ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS OF THE YOUNG GIFTED LEARNER

by

JENNIFER L STEVENSON

(Under the Direction of Dr. Stacey Neuharth-Pritchitt)

ABSTRACT

This case study followed the story of a ten year old girl, in a suburban Title I, extremely diverse and transient school who overcame many obstacles and barriers to become a gifted and talented student of minority. According to the literature, there is an extreme underrepresentation of minority students in gifted and talented programs. Through interviews of parents, grandparents, the student and her educators, combined with field notes, observations, and document reviews, barriers and obstacles, as well as, supports were established based on the following common themes: teacher preparation and awareness of cultural diversity, parental involvement, home-school relationships, cultural identity issues, low socio-economic status, identification of the young child, and single parent homes. By using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and relating it to these themes, we were able to uncover the barriers and obstacles that being from a multiethnic background, low income home, single parent family, presented for this student. In this study, this student was considered "at risk" by these characteristics, and supports from each of the five layers of her ecological systems working strongly together and focusing on the positive aspects of the child, allowed for her to become an identified gifted and talented learner of a minority group. The interactions of her strong home-school connection, cultural difference sensitivity and awareness of her educators, young

identification, appropriate assessment measures and strong biological needs of the learner allowed her to overcome the “at risk” characteristics and become successful, gifted and talented. Finally, implications for teaching to improve the statistics of minority groups in gifted education programs were established. Also, methodological implications for this type of case study were also discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted, At-Risk, Cultural Differences, Minority Groups, Parental Support, Teacher Preparation, Young Identification

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Children who are classified as at risk and who are from underrepresented ethnic and racial populations are identified less often and are less frequently enrolled in classrooms for young children who are gifted and talented (Seeley, 2004). There are a number of definitions for the term at risk; however, in the current study, this term will be used to describe a young child whose family has limited economic means, who lives with only one custodial parent, and who is from a mixed ethnic background. This child's story will demonstrate how she overcame and continues to break through obstacles that would prevent her from being successful and productive in school. One single case study will not change the complete discourse of this area of gifted and talented education but will provide the field with some additional evidence on which to further this research line. Educators and those who work with young gifted children will be able to use the information presented in this case study to inform their practice.

Gosfield (2002) suggested that strategies employed for the education of children who are gifted and talented should be an integral part of the school day for *all* children. Modifications and extensions should be a "habit" of teaching and should be planned by taking into consideration the needs of all learners in the classroom. In order for this to happen, further emphasis on professional development needs to occur. Through this case study, applications of serving students' individual needs, based on the needs of the whole child will be described so that teachers can use the information to better serve their own students. This case study will provide a glimpse into alternative strategies that may be useful to identify members of

underrepresented populations (e.g., minority, English Language Learners, and children of poverty) for programs in gifted and talented education. The case will illustrate how multiple and varied measures must also be used to determine eligibility of students for gifted and talented programs. Through the use of traditional and non-traditional measures, this case will illuminate how young children can be identified instead of being overlooked for programs in gifted and talented education.

When examining the social and emotional traits and needs of gifted learners, teachers, administrators, parents, and counselors need information regarding these students' unique social and emotional traits (Gosfield, 2002). This is particularly important when coupled with factors that place young gifted children at risk. With these characteristics, appropriate planning for counseling and other interventions can then be developed as needed to help the identification and education of these students. Such interventions might focus on training, collaboration, and interventions centered on the social and emotional needs of gifted.

A comprehensive study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Schroeder, 1994) suggested that America's gifted and talented are part of a "quiet crisis" in which the students are bored and unchallenged and are not encouraged to master rigorous and complex material. The report also compared American students to top students in other industrialized countries. It concluded that American students perform poorly on international tests, are offered less rigorous curriculum, read fewer demanding books, do less homework, and enter the work force and postsecondary education less prepared. When coupled with the fact that elementary gifted students know from a third to half of the year's curriculum before they even start school, it is not understandable why teachers do not make provisions for the needs of these gifted students.

Additional research indicates that poor and minority gifted students are especially neglected, with most programs serving students focusing on concerns or challenges that they bring to school, not on developing their strengths (Hardy, 2006).

In order for this context to improve, schools must set content standards and use curriculum that challenges all children, including the gifted. Talent of students should be identified by observing students in settings, which let them display their abilities, not by relying solely on a single means of identification, usually, test scores. There should be increased access for children from low-income families and who are from minority groups in early education programs that also focus on children's strengths and eliminate barriers to advanced learning opportunities. Early childhood teachers' skills must also be improved in order for them to feel comfortable in their abilities to accurately instruct children with more advanced academic skill.

Specific research on children who are placed at risk and those who are members of minority groups (Milner and Ford, 2005) further emphasize the need for understanding and being able to identify children early in their academic careers. These researchers stated that black students, particularly males, are three times as likely as white males to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded, but only half as likely to be placed in a class for the gifted. Not only are black students under-enrolled in gifted education programs, but they are over-represented in special education, in the lowest ability groups and tracks, and among the greatest in number of high school and college dropouts. Milner and Ford further suggest that explanations for this achievement gap are numerous ranging from problems associated with teacher quality, inadequate numbers of diverse teachers, differential resources, and inadequate family involvement among parents of color to student of color apathy and disengagement.

Some educators even believe that causes of such academic disparities are related more to socio-economics than race or other at risk factors.

Having considered the above factors, it is important to think seriously about academic disparities among students, especially at a time when our nation's public schools and schools of education are under attack. Although some students are considered at risk, our focus should be on high academic achievement of all students. Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) stress that when students present needs based on their race, gender, or socioeconomic status, it is important that schools and educators address those needs. Some questions suggested by the researchers that educators ask include: How does a student's culture affect his or her achievement? How do the social needs of gifted students of color affect their achievement? And how do psychological needs affect the achievement of gifted students of color? If educators seriously consider the needs of these at risk students, there is a greater potential that they will be recognized for their abilities. In fact, the unique social and psychological issues these students bring to the educational setting related to their culture could be educational and enlightening for all.

There is a growing trend in teacher education programs to have courses related to diversity and social justice in education, including gifted education programs (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway, 2005). Over the years, more courses have been offered; however, much more education for teachers is needed in order for educators to be appropriately and adequately prepared for identifying cultural characteristics and associated behaviors to identify and enroll minority and at risk students into gifted programs. This lack of cultural awareness has negative implications for students of color resulting in educators failing to recommend capable students of color or poverty for gifted education programs if these students exhibit disinterested behaviors or

appeared unmotivated (Moore, et al., 2005). Educators' focus on a child's perceived deficits fails to keep the focus on the child's strengths.

Social influences are another factor closely linked with underachieving children and those defined as at risk. Although many factors are related to social influences, peer pressure often has the most pervasive impact on educational outcomes for students in general. The research literature clearly demonstrates that negative peer pressure has profound effects on school experiences and educational outcomes. Unfortunately, African American students seem particularly susceptible to negative opposition from their peers (Ogbu, 2003). These students, while successful in school or identified as gifted, are frequently teased by peers, especially in urban settings, as acting white when they appear to be academically engaged. Ogbu (2003) states that people often define themselves according to their membership in a particular racial group (pp.63). This, in fact, serves as the referent that connects the individual with his or her identified cultural roots and historical experience. In order to reinforce their legitimacy as a member of a particular community, students of color may disengage psychologically, socially, and emotionally from school achievement to maintain their perceived cultural identity. In my study, the student participant battles with this phenomenon constantly as she exists in a white community, a black community, and the gifted community. She struggles with fitting in, as well as, dealing with the academic success she has had and continues to seek.

Research continually stresses and goes back to the knowledge and training of educational professionals and their abilities to recognize and to serve the student who may be at risk in the classroom. There are many school related and non-school related factors that contribute to the at risk student and his/her participation and success in school. Regardless of the factors, specific interventions are needed and must be connected to the strengths of the students while taking into

consideration the social, emotional, cultural, and economic factors surrounding the child. This is not an easy task to accomplish. Moore et al. (2005) suggests that multicultural education is a promise for engaging all students and giving them opportunities to identify with, connect with, and relate to the curriculum. Such curriculum must include deliberate, continuous, planned, and systematic opportunities to avoid drive-by teaching to make learning meaningful and relevant to all students, and to give at risk students' perspectives to reflect the gifted education curriculum. It is just as important for general and gifted education teachers and school counselors to learn about themselves and how their attitudes and perceptions affect at risk student populations, and it is equally important for at risk students to learn about themselves in the context of their cultural heritage, economic and family status, and other student groups.

Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway (2005) note that most educators agree that gifted and talented children can be found in all socioeconomic strata and in all racial and ethnic groups. However, in terms of actual practice, there is still a very low percentage of children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds found in gifted and talented programs. Ford (1993) found that less than 2% of more than 4,000 articles were written about gifted and talented students since 1924. Of course, in recent years attention and efforts have increased and been devoted to the identification practices in gifted and talented programs. Research has repeatedly indicated that teachers sometimes have negative attitudes and expectations of children from different culturally diverse backgrounds and often overlook these children for the gifted and talented programs. Elhoweris et al. (2005) also found that teachers tend to evaluate African American and poor students' academic performance and behavior in a biased manner. For example, when teachers were given the same information about students except for their ethnic backgrounds, teachers were found to view programs serving students with mental retardation as a

more appropriate placement option for black students. Children from low socio-economic status backgrounds were also more likely to be referred for restrictive placements.

Cushner, McClelland, and Stafford (2003) stated that the majority of U.S. teachers are European American and middle class. However, the student population is very diverse, and by the year 2040, children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are expected to be the majority in classrooms (Cushner, McClelland, and Stafford, 2003), which leads me to my subjectivity as a White middle class teacher. Studies show the significant discrepancy between the student population and the teaching force. Studies have not shown whether this phenomenon still operates in deciding the placement of children in gifted and talented programs. Although attention has focused on teachers' identification practices with culturally diverse youth in gifted and talented programs, research has not extensively examined the effect of children's ethnicity on teachers' student eligibility decisions in gifted and talented programs. So, not only is the under representation of African American students in gifted programs connected to risk factors associated with them, but it could also be due to the lack of multicultural sensitivity of teachers associated with these students, and the lack of sensitivity to cultures and characteristics different from the educators' own background.

As the white middle class teacher studying the African American, low socio-economic population, I have to be careful to put away all my beliefs and pictures on what a "typical" gifted and talented student should look like. It is important to remember that I live in an ever-changing world. There are many cultures that live in America today. I teach in a school that is predominantly African American and Hispanic. It is very difficult to understand and take into consideration the needs and wants of my students that are very different from mine. The needs of each student in my classroom must be met on a daily basis whether the need is academic,

social or emotional. Often I have to take into consideration that these students' physical needs must be met and that they need an adult to trust before they can even begin to learn what I have to teach them. These needs are often taken for granted by me, because I have never needed to search for these things.

Children act out and seek attention in different ways in order to get what they need. I have to be careful to focus on the strengths and not the negative factors, which may occur. This study will involve many social, emotional, ethnic, and academic realms, which may be difficult for me to understand but are significant to the implications of this study on education. I have found that children can be the most valuable insight into the future and I must approach telling this student's story with the utmost respect for who she is, what groups she belongs too, and what successes she brings to the interpretation of this data. While this child's mother is White and her father is African American, I can identify with her link to the White world. However, I can only attempt to understand her difficulty with fitting into the African American world as well. It is important that I take into consideration the multicultural training I have had in order to be sensitive to the differences in what I understand in and of the world and what my participant understands in and of the world.

Purpose of the Study

For the purpose of this study, I will focus on one student's story of being identified and serviced through a school's gifted and talented program. This study will examine how her ethnic background, her socioeconomic status, and her single parent home life has affected her in school and in life in general. It is imperative to study her story and how her strengths, rather than any negatively viewed characteristics, helped this child be successful thus far through school, and how those strengths will continue to help her be successful in the world as an adult. With a

strong support system in place at school, in the home-school connection, and through academic delivery, this child has already overcome so many obstacles. Her story will make a profound statement to the field as implications for teaching are outlined, and for making successful paths for all students, especially gifted students in the classroom. This case study will also show the significance of understanding and seeking to better educate ourselves on the needs of our students with different cultural backgrounds from our own.

In my efforts to contribute to this small, but growing body of knowledge I will present a qualitative analysis, using case study methodology. Glesne and Peshkin, (1992), a researcher and a poet once presented a piece of research with which she began with a story analogy, describing qualitative analysis as "finding your story." This was a perfect definition for me and my research as the case I will present is in fact a "story" of one little girl's educational experiences and how even through many obstacles and roadblocks, she managed to find her way into the gifted program with the help of the educational system, her parents, and all those who care about her.

The very nature of qualitative inquiry, within which case study methodology falls, makes it possible to get into the field quickly to study emerging phenomena and assess quickly developing situations in her world of rapid change. What I am most interested in is hearing and recording one's story. Hopefully, the findings will further influence and prompt more research in the same field. The overall purpose of my case study is to take the reader into the case situation and experience; in this case a student's journey to find her place within an educational system and life in general where she can have all opportunities to be successful, as well as incorporate and advance on all the factors that were initially viewed as roadblocks to her success.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Underrepresentation of the Minority and Economically Disadvantaged in Programs for Gifted and Creative Learners: The Issues

For the purpose of this case study, I chose to look at gifted elementary aged students based on the fact that early identification has routinely been key to success of these students. I also looked at literature concerning "at risk" students, mainly those from low income, single parent, and minority groups, and their lack of presence in the gifted and talented programs. Most of the reviews came from 1990 to the present, based on the fact that there was little research on gifted minorities before this time, yet it has been an issue since the 1920's including these minority students being over represented in special education programs. There are probably numerous studies to counteract the literature discussed in this chapter; however, the literature prominently supports the fact that minorities and "at risk" populations are less likely to show up in gifted education.

The disproportionate representation of children who are economically disadvantaged or from minority populations in gifted programs has been documented fairly well over the years. Even though the numbers of children from diverse backgrounds have increased within public schools, these populations of students are not as prevalent within programs for gifted and creative children. At the same time, the consistent and disproportionate representation of this population in special education services has continued to increase. The Department of Education's report, National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent (1993) stated that:

“Schools must eliminate barriers to participation of economically disadvantaged and minority students in services with outstanding talents and must develop strategies to serve students from underrepresented groups” (pp. 28).

Research on gifted students from underrepresented populations in the United States has been focused on three main areas that include non-traditional methods of identification, programming that emphasizes the particular strengths of minority students such as creativity and leadership, and specialized guidance designed to help students to overcome barriers to developing their giftedness. These barriers include social and cultural identity conflicts (Kitano & Kirby, 1986). Kitano and Kirby noted the area that has received the most attention in the research literature is the area examining non-traditional identification methods. A great deal of work has been dedicated to developing non-culturally biased tests for intelligence. However, the emphasis in the literature on nontraditional measures for identification, the need for adapted curriculum, home-school relationships and parental involvement, teacher attitudes, and the importance of counseling sometimes seems to suggest that students from diverse backgrounds can never be identified by traditional means, and that these students require considerable support if they are to achieve in such programs for the gifted (Passow & Frasier, 1996).

