Educating gifted and talented students:

From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Haw Hwa Tan
Abstract

To bring about a transformation in the provision of a meaningful education for gifted and talented students in regular classrooms, teachers need to develop a critical awareness about equity as ‘needs-based’ and address the ‘taken for grantedness’ of perceptions about giftedness and practices. It is argued that when teachers’ thinking about equity, giftedness, gifted and talented students is changed first, their critical pedagogy will transform the status quo of gifted and talented education in regular classrooms. This thesis outlines research that examines the ways teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students in regular classrooms in Western Australian primary schools and explores the circumstances in which teachers’ thinking transforms individual teachers into ‘thinking teachers’. A qualitative research approach with an emergent design and a critical interpretivist research paradigm grounded in Paulo Freire’s perspective of critical consciousness was utilised to understand teachers’ thinking. Twenty classroom teachers with different ethnic backgrounds and teaching experiences in both public and private primary schools were recruited through planned and snowball sampling. In-depth open ended face to face interviews were conducted with individual participants between December 2009 and July 2010 to find out what they thought about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students. The recursive model of interviewing was used as the method for collecting data.

My overarching research question is: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students? My two specific research questions are: How does teachers’ thinking affect their conceptualisations of giftedness, gifted
and talented students and their work in regular classrooms? Under what circumstances does teachers’ thinking change them into ‘thinking teachers’? Within the context of this study, ‘thinking teachers’ are conceptualised as those who reflect on why they are doing what they are doing, evaluate how they do what needs to be done and become empowered to transform the status quo and unsuitable teaching practices to provide a meaningful education to every student.

The findings suggested that individual participants were at different stages in the process of becoming ‘thinking teachers’. Participation in this study provided an opportunity for participants to examine more closely their ideas, beliefs and opinions about equity, giftedness, gifted and talented students and to reflect meaningfully about how they worked with those students. Despite their different perspectives of giftedness, all the participants acknowledged that giftedness is an above average ability to demonstrate an outstanding performance. There was a concern among many participants that certain teachers did not make any provisions for the gifted students in their regular classrooms. The findings also uncovered the notion of equity as equality (a concept based on sameness and equal shares) and a ‘taken for grantedness’ of perceptions about giftedness which affected both the participants’ identification of gifted and talented students and teaching practices.

This study concludes that stakeholders such as teachers, school principals, policy makers, Department of Education and teachers’ educational institutions need to bring about a transformation in the thinking of teachers to dispel misconceptions of giftedness and talent. Governments and the community need to support teachers with the resources and funds for teacher education and professional development in gifted education as well as gifted programs.
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Chapter 1

My positioning as a researcher, parent and teacher

Introduction

This thesis focusses on the broad topic of gifted and talented education and addresses the following overarching research question: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students? The study also explores two specific research questions: How does teachers’ thinking affect their conceptualisations of giftedness, gifted and talented students and their work in regular classrooms? Under what circumstances does teachers’ thinking change them into thinking teachers? My research questions focus on the teachers’ ideas, beliefs and opinions that form the basis for their thinking about giftedness and gifted education and the links with both the unique needs of gifted and talented students and the contemporary issues concerning gifted and talented students.

As I stepped back into my past and recalled the factors that contributed to my interest in this field of gifted and talented education, many vivid experiences came to mind. Hence in the first part of this chapter, I provide an overview of my lived experiences with poverty and social transformation to explain my position from a critical interpretivist paradigm. In the second part of the chapter, I elaborate an account of my youngest son’s schooling experiences which sparked my concern about how teachers work with gifted and talented children. In the third part of the chapter, I relate my encounter with gifted and talented education, my reasons for studying and the focus on teachers’ thinking in my study.
My taste of poverty and social transformation

My own taste of poverty during the first twenty years of my life created in me a critical awareness of the world around me and a hope for a transformation of my circumstances for the better. Since a young age, I loved reading and learning with deep understanding. For me, books constituted an opening to new ideas, accomplishments of great men and women and intriguing worlds that promised hope out of the world of poverty in which I found myself living. Books provided me with ‘bibliotherapy’ that enriched my emotional and intellectual development, and provided a consciousness of the reality of life. During my childhood, I lived in poverty in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia with my parents and ten siblings in a one bedroom low cost flat in a part of town where families with low socioeconomic backgrounds rented a place to stay. When we slept on the floor in the bedroom, there was no space to move around without accidentally stepping onto someone’s arms or legs. With such a big family, my parents could not find other places to rent. We stayed in that flat for fourteen years. In such an environment, it was not uncommon to see fights, experience being bullied, despised and harassed and to hear abusive or foul language. There was only one lift servicing the fifty six units of the high rise flats in which we lived. The lift always broke down and we had to climb up and down ten flights of stairs to get to our unit on the sixth floor. Each time it rained, the rainwater splashed through the windows into the bedroom, kitchen and living room. My mother had to cover the whole window area with plastic sheets to redirect the streams of rainwater onto the exterior wall of the building. The toilet was frequently blocked. My parents went through hard times getting their voices heard by the landlord in order to get the toilet and windows repaired.
It was amazing how the thirteen of us survived on our father’s daily income of eight Malaysian ringgit. My mother prudently budgeted the daily income and kept aside some money for the monthly rental and school fees. Once my mother questioned my father’s employer why there was no pay rise after so many years for my father. The reply was “Take it or leave”. My mother sewed uniforms for the army to supplement the family income at the rate of ten cents per uniform. I felt outraged that she was underpaid for the part time job. Despite the poor pay, I recalled that we had three meals a day: rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. My parents could afford a small piece of meat worth two Malaysian ringgit for the whole family only once a week. Such a small piece of meat ended up as morsels when divided among thirteen in a family. Our sources of protein were eggs with dark soya sauce and steamed bean curd. My mother related to me that my younger sister always asked her the same question every day: “Mum, is there any meat to eat today?” Meat was a delicacy during our childhood. Usually the older siblings would let the younger ones eat the meat morsels. We were all underweight for our age but fortunately not stunted intellectually. We understood our position at that moment in time. I remembered watching other children eating all sorts of delicious food during recess in school. Some rich children did not like the food prepared by their mothers and threw the food into the rubbish bins while poor ones like me had no food to bring to school to eat during recess. During our school days, we walked five kilometres to school per return journey and double that distance when we had to attend co-curricular activities in the afternoons.
Moving beyond poverty

Despite the unfavourable external conditions, my parents instilled in us the love for learning and the traits of diligence and perseverance. Both of them had a few years of primary school education before their opportunity to study was terminated by the onset of the Japanese Occupation in Malaysia. Surprisingly, that short span of education equipped them with the literacy skills to read and write in Mandarin. My parents believed that through diligence, perseverance, resilience and a meaningful education to acquire the competency, we could find a way to rise above poverty and overcome it. They believed in the principles of meritocracy which for them, appeared to offer a way out of the grip of poverty. My parents strongly believed that a good tertiary education could connect us to better paid jobs in the government sector and bring about the social transformation of a better future for us. All of us followed their advice. Prior to 1980, there were social structures whether state or federal, private associations and foreign aid to provide scholarships and loans based on merit for bright children from poor families to further their studies, either locally or overseas. However, by the 1980s, conditions for awarding scholarships for tertiary education in Malaysia were changed, resulting in a quota system with more opportunities for students from the culture in power and natives of the land than for students from other cultural backgrounds. The latter included the Chinese.

We were poor at a particular time but today we are no longer poor. Social transformation has indeed occurred for all of us. All my siblings are now university graduates. In our present circumstances, no one would think that we lived in poverty during our childhood. What we have individually acquired now in terms of professionalism and possessions is far beyond our imagination at the initial phases of our lives. If there were a continuum with poverty and wealth at the two extreme
ends, we have left the poverty end and have progressed to somewhere along the middle portion of the continuum. Although we were born under poor adverse circumstances, I believe that we can rise above the adverse circumstances and take control of the circumstances, instead of the other way round. We have tasted what it meant to be poor and we did not like the suffering that goes with it. The way out I believe, is to critique the adverse circumstances and think of ways to stand up for social transformation to alleviate the suffering.

When I was teaching in high schools in Sarawak, Malaysia in the late 1970s and 1990s, I developed an awareness of intelligent students from poor socioeconomic catchment areas. Though they were poor, they were well behaved studious students, who loved learning, and lacked the finances to further their education at the tertiary levels. Many felt trapped in their state of poverty and thought that they had to remain poor for the rest of their lives. I encouraged them to apply for government scholarships and recommended a number of them. Many are now successful in their various fields of interest. For almost two decades, two of them still keep in contact with me. Both of them invited me to their weddings. One of them told me that if it were not for my advice to pursue tertiary education, she would have ended up in a clerical position instead of the current position of a psychologist.

I know of a studious poor Chinese student who worked as he studied for an external university degree. Despite the unfavourable home environment, he excelled in all the school and public examinations as well as the accountancy examinations. He is currently a Chartered Accountant, provided with a personal assistant at his workplace. His current house is a sharp contrast to his first home. As a concerned teacher, I had visited his shed in the squatter area which had no piped water supply.
and limited generator power supply. He lived there with his parents and several siblings for almost two decades. When I taught him in Year Ten, I noticed that he was an isolate in class. His classmates seemed to make fun of his condition. I observed that his trousers were so big that he had to wrap his belt around his skinny waist twice to secure his trousers. The zip of his worn out school bag was spoilt and he had to secure the bag with a rope. He looked very embarrassed in class. After I bought a new school bag and new sets of uniform for him, he felt better in class. One day he fell down in the school hall and injured his back. No one helped him and those who saw what happened, laughed at him. He crawled home and was absent for several days. I saw him limping when he came back to school. He told me what happened. I brought him for physiotherapy until he got well.

The lived experiences with poverty of my students intersected with mine. I understood what it meant to be poor. What I did was to show concern for them, provide them the respect they needed, make them aware of the world around them, provide educational opportunities to meet their needs, and bolster their belief in themselves to help them bring about a social transformation for a better future for themselves. I strongly believe that it is up to each individual to develop that awareness of the world, experience what Freire (2004) described as a ‘critical consciousness’ in his/her life and imagine a better socioeconomic context and future. According to Freire (2004), knowledge of the world will shed light on the fluidity of an individual’s position in relation to poverty and provide hope for a social transformation of adverse circumstances.
Giftedness and a meaningful education

My awakening to the giftedness in my son

My son’s childhood and schooling experiences ignited in me a passionate interest in a meaningful education for him. Ern Eu’s experiences awakened me to his uniqueness and gave birth to a grave concern about teachers’ treatment of gifted and talented children. I did not realise that my recorded observations of his milestones and schooling experiences over time would materialise a decade later as the introduction to my study. Since the age of three, Ern Eu was fascinated by his older brothers playing computer games. He stood by the side of the computer table and watched them play until he got locked out of their rooms. They told him that he was too young to play teenagers’ games. Their friends would come to the house, link up their computers and challenge one another online. Each time he got locked out of the room in the midst of an exciting game, he would wring his hands and cry in frustration to me, saying: “Why can’t I grow up faster?” I felt so sorry for him: a small child trapped in a three year old body who wanted to be a teenager in order to belong to the same peer group as his brothers. The brothers told him to play kids’ computer games with his chronological peers but he found them uninteresting and unchallenging.

Whenever his brothers went to school, Ern Eu would use their computers, access the games he saw them playing and played on his own. When the boys came back, they wondered how he managed to bypass their passwords and log into their games and even beat their scores. This little boy had not even attended kindergarten at that age nor attended any computer lessons. When questioned how he was able to do this, he
answered that it was through his intense observation and mind mapping of what they did and applying what he saw them doing on the computer.

Ern Eu is a keen observer and has detailed visual recall. He told me that for movies that he has ever seen, when he heard the music or conversation of the actresses/actors, he could see the exact scene/episode vividly in his mind without looking at the television screen. During his childhood, he thought a lot and posed questions like: “Can astronauts go to the sun by wearing heat proof suits?” or “Where does money come from?” Since he was three, he liked to add and subtract with the calculator. He enjoyed testing his family members’ mental arithmetic with long addition and subtraction questions and gleefully checking out their answers with a calculator. In 2007 when he was in Year Three, he asked “What is a million divided by zero?” or a randomly picked number divided by infinity. He represented his class in the interclass written quiz competition for Abacus and Mental Arithmetic and was selected to represent his school in the interschool Abacus and Mental Arithmetic Quiz Competition for Year One to Three students at the district level in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. He beat sixty seven other students to win third prize in his category.

At the age of six, Ern Eu questioned the existence of mosquitoes because to him, mosquitoes did not serve a useful purpose for humanity. “If mosquitoes are bad and suck people’s blood, why do they still exist on earth?” At the age of nine, he critiqued the ‘Big Bang Theory’ concerning the formation of the solar galaxy by saying that “an explosion usually leads to destruction”. He asked me: “So how can it result in an orderly alignment of planets after the explosion?” At the age of ten, he told me: “I want to learn Engineering, Physics, Chemistry and Biology. Can you
teach me?” In early November 2009, my ten year old son discussed being normal and being different with me. He stated:

Someone said that you must be normal in order to fit in. But who is normal and who is not normal? Everyone is different and should be accepted as he or she is. If everyone tries to be normal, then they have become abnormal and not their real selves.

Sometimes my mind got blown away by the truth of some of the things he said at his young age. Whatever position a person has, s/he has no right to impose it on another person against the other person’s personal conviction. From the way he thinks, I know he uses higher order thinking skills, critical and creative thinking. In addition, he has a lot of imagination. From my evaluation, he learns through understanding and logical connections.

**My son’s taste of schooling experiences**

Ern Eu initially thought that school would be a pleasant place to go to learn. Little did we know that the school which he attended would lead to sleepless nights and disengagement from the class. When enrolling him in a traditional Chinese primary school in Kuching, I thought that Mandarin would be an advantageous language for him to possess. I did not realise that it would put him in a disadvantaged position in school. For the first six months of his schooling, my son was lost in the classroom and could not comprehend the teaching of subjects in the classroom whenever the medium of instruction was Mandarin. He could not sleep properly at night as he worried about his Mandarin classes. However, for subjects where the medium was in English, he scored ninety to a hundred percent in the tests. As he could not understand the Mandarin used by the teachers, he could not read the Mandarin
characters. The teachers tended to label him ‘stupid’, ‘lazy’ and ‘inattentive’ in the class. Consequently, he was often punished by the teachers for not listening to instructions, not starting class work as soon as possible and for daydreaming.

Whenever I visited him in the classroom during recess time, I noticed that he looked disengaged from the class and seemed to be daydreaming. In that school, parents were allowed to bring food for their children at recess time and accompany their children in their classrooms during recess time.

Ern Eu found the classroom atmosphere very noisy and very irritating as he was used to his own private quiet place at home. Many times he complained that he could not stand the noise made by forty-four classmates especially at break time. He complained that the noise caused his headaches and his ear drums to burst. He begged to go home many times, complaining: “I cannot stand the sound any more”. As an introvert, he felt drained by the large group of noisy children around him. I felt very concerned about my son’s situation and took a closer examination of the classroom environment.

Ern Eu’s classmates, especially those considered the ‘smart’ ones, started bullying him, thinking that he was not a ‘smart’ student. I felt that they seemed to make a practice of making fun of children who they thought were less ‘smart’ than them. He could not defend himself as he could not answer back in Mandarin. He felt frustrated, fearful, helpless and isolated in school. I advised my son to defend himself with answers in English if he could not figure out what to say in Mandarin.

To counteract the negative impact of my son’s experiences school on his development and wellbeing, I had to go every day during recess time to his classroom to advocate for him and report the bullying to his teachers and the parents.
of the bullies. Some teachers and parents misunderstood what I did for my son and thought that I was fussy and troublesome. I felt that the parents concerned did not seem to believe that their academically smart children could possibly act inappropriately towards my son in school. I remember a few occasions when I had to stop those smart students from bullying another student whom they labelled as ‘the girl holding the last position in class’ during recess time. I strongly believed that those students should be made aware that they had no right to show disrespect to any child with learning difficulties in the classroom.

**My awareness of my son’s learning difficulty**

By studying with Ern Eu at home, I discovered that his learning difficulty was impacting on his ability to read and decode Mandarin characters. Whenever he studied Mandarin on his own at home, he felt very unhappy, discouraged and frustrated when he could not read the characters. He could not understand why he could excel in the English subjects and not excel in the Chinese subjects. Ern Eu and I felt puzzled by this weakness in Mandarin that made him underachieve in his tests and pulled down his overall percentage. To help him cope with his learning difficulty, I revised his work with him and studied Mandarin at home with him. Knowing that my mother is literate in Mandarin, I learnt from my mother how to read every Mandarin character on the relevant pages in all my son’s text books and work books a day ahead, wrote the phonetics in English and explained to my son the sound and meaning during our revision sessions. I experienced how hard it was to identify Mandarin characters as I put myself in his shoes and studied his Mandarin books as a beginner with my mother. Mandarin characters are different from the alphabet. Either you know how to read it or you do not. I felt an overwhelming
helplessness when I could not read or identify the Chinese characters. From those sessions, I realised the depth of literacy in Mandarin my mother had acquired in her few years of education and understood how lost my son felt in that language.

I engaged a tutor to sit with Ern Eu, read and decode the Mandarin characters because I knew my limitation with Mandarin. He showed some improvement with his reading in Mandarin. Ern Eu tried to overcome his learning difficulty in novel ways. While studying for tests, he analysed the answer patterns for the subjective questions, explored links between answers and questions and created mind maps to organise answers for passages that would be tested. His techniques worked when teachers did not rearrange the sequence of questions in those passages in their tests. Six months later, Ern Eu could understand Mandarin better and he became more confident to speak in Mandarin. His classmates stopped bullying him when they found that he was not as ‘stupid’ as they thought he was. Consequently his academic performance in the Chinese subjects improved.

My son’s struggle with rote and ‘mental rot’

In Ern Eu’s primary school, teachers appeared to use text book and work book centred teaching methods and the ‘chalk and talk’ method every day. All students at each year level possessed the same type of textbooks and workbooks and did the same type of tasks in the classroom. They were taught to learn by rote and not through understanding. I felt that my child’s ability to think creatively seemed to rot away over time to pave the way for rote, hence the term ‘mental rot’. Students learnt through experience not to look at their teachers’ faces to avoid their gazes and being singled out to answer questions during class time, or regarded as challenging the teacher’s authority. It was common for teachers to punish students who did not
respond to their teaching methods by caning their palms. Though the original intention of the cane was to discipline unruly students, there were teachers who caned students for making mistakes in writing, reading and other reasons. In every classroom, on the teacher’s table were at least three canes of varying thicknesses which teachers chose or instructed students to select for the strokes of discipline.

During his early primary school education, Ern Eu was expected to memorise numerous pages of text in two languages for the weekly school tests, as instructed by the language teachers. I was surprised that he could write from memory perfectly memorised passages of Mandarin word for word, without knowing how to read them aloud word for word. A compulsory question in both the Mandarin language and Malay language papers was to write a memorised page of a given text within ten minutes. An imperfect regurgitation of the memorised texts in the tests meant punishment by caning and copying the text the number of times as the number of mistakes. I disagreed with the testing system used as the tests assessed perfect rote learning rather than understanding. I began to realise that the teacher-centred traditional method mismatched my son’s learning style. When he studied for his tests at home, there were times of outbursts of anger and frustrations over memorising the same thing over and over again. He hated going to school. Whenever it was assessment time, he developed stress, fever, headaches and a running nose. He experienced examination fever in the real sense. He would tell me that he was sick and could not go to school.
My son’s perceptions of school as a nightmare and a jail

One day Ern Eu said: “Going to school is a nightmare and Monday is the first day of a week of nightmares.” When asked for reasons about his comment, he mentioned that teachers liked to scold and punish students. Ern Eu felt threatened by the chaos in the classroom when teachers could not control the noisy and naughty students. He did not tell me what happened in the class as he did not want to think about those unpleasant incidents and he did not want me to worry about him. After much coaxing, he explained the unpleasant things that happened in the classroom. I was appalled at how several teachers appeared to act as executors of nightmares instead of educators to impact fear instead of knowledge into the minds of young children like my child, in a place called school. In the following paragraphs, I portray the traumatic experiences of my child with two teachers in that primary school.

My six year old son felt that he was being victimised by a particular teacher who caned him on his arms or thighs for no valid reason. For example, he was caned for being slow in opening his book to the required page. I remember one of his classmates describing to me how the teacher smacked the knuckles of my son’s outstretched hand with a meter long cane. I went straightaway to confront that particular teacher but he denied hurting my son’s hand. One day Ern Eu discovered that if he cried continuously after the punishment, the teacher would stop targeting him. After that incident, the teacher and his classmates labelled him “cry baby”, a label which hurt him emotionally. In my opinion, teachers should allow time for young children to understand instructions in a language that is new to them and help them to learn without punishment.
Ern Eu told me that he learnt to shut his mind down in the presence of the teacher whenever any teacher caned his palm. He explained to me that by shutting down his mind, he would not feel the intensity of the pain and suffering. Moreover, he told me that whenever it came to sitting for the test for the subject set by a particular teacher, his mind would go blank because he did not like the teacher. He would leave many questions unanswered even though he knew the answers. I was alarmed by my six year old son’s mental shutdown and his underachievement which seemed to be triggered by his responses to teachers who caned him. At times he reacted in ways beyond my comprehension for a child of his age.

In a separate incident in 2007, I felt that my eight year son was used as a scape-goat by a Mathematics teacher who lost the control of both her class and her temper. On a particular day, this teacher wrote nine long division questions on the board. After writing the answers, she gave the students a few minutes to look at the working. Then she erased the answers and called up nine ‘smart’ students one by one to write the answers on the board. Each one could not do the question and was humiliated in front of the class by the teacher and caned one time. She seemed to assume that ‘smart’ students possessed photographic memory. When it came to Ern Eu’s turn (he was the ninth student), he stood in front of the board. He took some time to figure out the answer as the pattern of question changed when it came to his turn. The teacher did not give him sufficient time to internalise the question, lost her patience and shouted at him. She caned him thrice and pulled his ears twice. Ern Eu felt so shocked by her irrational behaviour. He told me:

I felt the pain and humiliation in front of the class. I was so hurt that tears welled in my eyes. I wished at that instant I could teleport home straightaway to escape from this teacher.
When I approached this teacher about the matter, she gave me three unacceptable excuses. First, she explained that she disliked students who thought that they were ‘smart’ and could do their work without much instruction. Second, she could not control the noisy class at that time. Third, she was not feeling well and she lost her control. I felt that when noisy students broke the lines of power between the teacher and students, the power seemed to shift from the teacher to the noisy students.

Punishing the ‘smart’ children, especially my innocent son severely, for not providing the correct answers suggested a way of restoring the line of power back to her as the teacher who had the knowledge of the correct answers. In my opinion, she should not humiliate ‘smart’ students or any child in front of the rest of the class. Caning my son so severely just because she lost control of the class and her temper was detrimental to his perception of school, teachers and interest in the subject (Mathematics) that she was teaching. Ern Eu usually scored a hundred percent in his tests for Mathematics in his first primary school as he found the subject easy by his standards. After that incident, he remarked that he did not like Mathematics anymore and he began to underachieve.

My eight year old son reckoned: “School is a jail. I am imprisoned in the classroom to sit still, listen to fierce teachers and do boring stuff or else – be punished”. Tears flooded my eyes when it occurred to me that I was sending my beloved child to that place called school to serve what he reckoned was a daily jail sentence in a panopticon under the surveillance of fearsome persons called teachers. Since when did school become a jail to innocent children like my son? No wonder when he dragged himself to his class in the morning, his face turned downcast and he slumped in his chair. But when he left school at the end of the day, his face brightened up as if a rain cloud has disappeared from his face and he ran out of the
school compound as fast as a lightning bolt. As I held his hands and walked with him
to the classroom, I could feel the difference in the heaviness and tenseness of his
body before and after school. My son was of average weight and height according to
his chronological age. However, on his way to school, he weighed like a ton of
rocks, taking double the normal time to walk to school. He seemed to be moving
against gravity on his way to the classroom.

Through my son’s experiences with the teachers that I mentioned, I became critically
aware how unsafe and unsuitable school could become for children like Ern Eu when
punitive practices instead of educative practices were implemented by some
teachers. At that particular time, teachers in Malaysia were not required to undergo
working with children checks. It did not make sense to my son and me why some
teachers did not like students who were intelligent and well behaved. Neither did it
make sense to us why those teachers punished the intelligent and well behaved when
they could not control the misbehaving ones. I wondered about those teachers’
thinking underpinning the unjust ways they treated Ern Eu.

My son’s unexpected transformation
Within that short span of schooling life and daily encounters with teachers who
appeared to dislike him intensely, I saw Ern Eu gradually transformed by the adverse
school environment from an enthusiastic, inquisitive, happy child to a bored,
disillusioned, irritable, frustrated child who often lost his self-control when his anger
overflowed. I had to constantly find alternatives to counterattack this threat to bring
him back to become a happy, secure, strong, determined individual who learns to be
bold and fight against the adverse circumstances, and surface above them to emerge
as a champion, not as a loser. It is ironic that while education got me out of the grip
of poverty, I had to get my son out of the grip of this poor education. He was losing his interest in schooling. Much to my concern, in Year Three, he started to stutter and wrote mirror reflections of b and d as well as p and g.

When too much meaningless homework of the same kind was given every day, Ern Eu decided that it was time to quit wasting his time doing it. I noticed the frustration on my child’s face while he was writing and writing the same things over and over again although he knew how to do it. One day he commented: “There is more to life than homework. The teacher is just wasting my time – time that I can use to do things I enjoy doing.” On one particular occasion, Ern Eu became so disillusioned and overwhelmed by the unreasonable amount of homework that he wrote in his exercise book: “I cannot take it anymore. I quit”. Then he threw his homework into the rubbish bin and left the study room.

As I observed the change in Ern Eu’s nature and attitude towards schooling for the worse, my heart really ached for him. In July 2007, I withdrew him from that school and that type of educational system before he completely lost his interest in schooling. The classroom environment was detrimental to his emotional, intellectual and potential development. I went in search of a school with better school ethos and teachers with forward and positive thinking for his education and wellbeing. As I discussed the school situation and education system with other parents and teachers, I realised that the same type of classroom environment appeared to exist in Chinese primary schools in that place. I know of one parent who withdrew her bright child from the same school as my son and enrolled him in a private school. She reported her child’s unpleasant experiences with another teacher to the Sarawak Department of Education.
My dream of new beginnings

For my son’s wellbeing and to rekindle his interest in schooling, I took Ern Eu to Perth, Western Australia in July 2007 dreaming of and searching for a better education for him. At that moment in time, I believed that the education system in Australia would suit his learning needs and style better. Moreover, I knew that the Australian laws would protect my child from being abused or caned by teachers in schools. At the same time, I enrolled myself in postgraduate studies in gifted and talented education at Murdoch University, Perth to rekindle my passion in learning.

One of my childhood dreams was to pursue the highest level of education, which did not materialise earlier due to poverty, lack of financial support and family commitments. Finally in 2007, three decades after I graduated from a Malaysian university with my first degree, my dream came true. I remembered vividly how excited I was stepping onto Murdoch University campus on the first day as a postgraduate student. It was wonderful to have that opportunity to study again.

In the process of doing an extensive literature review on Gifted and Talented Education, I made sense of the perspectives, theories and ideas within my lived experiences and developed a fascination in this field. The more I read the literature, the more passionate I became about gifted and talented education. The literature review offered me an in-depth understanding of the situation my son and I were in. I began to understand why Ern Eu thought, behaved and reacted in the ways that differed from the norms. He is gifted and talented.
My son’s transition in status: From ‘average’ to gifted and talented

Ern Eu went through a difficult transition period in the school in Australia. First, his new Year Three teacher regarded him as an ‘average’ student and tried to convince me that he was ‘average’, not gifted nor talented. Second, two teachers constantly reminded him to look at their faces when they talked to him which he was not supposed to do in the previous school. He felt very uncomfortable under the serious gaze of one particular teacher who repeatedly reprimanded him: “Look at my face when you talk to me.” Third, the teachers emphasised sports, especially the running posture, Victorian handwriting and public speaking in class which were values that were not considered important in the previous school in comparison to academic excellence. His teachers kept commenting to me that Ern Eu was too quiet and should speak up. Fourth, he was the only Asian student in the class and his classmates made fun of his accent which they called ‘Malaysian/Chinese English’. He also had to get used to the Australian teachers’ accent and faster speed of speaking English compared to the Asian way of speaking English. Fifth, being a new student in the class, he had no friends. Sixth, we came in winter and had to adjust to the cold. It was a traumatic experience for my eight year old son to face all the weaknesses exposed by his teachers and peers in a new cold environment. I had to remind the teachers to give my child time to acclimatise to the Australian school culture.

