1996) reminds us:

"Language can be a powerful tool of exclusion" (p. 22).

The results of this autoethnography may contribute to our ongoing dialogue of whether

programmatic and placement options have or have not **evolved** throughout history to respond

to contemporary Gifted learners' needs in public education systems. Existing structures with

cyclical processes that are embedded within broader education system infrastructure go

largely unnoticed and are perceived as taken-for-granted. This study makes visible some of

these processes that are problematic and serve to perpetuate a status quo of programming

and placement options for high-ability pupils in public education, such as staffing and the

allocation of local special education funding and resources. Findings show a combined effect

of provincial and local policies that impact the frequency, duration, and quality of available

special education programs and services. More specifically, the annual application for

additional staffing that local schools apply to the system for also plays a role in the

perpetuation of the status quo of programming and placement, as it subscribes to an *apply-

review-allocate-repeat* cycle that is embedded and largely taken-for-granted within the local

board's established policies and infrastructure. Traditional and long-established "withdrawal-

based" delivery of enrichment programming combined with the overwhelming placement of

high-ability pupils in the regular classroom suggests that our response to Gifted needs has not

evolved in either broader infrastructure or pedagogical belief. Despite various school boards and districts taking-up different program offerings that are innovative and respond to contemporary learners' needs, the principles of *outside* delivery by *outside* personnel and deeply engrained beliefs that the needs are *assets* suggest that as public educational institutions, we are simply putting new patches on old robes and getting creative inside the box.

Literature on programs for and needs of Gifted learners demonstrate that regular classroom teachers feel that they are unable to meet the needs of Gifted pupils for two main reasons: the lack of awareness of how to program for Gifted learners in a mixed ability class (Loveless et al., 2008; see also Delisle & Lewis, 2003; Leroux, 1989; Reis & Renzulli, 2004, 2010; Robinson & Puk, 1989; Subotnik et al., 2011), and the struggle to differentiate for all learners in the same space that range in abilities (Loveless et al., 2008; see also Davis, 2006; Mills, Ablard, & Gustin, 1994; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2011; Subotnik et al., 2008; Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991; Winebrenner, 2000). When the delivery model of supporting enrichment and cognitive stimulation needs has largely existed *outside* of that regular classroom, it will take time to re-think, re-prioritize, and re-take responsibility for those needs within the everyday classroom again. It is also conceivable that this shift may require additional support from education systems in leadership positions who must draw on research-informed practices for designing and delivering ability-appropriate programming for Gifted learners. On the whole, this restructuring does present systems with the opportunity to reconceptualise how we respond to the needs of high-ability pupils. What is of the utmost importance, however, is that the shift toward re-taking responsibility for these pupils must be

sophisticated in both infrastructure and deep, philosophical understanding of the needs and ways in which we can support our students *within*, rather than relying on the undertheorized assumption that our regular classrooms can seamlessly transform into inclusive classrooms by virtue of physical location (Hibbert, 2012).

## 7.5   *Reconceptualisations*: Considerations for Refiguring a Future[13] for High-Ability Pupils

Iannacci (2007) reminds us that "as critical narrative researchers deconstruct and challenge dominant narratives, new storylines hopefully begin to emerge" (p. 60).  The central goal of this paper was to show the broader and long-term effects of enacting, enabling, and living public policy to engage educational stakeholders and decision-makers in reflection on current policies and practices that govern the experiences of our high-ability pupils.  Findings from this study have made visible how organizational and infrastructural decisions, policies, and practices are largely going un-checked, as they have become robotic, taken-for-granted processes that have resulted in actively perpetuating a status quo of programming and placement for high-ability learners where the overwhelming majority are placed in the regular classroom and provided with withdrawal-based programming.  Now that we are aware of *how* our staffing processes, achievement discourses, and special education policies are serving to overlook and de-prioritize this group of learners in the mixed-ability classroom, it is incumbent upon us to disrupt and intervene by way of rethinking our approach to how we support our Gifted learners in our classrooms and schools.  It is time we interrogate our pre-conceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions (Iannacci, 2007) of what learning needs are and where we

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[13] Iannacci, L. (2019). *Reconceptualizing disability in education*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

position those needs of high-ability learners in our education systems, as in this process the

potential for societal change and reconceptualisation can manifest (p. 60).

First, we must problematize the ways in which we program for the needs of high-ability

pupils by examining where the programming is **located** (Borland, 2013).  Given that the

predominant method of delivering services to Gifted pupils is often withdrawal or pull-out

programming (Gubbins, 2013; see also Cox & Daniel, 1984; Gubbins et al., 2002; Schroth, 2008;

Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003), we must interrogate our reasons why we subscribe to

these outside programs and question their effectiveness in meeting the diverse, every day

needs of these learners.  Borland (2013) argues that pull-out programs are generally offered to

provide Gifted students with differentiated experiences outside of the regular classroom but

are often designed for a monolithic population that "experience the same enrichment at the

same time" (p. 71) that may be furthering the misnomer that Gifted learners are a

homogeneous group (Schultz, 2018) that have a singular, *one-size-fits-all* need (Borland, 2005;

Jacobs & Eckert, 2017).  Even more important is to problematize *why* education systems

subscribe to these withdrawal-based programs in the first place, as they are not a panacea for

meeting the diverse needs, but rather a partial solution (Gubbins et al., 2013) that removes

them from the regular classroom to offer workshop-style enrichment that lacks scope and

sequence of learning activities in their day-to-day curriculum (Borland, 2013).  Tan et al. (2020)

find that programs designed to foster creativity and develop talents among Gifted pupils are

offered outside of the regular classroom, often after-school, are typically not part of the core

curriculum, and are both fragmented and ad hoc in nature (p. 130).  However, they are

marketed as extra enrichment and are attractive to parents and educators as they are

convenient add-ons and facilitated by expert educators, as well as appealing to schools

because of their cost-effectiveness and ease of implementation (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015).

When the programming is marketed as offering these "above" (regular curriculum),

enrichment opportunities by "expert" personnel, the messaging reads as an "extra"

commitment to providing programming; however, it serves to distract from the fact that pull-

out programming completely circumvents the regular, day-to-day learning experiences where

students spend the bulk of their time and where their needs lie fallow (Coleman, Micko, &

Cross, 2015) because their accommodations are overwhelmingly offered later; outside of their

classes; and not by their classroom teachers.  What is needed is thorough reflection and a level

of scrutiny brought to programming reform for high-ability pupils where we examine current

programming practices that primarily offer *withdrawal*-based options and look for ways to

support our educators with flexible, differentiated and acceleration options *within* the regular

classroom (Finn & Wright, 2015; see also Colangelo, Assouline, & Marron, 2013; VanTassel-

Baska, 2021, 2015).

Next, we must address the broader **construct** of Giftedness by taking up the dominant

discourses and language we use to refer to our high-ability learners.  The data makes visible

that even when labelled as students with special education needs, the needs of Gifted learners

are positioned as outside of the scope of what special education typically provides, as largely

understood through a deficit discourse.  Rather, the learning needs of high-ability students are

described as *above* or *beyond* what the regular curriculum and thus regular classroom teacher

can provide.  As evidenced in the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2017b) special education

guide, consideration for offering enrichment *within* the regular classroom necessitates a

referral process for accessing specialized services and programs (p. C24).  Our provincial policy

reinforces the hegemonic discourse that the needs of high-ability learners are not deficit

needs that demand attention (Finn & Wright, 2015; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2006), but

are rather assets, as their needs go *beyond* the ceiling (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell,

2011).  This recycling of institutional discourses (Souto-Manning, 2014) has resulted in the

identification of high-ability learners in Ontario in vain, as the placements for Gifted students

are most often fixed, offering only the regular classroom opposed to self-contained or

specialized programs with like-minded peers, and the programs provided are often sporadic

and withdrawal-based.

Lastly, we must take further issue with how we **identify**, label, and decide on how best

to support Gifted pupils in public education.  A large feat indeed, as this interrogation will

involve the ways in which education systems choose to find, assess, and identify high-ability

learners.  For over 100 years, Gifted learners have been identified by scores obtained on IQ

tests, and where most states in the United States of America still rely, almost exclusively, on

this data for identification (Pfeiffer, 2013; see also Subotnik et al., 2011; Ziegler et al., 2012).

Giftedness does not equal high IQ and equating these is highly problematic (Borland, 2009;

Pfeiffer, 2013), as an intelligence quotient is merely a snapshot or artefact that is determined

at a specific point in time in one's life (Schutz, 2018, p. 194).  Over two decades ago, Borland

(1997) wrote about his new thinking around assessment: "the field of gifted education is

beginning to warm to the notion that we need to augment (not abandon) our use of

standardized tests in assessing the needs of bright children" (p. 16).  Likewise, Pfeiffer (2013),

a clinical psychologist, argues that "no single score can ever tell the whole story about whether

a student is gifted" (p. 91), and in his decades of work with high-ability pupils, he has taken

issue with the single-test-and-identify method, recommending and encouraging that school

psychologists view gifted assessment as an ongoing process, and that "it is no longer

acceptable to evaluate a student for gifted classification on only one occasion" (Foley-Nicpon

& Pfeiffer, 2011, p. 296).  Callahan, Renzulli, Delcourt, and Hertberg-Davis (2013) take issue

with the identification inconsistencies, as there is no universal approach to locating, assessing,

and identifying high-ability individuals.  Finn and Wright (2015) argue that varied approaches

to identification are part of the much larger issue of limited, or scarcity of, resources, as

definitions and designation criteria are subject to the interpretation of local school boards,

which cannot remain unbiased given the fiscal influence of annual funding they receive to

program for all learners with special needs.  When boards subscribe to a *single* process such as

testing alone or teacher nomination to qualify a student for identification, we invent or

construct Giftedness differently.  To emphasize this point, Clarenbach & Eckert (2013)

compose an illustrative conversation showing how policy is developed at a local system using a

Task Force, and how the definition agreed upon will construct what Giftedness is in their

board:

> "As I look at all of these definitions we've collected, it seems like the closer we get to
>
> working with actual students, the policy definition becomes more specific and
>
> purposeful.  What I'm saying is that as great as it would be to identify in every
>
> conceivable talent area like leadership or kinesthetic learners, we don't have the
>
> resources or support to do that well." (p. 29)

Indeed, within the policy arena, definitions of Giftedness facilitate decision-making, which is inextricably connected to resource allocation (VanTassel-Baska, 2006). Here is where we must rethink the definitions and very processes for assessment and identification of high-ability learners that we use in our respective practices, as we ought to ensure that we are not subscribing to only a snapshot model of a single assessment on a specific day during our formative years—likely in an elementary school. History has taught us that this process only serves to label a student as exceptional and assume that he/she/they has the same needs as other identified Gifted learners, which we then move forward through a lockstep process of being placed in the regular classroom and receiving monolithic, outside, pull-out programming for the remaining years of their public education. We must do better.

For us to truly refigure a future for our high-ability pupils, we must interrogate our practices today to ensure that they evolve to meet the needs of high-ability students. Borland (1997) cautioned twenty-five years ago we had found ourselves at an impasse in Gifted education *then* and needed to rethink our approach: "I think that our primary task is either to construct the most educationally rewarding and equitable concept of giftedness we can or to find a way to move beyond the construct altogether" (p. 18). We are passed our *best before* date with our current practices of assessment, identification, and withdrawal-based programming options. This call to action is for movement toward a more robust, responsive, pedagogical approach that provides for current, contemporary, individual needs that focuses *less* on snapshot scores and traits (Ziegler et al., 2012) and *more* on maximizing their learning, developing their individual talents (Dixson et al., 2021), and entrenching ongoing evaluation and reflection on the programming in place.

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# Chapter 8

## 8    Discussion

*If you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got.*
*—Henry Ford*

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*"Until we can recognize that support efforts are fundamental to an efficient education system, we will be captives of the status quo, stumbling through local crises, patching what can be patched, but never getting ahead of the game." (Gallagher, 2015, p. 87)*

Although this chapter concludes the dissertation, it is written in the spirit of opening up conversations in educational settings and encouraging stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers to reflect on the findings from this research and begin—even modestly—to refigure a future (Iannacci, 2019) for our high-ability learners in our public education classrooms today. This dissertation is comprised of four chapters and four integrated articles that offer scholarly, methodological, and data discoveries at various phases along my learning journey toward identifying precisely *what* is preventing the intellectual accessibility in our classrooms and schools for our high-ability pupils. Together, these chapters and manuscripts embody my learning as both participant and researcher, from taking issue with the robust stagnation of the field of Gifted education to problematizing our varied approaches to meeting the needs of these pupils, as well as employing a novel methodological approach poised at getting close enough to the status quo mess by way of complementary "show and tell" methods of material-semiotics and autoethnography to finally see *what* and *how* this phenomenon is existing so we may engage in informed debate as to *why*.

I begin this chapter with a discussion on the original contributions of this research by way of salient findings and offer insights into the significance of the study. Following this, I consolidate my findings and respond to each of the research questions that guided this study. I then circle back to the problems with our approaches to Gifted education that were identified in the review of the literature and offer ways to reconceptualise those approaches as informed by *this* study's findings. I offer four calls to action for educational stakeholders and policymakers that must be implemented in order to disrupt the established status quo for both programming and placement practices for our Gifted learners, which are further supported by researchers who have not only invited trouble into the Gifted education discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011), but actively indict education system leaders for continuing to enact replicated policy and practice that do *not* serve the contemporary needs of high-ability pupils today. Following this, I address the limitations of this research before I offer discussion on the practical and theoretical implications of this work within the classroom and school levels, at system and governance levels, as well as for the fields of Gifted education and Disability Studies. I end this chapter with various recommendations for future research that could contribute meaningfully to this (re)thinking-and-(re)taking-responsibility conversation for our Gifted learners.

## 8.1 Significance of the Study

Despite 100 years of scholarly attention toward understanding the needs of high-ability learners and measuring their potential (Pfeiffer, 2013; see also Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011; Ziegler, Stoeger, & Vialle, 2012), we, as a field, continue to raise the same, redundant questions about what high-ability learners need in public education, signaling that

we are *still* missing the mark in practice.  Research on responsive, effective, and thriving

programming and placement is sparse and inconclusive (Finn & Wright, 2015) and we are

lacking empirical studies that can provide guidance for both policy and practice to *best* serve

the heterogeneous learning needs (Plucker & Callahan, 2014; see also Kim, 2016) of this group

of exceptional pupils.  Several problems with our approaches to Gifted education have been

identified in the literature where practices are *not* informed by theory and empirical evidence

(Dimitriadis, 2016).  As a consequence, our models of programming to meet the needs of this

highly misunderstood group of students have become fixed, unchanged, and regarded as a

"hodgepodge of activities" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012), and yet many educators remain dogmatic

in their beliefs that they are implementing the accepted model established by their employers

and respective districts (p. 169).  Indeed, we have been at an impasse for far too long.