Oakes' and Guiton's (1995) work suggested that students from diverse populations were more likely to be placed in low ability groups and non-college preparatory tracks, decreasing the likelihood they would ever be considered gifted. Their work revealed that schools with a large percentage of students from diverse groups are less likely than other schools to offer academically rigorous curriculum, high-ability groupings, and academic tracks such as honors courses and advanced placement within academic subjects. Ford (1996) found similar results in the high number of underachieving children who are African American. These less than adequate

educational experiences and levels of underachievement affect the performance of students from diverse groups in the identification process in their work samples used for screening and identification of gifted placement.

Research suggests that the underrepresentation of African American youth persists as a result of individual differences. Boykin (1994) suggested that the cultural styles of African American students such as verve, mobility, oral tradition, communalism, spirituality, and affect may be viewed differently by other cultures; indeed, those from the dominant culture who make referrals or evaluate these youth. A perspective that is focused on deficits exacerbates these misunderstandings of different cultural characteristics. According to Boykin (1994), tactile and kinesthetic preferences may be misinterpreted as hyperactivity, and an affective orientation may be misinterpreted as immaturity, irrationality, and/or low cognitive ability. Communalism may be misinterpreted as social dependency and immaturity. These perceptions are important to understand because the identification of underrepresented populations and the ideas about racial backgrounds influence the development of definitions, policies, and practices designed to work with children from diverse groups. Menchaca (1997) noted that deficit thinking contributed to past as well as current beliefs about ethnicity and intelligence, going further to suggest that past decisions with deficit thinking led to increasing ethnic and racial diversity, increased reliance on standardized tests [most of which are biased] that guaranteed low test scores for immigrants and culturally diverse groups who were unfamiliar with the United States customs, traditions, values, norms, and language.

Gould (1995) supported this notion in stating that tests measure familiarity with American culture and English proficiency, not intelligence and the resultant effect became a theory of limits for diverse populations. Menchaca's work traced deficit thinking back to the segregation

of schools and the resistance to desegregation. Despite this historical thinking, Hilliard (1992) reported that some educators continue to resist desegregation by using tracking and ability grouping to re-segregate students racially. His research also points to the fact that the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education, as well as their over-representation in special education, relates strongly to efforts to perpetuate school segregation.

While there are contextual systems that work against children, Ford and Grantham (2003) noted the contributions of self-concept and self-esteem among racially diverse students. They argued that few efforts designed to improve gifted African American students' achievement and social-emotional well being will be successful until one thing is fully realized and focused on: their racial identity. Ford and Grantham reported that in 1993, African American students were underrepresented in gifted programs by 50%. This number grew and in 1998, these students were underrepresented by 60%, although research has indicated a continued concern about this trend. And while there is research to lead us to believe this underrepresentation may be improving, teachers are often the initial step in identification, and thus one of the largest reasons African American students are not referred for gifted consideration.

Ford and Grantham's work supports previous research by Smith (1989) that argued, "Race creates a bond and feelings of people hood." It was her belief that a healthy regard for one's racial status is psychologically important for racially diverse groups. She also believed that racial identity development was a process of coming to terms with one's racial group membership as a reference group. As such, racial identity and giftedness may also cause confusion for these students. Ogbu (2003) suggested that often African American children find themselves in a dilemma of choosing between academic success and social acceptance. Ogbu further noted that in some situations, gifted or even high achieving African American students might feel that they

have won in the academic respect, but lost in the social or psychological aspect. Ford's (1996) work supports this by finding and indicated that feelings of loneliness, isolation, and rejection increase and the need for affiliation begins to outweigh the need for achievement; thus keeping minority students out of gifted programs.

In addition to the psychological issues associated with being identified as gifted, there are several other hypothesized reasons for the underrepresentation of gifted African American students. The first centers on intelligence definitions and theories. A second is the existence of inadequate policies and practices for including diverse children in gifted programs. Ford, Harris, Tyson and Trotman (2002) noted that most states continue to define giftedness as uni-dimensional, that is, a function of IQ scores. These definitions proved effective in identifying white, middle-class children, but ignored those who performed poorly on paper and pencil tasks, those who perform poorly on culturally loaded tests, those who have learning and/or cognitive styles that are different from other students, those who have test anxiety, and those who have low achievement motivation. Ford and her colleagues related inadequate policy and procedure practices to teachers who systematically under refer students from diverse groups for gifted education services. These researchers also noted that many minority students had high test scores, but were not referred for screening. Therefore, if this was the first step in the identification process, teachers didn’t do it, resulting in the underrepresentation problem.

Frasier, Garcia, and Passow (1995) recommended that identification and assessment of African American gifted students should be based on more reliable and valid, multidimensional, and broader definitions and theories of the gifted. The United States Congress in 1988 passed legislation, the Javits Act, to promote the interests of gifted students, with its major goal being to support the identification and service of children from diverse racial and ethnic groups and those

from homes with limited economic resources. To support these efforts, in 1998, the National Association for Gifted Children published a statement urging educators to use more than one test to make educational and placement decisions about gifted students. They also suggested that equity should be sought in the identification and assessment instruments, policies, and procedures used.

Although alternate assessment forms have been used more frequently to identify gifted students in underrepresented populations, some of the assessments still fall short of appropriate identification. Parent nomination forms have been advocated as a large part of identification of the gifted student. Forty-five states now include parent nomination forms in the identification process of gifted students (Ford, 1996). However many of these forms are complicated and cumbersome, thereby prohibiting many parents from completing the forms. Some parents may have difficulty or misunderstandings when completing the forms. In this case, parents might underestimate their own child's abilities or even just refuse to complete the forms. Ford (1998) discussed how parent nomination forms could represent important and essential sources of information, but also the forms and checklists are associated with the same shortcomings as all other assessment instruments. They lack reliability and validity, pay inattention to characteristics of underachievement, lack cultural sensitivity, and portray an exclusive focus on intellectual or academic characteristics of giftedness.

Ford (1998) also found that parent nomination forms lack culturally specific characteristics of minority students, which might make it difficult for parents to recognize their own children's strengths as they are listed on the forms. It is also important to note that not all minority parents are even aware of the parent nomination option, due to the lack of communication some parents

may have with the school. In fact, some parents may not even know gifted programming is available to their children.

Teacher Preparation and the Culturally Diverse Gifted Student

Banks and Banks (1995) attribute lack of multicultural preparation among teachers to be a problem. Their work highlighted that few pre-service teachers receive exposure to multicultural educational experiences, multicultural curriculum and instruction, and/or internships and practicum in urban areas. Hilliard (1992) and Banks and Banks (1995) found that African American children often tend to be concrete learners, social learners, field-dependent learners, and learners who value constructive responses to their work. Teachers often view these different learning styles as deficits, not assets that hold numerous implications for the identification of students from underrepresented populations into gifted programs. Most importantly, the extent to which African American students are global versus analytic learners, visual versus auditory learners, highly mobile versus static, and less peer-oriented affects their learning, achievement, motivation, and school performance.

Inadequate teacher preparation in gifted education is yet another contributor to the underrepresentation of African American students in the gifted program. In a survey conducted by Ford (1999), many teachers reported not having exposure, or at least very little exposure, to characteristics of the gifted learner in their teacher preparation programs. Ford's work revealed that teachers, who lacked preparation, were ineffective at identifying gifted students. This was mainly because the teachers did not have sensitivity to the characteristics of gifted students, lacked understanding of the social and emotional needs of gifted students, and lacked attention to the underachievement among gifted students. Ford also suggested that teachers who are unprepared to work with gifted students may retain certain stereotypes and misperceptions that in

turn would undermine the ability of those gifted students to recognize strengths in students who behave differently from their expectations. Unfortunately, the research literature also indicates that teachers often use the behaviors of the white children with which to norm the behaviors of all children in the classroom.

Another contributor in inadequate teacher preparation lies with the testing and assessment knowledge of teachers, which keeps the African American children out of gifted programs. The most important finding concerning this was reported by Ford et al., (2002). In her work, teachers using the assessment instruments had not been trained to administer the tests nor had they been trained how to reliably interpret intelligence and achievement test scores. Therefore, teachers who lacked these skills were not likely to administer high-quality gifted education services to any student, much less those from underrepresented populations.

Despite this bleak outlook, many professionals have prepared themselves in culturally competent ways to identify children who are gifted and who are from underrepresented populations (Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992). Culturally competent educators must exhibit self-awareness and understanding; cultural awareness and understanding; social responsiveness and responsibility, and culturally sensitive techniques and strategies. Ironically enough, these are the same characteristics found in the earlier research that if lacking pose a problem for the identification of gifted African American students. Culturally competent educators think seriously about their own biases, assumptions, and stereotypes. By increasing their own self-awareness of these issues, an example may be set for African American gifted students to do the same and be more successful within gifted programs.

To be socially responsible and responsive, it is important for educators to be advocates for the gifted African American student as well. It is important for equity to be sought in all areas of

the educational process and within their school and home communities. Pang (2001) stated that even students have to increase sensitivity to diversity, which would compel them to avoid promoting social injustices within the classroom. Certain principles of learning that meet the academic, social-emotional, and psychological needs of minority students will help educators deliver a more effective educational program to culturally diverse students. Ladson-Billings (1995) defined a central feature of culturally responsible classrooms as those that empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Such strategies help students develop a cultural identity that encourages them to strive for academic excellence. Banks and Banks (1995) also noted that the gifted African American student must be taught to be self-sufficient as a learner. Pang (2001) described further a communal philosophy in which culturally responsive teachers believe minority students' outcomes, both positive and negative, to be a shared responsibility. If the student fails, then the teacher fails. Likewise, if one student fails, then the whole group fails.

With the majority of the American teaching force being White, there may be a lack of minority role models that African American gifted students have within schools. This trend paired with the lack of formal preparation of teachers working with gifted students from underrepresented groups promotes cumulative disadvantage for these students. In addition to the low number of teachers who are African American, Ford (1999) also found that teachers from diverse groups are rarely encouraged by administration to pursue further training in the gifted and creative education. Some teachers reported being discouraged from working with the gifted African American students, altogether. This fact is quite disconcerting given that students from diverse groups reported being empowered by such teachers, seeing them as role models, mentors, and even advocates.

Identification of the Young Gifted Child

Although being culturally diverse and gifted is a growing area of research, there is also another large body of concern for education and development associated with the gifted and talented child: the young and gifted. Much of the research has revealed that the young gifted child also faces many obstacles in being "labeled" or even recognized as talented and gifted. Schools systems often set guidelines as to when a child may first be referred for gifted services and when the identification process actually should take place. As research through the decades has indicated, early identification of a child's weaknesses is crucial to their development. So, why should it be different for their strengths?

Weber (1999) reported that when a child is identified later in their educational career, teachers of the young gifted notice that by the second grade, the student has already closed the door to accepting challenge as exciting and enjoyable. Instead, new frustrations and additional persistence on tasks may encourage a child to give up and take easier routes. In fact, Weber noted that the child easily understands the subtleties and implications of the teachers' feelings and learns quickly there is little reward in working any harder than necessary to complete a task. Often teachers of the gifted may spend much of their time trying to instill new encouragement in the lost areas in the few short years the child was in school without have his/her gifts and talents noticed and/or enhanced. Weber along with Colangelo and Fleuridas (1986) proposed similar conclusions for identification problems of the young gifted. Weber suggested asking, "How can we create a mental model that will provide all educators with an understanding of the necessity of early identification, programming and intervention that will influence their attitudes and behavior toward gifted students?" Such questions may influence a change in the reactions of teachers, administrators, and even parents of the gifted child's behavior and efforts. It might also

provide a vision of giftedness to develop realistic expectations and make the necessary accommodations for the young gifted child.

Parents play an important, pivotal role in the identification of the young gifted child. Weber (1999) noted that parents could be torn on the decision to have their child tested or identified. Roedell (1989) described a typical fear of parents of young children that the child may be overburdened by challenging work. This could in fact be a misunderstanding of the needs and nature of the gifted child and the accompanying programming as well. Caine and Caine (1997) produced work on a mental model, which might explain the importance of early identification of the gifted child as explained specifically by the case above. As defined by Caine and Caine, mental models represent the assumptions, generalizations, and images that not only influence how people understand the world, by also the actions they take based on that understanding. Sadly, many educators carry the mental model that the young child is too young, too immature and not ready to be gifted and talented. Often teachers do not have a realistic understanding of the thoughts and unique style of the thinking of the gifted and talented. It was noted in Caines' study that one teacher suggested that the child came to her with “his own ideas at first, but she quickly took care of that.”

Inadequate communication with black families and communities is also a factor that changes the dynamics of children referred or identified for gifted services. According to Karnes, Shwedel and Steinberg (1984), active family involvement in the educational process enhances student achievement. This theme is found throughout most of the research in gifted education. Clark (1983) found that academically successful African American children had mothers who provided them with more books, clearer academic goals, and were more deeply involved in schoolwork than African American parents whose children were less successful. Ford and her colleagues

(2002) suggested that if deficit orientation is present among educators, they might not communicate with black families about gifted education or other opportunities available to their children. If this feeling is pervasive and communicated within the schools, African American parents may view schools with much doubt and negativity about commitment to their own, as well as other diverse children.

According to Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) early life experiences powerfully impact attitudes toward learning and later achievements in life, and most importantly in education. This research implies that current research on the young gifted has overlooked the delineation of developmental characteristics and specific educational experiences related to the population. Case studies have repeatedly been used to show themes of intellectual, social, affective, physical, aesthetic and creative domains. Robinson (1993) noted that the early years are considered formative and critical to cognitive, social and emotional development. Yet, the research has focused more on commonalities, individual differences, and abnormally and advanced as troublesome rather than positive. The most neglected population in gifted education is school entry aged children. So much so, that much uncertainty still exists about the nature and fostering of gifts and talents in these students.

Research on the gifted and young presents conflicting views between teachers and parents on what young and gifted “looks” like. Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) suggested that parents often describe their young gifted children as: divergent thinkers, highly focused on their interests, curious, becoming early readers, persistent and as possessing high verbal ability, having large vocabularies for a young age, an unusual sense of humor, an unusual ability to make abstract connections in learning, a keen sense of perceptiveness, and a wide range of interests, yet a demonstrated ability in a single area.

Teachers, although they have not been an area of focus in the research, tend to concentrate on classroom performance, extremely unusual academic performance and/or ability, and affective style including intensity, high visibility and/or uniqueness. Sankar-DeLeeuw (1997) found consistency in the characterizations by teachers and parents in the descriptions of young gifted children, yet teachers reported traits that were not reported by parents, including discordant development, emotional immaturity, socialization difficulties, and a tendency of being pushed by their parents. Maxwell (1995) found a number of cognitive-related behaviors, including high levels of accumulated knowledge and thinking abilities, spontaneous incorporation of academic activities in free play, and pre-logical thinking that were prevalent in the young gifted child. Parents of these children often noted differences from the general population such as greater awareness and intensity and early language ability, even from birth. In contrast, an avoidance of and discomfort with ambiguity were also observed.

Fatouros (1986) reported that teacher identification of the gifted has been more difficult as the child's chronological age decreased. It is the job of the preschool teacher to provide learning opportunities, intellectual, social, and personal, which facilitate positive school life experiences and adaptations. However, working with young gifted students often involves dealing with boredom of the child due to lack of challenging tasks, boredom due to repetitiveness, and frustrations of the child because they are unable to accomplish tasks due to growth and/or development discrepancies. Roedell (1989) suggests that teachers play an important role in the formation of good study habits, positive social behavior and self-esteem development, interest in general, prevention of underachievement and boredom in school by this group. Yet, early childhood educators are still unfamiliar with indicators of exceptional potential and gifted educators are unfamiliar with developmentally appropriate practices.