Each time I asked Ern Eu about what he learned in Year Three in the new school, he replied: “Nothing. I know everything already. School is so boring.” When I looked through his school work, I found that he had learned all that in Year One and Year Two in the school in Malaysia. No wonder he felt bored and dragged his feet to go to school. It seemed that school was wasting his time. I requested for relocating him in
Year Four instead of Year Three, but was told that grade acceleration was not practised in that particular school and that there were six or seven students who scored higher than him in certain subjects in the Year Three Examination. At that time, I wondered whether I had found the right school for him in Perth or not.

In Year Four, Ern Eu sat for the qualification tests for the Primary Extension and Challenge (PEAC) program and was identified as gifted and talented, much to the surprise of his Year Three teacher. The opportunity for my son to attend gifted programs like PEAC courses marked a new beginning of his educational journey and rekindled his interest in learning. Ern Eu thoroughly enjoyed all the enrichment activities of the withdrawal PEAC courses that he selected in Year Five and Year Six according to his interests. On PEAC days, he skipped to school. He eagerly looked forward to doing things like playing chess with likeminded peers during PEAC courses. At the school level, one particular Year Four teacher impacted on my son’s learning with his sense of humour and exciting stories of lived experiences that connected to Ern Eu’s curiosity to learn. Ern Eu wished that he could sit in that teacher’s class again in the future. I was happy that my son had regained his interest in learning.

Two other standardised tests conducted on gifted and talented students served as tools to affirm the status of my son as gifted and talented. When the music teacher in the school told me that Ern Eu sat for a qualifying test, conducted by the School of Instrumental Music for Year Six and Year Seven students, and was found to be very talented, I thought that she was joking. My son had never attended any private music lessons in any instrument. I was very surprised because music is a domain in which I lacked the theory and practice necessary to identify or support his abilities. In Year
Six in 2010, Ern Eu qualified among the top 202 students out of approximately two thousand bright Year Six students in Western Australia who sat for the gifted and talented entrance examination to enter Perth Modern School in Year Eight 2012. Perth Modern is the only academic selective school in Western Australia in which all the students are gifted and talented. I was overjoyed because my son has persevered and emerged as a champion, despite hindrances, injustice and doubts about his ability by some teachers. I think I have finally found a school which promises an education that suits him.

The impact of my journey and my son’s journey on my research

As I looked back at my son’s experiences in school, I felt very concerned about the suitability, unpredictability and inconsistency of teachers and the learning environments in school which impacted on the education, nurture and wellbeing of Ern Eu, both as a child and a gifted student. This phenomenon could happen to other gifted and talented children as well. Even Dr. James Delisle, a professor of gifted education, was put down as a “pushy” parent by the teacher concerned when he advocated for his gifted child in a school in the United States (2006, p.56). I am concerned about the education of gifted and talented students. What is it in the thinking of a teacher that makes a difference to the meaning of education in the life of a gifted and talented child? I wonder whether teachers, especially the three particular teachers in Malaysia, reflected on why they did what they did to the children that crossed their paths in school or paused to think about who they were (caning executors) and who they could be (caring educators). When some teachers act unfairly in their work with children and lose their perspectives in their calling to
become educators, they impact disastrously on their students’ lives and block students’ learning capacity instead of enhancing it.

We need to do justice to the education of all children, including the gifted and talented and take care of the needs of all children in school. How does a teacher teach all students, including the gifted and talented students, in regular classrooms? As I reflected on this question, I searched for insights and understanding about teachers’ perspectives of their roles as teachers and their thinking concerning the gifted and talented, in their classrooms. Many questions arose that led to the focus of my research. They included the following: What do teachers understand by the term ‘giftedness’? What do teachers think about gifted and talented students? How does their thinking affect their treatment of gifted students and their teaching styles? Why do some teachers appear to dislike/like gifted students? Why do some teachers seem to feel threatened by the presence of gifted students in their classes? Which types of students do teachers prefer to teach? What are the underlying factors, ideas, values and beliefs influencing the teachers’ thinking about giftedness and talent? To what extent is a teacher’s thinking about gifted education influenced by his/her knowledge, teaching experience, competency, professional development and training? How should teachers of the gifted think to cater effectively for their students? How/when do they change from doing things in taken for granted ways to critically thinking about who they are and what they do in their positions as teachers in schools? These unanswered questions led me to the topic of this study ‘Educating gifted and talented students: From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers’.

Thus the focus of my research is on the ways teachers think about giftedness, their work and the education of gifted and talented students. My overarching research
question is: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students? My two specific research questions are: How does teachers’ thinking affect their conceptualisations of giftedness, gifted and talented students and their work in regular classrooms? Under what circumstances does teachers’ thinking change them into ‘thinking teachers’? The overarching research question explores teachers’ ideas, beliefs and opinions about giftedness, talent and gifted and talented students. The first specific research question then addresses how these ideas, beliefs and opinions influence teachers’ awareness and understanding of the needs of gifted and talented students, as well as how they work with gifted and talented students in their classrooms. The second specific research question seeks to examine the circumstances in which teachers’ thinking about giftedness and gifted and talented students transforms them into ‘thinking teachers’ in the education of gifted and talented students. These questions formed the basis for my research.

**Overview of the thesis**

In Chapter 1 I have positioned myself as a researcher, parent and teacher with an account of my experiences with poverty and social transformation and my son’s experiences with teachers that impacted on my focus in this research. Chapter 1 also foreshadows the resonance of my experiences with Freirean critical consciousness, critical theorising, a critical interpretivist paradigm and social transformation as well as my fascination with the education of gifted and talented children. I continue in Chapter 2 by situating my study in the literature with an account of my search for a gap in the literature where I could make an original contribution to knowledge. In Chapter 3 I theorise teachers’ thinking by explicating my theoretical framework that interweaves Paulo Freire’s ideas and a critical interpretivist paradigm to help me
understand teachers’ thinking, feelings and reflections about giftedness, education of the gifted and talented, teachers’ work, the *status quo* and what could be transformed. In Chapter 4 I unfold the steps in my thinking and the design for my study which blends a qualitative research approach, a critical interpretivist methodology, the recursive model of interviewing as the method for collecting data, anecdotal approach and reflexive analysis.

Chapter 5 is the first of my data analysis chapters. In this chapter, I develop and propose models of teachers’ thinking about teachers’ work to understand and analyse the emergent key questions while Chapter 6 explores the ‘taken for grantedness’ of giftedness. I discuss what teachers think about giftedness and the way this ‘taken for grantedness’ might influence teachers’ work with gifted and talented children. Chapter 7 examines the complexity of teachers’ work as I explore teachers’ voices about their work and what teachers themselves think are the possible prevailing factors which hinder them in their work with gifted and talented education. Chapter 8 explores the ‘joy’ of teaching as I examine the ways in which individual teachers view their work in educating children, including gifted and talented students.

In Chapter 9 I provide an overall conclusion of the findings, discuss their implications and make recommendations for future research and practice. Most importantly, I argue that the transformation in gifted and talented education can come about when teachers develop a critical awareness that gifted and talented children need to be treated differently and provided with appropriate challenging learning experiences on par with their abilities, interests and pace. When teachers have the opportunity to address the ‘taken for granted’ ways of thinking about giftedness (in both individual students and more generally in the education context)
and the ways in which they work with gifted and talented students, their changed ways of thinking are likely to transform them into ‘thinking teachers’. Thinking teachers will provide a meaningful education for gifted and talented students in school and honour the students’ rights to a continuity of appropriate learning opportunities to develop their giftedness and talents. How education could achieve its meaning and purpose for gifted and talented students in regular classrooms, as I perceive it, depends on the ways teachers ‘think’ and the ‘thinking teachers’ who make a difference.
Chapter 2

Situating my study in the literature

Introduction

This chapter provides an account of my search of the literature and identification of a gap in which I could situate my research and make an original contribution to knowledge. My experiences with my gifted and talented son and his experiences with teachers led me to explore my research within the literature. Given that my overarching research question is: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students?, there seemed to be little research on teachers’ thinking about giftedness and gifted education from the insider viewpoint. Much of the literature seems to focus on commonly identified themes such as awareness of unique needs of gifted and talented students, knowledge of gifted education, teacher education and professional development in gifted education, attitudes of teachers, perspectives of giftedness, intelligence and talent, specific categories of gifted and talented students and school provisions.

Little research has been conducted to explore the thinking of regular classroom teachers about their work with gifted and talented students. Some researchers have explored teachers’ thinking with respect to their attitudes, feelings and preferences concerning their work with gifted and talented students (Carrington and Bailey, 2000; Chessman, 2010; Croft, 2003; Galbraith & Delisle, 1996; Plunkett, 2000; Smith & Chan, 1998). Teachers’ attitudes with respect to gifted/non gifted students, athletic/intellectual ability, gender, socio-economic background, culture, age and race were well researched by Bransky (1987 cited in Croft, 2003), Carrington and

Attitude seemed to be linked to the “affect, feelings, values or beliefs” (Henerson, Morris & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987, p.13) of an individual which are manifested in the ways s/he tends to behave toward a particular person, object or situation. Most definitions of attitude seemed “to agree that an attitude is a state of readiness, a tendency to act or react in a certain manner when confronted with certain stimuli” (Oppenheim, 1966, p.105). The measurement of attitudes could be problematic owing to the impossibility of measuring attitudes directly, the possibility of attitudes fluctuating over time and the lack of consensus about the nature of certain attitudes (Henerson, Morris & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987, p.13). The common “attribute of attitude is its evaluative (pro-con, positive-negative) dimension” (Ajzen 1993, p.41). Ajzen stated:

An attitude is an individual’s disposition to react with a certain degree of favorableness or unfavorableness to an object, behavior, person, institution, or event– or to any other discriminable aspect of the individual’s world.

(Ajzen 1993, p.41)

There seems to be a gap in the literature about the ways teachers think about giftedness, gifted and talented students and gifted education in regular classrooms. Thus I situated my research in that gap in the literature. The focus of my research is on teachers’ thinking: the ways teachers perceive and think about giftedness, their work and the education of gifted and talented students and the words they used to describe the ideas and beliefs underlying their thinking and reflection of their work. This chapter is written in two parts: the first part on the definitions of fundamental terms used in my study and the second part on gifted and talented education.
Conceptualisation of the terms ‘thinking’ and ‘education’

At the outset it is important to have a clear conceptualisation of the terms ‘thinking’, ‘education’ and ‘thinking teachers’ that I use in my study. The term ‘thinking’ can be defined as “judgement, reasoning, reflection and thought” (dictionary.com, 1 April 2009). ‘Thinking’ can also be defined as forming interconnected ideas, problem solving and imagination (Hornby, 2000). ‘Education’ can be defined as a process of imparting or acquiring knowledge, developing the skills of reasoning, reflection and judgement, and preparing someone emotionally, intellectually and socially for mature life (dictionary.com, 1 April 2009). Thus I am interested in exploring how teachers judge, reflect and reason about ideas of giftedness and talent and prepare the students to develop their knowledge and abilities to link ideas, imagine, problem solve, reason, reflect and make sound judgements during their journey from childhood to adulthood. If thinking is about imagination, problem solving, reasoning, reflection and judgement while education is about developing reasoning, intellect and judgement, then thinking and education overlap in their foci. In order to solve problems, plan, reason, reflect and judge, an individual needs to possess certain ideas, values, belief systems, opinions, standards, points of reference, theories and knowledge on which to base his/her reasoning, reflection, judgement, in order to reach a certain decision/conclusion/solution/assumption/plan of action. As I paused and reflected on the two terms, my research questions crossed my mind. How does teachers’ thinking affect their conceptualisations of giftedness, gifted and talented students and their work in regular classrooms? Under what circumstances does teachers’ thinking change them into thinking teachers?

‘Thinking teachers’ refer to teachers who reflect on why they do what they are doing and evaluate how they do what needs to be done. In thinking about teachers’
thinking, I am interested in what Buchman described as “teachers’ capacity to determine suitable courses of action and the dispositions and processes that presumably underlie that capacity”, for example “imagining and remembering, interpreting and giving meaning, judging and willing, caring and feeling” (Buchman, 1990, p.46) in their work with gifted and talented students. Within the context of this study, ‘thinking teachers’ are those whose meaningful reflections about their work empower them to become transformative agents of change in the education of gifted and talented students. ‘Thinking teachers’ are critically aware of a gifted and talented child’s right to have his/her educational needs met. They critique and become empowered to transform the ‘taken for granted’ ways of thinking and teaching related to the status quo which place gifted and talented students at educational risk. ‘Thinking teachers’ honour the rights of gifted and talented children to a continuity of appropriate educational experiences.

‘Becoming’ a thinking teacher denotes an experiential process in which the person actively seeks ways to understand and cater for the learning needs of all children in his/her classrooms by building up healthy relationships with students, parents and colleagues as well as upgrading himself/herself with the relevant knowledge and skills. It is also a process in which the person as an educator develops a hardy and reflexive nature, care and concern for the healthy academic, emotional, moral and social development of every child. The process of becoming a thinking teacher will also include developing a critical awareness of the world and the empowerment to transform the status quo and unsuitable teaching practices over time to make a difference in the lives of their students. They will strive to provide the meaningful education that each child deserves. I echo the same sentiment as Aronowitz who insisted on “seeing life not as a static state of being but as a process of becoming”
(2008, p.165). My research addresses the questions: How do teachers in my study view their lives/work as teachers of gifted and talented students? How/when/why do they move from the status quo towards becoming transformative agents in educating the gifted and talented?

**Reflective teachers**

Metaphors synonymous with the conceptualisation of ‘thinking teachers’ are “teacher as transformative intellectual” (Giroux, 1989), “critically reflective teachers” (Brookfield, 1995), “reflective teachers” (Grant & Zeichner, 1984; Zeichner, 1994, 2009) and “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983, 1987; Zeichner, 1994, 2009). Giroux (1989) introduced the metaphor “teacher as transformative intellectual” which seemed to be a new conceptualisation of the image of a teacher at that moment in time (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992, p.34). He elaborated further on the roles of transformative intellectual as reflexive professional educators with an emancipatory vision of better living and working conditions (Giroux, 1989, p.729 cited in Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992). Fain (2002) made a similar point. He declared:

> It is my belief that those of us who enter the enterprise of education in order to survive are often crushed in the workplace, but those of us who are called to education because we understand its emancipatory powers seek liberation for the students, for colleagues, and for ourselves. It is my conviction that emancipation and liberation result when professionals seek out and participate in what I call authentic professional engagements, …

(Fain, 2002, p.130)

Brookfield pointed out that in the process of becoming critically reflective teachers, “we also learn to speak about our practice in a way that is authentic and consistent”
He stated that “For teachers, the discovery, honouring, and expression of an authentic voice are genuinely transformative processes” (Brookfield, 1995, p.46) which could potentially change the way they teach for the better (Brookfield, 1995, p.47). Brookfield elaborated:

As we think about why we teach at all, and about why we teach in the particular way that we do, we try to ground our practice in core democratic values such as justice, fairness, and compassion.

(Brookfield, 1995, p.44)

Grant and Zeichner claimed that “reflective teaching occurs when you question and clarify why you have chosen your classroom materials, procedures and content” (1984 cited in Hayon, 1990, p.59). They believed that a “reflective teacher is dedicated and committed to teaching all students” (Grant & Zeichner, 1984 cited in Hayon, 1990, p.59). How does such a teacher teach all students, including the gifted and talented students in regular classrooms? For teachers to make a difference in their teaching, Jackson-Barrett identified “the three Rs” underlying good teaching: “Responsibility, Relationships and Respect” (2009 cited in Aveling, 2010, p.351). How a teacher accepts and implements his/her responsibility as an educator; builds up relationships with students, parents and the community; and inculcates respect for each individual, each culture and the diversity of beliefs and values, will directly or indirectly impact how students think and learn in a meaningful way and achieve the best that they are capable of, thus making a difference in their lives.

**The regular classroom context**

Any regular class consists of a diversity of students. This includes gifted and talented students. While there are gifted and talented students placed in selective schools, the
majority of gifted children undertake their education in regular classrooms in comprehensive schools. A teacher in the regular classroom teaches a wide spectrum of students: those with special educational needs at one end, students with a continuum of abilities, needs and developmental levels in the middle and the gifted and talented at the opposite end. Even the gifted and talented students differ in their levels of development and giftedness. They are by no means a homogeneous group and some will have learning difficulties or other existing weaknesses. Placed in that situation in the classroom with more than twenty students with different interests, needs, background and personalities, teachers are required to educate and manage every one of them as well as juggle other duties delegated to them by local school authorities.

The majority of schools depend on the commitment of regular classroom teachers to cater for the student diversity in terms of academic ability and cultural diversity within school hours and with limited resources (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000). I am interested to explore what teachers think about teaching in the regular classroom and responding to the diverse abilities and educational needs of all students, particularly the gifted and talented. How do they provide a conducive and safe learning environment and the appropriate curriculum to ensure the success of the education of all students, including the gifted and talented? It is equally important for me to point out the diversity of teachers that students encounter in regular classrooms in schools. The teacher spectrum consists of teachers with a continuum of abilities, teaching experience, qualifications and professional development. They differ in age, socio-cultural backgrounds, life experiences and job specifications.
Recognition of student diversity

The recognition of student diversity in terms of academic ability and cultural diversity in regular classrooms in Australian schools can be traced back to the consequences of school reforms and the influx of multicultural migrants in the 1960s. Braggett and Moltzen (2000) provided an overview of Australian education over the decades in the twentieth century. From 1900 till 1950, Australia provided comprehensive “mass education for students” until the age of fourteen or fifteen years and “academically oriented” secondary education for the minority who intended to enter colleges or universities (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000, p.779). In the 1960s and 1970s, schools were reformed owing to a shift in the education system from a highly elitist to a more comprehensive system in a changing multicultural society that aimed to provide postsecondary education to the majority of students, including those from different socioeconomic groups and migrant populations. Consequently the curriculum was modified to cater for a more comprehensive education system (Braggett, 1985 cited in Braggett & Moltzen, 2000). From 1950 till 1980, it was suggested that “Society could develop comprehensive schools for all students or provide individually for separate groups” to cater for student diversity and equity (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000, p.780). However, catering for equity and student diversity was not that straightforward. Students with special needs seemed to be favoured “often to the neglect of the gifted/talented (Braggett, 1985) or those with special abilities (Moltzen, 1996)” (cited in Braggett & Moltzen, 2000, p.780).

Braggett and Moltzen (2000) concluded that in the 1980s and 1990s, educational provisions for the gifted in Australia were affected by three main factors. First, an egalitarian outlook permeated different strata in society and focused on equality, social justice and teachers’ awareness of meeting the demands of student diversity in
terms of academic ability and cultural diversity. At that moment in time, politicians
and educators considered identification and special additional provision for the gifted
as elitist and believed that the comprehensive school education met the needs of all
students, including gifted students. The assumption was that regular classroom
teachers possessed the ability to cater for the needs of the gifted within a traditional
lockstep system. The myth was that gifted students would do well without specific
assistance because they already have a natural advantage (Braggett, 1994; Porter,
2005). Braggett and Moltzen pointed out the danger of neglecting gifted students
because “teachers may lose a sense of direction as they develop ‘the gifts and talents
of all students’, and pay less attention to the most advanced students, to those with
high potential, and to those with extraordinary abilities” (2000, p.781). This concern
seemed to linger on into the twenty first century. The second factor was the belief
that identification methods for ‘school house giftedness’ (Renzulli & Reis, 2000,
2003) favoured white, middle-class students and disadvantaged those from minority
groups and different cultural backgrounds. Third, the type of political ideology and
perceptions of equality seemed to affect provisions for the education of gifted and
talented students. Political parties with social democratic traditions tend to favour
equality of social outcomes while conservative political parties tend to be more
receptive to more elitist approaches which included making educational provisions
for gifted and talented students.

**Egalitarianism versus excellence**

Australian education seems to be influenced by two conflicting values of
egalitarianism and excellence (Braggett, 1994; Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Gross,
2004) which affect the provision of a different more advanced and faster paced
curriculum for the gifted and talented, particularly the intellectually gifted. Braggett and Moltzen stated that most Australian states “grappled” with providing “individuality and excellence” for the gifted and talented within their “egalitarian social systems” on the grounds of social justice to avoid issues of “elitism and privilege” (2000, p.779). Gross (2004) predicted that as long as intellectual giftedness is equated with social and economic privilege, resentment and distrust of the intellectually gifted would continue to have significant adverse significant effects on gifted education in Australia.

Teachers’ thinking seems to be affected by the swing of the pendulum between excellence on one end and egalitarianism on the other end. When teachers think of motivating gifted students to achieve excellence, they tend to provide appropriate conducive learning opportunities and a more advanced and qualitatively differentiated curriculum to meet the educational right, needs and abilities of their students. The reverse is also true. Braggett (1994) asserted that when teachers think that providing extra learning opportunities to the gifted students gives them an unfair advantage and widens the academic gap between them and the rest of the class, they tend to expect the gifted students to accommodate themselves to the normal curriculum and receive the same education as the rest of their peers. He argued that when their thinking is influenced by egalitarianism, they tend to regard the provision of the difference in curriculum and learning opportunities for the gifted students as elitism. This implies that a teacher’s values, whether leaning towards egalitarianism or excellence, bears significance on his/her teaching of the gifted children. The unresolved question that arises is how to strike a compromise between egalitarianism and excellence without disadvantaging the gifted child.
Research suggests that the underlying cause of the neglect of gifted and talented students is the political ideology which favours equality over excellence, and egalitarianism based on equality of outcomes (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Gross, 2004). Those supporting equality tend to emphasise helping the economically disadvantaged children achieve a higher level of performance in school and attaining similar educational outcomes. Political parties favouring social democracy tend to make policies focusing on social justice and equality of social outcomes. Gross pointed out that the equality of outcomes ideology focused on uniformity across the diversity of students by ensuring:

… that all children, regardless of their capacity to learn, should undertake the same curriculum, at the same time, at the same pace, and to the degree that it can be controlled, in classes which contain as wide a range of intellectual ability as can be managed by the average teacher.

(Gross, 2004, p.24)

The assumption was that the regular teacher could manage a class of children learning the same curriculum at the same pace and the same time. According to Braggett and Moltzen, those involved seemed to believe that “the usual classroom setting and the regular teacher” would provide “the most appropriate education for gifted children” (2000, p.781). As Braggett and Moltzen commented:

This is generally conceived within a traditional lockstep method of organisation, however, in which the majority of children cover similar work in groups and do not explore too far from the predetermined curriculum. As a consequence, some opposition is expressed when withdrawal groups, content or grade acceleration, special classes or differentiated programs are suggested.

(Braggett & Moltzen, 2000, p.782)

The ‘traditional lockstep method of organisation’ seemed to be a way of locking children into a system to learn within the borders of a fixed curriculum, with little
freedom for any child to step ahead of the rest of the class. Gross (2004) pointed out that in 1987, the Commonwealth Schools Commission introduced the equality of outcomes approach in Australian education along with a minimal competency curriculum. She explained that such an ideology not only equated equity with uniformity and sameness but also tried to reduce or even eradicate individual differences and overlooked the diversity of the needs, interests, abilities, developmental levels, cultural and social backgrounds of individuals. She indicated that to ensure the sameness, the equality of outcomes movement aimed to suppress gifted programs which catered for the faster and more advanced learning of the gifted and talented, imposed policies “to ‘level down’ the intellectually gifted” to the same level as the typical peers, and attain the same educational achievement (Gross, 2004, p.24). According to Gross (2004), teachers with such ideology tended to neglect and restrain their gifted and talented students in the classroom with the same curriculum for all students. Furthermore, she claimed that this ideology permeates different strata of the Australian society: the government, ministers of education, principals, teachers’ unions and parents of typical students. Members of the equality of outcomes movement seemed to oppose special gifted programs on grounds of elitism and widening the gap between the typical students and the gifted and talented. Braggett and Moltzen made a similar point about egalitarianism permeating “Australasian society during the 1980s and the 1990s” (2000, p.780).

Coleman and Cross suggested that the most common belief ingrained in some school principals, teachers and parents as well as society in general was that “giftedness is elitist” (2000, p.204). Many teachers seemed to regard the gifted and talented as already “educationally privileged” and felt that these students should not be provided with extra resources (South Australian Institute of Teachers, 1985 cited

However, they overlooked the fact that gifted and talented students came from different ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural backgrounds and from lower income parents as well as higher income parents. They might even be depriving economically disadvantaged gifted and talented students of the opportunity to develop to their full potential. They insinuated that special gifted programs and accelerative practices would cause socio-emotional disorders in the gifted and talented. Actually, researchers in gifted and talented education found that such programs have overwhelmingly possible benefits for gifted and talented students (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Clark, 2008; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Davis & Rimm, 1989; Gallagher, 2003; Gross, 2004; Kronborg, 2002; Neihart, 2007; Rimm, 2006; Ruf, 2005; Senate Select Committee, 1988; Smith, 2006; Tannenbaum, 2000; Whitmore, 1980; Winter, 2007). Research also suggested that acceleration did not harm the child socially or emotionally (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Neihart, 2007; Robinson, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Rogers, 2007b; Rogers, 2007 cited in Sousa, 2009).

**Perception of equity as equality in an egalitarian context**

In the Australian egalitarian context, equity seems to be equated with equality which emphasises equal shares. Two contrasting conceptualisations of equality are the notions of equality of outcomes and equality of opportunity. Winstanley (2006) explained that equality of outcomes demands the same end at the same time and reduces/eliminates individual differences. This implies the same treatment for all individuals. Gross clarified that equality of opportunity provides the same starting point for all, equal rights and the freedom to develop one's interests and abilities
without restrictions as well as equal access to relevant education (2004, p.24). Start stated that “all children have an equal right to develop maximally; the equal right to develop, however, should not be confused with a right to equal development” (1986 cited in Gross, 2004, p.24). Certainly, not all children develop at the same pace. Instead each individual child develops at his/her own pace according to his/her ability, interests and needs. To demand the same/equal development might either stunt the fast ones or overexert some children who have to catch up to conform to the required outcome. Gross (2004) suggested that it is time to move away from equality of outcomes to equality of opportunity.

There seems to be inconsistency in the execution of equity in terms of equality in relation to gifted education in Australia. Vigliante pointed out that based on the equal share concept of equality, all students had to be provided with equal portions of “available time, energy and resources” (2007, p.113) from teachers. She pointed out that such thinking implied that it was unfair to provide more to any child to assist the child to catch up or develop maximally. Some researchers noted that the government allocates large federal subsidies for programs for students with disabilities, special needs and minority groups to bring up their level of achievement but little support for gifted education programs for the same purpose (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Gallagher, 2003; Gross, 2004; Winebrenner, 2001; Winter, 2007). Similarly, the Australian government provides special treatment and substantial funds for coaching outstanding athletes for sports and Olympic programs but regards provision for gifted education programs (Gross, 2004) as elitism. It seems that intellectual/academic giftedness is considered to be elitism. It appears that it is all right to give equality of opportunity to those with disabilities, special needs and minority groups to catch up and outstanding athletes to improve their performance and not insist on
the equality of outcomes in sports. Gross (2004) termed the practice as hypocrisy. She further suggested that the underlying emotions connected to the hostile and unfounded objections to gifted programs seemed to be resentment in the form of “malice, spite and envy” (Gross, 2004, p.279). Fussell stated that “envy results in revengeful egalitarianism” (1983 cited in Gross, 2004, p.279).

All seemed to point to the same thing which was double standards and inequity. Interestingly, the dispute seemed to about ‘equality’ as ‘sameness’, fairness and controversy over unequal allocations of things like financial support, provisions, resources and opportunities or the same outcomes to different groups of students, whether between the two extreme ends of the student spectrum or between the athletes and the academically gifted.

While equality is equal share based (Beauchamp, 2001 cited in Vigliante, 2007), equity is needs-based (Vigliante, 2007). Equity does not mean that we treat everyone the same but rather that we provide what each individual needs (Vigliante, 2007). Equity in education involves considering the needs of all children and providing them with appropriate learning opportunities throughout their time in school, without insisting on the same starting point nor the same end point. Every child is unique and has different needs. Thus children need to be treated differently. It is imperative to practise social justice in terms of equity and not equality, and focus on the needs of each individual and not on an equal share entitlement of every individual. The position I take is based on Rawls’ conception of social justice as needs-based. Rawls (1971, 1999) theorised two principles of justice: the first principle concerning equal right of every individual to equal shares of things; and the second principle known as the difference principle provided exceptions to benefit the least advantaged/most
disadvantaged the most. This overview of the fundamental terms used in my study provides a context for the following overview of the concepts of giftedness, and gifted and talented education in the second part of this chapter.