Having first-hand experience as both a student receiving withdrawal-based

programming, as well as being a system staff at a board level position responsible for an entire

secondary Gifted portfolio, I have taken notice of how similar the experiences were for this

group of learners over the past thirty years.  After my tenure at the system when I went

*forward*—not back—to the classroom, I had the space to step back to see things more clearly.

It was as though we—including several boards of education in the province of Ontario—were

aimlessly subscribing to cyclical, status quo practices of regular classroom placements as the

*only* available placement for the masses, coupled with primarily withdrawal-based enrichment

programming that took place *outside* the regular classroom and included external personnel.

And I needed to understand exactly *what* and *who* were involved in these decisions, policies,

and guidance and *how* exactly this was continuing to happen before we could ask *why* we

were subscribing to a recycling of what Sayer (1992) calls "practically adequate" practices and discourses.

This research project took issue with educational institutions' compliance with this status quo approach where replicated policy and practice yield the same results and experiences. It took further issue with the ubiquitous research designs employed by researchers in the field of Gifted education that produce voluminous results that continue to raise the same concerns about what is happening rather than investigating how it is happening in the first place and asking why. To break out of this cycle, this study sought to learn from the experiences of students, teachers, and educational stakeholders in and around Gifted programming and placement and uncover *what* the root cause was of this status quo phenomenon once and for all. I was determined to make visible *how* this status quo practice has continued to exist within education systems and *what* the dominant discourses and practices are that are perpetuating this phenomenon. This research is incredibly timely with renewed conversations around the use of more inclusive language and approaches being used in governmental and institutional documentation, so our neurodiverse learners feel more represented and included rather than *othered* (Kumashiro, 2002). Above all else, this research lays the groundwork to intentionally interrupt (Katz & Dack, 2012) the dominant, institutional discourses that are being recycled (Souto-Manning, 2014) in practice so we may engage policymakers and educators in a critical conversation around re-taking responsibility for our high-ability learners and re-conceptualise how we respond to their needs in 21st Century classrooms, institutions, and educational systems.

*8.1.1 Experiencing the Topography of the Status Quo Phenomenon in a More Three-Dimensional Way with "Show and Tell" Methods*

The design of this research project was in direct response to the saturation of findings within the field of Gifted education that continue to take the form of critiques of programming and placement practices that merely contribute *what* is happening without offering insight into perhaps *why* this phenomenon might be existing in the first place, which consequently holds things in place and perpetuates the cycle altogether. What is more, when we are satisfied with investigating the types of programs rather than critically examining their effects on learning (Kim, 2016), we inform our field in more two-dimensional or *surface* topography (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) ways that do *not* bring us close enough to experience the features, the different terrain, and the contours of the phenomenon. It was necessary to employ a novel methodological approach that could both "show and tell" to give rise to a more complex, more *three*-dimensional understanding of this phenomenon. As part of a larger *critical narrative inquiry* (CNI), the varied methods employed in this study, including narrative, material-semiotic, and autoethnographic, aid in achieving the broader goals of reconceptualising how we are responding to the needs of our high-ability learners and offer "alternative ways of thinking, being, and doing" (Iannacci, 2019, p. 15; 2007) in our public education systems today.

**"Show" using Material-Semiotics.** I drew upon material-semiotic sensibilities, specifically *Actor-Network Theory*, as a critical method to "show" the various actors that were present and involved in enacting this status quo, as well as tracing their interactions, negotiations, and ways in which these entities were able to exert force, change, and be

changed by each other (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, 2012).  This precise, *socio*-material

approach made visible the *who*, *what*, and *how* we find ourselves in this perpetual

programming and placement impasse in public education.  These material findings are

incredibly compelling, as they force us to pay attention to the influence of various non-human

agents (Burm, 2016) at work, such as publications, established practices, memoranda, staff

meeting agendas, staffing processes, scheduling, timetabling, among others.  What is more,

material-semiotic methods are not often taken up in studies of Gifted education in the context

of programming, placement, or at the secondary panel in general, and through meticulous

attention to materiality in this research, I have been able to get close enough to this

phenomenon and examine the nuanced contours not visible from a single angle or approach.

**"Tell" with Autoethnography.**  This novel approach needed a way to respond to the

material findings, complete the stories, and share the effects of living with public policy

(Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005).  The previous "show" (material) phase of analysis

gave rise to the identification of various "critical incidents" or episodes that brought to light

significant issues within education systems that required additional information to complete a

more holistic picture of what had transpired.  Inspired by these critical events, a series of

autoethnographic vignettes were composed where I viewed myself as the phenomenon (Ellis,

Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 7) and reported on my own experiences and introspections to

"garner insights into the larger cultural or subculture of which you are a part" (Patton, 2015, p.

102).  Using autoethnography as a method of "telling" stories has invited a broader audience

to enter my world and use what they learn here to reflect upon, understand, and perhaps

engage in educational policy debate from these various entry points (Neysmith et al., 2005).

The spirit of this approach was to nest these personal experiences of enacting, enabling, and living the effects of educational policy within those specific policies themselves so as to promote "an understanding of that experience and perhaps providing insights into our judgements and the need for new types of practices in a changing society" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 9), such as how and where we position the needs of high-ability learners in public education today.

### 8.1.2   Salient Contributions

Crediting this "show and tell" methodological approach, these complementary methods have penetrated the *surface* understanding of this status quo phenomenon, and together, have made two (2) significant contributions that were first identified in the "show" (material) phase of the study, then further fleshed out in the "tell" (autoethnography) phase.

**The Needs of Gifted Pupils are Located *Outside* or *Beyond* the Regular Classroom.**

First, this research has made visible that the needs of high-ability pupils are continuously positioned as "outside" or "beyond" the regular classroom, curriculum, and teacher.  Initially discovered in the first (material) phase of the research, a notable assemblage that was rich in materials, connections, and negotiations with other assemblages in and around the material mindmaps appeared to orbit around the everyday, regular classroom experience, as well as those marks and grades achieved within this setting, and how Gifted pupils at the secondary panel are continuously having to navigate and negotiate how to have their needs met in public education.  Of course, the regular classroom is not a single entity, but a dynamic space comprised of many different entities that are also part of a much larger and more powerful assemblage that includes the regular classroom teacher, subject content, lessons, teaching and

delivery style, assessments, evaluations, grading, feedback, pace, reporting, among others.

The data showed extraordinary power in marks—a *specific* grade—which connected to a larger

network of students, educators, parents/guardians, school statistics, administrators, boards of

education, employers, accountability, government, Ministry of Education, among others,

which had tremendous influence over what was designed, delivered, and experienced for the

*entire* class within this regular classroom space.  This was a significant finding, as it showed

that should high-ability pupils achieve high enough marks in this regular curriculum setting,

then they have effectively reached the "ceiling" (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 35) and *exceeded* the

expectations of the regular curriculum as determined by the governing body, the Ministry of

Education.  Thus, any further learning needs that these Gifted pupils have—such as extension

and enrichment—are then *not* the responsibility of that teacher *within* the regular classroom

but of an *outside*, learning support teacher or expert personnel.

The material data further showed that this education institution did have infrastructure

by way of enrichment withdrawal programming in place, but as a compromise that was only

offered *outside* of the regular classroom and not provided by the regular classroom teacher.

This programming was positioned as "extra opportunities" and did provide a makeshift

solution to the problems of pace, perhaps redundancy, and the need for enrichment in the

regular classroom that was not a priority.  However, its very existence, from a material lens,

signals that it is only needed *because* the regular classroom's general focus is on reported

achievement, which does not seem to primarily target high-ability learners.  Locating special

education support *outside* of the regular classroom clearly communicates that the needs of

high-ability pupils are *beyond* their scope or domain of the regular curriculum and thus *not* the responsibility of the subject or classroom teacher.

A critical incident of "responsibility" was identified in the material phase with the blended focus groups, which was taken-up in the second (autoethnographic) phase in the vignette, *The story of everybody, somebody, anybody, and nobody*. I shared my own complicity in how my programming design efforts to bring awareness to enrichment needs *as* bona fide needs led to a system-wide assumption that someone or something else was responsible. This assumption was the result of not only the creation and subsequent perpetuation of outside enrichment only, but also the unclear messaging of the board-approved programming vision and additional staffing itself:

> Looking back, it was here where I positioned *Everybody* as not having responsibility. Even though I was talking about the [Gifted programs] that were within my scope and under my control, those programs were placed *outside* all those teachers' classrooms. Therefore, I may have given the impression (or permission) that meeting the needs of Gifted learners were *our* (outside) responsibility. [...] It wasn't until years later after I had left the portfolio and was engaging in this research did I see how the very infrastructure was enabling me to enable them to continue sending their Gifted students away from their regular classroom and thus their responsibility for providing enrichment because we (the system) gave those schools and those outside personnel [additional staffing] and told them to do that exact thing. It's just so clear. Now.

This vignette addressed issues of responsibility and the great confusion as to whose

responsibility it was to meet the needs of Gifted pupils in a publicly funded educational

institution.  Stories shared outline the genuine confusion around who had the ultimate

responsibility to meet the needs of Gifted pupils, as the board's vision for programming was

marketed as "the" (entire) program for high-ability learners, which was located *outside* of the

regular classroom and included *outside*, expert personnel who received additional staffing to

facilitate these programs.  From the *classroom* teacher's perspective, those programs *were* the

way that Gifted students' needs were to be met, as the system positioned them that way.

From the *Gifted* teacher's perspective, they had the responsibility for those outside programs,

but they were only offered a fraction of the time because they were primarily withdrawal-

based, and it was the *classroom* teacher who was responsible for programming daily within

the regular curriculum to meet the students' daily needs.  Indeed, these assumptions of

responsibility and scope left holes in our established infrastructure that our high-ability pupils

ultimately fell into, resulting in not adequately meeting their learning needs.

**Education Systems Perpetuate the Status Quo of Programming and Placement**

**through our Existing Infrastructure and Cyclical Processes.**  Second, this research has made

visible *how* we have found ourselves in this status quo rut of regular classroom placement with

primarily withdrawal-based *outside* programming.  Initially thought to have been heavily

influenced (and easily rectified) by the programming vision of the board that included

approved withdrawal-based programming options, it was discovered that the *most* influential

entity was simply *how we do school* via "The Model" in Ontario, Canada, where the majority of

pupils placed are in regular, mixed-ability classrooms and should they have special needs,

those are to be supported (and sometimes fully met) outside of that classroom by outside

personnel.  Because of this very foundation that our education system is built upon, where we

have general education as the primary placement and special education as the outside

support, we have given rise to a parallel system of education with two distinct groups of

students who are "often separate physically by way of special education classrooms and

schools, but separate also in teacher preparation and educational administration" (Sullivan &

King Thorius, 2010, p. 96).  What is more, the material data shows how stable and durable this

network is through the ongoing work of subscribing to established—albeit "taken-for-

granted"—practices of assessment, identification, placement, external enrichment, annual

educational funding, and accountability for numerical achievement.  Findings show that we

will continue to perpetuate these practices that de-prioritize the learning needs of high-ability

learners in the regular classroom unless we disrupt and change our broader lockstep

infrastructure that overwhelmingly places these exceptional learners in mainstreamed

classrooms with chronological-aged peers and provides them with outside enrichment

opportunities as a comprise because the regular classroom focus is on adhering to the

governmental priorities of utilitarian achievement of all learners, striving for that Level 3

provincial standard (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 16).

As evidenced in the "tell" (autoethnographic) data, the process of staffing was largely

taken-for-granted.  It was commonplace to begin staffing for the following school year

throughout the current school year, which adhered to established, nondescript timelines.

Findings show that staffing practices that determined additional staffing allocations for outside

enrichment opportunities were deeply entrenched practices that operated rather robotically

on an annual schedule and included a written application that each school would complete

that was released at the same time each year and required the same types of accountability

data.  I abided by the timelines and processes without question as a school-based staff and

then continued to enact this policy when I entered the system role, never questioning its

existence, effectiveness, or purpose in the broader organization; it truly was a taken-for-

granted practice that played a significant role in the ongoing perpetuation of this status quo

through the *apply-review-allocate-repeat* process.

## 8.2   Revisiting the Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of high-ability pupils,

teachers of high-ability students, and educational stakeholders about the programmatic and

placement needs of identified Gifted secondary school students in our current system.  There

were three (3) target areas of this research: how these experiences could help us better

understand the *construction* of Intellectual-Giftedness as an exceptionality in the current

system; in what ways these experiences could contribute to our understanding of whether

programmatic and placement options have or have not *evolved* throughout history to

ultimately respond to the contemporary learning needs of these pupils; and how a *material-

semiotic* approach could help us identify the actors and assemblages that produce the current

system so we might have a better understanding of not only what is preventing the intellectual

accessibility of programming and placement for high-ability learners but perpetuating status

quo practices.  Below I have consolidated my findings and respond to each of the research

questions that guided this study.

*8.2.1    In the Current Education System, "Intellectual—Giftedness" is a Constructed*
*Exceptionality*

This research demonstrates that Giftedness has been, and continues to be, largely constructed as an "asset" exceptionality within the current education system.  Moreover, it is subject to locally (board) constructed eligibility criteria for designation and subsequent programming and placement options that vary rather significantly depending on local board resources and infrastructure.  Within the "tell" phase of this study, several autoethnographic vignettes included the term *assets* when incorrectly referring to intellectually Gifted learners, which were always used within the context of misunderstandings, myths, and negotiations of the needs of high-ability pupils.  Despite Ontario Ministry of Education funding and local board allocations earmarked for Gifted programs and services, the data shows that conversations with leadership, community members, and colleagues from across the province were often met with confusion when discussing these learners as a vulnerable and disadvantaged group of pupils in public education, as they were largely understood to be the nation's brightest, strongest, and highly achieving group of learners.  In the vignette, *A crumb to feed a flock*, I reflected on the advocacy side of the system role with pivoting around often-stereotypical understandings of Gifted students' needs and helping colleagues to appreciate and re-frame them as legitimate needs that we were responsible for meeting: "The dominant understanding was that Gifted students are more advantaged and have assets; providing them with a program was a courtesy, almost, as they were simply fine (achievement-speaking)."  Findings illustrate how *singular* the collective understanding of Giftedness is when constructed as only a singular, cognitive need that does not require support to bring them *up* to the performance norm.