Early research, such as a study conducted by Radford (1990) focused on a sampling of students from high socioeconomic areas. The results of course, yielded superior scores in all facets of the child's development. The study also suggested that the accuracy of parent and teacher identification renders some examination. Students, whose adult like gifts and talents emerged at middle childhood ages, were rarely noticed prior to the entrance of school. It is unfortunate, that these studies confirm a belief that gifted students will overcome problems independently regardless of any intervention that could have been provided. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) had trouble obtaining a large population of kindergarten children to study due to the fact that identification of gifted populations at this age was not common practice. Very few studies like this are done during the present time of children experiencing the events that influence their development. The researchers' recommendations suggested focusing on present characterizations of particular features with more detailed attention to environmental factors influencing the gifted individual.

Other obstacles to identifying the gifted and young, outlined by Sankar-DeLeeuw, suggested that identification and assessment of the young and gifted could be very challenging and difficult. The young gifted child is described as possibly being: independent (choosing alternative and more desired ways of utilizing presented materials), noncompliant (a stubborn willingness to complete presented tasks or stating the opposite to desired responses), perseverative (set on the completion of current tasks as directed on earlier tasks), uncoordinated (difficulty adapting to quick growth spurts), distractible (by stimuli in the environment, including family activities and routines when assessments occur in their own homes), exhibiting short attention span (requiring quick transitions between tasks, interesting materials and activities, off

topic dialogue between item/subtest presentations and frequent breaks), and developing unevenly (spurts and lags in growth) (pp. 232).

Giftedness is an exception to the “norm” just like a learning disability, and thus identification is much more difficult from the onset. Monks (1992) suggested that for these very reasons, the young gifted child is unjustly left until the middle of their school career. However, the research shows that early identification is a practice that even for the gifted child can help avoid problems experienced later in life, including development of underachieving behaviors, as well as, concealing ability behaviors. Monks also contended that children identified as gifted at a young age tend to continue to be identified as having high ability and great accomplishments throughout their adult life.

Reid and McGuire (1995) suggested that teaching interactions, intervention, and classroom procedures also affect the identification of the young and gifted. Kaufmann (1989) supported this notion by stating: “offering instruction for which the pupils have no real or imagined use fails to engage students, but it also hinders their social adaptation by wasting their time and substituting trivial information for knowledge that would allow them to pursue rewarding activities” (pp. 200). This statement supports the misconception that regardless of environments failing to meet the learning needs of the gifted, they will succeed anyway. Underachievement resulting from the lack of appropriate stimulation may also manifest itself as boredom, distractibility, noncompliance, resignation from challenging behaviors, inconsistent work and time on task, lack of concentration, and uneven skill development (Rimm, 1995). These ideas are closely related to motivation levels of the young gifted as well.

There is yet much more in the body of knowledge concerning the identification and assessment of the young and culturally diverse gifted students. According to Baldwin (2002) the

debate and intense interest in the education of gifted students has grown over the last three decades. Within these concerns, lies the continuing dilemma of applying established criteria to those students who are culturally diverse. According to Kozol (1995) giftedness exists in many guises that cannot always be measured by a particular test, and by looking beyond the intelligence test, many diverse students of high potential have been and will continue to be brought into the programs for the gifted.

Ethnic minority gifted can be located through kindergarten screening programs, which involve large numbers of children. Second, open-ended tasks, which encourage fluency, are the most promising. Third, verbal tasks, which use familiar concepts and vocabulary, do not necessarily discriminate against young ethnic minority gifted students (pp. 147). This research supported the idea that cognition was a good candidate to serve as a basis for a new test to begin using to identify minority students. Although new measures were designed and put into practice, researchers such as Mills and Tissot (1995) suggest that differences among ethnic groups are still found on certain test.

Colangelo and Fleuridas (1986) described problems of early identification of the young child as lying in the attempt to quantify the point of giftedness instead of just exploring the extraordinary ability on one or more areas of the child who shows promise. Therefore, the question of who is and who is not gifted should be changed to what is the individual child ready for? Johnson (1983) presented compelling evidence that the first few years of a child's life are the most critical in terms of psychological, intellectual, and motor development. It was also argued that these important early years, should be utilized to provide enriched, supportive, and stimulating environments to foster the gifted and talented abilities of the young child. Colangelo and Fleuridas (1986) also mentioned that putting labels on children, even a so-called positive one

such as gifted, could be detrimental in ways to the child's educational development. It may put too much pressure, academically, socially, and societally on the child.

However, these children should not be prohibited from developing their full potential even at an early age. Perhaps the changing way, in which children are identified and most importantly served as gifted, will change the drawbacks that might arise from having unique gifts, talents, and capabilities. While paradigms are shifting to help identify more culturally diverse gifted students, Baldwin (2002) noted that before proper identification methods can be addressed, certain assumptions must be embraced:

1. Giftedness can be expressed through a variety of behaviors and the expression of giftedness in one dimension is just as important as giftedness expressed in another.
2. Intelligence is a broad concept that goes beyond language and logic to encompass a wide range of human abilities.
3. Carefully planned subjective assessment techniques can be used effectively along with objective measures.
4. Giftedness in any area can be a clue to the presence of potential giftedness in another area, or a catalyst for the development of giftedness in another area.
5. All cultures have individuals who exhibit behaviors that are indicative of giftedness (pp.142).

Parental Involvement and the Gifted Child

Karnes (1984) suggested that the inclusion of parents in understanding the concepts of giftedness would help teachers and other adults with the identification process of gifted diverse students. Karnes further stated that parents play a specific and critical role in developing the

potential of a child starting at birth. Her findings indicated that parents who attended training sessions on how to recognize and develop gifted potential in their children had children who were identified and often succeeded in gifted programs at school.

Active parental involvement continues to be stressed in relation to children in school. The theme of actually fostering those productive relationships is now prevalent in education. Epstein (1992a) reported a high degree of existence of agreement among educators and parents concerning family and school partnerships as being of vital importance for schools, families, children and their academics. Research suggested that the home-school partnership is the alternative to putting the emphasis on either home or school alone. In fact, Robinson and Fine (1994) noted that the critical contribution to successful learning is not derived from the home or school in isolation, but from the dynamic relationship between the two working together. As such, special attention should be paid to developing collaborative parent-teacher relationships with culturally diverse parents.

As the population of the United States continues to grow, including students from different cultural backgrounds presented against our mostly White American teaching force, differences and misunderstandings are bound to surface, even without intention. Voltz (1994) highlighted the interdependence relationship between school and home in the education process and underscored the importance of developing effective partnerships with parents. She proceeded with the idea that attention to the task of developing effective parent-teacher partnerships is particularly critical when working with high-risk populations facing special challenges such as those with disabilities and those who have culturally diverse backgrounds. Parents of these students must deal with not only the everyday stresses of parenting, but must also manage stressors presented by having a child with a disability, or those associated with being culturally different in a society

which has historically often viewed these differences as deviant, difficult, inferior, etc. Because parents face such challenges, the educator faces the same challenges when trying to foster a relationship or overcome barriers to establishing a healthy collaboration between the school, teacher and parent. A second practice described by Voltz suggested a “tracking” of parents. This tracking occurred when school personnel decided on their own that certain groups of parents are “concerned” and other groups are “unconcerned.” Based on preconceived notions, educators and other school personnel interacted differently with the two groups.

Baruth and Manning (1992) described how preconceived notions of parents' concern or interaction with their children and the school system can affect the nature of the school’s interactions with the parents from the onset. Teacher expectations affect parent-teacher interactions just as strongly as they affect student-teacher interactions. Baruth and Manning (1992) further described that effective partnerships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds are usually attributed to the lack of sensitivity to cultural differences. Another related barrier, as describe by Williams (1992) is the socioeconomic realities over which educators have minimal or no control. These can negatively influence the development of healthy partnerships with parents of culturally diverse exceptional learners. Williams further found that an estimated one-third of African Americans live below the poverty line, in comparison to one-tenth of white Americans. Therefore, these diverse parents might find themselves too economically challenged and too dedicated to meeting the basic needs of life, resulting in not having much time to dedicate to building and nurturing home-school relationships as would be desired or expected. Baruth and Manning (1992) noted that parents are often intimidated by school personnel or by the institutional structure of the school.

Shea and Bauer (1993) discuss how becoming culturally sensitive can be one of the biggest advantages the school and teachers could have in establishing effective, positive communication between the parent and the school. Smith (1993) offered a definition of cultural sensitivity as "accepting the other person's beliefs and values and showing understanding and respect. If you are culturally sensitive, you genuinely feel you can try to support or help without imposing your own agenda for change" (pp. 115). Shea and Bauer support his definition because they believe that respecting cultural diversity is not benevolent, but is valid professional practice. To foster cultural sensitivity, the following factors should be considered: recognize cultural differences, consider variance in family constellations, be sensitive to variance in attitudes toward disability, and respect variance in childrearing practices. It is important for school personnel to become familiar with the students and families with which they work, including their cultural patterns. First hand contact obtained through social activities in the students community or from visits to their homes can raise awareness (Baruth and Manning, 1992).

As we have learned by much research presented, there are many barriers as well as other issues concerned with parental involvement in schools and the formation and extension of family-school partnerships in education. These barriers are equally important in the realm of gifted education and the amount or lack thereof, of parental involvement in the education of these children as members of a special population. According to Renzulli (1999), gifted education received a great deal of support in the late 1960s, but has been in decline since the 1980s when the federal report, A Nation at Risk was published (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). First and foremost, it is vital for gifted children to be identified early to enable early intervention, just as it is important to identify children with other learning deficits or other

handicaps (Silverman, 1997). Walker (1991) stated that it is important for parents to understand the various methods of identification that are used in the field of gifted education, such as intelligence and achievement tests; teacher, parent and/or peer nominations; creativity assessments; evaluation of products and performances; grades; and task commitment. In addition, students from underrepresented groups may need alternate assessments and identification tools, which are more culturally sensitive, and the parents should be made aware of the importance and significance of their application (Rash, 1998).

Although the importance of parental support and involvement in schools has been shown to be necessary in the African American culture as well, Winner (1996) found that parents of gifted children in general are often concerned about being unprepared and uneducated about what having a gifted child actually means. In relation to this, parents who participated in the study by Huff et al., (2005) had children who attended both public and private schools and reported being dissatisfied with educational interventions and perceptions of inadequate training and support for teachers who are assigned to teach gifted African American students. Parents felt their children wasted time and talents in programs and classes not appropriate for the aptitude and achievement of their children. To go along with these reports of barriers to the gifted African American student's education, Ford (1995) found that academic programs, mentoring programs, academic competitions, tutoring and educational planning were highly preferred and sought by African American students and parents.

Parents also found teachers to be a big problem in the success of the African American student in gifted education. Participants in the study found that teachers were unaware of individual differences in terms of students' talents, inexperienced with students' uneven development, and unfamiliar with personality and cultural characteristics of gifted African

American students. This in turn, led many teachers to misconceive the actions of African American gifted students as oppositional, challenging to authority, incapable of accelerated lessons, and apathetic to their class environments (Huff et al., 2005).

Cropper (1998) believed that when parents of minority students, including the gifted, are involved in the formal education of their children, continuity is established between the two most important institutions in a child's life. Students then see these two elements as overlapped and integrated, resulting in a sense of pride by having support from every adult and inspiration in their lives. Cropper further offered that curriculum is enriched when parents of the culturally different and gifted volunteer in the school. When these parents share their knowledge and culture with others, all students benefit from enriching information.

Frasier and Passow (1994) found as minority parents and teachers work together, they pooled their knowledge about gifted children and developed appropriate educational options for the social and emotional nurturing of that underrepresented gifted minority student's abilities. Frasier and Passow (1994) charged educators to recognize and facilitate the needs of the culturally different minority students. The deep concern and anxiety that develops in parents of gifted children should also be acknowledged and addressed. This is especially true of parents of low socio-economic status and minimal educational levels.

Summary

The purpose of the current study is to contribute to the field information about the specific risk factors within the context of one gifted child's life and education. The study provides evidence about how this student overcame the characteristics that put her at risk and defied the literature and research that says this child would be prohibited from being successful, as well as identified as gifted, based on history, statistics, and everyday cultural, ecological, environmental,

educational and personal characteristics surrounding this individual child. The supports surrounding this child are also described and used to explain how many factors other than just test measurements can demonstrate a child’s true potential.

Chapter 3

Methods

This chapter provides an overview of the methods used to conduct this study. I begin by providing the local context in which this study took place and a thorough description of the participant in this case study, Jane. Embedded in my discussion of Jane is my role with her as her classroom teacher and as a teacher who watched her develop once she left my grade level. The theoretical framework and specific methods used for the study are presented. The chapter concludes with a description of the data collection and data analysis.

Context

This study took place in a suburban Title I school on the outskirts of a very large city in the southeastern United States. The schools racial composition was very diverse and included 5% Asian, 58% African American, .5% Multi-racial, 10% White, and 22% Other. The school maintains a free or reduced lunch percentage rate of 71.7%. Many of the students enrolled in the school were raised by other family members, with some children not having any relationship with their biological parents. Most of the children resided in apartments, extended stay hotels/motels, town homes, and rental homes. The socio-economic status was considered low to low-middle class. The transiency rate for this school last year was 70.26% and continues to rise year after year.

The participant in this case study was a female who had attended the school since kindergarten and has had an unequal number of White and African American teachers. The school staff was comprised of 3 Title I teachers, 21 Early Intervention Program teachers, 4

English as a Second Language (ESOL) teachers, one ESOL paraprofessional, 6 special education teachers, and 84 full and part-time certified faculty members including teachers, administration, media specialists, and counselors. Among the faculty at the time of the study, 54% of the faculty held a Master's Degree or higher level of education. The school employed 39 non-certified staff including paraprofessionals, office staff, lunchroom workers, custodians, and a clinic assistant.

My first meeting with this student, Jane, was when she was in second grade. This was three years prior to the completion of the study. Jane was in the homeroom of one of my colleagues and we frequently changed classes to do crafts or other special occasion lessons. Our classes were compacted for mathematics instruction, flexible ability grouped based on skills assessments taught throughout the year, which allowed Jane to work with each teacher in the grade level for mathematics at some point. Often at lunch, my colleagues and I would talk about the remarkable resiliency and self-motivation to achieve that this student exhibited on a consistent basis.

Participants

This female student, whose pseudonym was Jane, lived in a low socio-economic, single parent, multicultural household where there was some concern about the stability of the daily activities in the home. Jane's mother was White and her father was African American. Jane's physical appearance would lead one to perceive her as African American, exemplified by her dark complexion and the texture of her hair. Jane wore glasses and was always dressed nicely for school. She is very quiet by nature, but was very involved in activities at the school, including school council, drama, chorus, etc. At the time of the interviews, Jane was ten years old.

Jane's mother was not employed as a result of a number of health concerns, and Jane and her mother lived with governmental assistance such as food stamps. Jane resided in an apartment home with her mother and younger brother who was four years old. Although her maternal

grandparents did not live in the home, they played a large role in helping the family stay together, functional, and without interruption as much as possible.