**Giftedness: An overview**

It is important to have a clear understanding of the social and historical context of giftedness, gifted students and gifted education and what these mean across contexts. Borland argued that giftedness is a social construct because it “gains its meaning, its existence, from people’s interactions, especially their discourse” (2003, p.107). He wrote: “It is something that was invented, not discovered” (Borland, 2003, p.107). “Giftedness and gifted children are recent inventions in education that can be traced to the advent of psychometrics” (Borland, 2003, p.107). Borland pointed out that the hierarchical arrangement of children according to the quantitative psychometric measurement of their individual ability and level along the IQ continuum started “in the early twentieth century” in the United States of America (2003, p.107). In his opinion, power relations between the school authorities and their students underpinned the sorting of students according to IQ test scores into ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ students. This resulted in a bipolar continuum with students who did not fit the criteria of being judged ‘normal’ at the two opposite poles of the continuum. The term ‘supernormal’ was initially used to label the group of ‘abnormal’ students with abilities much higher than those of the normal students at one pole of the continuum. Borland noted that by 1920, the label ‘gifted’ replaced the term ‘supernormal’. With respect to the other pole of the continuum, the term ‘subnormal’ was originally used to refer to ‘abnormal’ students with abilities lower than the normal student in the student spectrum. However, the term ‘subnormal’ was replaced
by the concept of ‘special educational needs’ which evolved with time to include the
gifted and talented as well. The label ‘gifted’ was downplayed over time to “highly
able”, “talented” or “with special abilities” (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000, p.781).

Although Borland did not mention the reasons for the changes in the labels used for
students that were not categorised as ‘normal’, I suspect that the terms ‘supernormal’
and ‘subnormal’ carry a discriminatory connotation or sensitivity that may evoke
issues concerning elitism, equity and egalitarianism. Sutherland (2006) expressed the
concern of educators that labelling a child ‘gifted and talented’ might result in
his/her becoming a social isolate in school. I believe that whether gifted and talented
students became social isolates in school because of the label or other possible
reasons like being in the minority, different and misunderstood needs further
research. As Sutherland stated: “There is an anxiety on the part of educators and
parents that labelling a child as gifted and talented at an early age may lead to them
being isolated from their peers” (2006, p.60). On the other hand, Porter (2005)
pointed out that some parents might have concerns about their children who were
experiencing difficulty with social and emotional adjustments prior to their
assessment and labelling as gifted and talented. She had the opinion that the labelling
might have a positive effect on gifted and talented children (who “are already aware
that they are different” from their chronological peers) to explain the reason for their
differences (Porter, 2005, p.209). She added that “if labelling results in educational
provisions that meet their needs, its effects are positive” (Hershey & Oliver 1988;
Perspectives of giftedness and talent

Giftedness means different things to different people depending on the lens/perspective from which they view it. The foci in their perspectives vary from viewing giftedness as intelligent behaviours, intellectual ability (IQ test score), above average ability/performance (Gagné, 1985 cited in Gross, 2004; Renzulli, 2003), asynchronous intellectual and physical development (Columbus Group, 1991, cited in Clark, 2008) to problem solving ability (Maker, 2006; Schieber & Maker, 2003).

Borland argued that “defining giftedness is a matter of values and policy, not empirical research” (2003, p.112). There were other researchers who defined giftedness in other ways not necessarily related to the factor of intelligence. For example, Roeper (2000) emphasised a higher level of awareness, sensitivity and experiential understanding in her definition of giftedness, which Delisle (2006) termed as a simple conception of giftedness. Roeper believed that “Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” (2000 cited in Delisle, 2006, p.6).

Renzulli and Reis identified two kinds of giftedness: “schoolhouse giftedness” and “creative-productive giftedness” (Renzulli & Reis, 2003, p.185; Renzulli & Reis, 2000, p.369). ‘Schoolhouse giftedness’ is also known as test taking or lesson learning giftedness, measured by IQ tests and school tests. ‘Creative-productive giftedness’ is the ability to apply information (content) and thinking skills (process) to real life problems and domains of interest to the student in an integrated and inductive way (Renzulli & Reis, 2000, 2003).
**Schoolhouse giftedness**

Many researchers regarded the traditional view of ‘schoolhouse giftedness’ (fixed innate intelligence), evidenced by a high IQ test score of 130 or more, as a limited perspective which excludes the diversity and complexity of giftedness (Clark, 2008; Renzulli, 2003; Schiever & Maker, 2003). In Australia, Gross posited that through IQ tests, levels of giftedness in children are graded from mildly gifted (115-129), moderately gifted (130-144), highly gifted (145-159), exceptionally gifted (160-179) to profoundly gifted (180+), depending on the value of the IQ test score (2004, p.7).

Some researchers did not favour the quantitative measurement of giftedness using standardised/psychometric tests. Karolyi, Ramos-Ford and Gardner (2003) pointed out that IQ measures follow a limited/narrow view of intelligence associated with linguistic and logical-mathematical skills. They stressed that IQ tests capture an individual’s abilities at a specific time in a limited range of intellectual intelligence. There may be some students who score one or a few points below the cut off point for giftedness or do not perform well in the IQ tests at that specific time in that limited range of intellectual intelligence because their giftedness lie in other domains or because of different cultural/environmental factors. Clark (2008) posed the possibility that under conducive conditions, the intelligence of a person could continue to increase over time and implied that his/her IQ might change accordingly.

**Creative-productive giftedness**

In contrast to the traditional view, the conception of ‘creative-productive giftedness’ incorporates intellectual ability and other domains of excellence like creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts and specific academic ability (Davis & Rimm, 1989; DeHaan & Havighurst, 1957 cited in
Tannenbaum, 2000; Marland, 1972 cited in Clark, 2008) as well as the influences of environmental and personality factors (Gagné, 2000, 2003, 2004; Renzulli, 2003; Tannenbaum, 1983 cited in Gross, 2004). Giftedness appears to be a dynamic construct which can be developed by providing the appropriate and challenging experiences and environments. The first federal definition of gifted and talented children in the United States of America presented by the United States Commissioner of Education, Sidney Marland (1972) in his report, *Education of the Gifted and Talented* (Clark, 2008) seemed to be aligned to the conception of ‘creative- productive giftedness’. Marland posited:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contributions to self and society.

Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement/or potential ability in any of the following areas: (1) General intellectual aptitude, (2) specific academic aptitude, (3) creative or productive thinking, (4) leadership ability, (5) visual and performing arts.

(Marland, 1972, p.2 cited in Clark, 2008, p.16)

Although each state in the United States of America has its own definition of gifted and talented students, most of the state definitions seem to be influenced by Marland’s (1972) definition of gifted and talented students (Clark, 2008). Two most widespread definitions of gifted and talented students in the United States are the United States Department of Education (2001) definition of gifted and talented students and the definition of giftedness redefined by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) in the United States in 2010 (Rogers, Personal communication, 22 June 2012). Like Marland’s (1972) definition, these two
definitions of gifted and talented students emphasise outstanding or exceptional abilities capable of higher performance in one or more areas/domains. In the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001:

The terms ‘gifted and talented’, when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capacity in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.

(United States Department of Education, 2001, Section 9101(22), p. 3)

According to the National Association for Gifted Children, 2010,

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

(National Association for Gifted Children, 2010)

**Renzulli’s Three Ring Model**

Renzulli’s (1978) Three Ring Model posits that giftedness is the interaction of three essential human traits, namely “above average ability, creativity and task commitment” (Braggett, 1994, p.29; Gagné, 2004, p.82; Gross, 2004, pp.25-26). A child must exhibit all three traits before s/he is recognised as gifted. The weakness of his initial model is that this model did not accommodate the gifted underachiever (Gagné, 2004; Gross, 2004). Later Renzulli (2003) modified his model to embed the three intersecting rings of human traits in a hounds-tooth background to include the personality and environmental factors to allow for the underachieving gifted child.

**Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT)**

Like Renzulli’s (2003) model, Gagné’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) included the personality and environmental factors for the development of talent. Some researchers used the term ‘gifted’ as synonymous with the term ‘talented’. However, Gagné distinguished between giftedness and talent (Braggett, 1994; Gagné, 2000; Gross, 2004). According to Gagné (2000, 2003, 2004), giftedness is having and using natural abilities in one or more aptitude domains (intellectual, creative, socio-affective and sensorimotor) without any training in ways that positions the person among the top ten percent of his/her chronological peers. Talent is a competency: “the superior mastery of systematically developed abilities (skills) and knowledge in at least one field of human activity”, whether academics, arts, business, leisure, social action, sports and technology, social service or technical (Gagné, 2000, pp.67-69). A similar threshold of the top ten percent of active peers in the respective field of human activity is used to select the talented. Superior mastery is not attained through
repeating the same thing many times but involves a progressive achievement of higher levels of quality and control over the whole performance through systematic and intensive learning and practising (Gagné, 2000; Clark, 2008). Talent development is a process involving intentional provisions of conducive learning environments and opportunities for gifted children to develop optimally (Gagné, 2000; Clark, 2008). According to Gagné, “one cannot be talented without first being gifted. The reverse is not true, however” (2000, p.69). He suggested the possibility of gifts remaining as above average natural abilities and not being developed further into talents.

**Maker's conceptualisation of giftedness**

Maker (2006) appeared to define giftedness in line with the school of thought that regards the gifted and talented as a “natural resource” (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986 cited in Colangelo & Davis, 2003, p.5; Karnes & Stephens, 2008, p.41), “social capital” (Renzulli, 2003, p.77), “national resource” (Borland, 1989 cited in Porter, 2005, p.108) or “capital asset” (Toynbee, 1967 cited in Tannenbaum, 1993, p.4). She believed that “Giftedness is the ability, interest and willingness to solve the most complex problems in diverse domains in the most efficient or economical ways” (Maker, 2006, p.30). Maker designed the Maker Model of Curriculum Development as an approach to differentiate the curriculum with regard to content, process, product and learning environment for gifted and talented students. This model caters for the abstraction, complexity, variety, pacing, higher order thinking skills, problem solving and challenging questions that such students need (Schiever & Maker, 2003). Maker’s concept of giftedness in terms of problem solving seems to tie with Gardner’s (1983, 1999) multiple intelligences (MI) theory and Sternberg’s (1991)
triarchic theory of intelligence. Maker’s definition coincided with ‘creative-productive giftedness’. However, she did not specify the criteria for determining which problem/way is the superlative one. It appears that the complexity of the problem and the way of problem solving underpin her concept of giftedness. It is unclear whether a child who can solve more complex but not the most complex problems in more ‘efficient or economical ways’ would be considered as gifted by Maker. Those with ‘above average’ ability identified as gifted with Renzulli’s Three Ring Model (1978) might not qualify as gifted by Maker’s standards of giftedness.

Paradigms concerning giftedness

As I reviewed the literature on theories surrounding giftedness and gifted and talented education, it seemed that there was no consensus on the definition of giftedness. Researchers in gifted and talented education viewed giftedness from different lenses, resulting in similar or contending perspectives. Based on whether giftedness is a fixed entity or not, research suggested two corresponding schools of thought concerning giftedness: the traditional or emerging. The traditional paradigm posits that giftedness is a fixed entity, the level of which is measured by standardised tests. Two widely used intelligence tests are the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) which measure the “linear, rational and cognitive ability” (Clark, 2008, p.213). The Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale tests “general intellectual ability, including five broad cognitive abilities: fluid reasoning, crystallised ability (knowledge), quantitative reasoning, visual-spatial processing, and working memory” (Roid, 2003 cited in Clark, 2008, p.214). The test score is recorded as an intelligence quotient (IQ). Intelligence quotient is calculated by “dividing the mental age by the chronological age and multiplying the result by
100” (Clark, 2008, p.213). The distribution of the intelligence levels is represented by the Bell Curve while the level of giftedness is determined by the range in the IQ score.

On the other hand, the emerging paradigm posits that giftedness and intelligence is not fixed and can grow depending on conducive environmental factors and constant usage. Researchers and teachers who subscribe to the emerging paradigm question the validity of the constant shape of the Bell Curve, which is based on the assumption that intelligence is a fixed entity. To them, the possibility of a growth in intelligence and/or giftedness throughout a person’s lifetime may change the shape of the Bell Curve to another shape which may not look like a bell. Teachers who favour the emerging paradigm of giftedness as a dynamic and multidimensional construct tend to nurture their gifted and talented students by providing a continuity of appropriate learning environments and educational opportunities to develop their students’ potential optimally (Clark, 2008; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Roberts, 2008; Smith, 2006). By contrast, teachers who believe in giftedness as a fixed entity present in gifted and talented children tend not to nurture their gifted and talented students. Studies (Clark, 2008; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Gross, 2004; Roberts, 2008; Smith, 2006) suggested that what a teacher thinks of giftedness and gifted education has implications on what s/he does in the classroom.

**Conceptualisations of intelligence**

There seems to be little consensus on the definition for intelligence. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1996) expressed concern about the choice of a definition of intelligence underpinning the measurement of cognitive ability and the Bell Curve as well as the theoretical framework and socio-cultural context behind it. They believed that the
What definition of intelligence, for example, do we employ to study cognitive ability and its distribution within a society? Do we use Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1983), Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg’s postformal intelligence (1993), Robert Sternberg’s notion of practical intelligence (1979), or Charles Spearman’s concept of $g$, that views intelligence as a specific entity residing inside the head (Herrnstein and Murray use Spearman’s)? The definition we choose holds profound consequences for those who test well or poorly, who will gain social rewards and who will not. How important is the social and cultural context in shaping the individual? Do we value the ways other cultures define and express intelligence or do we focus exclusively on the way our culture operates in this domain?

(Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1996, p.7)

Chapman and West-Burnham (2010) also expressed concern over the potential negative effects, such as disengagement, doubt and underachievement in learners, of an inappropriate definition of intelligence. They stated:

The human cost of a narrow definition of intelligence is huge, as it will have long term negative impact on young people’s belief in their own capacity for growth and consequently damaging for their self-esteem. As research by Dweck (2006) shows, the impact of a belief in fixed ability stifles effort in all learners, even the high achievers. More worryingly it leads to an overall tendency towards disengagement in learners which fuels underachievement in every learner, and is actually toxic for certain groups.

(Chapman & West-Burnham, 2010, p.18)

Plomin and Price noted that “intelligence is the essence of many theories of giftedness” (2003, p.113). They believed that the conceptualisation of intelligence used affects the conceptualisation of giftedness (Plomin & Price, 2003). Sutherland (2006) made a similar point and asserted that what a person understands about intelligence influences his/her assessment and expectation of children as well as
his/her attitudes toward them. The traditional view of intelligence is the “theory of fixed intelligence” proposed by Galton (1869) which is similar to the entity theory of intelligence (Galton, 1869 cited in Clark, 2008, p.31). An entity theory of intelligence posits that the amount of intelligence a person has is fixed, constant and cannot be changed (Dweck, 1999 cited in Sutherland, 2006). A teacher who holds an entity theory of intelligence tends to emphasise performance, products of learning and positioning of the students with respect to the rest of the class and become teacher centred in his/her teaching.

Many people think that children are “born gifted” (Clark, 2008, p.62) and can thrive on their own (Braggett, 1994; Clark, 2008; Porter, 2005). Such conceptualisation of giftedness seems to reflect the entity theory of intelligence proposed by Dweck (1999). However, Clark (2008) suggested that children are not born gifted and cannot thrive on their own. Clark (2008) was adamant that each child is born with a potential to be tapped, challenged, nurtured with continual interactions with stimulating environments for the development of higher intelligence and consequently giftedness and talent. She elaborated that gifted children are those whose rates of development of intelligence far exceed the rest, as a result of the interaction between the environmental stimuli and their genetic makeup. She considered it important to note that gifted individuals exhibit faster developmental rates of intelligence which depend crucially on a broad spectrum of appropriate challenging learning experiences. Clark warned that without the appropriate challenging learning opportunities, gifted individuals “will regress in whatever abilities and talents are not supported” (2008, p.53). In her conceptualisation of intelligence, the focus was moved from intelligent behaviours to brain processes. Clark wrote: “Research data from the neurosciences suggest that a high level of
intelligence is the result of advanced, highly integrated, and accelerated processing within the brain” (2008, p.45).

Clark’s perspective of giftedness seems to align with the incremental theory of intelligence proposed by Dweck (1999) and interactive theory of intelligence. An incremental theory of intelligence posits that the amount of intelligence in a person is malleable and increases proportionately with the amount of learning and influence from educators (Dweck, 1999 cited in Sutherland, 2006). A teacher with an incremental theory of intelligence tends to focus on the individual’s learning needs, process and progress, creates a conducive environment for student focused learning and provides appropriate challenging learning experiences.

**Unthinkable thoughts**

As I reviewed the literature on giftedness, I came across a very interesting article by Gallagher, one of the pioneers in gifted education. Because there is no consensus among researchers about the definition for giftedness, Gallagher (2000) posed what he termed the unthinkable question “Is there such a thing as giftedness?” He pointed out that if giftedness does not exist, there is no basis to talk about gifted and talented education or gifted and talented students. On the other hand, if giftedness exists, then what is it? He termed such questions the unthinkable thoughts for gifted and talented educational researchers. If giftedness is non-existent, the story/research about giftedness, gifted and talented students and their education will die a natural death and what is past becomes part of history. On the other hand, if there is such a ‘thing’ as giftedness, the diversity of thinking among passionate researchers about what giftedness is adds to the allure of this ‘thing’ which defies the limitation of an unanimous belief, clarification, definition, perception and understanding. Gallagher
questioned the core beliefs of gifted education which are the existence of “the entity of a gifted child”, “the entity of gifted education”, “the entity of special personnel preparation for teachers of gifted students” and the breadth and depth of special gifted programs to make a difference for the gifted child in the classroom (2000, pp.5-12). If the gifted child exists, but there is no gifted education, then the preparation of personnel and special programs are meaningless. Such unthinkable thoughts shed some light about gifted education from another angle which contrasts the common one that was taken by most researchers in gifted and talented education.

The first question that Gallagher posed was: “Who is the gifted child?” The use of intelligence tests to identify gifted children seems ‘unfair’ to the minority groups who are disadvantaged by cultural and economic differences. Other factors like multiple intelligences, aptitude, academic achievement and interests need to be considered. His second question concerns the direction in which gifted education is heading. Has gifted education been carried out for the sake of repeating traditional practices and the status quo or for achieving its original intended purpose to benefit gifted students? (Gallagher, 2000). According to Gallagher, some so called “differentiated programs” were assessed as redundant and of lower thinking levels by the gifted students who attended them (2000, pp.7-8). Moreover, preparation of teachers to teach gifted and talented students seems to be haphazard, short in duration and lack rigor and depth, depending on the types of gifted workshops, courses, conferences and staff/professional development offered (Gallagher, 2000). Teachers themselves are expected to take the initiative to seek the additional appropriate preparation in gifted and talented education (Feldhusen, 1997 cited in Gallagher, 2000, p.8). Another area of concern is “ghost programs” for gifted students which provide false promises to parents of constructive actions which
cannot be realistically carried out due to limited time and insufficient teachers (Gallagher, 2000, p.10).

Unlike Gallagher, Borland (2003) seemed more concerned about the usefulness of the social construction of giftedness to education and the children labelled as “gifted” than the dilemma over its existence. He stated: “The basic question to ask about giftedness is not whether giftedness exists but whether the outcomes of the application of the construct, especially in the field of education, are beneficial, innocuous, or harmful” (Borland, 2003, pp.112-113). Borland argued that multiple definitions of giftedness resulted from the freedom of educators to choose and propose conceptualisations that matched their values, policies or gifted programs. Borland posed the question: “But what is a ‘correct’ definition of giftedness?” (2003, p.112). This question remained unanswered despite a “multiplicity of definitions” (Borland, 2003, p.112). This point is highly relevant to this study because it seemed to be one of the key issues underlying the confusion about what constituted giftedness. Borland maintained that:

… defining giftedness is a matter of value and policy, not empirical research. And in many, if not most, states, definitions are not mandated. The result is that local educators are free, and are of necessity required, to choose or write a definition of giftedness to serve as the basis for their program for gifted students, one that, to a large extent, determines who will and who will not be gifted. In other words, giftedness in schools is something we confer, not something we discover. It is a matter of educational policy, not a matter of scientific diagnosis. It is a social construction, not a fact of nature.

(Borland, 2003, p.112)

The literature revealed that too many definitions which constituted “a bewildering array” made it hard for researchers to reach a consensus on what constituted giftedness (Coleman & Cross, 2005, p.5). As Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and
Worrell remarked: “It is ironic that one of the most vexing questions in the field of gifted and talented education is how to define giftedness” (2011, p.7). Galbraith and Delisle concluded that “there is no ‘right’ way to view either intelligence or giftedness” (1996, p.37). When there seems to be no consistency, no consensus and no common basis in determining who is gifted, those identified as gifted according to a certain definition might not be identified as such according to the criteria of another definition. Sutherland (2006) made a similar point. She stated that “Identifying young gifted and talented learners is a complex and controversial business” (Sutherland, 2006, p.59).

**Characteristics of the gifted and talented**

The literature suggested that gifted and talented students are those whose rates of development of intelligence far exceed the rest of their peers as a result of the interaction between the environmental stimuli and their genetic makeup. They differ from one another, with respect to academic, economic and cultural backgrounds, needs, interests, levels of development and potential. There is no stereotypic gifted and talented student. Every gifted child is unique and different from the others. Despite their heterogeneity, gifted and talented students can be identified by observing their characteristics. A gifted child may possess several of the following common characteristics: early reading, advanced verbal ability, comprehension, extensive vocabulary, good memory, curiosity, an awareness for details, fast, advanced and logical thinking, fast learning ability, resilience, perseverance, persistence, a strong passion in areas of interest, long attention span, high internal control and motivation, desire to learn, advanced mathematical, musical and artistic abilities, empathy, high moral thinking and belief in oneself (Clark, 2008; Davis &
Rimm, 1989; Karnes & Stephens, 2008; Rogers, 1986; Winebrenner, 2001). All
gifted and talented students have the unique capacity to learn at a faster pace at a
more advanced level (Braggett, 1994; Clark, 2008; VanTassel-Baska, 1993). Thus
they require a more advanced curriculum than the normal curriculum to satisfy this
learning capacity. Winebrenner (2001) stated that some gifted and talented students
identify themselves by manifesting intelligent behaviours, creativity, success and
outstanding achievements in their respective domains of giftedness and talents.

Robinson, Shore and Enersen (2007) warned that a combination of unfavourable
environmental factors, boredom, failure and rejection in school with their intense
sensitivities and emotions can possibly induce mental illness, disruptive and suicidal
inclinations in maladjusted gifted and talented students. There is a danger that some
maladjusted gifted and talented students may use their giftedness in harmful ways
like threatening humanity (as in the case of Hitler, cited in Tannenbaum, 2000) or
mix with the wrong peers and become delinquents (Davis & Rimm, 1989). Research
suggested that many gifted and talented students themselves do not understand their
inner struggle, giftedness and unique needs. Such students either do not understand
their own exceptionality, their intensity and sensitivity of feelings and their need for
coping strategies to deal with their perfectionism and vulnerability (VanTassel-
Baska, 2000) or they harbour grudges, resentment and/or bitterness that result in
revenge and aggression. VanTassel-Baska stated that teachers need to be sensitive to
the nature of the gifted and talented and refer them for appropriate counselling and
mentoring.

Research also suggested that the brains of gifted children may malfunction and get
confused when they are given too many drills of easy questions (Clark, 2008; Helen
Dudeney, Personal communication, September 2007; Rogers, 2007a). Rogers termed the process of revision through drills as “drill and kill” (2007a, p.11). She claimed that gifted children are usually kept busy in the class with doing more drills and more of the same types of questions. According to Rogers, this seemed true in the classrooms as the gifted and talented students, who completed the normal classroom work faster than the rest, tended to be given more of the same easy kind (not the more advanced type) to occupy their time.

**Situation of gifted and talented students in schools**

In 1988 the Senate Select Committee unanimously agreed that the gifted and talented students were among “the most disadvantaged students” in Australian schools (Gross, 2004, p.37; Senate Select Committee, 1988). Research suggested that the intellectually gifted appeared to be neglected/restrained in their education by the government, parliamentarians, teachers, teachers’ unions and the community for reasons that seemed unacceptable to researchers and educators who supported gifted education (Gross, 2004; Kronborg, 2002; Senate Select Committee, 1988). There was a concern that Australian schools did not make provision for the intellectually gifted students in the regular classroom to cater for their capacity to learn at a faster and more advanced level (Braggett, 1994; Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Gross, 2004; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001; Senate Select Committee, 1988). An analysis of written submissions by parents concerning the neglect of their intellectually gifted children in schools revealed that almost all reports were about badly handled cases of giftedness in numeracy and literacy (Senate Select Committee, 1988). Similar findings about the neglect of the intellectually gifted were found in schools in the
United States of America (Clark, 2008; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Gallagher, 2003; Roberts, 2008; Whitmore, 1980; Winebrenner, 2001; Winter, 2007). The lack of school provision resulted in the gifted and talented students having socio-emotional problems like aggressiveness, boredom, delinquency, depression, frustration, low self-esteem, migraines, nightmares, stomach aches, stress, underachievement and withdrawal (Senate Select Committee, 1988; Whitmore, 1980) and wasting their time in school (Clark, 2008; Rogers, 2007a; Smith, 2006; Tannenbaum, 2000). The underlying reason for the neglect seemed to be the negative attitudes of the educators and parties concerned towards the high intellectual ability of gifted and talented students (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Gross, 2004; Kronborg, 2002; Senate Select Committee, 1988).

**Gifted education in Western Australia**

There is no national policy on gifted education and each state in Australia has its own policy as well as education authority guidelines. The influence of Renzulli’s (1978) Three Ring Model of Giftedness and Gagné’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) on gifted and talented education in Australia (Gross, 2004) continued into 2011. The Department of Education in Western Australia used Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) to formulate the *Policy and Guidelines for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students 1996, 2004; Gifted and Talented Guidelines June 2009, 1 March 2011; and Gifted and Talented 27 July 2010*, and resource packages like the *Primary Teaching TAGS (Talented and Gifted Students)* file and a booklet entitled *Exceptionally Able Children: Guidelines for the Early Childhood Years* to identify
and provide for gifted and talented children (Gifted and Talented Education Review, February 2007). The Department of Education selected Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) because his model, unlike other models, distinguished between ‘gifted’ and ‘talent’ in terms of aptitude/competency, domain/field of activity and natural/developed (Kinkade, Personal communication, 29 September 2011). In Gifted and Talented Guidelines (Department of Education, June 2009; 1 March 2011), the term ‘gifted’ refers to having and/or using aptitudes which are outstanding natural abilities in one or more ability domains, whether intellectual, creative, socio-affective and sensorimotor. ‘Talented’ refers to competencies due to outstanding mastery of knowledge and skills and systematic development of abilities in one or more fields of activity, whether academic, administration/sales, arts, business operations, games, sports and athletics, science and technology, social service or technical (References Committee: The Education of Gifted Children, October 2001 cited in Department of Education, 27 July 2010, p.5).

Gross (2004) noted that the New South Wales Department of School Education provided accelerative practices to nurture gifted and talented students and allocated significant funds to educate in-service teachers about gifted education. The University of New South Wales includes a compulsory gifted education subject for every student in its teacher education program. By contrast, in Western Australian universities, gifted and talented education is an optional unit in teacher education programs. Consequently, not all teachers are exposed to gifted and talented education during their teacher education. Some teachers may be exposed to gifted and talented education during staff/professional development but they may/may not be able to acquire the competency to teach gifted and talented students effectively.
VanTassel-Baska asserted that “Gifted and talented students, like all students, have the right to a continuity of educational experience that meets their present and future academic needs” (2003, p.174). Sutherland proffered the provision of “challenging opportunities” to learn for all children based on the understanding of their individual abilities and learning styles (2006, p.56). Huber and Roth wrote: “A good teacher should be able to look at the problem of teaching style from the point of view of complementary approaches” (1990, p.132). They seemed to suggest that some teaching styles may not suit the learning styles of children. A reflexive teacher who thinks about alternatives to problem solve the mismatch in teaching style with students’ learning styles is regarded as a “good teacher” by them.

**Reflections of the literature**

The regular classroom teacher is entrusted with the task of educating all children, including the gifted and talented. From an outsider’s viewpoint, the assumption underlying the ideology of equality of outcomes was that a regular classroom teacher could manage a class of children who should be learning the same curriculum at the same pace and at the same time. However, from an insider (teacher’s) viewpoint, does a regular classroom teacher have the ability to achieve that successfully? In reality, with the student spectrum, not all children learn at the same pace and at the same time. Neither does the same curriculum necessarily match the learning needs of all students, particularly those at the two ends of the student spectrum. What do teachers themselves think about the task of educating gifted and talented children in regular classrooms?

Without a common understanding of what constitutes giftedness, there seems to exist an uncertainty in the identification of gifted and talented students, with an attendant
danger of missing out children who mismatched the criteria of giftedness valued by
teachers. The issue that gifted and talented students were at educational risk in
regular classrooms constituted a recurring concern raised by researchers for more
than three decades, not only in Australia (Braggett, 1994; Braggett & Moltzen, 2000;
Gross, 2004; Kronborg, 2002; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small
Business and Education References Committee, 2001; Senate Select Committee,
1988) but also in other parts of the world (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004;
Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Davis & Rimms, 1989;
Gallagher, 2003; Rimm, 1995; Rogers, 2007b; Ruf, 2005; Smith, 2006;
Tannenbaum, 2000; Whitmore, 1980; Winter, 2007). What do teachers themselves
think about what constitute giftedness? How does their thinking affect their
identification of who the gifted and talented students are in regular classrooms? I
therefore situate my study in the gap in the literature that lies in the ways teachers
think about giftedness, gifted and talented children, and gifted and talented education
in regular classrooms.