From provincial legislation to government publications and local policy documents, findings show that programming for Giftedness is often marketed as *a* universal approach and presented as additional or extra opportunities that will enrich a pupil's learning experience. Autoethnographic data shows that the Ministry of Education is clear on its guidance that providing enrichment within the regular classroom is *not* part of the daily pedagogical approach of educators in Ontario, but rather considered to be a tiered, intervention approach and requires a formal referral process to an in-school team that reviews data and decides whether the student could benefit from said programming within or outside the classroom through withdrawal. Narrative and material-semiotic findings show that by incorrectly positioning high-ability learners as having only cognitive gifts and equating those gifts with academic achievement, it minimizes their agency as individual learners with individual interests and bona fide learning needs, and further marginalizes them in the mixed-ability classroom. Participants' stories remind us how they are learners too, and when they are positioned as intellectual beings and brains *only*, their social, emotional, and relational needs suffer. Findings from this research illuminate this marginalization in the regular classroom based on stereotypical misrepresentations, which ultimately leads to said referral for consideration of outside enrichment to appease the student, parents/guardians, and even broader community that an education system offers a solution via enrichment withdrawal programming. This solution, however, does not adequately address the daily learning experiences within the mixed-ability classroom and further endorses regular classroom teachers to abdicate responsibility for high-ability learners' needs because the established infrastructure has an (outside) plan for them.

Furthermore, the language used in various provincial and local policies construct the term "need" as more *deficit-oriented* within special education discourses that subscribe to a medical model (Gable, 2014; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010) understanding of *needs*, further excluding and positioning high-ability pupils as not intuitively belonging to the disability community. Findings illuminate that the language used by the governing body of education is contributing to this misrepresentation of the legitimate learning needs of Gifted learners, positioning them not as students with special education needs but as learners with cognitive gifts that are far beyond and above the acceptable achievement level. It further communicates that the type of programming needed to further enrich their learning would best be provided by external, expert personnel and offered outside of that regular classroom where the learners have already demonstrated proficiency. Certainly, the language is delegitimizing and even excluding (Roeher, 1996) this group of pupils from the regular classroom because they have been constructed as exceptional in a positive way as *more* able than their same-aged peers rather than *dis*abled. Findings further caution practitioners and policymakers that subscribing to such a limited, singular, and homogeneous view of high-ability learners' needs can and will lead to impoverished pedagogical responses (Iannacci, 2019) that fail to adequately support these pupils.

### 8.2.2 *Programmatic and Placement Practices Have Not Evolved Throughout History to Respond to the Contemporary Needs of Gifted Pupils in Public Education*

This research contributes to our ongoing discussion of whether programmatic and placement options have or have not evolved throughout history to respond to the needs of high-ability pupils in our classrooms and schools today. Findings show that despite

considerable programming options provided to high-ability learners such as high-interest

topics of independent study and enrichment groups, they have *not* evolved in a substantial

enough way over the past thirty years to significantly alter the experiences in more positive

ways for these learners.  Material findings from this research show this to be the case in an

education system that provided ample opportunities for enrichment by way of weekly

workshops, monthly enrichment conferences, curriculum compacting opportunities, college-

level preparatory courses with expert mentorship, cross-pollination of schools for student-led

research projects, among others.  However, all of these programs existed *outside* of the

regular curriculum and regular classroom and were not offered in the same frequency and

duration of a regular curriculum credit because they were often *non*-credit bearing

opportunities.  Traditional and long-established "withdrawal-based" delivery of enrichment

programming combined with the overwhelming placement of high-ability pupils in the regular

classroom suggests that our response to Gifted needs has not evolved in either broader

infrastructure or pedagogical belief.  Despite various school boards and districts taking-up

different program offerings that are creative and reflect contemporary learners' interests, the

principles of *outside* delivery by *outside* personnel and deeply engrained beliefs that the needs

are *assets* and are *beyond* the regular curriculum suggest that as public educational

institutions, we have been holding these stagnant practices in place for decades by simply

putting new patches on old robes instead of looking for different materials and compositions

altogether.

Additionally, the material findings make visible that the quantity and quality of

programming options are not the primary issues when it comes to satisfying students'

cognitive stimulation needs, but the actual model of education when it comes to students with special needs in Ontario, Canada, where we have general education (regular classroom) and special education (accommodations). Findings show that even in the hands of a highly competent enrichment teacher who is responsible for those enrichment needs but is on the periphery, that teacher cannot make-up for the lack of individualized, flexible, and enriched programming in the *everyday* regular curriculum and classroom. This is a significant contribution to our understanding of what is preventing the intellectual accessibility of public education, as findings show it is not first and foremost the enrichment withdrawal itself, but the very belief and antiquated infrastructure that sees general education and special education as separate entities with distinct responsibilities.

### 8.2.3  *Actor-Network Theory Has Helped Make Visible How the Actors and Assemblages Produce the Current Education System and Enable the Perpetuation of Status Quo Practices*

A meticulous and sustained material analysis on the narrative data has made visible not only *who* and *what* is responsible for the current programming and placement infrastructure, but *how* this status quo pathway has continued to be enabled, which is consequently *dis*abling our high-ability learners by imposing this singular option of regular classroom placement and withdrawal-based enrichment. *Actor-Network Theory* has provided this study with a means to penetrate the more distant, surface understanding of this phenomenon and come close enough to experience a more comprehensive understanding of the *topography* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013), including the unfamiliar terrain lying just beneath the surface model, as well as more nuanced contours that have not yet been visible with more singular methodological approaches. *ANT* as a method in this research has shown us *how* the everyday entities that we

frequently interact with in an education system come together in various ways in often

precarious networks that require constant maintenance and ongoing work to sustain their

connections, and this myriad of things is what is ordering and governing our current

educational practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013). What is more, material findings reveal a rich

and intimate understanding of *how* power is exerted within an education system and *how* it

privileges certain kinds of knowledge and practices (Fenwick, 2010).

Through revisiting the raw, narrative data from a previous study (Gollan-Wills, 2014)

with a sustained focus on the materials, networks, and processes involved within an education

system, findings show that operational items such as staffing and the allocation of local special

education funding and resources are not only complicit in, but the most powerful mediator

involved in, the perpetuation of this status quo phenomenon. More specifically, it was the

annual application for additional staffing for Gifted programming that local schools applied to

the system for that played a considerable role in the ongoing perpetuation of these stagnant

programming and placement practices. Material analysis shows that an education system

maintained these Xeroxed practices by "black boxing" or strategically concealing all the

negotiations that brought the practice into existence in the first place (Fenwick & Edwards,

2010) by quite literally hiding in plain sight—a finding that was only visible through such

attention to materiality. This application process was positioned as reciprocal and was shown

to have positive implications and benefits for students and staff. The system engaged in a

relationship with the schools whereby they would submit the application to the system and

were often rewarded with time via staffing, which fundamentally diverted attention away

from the fact that this very application was precisely *how* this stagnant practice continued by

providing staffing for *outside* programming rather than focusing some of the allocation of

resources and efforts *within* the regular classroom.  The annual *apply-review-allocate-repeat*

cycle truly became a taken-for-granted process within the local board's established policies

and infrastructure.

This research has demonstrated that existing structures with cyclical processes such as

staffing are deeply embedded within broader education system infrastructure and largely go

unnoticed and unchecked.  Findings show that these accepted and stable processes further

perpetuated insufficient pedagogical responses to student needs by teaching staff and

contributed to the erroneous belief that high-ability learners' needs are *beyond* the regular

curriculum and *outside* of the classroom teacher's scope.  The actor-network shows that when

regular classroom teachers shift Gifted pupils to those additional, external staff tasked with

providing enrichment programming, it is not seen as negligent or abdicating responsibility, as

the established infrastructure and understanding to have needs met outside that regular

classroom space was long-established by "The Model" and widely accepted.  Material findings

have also given rise to a visible network showing several redirections and abdications of

responsibility at the hands of the infrastructure itself, where regular classroom teachers are of

the understanding that enrichment needs are met outside of their classrooms and curriculum,

and where enrichment teachers see their role as sporadic and peripheral and believe daily

needs are to be met within that regular space.  This demonstrates that established practices

are not clear on who exactly has the *primarily* responsibility for the needs of high-ability pupils

in this education system, which ultimately condones, through willful blindness, deprioritizing

their learning needs.

## 8.3 Circling Back: Taking-Up the Problems with Our Approaches to Gifted Education by Reconceptualising Our Reforms—This Study's Calls to Action

One of the integrated manuscripts (Chapter 2) of this dissertation focused on a comprehensive examination of the literature surrounding our past and current approaches to Gifted education programs and services. This process made clear that the literature reviewed—literature that was currently informing both our field and subsequent policy and practice in our schools—was saturated with duplicate findings on *what* was happening in our schools rather than addressing perhaps *why* our schools were still subscribing to outside programming by outside personnel and failing to address why the regular classroom set-up is so problematic for high-ability learners. I felt compelled to problematize those approaches in hopes of engaging stakeholders and policymakers in reflection on their current responses to the needs of Gifted pupils in their respective institutions. Below I circle back to those problems and offer ways to reconceptualise those approaches as informed by *this* study's findings. I offer four calls to action for educational stakeholders and policymakers that must be implemented in order to disrupt the established status quo for both programming and placement practices for our Gifted learners. I draw upon researchers who continue to ring the alarm on these programmatic and placement issues, further inviting trouble into the Gifted education discourse (Latz & Adams, 2011).

### 8.3.1 Problem 1: Our established practices and understandings of high-ability potential have not evolved

Simply put, what we are currently providing by way of regular classroom placement and enrichment withdrawal programming for our high-ability pupils is not meeting their

learning needs.  Narrative, material, and autoethnographic findings from this research show

that an educational institution has been enacting the same processes of a singular cognitive

assessment in early elementary school followed by the identification as exceptional and

predominantly placed in the regular classroom with withdrawal-based programming.

Regardless of whether students are in the elementary or secondary panel, the data shows that

they are offered various enrichment opportunities, but that those opportunities are designed

for a homogeneous group of learners and largely exist outside of their regular classroom.  It is

then incumbent upon us to interrogate our practices to ensure that they are evolving with the

needs of contemporary students.

**Call to Action 1: We Need New Ways of Capturing and Assessing High-Ability**.  For a

century, scholars have sought to understand, measure, and explain Giftedness (Subotnik et al.,

2011).  Certainly, the label of Gifted is nondescript and is not particularly useful for educators,

as it tells them very little about a pupil beyond an IQ score (Peters, Kaufman, Matthews,

McBee, & McCoach, 2014).  Findings from this study show that the entire experience from the

initial cognitive assessment to identification and subsequent programming for enrichment is

not only lockstep but has been replicated over the last thirty years.  When looking at the

catalyst for this entire process—the assessment itself—scholars and even clinical psychologists

such as Pfeiffer (2013) are taking issue with the single-test-and-identify method that gives rise

to an "open-ended ticket" (p. 190) for a student to be labelled and thus receive specialized

programs and services without following-up on the students' needs over time.  Pfeiffer (2013)

further argues that no other classification carries that much advantage and unrestricted beliefs

including Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, varsity athletic teams,

or the orchestra (p. 192), arguing that "it is no longer acceptable to evaluate a student for

gifted classification on only one occasion" (Foley-Nicpon & Pfeiffer, 2011, p. 296), and that

assessments (plural) should start with young children and "be continuous, systematic, and

ongoing throughout early and middle childhood and adolescence" (Subotnik et al., 2011, p.

39).

Since the beginning of research on Gifted learners—particularly the means by which we

capture said potential—the identification process has changed very little and is still selection-

oriented and targets individuals instead of identifying various learning pathways (Ziegler et al.,

2012, p. 195) that promote talent development, something that Lo et al. (2019) see as an

emerging shift from "'education for the gifted' (a categorical view) to 'education that is gifted'

(an inclusive view)" (p. 3). Borland (1997) cautioned twenty-five years ago that we, as a field

of Gifted education, needed to interrogate our practices and rethink our approach to Gifted

identification and programming *then*, suggesting that "our primary task is either to construct

the most educationally rewarding and equitable concept of giftedness we can or to find a way

to move beyond the construct altogether" (p. 18). This research calls on educational

policymakers to reflect on the effectiveness of this entire identification and placement process

that focuses *more* on assessing characteristics and traits (Ziegler et al., 2012) through a

singular, snapshot assessment in elementary years and *less* on maximizing the learning and

developing individual talents of our highly able pupils (Dixson et al., 2021) for a lifetime.

*8.3.2    Problem 2: Fragmented, Ad Hoc, and Part-time Programming Solutions are Not Robust Enough to Genuinely Meet the Day-to-Day Needs of High-Ability Pupils*

Findings from this research have made clear that piecemeal, sporadic, outside, ad hoc programming is not robust enough to adequately meet the enrichment needs of high-ability pupils.  Further, withdrawal-based programming that is often provided more sporadically and includes more workshop-style formats ought not to be the *only* available program offering.  As Westberg and Daoust (2003) remind us, Gifted students are Gifted every day, not just during key times in the week (see also Brown & Stambaugh, 2014).  Both narrative and material data show that the regular classroom is where students are seeking the most support, but that enrichment withdrawal-type programming tends to be offered by the system as a compromise or solution to the problems of pace and lack of differentiated instruction and assessment in that regular classroom space where the needs of many high-ability students are not perceived as urgent (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Winstanley, 2006).  Findings show that these enrichment workshops and conferences are more homogeneous in design and are experienced as more of an enrichment distraction rather than Gifted educational experiences that are focused on developing individual talents and interests.