Academically, Jane excelled in school starting with her entrance in kindergarten. In kindergarten, Jane was perceived by her teachers to be a very bright child who had also seen and experienced much of the adult world. She was exposed to some less than desirable situations such as abuse of her parent. However, at one point, Jane was confident and intuitive enough to tell her kindergarten teacher about this abuse, which prompted the school to initiate social service intervention and also provided assistance for the family. In first grade, Jane consistently completed her work quickly and helped others in the class, clear indicators of early leadership skills. Her first grade teacher referred her for testing for the gifted program. At that time and according to the criteria used by the school for admission, Jane missed the entrance score by one point. Because of her high scores, Jane attended the Wings [enrichment program] classes for excelling students once a week for the remainder of first grade.

In the second grade, the homeroom teacher noted Jane's exceptional abilities and talked with her peers about her skills. Further testing was recommended by this teacher, and by the end of the year, Jane was placed in Target, the gifted program. When Jane enrolled in her third and fourth grade classrooms, Target students were clustered in certain homerooms so that differentiated instruction with a focus on their abilities was implemented in the general education classroom. Therefore, Jane's academic skills were supported in her general education and gifted classrooms.

While Jane continued to excel in all areas at school, one significant event took place in Jane's life during the second grade. Her mother, who suffered from sleep apnea, slipped into a coma for several weeks. Jane was taken care of by her grandparents who always were and still are major

components of her life. She began to show signs of decreased effort and didn't complete her work at school. She was not showing the same level of interest as she had before her mother became ill. Not knowing what would happen with her mother, and being unsure of her future, she was not the same student that her kindergarten and first grade teachers had known. With the help of her grandparents and other supportive teachers at the school, all parties worked to make sure that Jane did not lose her love of wanting to learn and her status as a role model in school. The school counselors also stepped in and helped the family with the home school connection to ensure that Jane continued to be successful.

While this concern with her mother was present, other family events began to impact Jane's life. According to accounts told by Jane, her mother and her grandparents, a woman who claimed to be married to her father, with whom Jane did not have contact, started interacting with Jane and her brother. She paid much attention to Jane's younger brother because he looked like Jane's father, whom this woman claimed to be married too. However, with Jane's father in prison and Jane's mother very ill, it was difficult for Jane's grandparents to extricate the children from this woman. She stayed at their house, ate their food, and tried to take control of the household. Even as a young girl, Jane knew this wasn't an ideal situation and began to talk to her grandparents about it. Soon enough, without much harm to the family and status of the children's health, the grandparents intervened to make sure that the woman was not able to affect the lives of Jane and her family any longer. In an interview with Jane, Jane expressed concerns about the feeling of favoritism towards her brother from this woman. Jane even expressed that this woman was actually "mean" to her because Jane didn't look like her father and this woman considered the father's son, Jane's brother to be like a child of her own. Naturally, feelings of uneasiness and rejection at home began to affect the lives of the children outside the home and in other

relationships with adults and children. Despite the concerns raised by the presence of this extra adult in the home, Jane's extended family provided her with incredible social support.

Jane’s grandmother was a retired teacher and her grandfather a retired minister, so the two of them have been important players in Jane's life since her birth. Her grandmother realized the importance of supporting Jane’s academics especially when Jane's mother was sick. Her grandfather felt it important to keep the faith strong in the family despite the obstacles that continued to present themselves**.** Jane's grandparents were very involved and supportive of Jane, her mother, and her brother. Although, there were many times the grandparents did not agree with decisions Jane’s mother made, they strived hard to keep the family focused on the important things in life and being successful while focusing on positive strengths.

Jane was very fortunate to have a number of teachers and counselors constantly concerned with her well-being and her willingness to be a successful, bright, young girl. Given this encouragement and continuous support, these teachers were interested in being a part of telling Jane’s story and working with me on this research project. Each person that had worked with or was currently working with Jane in the school agreed to be interviewed by me and participate in a group discussion.

The counselor at the school, who has been with Jane since Kindergarten, had played an important role as a liaison between the family, home, and school. This counselor's constant concern and support had also contributed to Jane’s success as a student and young lady. The counselor and Jane share a common characteristic in that both of them come from a mixed cultural background. Because of this characteristic, the two have a very close and open relationship with each other.

The gifted program and services at the school were administered through a pullout program. Jane had been with this same instructor of gifted services since testing into the program. The gifted teacher was a very proactive seeker in getting Jane the services she deserved and needed. The gifted teacher has been an educator for 10 years and is a White female.

Among the teachers Jane has had, kindergarten through fifth grade, only one was African American with the other five being White. The teachers have earned degrees ranging from a bachelor's degree to a specialist degree, with years of experience that ranged from 5 to 15 years. These teachers have dedicated their teaching careers to teaching in a Title I school where differences and individuality is not only noticed and fostered, but also highly respected. Each teacher is from an upper middle class socioeconomic family and has made a conscious choice to work with students who attend the Title I schools. Jane's kindergarten teacher was White and married with no children. Her first grade teacher was White and married with one child. Jane's second grade teacher was a single, White, and had two adopted children from China. Her third grade teacher was White, married, and had no children of her own. Her fourth grade teacher was a married African American female who had no children of her own. Finally, Jane's fifth grade teacher was White, married, and had one child with another due in December of 2007.

My role in the study is not only that of researcher, but of participant as well. I worked with Jane in mathematics groups, although she was not in my homeroom in second grade. Second grade math was taught through compacting so that those children who had already mastered the mathematics concepts could be challenged and those who needed more support could get the extra help they needed. Although I did not work with her on a daily basis for the whole year, the second grade teachers worked closely together so each teacher really knew every second grade

child. As such, many conversations took place amongst our team about each child we taught and how to reach the individual needs of each child.

Having been in this school for a number of years and appreciating the children who respect and love the adults in the school, Jane was very willing to be open and share her story with me. Her mother felt the same way. Jane's mother expressed to me in interviews that she never really viewed her child's multiethnic, single parent home, and low socio-economic status as negative factors that could affect her in her educational journey. Her grandparents were also not openly concerned with this. Her mother expressed that she knew that teachers have different ideas and feelings, but didn't realize that her child's progress and success could actually be influenced by how those teachers made Jane feel about her self-worth. Jane and her mother both expressed their love and appreciation for the school and the teachers who had worked with them for the past six years to insure that they, the student and the family, were a success and that Jane's potential didn't go unnoticed.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory is a theoretical frame that combines children's biological characteristics with the environmental forces that come together to shape development. Conceptualized by Urie Bronfenbrenner, there are two environmental conditions that are necessary for human development. The first is that one or more adults must support the child unconditionally, and the second is that adults must encourage and support the child in multiple environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's theory can be best envisioned through a series of concentric circles, where the smallest circle in the center of all the circles is the child. Such a nested environment then is contained in various systems, which contain individuals and groups of individuals in each subsequent layer. This theory is often referred to as "Development

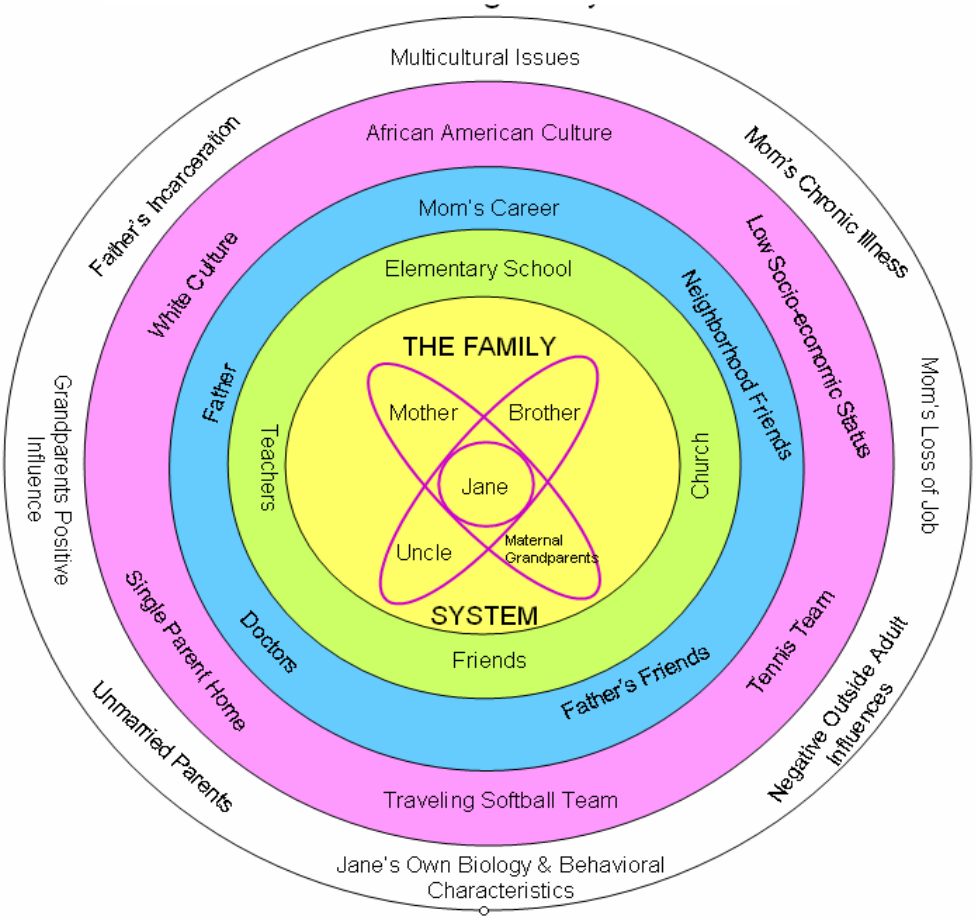
in Context" or "Human Ecology" theory in which four types of nested environmental systems with bi-directional influences within and between the systems interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Later, a fifth system was added.

The five systems are: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. The first, Microsystem, is the immediate environment (family, school, peer group, neighborhood, and childcare environments) of the child. These environments have bi-directional influences on each other, which take place when individuals and groups of individuals interact and directly affect others who exist within the same layer, as well as those who are in the layers on either side of them. The person's own biology is considered part of the microsystem; therefore, the theory has recently been referred to as the "Bio-Ecological Systems Theory." Second, the Mesosystem is comprised of connections between immediate environments such as the child's home and school and it encompasses connections between the Microsystems.

Third, the Exosystem surrounds the mesosystem and refers to social settings that affect the child but do not include the child, such as the parent's workplace or health services in the community. The fourth system, the Macrosystem, contains the larger cultural context in which the child functions such as Eastern vs. Western culture, national economy, political culture, subculture, norms, laws, and other environments that might influence and/or support the child within the environment. The final system, the Chronosystem is the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the course of life. It involves the temporal changes in a child's environment, which produce the new conditions, which affect development. These changes can be imposed externally or arise from within the child and can take place on a daily or frequent basis. Each system contains roles, norms, and rules that can powerfully shape development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The following description and illustration outlines each of the five systems as they relate to my subject, Jane and her environment (see figure 3.1). In the center of course, is Jane. Her Microsystem consists of mother, brother, grandmother, grandfather, and uncles. The Mesosystem is comprised of her elementary school, church, and groups of friends in school and at church. For part of Jane's life until the second grade, her Exosystem consisted of her mom's work, doctors, a neighborhood friend, and her father, inconsistently, and father's friends. Her macrosystem seems to be quite complicated. She is both part of the African American and White cultures. She is considered to be in a low socio-economic income status as she and her family received food stamps and lived on a limited budget. Jane is also from a single parent home which puts another stigma on her from some individuals in today's society. Jane's Chronosystem is full. The characteristics of this fullness include her father's repeated incarceration, her mother's loss of her job from her mother's illness, the inclusion of less than desirable people and influences that have also impacted her development. These other influences include lack of money, unmarried parents, and not being of one culture to which she can totally be accepted. Jane also has the everlasting, strong support from her grandparents, which brings a positive outlook on life into perspective. Their constant intervention on behalf of Jane and her mother instilled peace and tranquility despite the obstacles included in Jane's chronosystem. Regardless of some of these overarching concerns, Jane has accepted, adjusted, and overcome many concerns and has been academically and socially successful.

Figure 3.1 – Jane's Ecological Systems



Research Perspective

Phenomenology is a method of philosophical enquiry developed by Edmund Husserl, modified by Marin Heidegger and reinterpreted by many researchers over time. It is a set of theoretical approaches that attempt to understand the way in which people experience the world they create and inhabit; the study of human experience and consciousness in everyday life (Spiegelberg, 1982). This method is based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of factors independent of human consciousness. The starting point is the idea of "being" in the world that is

being situated in a physical and social space. Phenomenology argues against the view that there are hidden things in themselves, which lie beyond phenomena; it attempts to transcend the opposition between the idealist reduction of the world to the knowledge we have of it and postulates that the external world exists independently of the activity of the mind (Hammond et al., 1991). The emphasis is upon the intentionality of consciousness; for example, the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of something, is directed towards its objects in acts not only of perception and cognition, identification and synthesis, but also of willing, desiring, imagining, etc (Hammond et al., 1991). Husserl developed the phenomenological method to make possible a descriptive account of the essential structures of the directly given. The immediacy of experience is emphasized, which is the attempt to isolate it and set it off from all assumptions of existence or causal influence and lay bare its essential structure (Grossman, 1984). Phenomenology restricts the philosopher's attention to the pure data of consciousness, uncontaminated by the individual's personal world as directly experienced.

For a clearer understanding, I like the explanation given by Van Maanen (1990) where he states "Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some"thing" what it is and without which it could not be what it is" (pp. 56). What these various definitions have in common is a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning. This requires a researcher to methodologically capture and describe how people experience some phenomenon by how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others.

This particular case study of the "at-risk" gifted student is in fact a phenomenological study. I am attempting to understand the way Jane, as a successful gifted student, with at-risk factors,

experienced the world that had been created with and around her. In this journey, I am also trying to understand how the interaction of Jane's five ecological systems shaped Jane's world and her understanding of it influenced her development. Being a participant observer, I have been able to document how Jane's systems have interacted, as I have been an integral part of her education. As well I have seen Jane's connections between school, home, and other agencies. In this work, I participated in focused discussions with other participants who have had an influence in Jane's development. By participating in group discussions as an educator and not just the researcher, I was able to have fruitful discussions with colleagues about Jane and was not perceived as one who was merely doing research. As a group of colleagues, we discussed our ideas and experiences of students who were like Jane, as well as Jane herself, and to see where we all stood in her accomplishments and how our beliefs and practices helped, prohibited, changed, or influenced Jane's development.

Some might say this could also be an interpretive study. According to Erikson (1973) phenomenology is part of interpretivism. It is interpretive in the fact that the analyst examines a story, a case study, a set of interviews, or a collection of field notes and asks, What does this mean? What does this tell me about the nature of the phenomenon of interest? In asking these questions, the analyst works back and forth between the data and his or her own perspectives and understandings to make sense of the evidence. However, because phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences, using phenomenology as a method for this case study of understanding how a child with so many barriers, or at least as perceived by others, succeeds, can be very informative for the field as researchers reconceptualize young gifted learners.