Having defined the fundamental terms and provided an overview of the salient issues
in gifted and talented education, I proceeded to search for a basis and a lens for my
research. The next chapter entitled “Theorising teachers’ thinking” highlights the
type of orientation and theoretical framework that I used to help me understand the
ways teachers think about giftedness, talent and gifted and talented education.
Chapter 3

Theorising teachers’ thinking

Introduction

This chapter is a continuing account of my search for a theoretical framework to assist me to explain what teachers think of giftedness, talent and gifted and talented education and consequently, to make an original contribution to knowledge in the field of gifted and talented education. Critical theory is a basis and a lens for my thesis. This theory clicked with my study. I could shout “Eureka” like Archimedes because I found the meaningful theorising that intertwined teachers’ thinking and gifted and talented education and orientated my steps. As Kemmis believed, “a theory is a powerful resource for developing insight and understanding” (2006, p. 101). Adorno posited that the concepts of a theory which are introduced from the outside must transform an individual’s perceptions from the inside to enable him/her to be conscious of the differences between the contemporary and the possible (Adorno et al., 1976 cited in Giroux, 1983). I believe that this is the type of theorising that will best help me to broaden my outlook and gain in-depth understanding in this study. As with gifted and talented education, the more I read about critical theory the more interested I became. I think what happened at the end of my search for a theoretical framework is similar to the catastrophe theory posited by Berliner based on the concept of “more leads to different” (1986, p.34 cited in Schiever & Maker, 2003, p.167). It is like adding more and more information to my mind until the ideas and theories combine to produce the unique answer to my search.
In the first part of this chapter, I proceed to provide an overview of critical theory, Freirean critical consciousness as well as the positioning of gifted and talented students and teachers in schools. In the second part of the chapter, I elaborate on the culture of power, ‘dumbing down’ students, banking education, power relations, fluidity of power and empowerment. In the third part, I provide the rationale for my conceptualisation of a critical interpretivist paradigm, teachers’ voice and reflexivity which is the “thinking about thinking” (Jameson, 1971 cited in Giroux, 1983, p.35).

**Critical theory: An overview**

The concept of critical theory has evolved from its narrow sense associated with the first Critical Theory, conceptualised by Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School to a broader sense to include other social theories, like feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism. There are different conceptualisations of critical theory, depending on the foci of emancipatory interest, for example, critical pedagogy (focus on pedagogy), critical race theory (focus on race) and critical social theory (focus on knowledge). Despite the differences, conceptualisations of critical theory contain the common elements of critique of social injustice/power relations, dialectical thinking, social transformation and human emancipation. McLaren asserted that the common objectives of critical theorising are self-empowerment, particularly “to empower the powerless”, and social transformation, namely to “transform existing social inequalities and injustices” (2007a, p.186). Dialectical thinking means “both critique and theoretical reconstruction” to Giroux (1981a cited in Giroux, 1983, p.18) and reflexive thought or “thinking about thinking” to Jameson (1971).
Jameson commented:

[D]ialectical thinking is … thought about thinking itself, in which the mind must deal with its own thought process just as much as with the material it works on, in which both the particular content involved and the style of thinking suited to it must be held together in the mind at the same time.

(Jameson, 1971 cited in Giroux, 1983, p.35)

Patton (2002) believed that critique and change make the theory ‘critical’. He commented that “what makes it critical – is that it seeks not just to study and understand society but rather to critique and change society” (Patton, 2002, p.131).

Burbules (1995) asserted that being critical involves assuming a position of critique which is determined by certain norms and standards underlying one’s beliefs. Hence the exposition of my position and the basis of my beliefs in Chapter 1. Burbules explained:

To be critical is to acknowledge the existence of a basis for critique: to commit oneself to standards and norms that one is prepared to defend and against which one is prepared to allow one’s own positions to be judged.

(Burbules, 1995, p.56)

How (2003) believed that its critique of the status quo makes critical theory unique. He highlighted a concern of critical theory about the contemporary and future circumstances and the potential for betterment of life.

Critical Theory by contrast always had a concern with how things had come to be the way they are and what they might be in the future, a concern with the wider truth or validity of what is currently the case.

(How, 2003, p.3)

… what makes Critical Theory unique is its need to ground or justify its critique of the status quo. For Critical Theory, critique needs to be more than criticism. It must
be immanent to, or grounded in, particular historical circumstances and the potential they have to generate a better life.

(How, 2003, p.9)

The concern that How highlighted was similar to the need for self-reflexivity and awareness of the world around them by active human agents of change mentioned by Kincheloe (1995) and Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins (1992). Kincheloe explained that “To be critical is to assume that humans are active agents whose reflective self-analysis, whose knowledge of the world, leads to action” (1995, p.75). Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins believed that “Critical theory is concerned with extending a human’s consciousness of himself or herself as a social being” and that “Critical theory thus promotes self-reflection” (1992, p.75).

Snedeker (2004) made a similar point about the self-reflective style of approach in critical theory. He stated that “the distinctive form of argumentation of critical theories is reflective, in contrast with the objectifying intention of positive science” (Snedeker, 2004, p.ix). How’s concern of critical theory echoed the emancipatory purpose of critical theory indicated by McLaren and Giarelli who asserted that the purpose is “to improve human existence by viewing knowledge for its emancipatory or repressive potential” (1995, p.2).

Critical consciousness

How’s concern of critical theory seems similar to the critical/active consciousness associated with the purpose of Freirean education. Freire perceived critical consciousness as “the highest development of thought and action” portrayed by individuals who “think holistically and critically about their conditions” (Shor, 1993, p.32). He contrasted the naïve thinker, who conforms to the contemporary world,
with a critical thinker who practises critical thinking and is conscious of what is happening in the world around him/her (Freire, 1972 cited in Lankshear, 1993). The naïve thinkers seem to implement the taken for granted practices blindly. Teachers who are naïve thinkers and who implement the taken for granted practices blindly have not yet begun to reflect and evaluate whether those taken for granted ways of doing things meet the needs of individual students and prepare all students for the world to which they are heading or not. According to Shor, the four qualities of critical consciousness are power awareness (awareness of power relations), critical literacy (“analytical habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking” with a focus on in-depth understanding), desocialisation (questioning taken for granted practices/ideas) and self-organisation/self-evaluation (taking the initiative and participating in social transformation) (1993, p.32).

What fascinates me here is the overlap of Freirean critical consciousness with the two key processes underlying different conceptualisations of critical theorising that support my choice of a critical interpretivist paradigm. The first process involves a critique of the normal taken for granted ways of doing things that cause oppression, conformity, social injustice and human suffering. The second process involves a rethinking/dialectical thinking of alternative ways to act and break the unjust lines of power, challenge oppression, alleviate human suffering, bring about human emancipation and stand up for social justice and social transformation. From my viewpoint, the four common ideas are two mental processes (critique and rethinking) and two contrasting social contexts (an initial context related to oppression, social injustice and human suffering, and a transformed context related to human emancipation, social justice and alleviation of suffering). From my understanding, a critical theory is a social theory which aims to help individuals analyse and assess for
themselves their contemporary circumstances/status quo, and through their thinking, become reflexive people who are bold/empowered to challenge oppression and reductionism and stand up for social transformation and for a better future/life. Both critical theorising and critical consciousness involve rethinking in different ways about things done in the normal/reductionist ways, which cause human suffering and subjugation of certain individuals or groups of people, and looking for social transformation to alleviate the suffering and fight for democracy, emancipation and social justice. This form of critical theorising and critical consciousness makes sense to me within the context of my study. This is especially the case as teachers have the potential to be empowered to become active agents of change in their respective classrooms.

**Positioning of the gifted and talented in schools**

The principles underlying critical theorising and critical consciousness serve to throw light onto my study to explain the situation faced by teachers and gifted and talented students in schools and society. There are different angles of looking at it: from the context of who are suffering or are powerless, who are possibly responsible for it, who have the power to transform the situation and what can be done about it. Research suggests that gifted and talented students are experiencing neglect in classrooms and schools (Clark, 2008; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Gallagher, 2003; Roberts, 2008; Whitmore, 1980; Winebrenner, 2001). Parents, researchers, educators and the public could point their fingers at teachers and see them as the ones who are not providing the challenging education that gifted and talented students need for their academic, social and emotional needs. From an outsider’s view point, the possible reasons are linked to the teachers’ attitudes,
experience, competence, quality of the teachers in schools particularly public
schools, the quality of teacher education, professional development, in-service and
pre-service training in gifted and talented education (Carrington & Bailey, 2000;
Chessman, 2005; Ferrell, Kress & Croft, 1988 and Gallagher, 2000 cited in Croft,
2003; Galbraith & Delisle, 1996; Plunkett, 2000; Smith & Chan, 1998; Whitmore,
1988). I tend to believe that there are more implications than the direct relationship
between the quality of gifted education and the nature of teachers’ attitudes and
preferences.

I believe that in cases where teachers appear to show hostility or negative attitudes
towards gifted and talented students, they apply the concept of bodily excess to
students with giftedness, similar to the concept mentioned by Warren (2005)
concerning nonwhiteness. They may even impose interventions/demands on the
gifted and talented to force them to conform to the norms of the mediocre or even
make things difficult for those students who dare to react against the unjust
treatment. Those students who differ from the norms appear to be regarded as
subversive elements or rebellious students who need discipline and controlling to
conform them to fit the moulds (Kincheloe, 2004; Warren, 2005). It may also be the
case that those teachers are keen to maintain the status quo in classrooms. It is
apparent that underlying lines of power exist between teachers and students which
promote inequalities and social injustice in the education of gifted and talented
students. More often than not, the culture of power and in this case, the culture of
mediocritiy as well, tend to coexist with the culture of silence in schools at the
expense of the gifted and talented.
Positioning of teachers in schools

It is also possible that teachers may be struggling in schools as they face the challenges of the student diversity as well as demands of the school administrators, policy makers, their employing body and the Department of Education. As Kincheloe wrote: “Every minute of every hour teachers teach, they are faced with complex decisions concerning justice, democracy; and competing ethical claims” (2004, p.1). From the perspective of a critical theorist and educator, the finger seems to be pointing at the politics of schools whereby top-down directives, top-down standards, an educational banking system where teachers transmit knowledge to be banked in students’ minds and reductionist practices are implemented to maintain conformity and reflect the culture of power. Together with this, is attached the suggestion that teachers are “unwittingly used as pawns” to educate students to accept normal/traditional practices and class structures without questioning (McLaren, 1989, p.202). However, the question that arises is posed by Kincheloe as “Do teachers operate as functionaries who simply do what they are told?” (2004, p.5). Perhaps not, as I believe that teachers can choose to examine the directives concerning teaching and learning vis-a-vis practising democracy and justice in schools. They do not have to simply do what they are told, without questioning if they do not want to or if the directives contradict democratic principles and social justice. However, by questioning those directives, teachers may face the risk of being disciplined or made to conform to the culture of power and submit to the culture of silence or other consequences of their reactions.
Culture of power

Clark stated that teachers’ concerns are complex, contextual, “multifaceted and non-linear” (1986 cited in Elbaz, 1990, p.21) owing to the complexity of teaching and student diversity. She pointed out that the teacher’s voice tends to reflect an embeddedness within the culture of the particular school, school system and society in which the teacher lives and works (Clark, 1986 cited in Elbaz, 1990). Delpit (1995) noted that schooling “is embedded in a “culture of power” that regulates, controls and mediates interaction among participants” (cited in Warren, 2005, p.87). Fain (2002) made a similar point.

We find ourselves caught up in a work culture that we often accept without examination and which often controls us beyond our awareness. Those of us who consider ourselves to be professional find that we are caught between the autonomy associated with professional practice and the conditions imposed upon us by the structures in which we practise.

(Fain, 2002, p.130)

Giroux believed that since schools are not fully “autonomous sites”, teachers and students can learn to make their choices to resist the limitations and dominating power relations embedded in school regulations and educational politics (cited in McLaren, 1989, p.200). Adams St Pierre asserted that poststructuralism demands that teachers take a position to examine their “own complicity” in maintaining “social injustice” (2000, p.484) and critique the taken for granted ways of doing things. Slater (2000) believed that a high degree of dissatisfaction with the status quo in schools would open the doors for new changes to replace the unsuitable old ways of doing things. She wrote: “It takes a whole lot of discomfort with the status quo, or an internal conflict, to reject the norms and rules of behaviour in school environments” (Slater, 2002, p.61). Moreover, she pointed out that “When the old no
longer serves the purpose for which it was intended, it is time to seek new options” (Slater, 2002, p.64).

'Dumbing down' students

Kincheloe (2004) clarified that most teachers that merely follow such directives to implement the ‘dumbing down’ processes do not intentionally hurt students. He noted that gifted and talented students seem to be constrained by teachers and distressed by the ‘dumbing down’ of students. During the ‘dumbing down’ processes, gifted students who find the general education unchallenging and their needs unmet, face the risk of being reduced to conform to the majority or being regarded as rebellious if they voice their boredom or choose not to conform. According to Warren, the culture of power maintains that if “students want to succeed economically or socially, they must comply with the norms of school” (2005, p.97). He added that their failure seemed to be blamed on their inabilities rather than “a system that continually works against them” (Warren, 2005, p.97). Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins (1992) argued that students that are ‘dumbed down’ seem to lose their individuality, identity, voice and consciousness of the world around them. They implied that “schools pursue blandness, working to turn out faceless students who go through the system quietly, unable to question the world around them” (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992, p.11). At the school level, the imbalance in power relations between schools, teachers and students may result in the continuation of inequalities in schools (Giroux cited in McLaren, 1989; McLaren, 1993, Fine, 1991 and Willis, 1997 cited in Warren, 2005), the reproduction of class structures (Willis, 1997 cited in Warren, 2005), neglect of equity issues in public schools which is detrimental to the development of students.
attending poor schools (Kinchele, 2006) and the implementation of the political ideology of the dominant culture (McLaren, 1989). I tend to agree with those researchers who argue that there are lines of power which are reductionist and/or oppressive in nature and which work to maintain the status quo in schools. Such power relations in schools can potentially influence teachers’ thinking and teaching in regular classrooms in ways that may be detrimental to the learning and socio-emotional development of gifted and talented students. Yet I believe that teachers themselves have the potential to critique those power relations and become empowered to become transformative agents of change when they develop critical consciousness.

**Banking education**

Teachers seem to be restrained by the banking system in education which is believed to produce passive teachers and learners (Freire, 1972 cited in Lankshear, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Freire (1972) elaborated on the purpose of banking education to produce passive students that conform to the contemporary world:

Banking education refers to situations in which narrating teachers deposit information into the minds of passive receiving students. It assumes that knowledge is a ‘gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing,’ and regards humans as adaptable and manageable beings (Freire 1972:46-7). Banking education is invaluable for maintaining an oppressive social order, for the more students put in their efforts into receiving and storing information deposited in them, the less they can attain the critical consciousness that comes from intervening in reality as makers and transformers of the world. … The more completely learners learn the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend merely to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (Freire 1972:47).

Lankshear and McLaren commented further on banking education:

Banking pedagogy and the literacy it fosters encourages passive acceptance of the way things are: at the very least to the extent that it undermines conceptions and capacities conducive to a more active orientation.

(Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, pp.6-7)

Kincheloe stated that when teachers assume the role of workers in their respective factories (schools), they become “functionaries who follow top-down orders without questioning” (2004, p.18). They are expected to teach all students the minimum content requirements in the same way (Kincheloe, 2004). This expectation seems to ignore the heterogeneity of both teachers and students. In addition, when teachers are required to teach to standardised tests which emphasise rote learning of meaningless, fragmented and decontextualised data, both students and schools are ‘dumbed down’ (Berkowitz, 2001; Hartman, 2002 cited in Kincheloe, 2006; Jardine, 1998; Kincheloe, 2003a; Norris, 1998: Norris, 1996 cited in Kincheloe, 2004). By implementing such directives in the banking system of education, teachers become deskill (Jardine, 1998; Kincheloe, 2003a; Norris, 1996 cited in Kincheloe, 2004), reduced in their “professional status” (Kincheloe, 2004, p.19) and trapped in Skinner boxes (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992). Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins implied that teachers unknowingly infect students with a “factoid syndrome”, spread the “fragmented world view” (1992, p.19) and perpetuate the “cognitive illness” (1992, p.13). Kincheloe and his colleagues explained that a “factoid syndrome” occurs when students learn fragments of information that are not interrelated nor connected to their lived experiences and socio-cultural contexts as well as the world beyond the classroom (1992, p.19).
Grounding my study in a critical interpretivist paradigm

I agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and Goodrick (2007) who possess similar definitions of a paradigm as a set of beliefs/belief system “that guide action” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.157) or “guides the researcher in determining what is worth knowing (including the purpose of the research)” (Goodrick, 2007, p.6). The theoretical framework for this research interweaves Paulo Freire and aspects of an interpretivist paradigm as well as a transformative paradigm, thus making it a type of pragmatic paradigm. I believe that a combination of Freirean perspective of critical consciousness in education and a critical interpretivist paradigm is the best fit to assist me to understand what teachers thought about their work and education of the gifted and talented, how they carried out their work, why they did it that way and their reflections about the status quo and what might be transformed. Such a combination works best to answer my research question. This theoretical framework acknowledges my set of beliefs that guide my action in the interpretation of my findings and makes my research an orientational qualitative inquiry. This inquiry concurs with Patton’s (2002) opinion of qualitative research with predetermined orientation. Patton stated: “Orientational qualitative inquiry begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what conceptual framework will direct fieldwork and the interpretation of findings” (2002, p.129). Thus the research will have a planned path but will also respond to fieldwork and analysis of data as it is collected.

My choice of a critical interpretivist paradigm mirrors my stance which aligns with the following statement by Goodrick (2007):

The selection of a paradigm usually reflects the preferred epistemology and ontological stance of the researcher. … For example, questions of equity and social
justice may benefit from a critical theory perspective that aims to emancipate and empower participants and call into question commonly accepted definitions that reflect the status quo.

(Goodrick, 2007, p.6)

This research paradigm is two pronged in purpose: first, interpretivist as my emphasis was on exploration, insight and descriptive data (Cryer, 2006) and second, critical as I focused on the status quo of teachers’ work, reflectivity and transformative actions of some teachers. The two mental processes are critique and rethinking by the participants about two opposing contexts, namely the prevailing situation of the gifted and talented and their teachers as well as the need for transformation that leads to improvement of their education. Some teachers may accept the status quo and follow the norms. Some may identify issues associated with their work where they do not feel empowered to make changes for the better. Those with critical awareness will work as Culley and Portuges (1985) did as they critiqued and actively changed the teaching content and process to provide quality education to their students. Culley and Portuges stated: “We know that … changing what we teach, means changing how we teach” (1985, p.2 cited in Adams, 2007, p.15). They realised the need to change schooling practices to meaningful education for the gifted and talented.

I believe that it is not about finding out whose fault it is: whether political ideology, the educational system, teachers, students or other factors. Instead it is more about exploring what teachers themselves think are the possible prevailing factors which hinder them from providing the appropriate gifted and talented education. It is also about how to critique the findings, deconstruct them and reconstruct them so that teachers can reflect on their thinking, transform their styles of thinking of gifted and
talented students and improve their education of gifted and talented students in regular classrooms to take into account the healthy academic, emotional and social development of such students. This involves the four common components of a critical theory: first, the initial social context related to social injustice, human suffering and emancipation; second, a critique of the normal taken for granted ways of doing things that cause the conformity, social injustice and human suffering; third, the process of rethinking/dialectical thinking of alternative ways to challenge the status quo; and fourth, the social context related to transformation to alleviate human suffering. The aim is to cause a shift from the existing unfavourable/less favourable practices/beliefs to favourable/more favourable ones, social injustice to social justice, reductionist pedagogy to critical pedagogy, thinking to dialectical thinking and a deficit paradigm to a growth paradigm.

**Teacher’s voice**

My concern with what teachers think is a concern that Feiman-Nemser and Flooden (1986) identified with teacher thinking research (cited in Elbaz, 1990, p.17). The term ‘teacher thinking research’ means research which is focused on what teachers think. Elbaz noted that the “notion of ‘voice’ has been central to the development of teacher thinking research” (1990, p.17). He pointed out the usage of the notion of ‘voice’ against a ‘background of a previous silence’ which may have a political implication. Why was there a previous silence? ‘Silence’ conveys the idea of no sound/noise: in this case the expected consequence by a person/persons of the process of shutting down the voice of another and the void in the person who shuts up or whose mouth is clammed up. Cheung’s (1993) suggested “five categories of silence: oppressive, submissive, defiant, dignified, and attentive” (Henry, 2011,
Pang argued that much literature focused on “oppressive silence” in which the “oppressor obstructs the voices of others” (1996, p.185 cited in Henry, 2011, p.265).

The questions that arise are: Who is speaking? From what position are they speaking? Who are they speaking to/for? Do these three aspects: the position of the speaker, the audience and the speech matter? Is there a direct relationship between how/what is said, who says it and who listens? I believe there is. Alcoff (2003) also believed that there is a direct relationship. She wrote:

Thus, how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, and which will in turn affects its perceived significance (for specified hearers).

(Alcoff, 2003, p.13)

Who the speaker is seems to determine the effectiveness of what is spoken and how it is heard by the audience. This implies the presence of a discrimination or unequal power relations between the speaker, and the audience and other parties involved if the speaker is not speaking for himself. It suggests that a certain type of speaker with a particular way/tone of speech gets heard by a certain type of audience while a contrasting type might be rejected. We need to examine the contextual backgrounds and underlying reasons in order to understand their preferences, discrimination or the silencing of their voices. Giroux (1992) posed similar questions about the identity of the speaker, circumstances of the speech and unbalanced power relations.

At question here is the issue of who speaks, under what conditions, for whom, and how knowledge is constructed and translated within and between different communities located within asymmetrical relations of power.

(Giroux, 1992, p.26)
There are many conceptualisations of the notion of ‘teacher’s voice’. Some researchers think that “teacher’s voice” means “teacher’s perspective” (Janesick, 1982; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1986 cited in Elbaz, 1990, p.17), a point of view or “frame of reference” (Clark & Peterson, 1986 cited in Elbaz, 1990, p.17). Elbaz (1990) said that an individual with a voice is assumed to have recognised his/her authentic concerns and possesses a language to express his/her concerns to an audience of significant others who may or may not listen. He added that associated with a voice is the power to be conscious of the reality of one’s situation and the power to nurture oneself and others in similar situations. He argued that teacher thinking researchers are concerned with returning the right to speak for themselves about teaching to teachers. Smyth made a similar point that the goal of having a voice is to work towards the empowerment of teachers (1987 cited in Elbaz, 1990, p.17). The label ‘teacher thinking researchers’ seems ambiguous and might be interpreted in two possible ways: first, to mean researchers who think about teachers; and second, to mean researchers whose focus in their research on teachers is on what teachers think. In this context, ‘teacher thinking researchers’ are researchers whose focus in their research is on what teachers think. I identify myself as one of them.

Noddings had the opinion that “the teacher’s voice is always a moral voice, always concerned about the good of pupils” (1987 cited in Elbaz, 1990, p.23). Brown and McIntyre found that more than half of the twelve areas of concern identified by teachers were directly linked to teachers’ nurture of students for the good of their students (1986 cited in Elbaz, 1990). But they did not mention whether the students indicated the majority or all students. I believe that the teacher’s voice should maintain its moral nature and concern about the good of all students, including the gifted and talented, without any prejudice. Not providing similar concern and care to
any individual or group of students implies practising inequity and injustice in schools. Researchers in the field of gifted and talented education advocated for a voice to be heard by the authorities concerned about the nurture of gifted and talented students in schools.

Reflections

After writing this far, I realised that my thinking about the study had changed direction. I believed that through trying to understand the concept of critical theory, I had to apply personally the two mental processes of critique and dialectical thinking. Initially, I followed the finger that was pointing at the deficits of teachers and teachers’ reductionist thinking about giftedness and egalitarianism, which affected the education and socio-emotional welfare of gifted and talented students in regular classrooms. After trying to make sense of the literature review of research on critical theories, I began to be more aware of diverse ways to critique the situations of teachers and their gifted and talented students in schools. The networking of teachers, gifted and talented students, schools and society appears to be more complicated than I initially thought. Power relations seem to exist in education. Foucault defined power relations as relationships “in which one tries to control the conduct of the other” (1997/1984 cited in Adams St Pierre, 2000, p.489) which are unstable (Foucault, 1978/1976 cited in Adams St Pierre, 2000). McLaren pointed out that schooling “is always implicated in relations of power, social practices, and the favoring of forms of knowledge that support a specific vision of past, present, and future” (2007a, p.188). Both Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux stressed that schooling differs from education (McLaren, 2007a). The difference is that schooling is a way to control society while education can potentially transform individuals who become
empowered to change society (McLaren, 2007a). As I was looking at the education of the gifted and talented from the teachers’ viewpoints, I found more information on schooling than on education.

**Empowerment as a deliberate choice**

Schools, teachers and students seemed to be all intertwined in chains that are linked together in lines of power. Based on the idea that power is fluid and exists as lines of force, teachers and students can be empowered to break the lines of power and create new lines of power which benefit both teachers of the gifted and talented and their students. I am fascinated by the fluidity of power and I visualised it in the following way. Since power is fluid, like water, it takes the shape of the vessel that contains it. Water by itself has no shape. It is the vessel that determines the level/quantity/quality of water. Likewise it is the people and environment in which the power is contained that determines its nature and level. There is a maximum limit that any vessel can contain, over which the fluid will overflow. Similarly the fluid will leak out if the vessel is broken. The directions of the lines of power can be reversed or changed/broken/fractured as the level and shape of the water depends on the condition, shape and size of the container. When the container is broken/cracked/leaking, the power loses its grip and dimensions. Thus the teachers and students have the freedom to choose what is better for them and be empowered to do so. However Spelman (1985) seemed uncertain whether teachers are conscious or not of the type of power which they and their students possess. He wrote:

> Do we know what powers we do have and want to have? Do we know what powers our students have, and what powers we hope they might come to have? Are we clear about the powers, *wanted and unwanted*, that we as teachers have?

(Spelman, 1985, p.244; author’s italics cited in Adams, 2007, p. 29)
This concept of fluid power gives me the insight that it is not power that controls the people but the container that it is in that allows power to occupy it and manifest its level and properties. When water is spilled onto the floor, the water loses its shape and dimensions. Likewise when people realise this principle, choose to free themselves of the ones exerting the power, reject the power and do not allow themselves be occupied by the power (oppressed by the other individual/group) and literally pour the latter out of their lives, the group in power will lose their threat/grip on them and lose their position of power. So they cut off the lines of power by breaking or cracking the vessel that contains the power. I believe this is what happens during revolutions when the tables are overturned and when the oppressed are bold and empowered to stand for their freedom and social justice. No matter what happens, when an individual does not allow another individual to oppress/repress/hurt him/her and cause human emancipation/suffering, the latter is blocked from the position to execute a line of unbalanced power. Likewise when a person learns to speak and stand for justice for himself/herself and others, s/he is empowered to break the lines of oppressive powers and contribute to social transformation.

However, it cannot be denied that in some cases, when individuals stand for their rights, they are successful in their stand for freedom and social justice. In some cases, they may not be successful in their attempts to free themselves and are unfortunately disciplined and penalized for doing so by the ones in power to curb non-conformity. In the latter case, social injustice persists to try to maintain the status quo. Research suggested that there are three responses to the teacher’s voice, namely positive, neutral or negative. Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins asserted that teachers’ “voices are silenced on what can be done” (1992, p.33). They claimed that
“even critically aware teachers have been silenced by the myth of political neutrality in education which serves to label them as subversives” (1992, p.33). Cochran-Smith brought up an interesting comparison about teachers’ struggle for their voice to be heard by the intended audience with the concept of “work against the grain” (1991 cited in Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992, p.34). Another metaphor with a similar concept of hard work and a shift in perspective is “cutting across the current” (Briggs & Peat, 1984, p.277 cited in Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992, p.27). I agree that getting one’s voice heard can be quite a struggle, particularly when one upsets the status quo and speaks for social justice from a position outside the dominant culture. It takes a lot of courage, commitment, determination, endurance, patience and perseverance to overcome the obstacles and contend for a breakthrough, followed by a transformation, in the circumstances and mindsets of people.