**Call to Action 2: We Must Rethink the Design of our Programs and Placements to Focus on Developing Talents**.  Simply put, many Gifted programs are far more exclusive than they need to be and should take a more inclusive approach to individual talent development that serves more students (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 23).  As discussed above, traditional approaches to Gifted education rely on a single snapshot of each student's performance, which is then transacted for entrance into an enrichment program and seldom revisited.  In

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contrast, Dixson et al. (2021) propose that schools assess students more regularly in all areas

to ensure they are being sufficiently challenged so staff might intervene before they are

perhaps disengaged.  This requires that stakeholders rethink old assumptions about what it

means to be Gifted, how to identify and best serve this group of learners, how best to measure

their success and engagement, and rely on local research for guidance on programs and

strategies that complement their learning rather than designing external programs that are

mere enrichment distractions.  To accomplish this, Dixson et al. (2021) call on educational

institutions to establish their own proactive and locally-focused model of Gifted education in

four ways: first, where teachers and staff act as talent scouts, identifying varied students who

might be underchallenged, and second, focus on local rather than universal metrics that assess

where students stand relative to other students within their own school: "Just as art and

athletic programs differ depending on the size and characteristics of the community, so should

academic programming" (p. 23).  Third, services should be dependent on the present (not past

or future) need.  The model Dixson et al. (2021) propose de-emphasizes the labelling of

students as Gifted and instead focuses on determining which students might need and

respond well to advanced academic interventions, even temporarily.  The rationale for this

approach is to keep students engaged, as they might require greater challenge in a particular

subject one year, but not the next: "Our goal is to alleviate instructional mismatch, not to

diagnose students who have the trait of giftedness" (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 23).  Lastly, the

model requires that this contemporary approach to local, Gifted education be domain-specific,

as schools often limit their programs and services to students who meet broad criteria and test

at a high level across all areas of academics.  Dixson et al. (2021) suggest completely rethinking

this approach of testing high, meeting criteria, being identified and subsequently placed in an enrichment program to refocusing on developing talents in specific subject areas for a broader population of learners who could benefit from more challenging instruction.

This research contributes to the ongoing dialogue of how best to serve this population of exceptional pupils, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach to a singular style of programming, such as enrichment workshops via withdrawal, is as ineffective as a one-size-fits-all shoe (Borland, 2005, p. 1). Students have a range of starting points, interest levels, and rates of learning (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 24), and it is necessary for current policy to reflect this diversity and be willing to adapt services to meet the needs of the students rather than expecting students to adapt to the available program offering(s). This also includes recommendations for systems to provide acceleration where needed, completely rethinking the traditional, fixed way of grouping learners by chronological age. Schools should enable children to advance in certain academic domains where they show both interest and developed talent (Subotnik et al., 2011) and remain focused not on a separate, external enrichment program but on Gifted program design *thinking* and pedagogical approaches that support talent development trajectories from early childhood into adulthood (p. 39).

**Call to Action 3: We Must Engage in Ongoing Evaluation of How Our Programming and Placement Practices are Meeting Contemporary Needs**. Material and autoethnographic findings affirm that there is, in fact, a status quo of programming and placement practices that is reproduced through established, cyclical infrastructure that is reenacted annually. A contributing factor in this replicated practice is that education systems continue to subscribe to more narrow and even antiquated understandings of high-ability that are rooted in

"practically adequate" (Sayer, 1992) theories from last century that continue in the absence of a more contemporary contribution to our collective understanding of their needs.  Sayer (1992) argues that limited knowledge *can* be deemed adequate when it can still support *some* degree of practice, such as initially informing on a once preferred placement for Gifted pupils within the regular classroom that supplements their learning with outside enrichment programming.  Without critical evaluation of affective and cognitive outcomes for these pupils during this cornerstone pathway's tenure, this initial recommendation has now become a long-established and almost taken-for-granted practice.  This research now calls into question the efficacy of such practices that reflect earlier, 20th Century understandings of Gifted learners' needs, as findings show that this pathway has continued into the year 2022 based largely on unquestioned conventions of thought (Sayer, 1992, p. 88; see also Gable, 2014). Evidently, these systems heedlessly—almost negligently—perpetuate this status quo by failing to engage in reflection and evaluation to determine *if* and *how* these programs and placements are meeting 21st Century students' needs.

Scholars repeatedly call for ongoing evaluation of any Gifted education program, as it is an integral part of the program development cycle (Dixson et al., 2021; Jacobs & Eckert, 2017; Lo et al., 2019; see also VanTassel-Baska, 2015).  Regardless of what programs and services are provided, it is important to review and measure success to determine how and where to make necessary changes (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 24).  It is equally necessary to consult those local stakeholders who have a vested interest (Jacobs & Eckert, 2017) and can provide timely input on how best to serve this population, rather than relying on more general, often stereotypical (mis)understandings of these "universal" Gifted needs then subsequently building and

maintaining an ill-fitting program around improper guidance.  This is especially clear in Lo et al.

(2019) research examining policy analysis in the context of British Columbia, Canada's,

redesigned public education curriculum that was slated for implementation across all grades in

2019.  Despite British Columbia having a long history of special education services, including

support for Gifted pupils, evaluations of such policies are scarce, as evidenced in their

provincial policy (Manual) that has been in place since 1995 and has never been systematically

examined or evaluated (p. 2).  This misstep has resulted in a lack of documentation that

continues to pose a challenge for generating compelling, evidence-based recommendations

for reform and improvements to both policy and practice.  Lo et al.'s (2019) research highlights

this system-level failure to properly engage in due diligence by reviewing and evaluating

existing programs and services.  Findings further show that there has been little consultation

between provincial government and academia on how educational policy for Gifted pupils

could better address their needs within the reformed curricular approaches (Lo et al., 2019, p.

2).

This research calls upon educational policymakers to engage in thorough reflection on

both the current and past programs, services, and placements designed for high-ability pupils,

and to seek out local researchers to aid in a comprehensive review and offer

recommendations.  When defining the parameters of their review, policymakers are

encouraged to extend beyond academic achievement and broaden their focus toward a more

holistic approach to individual talent development, social and emotional needs, and

appropriate accommodations.  The goals of such a review are to pause and pay attention to

*what* is being offered, then engage in reflection as to *why* these practices are in effect and *how* exactly they are meeting our students' needs.

### 8.3.3    Problem 4: We Must Stop Using Achievement Standards or Proficiencies as the Only Barometer of Success to Guide Our Pedagogical Approaches in Public Education

This research presents us—practitioners, administrators, policymakers, stakeholders—with the opportunity to rethink what we are currently doing and reframe this traditionally outside, compensatory, and opportunistic programming with more meaningful, targeted, and individualized education that focuses *less* on achievement and snapshot scores (Ziegler et al., 2012) and *more* on maximizing learning and developing individual talents (Dixson et al., 2021). This problem of achievement as the sole barometer of success in public education is deeply connected to earlier calls to action for more contemporary ways to capture and assess high-ability—not just a singular score on an isolated assessment—as well as rethinking how we can design these programming opportunities to be more heterogeneous and individualized, moving away from these narrowed approaches to enrichment that focus on "the" Gifted learner's (singular) cognitive need.  It is now necessary to confront the unpleasant truth that this research has made visible: education systems rely on primarily quantitative, numerical and achievement data to drive policy and program decisions that are disproportionately impacting our high-ability learners in their every day, regular classroom education.

**Call to Action 4: We Must Reframe Gifted Education as a Maximizing Learning Pedagogical Approach**.  This research reaffirms the ineffectiveness of primarily withdrawal-based programming as the only available option for Gifted pupils, as these learners spend a fraction of their time in enrichment programming and the bulk of their time within the regular,

mixed-ability classroom (Borland, 2013).  Enrichment withdrawal is also a curious paradox, as

it exists to provide Gifted learners with differentiated experiences, but those experiences are

often designed for a monolithic population that "experience the same enrichment at the same

time" (Borland, 2013, p. 71).  Indeed, withdrawal-based programming is not a panacea for

meeting diverse, heterogeneous needs (Gubbins et al., 2013), and it is time to reframe Gifted

education as maximizing learning (Dixson et al., 2021).

Over two decades ago, Borland (1997) wrote about his new thinking around cognitive

assessment of Gifted learners, signaling that the field of Gifted education is warming to the

notion of augmenting the use of standardized tests when assessing the needs of bright

children.  This thinking has inspired a movement away from looking at Giftedness as merely a

score of aptitude (Borland, 1997) to looking at ways to support this neurodivergent thinking,

calling on scholars to contribute more contemporary ways to capture, measure, and educate

for more individual talent development of these high-ability learners.  Such rigid cut-off scores

on these assessments of IQ for eligibility criteria or admission into a Gifted education program

results in what Borland (2009) calls "admitting absurdities" (p. 237) where a student with a

score of 130 meets criteria but a student with a score of 129 does not.  Owing to a standard

error of measurement, these scores are essentially equal (Borland, 2009, p. 237), and thus

illustrate how inflexible policy for entrance into Gifted education might be leaving high-ability

pupils behind.

Leading the charge on reframing enrichment programming as a maximizing learning

pedagogical approach, Dixson et al. (2021) remind the field of Gifted education that our goals

are to challenge students who would otherwise go unchallenged and undereducated in

schools. They have also called us out on our antiquated practices of using narrow and

restrictive criteria to decide on who can participate in Gifted programs that "tend to focus on a

tiny and homogeneous group of students, shutting out many others who would benefit from

the supports and services they offer" (Card & Giuliano, as cited in Dixon, p. 22). Rather than

designing policy that fosters individual talent development and supports tailoring our

instruction to individual students, we, as a broader education system "provide generalized and

haphazard curricula built upon the common misconception that children who are exceptional

in one area must be exceptional across all areas" (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 22). This call to action

demands that all stakeholders—educators, policymakers, parents, and students themselves—

rethink their assumptions about what it means to be Gifted (Dixson et al., 2021, p. 25) and ask

these students to vocalize what they may need as *individuals* to "capture their interest and

prepare them for a lifetime of learning" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 3). This local input

should then inform a renewed, more flexible, pedagogical approach to supporting Gifted

pupils so they may flourish in our regular classrooms in public education in Ontario, Canada.

## 8.4    Acknowledging the Limitations

Five (5) foreseeable limitations were identified that may have impacted the results of

this research, all of which were primarily methodological in nature. It must first be noted that

the broader narrative methodology of this research does not claim to generalize but rather

listen to the voices of those we program with and for, learning from their stories of experience

to better inform our understanding of a phenomenon under investigation. Further, narrative

research produces deep understandings of rich and dynamic processes and "is not

generalizable to populations but rather highlights the particularities of experience" (Josselson,

2010, p. 874) that may emerge as patterns when analysing multiple narratives of similar experiences.  I acknowledge that I first and foremost looked at a **single school board**—albeit a relatively large board covering a significant amount of geographical space—for collection of both student and educator-participant data, as well as participant-researcher data through the sharing of my own stories of experience in the same school board in Ontario, Canada.  The "tell" phase of the study, which drew upon autoethnographic sensibilities, did rely solely on my experiences as an educator of nearly fifteen years within a single school board.  It was not the intention of this research to be able to, nor would narrative research protest to, generalize across the individual secondary schools or with classroom and system-level educators within the board.

Given the flexibility of the programming, the volunteer or administrative nature of teacher selection to become the designated Gifted teacher(s) within individual schools, and the multitude of student interests in each building, each individual school and perhaps individual teachers and students within this participating board were likely to be at different capacities either in their comfort level with programming or even in their needs.  It is important to recognize the **plethora of issues** that might have impacted students' and educators' experiences with programs, services, and even placements.  One such issue might be the lack of assigned or programmatic curriculum for non-credit enrichment—specifically enrichment withdrawal programming—that may have impacted students' affective or cognitive skills.  Regarding affective skill development, such as social and emotional support and individual talent development, experiencing programming with like-minded peers may have been a positive experience, and for others it may not have been a worthwhile endeavour

when being asked to leave one's regular classroom for that programming and then having to explain why.  Regarding cognitive skills, specifically academic achievement, one's grades in the regular programming may not have been influenced by attendance in these enrichment withdrawal opportunities.  That said, low motivation and interest are significant predictors of underachievement (Delisle & Lewis, 2003) and enrichment withdrawal opportunities may have increased one's motivation to complete or engage in regular academic work.  Additionally, student motivation may have been impacted by classroom teacher attitudes, as some educators might not have been as supportive of the constant withdrawal of students for a non-curricular program, which may have significantly impacted student attendance and interest in the program (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006).  Lastly, resources available to this individual board might have driven the placement decisions for Gifted learners toward the regular classroom, so participants—students and educators—might not have able to share experiences from specialized, self-contained or enriched classes or cohorts, but rather speculate on what those learning environment might have provided.

It is possible that circumstances around current infrastructure and above-complement staffing allocations may have impacted educator-participants and the breadth of available programming options for student-participants, as the participating school board provided additional staffing to their secondary schools on an annual basis through an application process.  **Above-complement staffing lines are not allocated equally** across the schools, which could impact development, delivery, capacity, and availability.  With respect to the designated staffing and the participants who elected to join the study, results of individual schools might be skewed from both student and teacher participant focus group and interview discussions,

as staff members may not have been able to offer a variety of programming options that perhaps other schools might have been able to.  Allocations may have also impacted students' placement experiences from either regular, self-contained, or specialized classrooms for study. Furthermore, it is possible that the narratives offered by educator-participants through the various focus groups may have been skewed as teachers might have felt inclined to offer narratives on potential ideas and intentions rather than current, implemented programming.

Another foreseeable limitation with regards to the **quality** of enrichment programming might be connected to the individual teachers who were responsible for programming for students who are Gifted.  At the time of the study, there were no applications for educators to apply to teach enrichment consistently throughout the participating school board, so the majority of them volunteered or were given the staffing lines by their respective administrations annually.  What is more, it was not a requirement for these designated teachers to have additional credentials or qualifications to program for high-ability pupils in this established role at the time, and findings show that there were limited opportunities available for teacher training and professional development.  Thus, findings may have varied across schools in planning, content, delivery, frequency and duration, and overall enrichment quality (Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Subotnik & Olszewski-Kubilius, 1997) as a result.  In the hands of a competent, well-versed and dynamic teacher, program content may be exceptional, but in the hands of someone less skilled or unidimensional, this type of programming may not provide sufficient support and may not impact student skill development the way it was originally intended (Delisle & Lewis, 2003).

Finally, this research **included only formally identified Gifted secondary students** as per the designation criteria established by the participating school board for the purpose of developing a research foundation for enrichment opportunities and programming at the secondary level.  This decision may be viewed as inequitable since the programming implemented by the participating school board during the 2012-2013 school year was—and continues to be—for all formally identified Gifted, as well as bright, talented, and high-ability students who self-select to participate.  However, this decision can provide the data necessary for thorough comparisons between other samples including other high-ability, bright and talented students, as well as multiply exceptional students, who may not have been formally identified, for a variety of reasons, in the future.