Data Collection

Formal individual interviews were conducted with six elementary school teachers, one guidance counselor, and the gifted education teacher, those who were either directly or indirectly involved in the education of Jane, using an interview protocol developed by the researcher including questions such as: relationship with Jane, ideas and feelings on working with children from low socio-economic status, multiethnic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds different from the interviewee, and different make-ups of the family nucleus. These interviews took place in an off campus, neutral location, and were kept to a one-hour time limit to be considerate of personal obligations and family time. Information was also collected by questionnaire from her current principal in the school. Informal interviews were also conducted with Jane, her mother, and her grandparents. Ideas and areas of interest explored were their family background and history, significant events in their lives, cultural differences, issues dealing with lack of monetary support, and raising and being raised in a family with only one primary caregiver. These discussions took place after school in a secure and private location and in the grandparents' home. The duration of the interviews was between one and two hours. Her father was contacted by letter in his prison but no response was received.

Focus group interviews among the six general education educators and me took place off campus in a secure and comfortable location. These generally lasted two hours in length. Educators could talk much more on subjects such as Jane and her successes and how she overcame many boundaries, but we tried to keep it to a minimum. I was an active participant in the focus group discussions, and my main goal was to keep it a discussion session to get strong, high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of

the views of others. It was my main objective to participate in the discussions and keep it from becoming a decision-making or problem solving session.

All interview and focus group discussions were taped and transcribed. Interview protocols for Jane, her mother, her grandparents, and her teachers were established. Jane's mother's and grandparents' interviews remained structured according to the protocol. However, Jane's interviews and the teacher's interview protocol structure were loosely followed. Focus group discussions centered around Jane as a student and the obstacles and/or supports that she identified as influences of importance in her life.

Analysis of Jane's cumulative records and other schoolwork and social work documentation also provided information. The cumulative folder contained identification information, residence proof, custody papers, standardized test scores, record of SST (student support team) information, Gifted and Talented referral, testing and admittance information, and other social work papers that had been provided throughout Jane's schooling in elementary school. These documents were studied to look for information that cannot be observed or obtained in an interview. They revealed things that had taken place before my evaluation began such as reports from home referred to DFACS, Department of Family and Children Services, that the social worker and guidance counselor were involved in and other private interchanges I may not have been made aware of from the family or other participants. According to Patton (2002) by analyzing these documents right at the beginning of my inquiry, further stimulus was provided for paths of inquiry that could only be pursued through observations and interviews. Having looked through all of this information first, I realized Jane's family was already incredibly open and honest with me, but it gave me an avenue to explore issues that may not have readily come up in our interviews without a premise.

The school system, which Jane attends, keeps a separate portfolio of work. This portfolio was collected and analyzed to measure growth and progress throughout her years of schooling. A portfolio is a compilation of work consisting of reading, math, and writing samples that followed the student throughout their schooling within the county where this study was conducted. The portfolio enabled the teachers to see from year to year where the student left off and what data should be collected on the student at the beginning of the next year. Many teachers referred to this portfolio before administering start of the year evaluations to see where to begin with a student, if there are any immediate concerns, or if further planning and challenging for differentiated instruction is needed.

Data was also collected through my own notes and observations of the student, student parent interactions at the time of interviewing, and observations of teaching practices and student-teacher interactions. I frequently would observe her interactions in the hallway, lunchtime, and on the playground. Classroom performance was noted from teachers who had her at specific times during the data collection process. I considered her performance when she was in second grade when I had a closer contact throughout the day. Being a participant observer allowed me to gather much more insight and strong data because I was not simply viewed as an on-looker by the participants. Especially between the teachers, I was seen as a facilitator of discussions, which we as educators are used to in so many settings. Over the three months that I observed the student, the sessions were kept short and informal so as not to interrupt the school day or call attention to the student and/or teacher under observation. This task was fairly easy being in a Title I school where many volunteers are in and out of classrooms on a daily basis. Upon the completion of an observation of participants (such as teachers) or Jane, notes were taken and completed so as not to forget the importance of the session and the data presented. Knowing

what kind of student Jane was through working with her and her teachers, many more characteristics were noted through my individual meetings and activities with the student outside of school.

Finally, a parent history form was completed. This document had previously been completed when numerous reports were made to the guidance counselor at the school and social worker as a result of reports made by teachers based on information Jane provided about her home situations. Jane's mother completed the form again and updated the information on Jane, their history, and current events. Jane's mother continued to work with me openly and honestly, although many of the past situations were quite personal and perhaps embarrassing. Because of her openness from the start, this was one more document that allowed me information for further discussion should something of importance not arise in the interviews naturally. This is where the home-school connection and problems or situations at home affecting Jane's performance at school were brought to my attention, which were subsequently discussed in interviews.

Data Analysis

Bernard (2000) writes of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and his known contributions to inductive analysis, defined as the use of direct observation to confirm ideas and the linking together of observed facts to form theories or explanations of how natural phenomenon work. Analysis was conducted on the data forms collected - interviews, documents, and observations, using Inductive Analysis. This method involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data (Patton, 2000). Findings emerge from the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data, and analytic induction is a procedure for verifying theories and propositions based on qualitative data (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The first step taken was to find some manageable coding system for the data. After reviewing the data observed and referring constantly back to

the interviews, three a priori categories arose; support mechanisms, barriers, and barriers that were overcome. After coding the data collected and establishing these categories, the challenge of convergence and making sure that things fit together was easily avoided. The information collected throughout the different forms of data all seemed to relate and interact in some form or another with each other, the participants, and the ecological systems identified for Jane.

Guba (1978) talked of divergence, which means the analyst must "flesh out" the patterns, or categories established. This is done by processes of extension, building on items of information already known; bridging, making connections among different items; and surfacing, proposing new information that ought to fit and brings closure to the process. This process helped to relate the data categories of support mechanisms, barriers, and barriers that were overcome to each of Jane's ecological systems that make up her identity and world. The support mechanisms category is strongly related to Jane's microsystem in that her mother, grandparents, and uncles have been highly supportive and protective of her. They strived to make sure she has the most stable environment possible through working together and supporting each other. Jane's own biological make-up is a big support mechanism within her microsystem. She is a survivor and an achiever and wants to be the best she can be, despite anything negative or potentially harmful that could be thrown in her way. Another huge support mechanism is the fact that the members of Jane's micro and mesosystem have worked together to insure that the barriers Jane faces are overcome. There is a strong home-school connection; with very open communication established that keeps these systems strong and effective.

One barrier that may have occurred early on in this system was the fact that many home situations concerning relationships with Jane's father and friends of his were less than desirable situations for the school to know about. Jane's mother, like most others, wanted to keep personal

home life matters exactly there, in the home. However, they were on Jane's mind and prohibiting her from doing her best and being able to function as a fully attentive student so she brought them to trusting adults' attention, her educators. Soon, however, her mother saw that her child's happiness and success was most important and worked cooperatively and thankfully with the school and appreciated everything they were doing for her daughter and family.

Jane's exosystem consisted mainly of her mom's work, dad's friends, letters from dad in prison, and church activities. Her church activities and mom's work were of course support mechanisms in her life. However, when her mother lost her job due to illness, this caused a barrier, but one that was overcome through the support of home, school, and family. Her father and father's friends would seem to be barriers to Jane's systems interacting successfully without fail. Although her father was basically absent from most of her life, her mother still tried to encourage Jane to write or call him to keep some form of contact. However, through the bad choices her father made in his life and the friend's that remained consistently present around Jane and her family, Jane would later choose to ignore these barriers and strive to be better on her own anyway. She viewed these as things that might keep her from reaching her goals and being who she wanted to be.

Jane's macrosystem contained barriers to overcome in her life. As related to the review of the research, children from low socio-economic, single parent, culturally diverse backgrounds are highly underrepresented in the gifted education field and often go unnoticed for their positive characteristics and contributions to society, friends, and all that they are involved in. Jane, however, has become a successful, self-driven, goal oriented young lady on her own, as well as, with school and home support despite the fact that she belongs to each of these groups.

Jane's chronosystem, the changes in her life, are what seriously contributed to barriers to be overcome. Her mother lost her job and is unable to seek employment due to her illness, therefore forcing the family to be supported by the government monetarily. During this time, Jane lived with her grandparents. Any change in household status, moving, or other related events to these can influence a change in disposition for a child. Jane has always known the status of her mother and father's relationship, and seeing abuse of her mother definitely prompted Jane to act differently and withdraw from activities or socialization at school. Having to deal with strangers in and out of the house that are "friends" of her father's caused discomfort in Jane as well. Having her family nucleus, as she knew it, disrupted caused a hardship for her at school also. However, by seeking help through "telling" about what was going on at home and realizing that the school would care enough to get help for Jane and her family, these barriers were overcome.

Because measures of this particular case study are not of a quantitative style with numbers to represent data or information, qualitative analysts, such as me, must rely on intelligence, experience, and judgment, and must take seriously the responses of those who were studied or participated in the inquiry, and should consider the responses and reactions of those who read and review the results. Where we all three agree, the analyst, those studied, and reviewers, is where viability will occur for this qualitative study. Being an educator for ten years myself, working with this population of children all ten years in different areas, has helped me to see and understand that there are positive aspects to every child and taking the time to figure that out can be a long and tedious process, but well worth the results. This leads the qualitative inductive analyst to interpret findings beginning with elucidating meanings (Patton, 2000). As a researcher and an educator, giftedness is not clearly defined for me. There is no clear-cut definition or "menu" to follow that defines giftedness. Giftedness to me shows itself in various ways such as

children advancing their own learning, asking many questions, showing problem solving skills, looking into areas of interest on their own. Giftedness also presents itself in negative ways such as refusal behaviors that could be viewed as defiant, but just might be a different learning style held by the student in accordance with the instruction. I also look for talent and unique qualities in other areas such as music and art. Therefore, all the data collected through interviews, Jane's story, documentation, and field notes will lead us to ask, What does this all mean? What does this tell me about the nature of the phenomenon of interest? The discovery of these categories and themes and how they relate back to Jane's systems will help us to understand how despite the research that an "at risk" student would not be successful and/or represented in the gifted education realm as readily as another student not displaying these at risk characteristics, but can in fact overcome and be successful if the support mechanisms are in place from the viewpoint that all children can and will learn if given the chance.

Specifically, the following research questions will be answered. What contributed to this "at risk" student becoming a success in school? How are "at risk" characteristics viewed as barriers and/or obstacles to the success of minority gifted learners? What is the importance of one's ecological systems, positive or negative, on the success or failure of gifted minority students and how do they work together? By finding the answers to these questions I hope to discover implications for identifying more minority gifted learners and establish ways to allow them to realize the importance of their gifts and how to firmly establish these gifts to be successful learners.

Chapter 4

Findings

The interviews, focus groups, and document analysis that centered on the experiences that Jane had during her formative elementary school years can be tightly connected to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory. This chapter will provide a description of how one child's systems interacted with one another and how those systems influenced the development of a child who would be considered at risk for not maximizing her potential to succeed in elementary school. In particular, the value of the fifth of Bronfenbrenner's systems will be highlighted in this case. It is through this lens that one can view the obstacles Jane faced and the elements that helped Jane overcome such obstacles to promote her early success.

Microsystems

Beginning with Jane's microsystems, Jane was one of a number of Microsystems that also consisted of her mother, her brother, her maternal grandparents, and her uncle. Each of these microsystems influenced the development of Jane's strong sense of self worth. That is, all of these adults supported and loved Jane unconditionally and did so within multiple environments. An interview with Jane's mother revealed that Jane's mother struggled with her own personal life and relationships, but with assistance from her own parents, did not let those issues interfere with Jane's upbringing. Such a relationship was described by both Jane and her mother as close and more like "sisters than mother and daughter."

The closeness of Jane's relationship with her mother was also perceived to be a result of the transciency of Jane's mother's relationship with Jane's biological father. Jane's mother and father never married. In addition, Jane's father would come and go and live with the family for different amounts of time prompting Jane and her mother to rely on each other for company and support. During one interview Jane stated,

> I don't even have any desire to move out ever. When I go to college my mom has said she is moving with me. We love being together and I have no desire to move away from my mom until I have too.

Subsequently, in an interview with her mother, Jane's mother confirmed the strength of this relationship by noting:

> Where ever Jane goes I am going. I have no desire to date or have a relationship with another man. I just want my children to be successful and feel loved and supported by me, their grandparents, and other adults such as teachers involved in their lives.

Interviews with Jane's maternal grandparents revealed that they were one of her biggest support systems, as well as, instrumental in keeping stability within Jane's, her mother's, and her brother's home. In fact, during the time that Jane's mother was in the hospital and in a coma, Jane lived with her grandparents who tried to keep everything as typical as possible with Jane's everyday responsibilities and activities. Her grandfather expressed: "I take Jane to school every morning. That is our time together and helps me to know that she is at school on time everyday so she can start her day off the right way." Jane's grandfather was a retired minister, and stated that it was very important to him to keep the family within the church. He was so committed to that ideal that he took primary responsibility for that endeavor. Jane's grandfather expressed his spiritual view by noting "I never push my views on others. I simply seek to encourage each person to find and grow in their own spiritual well-being." He went on to say that approach was the approach that he took with Jane and other members of his family. Jane's grandfather further noted that he wanted Jane, her mother, and her brother to keep the faith, albeit finding it in their own way, so that they can have a prosperous, peaceful life; despite the obstacles that the family, especially Jane, had to overcome in her macro- and chronosystems.

Jane also spoke often of an uncle who played an important role in certain episodes in her life. Jane stated: "When I was born my mom sent a picture of me to my uncle and my skin was lighter then. When he saw me in person later, he didn't think I was the same baby because my skin was darker like my father's at that point." However, Jane's mother said that was a "short lived" experience and the family immediately fell in love with Jane and began to support and take care of Jane and her mother. Although Jane does not have as much interaction with her uncle as she does with her grandparents and her mother, it was apparent by the way Jane referred to her uncle that she respected her uncle, his actions, how he reacted to her, and how he supported the family. Her relationship with her uncle will be described more fully as Jane's chronosystem is discussed.

The final person involved in Jane's microsystem is her four-year-old brother. He was present at an interview with Jane and her mother, but wasn't interested in talking to me. He played with

the toys while the interview was conducted and simply ignored the conversation. Jane's mother stated that "My daughter is like a little mother to her brother. She helps me take care of him and tends to his needs if I can't or am not feeling well. The age difference between the two of them naturally created this support system, especially because Jane is the helpful, independent, motherly type, anyway." It became apparent after my interview with the family that they were very close and in fact, it seemed that Jane's little brother had "two moms" to take care of him as Jane paid the same attention to her brother as did her mother.

Mesosystem

Jane's mesosystem consisted of her friends, church, teachers, and others from her elementary school. As Bronfenbrenner advanced, the microsystem and mesosystems work together in that one encompasses the other and the connection between the two is extremely important. As mentioned in the discussion of Jane's microsystem, her grandfather and the church is highly connected to Jane's life. Jane told me in an interview that she attended a Lutheran Church and was the only African American person who attended that specific church. Jane followed this with, "I never felt uneasy there or out of place due to my race until new people joined the church. They would all stare at first until they got to know us, especially since my skin color looked different from my mother's." As we talked further, Jane said the church was very large until the previous pastor stole from the church and was dismissed. When this happened, Jane said she felt "like all eyes weren't on her anymore and people became more accepting. It was like they didn't worry about what I looked like anymore, especially since a pastor just took money from his own church." Jane commented that she thought that people should be more worried about the really "bad" things people do and not what they look like, especially if one may have considered her former pastor to "look like a perfect pastor." In Jane's mind she was trying to make sense of prejudices in her world and how they related to or affected her. She let me know that by witnessing such an event, she could overcome a simple thing like someone having a problem with what color she or her parents were. Such a view is one that is quite enlightened for an elementary-aged child.