In this study, I focus on teachers since they exert the authority over the students in regular classrooms and they also have the opportunity to be empowered to transform their teaching and the education of their students. I argue that when teachers’ thinking is transformed first, their changed ways of thinking will transform them into thinking teachers. Then their critical pedagogy will transform the status quo of gifted and talented education. Kincheloe asserted that empowerment occurs “when teachers develop the knowledge-work skills, the power literacy and the pedagogical abilities befitting the calling of teaching” (2004, p.19) and acquire the dialectical authority. He elaborated further that critical teachers critique their own professional practices, analyse the power of their ideas, study their students to understand them better and form a “think tank that teaches students” what they do not know and what the latter want to know (Kincheloe, 2004, pp.18-19). In order for critical teachers to do that, he suggested that they may have to change any unjust social environment which
hinders the thinking and learning of teachers and students. He claimed that critical pedagogy emboldens both teachers and students to expose and challenge the taken for granted ways of doing things and the lines of power in schools that cause them to suffer to bring about social transformation.

My study consists of two main components: a component about teachers’ thinking and the other component on gifted and talented education. The foci of both components overlap on the common grounds of critique, empowerment/power, equality, social justice, reflexivity, transformation and voice. I believe that an interweaving of Paulo Freire’s ideas and a critical interpretivist paradigm is the best fit for my study to assist me to understand in-depth what teachers think about giftedness, gifted and talented students and their education. This form of theorising also sheds light on how/when teachers change from being and doing what they think to thinking about who they are and what they do in their positioning as teachers in regular classrooms in schools.

Having chosen the theoretical framework for my research, I went on to search for methodological approaches to explore what teachers think about giftedness, talent and gifted and talented education. The next chapter, Chapter 4 provides an account of the rationale for my choice of methodological approaches and methods to collect and analyse data.
Chapter 4

A critical interpretivist methodology

Introduction

I chose to approach this study from the insiders’ (teachers’) perspectives to explore what teachers thought about giftedness and gifted education, without limiting their responses to any predetermined assumptions/belief statements/hypotheses. I aimed to approach the data collection with an open mind and look for what boils to the top. The research approach is inductive rather than deductive, giving rise to emergent themes, interpretations and theory from the process of analysis. I studied the emergent key words in depth to make sense of the raw data with respect to my overarching research question: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students? As O’Leary explained: “In qualitative analysis, understandings are built by a process of uncovering and discovering themes that run through raw data, and by interpreting the implication of those themes for the research questions” (2005, p.195).

In the first part of this chapter, I provide the rationale for my choice of methodological approaches and an overview of my approach to qualitative research. In the second part of this chapter, I elaborate on the methods used to collect and analyse data.

Methodological approaches

This qualitative research approach and the use of a critical interpretivist paradigm to examine teachers’ thinking make this study different from others in the field of
gifted and talented education. The present study aims to explore regular classroom teachers’ thinking in depth about what giftedness means to them and the circumstances under which teachers’ thinking transforms them into thinking teachers. The use of a critical interpretivist paradigm provides a guiding framework for its progression.

**Qualitative research: An overview**

The type and quality of qualitative research carried out is affected by the conceptualisation of qualitative research chosen by the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). Goodrick emphasised that “it is important to be clear about your own understanding of qualitative research and the implications of these understandings for your research practice” (2007, p.2). Patton (2002) noted that different people define qualitative research in different ways. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) believed that different paradigms, contradictory styles and types of research, cultural, disciplinary, gender, national and racial differences create tensions, contradictions and hesitations that primarily affect the definition of qualitative research and its conduct. Qualitative research seems to evolve with time as a research method, methodology, approach, tradition and field of inquiry, depending on the contemporary paradigm, concern, context, interpretative perspective and text (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that the two terms ‘method’ and ‘methodology’ are not synonymous. ‘Method’ refers to the technique used. ‘Methodology’ refers to the logic and theoretical perspective for a project. There are many types of methodologies underpinning qualitative research (Ary, Cheser-Jacobs, Ravavich, & Sorensen, 2010; Ary et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). However, Glesne stated that all qualitative researchers use six similar
methodological procedures (1999 cited in Maddison, 2005). The procedures are purpose statement, problem statement, a specific research population, time frame, data collection and analysis and outcome presentation.

My focus here is on some of the principles underlying different conceptualisations of qualitative research which support my choice of a critical interpretative paradigm and a qualitative instead of a quantitative research approach. First, I am attracted to the critical aspect of qualitative research that challenges the status quo and explores new ways of thinking and doing research. Schwandt likened qualitative research to an “arena for social scientific criticism” by radical scholars who challenge the traditions of “mainstream” social science and explore new ways of thinking as well as an arena to gain attention to justify different perspectives and epistemologies of doing qualitative inquiry (2000, p.190).

Second, I am interested in the emancipatory and transformative potential of qualitative research to cater for a world that is evolving with time. Qualitative research seems to be dynamic, changing with time, to cater for a changing world that is heading towards a future that may differ from the past and the present. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) believed that we have entered a time of emancipation and transformation.

We occupy a historical moment marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms. This is an age of emancipation; we have been freed from the confines of a single regime of truth and from the habit of seeing the world in one colour.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.162)

Third, I used an interpretative and naturalistic approach from an insider perspective that coincides with the purpose of another conceptualisation of qualitative research,
namely to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of the participants of their world. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stipulated that qualitative research is an activity which places the researcher in the world with a set of practices to see and transform the world by interpreting the phenomena through peoples’ experiences and perspectives. Merriam believed that the “key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s” (1998, p.6). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998 cited in Goodrick, 2007), most of the analysis in qualitative research is interpretative. Qualitative research is “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification … but the bulk of the analysis is interpretative” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp.10-11 cited in Goodrick, 2007, p.2, original emphasis). Interpretation of the data is the ‘sense making’ undertaken by the researcher who is faithful to the data and also brings his/her unique perspective to the analysis.

Fourth, the product of my study is “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 1998, p.8) as this type of interpretative and naturalistic approach collects data in the form of words, uses the perspective of the researcher and analyses the emerging patterns (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Merriam pointed out that “since qualitative research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding, the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive” (1998, p.8). Kervin, Vialle, Herrington and Okely believed that qualitative research is research “that involves the collection of data that are analysed and reported verbally” (2006, p.35). Maykut and Morehouse made similar comments about qualitative research that “examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants” (1994, pp.2-3). They indicated that “The goal of
qualitative research is to discover patterns which emerge from close observation, careful documentation and thoughtful analysis of the research topic” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.21). To them, qualitative research

“values participants’ perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover those perspectives, that view inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, and that is primarily descriptive and relies on people’s words as primary data.”


Fifth, qualitative research is a research approach that tries to portray and analyse complex experiences through attentive listening, skilful and open minded questioning and detailed observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). All the data are used to contribute meaning to the research. As noted by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research includes one or more of the following five common aspects: concern with process, meaning, inductive analysis, naturalistic approach and descriptive data. Ary et al. (2006) noted six common aspects as concern for context and meaning, natural setting, descriptive data, inductive analysis, emergent design and human instrument, (of which the four highlighted above) overlap with the observations of Bogdan and Biklen.

Although there are many ways to conceptualise and undertake qualitative research, in this study I identified nine key features to guide me in its conceptualisation. They are as follows:

1. Qualitative research is a holistic and naturalistic approach, which uses different methodologies and methods, to study real life phenomena in natural settings (Ary et al., 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002).
2. The purpose of the research is to gain a better understanding of the phenomena in the world from the insiders’ (participants’) perspectives within their social, historical, political and cultural context. Researchers interpret the meanings the latter bring to the phenomena (Ary et al., 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3. One distinct characteristic of qualitative research is using the researcher as the key instrument to be personally present at the setting to collect and analyse the data (Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the concept of a person (human-as-instrument) as the only instrument flexible enough to comprehend, react and adjust to the complexity and unpredictability of human experiences (Ary et al., 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

4. The data are collected in the form of words and/or pictures of the participants’ perspectives and experiences (Ary et al., 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) and reported in the form of thick descriptions and holistic language (Ary et al., 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously in most qualitative research (Ary et al., 2006).

5. The approach is inductive not deductive (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The data gives rise to hypotheses and theory.

6. A qualitative research has an emergent design: starting with a broad design which emerges over time (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002).

7. Qualitative research is an interactive process between the researcher and the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).
8. The research is always value bound as researchers usually keep records of their field notes, reflections and rationale for decisions made (Ary et al., 2006).

9. Qualitative research methods usually use purposeful sampling and focus on its quality not quantity (Ary et al., 2006; Patton, 2002).

Qualitative research offers a holistic and naturalistic approach to understand human behaviours and experiences from their perspectives in the context of their natural settings by means of using the researcher as the primary and flexible instrument to collect, analyse and interpret data in thick and holistic descriptions through an inductive process from the emerging design. In my study, the aspects of a natural setting, naturalistic approach, context, research population, personal engagement and participation were catered for. I believe that I served as the flexible instrument to capture what the teachers actually said and comprehended, reacted and adjusted to the complexity and unpredictability of the teachers’ thinking and experiences (Patton, 2002). The data collection and data analysis were on-going processes. Inductive analysis of the data helped me to deepen my understanding of teachers’ thinking about their work as educators of children, including gifted and talented students, in primary schools and their potential as transformative agents in their sphere of influence. The research was value bound as I kept records of my field notes, documents, audio recordings, reflections and rationale for the interpretations and decisions made.

Method

The primary method of data collection was in-depth intensive open ended face to face interviews with a sample of twenty participants, comprising of teachers from a
range of different ethnic backgrounds and teaching experiences in both public and private Western Australian primary schools. I kept a journal of notes about the interviews and reflections along the way. Eleven out of twenty interviews were conducted at the school premises at the participants’ convenience to avoid impinging on formal schooling time of both the students and the teachers. Nine interviews were conducted outside the school premises at venues selected by the participants and at their convenience outside school hours. Informed consent in the form of a signed written consent form was sought from all the participants to use the information they provided during interviews. They were briefed on the purpose of the research and were given the chance to read through the written transcripts after I transcribed the interviews. Moreover, they were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time from the study without prejudice. Pseudonyms (Table 4.1) were used to protect the confidentiality of all the participants. Thus quotations are identified by pseudonym, gender, age and years of teaching experience. At all times, all the consent forms, transcripts, audio recordings and data were kept in a safe and secure place which was accessible only to the investigators of this study.
Table 4.1 Pseudonyms and coding of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronological order</th>
<th>Alphabetical order of pseudonym</th>
<th>Meaning of pseudonym</th>
<th>Coding (pseudonym, gender, age, years of teaching experience)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aldwyn</td>
<td>Noble friend</td>
<td>(Aldwyn,M,55,35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>Quick, alert</td>
<td>(Bryce,M,47,27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Calla</td>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>(Calla,F,42,22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Drusilla</td>
<td>The strong one</td>
<td>(Drusilla,F,56,36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Elma</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>(Elma,F,46,25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Calm</td>
<td>(Frida,F,57,34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Guda</td>
<td>The good one</td>
<td>(Guda,F,33,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Haidee</td>
<td>Modest</td>
<td>(Haidee,F,48,27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Idelia</td>
<td>Noble</td>
<td>(Idelia,F,47,27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jolie</td>
<td>Pretty</td>
<td>(Jolie,F,22,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>(Kara, F,44.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Leona</td>
<td>Bright light</td>
<td>(Leona,F,33,4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Myra</td>
<td>Admired</td>
<td>(Myra,F,22,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Neysa</td>
<td>Pure</td>
<td>(Neysa,F,21,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ozora</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>(Ozora,F,21,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Petrina</td>
<td>Steadfast</td>
<td>(Petrina,F,59,39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Quenby</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>(Quenby,F,60,40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Radbert</td>
<td>Brilliant</td>
<td>(Radbert,M,39,15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sorcha</td>
<td>Bright</td>
<td>(Sorcha,F,32,10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Thirza</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>(Thirza,F,65,40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F Female  M Male

I used pseudonyms given to interviewees in alphabetical order to coincide with the chronological order in which the participants were interviewed. From the first letter of the pseudonym, I know which person I interviewed. A for Aldwyn was the first person to be interviewed. B for Bryce was the second interviewee, followed by C for Calla as the third participant. Moreover, I chose names for the interviewees based on their gender and my impressions of them. The coding is (pseudonym, gender, age, years of teaching experience).
Sampling

The sample size of twenty teachers provided sufficient rich descriptive data. I originally planned to select teacher volunteers from primary schools in diverse socio-economic catchment areas in Perth, Western Australia. I sketched a location map of all the primary public schools in suburbs south of the Swan River in Perth and identified schools according to the socio-economic catchment areas to be contacted for this study. Information rich cases that contributed more to this study, in terms of “opportunities to learn” and better understanding, were selected (Stake, 2000, p.437; Stake, 2003, pp.152-153). The thirty schools identified included schools from high, middle and low socio-economic catchment areas. If at least one teacher volunteered from every school, I would have achieved the targeted sample of twenty participants through the sampling. The planned sample of schools included schools with centres for the conduct of gifted programs located within the school premises as well as schools with Aboriginal children.

Initially I planned to contact one school at a time and wait for five to seven working days for a reply. Once consent was given, I planned to hold an information session with teachers, circulate information letters (Appendix 1) and consent forms (Appendix 2) to teachers, recruit then interview the teachers who volunteered, complete the interview transcripts for that school and then proceed to contact the next school until I achieved the sample of twenty. If the responses from schools indicated that they were not interested in participation, then I would contact the next one according to my list. At that time, the procedure seemed logical and systematic because until the school was contacted, I would not know what the response from the principal or teachers would be. The principal of the first school that I contacted on 20 November 2009 gave me consent to interview his teachers on site. He preferred to
inform his teachers personally about this study without an information session and gave me a list of the names of interested participants. I was overjoyed when a total of six teachers including three deputy principals (Aldwyn, Calla, Frida), two level three teachers (Bryce, Drusilla), and a Gifted and Talented Coordinator (Elma), from this school volunteered to be interviewed within the last two weeks of the school year (December 2009) despite their busy schedule as the school year drew to a close. They formed my pioneer group whose responses prompted me to include questions about gifted (PEAC) programs in subsequent interviews. I completed all the transcripts and personally passed to them for member checking by the participants concerned, by early February 2010 when the new term reopened. Three participants (Aldwyn, Bryce, Calla) returned the transcripts to me without any change while the other three made minor changes with notations. On the whole they felt happy about the authenticity of the transcripts. Calla drew a smiling face on a sticker attached to the checked transcript returned to me.

In the process, I realised that when I contacted one school at a time and waited for five to seven working days for the school principal to reply to my letter before I contacted the latter again for a reply, the procedure would take considerable time. This method will work successfully provided the school principal contacted gives consent for contact with teachers. However, when the school principal did not give consent, two weeks might have lapsed before my contacting the next school principal and then the next one. So I decided to contact two schools at a time with letters (Appendix 3) and consent forms (Appendix 4) ready to be posted or hand delivered to the next school on the list whenever any school gave a negative response to my invitation to participate. By the end of Term One 2010, I changed this strategy to four schools at one time. The reason why I did not contact all those on my list at
one go was because of the very positive response from my first school. I thought that responses from subsequent schools would be similar.

Simons proposed a preliminary telephone approach to assess the type of responses by principals, followed by letters to those who responded favourably “to save a lot of time waiting for a response to a letter” and “move on to another site” (2009, p.39). Perhaps I might have saved a school term of waiting time had I used this approach but the availability and the uncertainty of which one would respond favourably at the time of the phone call remained a reality. I actually had to phone five school principals twice to enquire about their responses, because they were unavailable at the time of my first calls. This is not surprising in view of the busy schedules and complex tasks undertaken by school leaders.

Eight school principals did not give consent to their teachers’ participating in this research. The common reasons given were “wrong timing”, “too much research going on in the school”, “too busy” or “too many commitments”. Two principals were quite adamant that they preferred not to be involved in the research. It dawned on me that if the principal’s consent was imperative for me to enter and contact teachers to invite them to participate in an interview, the uncertainty of when and which school principal would grant me consent to interview teachers was a reality. I felt disturbed by the uncertainty and delay in data collection. What I did coincided with what Huber and Roth (1990) stated that an uncertainty oriented person would do. As I faced this element of uncertainty in orientation towards the recruitment of teachers through school principals, I tended to critique the situation that I was in, understand my positioning as a researcher and make sense of the situation to “attain clarity” (Huber & Roth, 1990, p.120). As I reflected on the method used to recruit
teachers, I considered an alternative of approaching teachers directly, instead of through their principals and conducting interviews outside school hours, instead of on school premises.

Although I had clear ideas of how to get a sample before the onset of the research, my attempts to secure a sample of twenty participants were less than straightforward. This is not unusual as other researchers reported similar encounters in sampling. Thus I obtained eight respondents through the method I had originally devised and a further twelve through snowball sampling. Unplanned snowball sampling in the alternative approach yielded more participants (twelve) than those (eight) recruited through two school principals. I collected my data over a period of eight months: six participants in December 2009, two participants in March 2010, seven in April 2010, four in May 2010 and one in July 2010. I found that the pioneer group of six participants teaching in the same public primary school provided similar data on most of the categories, possibly owing to the whole school approach and focus on higher order thinking skills. The other fourteen teachers (including three teachers posted to the pioneer school in 2010) provided some similar as well as some contending insights to the thinking of the pioneer group of participants. By August 2010, I had completed manually transcribing all the interviews and sent all the typed transcripts to the respective participants for member checks. Most of the participants accepted their individual transcripts with minimum or no change.

**Teacher demographics**

As I reflected on the final sample of teachers, especially the participants recruited via snowball sampling, I realised that I had captured diversity in the types and locality of schools, teachers and students which was beyond my expectation and initial
planning. Because some were self-selected, they constituted a different kind of sample (Table 4.2). The teacher spectrum of the sample consisted of one part time teacher (0.4), three relief teachers and sixteen full time teachers, including three deputy school principals, four beginner/early career teachers, and a Gifted and Talented Coordinator. The responsibility of a Gifted and Talented Coordinator at the school level appeared to be to assist the Department of Education in the conduct of standardised testing at the Year Four level to identify gifted and talented students for withdrawal gifted programs called Primary Extension and Challenge (PEAC) programs. S/he liaises with the Gifted and Talented Coordinators of PEAC programs at the district level concerning these students’ involvement in PEAC courses in subsequent year levels as well as coordinates professional development for teachers concerning giftedness and gifted programs. Among the teachers, there was a continuum of teaching experience ranging from less than a year in beginner teachers to forty four years in the more experienced ones. With respect to age, the sample consisted of four teachers in their twenties, four in their thirties, six in their forties, five in their fifties and one in her sixties. It just happened to end up with a relatively even distribution of teachers across the age groups despite the random and snowball sampling. Bearing this in mind, I had no preconceived idea of the participants’ ages, backgrounds and teaching experiences prior the interviews. During the analysis of teacher demographics, the almost even distribution across the age groups came as a pleasant surprise to me and would enrich my data.
### Table 4.2 Demographics of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Name of teacher</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Duration (minutes/seconds)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>Pre-service PD</th>
<th>In-service PD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aldwyn</td>
<td>4.12.2009</td>
<td>60m</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>4.12.2009</td>
<td>31m 48s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Calla</td>
<td>10.12.2009</td>
<td>60m 55s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Drusilla</td>
<td>11.12.2009</td>
<td>40m 55s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Elma</td>
<td>11.12.2009</td>
<td>30m 11s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>14.12.2009</td>
<td>43m 57s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Guda</td>
<td>2.3.2010</td>
<td>40m</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Haidee</td>
<td>19.3.2010</td>
<td>37m 25s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Idelia</td>
<td>12.4.2010</td>
<td>91m 38s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jolie</td>
<td>12.4.2010</td>
<td>88m 39s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>13.4.2010</td>
<td>49m 21s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Leona</td>
<td>14.4.2010</td>
<td>52m 3s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Myra</td>
<td>14.4.2010</td>
<td>37m 40s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Neysa</td>
<td>15.4.2010</td>
<td>59m 27s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ozora</td>
<td>15.4.2010</td>
<td>36m 9s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Petrina</td>
<td>11.5.2010</td>
<td>72m 35s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Quenby</td>
<td>12.5.2010</td>
<td>40m 8s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Radbert</td>
<td>13.5.2010</td>
<td>61m 30s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sorcha</td>
<td>19.5.2010</td>
<td>36m 29s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Thirza</td>
<td>8.7.2010</td>
<td>92m 47s</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F Female  M Male  
Y Yes      N No  
PD Professional development

Initially I tabulated the breakdown of participants according to category of teachers, types of schools, age group, gender, teaching experience, ethnic background and professional development in gifted and talented education in anticipation of the insights concerning the interrelationships between them that concur and/or contend with the findings of other research. In the process of data analysis, I found that these variables were not factors and the factors I had tabulated actually had no effect on my data. Thus I discarded all the eight tables. Teachers from schools in high, middle and low socioeconomic catchment areas were represented in this study to maximise the range in backgrounds of students with whom the teachers had contact and many of these teachers had prior experiences in a wide variety of schools from high,
middle and low catchment areas prior the current positions at the time of their respective interviews. What the teachers shared during the interviews was not limited to the current schools in which they taught, but instead included lived experiences in other schools as well. The findings were therefore more particular to the teachers and their overall teaching experiences rather than confined to experiences in the current schools in which they taught.

**Interviewing**

I interviewed the teachers to find out what they thought about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students and to analyse their thinking and experiences from their perspectives. Patton stated that the “purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (1990, p.278 cited in Merriam, 1998, p.23). I agree with Patton’s three fold purposes of interviewing: first to discover what we cannot observe, second to ask questions about such matters and third to enter into the participant’s perspective to discover what is in his/her mind (Patton, 2002). The underlying assumption in qualitative interviewing is that the perspective of a person is “meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p.341). I also agree with Patton that qualitative interviewing aims to capture the diversity of interviewees’ individual perspectives of their world and the complexities of their experiences. As Fontana and Frey believed, “interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (2000, p.645). Likewise, I used interviews to understand teachers’ thinking about their work with gifted and talented students.

I used interviewing as the primary method of data collection because the open ended and flexible questions allowed me more in-depth access into teachers’ beliefs,
experiences, perceptions and values (Byrne, 2004; Patton, 2002). As Patton argued, the participants can voice “their own understandings in their own terms” within the framework provided by qualitative interviewing (2002, p.348). Moreover, I used open ended questions, with the help of an interview guide (Appendix 5), to capture and understand the views of the participants without categorizing the viewpoints first. The openness of qualitative interviewing contrasts with the closed instruments used in quantitative research that confine participants’ emotions, experiences, knowledge and responses to categories predetermined by the researcher(s) (Patton, 2002). I asked probing questions whenever the need arose to clarify my interpretations of what the teachers shared with me during the interviews. The questions asked concurred with all the six types indicated by Patton, namely “experience and behaviour questions, opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions and background/demographic questions” (Patton, 2002, pp.348, 350, 351). The flexibility of the interview process coincides with Goodrick’s (2007) observations about the nature of unstructured interviews. According to Goodrick:

The researcher may have topics listed to guide the interview, but the interview process is fluid and questions emerge during the interchange between researcher and participant. Researchers need to be able to ‘think on their feet’ for this interview style, picking up on themes and responding to the participants’ ideas.

(Goodrick, 2007, p.24)

To be able to ‘think on my feet’ and pick up themes, I used the recursive model of interviewing. I began with the initial research question, allowed the natural flow of the conversation to direct the interview and used links and transitions as well as interactions during the conversation to stay focused on the research question. By doing so, I found that most participants had provided not only information to answer
the questions in my interview guide but additional relevant information as well. Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) and Stewart and Cash (1988) developed the recursive model of interviewing, a type of questioning linked to most in-depth interviewing (cited in Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). The traits of the recursive model include using the interactions and flow in the conversation to direct the interview process and considering the uniqueness of the participants (Schwartz & Jacob, 1979 cited in Minichiello et al., 1995). Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander believed that this “is close to the ideal form of research for those researchers who follow the interpretive approach” (1995, p.81).

I prepared a form on teacher demographics (Appendix 6) for teachers to complete initially at the beginning of the interview together with the consent form. In the process of collecting demographics, I realised that if I asked demographic questions at the end of the interview, the flow and momentum of the interview was better and the participants were in a more relaxed position to render the details at the conclusion of the interviews. We seemed to be more comfortable with one another when at the beginning of the interview, I introduced my study and interviewed them straightaway, instead of collecting their demographic data first. This finding is similar to what Goodrick (2007) experienced in interviews. She stated:

I tend to ask demographic questions (age, employment history etc.,) at the end of the interview or incorporate them in a conversational style throughout the interview as, if they are sought upfront, they may constrain the participant to dichotomous responses. (Goodrick, 2007, p.25)

The duration of the interviews varied from thirty minutes to ninety two minutes. I found that most of the interviews conducted at the school premises tend to be around thirty to sixty two minutes, depending on the timing of the interview whether before
or in between lessons and the participant. None of the interviews appeared to
impinge on the students’ or teachers’ schooling time. On the whole, interviews
conducted in the participants’ homes and outside school hours tend to be longer. It
was not surprising that teachers interviewed in their home environments tended to be
more relaxed, compared to participants interviewed in the school environment. Five
teachers (Bryce, Frida, Petrina, Radbert, Thirza) expressed that they enjoyed
conversing with me during the interview as they had the opportunity to rethink and
state their beliefs and practices. Frida said “Nice to chat about it. Sometimes until
you verbalise it, you are not aware of what your beliefs are.” Petrina commented “I
kind of enjoy talking to you”.

Most teachers provided information spontaneously with minimum probing questions,
extcept for two teachers (Haidee, Myra) who needed more probing questions to break
the pauses. Haidee seemed to need more time to think about her answers and kept
repeating, “I have to think. I have to think.” During the member check, she made
more changes in her transcript than the other participants, giving the reason that at
the time of interview she did not phrase her ideas accurately. As Simons observed,
“If the face-to-face interview questions caught interviewees off guard and they
subsequently found what they said was not accurate or revealed more than they
intended, this [member check] is a useful corrective” (2009, p.50).

I succeeded in establishing rapport with the participants, resulting in a cordial
relationship between the participants and me. I agreed with Simons that “There is no
need to say a lot to get the interview started” (2009, p.47). I recalled separate light
moments with Bryce, Calla, Frida and Thirza who made some funny comments that
casted us to burst out laughing. Idelia offered me a cup of tea and some biscuits in
her home. At the end of the interview, Myra showed me the drawings done by her
gifted student while Ozora showed me her university assignment on a gifted child. In
all cases, the participants allowed me to enter their worlds to gain their perspectives
and understand their experiences. As Patton stated, “An evaluator, or any
interviewer, faces the challenge of making it possible for the person being
interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world” (2002, p.341). Likewise
Fontana and Frey (2000), Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1995) and
Simons (2009) deemed it important to establish rapport with the participants to
understand the situation from their perspectives. Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and
Alexander believed that “Rapport with another person is basically a matter of
understanding their model of the world and communicating your understanding
symmetrically” (1995, p.80). Simons had the viewpoint that “Establishing rapport is
essential for the generation of in-depth data. You need to create a contemporary
context, often in little time, in which interviewees feel comfortable to express their
innermost thoughts and feelings” (2009, p.47). Fontana and Frey said:

Because the goal of unstructured interviewing is understanding, it is paramount that
the researcher establishes rapport with respondents; that is, the researcher must be
able to take the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their
viewpoint, rather than superimpose his or her world of academia and preconceptions
upon them.

(Fontana & Frey, 2000, p.655)

I listened attentively to the participants, ensuring that the information provided was
relevant to my research questions and communicated my understanding to them.
This is in accordance with Patton’s advice that the “researcher must listen actively
and carefully to responses to make sure that the interview is working” (2002, p.376).
In one instance, one participant (Thirza) commented that she was rambling during a
certain portion of the interview and mentioned the irrelevance of that piece of information provided. However, I found the information totally relevant to the critical interpretivist paradigm underpinning my study and I told her that. At the beginning of the interview, Myra, Neysa and Ozora expressed their concern that they might not be of much help to me as they were beginner teachers. Simons made a similar observation in her research of a participant who “was slightly nervous about being interviewed as he did not think that he had much to say” (2009, p.48). During the conversations with them, I found that Myra, Neysa and Ozora took a gifted and talented education unit in their respective universities to learn what to do when they encounter any gifted and talented children in their classrooms. I found the information provided by them relevant and thanked them for sharing it with me. Listening includes not only hearing what the participant says but also interpreting and mentally analysing the information given, interacting appropriately and probing to maintain the momentum of the conversation, understanding the participant’s perspective and taking notes of the interview. To achieve all the stated tasks, this process involves “a critical inner dialogue” which according to Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander, enables data analysis to occur simultaneously with data collection (1995, pp.101, 104). As Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander (1995) pointed out:

The process of listening is a crucial part of the interview process. It acknowledges the value of the informant’s participation in the interview. For the researcher, it is the means of engaging in the conversation as part of normal social interaction while at the same time being distanced enough to sustain that critical inner dialogue which enables analysis of the data. This analytical ability enables the researcher to analyse what is happening at the same time as participating in the interaction and the discussion. … The most significant point to remember is that the in-depth interview is social interaction and listening can act as a stimulation for further interaction or as
a response to such interaction. The fundamental principle of in-depth interviewing is to provide a framework within which informants can express their understandings in their own terms. That framework is negotiated through talking, listening and reflecting. 