## 8.5   Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

*Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.*

*—Maya Angelou*

The novel "show and tell" methodological approach of this *Critical Narrative Inquiry* has made it possible to know better, so it is incumbent upon us to do better.  The complementary methods have penetrated the *surface* understanding of the status quo phenomenon under investigation, and together, have created the conditions for us to pay close attention to not only the relationships between humans, but those relations, negotiations, and interactions with non-human materials as well.  Material-semiotics have been very fruitful in tracing and pinpointing exactly *how* programming and placement practices in an education system continue to be enabled through the sustained efforts of the very parallel infrastructure or

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"Model" of general education and special education, allowing us to "attune very closely to the connections…to tinker and improvise, to interrupt, and to seize emerging possibilities" (Fenwick, 2014, p. 45).  Such attuning continued with the autoethnographic vignettes that responded to the significant issues or "critical incidents" identified in the material findings.  It was here that additional information was provided to complete a more holistic picture of what had transpired, effectively fleshing out and picking up where the material analyses left off.  Several emerging possibilities from this research are discussed below, including practical implications for our school and classroom level, policy implications for our system and governance levels, and theoretical implications for both the fields of Gifted education and Disability Studies.

### 8.5.1   Implications for Practice at the School and Classroom Level

This research ought to have implications on our practice within our schools and our classrooms.  Findings show that our practices and actions, even our pedagogical beliefs, position the needs of our high-ability pupils as fundamentally *outside* of our scope of regular curriculum and see their needs as *above* and *beyond* what we can provide within our regular classroom space.  It is time to re-take responsibility for their learning needs *within* our classrooms, which involves a pedagogical shift to re-locate their needs back *in* that will have additional implications on other levels of education systems, such as current policy, infrastructure of special education services, as well as legislation around identification, placement, and documentation that will be addressed in the subsequent section.  For our classroom teachers and administrators in our schools today, we must engage in deep reflection on whether we take responsibility for the enrichment and extension needs of our

Gifted learners within our classrooms.  Should we determine that we do take responsibility, further reflection is needed on how we are accomplishing this and what its effectiveness is on the learning outcomes of these pupils.  This reflection also requires us to examine our very understanding of inclusive classrooms, questioning (without prejudice) whether our infrastructure and practices are welcoming and supporting *all* abilities regardless of *dis*ability, *different* ability, or *more* ability.  This research seeks to encourage *all* educational stakeholders within our classrooms and our schools to raise the educational ceiling while we lift the floor (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 225).

It will certainly take time to re-think, re-prioritize, and re-take responsibility for these needs within our everyday classrooms again, but it is entirely possible.  This research does caution, however, that our shift toward re-taking responsibility must be sophisticated in both infrastructure and deep, philosophical understanding of their needs and ways in which we can support our students *within*, rather than relying on the undertheorized assumption that our regular classrooms can seamlessly transform into inclusive classrooms by virtue of physical location (Hibbert, 2012).  This research identifies additional implications for practice at the school and classroom levels by looking toward teacher preparedness and education, professional learning, and language use, ensuring that we are offering sufficient supports to our pre-service educators, current faculty, and educational staff to use more inclusive language in our interactions, documentation, and in our professional dialogue.  To support this professional growth, administrators and policymakers must provide the support, resources, and possess the patience that is required for this paradigm shift of differentiation for greater inclusion to become *practice* (Borland, 2013, pp. 73-74).

*8.5.2   Implications for Policy at the System and Governance Levels*

Several emerging possibilities for policy have been identified in this research at

education system and governance levels.  First, education systems such as local school boards

are called on to thoroughly and thoughtfully reflect upon their current policies and practices

for high-ability learners and their special education programs and placements in general,

further unpacking where they might be locating their learning needs (i.e., outside learning

support located in a separate classroom or space).  This research has made it possible to see

how systems are positioning the needs of high-ability learners as fundamentally outside and

beyond the often *only* available placement of the regular classroom.  It further prompts

education systems to engage in thoughtful debate as to which of their practices, pathways,

and language they are using that might be contributing to this abdication of responsibility and

de-prioritization of the bona fide learning needs of their Gifted pupils so they can make

necessary amendments for greater inclusion.  It is entirely expected that this system review of

policies will have a ripple-effect on current infrastructure within systems, as well as schools.

This could extend beyond special education policies to looking at availability of and application

processes for specialized classrooms, allocated funding and refiguring system-level support for

teaching staff around intellectually accessible pedagogical responses, and even reconfiguring

regular classroom compositions with the number of pupils, which could spill-over into other

areas such as teacher federations, class capacities, and collective agreements.  This research is

not advocating for a complete removal of special education within Ontario schools at this time,

but rather looking at ways in which our current faculty and staff in public education could

benefit from a shift in pedagogical belief around re-positioning those special needs as within

our scope in the classroom, and further re-defining the role of robust, outside, system-level support to perhaps being re-located within the classrooms and schools.

Second, findings show that our current means of measuring Giftedness and Gifted potential is incomplete and insufficient, as we cannot genuinely capture this precise aptitude on a single test on a single day at a single moment in time that can last a lifetime.  According to Borland (2009), few experts in the field believe this "giftedness-equals-high-IQ myth" (p. 237), but his concern is not with the experts but with the educators who subscribe to this fiction. Scholars in the field of clinical psychology, such as Pfeiffer (2013), echo this concern that many educators and parents still hold this belief that intelligence can be quantified, and when the score is high, it results in Giftedness (p. 89).  Pfeiffer (2013) further argues that "no single score can ever tell the whole story about whether a student is gifted" (p. 91).

Several student-participants echoed a nearly identical experience of being tested in early elementary years (mostly in Grade Four), being identified as Gifted months later, then either attending outside enrichment groups sporadically or few being placed in a self-contained class with other identified Gifted pupils during their elementary school years. Callahan, Renzulli, Delcourt, and Hertberg-Davis (2013) have taken issue with employing only one type of screener or test that is viewed as the ultimate gatekeeper (p. 87) for meeting district criteria and thus being identified as exceptional.  It further communicates that Giftedness can be captured only once and that this "ticket" (Callahan et al., 2013, p. 87) or "pass" (Schultz, 2018, p. 192) has no expiry date.  Pfeiffer (2013) also takes issue with this "open-ended ticket" (p. 190) for a student to be labeled and thus receive specialized programs and services without following-up on the students' needs over time.  There are certainly

extensive policy implications for education systems here, as they are encouraged to rethink

current processes and eligibility criteria and move toward more holistic and contemporary

ways to capture high ability.  It is recommended that assessments should start with young

children and be "continuous, systematic, and ongoing" (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 39; see also

Foley-Nicpon & Pfeiffer, 2011) throughout K-12 schooling.  This shift from single to multiple,

ongoing, and often assessments will have fiscal and funding implications for the education

system and board level should policy reflect ongoing re-assessment by professional services

such as board psychologists and psychometrists.

Third, findings pinpoint an immediate implication for policy around subject acceleration

to increase students' mobility across courses in the higher grades.  This, of course, will have

implications at the school level for operational items such as scheduling, reporting, student

information systems to perhaps reduce the amount of mandatory credit hours to achieve a

credit—as established by the Ministry of Education—as well as rethinking full-grade

acceleration and the deeply developmental, taken-for-granted practice of placing students in

schools in Ontario by chronological age rather than ability.  According to recommendations

from Subotnik et al. (2011), schools should move away from rigid, broad-scale eligibility

criteria for access to programming options and move toward more flexible opportunities for

individual talent development.  Schools should have policies in place that enable students to

advance in various academic domains where they show interest and talent, further "expecting

that children will show advanced development and achievement in some areas and age-

appropriate development and achievement in others" (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 39).  This

involves shifting away from more universal metrics and discourse to looking at local research,

local needs, and local metrics (Dixson et al., 2021) to determine a reconceptualised, regional approach to Gifted education and talent development.

Fourth, this research calls on education systems to re-invest in our regular classroom teachers and educational staff, calling for additional supports and resources in the regular classroom, more robust professional development and networking, and both system and staff development across an entire school board around reconceptualising our language use and approaches to supporting pupils with exceptionalities. Recommendations from Subotnik et al. (2011) include recruitment of and professional learning support for teachers with high levels of technical experience and content knowledge at even the earliest grades of education to help foster inquiry and creativity for advanced children (p. 39). Stories shared from this research reveal that there were few available opportunities for necessary "cross-pollination" of professionals, which were intimated to be high in demand but seldom offered on a broad scale. There are fiscal implications when it comes to offering additional professional development sessions, as teaching staff not only need to be paid for their time to attend, but a substitute teacher must also be hired for this release time.

In addition to re-investing in our current teaching staff, it is important to look toward the future in a more proactive rather than reactive way, targeting the teacher education of pre-service candidates. Arrigoni and Tatalović Vorkapić's (2018) case study research from Croatia focused on the perspective of pre-service teacher education students and their attitudes toward Gifted students in early/preschool and elementary. They found that there was a direct correlation between pre-service teacher education and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) when it came to educating high-ability pupils. Respondents who took an elective course

on educating Gifted children expressed more positive views toward Gifted learners, were

predominantly of the opinion that schools do not satisfy the needs of high-ability pupils,

regarded acceleration practices as positive, and believed that "society should invest in the

gifted as it does for children with disabilities" (Arrigoni & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2018, p. 34).

Looking toward professional services, Foley-Nicpon and Pfeiffer (2011) found that few school

psychology programs provided any exposure to issues that pertained to Gifted and high-ability

pupils despite their clear presence in all populations and schools (p. 294).  Beyond financial

implications for taking-up a more proactive approach to supporting both existing staff and

future teachers and professional service staff, there are broader, theoretical implications here

that rest with pedagogical beliefs in various Faculties of Education, as well as Departments of

Social Work, Psychology, among others.  This may present local boards of education with an

opportunity to network with professional programs in shared, action research or other

opportunities to co-construct resources and use local research to inform local approaches and

policies.

Fifth, there are significant implications for staffing and funding for programming and

placement for high-ability pupils.  It is important to consider that in some boards where

programming is provided by external staff, they are receiving additional funding or dedicated

time in their teaching schedule to provide said programming.  It is recommended that a review

of programming is handled gently, and reviewers are mindful that their decisions will most

certainly impact individual teachers.  This research detailed one education system's approach

to enrichment withdrawal programming by way of providing additional funding on an annual

basis and required an application documenting needs.  Findings clearly implicate the annual

cycle of *apply-review-allocate-repeat* as a contributing factor in the perpetuation of primarily

outside programming for high-ability learners.  However, it is important to understand that

this enrichment programming and vision of available programming was *not* the primary

problem; rather, it was the very infrastructure that the education system was subscribing to—

albeit that many systems subscribe to—that saw general education as separate from special

education (Sullivan & King Thorius, 2010), and the system response to this established

infrastructure was to provide enrichment withdrawal that aligned with this systemic belief.

When education systems are ready to deeply reflect on current policies and practices for high-

ability learners, they are encouraged to seek local input from a variety of educational

stakeholders including current students, parents/guardians, and members from advisory

councils, as they might indicate that enrichment withdrawal can be a positive experience, but

perhaps not when it is the only experience.  When engaging in this review and evaluation of

programming and placement practices, there will be additional implications for staffing

considerations, financial and funding allocations, as well as implications for policy around what

each education system is able and prepared to offer.  It is likely that this process and revised

approach could impact other areas of human resources and operations, including teacher

federations and collective agreements that must be consulted with representatives.

Sixth, this research examined public policies around special education funding within

the context of reconceptualising our approaches to supporting high-ability learners in public

education.  The data makes visible that the current funding models of the Ministry of

Education in Ontario, Canada, do not adequately address or even represent the needs of all

exceptional pupils, suggesting some policy implications with the funding formulas themselves.

Looking specifically at the *Special Education Grants* (SEG) that provide funding for additional costs of programs, services, and specialized equipment (Ministry of Education, 2020), the Ministry of Education provides per pupil funding for all students with reported exceptionalities—Gifted included—and those receiving special education services. According to the Ministry of Education (2020), school boards are given flexibility to use special education funding or other funding to support their own policies and priorities (p. 5), granting autonomy to local boards to allot funding to whichever programs and services they see fit within the entirety of all special education needs in their respective boards. Although autonomy is welcomed, this power can be problematic when the decisions to allocate funding equitably to all portfolios are based on local boards' interpretation of needs. This research has made visible just how problematic this can be when there is a systemic and fundamental misunderstanding of high-ability learners possessing an "asset" exceptionality, as they are not typically viewed as having a *deficit* or impairment (Finn & Wright, 2015; Reis & Renzulli, 2010; Smith, 2006), so their needs are positioned as *above* the regular curriculum and do not require support to bring them *up* to the performance norm.

The most recently publicized data from school reports in the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS) is from September 2020 and indicates that 17.7% of Ontario's 2,053,036 students in publicly funded school system were receiving special education programs and services (Ministry of Education, 2021a). The Ministry of Education's (2021b) enrolment by exceptionality data set includes the overall total for each exceptionality by panel, which showed the total Gifted enrolment of 12,185 students at the secondary panel in 2019-20, which accounted for approximately 8.4% of all exceptional pupils at secondary

(Ministry of Education, 2021b).  Despite documented commitments and transparent educational funding models from the Ministry, access to programs and services for Gifted learners varies.  There is no universal or agreed upon definition of Giftedness, and the identification process itself is flawed, as the criteria to meet the designation of Intellectual-Giftedness is also the sole responsibility of—and is completely constructed by—individual boards of education (Borders, Woodley, & Moore, 2014; Finn & Wright, 2015).  Thus 8.4% of the total reported exceptional learners at secondary may be a skewed figure, as it is completely dependent upon how each board establishes their criteria for that designation.

Policy implications are further noted with the *Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount* (DSENA) funding that addresses the variation among school boards with respect to their population of students with special education needs.  This research discussed DSENA funding as limited in its scope, as it is comprised of a number of measures of variability (MOV) including: (1) the number of students reported as receiving special education programs and services; (2) participation and achievement in the mandated, province-wide standardized tests from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) by students with special education needs; and (3) the credit accumulation and participation in locally developed and alternative non-credit (K-courses) by students with special education needs, where the latter are typically accessed by pupils who not working toward an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (O.S.S.D.).  Should allocations be determined based on the level of need, where need is understood through a *deficit* discourse and specifically related to *achievement*, out of those three categories that help determine the additional funding for exceptional pupils under DSENA, conceivably only the first category—the number of students accessing special

education programs and services—would include high-ability learners.  There are both

philosophical and practical implications for policy here, as special education funding is

allocated based on a *deficit* understanding of special needs, rather than difference and

diversity.  When looking at how DSENA funding is allocated, it is largely based on measures of

variability such as the number of reported exceptionalities or those pupils accessing

specialized programs and services, what the achievement scores were for pupils with

exceptionalities, and how many exceptional pupils are taking locally-developed or workplace

credits or non-credit bearing courses altogether—all of which communicate that funding is

allocated in larger amounts for those boards with pupils needing support to bring them *up* to

the performance norm.  This raises further concerns around how equitable the measures of

variability are for all exceptionalities, as well as how we are communicating and positioning

the special education needs of all our pupils.