Within Jane's mesosystem, she had friends who were in the program for the gifted, friends who were not in the program for the gifted, friends at church, and only one friend from her apartment building. Jane's best friend was not in the Target program with her and was slated to go to a different middle school the next academic year. This change upset Jane as she perceived that she

and her friend would not be able to stay as close with one another without the constant contact of the school setting. The other friend, from Jane's apartment building, was not one of whom she spoke as highly. From our interview, it appeared that the mother of that friend gave her friend many things that Jane wasn't able to receive and which she subsequently flaunted to Jane. Her friend's behavior caused feelings of uneasiness, but not really jealousy as Jane expressed, "I know my mom and family can't quite give me what her mom does, but for reasons I shouldn't talk about, I'm ok with it. Mainly because we are concerned about the way the mother of my friend gets all that money to spend." Jane didn't want to continue talking about this sensitive subject because she obviously knew what information she could share or not share and as an educator, I might have a duty to report such behavior. Jane was adept at understanding the intricacies of this specific mesosystem and could appreciate some aspects of her friendship with the young girl, but also distance herself from the elements of that mesosystem that were not appealing to her.

The same finding could be seen in Jane's relationships with some of her classmates. Jane felt as though she related better to her gifted peers and always drifted toward the "brighter" students where they could have more "meaningful" conversations. She further noted that sometimes "other children, not as smart as her, wouldn't catch her jokes or understand her jokes, and other things like that."

Jane's elementary school, including her teachers and other staff members, comprised another mesosystem and played an important role in Jane's development as a student and as a person. Jane's kindergarten teacher was the first to notice and to express that,

> Jane was an awfully bright and intuitive child. She took the initiative to learn new things on her own and was always searching for things to do and interact with. She naturally gravitated toward other children like her, but I did begin to notice that there were shy, quiet times when she would come to school and I could see in her eyes there was something on her mind.

This kindergarten teacher further noted that Jane would become slightly withdrawn and quiet and not seem as interested in school. One particular incident was brought to my attention by Jane, her mother, and her kindergarten teacher. Jane was present when Jane's mother told me that if I looked in Jane's permanent record I would see a DFACS (Department of Family and Children Services) report from Kindergarten where Jane's father had "hit her in the mouth and Jane was

worried and told her teacher about it." On another account when I was talking with Jane individually, she said:

> The other day, my mom didn't really remember the story as it was. After my dad had hit my mom and busted her nose or lip, he threw a phone at her and it happened to hit me and leave a bruise. I was very scared and decided to tell my teacher hoping for help when she asked how I had gotten that nasty bruise. They were mad at me at first and my mom was even arrested at work, and the police officer came to school to talk to me.

Although Jane's mother and Jane seemed to remember the incident differently, Jane said she felt more at ease knowing the school would care enough to help. This is another example of how Jane sought resources in the systems that surrounded her. Such attention to the positive role that the school as a mesosystem could play would likely not be found in a child who does not have the same gifts and talents as did Jane. Jane's mother said it was an "eye-opening" experience and that she learned an extremely valuable lesson in that her children come first and that she did not have to experience such abuse or subject her children to it. Jane also stated she was reluctant to tell anyone at first, because she thought her mom would be in trouble with her parents, Jane's grandparents, because they thought Jane's mom had gotten away from her dad. This is an interesting finding in that Jane sought support in a mesosystem instead of the microsystems that were more closely surrounding her. As this was not the first incident of abuse that Jane witnessed, and because Jane's father never married her mother because he had another wife already, and because Jane's grandparents really didn't want her father around their daughter or grandchild, Jane sought support from systems that were slightly removed from her.

Jane's first grade year was marked by her teacher noticing "her inquisitive attitude as a student and her fast progress and desire for reading." Jane's teacher expressed that this was one student who would read all day if allowed. "She would pick up any book and attempt to read it." Other than occasional times in which Jane seemed to have other things on her mind, her teacher didn't notice anything like the incidence reported in kindergarten. She knew of Jane's history and that her father wasn't around consistently, but could tell when he might be "in the picture." Jane's first grade teacher stated,

> I often felt I knew when her father might have drifted into their family again, because Jane came to school with much more apprehension and tension than usual. I kept close to the counselor hoping to know when her father was in or out of jail and might be around to harm the family. I didn't want anything to go unnoticed.

By the end of the first grade year, Jane was still showing signs of exceptional work and ability. The first grade teacher noted that she should be tested for Target. Her first grade teacher also indicated that she saw this as a "good avenue to give Jane some success she could own without worry in her life."

By second grade, Jane was tested for the gifted program at her school. She missed the requisite number of points by two, but her Target teacher said:

> I pushed for this child and we got her into the program. I saw so much potential in this one little girl that I couldn't let a test score hold her back. So, I used two other means, a teacher rating form and the creativity test to get her in. As far as I was concerned, the teacher ratings were so high I would have to let her in anyway.

Along with Jane's general education teachers, the gifted teacher stated Jane had so much drive, ambition, and intelligence, she needed other opportunities to show it. Jane's gifted teachers also felt this would give Jane a way to express her independence and love of learning as well as improve her own self-confidence. Here we can see the operation of the mesosystem. Jane was being acted upon by caring adults. The literature points to the lack of teacher endorsement or advocacy. Here is an example of how a system was working on Jane and promoted her inclusion because of thorough efforts to match her instructional needs with programs that facilitated her abilities. Although this great experience with her education in the second grade took place, obstacles from Jane's chronosystem began to arise and interfere with her progress, albeit ever so slightly. Jane's mother stopped breathing and slipped into a coma for several weeks. Jane had to go live with her grandparents unsure of whether her mother would live or die. Naturally, this caused her to be less attentive at school. Also, a negative adult influence crept into her family's life. Jane reported,

> My dad's wife thought my mom was going to die and since my dad was in jail, this woman thought she was going to get my brother because he looked like my dad. She kept coming to our house and being only nice to my brother, but she was mean to me and would hit me and stuff.

Jane said her father didn't believe her and that she should be nice to this woman who was "only trying to help them while her mother was sick." Instead, Jane's grandparents and mother agreed she was trying to take advantage of them while her mother was sick and to obtain custody of Jane's brother because he was the father's son, and this woman herself couldn't have children.

By the end of second grade, the grandparents and Jane's uncle had intervened, and removed the father's wife and any more of Jane's father's friends who might have a negative influence over the family or harm them in any way. Jane said it was like this for most of her life through second grade. Her father would come and go as he pleased, his other wives would invade her home and be mean to her, then he would go to jail for something, but leave again "once he got out and made bond." Jane expressed to me that until she was older, which to her was third grade, she wasn't sure how many wives her father actually claimed to have, and he also had six other children; all of whom Jane and her brother hardly knew or with whom they had little interaction. Her father continued to drift in and out of their lives until remaining in jail for an extended period of time. Jane's grandparents also finally intervened, as well as, Jane's mother realizing, "My children needed a more stable, positive atmosphere and only I and my parents can give it to them."

Jane was extremely close to her third grade teacher. Jane, in an interview, reported,

> Mrs. Smith my third grade teacher was a pusher. She always wanted and expected me to do more. My mom wouldn't help because she would want to get what was necessary done and not anything extra. I guess that it was because she was always worried about keeping the other bad things that happened to us away from everybody else's knowing.

Jane went on to say that once her mother was feeling better, although she couldn't work any longer, her attitude changed and she also supported all the extra things Jane was doing in school. Along with this Jane told me,

> I didn't know I was really smart before I tested into the gifted program. I looked forward to going to school because of home problems and learning made me excited and feel good. I would also dread going home if my parents were fighting.

Jane also expressed that by third grade school was "a whole lot easier." She went on to say, "When I didn't have to worry about what was going on at home, or what to say to my teachers, or what not to say to my teachers and grandparents, school and my life was so much easier."

Jane's fourth and fifth grade teachers experienced very similar interactions with Jane and her family. The negative influences of her chronosystem like her father being in jail, his inappropriate friends hanging around, her mom's chronic illness of sleep apnea and having a tracheotomy, her mother's loss of job due to illness, all seemed to dwindle with positive influences beginning to take over. Jane's constant and serious support from her grandparents, her mother realizing her children were special and should be protected, and Jane's own biological and behavioral characteristics enabled her to soar academically and in her other activities.

The counselor at Jane's school also contributed to Jane's overall success. Both the counselor and Jane share being conceived from two different cultures and had an instant respect for one another and the issues that arise from having two cultures to understand and be a part of. The school counselor expressed: "We have a lot in common, she is a wonderful girl full of talent and promise who is able to overcome the obstacles presented in her life in order to be successful and productive despite what she has had to go through." By this, after being questioned further, the counselor referred to Jane's family issues, not having money to "keep up with some others," and cultural identity struggles Jane had to face.

Being in a school with roughly 900 students, a transient faculty where principals are moved around every two or three years, Jane's administrators in her intermediate years didn't have as much insight into her situation as the administrator who was present during her primary schooling. Although the principal was made aware of situations involving students and DFACS, the principal I spoke with didn't have much knowledge of Jane's situation but knew that the family was in close contact with Jane's teachers and the school counselor to insure her academic progress and success in school. The principal did state however; "I did have a working relationship with the mother in that I listened when she was angry about the report made in kindergarten and understood the strain it put on her at home, with her own parents, and at work." This administrator further noted that she and Jane's mother agreed the school was following procedures to ensure Jane's safety, which Jane's mother respected and appreciated. While much more removed from other members of the mesosystem, even this administrator played a role in facilitating a smooth pathway for Jane and her family to be connected to the school.

Exosystem

Jane's exosystem was comprised of doctors, her father's friends, and neighborhood friends, all of which seemed to present barriers and obstacles for Jane to overcome the older she became. As

a young child, Jane's mother reported her to be a healthy, normal girl. Her mother worked for a professional company making a very admirable salary. As Jane's father would drift in and out of her life, without the same goals and ambitions as Jane's mother, Jane's mother would give him money, feed him, clothe him, and buy him cars. Soon, Jane's mother had depleted her entire 401K. Her mother became ill, lapsed into a coma, and subsequently lost her job unable to obtain another one. This last matter being part of Jane's chronosystem. Between Jane's father's behavior and her mother's illness, their lives changed drastically. Jane explained in an interview,

> We are now on food stamps, and my grandparents give us each $25 a month for an allowance. So, I have started saving that money for things that I want or need such as field trips at school or a new pair of shoes.

Jane's mother informed me that she and her two children live in a condominium that Jane's grandfather owns, so she and her family do not have expenses such as a mortgage or rent. Jane's grandfather did this for them, so they could live as a family in their own space and not have to live with the grandparents. Jane's father also put the family through a hard time about paternity of Jane and her brother. For over five years, he questioned the children's biological origin and avoided paying child support. Jane's mother, despite all he put the family through, did not hold any animosity toward the father, and often encouraged Jane to write him a letter in prison. Jane expressed to me: "I don't really want to write him. It just brings up bad memories for me and I like how peaceful my life is without him or any of his so called friends bothering us."

One neighborhood friend often caused struggles for Jane about her socio-economic status. This particular girl was given much by her family and often had more consumable cash than a typical eleven-year-old. In order to reconcile her concerns about this friendship, Jane often ignored the girls' antics and overlooked what she was trying to do. Jane expressed that she was happy that she had a roof over her head, food to eat, clothes to wear, and did not really "need" anything. At other times, Jane and her mother were affected by their low socio-economic status. Jane would go to friends' birthday parties where they would get to go shopping at the mall and do expensive things, and Jane's party consisted of spending the night and going to the dollar store. Her mother stated: "I just feel bad that we are not able to do elaborate things and when the kids spend the night they have to be quiet because we live in an apartment over old people." Jane let me know that she didn't really care about that. She would never choose to do something for a birthday that she thought her mom might have trouble supporting or providing. Jane seemed fine with her

decisions and was happy to have the opportunity for a birthday party of any kind. Such behavior and rationalizations are atypical for young girls of Jane's age and were indicative not only of her gifts but also of Jane's reconciliation with this exosystem.

Jane also noted that she faced the struggle of being from the White and African American cultures. In stores her mother said: "People will stare and because I'm White if there is a black woman around we've been asked if my daughter was adopted." Relating back to Jane's father, only two of her friends have ever met him. Jane was concerned when one of the girls was not allowed over, but Jane explained: "In the end I'm not sure if the parents of my friend were concerned that my father was a black man, or if they were just scared of him because he did drugs and has been in and out of jail." This perception of the exchange between Jane and her friend suggests that Jane understands and accepts elements of the systems that work on and around her.

Jane also stated that she had one friend who was "very White." The friend now lives in Florida and invited her one summer to visit. Jane's mother was going to find a way to get her there, but the friend's mother called and retracted the invitation. Jane said, "My friend's mom called and said I couldn't come there because Florida people wouldn't want her there or like her, and we might get death threats for a black child being here." Naturally this upset Jane and her mother, and not to mention Jane's friend who wanted to see her. Jane expressed to me that this was the first time she really started to understand that racial tensions existed between her two cultures. Jane also said, "I have friends who are African American and when I say something like 'wuz up' (what's up?) They tell me I'm not black enough to say that. Well, what does that mean?"

One other specific incident Jane recalled of not feeling a sense of belonging to one's culture was a game called "Guess the Rule." In this particular round, the student chose the rule. "In first grade we played a game where the teacher or a student picked a group of kids and the rest of us had to guess the rule. In this inning I was amongst a big group of White kids, and no one could guess the rule." Jane continued by stating, "No one could guess the rule because I didn't appear to be White according to my skin tone." Jane said, the teacher asked a student about the rule, and the student stated White culture was the rule, and she had put Jane in that group because her mother was White. Jane said she assumed the girl did this not having ever met her father and not really considering her father was actually African American.

Jane also suggested that being a child from two different cultures was difficult in little things like styling her hair. The texture of Jane's hair is consistent with that of her father's and the African American culture, but she tells me it grows longer than most African American's hair, which is more consistent with the White culture. Her mother needs to take her to a special salon to have her hair done, which costs money and is not inexpensive; therefore, Jane did not get to have her hair styled at the salon often, as it was not an expense her family could readily afford. Jane stated that as far as clothing and style go, she is just "consistent with the fifth grade girls." She might not have the most expensive shoes and clothes, but you can be in style shopping from a department store as well.

Macrosystem

Jane's macrosystem of being raised in a single parent home is closely connected to the mesosystem of Jane's school and teachers. During group discussions with teachers, this theme was consistently advanced as a possible barrier or obstacle to Jane's development. The teachers, including myself, participating in the discussion often perceived that children who lived with a single parent had the potential of lacking strong parental involvement and support at times. In other words, the resources available to children with more than one parent are vast. This group of teachers consistently noted that Jane's mother has been a consistent support in Jane's academic endeavors [with the exception of the time period of her mother's illness]. They also reported that Jane's mother also worked with and supported the school.

Jane's mother told me, "If I get some paperwork or Jane has an assignment we don't understand or I can't help her with, then I call my sister or my mother to help me or explain it to me and/or Jane." Jane's mother expressed that although she lost her career and ability to work due to illness, it actually gave her more time to be concerned with Jane's schooling than before when she was a single, working parent. Jane insisted that sometimes her mother would rather just get what "needs" to be done finished and not bother with her extra schoolwork for gifted classes, so she didn't get much help in that area of her schooling. However, Jane said her mother has always been supportive and involved with her and any activity she was engaged in even though she was a single parent with two children. Jane said she liked that her mother also has more time, even though they did not have a lot of money, to spend with Jane's little brother. Jane stated: "A lot of kids don't get a stay at home mom to give them that much attention even when there are two parents involved." Despite concerns that can be raised about the resources available to a

single parent, the interviews with Jane, her family, and her teachers indicated that when all systems are working together, that concern about resources is minimized.