(Minichiello et al., 1995, p.101)

Recursive questioning is an excellent means of maintaining concentration. When researchers use this strategy, they tend to integrate the informant’s and comments into organised patterns or trends which help arrange the pieces into a total picture. They then interpret and analyse the information as it is given. The use of the critical inner dialogue is part of this overall process. 

(Minichiello et al., 1995, p.104)

In the process of interviewing and data analysis, I have to constantly orientate myself to look for the coherence and divergence of the data, since according to Patton (2002), the quality of the study depends on myself as the flexible human instrument and analyst. As Patton stated:

Because qualitative inquiry depends, at every stage, on the skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the inquirer, qualitative analysis ultimately depends on the analytical intellect and style of the analyst. The human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis—a scientific two-edged sword. 

(Patton, 2002, p.433)

In addition, Fontana and Frey (2000) believed that of the three sources of errors in an interview, the one of greatest concern is the error due to the interviewer. Throughout the study, I bore in mind that point made by Fontana and Frey (2000), and Patton (2002).
Transcribing the interviews

I used two audio tape recorders to record every interview. I transcribed the interviews manually using the exact words of the participants. For each interview, I listened to the audio recording at least three times to write a word for word record of the participant’s words and my words. During the first listening of the audio recording, I wrote as much as I could. During the second listening, I filled in the parts that I did not manage to write on time during the first round. During the third listening, I filled in the missing parts and in most cases, by the fourth listening, I had written down the complete conversation word for word. In two cases (Bryce, Haidee), I needed a fifth listening to complete writing the interview. Once I had the complete written record of each participant, I typed out the transcript. During the transcribing process, I read and reread the transcripts, immersing myself in the data and experiencing what it means to metaphorically ‘get my hands dirty’ in analysing the interviews without the assistance of any computer program.

Trustworthy-ness of the data

To ensure the trustworthy-ness of my data, I used a multifaceted view and different methods in my approach to analyse my data and insights in depth to develop Foucault’s (1981) ‘polyhedron of intelligibility’ (Gary, 2011, p.68). Utilising an anecdotal approach based on the twenty interviews and personal observations, I analysed the data to generate emergent key words, explanations and conclusions. I took into consideration contrary cases or what Goodrick (2007) termed as negative case analysis to improve the trustworthiness of the explanations and conclusions. Goodrick stated that “Negative case analysis involves consideration of instances and cases that do not fit the predominant pattern” (2007, pp.43-44). This step was taken
to avoid any possible doubt on the trustworthiness of the data analysis. Bryman stated that in an anecdotal approach, data collected from “brief conversations, snippets from unstructured interviews” are analysed to produce explanations and conclusions in qualitative research (1988 cited in Silverman, 2000, p.11). However, when the researcher neglects dealing with contrary cases or analysis that does not ‘fit’, an element of doubt concerning the trustworthiness of the explanation may arise. My data were trustworthy because I considered both the predominant and counter patterns and used all data to contribute meaning to my research. As Lather pointed out: “The researcher must consciously utilise designs which seek counter patterns as well as convergence if data are to be credible” (1991, p.67).

At the end of some interviews, the participants asked me about my findings so far. After I shared with them the preliminary insights from the previous interviews, they gave me feedback that addressed the trustworthy-ness of my data. Three participants (Idelia, Quenby and Thirza) have gifted and talented children of their own. Besides expressing their viewpoints as teachers of the gifted and talented, they also shared their experiences from the perspectives of parents of gifted and talented children.

To avoid any possible bias or misinterpretation of the purpose of this study, I did not share my personal experiences nor my son’s stories mentioned in Chapter One with any participant. Even when some participants asked me for my definition of giftedness during the interview, I did not disclose my conceptualisation of giftedness and talent. This precaution was taken to avoid any possibility of their trying to please the researcher by saying what they thought would align to the researcher’s viewpoint. Throughout the study, I bore in mind that the focus of this study was on what the participants themselves thought about giftedness and the education of gifted
and talented students. This research was exploratory not confirmatory in nature.

Other ways of addressing the trustworthy-ness of my data were to conduct a member check of the interview transcripts and to obtain feedback from peers. My presentation on 14 October 2010 sparked off an avalanche of questions from my researcher peers during the questioning time, indicating much interest in my research findings. It seemed as though it was my turn to face the recursive questioning from my peers. Even when the seminar time was up, one of them still requested for additional time to pose the final question. I noticed that most of them were still excitedly talking about my research when they left the seminar room. Interestingly, some of my peers whose orientation was more quantitative had the most questions concerning my approach. One doctoral student (Verene) commented on the recruiting and my findings.

It was so difficult to recruit teachers. I even used raffle draws as incentives.

I felt so overwhelmed by your findings on teachers’ thinking about gifted students. In the 1990s, I did my Master of Education project on gifted students with learning disabilities. Nothing seems to have changed.

(Verene, Personal communication, 14 October 2010)

Verene’s comment about teachers of the gifted and talented concurred with the responses of some of the participants in this research. Almost two decades later, there still existed the same teacher related issues with the education of gifted and talented students in schools. To my surprise, I found that just like my sample of teachers, the majority of the doctoral students, except the one with a gifted and talented education background, expressed an uncertainty about what giftedness and talent meant to them. They asked me whether giftedness is natural or can be trained. It was clear that they were unsure about the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’.
I thought that you have to be gifted or talented in something. I did not think of it as being gifted and talented.

I learnt before about the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ but I can’t remember the difference between the two.

Is giftedness natural or can it be acquired through training?

Is gifted the same as talented or different?

From my observation, one of my peers did not possess a favourable inclination towards gifted and talented students owing to certain unpleasant personal experiences with students who, according to her, ‘claimed’ to be gifted and talented. Likewise during my interviews and in my literature review, there existed three categories of attitudes of people towards gifted and talented students, namely favourable, neutral and unfavourable (Croft, 2003; Galbraith & Delisle, 1996).

**Data collection and analysis**

Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously. The data analysis was an ongoing systematic and rigorous process. The data collected recorded direct quotations of people, both what they said and what they wrote down on paper. Such data were messy, voluminous, detailed, disorganised and unsystematic. They had to be deconstructed, analysed, interpreted, integrated, classified, categorised, coded, reconstructed and reorganised according to the emerging patterns into meaningful categories, themes and interrelationships to make sense out of what teachers said before writing the final case study. Analysis involved rearranging the data into patterns and categories and their relationships with one another. Coding was used to categorise the interviews, observations and documents systematically for easier retrieval at a later stage (Stake, 1995). Interpretation means making sense of the data,
patterns and categories and relationships while presentation is writing up the data into a formal report. Ideas and insights that emerged during and after interviews were recorded immediately as emergent insights (Patton, 2002).

As I attempted to uncover and discover emergent insights, I used reflexive analysis, instead of depending on a computer program to assist with the organisation of the data, to understand the raw data in a meaningful way. As O’Leary commented, “Reflexive analysis means staying as close to the data as possible – from initial collection right through to the drawing of final conclusions” (2005, p.184). By staying close to the data collected, I thought my way through inductively to make sense of what the participants said and to discover the emergent themes in relation to the research questions. O’Leary indicated that:

… it is the researcher who needs to work strategically, creatively, intuitively to get a ‘feel’ for the data, to cycle between that data and existing theory, and to follow the hunches that can lead to unexpected yet significant findings. … Rather than hand your thinking over to a computer program, the process of analysis should see you persistently interrogating the data and the findings that emerge from the data.

(O’Leary, 2005, pp.184-185)

Stake also had a similar opinion that qualitative researchers spend a lot of time “personally in contact” and “reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (2003, p.150). Indeed this study involved reflexivity and deliberate rethinking on my part as a qualitative researcher to analyse the data.

Having provided the rationale for my choice of a critical interpretivist methodology, and interviewing as the primary means of data collection, the next chapter reveals my thinking as I searched for emergent insights into teachers’ thinking about giftedness and gifted and talented education.
Chapter 5

Proposing models for teachers’ thinking about teachers’ work

Introduction

To be reflexive is to think about how your actions, values, beliefs, preferences and biases influence the research process and outcome. It is an active process, an intentional, conscious, looking back (whether contemporaneously or at different points in the research process) on actions you take and decisions you make to deliberate how they influence your study. … When you are the major research instrument, demonstrating reflexivity – your role and reaction in this process – is a critical factor in ensuring the validity of the study.

(Simons, 2009, p.91)

During my data analysis, I changed my approaches one after another as Simons has described whenever I found any one not as appropriate as I initially thought it would be. When I transcribed the first interview (Aldwyn), I noted the categories of the interview and used the same format for the second interview transcript. However, more categories emerged during the second and subsequent interviews. So I discarded that format which was limiting the openness of my mind towards emerging insights. Instead I transcribed the first two interviews all over again and the other eighteen interviews as word for word records of the interviews. In an attempt to analyse the data, I printed the first six interview transcripts on differently coloured paper and cut out statements, portions of every transcript and paste on large drawing pieces of paper to generate the emerging insights. In the process, I found the cutting of sentences and paragraphs on paper for each transcript and pasting such segments on paper very time consuming. As I reflected on a more efficient way to use the
same cut and paste principle to generate the categories, I decided to colour the fonts of every transcript in the computer instead of using paper to distinguish the participant. Thus as I reviewed the first interview transcript, I categorised all the data. Next I reviewed the second transcript under the same categories and included additional ones. Then I reviewed the third transcript and did the same categorisation of data. I repeated the same review for all the other seventeen transcripts. By the end of the process, I had categorised the data of all participants under twenty five categories.

As I critiqued what I had done so far, the element of uniqueness of the research seemed to be missing from the outcome. I had to search for an alternative way to generate the emerging keywords and the unique aspects of this research to make a contribution to the research on gifted and talented students. I decided to review all the interview transcripts and re-analyse them. This time I used coloured stickers to represent the following five categories: peach for characteristics of the gifted and talented, dark pink for types of gifted and talented students, green for thinking and definitions of giftedness, orange for provision, programs and catering for gifted and talented and yellow for problems and issues. I wrote relevant data in point form on the respective coloured stickers, underlined the quote and stuck the sticker next to it. At the end of the review, I summarised the points on another overview sticker on the front page of the transcript. Moreover, I jotted down repetitive words in the transcript on the overview sticker. During the reviewing process, I became aware of the key words ‘hard’, ‘fair’, ‘joy’, ‘job’ and ‘unsure’, synonyms of those key words like ‘difficult’, ‘enjoy’, ‘happy’ and ‘uncertain’ as well as antonyms like ‘unhappy’, ‘unfair’ emerging from the interviews.
As I probed deeper into my data, the following four questions emerged. First, ‘What is giftedness?’ Most of the participants seemed uncertain about their definitions of the terms giftedness, gifted and talented. Second, ‘What is hard?’ Teachers found their work in regular classrooms hard and had to work hard. Third, ‘What is fair?’ Catering for the student diversity in terms of academic and cultural diversity is a daily challenge to teachers. Fourth, ‘Is teaching a job or a joy to teachers?’ As I am a visual learner, I sketched separate mind maps on the four emergent key questions. The first mind map (Mind map 1) was on giftedness. The second mind map (Mind map 2) was on ‘What is hard?’ The third (Mind map 3) and the fourth mind maps (Mind map 4) were on ‘What is fair?’ and ‘Is teaching a job or joy?’ respectively.

Mind map 1 (Figure 5.1) portrays teachers’ thinking about giftedness. An uncertainty about what giftedness is, what the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ mean and who is gifted and/talented prevailed among the teachers in this research. Mind map 2 (Figure 5.2) summarises what was ‘hard’ about educating gifted and talented children in regular classrooms. Because of diverse teachers’ perceptions of giftedness and talent and student diversity in terms of academic ability and cultural diversity, it seemed ‘hard’ to identify all students who were gifted and talented. Depending on teachers’ individual perceptions, priorities, preferences and the school environment, catering for the learning needs of all gifted and talented students in regular classrooms could be ‘hard’. Mind map 3 (Figure 5.3) links teachers’ perceptions of equity to what seemed ‘fair’ in terms of provisions and practices. Mind map 4 (Figure 5.4) conveys perceived feelings of teachers’ thinking about their work in educating children as a job or a ‘joy’.
Figure 5.1 Mind map 1 What is giftedness?
Figure 5.2 Mind map 2 What is hard?
Figure 5.3 Mind map 3 What is fair?

Figure 5.4 Mind map 4 Is teaching a job or a joy?
Proposing models to explain teachers’ thinking about their work

Then my thinking about this research crystallised and revolved about the four emergent key questions. I focussed on how to correlate the interplay of the four emergent key questions to my overarching research question: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students? How could I present the hard, unfair and job/joy factors in a model to illustrate the participants’ contemporary thinking of teachers’ work? As I probed deeper into the emergent themes of this study, I started to draw two shapes, namely a square and a circle. Next I drew two eyes and a mouth in each shape. I used the eyes to represent the ‘hard’ (left eye) and ‘fair’ (right eye) themes since they were linked more to the lens from which teachers viewed their situations and work. I used the mouth to show the emotion expressed when teachers talked about their work in schools: whether they found joy in what they did in school or they regarded their work as a job or chore which they carried out with negative feelings. The outcome was a sketch of two faces of teachers on the same piece of paper to represent the contending facial expressions and emotions of teachers when they talked about their work to me. In the process, I developed a model which I proposed as Tan’s model of teachers’ thinking about teachers’ work (Model 3) to illustrate how I visualised the thinking of teachers about their work in schools. To explain the rationale for the model, I re-presented my ideas in the form of three models. Model 1 (Figure 5.5) portrays the status quo, Model 2 (Figure 5.6) the transformation while Model 3 (Figure 5.7) combined Model 1 and Model 2 into one to show the contrast.
Figure 5.5 Model 1 Proposed Tan’s model of teachers’ thinking about teachers’ work: The status quo

In Model 1 (Figure 5.5), the square represents the contemporary state teachers tend to face in schools today. The left eye has a spiral symbol which is intended to show the confusion, uncertainty, hardship and overwhelming experiences teachers face that spiral off emotions of frustrations, dissatisfaction and unhappiness in their encounters as well as student encounters in school. The right eye has a symbol of a tilted balance or see-saw to represent unfairness exercised by teachers, which results in the imbalance of learning opportunities given to the student spectrum in any regular classroom. Unfair practices by teachers have implications for the atmosphere in the classroom, the emotions of both teachers and students, especially the gifted and talented. The upside down mouth represents the negative emotions like unhappiness faced by teachers due to the interplay of the hard and unfair factors in
their job dealing with the *status quo* in teaching in regular classrooms. The square face in Model 1 looks unhappy. I deliberately chose the pallor to emphasise the unhappiness in the face.

By contrast in Model 2 (Figure 5.6), the face looks happy and I purposely chose yellow, a bright colour, to give the face its radiance. The circle represents the transformed state towards which some teachers are heading or developing. The left eye has a target symbol to reflect the peace and order in classrooms when teachers hit the bull’s eye and target their teaching to cater for the needs of all students, including the gifted and talented, so that every child learns at his/her own pace to reach the level of education that s/he is capable of. The right eye has a symbol of a
level balance or see-saw to represent fairness exercised by teachers, which results in the balance of learning opportunities given to the student spectrum in any regular classroom. Fair practices by teachers have implications on the atmosphere in the classroom, the emotions of both teachers and students, especially the gifted and talented. The happy smile reflects the joy teachers can have in their work when they manage to target their teaching to cater for every child’s needs, interests and level of development so that their students find learning fun and enjoyable while they enjoy teaching and make teaching interesting. There is joy in the atmosphere in the classroom when both teachers and students are happy. It is hard work to bring about the change but it is not an impossible task.

**Figure 5.7 Model 3 Proposed Tan’s model of teachers’ thinking about teachers’ work**

In Model 3 (Figure 5.7), I displayed the two models side by side to contrast the two contexts: the *status quo* and the transformation. As mentioned earlier, the square on the left represents the contemporary situation teachers face in schools while the circle on the right represents the transformed state towards which some teachers are
heading or developing. The square also represents thinking inside the box while the circle represents flexible/critical thinking. When teachers think outside the box and accept the challenge to act as transformative agents, they can potentially make a difference in the education of all students, including the gifted and talented, and bring about a transformation in the regular classrooms.

The process involves a continuum of changing faces with the square on one extreme (left) and the circle on the other extreme. I visualise it as a square shape being pulled out at the sides until it becomes a circle. The reshaping takes time. The stages in between include a square with rounded corners with the sides of the square gradually becoming curves instead of straight lines. In the process, the eye expressions also change from a spiral symbol to a target symbol in the left eye and from an unbalanced see saw to a balanced one in the right eye. The shape of the mouth changed from being curved upside down to a wide smile.

The movement from the less desirable state to the transformed one takes time and involves hard work. The movement from one state to another is an ongoing process and depends on the interplay of the three main emergent themes: hard, fair and job/joy as well as the types of classes, schools and environments teachers are positioned in at the beginning of each year. It is a process which teachers deal with year in and year out with the new classes and maybe new school environments they come into contact with. Some teachers who have thought through their status quo and their jobs as teachers have become ‘thinking teachers’. As classes change, time changes and school foci change, ‘thinking teachers’ continue to change their strategies to suit the targeted student population, to act fairly and build up the joyful
learning and teaching atmosphere in regular classrooms so that no child is missed out in his/her development as a happy learner.

With this model as my lens, I proceeded to analyse the four key emergent questions, beginning with “What is giftedness?” in the next chapter, namely Chapter 6, followed by ‘What is hard?’ and ‘What is fair?’ in Chapter 7, and finally ‘Is teaching a job or a joy?’ in Chapter 8.
Chapter 6
Exploring the ‘taken for grantedness’

Introduction
To find the answers to my overarching research question: ‘What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students?’, I asked all the participants in this study the key questions in the interviews, besides prompting questions when the need arose. The following questions were used as a guide and were adapted to meet the need of individual circumstances in keeping with the recursive model of interviewing. Do you have any gifted and talented students in your class? Why do you think that they are gifted or talented? How do you cater for their needs in the classroom? What do you think ‘giftedness’ means?

During the course of the interviews, most of the participants shared their experiences spontaneously. The smooth flow of the interview seemed interrupted for several minutes when I posed the question concerning the meaning of ‘giftedness’. Most participants expressed uncertainty about the two terms “gifted” and “talented”. They seemed to have taken the phrase ‘gifted and talented’ for granted and used the two terms interchangeably or linked together during the interviews. They seemed unsure whether their perceptions of the meanings they provided for the terms ‘giftedness’, ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ were ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Hence this chapter is about exploring the ‘taken for grantedness’ of giftedness among the participants. I found from experience not to start with the question concerning their definition of giftedness as it caused an awkward silence in the participants. It seemed as if they felt more comfortable, talking about their experiences, and describing the characteristics of
their gifted and talented students and what the students could do, as opposed to examining what they thought giftedness might mean to them. Most of the participants had to take some time to think to find a definition for giftedness even though they had been talking to me about their experiences with the gifted and talented, and using the words ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ during our interviews.

After interviewing a number of teachers and noticing this level of uncertainty about the meaning of giftedness, I decided to ask the subsequent participants two additional questions: The first question was: Is giftedness natural or a result of training? The phrase ‘a result of training’ was used by participants in earlier interviews, raising the question about whether children who had been ‘trained’/coached since a young age by parents, tutors or in special programs like Kumon to be ‘very smart’ were ‘originally’ gifted or not. They implied that those who were ‘trained’ were not ‘really’ gifted or talented based on their assumption that ‘genuine’ giftedness should be natural, innate and does not require ‘training’. The second question was: Is ‘gifted’ the same as ‘talented’ or different? Our discussions during the interviews reflected three rather than one or two distinct groups of children. The first group consisted of gifted children while the second group involved talented children. If being ‘talented’ were different from being ‘gifted’, then the third group – the ‘gifted and talented’ – consisted of children who were gifted as well as talented.

Given the diversity of interpretation of giftedness and talent in the literature, this uncertainty about the meaning of giftedness among the participants was perhaps not surprising and seemed to repeat the question posed by Borland: “But what is a ‘correct’ definition of giftedness?” (2003, p.112). This question remained
unanswered because the literature revealed that too many definitions made it hard for researchers to reach a consensus on what constituted giftedness (Borland, 2003; Coleman & Cross, 2005). As Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and Worrell stated: “It is ironic that one of the most vexing questions in the field of gifted and talented education is how to define giftedness” (2011, p.7). Galbraith and Delisle also concluded that “there is no ‘right’ way to view either intelligence or giftedness” (1996, p.37). If there were no ‘correct’ definition of giftedness and no ‘right’ way to view giftedness or intelligence, there might not be a common understanding or basis of what giftedness is. Given the lack of a specific definition, it is not surprising that individual teachers might perceive giftedness in diverse ways and identify children as gifted and talented according to their individual perceptions. This further suggested the possibility of inconsistency in the identification of the gifted and talented and the missing out of certain gifted and talented children who might not match the criteria valued by teachers with particular perspectives of giftedness.

Questions and answers arising from the interviews

Following the interviews, I analysed the data for answers to my research questions concerning teachers’ thinking about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students. It was clear that giftedness meant different things to different participants, depending on the lens from which they viewed it. Some participants seemed uncertain about the criteria for giftedness. The terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ might have been taken for granted as labels for certain students with certain characteristics. Moreover, there seemed to be an uncertainty about the nature of giftedness, whether natural or the result of training or coaching.
Despite their different perspectives of giftedness, all the participants acknowledged that giftedness is an ability to demonstrate an outstanding performance. This common idea in their thinking about giftedness overlapped with the definition suggested by the United States National Association for Gifted Children (2010). However, they differed in opinions about the type of ability associated with giftedness; the number of domains in which the ability lay, whether one, many or all; the nature of the ability, whether natural or the product of training/coaching; the occurrence of demonstrated giftedness, whether rare, unique or common among students; and the standard of performance, whether in terms of test scores, speed, quality of work or years ahead of chronological peers. The differences in perceptions of giftedness were consistent with the inconsistency and the absence of consensus in the multiple conceptualisations of giftedness in the literature pointed out by researchers like Borland (2003), Coleman and Cross (2005), Galbraith and Delisle (1996), Gallagher (2000), Subotnik et al., (2011), and Sutherland (2006) which seemed to affect the identification of gifted and talented students. Thus certain students identified as gifted and talented by teachers with a particular perception of giftedness might not be regarded as gifted and talented by other teachers. The uncertainty about what giftedness means and who the gifted children actually are, makes implementation of suitable provisions problematic.

Nature of ability associated with giftedness

The majority of teachers positioned the particular ability associated with giftedness as a mental process or brain function, whether thinking, understanding, seeing links, awareness, perception, imagination, knowledge or intelligence. Seventeen teachers linked the ability with thinking, whether in terms of expressions of ideas (Aldwyn,
Haidee, Idelia), higher order thinking skills (Aldwyn, Bryce, Calla, Frida, Guda, Jolie, Leona, Myra, Neysa, Quenby, Sorcha, Thirza), critical thinking (Calla, Drusilla, Petrina), imagination (Thirza), interesting insights (Guda, Sorcha, Thirza), problem solving (Drusilla, Jolie, Neysa, Petrina, Radbert, Sorcha) and different thinking patterns (Leona, Quenby, Sorcha). Nine teachers linked the ability with understanding (Calla, Drusila, Frida, Jolie, Leona, Ozora, Quenby, Radbert, Thirza). Three of them (Calla, Frida, Leona) also included seeing links in information as another feature of the ability. Thirza perceived giftedness as an awareness, perception and understanding of how the world works. Seven teachers linked the ability with intelligence, whether Gardner’s multiple intelligences (Calla, Elma, Frida, Haidee) or intelligence quotients (Guda, Quenby, Thirza). One teacher (Haidee) equated giftedness with being knowledgeable.

To three teachers (Idelia, Leona, Thirza), the particular ability associated with giftedness seemed to be linked to maturity, whether in approach, attitude, behaviour, communicating, thinking or understanding. Three teachers (Leona, Neysa, Thirza) added another feature to the ability associated with giftedness: the eagerness to learn more. Three teachers (Drusilla, Elma, Quenby) also regarded the ability associated with giftedness as the potential to excel in something. Two teachers (Calla, Neysa) thought of the ability as strength: something that the child is good at doing. One teacher (Idelia) made a point that it is difficult to know to what giftedness is attributed because of the multiple ways of thinking about the ability underpinning giftedness. Her opinion was consistent with the opinions of researchers like Borland (2003), Gabraith and Delisle (1996), Gallagher (2000), Subotnik et al., (2011) and Sutherland (2006) concerning the existence of multiple perspectives of giftedness.
and thus the absence of consensus of what giftedness means as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

With respect to the nature of the ability associated with giftedness, the majority of teachers linked the ability with competency of a much higher level than that exhibited by the gifted child’s chronological peers. So it is not necessarily a higher ability but rather an ability that is advanced beyond that of the expected norm or the level of the child’s chronological peers. Both Petrina and Gida used the same phrase “way, way above” and similar phrases like “so far ahead” (Guda), “years above” (Guda) or “more than two years higher and much more” (Petrina) to emphasise the degree of the giftedness and the advanced level of achievement in their examples of gifted students. Guda recalled: “He was way, way above the rest of the class. He is years above the class, particularly in Mathematics. He was so far ahead, so far ahead.” Petrina explained:

It is the ability to produce, problem solve and think critically at a much greater level than your peers at your chronological age and achieve at a much higher level. Giftedness, I would say, would be more than two years higher and much more. I do have one student this year who I believe shows competencies way, way above what I would be expecting of a child of her age.

(Petrina: F, 59, 39)

**Occurrence of giftedness**

In the identification of gifted and talented students, all teachers except Calla thought of the gifted and talented as the high/top, if not the very top, group of students in the classroom. Most of the teachers commented that giftedness was usually present in the top three to ten percent of the student population. Their perceptions of the occurrence of giftedness among students coincided with the top ten percent or rarer
in the definition posited by the United States National Association for Gifted Children (2010) as well as the prevalence of ‘mildly gifted’ children (“1:6-1:40”) and ‘moderately gifted’ children (“1:40-1:1,000”) in the general student population in the levels of intellectual giftedness posited by Gross (2004, p.7). However, two teachers seemed to perceive the term ‘gifted’ within the higher levels of intellectual giftedness, for example the ‘highly gifted’ (Drusilla) or the ‘exceptionally gifted’ and ‘profoundly gifted’ (Petrina), the prevalence of which was posited as “1:1,000-1:10,000”, “1:10,000-1:1 million” and “Fewer than 1:1 million” respectively by Gross (2004, p.7). Drusilla specified giftedness as present in “the very top group of children (0.1%)”. Petrina seemed to imply the rare existence of gifted and talented students when she used the phrase “only once in a little while, a very long while”. She appeared to have encountered not more than five gifted and talented students in her thirty nine years of teaching. Petrina said:

I feel that a gifted and talented student comes along only once in a little while, a very long while. But again we don’t find them very often. I could count on one hand the number of really gifted and talented students that I have taught during the time of my teaching. You don’t see many. How common is the term gifted and talented?

(Petrina: F, 59, 39)

In contrast, Elma stated that fifteen out of forty eight students Year Four students in her school were identified among the top three percent in the 2009 PEAC testing, implying that more than thirty percent of the Year Four students in that particular school were gifted and talented. She added that probably five out of the fifteen belonged to the group that did not perform in class, implying that a third of them underachieved in school. The high percentage came as a surprise to both teachers and people who suspected cheating on the part of some children. They seemed doubtful that those students were gifted and talented. However, Elma believed that it
was not possible to cheat during PEAC tests while under supervision and time
constraint. She commented that:

    Some people say that it is a large percentage and we are surprised, too in the test.
    They say that some of these children may have cheated in the test. I think that the test
    is so quick that you don’t have time to look at anybody else’s answers. Moreover,
    someone is supervising the test.

    (Elma: F, 46, 25)

From Thirza’s viewpoint, she was surprised to encounter six gifted and talented
students in one classroom in a particular school in 1998 because normally there
would only be one or two in a class of thirty. She attributed the increase in number to
the influx of gifted students from overseas like Dubai and Singapore. Thirza
commented:

    But in 1998 I did have a class of Year Sevens. Not only did the class have gifted and
talented children who were already there but then several students came into the class
from international schools – one from Dubai, one from Singapore, who also were
very gifted – which was quite unusual because probably you might find one or two in
your class of thirty. So that was quite an amazing experience because really there was
probably a group of half a dozen children who were gifted.