Lastly, there are philosophical and theoretical implications for governance levels

around how special education is framed and understood through government publications,

documentation, and legislation, as it communicates values and beliefs through a binary of

able-minded, able-bodied, mainstream, average students in general education and those

students who are *dis*abled, exceptional, and different within special education.  Indeed, how

dis/ability is perceived and diagnosed shapes the way in which we understand and view

individuals with exceptionalities (Roeher, 1996).  This research has repeatedly raised concerns

over how systems position the special needs of pupils as different or separate, particularly

those pupils who are effectively *more* (intellectually) able than the standard, mainstreamed,

average student and are then marginalized as being out of the norm (Chu & Myers, 2015).

When considering the language around "inclusion," findings show that as a concept, it is positively regarded as welcoming and supportive, but continues to be enacted within a *deficit* discourse; for example, including pupils with intellectual disabilities in mainstreamed classes who may or may not be accessing the curriculum at the same level as, but are learning alongside, chronologically aged peers. Yet learners who also have an intellectual exceptionality of Giftedness are not necessarily "included" in that mainstream classroom, as their needs are positioned as *beyond* or *exceeding* what that regular curriculum can provide, and thus those needs must be met *outside* that space with external personnel. When considering the range of abilities in today's mainstreamed classrooms, both extremes of abilities on a learning curve are equally as far removed from the norm (Winebrenner, 2000) and are deserving of appropriate accommodations in public education. It is time to expand our governmentally communicated understanding of inclusion as an authentic *feeling* rather than a physical *location*, where all pupils with different abilities feel welcomed and are treated as contributing, valued members of that classroom community.

These findings that locate needs as *outside* of that mainstreamed classroom are visible and compelling and demand that governance levels review their publications and communications to reflect more inclusive, diverse language, and stop separating the needs from the learner as belonging within a separate, "special" system. They are further encouraged to reconsider the way achievement discourse is positioned as the only barometer of success, and where high achievement is equated with higher success for pupils in Ontario, Canada. Of course, these philosophical implications, specifically around achievement, will

spill-over into other institutions such as postsecondary institutions that offer admission to prospective pupils based on achievement levels in secondary education.

**Addressing Problem 3: Differentiated Instruction *Can* Work, But Not Under the Current Conditions of How We "Do" School**.  The findings from this research are not able to contribute to the conversations taking place right now around this dynamic concern of meeting the needs of all learners with large, untenable regular classroom compositions in a robust enough way.  However, this research has identified this space as an area where greater research needs to be conducted regarding what is expected and what are the responsibilities of a regular, mixed-ability classroom teacher in Ontario, Canada for supporting all students with their individual learning needs and developing all their individual talents.  Findings from this study do address individual concerns with regards to programming and placement within the regular classroom experience; however, they do not show in great enough depth how differentiated instruction (DI) was experienced by the participants nor how it could be implemented with greater precision to meet the needs of these pupils in this study. Additionally, findings do not adequately address the many operational and policy implications at the system and governance levels for staffing, funding, class sizes, and collective agreement negotiations that could have a direct impact on the ability of classroom teachers to implement differentiated instruction.

What is clear from a review of the literature is that we must problematize the use of differentiated instruction and assessment in contemporary classrooms from an implementation stance, as education systems are downloading full responsibility onto regular classroom teachers without consideration of the many operational items that must be

adequately addressed to ensure its success, including class size, streaming, funding, among others.  Differentiated instruction and assessment have great potential as pedagogical responses to educating our pupils and meeting their individual needs, but the broader question in this shift to more inclusive classrooms that adopt differentiated instruction and assessment practices is whether reliance on *individual* teachers to meet all pupils' educational needs is robust enough "to bear the enormous policy and professional weight that's being placed on it today, particularly for the high-ability pupils"? (Finn & Wright, 2015, p. 66).  The reality is that the way we currently "do school" with relatively large class sizes and wide ranges of academic abilities spanning five (Freedberg, Bondie, Zusho, & Allison, 2019; Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006; Latz, Spiers Neumeister, Adams, & Pierce, 2009) to seven grade levels (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2020) in a single class, makes it incredibly challenging for our already stretched classroom teachers to provide individual programming and differentiated instruction for all pupils while feeling the pressure of pass rates, class averages, and standardized tests that ultimately shape the day-to-day curriculum (Hertberg-Davis, 2009).  This concern with the superficial composition of regular, inclusive classrooms is real and ongoing, as education systems enjoy the cost-saving measures by cutting back on additional Gifted programs in favour of mandating DI in the regular classroom (Hertberg-Davis, 2009), but are not investing enough in their teaching staff to build their repertoire of skills and enable them to flourish. Indeed, there is a considerable disconnect between theory and practice when it comes to marketing inclusive, regular classrooms that pride themselves on meeting individual needs at the expense of the regular classroom teachers themselves.

There are many implications for system and governance levels here, as the shift to

inclusive classrooms that adopt DI practices has been superficial in nature and does not create

the conditions for educators and students to thrive with this new model.  Systems have

effectively failed their staff and students by hastily shifting to mixed-ability classrooms without

thoughtful restructuring of operational items that could make DI more tenable and achievable.

Specific to meeting the needs of Gifted pupils in the regular classroom, Finn and Wright (2015)

believe that differentiation can work for many children but that it must be done with finesse,

be accompanied by thoughtful planning, and include the versatile use of diverse instructional

materials.  What is more, this shift must be supported by districts and administrators with

resources and patience (Borland, 2013) to better prepare their teachers for this approach to

educating (Finn & Wright, 2015).  Although Finn and Wright (2015) do not share the belief that

professional development can "cure every educational ill" (p. 232), they do strongly

recommend that all stakeholders are involved and model this re-investment in our Gifted

learners.

### 8.5.3   *Implications for the Field of Gifted Education*

This research has invited more trouble in the Gifted education discourse by adding to

the collective dialogue around how exclusive our field has become and raising concerns

around our own existence.  Our field is highly sought after for guidance around measuring

intellectual Giftedness and programming for their needs.  Yet our field is fraught with

challenges around defining Giftedness (Finn & Wright, 2015) and providing recommendations

for eligibility criteria for entrance into Gifted education placements and programs that are

largely based on cognitive assessments that meet a certain threshold and are administered

often once throughout public education.  We are still concerned about researching these universal metrics for easy comparison of high-ability, talking about withdrawal-based programming and what placement (regular classroom or self-contained classroom) is "best," and we remain static ourselves with continually contributing knowledge around narrowed definitions and approaches to capturing Gifted potential.  For decades we have had dedicated scholars critique our field's existence, arguing that we should adopt a more inclusive perspective that could serve more pupils and support individual talent development in various domains (Dixson et al., 2021).  This requires us to expand our seemingly fixed understanding of Giftedness as aptitude that can be quantified.

Despite a century of scholarly attention to this group of pupils, our field is saturated with findings that orbit around redundant issues and give rise to an overabundance of critiques of programming and placement that communicate merely *what* is happening rather than perhaps *why* they are in existence in the first place and *how* we might reconceptualise our approaches to better meet students' needs.  There are deep, philosophical, and theoretical implications for our field here, and we must address our assumptions and beliefs about the purpose and goals of Gifted education, further problematizing our practices because we, too, have grown far too comfortable with our ways of thinking that may be impeding on our ability to properly inform our educators (Borland, 2013, p. 69).  Borland (2013) raises this very issue around confronting our own existence when we recommend certain programs, such as enrichment withdrawal, that exist to provide pupils with differentiated experiences but are often designed for a monolithic population that "experience the same enrichment at the same time" (p. 71), arguing that we cannot have a program to justify having a program (p. 73).  This

research makes visible that resources are allocated outside of the regular classroom to fund a separate enrichment program that serves to remove or circumvent the regular classroom altogether. Indeed, by continuing to recommend programs such as enrichment withdrawal, our field might be furthering the misnomer that Gifted learners are a homogeneous group (Schultz, 2018) that have a singular, *one-size-fits-all* need (Borland, 2005; Jacobs & Eckert, 2017). We *know* this not to be true, but this research has raised several implications for our field around what we might be recommending, demanding that we reflect on what we are publishing and contributing, as it ought to be focused on "the proper education of gifted students, not the creation or preservation of gifted programs" (Borland, 2013, p. 69).

Lastly, this research has identified further implications for the more privileged knowledge that is published and circulated, ultimately reaching educational institutions that draw upon findings and recommendations to initiate or refine their programs for Gifted learners. Researchers continue to find that established programming and placement practices rely on widely cited, existing information and knowledge in the broader field (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020) rather than drawing upon local data and developing deeper understandings of the high-ability students in their own communities (Tan et al., 2020). Hernández-Torrano and Kuzhabekova's (2020) bibliometric study of the most influential journals publishing knowledge on Gifted education across a 60-year found that the United States of America is the world leader in research in Gifted education at 71% of all publications, and although Canada was the second-ranked producer, it only accounted for 3.6% of all disseminated research pertaining to Gifted education (p. 142). Indeed, the hegemony of a few countries or regions (Hernández-Torrano & Kuzhabekova, 2020) in the production of a

privileged knowledge suggests that the available knowledge that education systems draw

upon is limited in representation.

### 8.5.4   Implications for the Field of Disability Studies

This research makes an important contribution to a rather limited—albeit emerging—

body of work within the field of Disability Studies that is taking-up systems and structures as

disabling learners with high abilities.  This work has theoretical implications for both inclusive

education and our scope as a field to cast our net wider and include exceptionalities and

abilities, not just disabilities.  Gifted learners are not typically viewed as having a disability or

learning exceptionality (Reis & Renzulli, 2010) nor do they intuitively fall into the category of

vulnerable and socially diverse students who might receive assistance from professional or

support staff, but they *do* meet the standards of an oppressed identity group that is politically,

socially, and intellectually marginalized (Chu & Myers, 2015).  The field of Social Work has

more recently taken a stand on supporting this population of pupils within educational

settings.  Scholars such as Chu and Myers (2015) find that little attention has been given

historically to this population, as their needs represent a "quiet crisis" (p. 43) where they fail to

perform *so* far outside the norm that their performance runs the risk of endangering the

reputations of educational institutions in the public eye and are thus not seen as a liability that

is deserving of vocal crisis status.

This research does not seek to discriminate against nor condemn the progressive work

of critical disability scholars, but rather build off the shoulders of these social model giants

(Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010).  Critical disability scholars seek to redefine the meanings of

disability and foster meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in the exercise of

power (Biklen, 2000, p. 337).  Our field draws upon critical and poststructural theories that are

driven by the study of social structures, power, and control (Merriam, 1991).  In Ontario,

Canada, the hegemonic, medical model discourse of current practices in special education

continue to shape the beliefs and pedagogical approaches of educators by primarily targeting

support for those pupils with identified exceptionalities that are of a *deficit* nature, opposed to

exceptionalities that also transgress the norms of ableism but are not viewed as impairments

that require supports to bring them *up* to the norm, such as Giftedness.  This suggests that

those individuals who not only fail to comply with the dominant understanding but noticeably

deviate from and threaten the status quo are subject to *othering* (Kumashiro, 2002), which

includes those who are *too* able or far *too* abstract, as they still deviate from the norm that is

the mid-range of the bell curve of able, rational, and fit.  Dolmage (2014, 2017) would argue

that high-ability learners are experiencing "exceptionalism" as a form of disablism, implying

that even though Gifted learners are neurodiverse, different, and deviate from the norm, they

are only seen for their "gifts" and "assets," which continue to be positioned as *beyond* their

chronological-aged classmates.  Indeed, when we continue to view Gifted learners as

"superheroes" with exceptional academic powers, we continue to reinforce that they are

fundamentally different in some exciting or attractive way, that only serves to separate and

other them.  Goodley (2014) further argues that when disabled children enter mainstream

education, they disrupt the ableist ideals.  And herein lies the deeper, theoretical implication

for our field: when intellectually Gifted children enter those same classrooms, they, too,

disrupt the mainstream average and face hardships and marginalization akin to those with

exceptionalities for impairments.  Thus, our work must broaden our purview to more

inclusively advocate for all individuals who experience discrimination and dis/ablism from these structures and systems.

Additionally, critical disability scholars have taken up the social injustice of inaccessibility for individuals with disabilities ranging from physical and intellectual impairments to both severe and multiple learning and developmental disabilities, often illuminating how the hegemonic discourse of ableism and ableist assumptions shape understanding and govern knowledge production in society. An additional implication from this research is to widen our lens around the notion of accessibility that extends beyond physical accessibility, social accessibility, and emotional accessibility to include *intellectual* accessibility for our high-ability pupils.

Lastly, and quite possibly the most ambitious implication for this work and field, is the necessary movement toward more rights-based educational approaches for our pupils with special needs. What unites most approaches within contemporary Disability Studies is the rejection of any model that locates the problem of disability *within* the person (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001; Mallet & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Roeher, 1996; see also Linton, 1998), which is precisely what our current, bio-medical model of special education does. To shift our collective thinking in public education institutions from classrooms to schools to board level and governance, we must rethink the way we view disability as a more *social* issue that locates the problem within barriers that disable persons with impairments and exceptionalities. This shift toward viewing disability as a social pathology (Roeher, 1996) must move beyond an environmental approach that identifies and eliminates or modifies the environment to become barrier-free, and toward a rights-outcome approach that calls on stakeholders from

various sectors to examine how society is organized and view disability as merely natural difference and diversity (Roeher, 1996).  Drawing upon Linton (1998), the field of Disability Studies was developed in response to "omissions and distortions in the traditional curriculum's approach to disability" (p. 525) but has since shifted beyond this remedial or corrective endeavour and toward a more interdisciplinary field of inquiry that studies disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon (p. 527).  Our field must break new ground and network with educational institutions around how disability is positioned within our schools, our professional development, our exchanges, our language, and our beliefs.