Another component of Jane's macrosystem was sports, particularly a traveling softball and tennis team at the local YMCA. Jane said she loved tennis and was lucky to receive a scholarship to be able to participate in the activity. This scholarship also allowed Jane to participate in the traveling softball team, finances which her grandparents supplement should money become an issue. The fifth grade at Jane's school also took a big out of town field trip on chartered buses at the end of each fifth-grade year. This trip required a significant amount of money; however, given significant time notification, Jane's family saved enough money to allow her to attend the trip with her peers. In addition, Jane had saved her small allowance to make sure she was able to go on the trip. Jane said, "If it is something important and fun I want to do and money might be the issue, then I save the allowance my grandparents give each month to make sure I can do it when the time comes." After talking with Jane's family, it was apparent that because of all of Jane's hard work, dedication, perseverance, and lack of selfishness, they would find anyway possible to afford her opportunities "within reason for a fifth grader of course."

Chronosystem

While talking with the school staff involved with Jane, during their individual interviews, we began to discuss the elements of Jane's chronosystem and not exclusive of all the other systems, to express our thoughts about the barriers and obstacles that might prevent a child such as Jane from being successful in school, much less being identified as gifted and talented. One of the central themes that was generated was that of multiculturalism. Often teachers who do not share the same culture as a child might have difficulty understanding certain actions and interactions of the child from the second culture. The teachers noted that many current teachers are much better trained to teach and understand children of different cultures; however, Jane's background of being from both the White and African American cultures, and Jane's own struggle with where she belong, posed a different challenge.

One statement by a participant of the group was, "The good thing is, although I am part of the White culture, this school is so full of many cultures, you have to be sensitive to the needs of everyone and how they might react to teaching styles, friends, teachers, and everything that happens within the school day." Fortunately for Jane and other children with similar backgrounds, and which was how every member of the group perceived the elementary school,

no one culture was dominant, and teachers were challenged daily to meet the social, personal, and educational needs of each child. One teacher stated,

> The challenge is where the student comes to you with a social cultural confusion, such as someone telling Jane she isn't 'black enough.' You have to be sensitive to the child's needs in order to answer where you wouldn't criticize or belittle either of her cultural identities.

Each of the teachers in the group expressed an awareness of cultures and how to be sensitive to the needs of each individual based on the needs presented, especially given the diversity of the school. Because of this awareness, the teachers seemed to embrace the fact that Jane belonged to two cultures and worked to meet her needs and ensure that she was properly challenged to her true potential and ability.

Another barrier that teachers noted could be present in Jane's educational career was that of coming from a single parent home. One teacher mentioned,

> I don't even really consider that with my students. So many of my children only live with one parent, that it is almost shocking to me if they have two.

Teachers of this group had a long history and experience teaching in Title I schools with a high transiency rate. Often these schools are comprised of children, many of who are from single parent homes. Although, the teachers mentioned this is a factor that could characterize a student as at-risk and therefore perhaps one who may be overlooked for gifted programs or special attention, the teacher's perceived in Jane's case that this was not a factor. Her potential was immediately noticed, the teachers knew she had strong family support regardless of the family structure composition, and therefore pushed Jane to reach and achieve her full potential. However, from individual interviews and document analysis, it was clear that her second grade teacher was the catalyst to push for Jane's placement in the program for the gifted.

During the teachers' group discussions, Jane's mother's illness and loss of job came up in conversations often as an obstacle to overcome. Although Jane showed unique intelligence at an early age, the teachers noted the times when she "lacked her spark and interest for learning." After Jane, her mother, and her grandparents began to bring to school attention to the issues at home; teachers began to understand where her lack of interest might be coming from. One teacher stated, "I always knew when dad came back around or when mom had been hurt by dad because Jane always looked as though she was holding something back that she really wanted to

tell me." The teacher went on to state, "I then made it my job to let her know she was safe in telling the adults at school who cared about her and that we would see to it that she got whatever attention she needed to get through the situation." The teachers agreed and expressed that by being sensitive to Jane's home situations and not judging or criticizing her for being sensitive and reacting to what was going on at home in what might be perceived as a negative reaction, Jane was allowed to feel free to eventually express her apprehensions and feelings of not wanting to be home, but not feeling her best at school.

Jane, who expressed this herself, loved school, and needed that extra sensitivity of the teachers to get through the tough times at home. She noted that she wasn't giving up, but needed a little time to climb the obstacle put in her way at home. Along with the abuse by her father and her father's other negative decisions, Jane's mother's illness caused the same withdrawal and lack of energy at school. Such interactions may have caused Jane to perform less than her actual potential and not be "herself" in the classroom. However, because of the quick intervention of teachers, Jane was able to recover quickly each time and continue to persevere in school.

Summary

Several of Jane's barriers to her success as an at risk gifted student, presented within her five systems, were overcome by the positive aspects of her chronosystem. Those positive aspects most helpful were Jane's own biological initiative, her grandparent's support, her mother's realization of family importance, and her father's extended incarceration. Jane's mother stated in one interview, "Jane is well-rounded with sports, her education and other activities, we don't push her towards being the smart, gifted student. We don't want to steer her to think she has to be the best at school."

However, Jane's mother went on to say, "Jane is actually harder on herself than anyone could be on her. Her only release time is church, a few sports, and reading, which is still academics. She has the personal drive and wants to learn which began very early on." Jane's teachers agreed, "Jane is hard on herself." Many of them said this very statement at the same time. The teachers suggested she always picks up a book to learn more; she works hard on her extra work for gifted studies, and is constantly writing in a journal. When I asked Jane about this journal, she stated, "I want to be a journalist. I take a notebook with me everywhere I go and take notes on what is going on around me. I am also good at keeping a secret, but I like to write everything down."

Once Jane's father was sentenced to a long incarceration, the negative friend influences subsided. Jane expressed that this also gave her a different sense of freedom to enjoy her mom and her life without worrying that bad things would happen at home. The teachers in the group discussion also shared the idea that the positive influence of Jane's microsystem, Jane's personal drive and ambition, and the incarceration and consistent absence of her father in the home, contributed to Jane's further success and ability to overcome the at risk obstacles that were presented in her life beyond her control.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

This chapter revisits the scholarly literature presented in the first two chapters and connects the findings from this case study to the existing work. The chapter concludes with implications for future research and a general conclusion.

Seeley (2004) found that children who are classified at risk and who are from underrepresented ethnic and racial populations are identified less often and not as frequently enrolled in classrooms for young children who are gifted and talented. Gosfield (2002) supports this research and also noted that the strategies employed for the children who are gifted and talented should be an integral part of the school day for all children, with modifications and extensions becoming habitual for teachers to reach the individual needs of all learners. It is evident through this case study that Jane's teachers, throughout her entire elementary school experience, did in fact operate under such principles. Jane was a student, characterized as at risk, by being multicultural, living in limited economic conditions, and coming from a single parent home. She has struggled with identification issues as to which culture she can truly fit into to, White or African American, as well as, gifted or non-gifted.

Jane has lived without many of the amenities to which children around her are accustomed, yet her basic survival needs of food, water, and shelter have always been met. Jane also lived successfully in a single parent home, had a father who wasn't a positive influence in her life when he wasn't absent, and her sole guardian, her mother, suffered from an illness whose

resolution could have ended much more poorly. Together, by the school working closely with Jane and her mother, teachers, administrators, parents and counselors pulled together to examine the unique social and emotional traits of this one child as a path to educate and to meet all of her academic and social needs.

Hardy (2006) found that poor and minority gifted students were especially neglected with most school programs serving students focused on concerns or challenges that they brought to school and not on developing strengths. Through conversations with Jane's teachers and counselors, it was clear that the obstacles that were identified early in Jane's academic career as a gifted and talented learner were eliminated because Jane's school support system refused to focus on her at risk characteristics and instead concentrated on what Jane needed to enhance her positive capabilities.

Like the research conducted by Moore, Ford and Milner (2005) students present needs based on their race, gender, or socioeconomic status, and for whom it is important for schools and educators to address those needs, this case study demonstrated that young gifted children can be successful when their needs are recognized. As well, Jane's school and teachers emphasized the need to focus on a child's strengths and not on a child's perceived deficits. By pulling together and acting on Jane's reactions to the violence and unstable atmosphere she confessed to her teachers, her schoolwork and academic potential was not impacted.

In work by Cushner, McClelland, and Stafford (2003) where the student population was cited as very diverse and the teaching profession was predominantly European middle-class, this current study also noted that Jane's unique at risk as well as positive characteristics were ones that needed to be met and that Jane needed attention. Teachers in Jane's school put aside

preconceived notions and biases, and coupled with their work with diverse populations over a period of time, worked collaboratively to assist Jane.

Passow and Frasier (1996) stressed the importance of home-school relationships, parental involvement, teacher attitudes and counseling as integral components of identifying and meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and for those students achievement in gifted programs. Of which Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Huff (2005) stressed the importance of teachers being the first to initiate. In Jane's case teachers did just this. They made the connection with home first focusing on Jane's inquisitive desire to learn at an early age. When problems were presented from home, the focus was on how the school could help so that Jane could be successful at school. This strategy allowed teachers to focus on Jane's signs of distress at school and accommodations to meet her needs. Again, the teachers focused on the positive and not the negative, which broke down a barrier to Jane's engagement in school.

Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) suggested that multicultural education is a promise for engaging all students and by providing them with opportunities to identify with, connect with, and relate to the curriculum. Banks and Banks (1995) had previously conducted research-attributing lack of multicultural preparation among teachers to be a problem as well. Based on this research and others in the same area whose findings suggested teachers often viewed these learning styles as deficits, not assets that hold numerous implications for the identification of students from underrepresented populations in gifted programs as was witnessed in Jane's case.

Ford (1999) reported teachers' lack of exposure to diverse populations in their teacher preparation programs; however this was not the case with Jane. Specifically, much of Jane's success as a student with at risk factors could be attributed to her teacher's preparation and attitudes towards the planning and implementation of her education. With all of Jane's teachers

devoting their love and passion for teaching to Title I schools, one could easily see that their exposure and experience with diverse populations clearly supported and enhanced Jane's experiences.

Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis (1992) suggested that culturally competent educators think seriously about their own biases, assumptions, and stereotypes; thus, they exhibit self-awareness and understanding; cultural awareness and understanding; social responsiveness and responsibility; and culturally sensitive techniques and strategies. By acting upon these beliefs, Jane was taught by educators who perceived Jane to be an intelligent, hard working young lady who wanted to learn and be the best she could be. By reacting to her needs in a sensitive manner, teachers were able to focus on Jane's strengths as a student learner rather than what she looked like, where she came from, or what she had or didn't have in her life. With Banks and Banks (1995) suggesting that the African American student must be taught to be a self-sufficient learner, the teacher must be a part of a communal process and share the responsibility. Jane's teachers, as one expressed, believed, "If I fail then my student fails. It is a joint effort for learning to take place successfully." Jane's teachers were truly invested in understanding this one student and in allowing her strengths to prosper, so much so that by working as a team they allowed for avenues for each obstacle placed in her life to be overturned quickly.

The obstacles and barriers placed in Jane's life by the at risk characteristics that she started school with were overcome quickly in her primary schooling years mostly as a result of early identification according to her strengths and not her weaknesses. Milner and Ford (2005) suggested culturally diverse students are not recognized for their gifted qualities early due to numerous factors such as lack of teacher quality, inadequate numbers of diverse teachers, differential resources, and inadequate family involvement among parents. Weber (1999) further

reported that identifying children later in life causes them to close the door to accepting new challenges as exciting and enjoyable. Jane was identified early in her education. The process started in kindergarten to keep a watch on Jane's progress; next she was referred for testing in first grade, and then placed by the end of second grade. Despite what the research states, Jane had teachers adequately trained, appropriately attentive to the correct aspects of the child, and a unique home-school relationship that allowed for her parents and the school to be on one page in order for Jane to be a successful student.

According to Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004), early life experiences powerfully impact attitude toward learning and later achievements in life, and most importantly in education. With many of Jane's early positive experiences being associated with school, and school being her safe haven from the problems within her own home, the groundwork was already laid for success in future years. Jane, having witnessed abuse as a young child, being frightened of a parent, having strange adults in and out of her home, having a mother who was chronically ill and unable to work, and dealing with internal feelings of what culture she actually belonged to when situations arose at school and other environments, was extremely lucky to have the support systems in place that she did from school and home. Her grandparents did everything in their power to get the family safe and insure that Jane was at school every day on time to learn. Her mother eventually realized that everything the school was doing was for the good of Jane, her future, and her family as well. Although Jane's mother said she knew her child was smart, she never knew that she would in fact be considered gifted. Jane also overcame the obstacle related to culturally diverse gifted students and the identification process. Kozol (1995) reported that giftedness exists in many guises that cannot always be measured by a particular test. In fact, as reported by the gifted teacher at Jane's school, Jane missed the testing scores by 2 points. The gifted teacher

used parent nomination forms, teacher nomination forms, and alternate means of testing to get this child into gifted services, for which she knew Jane was ready. When Jane's mother was asked to fill out the forms she stated she was both honored and shocked. She explained that she had never thought of her child in comparison to some of the descriptions on the form, but once it was presented to her, she realized her child's capabilities. By having a teacher culturally sensitive and aware of the needs of this learner in both the general and gifted educational setting, Jane was able to express her intelligence in ways that might not have been possible otherwise.

Parental involvement is another obstacle many at risk students face, but proved not to be the case for Jane. Winner (1996) discussed that parents of gifted children in general were often concerned about being unprepared and uneducated about what having a gifted child actually means. Jane's mother expressed apprehension and feelings of inadequacy at times when she wasn't able to help Jane with components of her homework. However, she said she didn't let it stop either of them. They sought help from Jane's grandmother a retired teacher, they called her sister, or Jane often took the initiative to research and figure out the problem on her own. Likewise, Cropper (1998) believed that when parents of minority students, including the gifted are involved in the formal education of their children, continuity is established between the two most important institutions in a child's life. Students who are able to see these two institutions overlap have a sense of pride by having support from every adult and inspiration in their lives, thus feeling a sense of security to learn and explore in and about the world around them in order to be successful individuals.

Jane was lucky, that although a few individuals within her systems were not positive influences and in fact caused a barrier or obstacle to be overcome to arise, she was surrounded by teachers, counselors, parents, and grandparents who loved and supported her and wanted to see

her be successful in everything she did. In fact, through the conversations with her parents and school support staff, these two institutions fought so hard to insure stability and positive influences in Jane's life and education. If an obstacle arose, they immediately worked together to keep her life calm and on the successful track.