    (Thirza: F, 65, 40)

With one student from Dubai, one from Singapore and two from Australia, there
remained two gifted students whose backgrounds were not made known to me.
Thirza was not the only teacher in this study who noticed the presence of gifted
students from Asia in her classrooms. Leona made a similar comment about two
gifted students from Singapore. She said: “There was one girl as well as her older
sister who were very smart. They were from Singapore. In my previous school, she
skipped a year because she was so smart.”
Quenby commented that there were quite a few gifted international students in one of her previous schools. She noticed that some of those Asian students worked hard because of their cultural emphasis on academic excellence and support from their parents at home. This relates to the question concerning whether giftedness is natural or the result of coaching and being hard working. According to Quenby:

They were good and they came from all over the world like this school does. You have all those ethnic backgrounds as well. Some of those ones did push themselves hard because of their family background … Chinese, Indian including Singapore and Malaysia. In those areas, they seem to have a higher regard for education than we do. (Quenby: F, 60, 40)

By contrast, Calla disagreed with the other nineteen teachers’ thinking of the gifted and talented as the high/top, if not the very top, group of students in the classroom. Calla was adamant that giftedness is present in every child and expressed in his/her area of strength/multiple intelligence, thus posing a controversial viewpoint of giftedness and downplaying giftedness. Her way of thinking concurred with the belief among certain experts in education and social sciences that “all children are gifted” (Braggett, 1994, pp.25, 57; Davidson & Davidson, 2004, p.75) and “we just have to discover where those equally valuable gifts lie” (Davidson & Davidson, 2004, p.75). Based on Calla’s thinking that all children were gifted, the terms ‘average’ and ‘non gifted’ seemed to be redundant. However, with such a broad view of giftedness, she found it difficult to define what giftedness is and showed inconsistency in her examples of gifted children. As Calla asserted:

All children come to us with gifts and strengths in certain areas where they excel. All children are gifted in one way or another. It is not necessarily that there are gifted and non gifted children. Every child is gifted. Every child is gifted in one way or another. Giftedness is a broad view. We cannot say which type of giftedness. It is difficult to pinpoint giftedness. A child who is gifted can be academically gifted,
linguistically gifted or mathematically gifted or come gifted in different realms of learning. Giftedness does not necessarily mean that a child can achieve 100% in all the tests provided in the classroom. Our job as educators is to search for those kids. Sometimes in our role in the way our educational system operates, giftedness is not made explicit or discovered until later on.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

Uncertainty in identifying the ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’

Six teachers seemed uncertain about what giftedness means and the criteria for giftedness. Their responses reflected their uncertainty in their conceptualisation of the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’. Upon closer examination, I noticed two particular groups, namely beginner/early career teachers (Myra, Ozora) and the ones (Haidee, Kara, Leona, Sorcha) that claimed the lack of encounter with such children in their classrooms. As a beginner/early career teacher, Ozora attributed her uncertainty about norms regarding the average/gifted to her lack of experience. She commented: “As this is my first year of teaching, I am not sure what the standard of average or gifted is.” She continued to say that the student performance would give a clue to her whether that student was gifted or not.

It depends on what the definition of giftedness is. Gifted in my school is someone who is able to play notes while the rest of the class cannot. If compared to some schools, they would probably be at the bottom of the average group.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

She made it obvious that if giftedness was based on comparison between chronological peers intraschool and interschool using the criteria of ability and performance, there would be a discrepancy in the standards used in identifying gifted and talented students. Those identified as gifted and talented in one school might even be regarded as average students in another. Ozora’s opinion resonated with the
uncertainty in identification of the gifted and talented due to the absence of consensus in the multiple definitions of giftedness pointed out by researchers such as Borland (2003), Gallagher (2000) and Sutherland (2006). The uncertainty seemed to continue into 2010.

Another beginner/early career teacher, Myra, also mentioned her lack of experience in teaching gifted and talented children. She had not encountered any gifted and talented students based on her perception of a gifted child as a very smart person with no flaw. In response to my question: “Have you ever come across any children who are gifted and talented?”, she replied:

Not yet. I have come across some who are smart and above average but I won’t say that smart enough to be gifted and talented. One or two but not outstanding because they have flaws. There is always something that needs to be fixed. They are not really very smart. I haven’t had any experience teaching them.  

(Myra: F, 22, 0)

Five teachers, namely Haidee, Kara, Leona, Myra and Sorcha, thought that the gifted and talented were all rounders and perfectionists. To them, ‘gifted’ seemed to mean ‘flawless’ or ‘perfect’ in the student’s performances across all domains. By coincidence, they commented that they had not yet encountered any gifted and talented students in their classrooms to meet their criteria. Kara said: “I don’t have any children in my classroom who are identified as gifted and talented. I really don’t know. I talk about them as my high group but they have not been identified as gifted and talented.” When I asked Haidee whether she had any gifted and talented students in her classroom, there was a long awkward silence. She kept repeating: “I have to think. I have to think.” Finally she answered.

I haven’t seen any children in my teaching class here that I would consider as gifted
and talented. I am not sure whether they are gifted or not but definitely they had a strength that is beyond their age group levels.

(Haidee: F, 48, 27)

Surprisingly, Kara seemed to imply that I had a high level of expectations of gifted and talented students although I did not mention anything about my perception of giftedness. She said:

I have a higher group but not to the level that you are talking about. They are not that high. If I were to assess them myself, I am not sure that I will put them in that category of gifted and talented.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Kara differentiated between gifted and talented in terms of academic/sports oriented and the number of areas in which they were good. She stated:

I think gifted is in academic side and talented is in sports side. I agree with the definition that gifted is academic, talented is non-academic while gifted and talented possesses both. That seems logical to me. I think that the gifted is an all rounder in all subjects. Otherwise you are just ‘clever’. You are gifted if you are good in all areas. You are talented if you are good in one or more areas. Giftedness should cover everything.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Kara and Sorcha were quite adamant that the gifted child is academic and good in everything while the talented child is good in at least one domain. Sorcha said:

To me, a talented child generally is good in one thing, often in music. The gifted child is good in everything. No matter what they do, they just excel in everything. If only good in one thing, the child is talented. Talented is probably for the less academic areas like talented in sports and talented in music. The sports kids who are really talented in sports are not that good at academics. A gifted child is really gifted in English, Mathematics, Science and across other fields. So ‘gifted’ would be someone intellectual, I guess.

(Sorcha: F, 32, 10)
Although Quenby had the same idea as Kara and Sorcha that ‘gifted’ is related to the intellectual domain, she differentiated between the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’. To Quenby, ‘gifted’ is defined as the ability to “do more than the average person” while ‘talent’ is defined as “a particular skill in a particular area”. However, Elma disagreed with Kara, Quenby and Sorcha over the academic aspect of giftedness. Leona and Myra possessed perspectives similar to Kara’s and Sorcha’s that the gifted must be all rounders. Myra said: “Yes, good in all areas. If they do outstanding performance in everything, then they are gifted. If they don’t, they are not gifted.”

Fifteen teachers disputed using the criterion of “all rounders” for identifying the gifted and talented. Neysa commented that “You have the idea that gifted and talented students are all round smart but sometimes they are not”. Jolie made a similar point: “Just because they are gifted does not mean that they are gifted at all learning areas and good at everything. I think that is rare.” Radbert seemed to echo Jolie’s thoughts when he stated: “I don’t know if I have found a gifted and talented person who is gifted and talented in everything”. Guda, Idelia, Jolie, Neysa, Petrina, Radbert and Thirza stressed that giftedness could be in one or more domains.

Drusilla used ranking based on standardised testing as a means to differentiate children with the gifted and talented as the very top (0.1%) group of the general student population. To her, “gifted students usually are the ones in the highest range when they do the testing” while “a talented child usually has a talent in a particular area”. Thirza also had the opinion that talent was related to one particular area. The common perception of the term ‘talented’ among the teachers was its linkage to only one particular area/domain.
Is gifted the same as talented?

The terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ might have been taken for granted by many teachers as labels for certain students with certain characteristics identified by themselves or other teachers. During the interviews, they appeared to feel uncomfortable thinking through the terms that were probably taken for granted and re-examining for themselves what those terms meant to them. Here are some responses to my question: In your opinion, do the two terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ mean the same or something different? Petrina perceived the term ‘gift’ literally as “it is given to you”. She believed that “gifted and talented is natural − something that is there which is different − and perhaps inherited”, and that it is “a quality that sets you apart”. She used the two terms combined together to mean the presence of something unique in a particular child concerned but she did not differentiate between the two. Radbert expressed his uncertainty at the beginning of his definition and attempted to differentiate but ended up still unsure of the difference. He found it hard to provide an impromptu answer to that particular question although he used the terms throughout the interview. Like Petrina, he also had the concept of ‘gift’ as something given to the child which is inborn. He implied that talents are not inborn but are the consequences of a developmental process. His perception of the development of talent resonated with the principles underpinning Gagné’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. Radbert commented:

Good question. I’m not sure. A gifted child and a talented child – are they the same? I guess some people have been given gifts that are there. The kids that have talents do not have gifts given to them but their talents were developed. Maybe that could be the difference, but I am not sure. I don’t know if I have found a gifted and talented
person who is gifted and talented in everything. That is a hard one. You need to give me a week to think of that.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)

Another teacher, Thirza, expressed the same difficulty of giving an impromptu answer to the same question. She finally commented: “There could be a difference. But I have never thought about it particularly. So that is a bit off the top of my head answer.” She ended up, interrogating me: “Who came up with the definition for giftedness in the first place? How did that come about and how did people talk about giftedness?” I realised that she was one unique participant who thought through the matter and spoke her mind. She pointed out a relevant point which was to go back to the origins of giftedness and re-examine the rationale underlying the conception of giftedness and basis for discourse about it. I provided her an overview of the origins of giftedness. She shared with me her perspective of giftedness in line with Ruf’s (2005) levels of gifted which are based on IQ test scores and milestones in the development of a child.

Is giftedness natural or the result of coaching?

Four teachers (Calla, Elma, Neysa, Radbert) brought up the dispute over the nature of giftedness, whether natural or the result of training/coaching. They raised the issue that certain smart children appeared to be gifted and talented but their giftedness seemed not natural. These teachers claimed that those students had been trained/coached from a young age by supportive parents or through certain programs like Kumon to be smart and to excel at levels attributed to gifted and talented students. As Quenby commented about the Asian gifted students in one of her previous schools, “some of those ones did push themselves hard because of their family background.”
Radbert stated:

I have kids whom I consider gifted and talented who have been coached throughout their lives to be gifted and talented by their parents. I have seen that some kids just come natural. They are very smart, very intelligent, very switched on – answer everything.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)

The four teachers were not sure whether the children were initially gifted and coached to be even more gifted or the children were initially not gifted but they learnt/practised to be gifted through the training. Thus they differentiated the two groups of gifted and talented students in school: the natural and the trained/coached. Three teachers (Calla, Elma, Neysa) seemed to imply that the trained ones might not be gifted and talented because they appeared to lack an understanding of what they learnt by rote. Neysa said: “I think people get gifted and talented students to be really smart in terms of practising to be smart. Reading lots and lots of books, thinking and memorising but not understanding it.” Calla stated:

Talking about academic giftedness in terms of the ability to learn, I have a fairly strong view that the ability to memorise facts does not designate giftedness. For example, the Kumon program does not cater for giftedness. The child rote repeats Mathematical facts and is not asked to apply the knowledge. The child has to apply the concept to demonstrate that s/he fully understands.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

Elma seemed to imply that without the conducive environment, teaching and effort, certain academically able students who possessed good memory might not be gifted. She stated:

They are those who perform well academically in the classroom. Academic ability is not necessarily giftedness. Often it is acquired learning due to the environment that they are in. They work for it. They learn it if someone teaches it to them. They
remember it. They are still very academic, bright and successful but not necessarily gifted.

(Elma: F, 46, 25)

I believed that the four teachers concerned questioned the genuineness of the giftedness in that particular group of students who seemed to have been trained/coached to exhibit characteristics of the gifted and talented. They seemed to suggest two schools of thought. First, without the training/coaching, those students might not possess the ability associated with giftedness and thus might not have been originally gifted or talented. Second, those particular teachers seemed to assume that genuine gifted and talented students possess the ability to do things on their own and without any training/coaching. As I see it, the key question underlying the dispute is still: What is ‘giftedness’? Without consensus of a universal definition for giftedness, there appeared to be a lack of a common understanding of what giftedness means and a common basis of identifying the gifted and talented among the teachers. A subset of the key question included the following questions about the criteria of giftedness: Is giftedness natural? Does a gifted and talented child require training/coaching to develop his/her natural giftedness? Can giftedness be developed in a person who originally does not have the natural type of giftedness? Is such a person considered gifted and talented after receiving the relevant coaching/training to develop his/her ability and performance up to the expected standards of excellence? These are questions that require further investigation.

Some researchers like Braggett (1994), Clark (2008) and Gagné (2000, 2003) have stressed the importance of developing the giftedness and talent in the gifted and talented to avoid their underachieving in school. The warning that the gifted and talented might achieve below their potential implied that they might regress to
become average students. The process of developing something like giftedness and
talent suggests that the child initially possesses a particular ability/skill/potential at a
certain level which needs to progress to higher levels and grow to become better over
time. This suggests a need for appropriate and relevant resources, practices, coaching
and mentoring to improve the particular abilities, skills and potential associated with
the giftedness of individual gifted and talented students to a higher level of
development of their giftedness and talent. Moreover, this implies that gifted and
talented students have to put in time and effort to develop their giftedness and talent.
This further suggests that the giftedness and talent exhibited by a child at different
stages in his/her life may grow, fluctuate, remain static or disappear depending
whether steps have been taken to develop the giftedness in that particular child or
not. As VanTassel-Baska pointed out: “Effort and practice over time build the
student’s skills and continued predisposition for a particular talent area” (2001,
p.23). Two teachers (Elma and Radbert) made a similar point. Elma said: “Children
can be talented if they can do well and put in time and effort to work on it. They can
be gifted but not pursue their giftedness and not make anything out of it.” Their
comments about talent development seemed to be linked to the principles
Giftedness and Talent. Gagnè believed that “the process of developing talent occurs
when the child or adolescent engages in systematic learning, training and

**Teachers’ personal stand versus test standards**

The identification of gifted and talented students, whether their abilities were seen as
natural or coached, seemed to be affected by individual teachers’ beliefs and stand
about the nature of giftedness and talent as well as standardised test scores. In this part of the chapter, I provided an overview of standardised tests called Primary Extension and Challenge (PEAC) testing, carried out among Year Four students in Western Australia to identify the gifted and talented among them. Usually those in the top two and a half percent are officially recognised as gifted and talented, and are then offered special withdrawal gifted programs called PEAC courses in Year Five till Year Seven. Those who are not identified as gifted and talented are usually not given the opportunity to attend PEAC courses. However, in certain catchment areas or exceptional cases, there were available vacancies/funds for the top five percent, and some teachers recommended certain students to attend. PEAC courses are designed to withdraw like-minded gifted and talented students within a school district to come together once a week for two hours or more to carry out challenging activities that cater for their abilities and interests. Those identified as gifted and talented students select courses of their preferences and interests from the courses offered. However, the acceptance of their choices depends on the availability of places for each course and there is a possibility that they may not get their preferences. Each course lasts for ten weeks and each child can attend a maximum of three a year. However, the courses are offered during school time and outside the child’s school premises in PEAC Centres or other sites located in different suburbs. Every child who attends PEAC has to pay for the course fees, find his/her own transport to the respective site and miss lessons during the duration of the course (two and a half to three hours per week for ten weeks per course). The child is usually expected to complete both the PEAC work and the school work that he/she misses as homework and catch up with the lessons missed every week for thirty weeks owing to withdrawal from the class for PEAC.
Three teachers (Aldwyn, Calla, Drusilla) questioned the trustworthiness of PEAC tests because some students who teachers believed were gifted were not identified as such in the tests while some students that teachers thought were non gifted were picked up instead. Aldwyn and Drusilla also questioned the appropriateness, fairness and reliability of using PEAC tests formulated in the twentieth century per se for children in the twenty first century. To them, the PEAC tests seemed ancient (Calla), really old (Drusilla) and very out dated (Bryce) and generally flawed. There was a discrepancy in the perceived age of the PEAC testing provided by Aldwyn and Drusilla. As Drusilla stated about using PEAC test as one of the standardised test to identify gifted and talented students, “One of the tests is from 1958. I don’t know whether it is still as reliable as it used to be. Maybe it used to select well in the past but sometimes I do query it.”

Aldwyn said:

PEAC testing was formulated in 1934 in the twentieth century and the same tests are still used, unmodified for the students in the twenty first century. Are factors like suitability of tests for students in a different country, the advances in computer or information technology and fairness of test in contemporary times and context taken into account?

(Aldwyn: M, 55, 35)

Although Aldwyn seemed concerned that PEAC tests might be unsuitable for students from other countries, many students attending PEAC courses in his school (same school as Elma) and in other schools, migrated from different countries. This suggested that either the cultural factor did not seem to affect the test performance or that the cultural factor was perhaps already taken into consideration in the formulation of PEAC tests.
Calla expressed her opinion of the results of PEAC testing and was adamant that it was an IQ test. She said:

PEAC testing is quite ancient. It has not changed since the 1950s. It needs a revamp. Is it looking purely at IQ? That’s what it does. Is that a measure of giftedness? Do we allow the child who is struggling at school to go to PEAC sessions when they are not coping with the normal classroom? Are we doing them a disservice if we do not allow them to go? This is dilemma that we face as their teachers. According to the test, it is obvious that the intelligence is there but is not tapped. What is the test? It is an IQ test.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

Based on her own perception and observations of students, Calla claimed that the PEAC tests seemed to wrongly identify some unexpected students as gifted and talented and miss out some whom she expected to be gifted and talented. Calla described the unexpected ones as having a “huge wealth of knowledge” but “totally disorganised and difficult to put on tasks”. She seemed to make her stand that gifted and talented students were organised and easy to put on task. She continued with: “When teachers get the PEAC test results, they exclaim: Oh my God! I never would have picked him. Oh gosh, not him! If his head is not on his neck, he’ll lose it.”

By contrast, although Bryce noticed that the identification of a lot of students by PEAC tests contradicted his perception of them, he accepted the test results. He commented positively that teachers would assist those students from thence on in their achievements. His regarding the PEAC testing as a chance for the children to show their talents concurred with the link between chance and talent development in Gagne’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. As Bryce said:

Over the years, PEAC tests identified a lot of kids that we do not see as gifted and
talented. There are a couple of kids that I won’t identify as gifted and talented. Perhaps it is something in certain areas of giftedness in those students that we have not picked up. The identification includes a few kids with behavioural problems in the classroom who are probably bored with not receiving enough stimulation in class. We do not know what exactly causes the boredom. In a way the PEAC testing is good as it is one way to identify gifted and talented students that teachers are not aware of. It gives them a chance to show their talents. Teachers can then help these students to perform better in class.

(Bryce: M, 47, 27)

As much as teachers were surprised by the ‘reverse’ identification of unexpected gifted and talented students, Frida mentioned a similar surprise among two groups of students: those students who did not expect themselves to be identified as gifted and talented, and ‘good’ students who were good ‘do-ers’ that were not identified as gifted and talented. She commented:

Quite often students are surprised when they come high in the PEAC testing. They do not think that they are that clever. On the other hand, some good students are surprised when they do not qualify for PEAC. These students are good at doing what teachers want but are not good at thinking for themselves.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Elma, who was the Gifted and Talented Coordinator in one school, believed in the fairness of the PEAC tests to all children and the capacity of the tests to identify all the gifted and talented among them. Her thinking contradicted Aldwyn’s opinion about the possible unsuitability of PEAC tests for children from different cultural backgrounds. According to her, the PEAC test consists of two parts: the first part which is similar to an IQ test; and the second part, a test on nonverbal abstract reasoning ability. Children who score at the ninety seven and a half percentile or above in at least one of the two parts qualify as gifted and talented as well as attendees of PEAC programs.
Elma confidently said:

The PEAC test gives everyone a chance whether they speak English or not. The test picks up all gifted children, regardless of how strong their command of the English language is. One part is more like an IQ test. The second part of the PEAC test brings out children whom teachers don’t expect to be gifted and talented. They do not perform in class at all. The ones that do poorly academically can do very well in lateral thinking patterns in the second part of the PEAC test. ESL (English as Second Language) children have the ability but do not have the language to answer language/mathematically based testing. They do well in testing that follows frequency and patterns.

(Elma: F, 46, 26)

Quenby spoke favourably of PEAC tests which she found “really very helpful” to identify gifted and talented students who were underachieving and contented with their average performance. Having identified them as gifted and talented, she proceeded to challenge them to the extent of which they were capable. She was aware of another group of gifted and talented students who did not perform well in PEAC tests and she recommended them for PEAC programs. To Quenby said:

The testing is really very helpful in identifying underachievers. As I said before, they could be bright but not performing. They could be sitting in the middle, drifting alone, nice, happy and comfortable, never pushing themselves. All of a sudden, the testing comes along and you say: “Hang on. We are going to see how far we can actually get you.”

Sometimes children don’t perform well in a test. They just don’t. You know that they are bright. You know that they are not going to do well. So we can actually go round the other way. There is a teacher recommendation. Yes, if you know that they should be there. I love PEAC. I think that it is a good thing. I don’t see how you can do without testing. Sometimes you just can’t just rely on the teacher. You need something that is across the board. Different teachers have different perspectives and all sorts of things.

(Quenby: F, 60, 40)
There appeared to be different opinions about the consistency of PEAC programs in terms of its quality, appropriateness or desirability compared to the school programs in regular classrooms. First, school programs were as good as PEAC programs (Elma). Second, programs offered by regular classroom teachers at the school level were better than PEAC programs (Calla). Third, some PEAC programs were very good while others were not appropriate for certain gifted and talented students (Quenby). Fourth, PEAC programs were more valuable than the missed lessons in regular classrooms (Guda, Radbert).

First, school programs were as good as PEAC programs. Elma expressed her opinion of the value of PEAC programs and made her stand clear when she contended that her school offered equally challenging programs as the PEAC courses. She said: “The courses are no better than what students get out of school here. Our school has an academically challenging program which is as good as the PEAC program”. The teachers in Elma’s school followed a whole school approach which focussed on higher order thinking skills.

Second, programs offered by regular classroom teachers at the school level were better than PEAC programs. Calla believed that classroom teachers were more capable of catering for the gifted and talented than PEAC teachers. Upon closer examination, the teachers in Calla’s school followed a whole school approach which focussed on higher order thinking skills and Gardner’s (1983) Multiple Intelligences. She brought to my attention that students might be attending PEAC courses not of their choice because of convenience to their parents, students’ preference to be with their friends or unavailability of places in courses of their choice. Calla stated her opinion which coincided with the assumption that “the usual classroom setting and
the regular teacher” would provide the “most appropriate education for gifted children” (Braggett & Moltzen 2000, p.781).

Classroom teachers are able to cater for them better. PEAC programs don’t necessarily cater for their giftedness. Sometimes gifted children end up in programs that are not in their areas for various reasons like no choice, doing what their friends are doing and going to programs which fit their parents’ time.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

Third, some PEAC programs were very good while others were not appropriate for certain gifted and talented students. To Quenby, some PEAC programs were very good while others were too advanced and difficult because they mismatched the developmental levels of her gifted and talented students. Like Calla, she made an observation that certain PEAC courses might not suit certain gifted and talented students. She believed that PEAC teachers should take into consideration the developmental levels of the students and the gaps in knowledge to enable the children to follow the programs successfully. Quenby said:

It depends which one it is. Some of them are very good and some of them seem to pitch the subject way beyond where the kids are at and maybe it is too hard for them. They have gone linear instead of broad. Not all of them. Some of it is very good. I have kids who come back to me and say “What do I do with this? I don’t know what it is.” I look at it and it is Year Nine work. It is too many years advanced and the in between bit is not there. They have jumped that far that the kids can’t follow. It depends on which particular course they do at that time. It looks good on paper. They don’t realise that it is beyond what they would be able to cope with it. That is partly the PEAC teacher’s fault.

(Quenby: F, 60, 40)

Elma commented that students who found it hard to cope with catching up with school work decided to drop out of PEAC programs in Year Seven. The reason for
the dropping out of PEAC programs was associated with the inability to catch up with missed school work and not with the quality/appropriateness of the programs.

Sometimes the whole Year Seven group in this school drops out of the PEAC programs. Students leave school to go to PEAC programs. There is so much work to catch up. It is hard to keep up with both. So they choose to drop out of PEAC programs.

(Elma: F, 46, 25)

Like Elma, Calla attributed the high dropout rate among Year Seven PEAC attendees to an inability to cope with the pressure of catching up with missed lessons.

Gifted children leave the PEAC programs as they move up to the upper primary. They cannot cope and can’t keep up with both. Pressure builds up to a point that it is too much for some gifted children. The dropout rate is high for PEAC because of the pressure and the demand in the class. Lessons carry on as normal in the classroom while the gifted and talented children are away for the PEAC programs. When they return to school, they have to pick up and do the normal school home work as well as PEAC homework. They stop PEAC in Year Seven to reduce the pressure.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

Calla seemed to liken the classroom, whether the regular or PEAC classroom, to a prison for some students whose expectations of PEAC programs did not materialise. The metaphor of ‘prison’ seemed to portray an unpleasant place for those students who seemed to be punished for being gifted and talented with doing more work in school as well as in PEAC classrooms. Calla stated:

A lot of children become disillusioned when it turns out to be not what they expected. They realise that it is hard work and they need to put in effort to complete the tasks. They walk from one prison to another where another teacher tells them what to do. When they go home, they have to do this homework from school and that homework from PEAC. Normally they drop out after the first year because it is too hard for them. They voice out that it is too hard and not what they wanted to do.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)
This finding about the problem of having to catch up with lessons missed by gifted and talented students during withdrawal gifted programs resonated with Braggett’s opinion that “Writing up missed work is a real problem for gifted students who are penalised for attending the withdrawal program” (1994, p.52, original emphasis). According to Braggett, the assumption on the part of some teachers was that “the regular classroom work is more important while withdrawal group activities are of secondary use” (1994, p.52). Thus “the regular classroom teacher may insist that the work missed during the withdrawal lesson be written up and learnt at home” and the “weekly enrichment activities may come at a price” (Braggett, 1994, p.52). Consequently, gifted and talented students have to make a deliberate choice about what is more important to them: compulsory regular classroom work or PEAC courses.

Frida pointed out that some parents did not let their gifted and talented children attend PEAC programs so that they did not miss school. She asserted that a lot of students attending PEAC programs did not catch up and stated the difficulty for a teacher to reteach them. Frida took the stand that:

The idea of PEAC is that the students go out of school for the special programs and catch up with the lessons they miss. From my experience, a lot of them don’t. They do PEAC well but are not advanced enough to get the links. It is up to students to decide: Shall I go back to school and get the notes and sheets from the teacher? Unfortunately when they go out for PEAC, they may miss Mathematics, English or Science lesson and certain principles of knowledge which they need. It is quite difficult for the teacher to reteach while the teacher takes the next group down a little bit. It is a challenge for students to keep up with the missed lessons.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Frida’s opinion about the idea of PEAC programs: “that students go out of school … and catch with the lessons they miss” seemed to emphasise the ability of the students
to catch up with missed lessons rather than the intended purpose of gifted programs. The original intention of gifted programs is to offer appropriate supplementary challenging learning opportunities for gifted and talented alongside their like-minded peers to develop their giftedness.

Fourth, PEAC programs were more valuable than the lessons missed in regular classrooms. Guda and Radbert who believed that PEAC programs were more valuable than the missed lessons in their classrooms supported their gifted and talented students’ attending PEAC programs. Surprisingly, Guda and Radbert had no exposure to professional development in gifted and talented education unlike Calla and Elma, but the former nurtured the gifted and talented in their respective classrooms. They took the time to explain to the latter when they returned to the classrooms to help them catch up every week so that their students did not miss out anything. These teachers even purposely adjusted their teaching so that no new concept was taught in their absence to encourage them to go for PEAC programs. They honoured the rights of their gifted and talented children to other appropriate educational experiences. Radbert shared:

None of my kids has a problem of catching up. You let those PEAC children know that this is what we are doing today and they have to do page 5 for homework. No problem at all. Nine times out of ten, they finish before the rest. If it is a new concept, I will skip it while they are away. If you give them an outline or a page of what you are doing, they thank you and that is done. They do it at home. They are brilliant. They could do everything.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)

Guda stated her view:

It depends what the activity is. If it is something they need to do, I have them do that particular activity while the other students are doing silent reading. I would rather
they go to PEAC. I think that is more valuable to them. Kids generally catch up.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

**Teachers’ concern about the ‘correctness’ of their perceptions**

Four teachers (Calla, Leona, Quenby, Radbert) were concerned whether the definitions and information they provided were right or wrong from the researcher’s (my) perspective. Calla concluded her sharing with: “That’s all my opinion: could be right, could be wrong” and then seemed to wait for confirmation from me. At the end of the interview, Radbert who talked confidently about his students, surprisingly said: “I hope I do okay” and like Calla, waited for an assessment from me. Guda concluded her definition of giftedness with a note of uncertainty: “Something like that. Probably it is wrong.” By contrast, Quenby asked for my perspective of the definition of the term ‘gifted’ right at the beginning instead of at the end of the interview. I did not give her my perspective. I had not made known to any participant my conceptualisation of giftedness because I did not want the participants to provide what they thought would be possible ‘right’ answers based my conceptualisation. Quenby seemed to assume that I possessed the same traditional view of ‘schoolhouse giftedness’ (Renzulli & Reis, 2000, 2003) as hers but she was mistaken. The position I take is actually based on the emerging paradigm of giftedness as a dynamic and multidimensional construct, ‘creative-productive giftedness’ (Renzulli & Reis, 2000, 2003) and the incremental theory of intelligence (Dweck 1999). I did not tell her that she was mistaken in her assumption. Instead, I asked her for her definition of giftedness. Quenby stated: “It depends what you mean by gifted and talented. Gifted depends on where you draw the line with the IQs. I am not sure where you want to draw the line.” When I asked her where she would draw
the line, she confidently quoted the number 136. Such an IQ score would be considered to fall in the ‘moderately gifted’ range according to Gross’ (2004) levels of intellectual giftedness. Quenby acknowledged the fact that not all children had information about their respective IQs, and thus she had “just to feel” it.