As an example of what is possible, we look to the Scottish Education System with the release of their inclusive *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) in September 2010 that sees a "shift away from a needs-based model toward a rights-based model" (Sutherland & Stack, 2014, p. 76).  One impactful change with this approach is the shift in language from special education needs toward "additional support needs" as per the revised *Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act*, 2009, as they felt that "SEN had become too firmly associated with pupils who had disability and difficulties" (Sutherland & Stack, 2014) and wanted to reframe supports—learning, health, social, family circumstance—as accessible by all.  Special education interventions are typically comprised of special help for particular groups of children that may have common areas of need who then receive outside assistance temporarily by external personnel, whereas additional support needs are positioned as any area of need that *any* child may access throughout one's education to promote opportunities for challenge and participation (Sutherland & Stack, 2014).  There are far-reaching implications for this important work that require various stakeholders and scholars in a variety of interconnected

fields including Disability Studies, Gifted Education, Curriculum Studies, Inclusive Education,

Educational Policy, among others to consider how our language shapes the way our

employees, colleagues, children, families, and communities see and understand different

abilities, deeply reflecting on how our "language can be a powerful tool of exclusion" (Roeher,

1996, p. 22).

### 8.5.5   Recommendations for Future Research

In what follows is a brief discussion on the methodological and field-specific

recommendations for future research.  Material-semiotic methods are not often taken up in

studies of Gifted education in the context of programming, placement, or at the secondary

panel in general.  A meticulous, material analysis allowed me to investigate *what* holds things

together and *how* these assemblages influence policy and practice in an incredibly precise

way.  By remaining focused on the abundance of materials under investigation, I was conscious

not to ignore the material practices that are generating the social and further resisting the

desire to move too quickly to a non-material version of the social (Law, 2009).  Whereas

sociological approaches are often interested in the *whys* of the social, material-semiotics

explore the *hows* (Law, 2009, p. 148) *in order to* address the whys.

Findings from this research have made it possible to examine how influential non-

human materials such as documentation, legislation, funding formulas, policy, memoranda,

and other textual means are on our beliefs, practices, and collective understanding of a

phenomenon.  Inspired by the process of uncovering and mining beneath the surface, I

recommend further research in educational studies that draw upon *Actor-Network Theory* and

material-semiotics, specifically around existing and forthcoming policy development for a

more complete understanding of the connections, negotiations, and "work" that is taking place between and around these entities. There is also great enthusiasm for participatory research for those researchers who "share the same ground truth" (Dodson, Piatelli, & Schmalzbauer, 2007) perhaps within educational leadership and policy development, and who could contribute stories of experience through more autoethnographic means that further complement material findings in a "show and tell" approach to investigating policy development. There is a need for increased policy research at the state or provincial and local or district levels (Plucker, Makel, Matthews, Peters, & Rambo-Hernandez, 2017; Subotnik, Stoeger, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2017), as well as the need to critically examine the beliefs, attitudes, and skills of Gifted program administrators and school leaders (Mun, Ezzani, & Lee, 2020). I would further recommend an *ANT*-approach to studying the language and positionality of disability within our governance levels. Combining critical discursive elements of discourse analysis with material-semiotics might allow for a more complete picture of how our Ministry of Education positions disability in all educational policy, legislation, and publications, and how these publications may further influence current teacher practice toward more inclusive pedagogical responses.

Future directions for research in the field of Gifted education in Ontario, Canada, include significant, scholarly attention on the dynamics of the regular, mixed-ability classroom for our high-ability learners. Findings from this study continually raised concerns over this important space, as it is often the *only* available placement for our Gifted learners in Ontario, and where all our children are primarily placed for an entire grade in elementary school or individual courses for secondary school. Findings have signalled several influences on that

regular classroom space that must be researched for their effects on the learning outcomes

and well-being of our high-ability pupils who continue to be grouped in mainstreamed

classrooms by chronological age.  These include the grand and swift shift toward more

inclusive classrooms by virtue of geographic location and the widely accepted pedagogical

response of differentiated instruction and assessment without consideration of the

operational items that must be explored to ensure the success of DI, such as class sizes,

resources, teacher training, and time to shift pedagogical belief.  Additionally, it is

recommended that this research on the status quo phenomenon be continued to include

other Gifted education scholars and educational stakeholders to close the knowledge loop, as

well as extending to other provinces in Canada or other nations that might subscribe to this

practice of regular classroom placement with primarily withdrawal-based enrichment

programming.  Findings could inform our field on local issues, metrics, and policy development

for high-ability pupils in publicly funded institutions.

Initially raised as a call to action around more contemporary means of capturing and

re-assessing Gifted potential for individual talent development, I am recommending more

longitudinal research that investigates initial cognitive assessments and the identification and

placement processes that often follow, as well as following-up with participants on what

programming was in place and what affects those experiences had on life-long learning and

their future studies, career choices, identity, and well-being of these pupils.  I would further

advocate for more complex methodological approaches such as critical narrative or

autoethnography with material-semiotics or even more quantitative methods to investigate or

measure high-ability students' well-being and engagement with learning, as well as how their

achievement factored into their experiences and future trajectories.  Ideally, research would

be undertaken at local boards of education across Ontario and perhaps beyond to include

other provinces in Canada and nations who have established infrastructure for Gifted

education to better understand how education systems are currently capturing Giftedness, in

what ways they are re-visiting assessment or offering new assessment, and what the policies

are around entrance and access to enrichment programming and placement.  Finally, it is

recommended that further research be conducted with pre-service teacher candidates in

Ontario, Canada, around their readiness and beliefs around accommodations, needs,

feasibility for differentiated instruction and assessment, inclusive practices, and a more social

understanding of disability for all exceptionalities, but in particular, high-ability learners, as

this research has found that the needs of Gifted learners continue to be positioned outside of

the scope of in-practice educators largely due to established infrastructure and processes that

hold this practice in place.

## 8.6  Closing Remarks

This research is incredibly personal.  In some way, either as a student, a classroom

teacher, a system staff, and even a sessional professor, I have been living the effects of public

education policies in Ontario, Canada, for over thirty years.  For decades I experienced

different aspects of the public education system's policies around special education, but it was

the opportunity to work at a system level where I was responsible for an entire portfolio

dedicated to Gifted programming for secondary learners where I began to appreciate the

incredibly dynamic, interconnected network of an education system.  I was honoured to have

this role and I was dedicated to the students, my colleagues, the portfolio, and the broader

system.  I was also determined to learn about our students and the staff supporting them so I could advocate for their needs and design programs that would be highly interest-driven, giving them the opportunities that I did not have when I experienced more monolithic, homogeneous mathematic enrichment as a child.  Working alongside some of the finest, most dedicated educators and administrators, I felt we were making incredible gains where the needs of high-ability pupils were on the radar of classroom teachers, and students were beginning to advocate for programs that they wanted to be a part of.  This was progress.

Despite this rather significant growth over the years, I felt as though I was missing something.  Over the course of the next few years, I had the pleasure of supporting another portfolio within special education, had the incredible opportunity to teach at the postsecondary panel within a Disability Studies faculty, and had gone forward to a classroom teaching position where I found myself constantly reflecting on my day-to-day experiences with established public policy, realizing that the experiences that our Gifted students were having—which were designed, in part, by myself at the system-level years prior—were akin to what I experienced as a student myself.  These learners were being withdrawn from that regular classroom space to experience enrichment programming by an external, expert educator or community partner for a large-scale enrichment conference; exciting and engaging indeed, but it was all taking place *outside* and by someone *else*.  Of course, it was so much more than mathematical worksheets and computer programs, but the format was the same.

This research, my research, was inspired by this visceral need to know *how* this outside programming composition coupled with this overwhelming placement in the regular

classroom managed to continue over the last thirty years.  And I did not see myself as part of it

when I was in the thick of it.  What we were doing felt innovative and different at the time.  It

was also clear that our field of Gifted education continued to take-up the same issues that

were informing practice, and we needed a novel approach that could help identify *what* and

*how* this status quo of programming and placement was not only being enabled but managed

to thrive over the past three decades in my experience.  Combining complementary methods

of material-semiotics, autoethnography, and narrative were, without question, the ideal fit for

purpose to go *beneath* the decades of surface findings that saturated the field with detailed

explanations on what was happening with programming and placement for our high-ability

learners rather than looking at the deeper issue of why we were still putting new patches on

old robes and calling it innovative.

I remain incredibly hopeful that our education systems and stakeholders will see how

influential our language and infrastructure are on the experiences of our high-ability learners

in our schools, as findings make clear that we are fundamentally positioning these pupils as

*beyond* our scope and ultimately someone else's responsibility to support.  It is my great hope

that stakeholders at system, governance, and school levels learn from this and be brave and

bold to start a critical conversation around re-taking responsibility for our Gifted learners

today.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are used as defined:

**Academic achievement** refers to the collective, numerical grades obtained through various assessments within formal schooling.  These grades are recorded and reported on through a software program that an education system or individual school board would use to manage student information.  Students' academic achievement is reported to the governing body in the province, the Ministry of Education, by individual school boards.

**Actor** in this study is situated within the context of socio-materiality, specifically *Actor-Network Theory*, which is "an approach that enables us to trace the ways that things come together, act and become taken for granted" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 4).  Actors are *agents*, either human or non-human (e.g. humans, animals, things, and matters), that have the same ontological status to begin with (Müller, 2015) and can exert force.

**Affective** refers specifically to the feelings and attitudes about learning and is a domain of development that addresses a learner's emotions toward learning experiences (Clark, 2013). The affective domain includes social and peer relations, social-emotional development, and individual self-concept with respect to identifying one's feelings of interest and unique talents.

For the purposes of this study, **assemblage** is also situated within the context of socio-materiality and is akin to an *association* or *network* of actors or *gathering* of materials that when brought or linked together perform a particular enactment (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012).

Assemblages are understood in this study to be both relational and heterogeneous, as they contain different human and non-human agents or entities linked together to form a whole (Müller, 2015; see also Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) that behaves, acts, or influences in a particular way, hence *socio*-material.

**Cognitive** is used in this study as a learning domain (Gentile & Lalley, 2005) to classify learning outcomes, specifically how academic achievement and knowledge are developed and/or fostered. The cognitive domain includes academic achievement, motivation, and both critical and creative thinking skills.

Both **critical and creative thinking skills** refer specifically to the ability to extend one's cognitive understanding and application of new content and contexts, and for the purposes of this study are understood to be within the cognitive domain (Gentile & Lalley, 2005), as they are learning outcomes that are affected by instruction and assessment.

**Enrichment** refers to the extended, in-depth, and/or broadened programming offered to above average ability students and is also referred to as an instructional accommodation in this study. Enrichment is typically beyond the depth and breadth of what is offered in the regular classroom (Clark & Zimmerman, 1994) and programmatic curriculum.

**Enrichment withdrawal** describes a type of enrichment programming similar to "pull-out" programs where students are released from their regular classroom and curriculum for a period of time within or outside of their school to participate in enrichment workshops and other enriching programming.

**Gifted** in this study refers to the designation given to either elementary or secondary students that meet individual board criteria. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2001) *Special Education Guide for Educators*, Giftedness is an intellectual exceptionality where individuals have "an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated" (p. A 20).

**Secondary school students** refer to those students registered in Grades 9 through 12, approximate ages of 14 to 18, and include any returning fifth year students, which is a specific term used in Ontario, Canada for pupils who meet graduation requirements but return to secondary school for another year for a variety of purposes.

**Social-emotional development** in this study refers specifically to the process of attaining social skills and various affective skills including different feelings, emotions, and understandings that are used for a variety of social situations.

**Talent** refers to a student's particular accomplishments in a specific or variety of areas.

# Appendix B: Research Ethics Approval (Current Study)

**Western Research**

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board**
**NMREB Full Board Initial Approval Notice**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Kathryn Hibbert
**Department & Institution:** Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 109424
**Study Title:** Re-conceptualising how we respond to secondary Gifted learners' needs: A critical narrative and ANT approach investigating programming and placement within Ontario's current public educational system

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** September 06, 2017
**NMREB Expiry Date:** September 06, 2018

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

| Document Name | Comments | Version Date |
|---|---|---|
| Western University Protocol | | 2017/09/04 |
| Other | Appendix A - Definition of Terms - Received for Information Only | 2017/06/06 |
| Letter of Information & Consent | Appendix B - Student | 2017/09/04 |
| Letter of Information & Consent | Appendix C - Teacher | 2017/09/04 |
| Letter of Information & Consent | Appendix D - Stakeholder | 2017/09/04 |
| Recruitment Items | Appendix E - Sample Emails | 2017/07/27 |
| Instruments | Appendix F - Student Questionnaire | 2017/09/04 |
| Instruments | Appendix G - Teacher Questionnaire | 2017/09/04 |
| Instruments | Appendix H - Placement Organizer - Received August 15, 2017 | |
| Other | Appendix I - Correspondence from School Board - Received August 15, 2017 | 2017/03/20 |
| Approval Notice | Appendix J - REB Approval Notice from previous study (M.Ed.) - Received for Information | 2013/08/23 |
| Instruments | Appendix K - List of General Questions for Focus Groups and Interviews | 2017/07/27 |

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

EO: Erika Basile __ Grace Kelly __ Katelyn Harris ✓ Nicola Morphet __ Karen Gopaul __ Patricia Sargeant __ Kelly Patterson __

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150
London, ON, Canada N6G 1G9 t

## Appendix C: Research Ethics Approval (Earlier Study)

**Western Education**

### WESTERN UNIVERSITY
### FACULTY OF EDUCATION
### USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE

Review Number: 1307-5
Principal Investigator: Kathryn Hibbert
Student Name: Melissa Gollan-Wills
Title: *Enrichment Programming for Secondary School Gifted Students: A Narrative Inquiry*
Expiry Date: April 30, 2014
Type: M.Ed. Thesis
Ethics Approval Date: August 23, 2013.
Revision #:
Documents Reviewed &
Approved: Western Protocol, Letter of Information & Consent, Recruitment Emails

This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of the Western University Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or information/consent documents may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB, except for minor administrative aspects. Participants must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information/consent documentation and/or recruitment advertisement, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Alan Edmunds (Chair)

*2012-2013 Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board*

| | |
|---|---|
| Dr. Alan Edmunds | Faculty of Education (Chair) |
| Dr. John Barnett | Faculty of Education |
| Dr. Wayne Martino | Faculty of Education |
| Dr. George Gadanidis | Faculty of Education |
| Dr. Elizabeth Nowicki | Faculty of Education |
| Dr. Julie Byrd Clark | Faculty of Education |
| Dr. Kari Veblen | Faculty of Music |
| Dr. Jason Brown | Faculty of Education |
| Dr. Susan Rodger | Faculty of Education, Associate Dean, Research *(ex officio)* |
| Dr. Ruth Wright | Faculty of Music, Western Non-Medical Research Ethics Board *(ex officio)* |
| Dr. Kevin Watson | Faculty of Music, Western Non-Medical Research Ethics Board *(ex officio)* |

The Faculty of Education     Faculty of Education Building
1137 Western Rd.
London, ON  N6G 1G7

Copy: Office of Research Ethics

# Appendix D: Amendment Approval for Letter of Information and Protocol Change

**Western Research**

**Date:** 30 July 2021

**To:** Dr. Kathryn Hibbert

**Project ID:** 109424

**Study Title:** Re-conceptualising how we respond to secondary Gifted learners' needs: A critical narrative and ANT approach investigating programming and placement within Ontario's current public educational system

**Application Type:** NMREB Amendment Form

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 03/Sept/2021

**Date Approval Issued:** 30/Jul/2021 15:57

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 06/Sep/2021

_____

Dear Dr. Kathryn Hibbert,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the amendment, as of the date noted above.