Jane, herself, was also responsible for this. Jane had the innate ability to work through the obstacles placed in her way in order to achieve her goals. Ogbu (2003) found that multicultural students, who were in fact gifted, were frequently teased by peers, especially in urban and suburban settings, as acting White when they appear to be academically engaged. This particularly posed a problem for Jane as she is from both the White and African American cultures. When talking with Jane, she said she never really worried about which she might fit into at school, because her school was so diverse it wasn't an issue for the most part. Occasionally, her friends would say things like "you aren't black enough" or "you are white enough" to do or say something. Smith (1989) stated and Ford and Grantham (2003) agreed that "race creates a bond of people hood." Smith's belief was that a healthy regard for one's racial status is psychologically important for racially diverse groups, and that racial identity development was a process of coming to terms with one's racial group membership as a reference group.

This was a serious obstacle for Jane because she had to figure out which racial group she could truly identify with and then she was considered gifted; yet, another issue for multicultural students. Ford (1996) found that feelings of loneliness, isolation, and rejection increase the need for affiliation to outweigh the need for achievement; thus keeping minority students out of gifted programs. While Jane overcame this particular obstacle because her need and desire for learning more and more outweighed any belonging to a particular group, she often spoke of friends of

hers from diverse cultures who didn't do well in school because they didn't think it would be cool to be in the "smart" classes. Without the internal drive Jane had, and the attentiveness of teachers to individual aspects of learners, this phenomenon could continue. However, in Jane's case the connection of school and home and her own biological make-up allowed her to overcome this barrier and not be an issue for Jane as a learner.

Williams (1992) suggested that the socioeconomic realities over which educators have minimal or no control could negatively influence the development of healthy partnerships with parents of culturally diverse exceptional learners. Often these diverse parents find themselves too economically challenged and too dedicated to meeting the daily needs of life, resulting in not having much time to dedicate to building and nurturing the home-school relationship as would be desired or expected. In Jane's case this phenomenon presented itself in a slightly different manner. Jane's mother was a single parent concerned with working and meeting the basic needs of her children early on. However, Jane's mother had the support of her own parents to encourage a healthy home-school relationship. When Jane's mother lost her job and ability to work due to illness, a different stress presented itself. The amenities Jane and her family were accustomed to change, and basic needs were all that could be met. However, the school worked closely with the family to make sure that Jane received everything she needed if it should affect her functioning at school. In fact, when her mother recovered from her illness, although they had monetary constraints, she was able to spend more time with Jane and her schoolwork than before. It may not have been the most desirable circumstances under which this could occur, but because the home-school connection was already established in a positive manner it worked in Jane's favor.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

The results of this case study have many implications for educators and researchers. First, previous research has proven that students with culturally diverse backgrounds are enrolled in gifted and talented programs in disproportionately low numbers. However, there are ways to improve this statistic. Links were shown between teacher preparation and attitude and student achievement. In order to increase the number of referrals of students within programs such as gifted and talented, educators must realize their own biases and take steps and/or other measures to insure that they are educated and prepared to meet the needs of the individual child no matter what cultural make-up the child may have. Grossman (1995) suggested that educators' knowledge of cultural factors be increased in order for this to happen. Also, agreeing with Banks (1999) multicultural education should be emphasized in teacher education programs to empower teachers in schools who work with a diverse population on a daily basis. Kea and Utley (1998) found that by helping teachers to become aware of how their own personal values can affect the evaluation of a child coming from a culturally diverse background different from his/her own.

Another aspect related to teacher education is the identification process and assessments used for identifying gifted and talented students. Non-traditional and pluralistic instruments are critical to identifying gifted and talented African American students (Ford and Harris, 1990). Standardized tests should be used primarily for instructional diagnosis and improvement, and tests should be administered and interpreted relative to children's background and experience. Other means of testing and identification should also be in place for identifying gifted children of diverse cultural backgrounds. If the measures in place fail to identify a child that an educator firmly believes, by the child's academic performance, should be given a chance, then the student

should not be kept out of exceptional programs for a test score that may in fact be culturally biased.

As of equal importance to testing measures, identification must begin in the early years and the primary grades of schooling. Robinson (1993) emphasized that the early years are considered formative and critical to cognitive, social and emotional development. However, research has traditionally focused on the commonalities, individual differences, and abnormally and advanced as troublesome or difficult rather than positive and productive. This comes in to play especially when children exhibit at risk factors. In order for these children to be identified in gifted programs, rather than showing up in special education programs, appropriate measures and preparation must take place to insure the focus is on the individual needs and educational desires of the child, which in turn relates back to sensitivities to diverse populations. Often these gifted characteristics are presented in a negative way from at risk, gifted children. It is most important that teachers are educated and made aware of the negative identifiers of the gifted and talented child in order for the child to experience success. This must happen early as well before the child develops a dislike of school and lack of desire to learn. Roedell (1989) suggested that teachers play the most important role in the development and formation of good study habits, positive social behavior and self-esteem development, interest in general of expanding their education, and prevention of underachievement and boredom in school.

An implication calling for parental involvement and the home-school connection is soundly established. Ford and Harris (1990) discussed that the first six years of a child's life are the most critical in the development and manifestation of giftedness regardless of other identifying characteristics, even those considered at risk. Parents should provide their children many opportunities to develop their love and initiative for learning at an early age by such things as

providing them with books, talking to them, and modeling and exposing children to cultural stimuli would be helpful as well. Most importantly parents, as well as educators, should praise not criticize unique and different behavior or learning styles. This will improve a child's motivation to know that their efforts are supported although they may not be traditional in the eyes of the beholder. The home-school connection is important in that they should help educate parents as well. Parents, especially those of diverse cultures and/or parents of children who exhibit at risk factors, may need educational assistance from the school in order to nurture the gifts of their own children. The partnership of parents and educators, no matter which side initiates the relationship, may provide diverse, at risk, gifted and talented students with a supportive, nurturing environment. The parent or educator alone cannot provide this supportive, nurturing environment effectively. If parents are limited by having to work, or being a single parent, or other extenuating circumstances from being an involved parent, then the school should develop and implement policies that would help these parents be involved in their child's education one way or another without feeling guilty for trying to meet the basic needs of the child and/or family.

As far as Bronfenbrenner and his Ecological Systems and the child are concerned, society is also responsible for helping parents support their children. Often the burden is placed on the child with educational programs such as drug awareness and prevention being presented too early in the schools. This responsibility is then not on the parent anymore. In his book, Bronfenbrenner (1978) suggested some causes to stop the breakdown of ecological systems so they can interact more effectively:

1. Families must keep together. American families don't live close enough to rely on one another anymore. This is important for teaching children values and culture and provides support for the parents. In some culturally diverse families, we see more of the extended family helping with raising the children.
2. Neighborhoods are no longer as safe. It is important that people know their neighbors.
3. Families are now experiencing stress trying to balance work and family, especially in single parent homes.
4. All families are not benefiting from the same laws and/or programs within schools and society, which are in effect.

Children need to be around people who will encourage them in positive manners and help them make the right decisions. Bronfenbrenner (1978) also suggested that our society does not make it easy for parents to get the help they need, especially those families with at risk characteristics. By the time the family is done demonstrating how they qualify for help, families are made to feel inadequate. This could happen in the school setting with children as well if the proper needs are not identified and approached for the child. If the negative is focused on, parents and students will be discouraged from the learning and educational process.

There are methodological implications as well. I definitely had an insider perspective on this case study, and it would be almost impossible to conduct a case study of this magnitude without this. Having established a long-term relationship with this parent and child through the school, teachers, and the close connection of them working together allowed for the honesty and trustworthiness of this case to be displayed. The parent felt at ease, as well as the student, to share their story with someone they felt was truly concerned with the well being of their family and the success of the child, as well as, others in the school "like" Jane. Being a female dealing

with a single parent mother and child also gave me an advantage. The story could have turned out totally different if a man had been trying to gain insight into the same story and family. Also, this case study is one that is on going in nature. Naturally, there is no exit point for me. I will always be concerned with and want to keep up with Jane's success in school and life. It has also been a study that has been continuous for many years, although it was not formal from the initial start point of this child's journey through school.

Conclusion

Looking back on Jane and her ecological systems and how they interact and react with each other brought clear insight into her world and how she reacts and thrives in it. Jane was a bright, young lady from a home with a successful working mother, a father drifting in and out of her life, and wonderful supportive grandparents. Her father became abusive when he was around and brought less than desirable influences into the home. Jane felt comfortable to seek refuge and safety at school with the other adults that loved her. Jane's mother became ill and her life changed even more. They no longer could afford the same amenities they once had. Jane was forced to live with her grandparents for a while which put an extra stress on this young child she did not deserve. As it was she was already from a multiethnic background, her mother being White and her father being African American. She already had the stigma of not having married parents and no money. Thus, she started school with at risk characteristics that became even more apparent when her chronosystem, as well as her other four ecological systems, became intertwined and reacted with one another as they naturally would.

Despite Jane's at risk identifying characteristics, she was also a bright, intuitive, eager to learn young lady. She was constantly showing signs in school of her creativity and desire to learn as much as she could. Luckily, grouped with educators and a school support system that encouraged

diversity and supported the needs of all learners her desires were not burned out. Jane was able at an early age to be recognized for her gifted characteristics and educators took exceptional approaches to see to it that Jane's needs were clearly defined and met. By establishing a strong relationship with Jane's family, by attending to Jane's needs when they weren't what the teachers were accustomed too, they were able to encourage and influence Jane to continue on the successful track on which she started. Along the way, Jane faced barriers and obstacles. Jane also struggled with having one supportive parent, although for a time Jane was just worried that her mother may not live, and what would happen to her? Certainly learning was not her priority at that point, yet she still prevailed. Peer pressure, friends, and societal influences about money and socioeconomic status also presented a conflict for Jane at times, yet she continued to strive for success regardless. Although, Jane will always be from two different cultures, she is at peace with who she is as a person, and elates in her support from her mother, her school, her grandparents, and the positive influences in her life now that she has overcome the negative interactions and influences within her ecological systems that caused the barriers and obstacles she has readily overcome at such a young age.

It is through the positive interactions and influences in her ecological systems that she has come to know herself and who she wants to be. She, her family, and her school focused on the positive aspects of this child and not the at risk characteristics from the start. By noticing and identifying Jane's giftedness at an early age her desire and love for learning was fostered. The strong home-school connection encouraged a healthy relationship between Jane, her family, and the school in order to keep her reaching for success. Dedication of Jane's teachers to the individual needs of this child encouraged her to explore and be the learner she is and the productive, successful citizen she will be in the future. The cultural sensitivity and attention paid

to Jane's diversity, along with the educators putting aside their own biases and assumptions, allowed Jane the freedom to overcome obstacles easily and continue her journey through school and with her giftedness. It is my hope that this will continue for her as she grows older and decides on her future, especially because she had overcome and succeeded despite the obstacles in her life at such an early age.

This case study explains the fact that our focus should be on the effective education of all students and how to make learning the focal point of the teaching and learning process. Our educational system must continue to rise to the challenge of instituting more rigorous standards and accountability measures and respond to the challenges of living in a global society where diverse populations are increasingly competing for education and work. Educators and researchers should reflect on where we have been, where we are today, and where we are going in the future. We should concentrate our efforts on educating a diverse population and focusing on the true, positive, potential of the learner, while being sensitive to how they interact with other characteristics of the leaner even if they are considered at risk. It is for this very reason that Jane is and will likely continue to be a successful, ambitious, gifted learner, adult and professional.

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Appendix A

Parent/Grandparent Interview Protocol

1. As Jane's parent/grandparent how do you feel about her academic progress in school?

2. How do you feel about your relationship with the school? Is it positive or negative? How was it established, strengthened, and encouraged in the education of Jane?

3. According to the "at risk" definition I gave you, and according to the literature that says Jane might not be successful in school, much less gifted, how do you feel about this?

4. How do you deal with the stresses in your life and activities that might affect Jane's education and well being? How do you think significant life changes have affected Jane socially and academically?

5. Jane has parents that come from two different cultures. What struggles/strengths does this pose for your family?

6. How has a single parent income/support system affected your family life?

7. Coping with losing a job and raising two children can be tough? What supports have you and Jane had to survive your illness and job loss?

8. Talk a little bit about being restricted financially. How does this affect you, Jane, your lifestyle, etc.?

9. There have been numerous events that have disrupted your life in a negative manner, talk a little about this?

10. What are the strengths that you seen have helped you survive, keep your family in tact, and helped Jane to become the successful gifted learner she is despite what the literature says about situations such as yours?

Appendix B

Educator Interview Protocol

1. How long have you known Jane and what is your relationship with this student? What is your position within the school?

2. According to the "at risk" definition and the literature presented, how well do you think Jane fits into this category. Talk about why she may not if that is the case.

3. What is your definition of gifted and talented? How does this relate to the gifts and talents you see in Jane?

4. What significant academic events are specifically evident in your memory of Jane's strengths and weaknesses?

5. Were there any specific events in Jane's life, family and social that you saw as barriers to Jane's success? How did this affect Jane's performance and interactions in school?

6. What is your definition of parental involvement? Explain Jane's support or lack of concerning parental involvement. How is evident in her work as a student?

7. How do you view the home-school connection between Jane, her family and the school? What was your role in establishing and maintaining this relationship?

8. What do think were the main contributors to Jane's overall success socially and academically despite her multiethnicity, home life, and issues regarding finances?

9. In your experience, what is the most important or what is lacking in teacher education for the gifted and for the multicultural society of today?

10. Concerning, early identification of students with gifts, where do you stand? How do your beliefs coincide or not with the protocols at school?

11. How do you plan, assess, and instruct the needs of different learners in your classroom?

12. When presented with other challenges of students, such as ethnicity debates, teasing from friends for whatever reason, and parental concerns, how do you handle this?

13. How do you feel the school does with educating parents on student rights and programs available to them?

14. Do you feel the school in general is sensitive to the needs of learners, parents, minorities, differences in cultures, etc.?

15. Talk to me about the diversity and transiency in your Title I school. How does affect your daily plans and teaching styles?

16. How do the home lives of some of your students affect their success and/or failure at school?

Appendix C

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Talks centered around issues presented by Jane:

1. Multiethnic and culture identity challenges amongst students and teachers.

2. Low socio-economic status and coping with peer pressure.

3. Being part of the gifted culture when others are not. Feeling the pressure.

4. Parental support or lack thereof for different reasons. The schools views and the students views.

Appendix D

Student Interview Protocol

1. Talk to me a little bit about being considered “at risk” as I have described the definition to you? What do you think about this label as it applies to you or others in your school?

2. How do you like your gifted classes? What challenges and/or successes does it offer to you?

3. How do you interact with your friends that are gifted? Those that are not?

4. What is it like to be from a multiethnic background? How does this make you feel? How does this affect your interactions with your friends, family, and strangers?

5. What changed in your life when your mother lost her job?

6. Talk to me about your father? How does his presence/absence change your interactions at home, with your friends, at school, or anywhere else?

7. How do you cope with the peer pressure of not having as much money as others may have?

8. What are the greatest supports in your life? At school? At home? In society?

9. What would you say contributed to all of your success at school?

10. How do you deal with cultural identity issues when they arise?

11. What is it like to be raised with just your mother and brother? Do you notice any differences from the lives of your friends with two parents?

12. Talk about your relationship with your teachers? Who were most memorable? What did they do to establish a relationship with you?

13. How do you see the interaction between your home and school life?

14. What would you like to see different happen for you in the future?

15. What are your future career goals and how do you plan to fulfill them?

16. What are the biggest events in your life that have caused challenges and setbacks and what did you do to overcome them?

17. Can you describe to me the atmosphere at your school? How do you feel about the students? The teachers? What they teach you? How they react to your specific daily needs?