**Documents Approved:**

| Document Name | Document Type | Document Date | Document Version |
|---|---|---|---|
| GOLLAN-WILLS_Appendix D_Stakeholder Letter of Information, Consent_REVISED 29 June 2021 | Written Consent/Assent | 29/Jun/2021 | 1 |
| GOLLAN-WILLS_Western Protocol ETHICS_REVISED 3 CLEAN_July 29 2021 | Protocol | 29/Jul/2021 | 1 |
| GOLLAN-WILLS_Appendix D_Stakeholder Letter of Information, Consent_REVISED 29 July 2021 | Written Consent/Assent | 29/Jul/2021 | 2 |

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ms. Katelyn Harris , Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

_Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations)._

**Appendix E: Letter of Information and Consent Form**

**Western Education**

# Letter of Information

*Re-conceptualising how we respond to secondary Gifted learners' needs:*
*A critical narrative and ANT approach investigating programming and placement within Ontario's current public educational system*

June 29, 2021

Dear Potential Educational Stakeholder Research Participant:

My name is Mel Gollan-Wills and I am a sixth year PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario, as well as a former Special Education Learning Coordinator and Gifted Itinerant Teacher for Secondary Schools for a large public school board in Ontario, Canada. I am currently investigating programming and placement experiences of Gifted secondary students within the current public education system in Ontario, Canada, and I am inviting you to participate in this study, as you are an educational stakeholder who is invested in the welfare and success of exceptional learners in the current public education system.

**Purpose of the Study**
The aim of this study is to gather stories of experience about Gifted programs, services, and placements for high-ability learners in public education. This study will explore the narratives or stories that participants share, including Gifted students, designated Gifted Teacher contacts at various secondary schools who are responsible for programming for these students, as well as educational stakeholders such as parents/guardians, Senior Administrators, Trustees, policymakers, experts in the field of Gifted Education, among others who are invested in the welfare and success of exceptional learners in the current public education system. The goal of this study is to learn from the stories of experiences around programs, placements, and services that Gifted learners require in today's public education system, helping to inform our practice as educators, and add to a collective dialogue of how we might better respond to our high-ability learners' needs.

**If You Agree to Participate**
I am inviting you to signal your interest in perhaps engaging in an individual interview session so I might learn from and with you. A commitment from educational stakeholders will include a single interview session via digital platform (i.e. Zoom) at a timeframe determined by the participant. You will be asked to complete and sign a Consent Form (see page 4), which can be returned digitally via email should you wish to participate in this study.

Individual interviews will be video and audio-recorded, and these recordings will be securely stored.  You will be asked to share your experiences with and insights into Gifted programming and placement.  There is also an opportunity to revisit findings and themes from an earlier study on Gifted Education.  Conceivably, participants may provide further insight through any critiques or *re*interpretations of any of the researcher's interpretations or *mis*interpretations (Dodson et al., 2007, p. 826), as they "are living the same 'ground truth'" (p. 826).  The individual interviews will be transcribed into written format.  You will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts of your sessions to check for accuracy and to ensure you are comfortable with what you said.

**Confidentiality**

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results.  All information collected for the study will be kept confidential.  Your anonymity will be maintained by using a pseudonym in the event that direct quotations of what you said or artefactual representations are used to inform subsequent phases of this study, as well as in all future public presentations and publications.  Pseudonyms will be securely stored separately from the study data for added security.

All video recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a locked cabinet to which only the researcher will have access.  The interview materials including video recordings and digital copies of transcriptions will be destroyed five (5) years after the completion of the study.  Representatives of The University of Western Ontario's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) may require access to study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

**Risks and Benefits**

There are no known risks to participating in this study.  Possible benefits include collaborative refinement of system-level programs, services, and placements for Gifted, bright and talented learners in public education; improved development and delivery of in-school programming, transition support, and both outreach and offsite enrichment opportunities; as well as honouring the voices and experiences of our high-ability learners in the current public education system, helping us to collectively re-conceptualise our responses to their needs.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary.  You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect for students (on your academic status or your participation in programming) or for teachers (no effect on your employment status).  Please be advised that participants can exercise their right to withdraw at any time and participants are asked to speak to the researchers at any point throughout the study should they have questions.  You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study.

**Questions**

Please keep this letter of information for your records.  If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario, at ██████████ or ██████████.  If you have questions about this study, please contact myself at the numbers or addresses listed below, or my supervisor, Dr. Kathy Hibbert, at ██████████ ext. ████ or ██████████.

Sincerely,

Mel Gollan-Wills, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education, Curriculum Studies | Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
Email: ██████████

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Dodson, L., Piatelli, D., & Schmalzbauer, L. (2007). Researching inequality through interpretive collaborations: Shifting power and the unspoken contract. *Qualitative Inquiry, 13*(6), 821-843.

# Consent Form

*Re-conceptualising how we respond to secondary Gifted learners' needs:*
*A critical narrative and ANT approach investigating programming and placement within Ontario's*
*current public educational system*

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate.  I understand that I must check all boxes below to confirm my consent to participate in this study:

- ❑ Individual interview
- ❑ Audio and video recorded for transcription purposes
- ❑ To allow the researchers to share any artefacts and direct quotations that have been shared during the interview with other participants *(all identifiable information will be removed)*

**Name of Participant (please print)**: _____

**Signature of Participant**: _____

**Date**: _____

**Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:**       Mel Gollan-Wills, PhD Candidate

**Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** _____

# MELISSA D. GOLLAN-WILLS

## EDUCATION

**Ph.D. | Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies**                                      **2022**
Western University, Faculty of Education (London, ON)
Supervisor: Kathryn Hibbert, Ph.D.
Advisors: Luigi Iannacci, Ph.D., Melody Viczko, Ph.D.


**M.Ed. | Master of Education**                                                                     **2014**
Western University, Faculty of Education (London, ON)
Supervisor: Kathryn Hibbert, Ph.D.
Advisor: Jacqueline Specht, Ph.D.
*Honours: Nominated for a Governor General's Academic Medal*


**M.S.Ed. | Master of Science in Adolescent Education**                                  **2008**
D'Youville College, Department of Education (Buffalo, NY, USA)
Graduate School of Arts, Sciences, and Education


**Additional Qualifications**
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto (Toronto, ON)
- Special Education Honours Specialist                                                      *July 2013*
- Special Education Part 2—Secondary                                                     *July 2013*
- Social Science Honours Specialist                                                           *July 2011*
- English Honours Specialist                                                              *December 2010*
- Special Education Part 1—Secondary                                              *December 2008*
- Senior Law                                                                                            *July 2008*


**Professional Program in Education**                                                            **2008**
D'Youville College, Department of Education (Buffalo, NY, USA)
Canadian Teacher Certification Program, Adolescent Education
Intermediate/Senior English


**H.B.A. | Honours Bachelor of Arts**                                                              **2007**
King's University College, The University of Western Ontario (London, ON)
Department of Modern Languages, Department of Social Sciences
Major: English Language and Literature
Major: Criminology

## AWARDS

- Western Research Graduate Scholarship, Western University (London, ON)          2020
- Western Research Graduate Scholarship, Western University (London, ON)          2019
- Award of Distinction (Nomination), Unnamed School Board (Southwestern, ON)    2018
- Walter M. Lobb Ontario Graduate Scholarship, Western University (London, ON)   2018
- Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), Western University (London, ON)             2017
- Western Research Graduate Scholarship, Western University (London, ON)          2017

- Western Research Graduate Scholarship, Western University (London, ON)                2016
- Western Research Graduate Scholarship, Western University (London, ON)                2015
- Governor General's Academic Medal (Nomination), Western University (London, ON)       2014
- The Western Scholarship of Distinction, Western University (London, ON)               2003

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**Unnamed School Board | Southwestern Ontario, Canada**
- *Learning Coordinator (K-12), Special Education*                          *September 2018-August 2019*
- *Gifted Itinerant—Secondary, Special Education*                          *September 2012-August 2018*
- *Acting Department Head, Special Education*                              *November 2011-August 2012*
- *Learning Support Teacher, Special Education*                            *September 2009-August 2012*
- *Classroom Teacher, Secondary (3 Secondary Schools)*                     *March 2008-present*
    - Courses designed and taught: ENG 1P (Grade 9 Applied English); ENG 2D (Grade 10 Academic English); ENG 3E (Grade 11 Essential English); ENG 3C (Grade 11 College English); ENG 3U (Grade 11 University English); ENG 4E (Grade 12 Essential English); ENG 4U (Grade 12 University English); OLC 4O (Grade 12 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course); SNC 2P (Grade 10 Applied, Science); CLU 3M (Grade 11 Postsecondary, Canadian Law); GLE 1O (Grade 9 Open, Learning Strategies); CHV 2OE (Grade 10 Enriched, Civics); GLC 2OE (Grade 10 Enriched Careers); IDC 3OE (Grade 11 Enriched, Interdisciplinary Studies); IDC 4OE (Grade 12 Enriched, Interdisciplinary Studies); IDC 4UT (Grade 12 University Honours Thesis); HFN 2O (Grade 10 Open, Food and Nutrition); HPC 3O (Grade 11 Open, Raising Healthy Children); HHG 4M (Grade 12 Postsecondary, Human Growth throughout the Lifespan); HPD 4C (Grade 12 College, Working with School-Age Children and Adolescence).
- *Summer School Teacher, Secondary*                                       *July 2009, 2010*
    - ENG 3U (Grade 11 University English)

## UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

**King's University College | Western University, Disability Studies**
*Sessional Professor*
- DS 2210B: Education and Disability Studies          *Hired; withdrawn due to leave*
- DS 2210B: Education and Disability Studies          *Hired; withdrawn due to leave*
- DS 2210B: Education and Disability Studies          *January-April 2020*
- DS 2210B: Education and Disability Studies          *January-April 2019*
- DS 2210A: Education and Disability Studies          *September-December 2017*

**Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation**
- Appointed to the Provincial Research Group on Inclusive Education Research Project          *February 2020-June 2022*

**Western University, Faculty of Education**
- Graduate Research Assistant                         *September 2019-April 2020*
- Graduate Research Assistant                         *September 2017-April 2018*
- Research Assistant, Dr. K. Hibbert                  *September 2016-April 2017*
- Research Assistant, Dr. K. Hibbert                  *April-August 2016*

## PUBLICATIONS

**Gollan-Wills, M.**, Hibbert, K., Iannacci, L., & Viczko, M. (forthcoming). Problematizing our approaches to Gifted education: A call to disrupt the contemporary (status quo) state of Gifted education. *High Ability Studies*.

**Gollan-Wills, M.**, Hibbert, K., Iannacci, L., & Viczko, M. (forthcoming). Autoethnographic revelations: Enabling, enacting, and living the effects of public policy. *The Qualitative Report*.

**Gollan-Wills, M.**, Hibbert, K., Iannacci, L., & Viczko, M. (forthcoming). Using ANT sensibilities to experience a more three-dimensional understanding of the needs of Gifted learners in public education. *Journal of Education Policy*.

**Gollan-Wills, M.**, & Hibbert, K. (forthcoming). When storying becomes the story: The elephant in the room. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted.*

**Gollan-Wills, M**. (2014). *Enrichment programming for secondary school gifted students: A narrative inquiry. University of Western Ontario—Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository.* Paper 2098.

## SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

**Gollan-Wills, M.** (2017, June). *Curriculum traditions meet (or collide)? Implications for curriculum theory, policy, and practice.* Plenary presented at the European Educational Research Association (EERA) & Stirling Network for Curriculum Studies Summer Institute, Stirling University, Stirling, Scotland.

**Gollan-Wills, M.** (2017, April*). Enrichment programming for secondary school gifted students: A narrative inquiry.* Poster session presented at the Graduate Research in Education Symposium (GRiES), Western University, London, ON.

**Gollan-Wills, M.** (2017, April). *Re-conceptualising how we respond to secondary gifted learners' needs: A critical narrative and ANT approach investigating programming and placement within Ontario's current public educational system.* Roundtable session presented at the Graduate Research in Education Symposium (GRiES), Western University, London, ON.

Gold, A., **Gollan-Wills, M.**, & Sun, L. (2017, April). *Examining the curriculum as a marginalizing agent: A critical self-study into the actor-networks within and around all levels of the curriculum.* Poster session presented at the Graduate Research in Education Symposium (GRiES), Western University, London, ON.

## SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

### EXTERNAL
*Peer Review/Review Boards*
- Reviewer, *The Curriculum Journal*                                                                                   *2021-current*

## ADDITIONAL CERTIFICATIONS

- International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme Coordinator—Category 1 Certification          2018
- International Baccalaureate (IB) Administrators—Category 1 Certification                                      2018
- Applied Suicide Intervention Stills Training (ASIST) and Certification                                            2017
- Advanced Placement Summer Institute (APSI): English Language and Literature AP Teacher Certification          2013
- Behaviour Management Systems (BMS) Practitioner Certification                                                   2012
- Woodcock-Johnson-III Tests of Achievement Certification to Administer                                         2009
- Ontario College of Teachers, Certificate of Qualification and Registration                                        2008
- University of the State of New York Education Department, Public School Teacher Certificate               2008