Another participant, Leona, asked me for my criteria of identifying the gifted and talented, which again I did not reveal. As Leona was sharing her experiences with several children, she expressed her uncertainty about their giftedness. She said: “I don’t know whether they are gifted or not. I don’t know whether you could say that they are gifted. How would you consider students as gifted?”

I reassured the teachers that there was no absolute correct nor incorrect definition for giftedness and that I was interested in what they thought giftedness meant from their perspectives as well as their criteria for identifying children as gifted and talented. Teachers’ concern about the correctness of answers to questions was a concern which Kincheloe (1993) attributed to their learning in ‘educational sciences’ of arriving at the one ‘correct’ answer by following a certain linear procedure.

My reflections of teachers’ perceptions of giftedness

Definitions of giftedness and talent underpinning gifted policy

The Department of Education in Western Australia emphasises Gagné’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent and his definitions of giftedness and talent in the gifted policy and resource packages like the Primary Teaching TAGS [Talented and Gifted Students] file and a booklet entitled Exceptionally Able Children: Guidelines for the Early Childhood Years to identify and provide for gifted and talented children (Department of Education, Gifted and
Talented Education Review, February 2007). The Department of Education uses Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) which differentiates ‘gifted’ and ‘talent’ in terms of aptitude/competency, domain/field of activity and natural/developed. In Gifted and Talented Guidelines (Department of Education, June 2009; 1 March 2011), the term ‘gifted’ refers to having and/or using aptitudes which are outstanding natural abilities in one or more ability domains, whether intellectual, creative, socio-affective and sensorimotor. ‘Talented’ refers to competencies due to outstanding mastery of knowledge and skills and systematic development of abilities in one or more fields of activity, whether academic, administration/sales, arts, business operations, games, sports and athletics, science and technology, social service or technical.

GIFTED
The possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain.

TALENTED
Outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, called competencies (knowledge and skills), in at least one field of human activity. Talent emerges from ability as a consequence of the student’s learning experience.

(References Committee: Education of Gifted Children, October 2001 cited in Department of Education, 27 July 2010, p.5)

In this study, no participant mentioned the definition of giftedness and talent emphasised in the Policy and Guidelines for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students 1996, 2004; Gifted and Talented Guidelines June 2009, 1 March 2011; and Gifted and Talented 27 July 2010 for the identification and education of the gifted and talented issued by the Department of Education, Western Australia. My results suggested that eighteen teachers in this study were either not aware of or not
influenced by the definitions for the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ in the Western Australian Education Department’s gifted and talented policies which had the potential to clarify their uncertainty and dissonance about the nature of giftedness. Being gifted is natural while becoming talented may require coaching and training to develop the ability. This implies that a gift has to be developed to become a talent. This further suggests that a person can be gifted but not talented if the gift (ability) is not provided with the training/learning opportunities to emerge and grow into a talent (competency). Two teachers (Elma, Radbert) recognised the developmental process of the talent development in a child. Another implication is that the term ‘talented’ indicates a step or more steps higher than ‘gifted’. This confirms my perspective of three categories of gifted and talented students: first, the gifted whose gifts have not yet been developed into talents; second, the talented whose gifts have all been developed into talents; and third, the gifted and talented who possess competencies in certain fields of activity as well as undeveloped aptitudes in certain ability domains. Teachers who used the terms interchangeably seemed unaware of the distinction between the two because of other definitions of giftedness influencing their conceptualisations and their identification of gifted and talented students. The conceptualisation of a talent emerging from a natural ability (giftedness) would bridge the gap in knowledge of some teachers who questioned whether students who were coached to be gifted and talented were naturally/actually gifted or not prior to coaching. Though the Western Australian Education Department’s gifted and talented policy is mandatory, practice seemed to lag behind the theory. Further research is needed to explore whether the mandatory nature of the policy makes any difference in the ways teachers think about the education of gifted and talented students and the situation of gifted and talented students in regular classroom or not.
Teachers’ exposure to Gifted and Talented Education

Thirteen out of twenty teachers had been exposed to gifted and talented education either during their teacher education (Jolie, Myra, Neysa, Ozora) or in-service professional development (Alwyn, Bryce, Drusila, Elma, Frida, Haidee, Quenby) or both (Calla, Thirza). Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences underpinned the stand on giftedness taken by the first six teachers from the same school, even though they had attended professional development in gifted and talented education conducted by the Department of Education at their school level. One of them, Calla, had a copy of the Department’s resource package, namely the Primary Teaching TAGS (Talented and Gifted Students) file in her office in school. Calla commented that gifted and talented education was not something new as it was called the reverse in the past. It was a matter of changing TAGS [Talented and Gifted Students] to GATS [Gifted and Talented Students]. Calla’s stand was that “All children are gifted”. Thirza attended a professional development about TAGS (Talented and Gifted Students) at the school level and a public lecture on Levels of Giftedness by Deborah Ruf in 2010. Ruf’s ideas appeared to have influenced Thirza’s way of thinking about giftedness. This contributed to my impression that many teachers seemed to be either unfamiliar with the definition used by their employing body, the Department of Education or they preferred their own perceptions of giftedness and talent. This suggested that a person might attend any professional development or undertake a unit in gifted and talented education in university but his/her personal thinking and conviction of what giftedness meant to him/her, whether similar or different to the outsider’s viewpoint, seemed to remain unchanged.
There seemed to be certain perceptions and expectations of gifted and talented students as organised (Calla), well behaved (Bryce, Idelia), good at doing things (Frida, Idelia) and teacher pleasers (Idelia). Teachers having such perceptions and expectations did not expect students who mismatched their expectations to be gifted and talented. Those students themselves probably did not realise that they might be gifted and talented until Year Four when they were identified by PEAC testing. As Bryce realised, certain gifted and talented students might not have been stimulated to learn, thus becoming bored and misbehaving in the lower primary classes. Undoubtedly, a diversity of gifted and talented students existed in regular classrooms. The dispute about who were gifted and talented seemed to arise when certain teachers did not accept the evidence provided by standardised tests, questioned the trustworthiness of such tests and preferred to stand by their own expectations and beliefs.

What I found alarming was that many students, especially those in the lower primary classes were not regarded as gifted and talented based on some teachers’ standpoint. Thus the development of their potential giftedness and talent was not catered for by teachers until the giftedness of these students was identified in the PEAC testing conducted at the Year Four level. On the other hand, some students who matched their teachers’ perceptions of the gifted and talented were not picked up as such in the PEAC testing. Frida commented that those students were good ‘do-ers’ but not good at thinking for themselves, implying that giftedness involves an ability to think for oneself and that those students who might not be the ‘thinking about thinking’ type were perhaps ‘not gifted or talented’.
Teachers’ confusion about PEAC testing and programs

Teachers’ misconceptions and confusion concerning PEAC testing appeared to impact their attitudes toward the testing and PEAC programs as well as the ways they worked with the children who attended the programs. I found several discrepancies among the perceptions of teachers concerning PEAC testing. For example: Was the PEAC test formulated in the 1930s or 1950s? Had the PEAC test ever been revised? Is the PEAC test just an IQ test or more than an IQ test? Which percentile is the cut off point in identifying students as the gifted and talented for PEAC programs? To answer those questions, I searched for information, materials and references about the history/origins and aims of PEAC programs and PEAC tests.

From my personal communication with Geoff Kinkade, the Principal Consultant of the Gifted and Talented Unit, Department of Education and Training and an analysis of an extract on The History of Gifted and Talented Education in Public Schools in Western Australia from the Department’s unpublished Gifted and Talented Education Review dated February 2007, I became aware of the misconceptions of teachers underlying the discrepancies concerning PEAC tests and programs. First, the PEAC test is a combination of two tests: a verbal test which is the Tests of Learning Ability 4 (TOLA 4) and a non-verbal test which is Raven’s Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM). Kinkade noted that TOLA 4 was first published in 1971 while the SPM was first developed and published in 1936 and 1938 respectively. The SPM was revised twice: in 1948 and 1956. The dates used by Aldwyn (1934) and Drusilla (1958) seemed to coincide with the origin and revision of the SPM. According to the Gifted and Talented Education Review (February 2007), PEAC programs were first introduced in 1983. Kinkade further explained that
current PEAC tests followed the SPM edition that was published in 1989 and SPM norming tables which were renewed in 2006. Second, PEAC tests were not IQ tests as believed by Calla. Kinkade said:

> These tests are specific in their purpose. TOLA 4 measures acquired learning in language and mathematics as well as reasoning by analogy. The SPM identifies students who can work quickly and accurately in pattern identification, prediction, reasoning and non-verbal problem solving.

> We do not measure IQ. Instead we are seeking the students in the top 2.5% of the Year 4 public school student population. We use the tests to identify a ‘pool of talent’ who are students who will benefit from participation in PEAC courses with other high ability students with similar interests and similar abilities.

(Kinkade, Personal communication, 29 September 2011)

Third, apparently teachers were unaware of the Revolving Door Model/Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1984) based on Renzulli’s Three Ring Model of Giftedness (1978) underpinning PEAC programs. Renzulli’s Three Ring Model of Giftedness posits that giftedness is the interaction of three essential human traits: above average ability, task commitment and creativity. In PEAC courses, gifted and talented students revolve in and out of different types and levels of development of enrichment activities in PEAC courses, depending on their learning styles, responses, performance and interests in particular fields/topics. Although Gagné’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) definition of giftedness underpinned the gifted and talented policy and guidelines for the identification of gifted and talented students, Renzulli’s Revolving Door Model (1984) and Renzulli’s (1978, 2003) definition of giftedness underpinned gifted programs like PEAC. It appeared to me that Gagné’s definition was compatible with Renzulli’s Revolving Door Model because of a common ground: the flexibility to include a higher percentage (10% for Gagné’s Model; 15-20% for Renzulli’s Model) of above average students who could potentially show
their creative-productive giftedness (Renzulli, 1984) and develop/revolve their gifts into talents.

PEAC programs which were initially intended to provide the supplementary challenging and stimulating activities for the gifted and talented appeared to impinge on children’s schooling time and challenge their abilities to catch up with missed lessons. Three teachers (Calla, Elma, Frida) mentioned that any student who could not cope with the pressure of catching up with missed lessons usually dropped out of the gifted programs. My data analysis indicated that gifted and talented students whose teachers (Guda, Radbert) assisted them to catch up with missed work continued with PEAC courses. The analysis of my data also suggested that gifted and talented students whose teachers did not support their attending PEAC courses and/or did not offer any assistance to their students to catch up with missed lessons could not cope with the pressure and consequently, dropped out of PEAC courses.

If there exists an awareness of dropouts in PEAC programs due to the unsuitability of the timing of PEAC programs leading to the inability to catch up with missed lessons, the question is: What are teachers and the Department of Education going to do about it? This seems to echo the question raised by Gallagher (2000) about gifted education. He asked whether gifted education has been carried out for the sake of repeating traditional practices and the status quo or for achieving its original intended purpose to benefit gifted children. This is an area that needs further research.
Teachers' uncertainty about what giftedness means

The analysis of data in this study revealed dissonance and an uncertainty about what giftedness meant amongst the participants which seemed to affect the ways they worked with gifted and talented students. What made it hard to reach a consensus seemed to be the individual teachers’ personal conviction, stand and thinking of what giftedness meant and who gifted and talented students were. The lack of a universally accepted definition of giftedness was not surprising, given the diversity of the gifted population and the multiplicity of definitions of giftedness. Giftedness is the essence of a gifted and/or talented child, the uncertainty of what it is affects the identification of its presence in a child and subsequently the type of education a child receives.

Having outlined the different perceptions of teachers about giftedness and gifted and talented students, I continue in the next chapter to explore the complexity of teachers’ work. What is it about a teacher’s work from a teacher’s perspective that makes it seem hard to cater for the diversity of abilities of all students in the complex regular classroom and to do justice to the education of every child?
Chapter 7

Examining the complexity of teachers’ work

Introduction

Having given an overview of teachers’ thinking about what giftedness means, I continue in this chapter to probe further into their thinking about their work as educators of students in general and gifted and talented students in particular. In the process, I outlined the complexity of teachers’ work in regular classrooms in schools and examined school based provisions for educating gifted and talented students. All teachers (except Aldwyn) used the terms ‘hard’ or ‘difficult’ in varying number of times when they talked about their work and students. As these two terms resonated in my ears during the transcribing of nineteen interviews, I could not help counting their frequency of occurrences and ended up with a total count of 104: seventy three times for the term ‘hard’ (inclusive of the term ‘harder’) and thirty one times for the term ‘difficult’ (inclusive of the term ‘difficulty’). What also caught my attention was the high frequency of the usage of the two terms by ten teachers: six times by three teachers (Guda, Ozora, Petrina), seven times by Quenby, eight times by Idelia, nine times by Leona, ten times by Radbert, eleven times by Jolie and sixteen times by Sorcha.

What did teachers mean by the two terms ‘hard’ and ‘difficult’? In most cases, the two terms were used interchangeably to mean the same thing: hard/difficult or in other words, not easy. When seven teachers (Calla, Idelia, Jolie, Ozora, Petrina, Radbert, Sorcha) used the term ‘hard work’, they implied that the work was not easy. Three teachers used the terms ‘hard time’ to mean difficult/not easy as well. In other
instances, teachers used the word ‘hard’ in terms of ‘work hard’ (Guda, Idelia, Quenby, Radbert, Sorcha), ‘work harder’ (Drusilla), ‘more work’ (Guda, Haidee, Idelia, Jolie, Kara, Quenby, Radbert, Sorcha, Thirza), ‘try hard’ (Frida, Guda, Idelia, Sorcha) or ‘make harder work’ (Elma, Kara, Sorcha) to indicate that a lot of mental and/or physical strength, effort and time was required to carry out their work. Drusilla used the term ‘hard’ in the form of ‘hard workers’ as students who worked hard and harder in certain domains. Why was it hard/difficult to be a teacher? How hard/difficult was it to teach in a regular classroom in contemporary times? Who/what contributed to the hardship/difficulty for teachers? Where did teachers encounter hardness/hardship/difficulty? What constituted the overwhelming issues? As I used my proposed model to view the situations that teachers faced in school, I could visualise the teachers positioned along a continuum of teachers’ faces changing from a square on the left end to a circle on the right end, depending on their thinking, responses and the types of students, schools, parents and environments that they encountered.

**Clues to the complexity of teachers’ work**

As I probed deeper into my data for answers to those questions, I encountered many clues that provided me with insights into the ways teachers dealt with the complexity of teaching. First, teachers’ work was not that straightforward: being not limited to classroom teaching but to managing children’s behaviours, marking, paper work, nonteaching duties, conferences and meetings with parents as well. Indeed, Kincheloe (2004) acknowledged the fact that the job of a teacher is hard.
Teachers need to be hardy in nature

Teachers who coped well with the demands of their work seemed to be hardy in nature. Fourteen teachers (Bryce, Calla, Guda, Haidee, Jolie, Leona, Myra, Neysa, Ozora, Petrina, Quenby, Radbert, Sorcha, Thirza) indicated that it was hard to meet the tough demands of their work. Thirteen teachers (Bryce, Calla, Drusilla, Elma, Frida, Guda, Haidee, Idelia, Jolie, Leona, Neysa, Ozora and Radbert) stressed that time in school was insufficient for the work that they had to do. Bryce, Calla, Idelia, Leona, Neysa and Radbert shared the same opinion that many things were happening in school and time was not on their side. Calla explained:

A lot is going on in the school. Everything needs to be documented including how I help a child and get parents to come in. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) work for struggling and gifted and talented students. Teaching time is limited. With all other things to do, it is difficult to challenge students and be innovative. Quite difficult.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

Neysa indicated:

Teachers are given time to plan but I don’t think they are given enough to sit down and plan for extra activities. I don’t think that the Education Department really understands the importance of time that is needed to do this. Teachers do it out of their own time. On top of that, they have the marking, recording, meeting parents and so many other issues.

(Neysa: F, 21, 0)

Leona strongly felt that teachers lacked the time to provide guidance for the gifted and talented because of the demands of work. She had the same thinking as Calla that the primary concern of a teacher was to teach the students, but she added the fun part to teaching. She found the other tasks cumbersome. She stated:

I feel that we do not give them enough guidance because teachers are so strapped for
time, strapped with administrative work and just having to do everything. All you want to do is teach and make it fun and not be bothered with all this reporting stuff.

(Leona: F, 33, 4)

Three teachers (Bryce, Frida, Myra) mentioned that they coped with the demands by prioritising what needed to be done first and who/what needed their attention the most in school, and managing their time to complete their work. In the classroom, Bryce and Frida would prioritise the children. Frida had teaching tasks besides other duties as a deputy principal. She stated:

When I am in the classroom at a particular time, I give my full attention to the kids and concentrate on them. When I am in the office, I do the same thing and concentrate on matters related to my office work. I try not to be drawn back to the classroom. While in here, I do this. While in there, I do that. It is a time management thing.

(Frida: F, 57, 36)

Bryce said: “At times, it is tough. At the moment, there is a lot going on.” Apart from teaching, Bryce was in charge of the school magazine and website. He finished the rest of his school work outside school hours: early in the morning before school started and at home. He reckoned:

Basically the kids come first. The class is the most important part and every other bit is second. During the day the kids come first. At home, I have to do the school work. I get everything done eventually. I get quite a bit of time to do my planning, marking, programming and the school bit but there is never enough time. I come early to school at 7:30a.m. to do a lot of my work before the school starts. It all gets done in the end.

(Bryce: M, 47, 27)

Jolie pointed out the differences between being a trainee teacher assisted by cooperating teachers and a beginner/early career teacher on her own in real life.
classrooms, responsible for her own planning and decisions about what was best for the students. She stated:

There is a lot of planning. It is your responsibility. You don’t have a cooperating teacher to help you. During your practicum, you can ask your cooperating teachers. They have a wealth of experience. When you graduate, you are on your own unless you have a friendly teacher next door who helps you to think what is best. You pick what is best for you and the class. You have to make a lot of decisions. At times it can be hard because as a new graduate, you are learning so much.

(Jolie: F, 22, 0)

Myra prioritised the ‘correctness’ of doing school work instead of the needs of students. She stated that she tried to “survive the first term” as a beginner/early career teacher. She said:

At the moment, I concentrate more on doing the general than the specific in the classroom because I am getting used to the school and the procedures. I find it difficult settling in at first. I actually try to survive the first term. Next term it will be the reports. I will focus on how to make sure I get it right rather than catering for the students’ needs.

(Myra: F, 22, 0)

The term ‘survive’ seemed to convey the meaning of continuing to exist/stay on as a teacher despite encountering certain difficulties/hard times. The implication is that some teachers might not be the hardy type. Some might not survive the school term and consequently drop out of the teaching profession. Thirza related to me an incident in which she had to assist an early career teacher back to the classroom after her stress leave. To Thirza, it was tragic that the young teacher who had the potential to be an ideal teacher should have her confidence destroyed by reactive parents, due to some misunderstanding over her behavioural management of their children in Year One.
Thirza recalled:

I did have an incident of going to a school to help a young teacher come back into the classroom. I was employed to ease her back in because she has some difficulty. It was quite sad to see a young person who was really being destroyed by parents not trusting her. To me, she has all the ideal qualities of a junior primary teacher but her confidence has been destroyed simply because of a lot of gossiping stuff that went on about what she was doing in the class. The parents were very reactive. When their child said something, the parents would rush back to the class and sort of threw it in her face. So she went on stress leave and they employed me when they were easing her back into the classroom. She would come for a day or she would not. I thought it was a very sad situation. She would come to the classroom in the morning and burst into tears and could not go on. That is very sad. Because if you look around and look at her efforts in planning stuff, there was everything there that she needed to have to engage those children. It is all there but it is this aspect of her confidence being destroyed.

(Thirza: F, 65, 45)

Another demand of a teacher’s work involved meetings and possible confrontations with parents in cases when matters appeared to be not resolved in a fair or satisfactory way according to the parents’ viewpoints. How well a teacher handles the meetings/confrontations seems to affect his/her confidence in the work as a teacher and the respect due to him/her as a teacher and either makes him/her hardy in the process or hardly makes it through the process. Thus a teacher’s work is not that straightforward nor easy.

**Teachers’ work seems never ending**

While Bryce felt that he finished all his work, Radbert was quite adamant that the work as a teacher never seemed to end. Radbert used the phrases “Time is not enough” and ‘never finish’ to emphasise the insufficiency of time to do the tremendous work as a teacher. Like Bryce, he had to do school work at home.
Apparently, it was not only students who had to do homework but some teachers had to complete unfinished school work as homework as well. He reflected on his teaching and evaluated students’ understanding and areas of weaknesses. In his dilemma of thinking of ways to help all children to learn, the tricky part which he found hard was how to strike a balance. He seemed to imply that the school work might impinge on his time at home to the extent of affecting his time to rest and thus his health. Radbert stated:

Time is not enough. Teachers never finish, never finish. We are only seeing these people a little segment in their lives. It is that process of thinking of all those kids. Sometimes it is just impossible and sometimes it is not impossible day in day out to produce the teaching strategies, approaches, learning factors, and higher thinking. It is really hard but challenging and worth thinking about. Very challenging. In the current environment, almost impossible. If we do our job properly, they continue to learn and grow. Our job is never done, never finished. Time is never enough. So make sure you use your time wisely to get that balance.

You couldn’t teach without working from home. It could be impossible. So you have to work from home as well. You also have to take some time off. If you don’t, you won’t have energy. A teacher needs energy to teach kids who are full of energy. They reflect who you are. If you are up, they are up. In my experience, if I am tired or sick, the room reflects me.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)

Teachers’ work seemed tremendous to Radbert and Idelia. Idelia described how teachers had to work hard in terms of putting in a lot of extra time and effort voluntarily outside school hours, going home late, and bringing home tremendous amounts of work to do at night and during the weekends. She made a relevant point that the tremendous work might put some people off, especially those who do not want to become teachers or those who teach for the money rather than the children.
Idelia said:

The amount of work you do for your classes at home is enormous. You might work, stay in school till 4:30p.m., come home, do an hour or two at home and spend a couple of hours during the weekends marking and doing things. There is not enough time to do them at school. It is one of those jobs that you have got to be wanting to do.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

In addition, Frida commented that the teacher’s work seemed to be an on-going process which did not stop at the end of the school day but seemed to continue at home. She used a metaphor of building a wall whereby the bricks can be left overnight on site to be laid the following day during working hours. However, a teacher’s work was not like building a wall which could be left unfinished after working hours and continued the following day during working hours. This is consistent with Idelia’s and Radbert’s perspectives of the nature of a teacher’s work as never ending. These teachers reflected on what they did in school and continued the rest at home to finish the work. Frida said:

Teachers never have enough time. They always go home thinking: “I wish I have another ten minutes. There are always ten other kids that I can help.” That’s part of the job. It is not like building a wall. At the end of the day, you can stop at what you are doing with the wall and carry on another time.

(Frida: F, 57, 36)

Kara made a similar point about the on-going process of thinking of ways to help her students which continued to grab hold of her mind after school hours every night. It showed the extent to which commitment to a teacher’s work and reflexivity could impinge on her private life. Kara reminisced:

Every night I think of this child working at pre-primary level in my class. I think
about how I can move him to the next level. It is like that. Teaching is in your blood. When I am off at the beach on the weekend with my family, I am still thinking of this child and what is happening to him. I want to move the child by the next one to two levels by the end of the year. Then at the end of the year, I look into that. If I have not done that, I think: What have I done wrong? It is feedback for yourself, constantly analysing your own teaching. You move every child up: the lower group, the middle group and the high group all moving up.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

**Teachers need to be tough in tough schools**

Three teachers (Guda, Haidee, Radbert) had overwhelmingly hard times in tough schools, assuming tough roles in the classrooms managing the behavioural problems, protecting children from harm and maintaining peace in the classrooms. By the time that they were ready to teach, they felt that there was insufficient time to teach, let alone to cater for the needs of the gifted and talented. In such an environment, it seemed difficult to identify the gifted and talented or perhaps difficult for the latter to show themselves because the behavioural problems were more prominent. In such situations, behavioural problems were caused by other types of “smart” students, and not the gifted and talented whose needs were not catered for in the classrooms.

Haidee indicated that in one tough country school with street smart children, she had no time to teach because most, if not all, of the time was spent on behavioural management of street smart children who could potentially hurt both teachers and students. She felt that gifted and talented students were not provided with the appropriate learning opportunities in that school. She used the metaphor “keep the lid on so that it does not explode too much”, dramatising the difficult, precarious and stressful position that she was in to reduce the catastrophe of the explosion and to survive the unsafe and unconducive environment. From her facial expressions during
that particular portion of the interview, those experiences were unpleasant. Haidee revealed that:

There are street smart children in all the grades. You know street smart children: meaning that they have to fight their way through — use language less than desirable and are physically violent. Street smart children are quick to retaliate using inappropriate language and physical. They hurt you. What they don’t like, they hurt. They hurt children and teachers. In that situation, I spend all the time trying to keep the lid on the situation so that it does not explode too much. Sometimes I don’t have the time to teach what I plan to teach. I find that I cannot get through the amount of work which I get through here in this school.

I had Grade Five children who are already doing things with knives. In that atmosphere in the classroom, there is little opportunity of seeing which children are gifted and talented. They all react to this sort of atmosphere. Unfortunately it is not the best scenario in regard to education for the gifted and talented because they have limited opportunities. We spend a lot of time to keep things in a peaceful manner.

(Haidee: F, 48, 27)

Radbert had a similar experience in a country school which in his opinion consisted of students who lacked respect for one another and for the school. Like Haidee, he had to protect the students from the violent ones in class. Time for managing behavioural problems impinged on teaching time, thus making it hard to get into the position to teach. Even when he could teach, time was insufficient to provide a complete lesson/education, resulting in gaps in their learning and implying that all students including any gifted and talented students in the class were at educational risk. With a tinge of sadness in his facial expression, Radbert reminisced:

It was a very tough area to teach — culturally. The kids do not appreciate school. They did not have respect for themselves. They did not have respect for the school. The environment is very difficult. They fight in class and try to punch each other. Teachers have to protect kids from kids. It is quite difficult to get to the position to
teach. The moment you could teach, you find that they do not have enough building blocks.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)

Guda made a similar point that in all her previous tough country schools, she had no time to teach because the day was eaten away by behavioural management issues. I felt a lump in my throat when she stated that it was the first time in her life that she “can teach” and “can do teaching the way I like” in the current school with well behaved students. She revealed how stressful it was to do other demands of a teacher’s work like managing children’s behavioural issues throughout the day and not being able to teach or teaching the way she did not like for a considerable period of time. Teachers like Guda, Haidee and Radbert had to be hardy and tough to survive the deskilling and hard times in different tough schools, and continue in the teaching profession. The essence of a teaching profession is teaching: meaningful and effective teaching without which the person would be deskilled to a child minder, children worker, helper, peace maker or disciplinary officer. As Idelia said: “You have got to like it or there is no point being here”.

While some teachers found it difficult to teach in country schools, Thirza found teaching in a very difficult city school in the low socioeconomic area “fantastic”. Although she found teaching in the city school very difficult, surprisingly she viewed it as “lots of fun and always interesting”, implying that she enjoyed teaching there despite the difficulties. Thirza said:

One was a very difficult city school with lots of immigrants, lots of Italian children who did not speak English and lots of poor ordinary Australian children. It was in a slum area but it was a fantastic school to teach.

(Thirza: F, 65, 45)
Thirza gave me the impression of a hardy and tough teacher who enjoyed teaching children regardless of their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and the type of school environment. She revealed a hard time that her principal had in resolving a crisis in her school by chasing after a child who tried to escape from school. She entertained thoughts of how nice it would be to teach in a school with “prim and proper” children, sharing Guda’s similar sentiment about her current school with well behaved children.

Yet Kara seemed certain that most students possessed a positive outlook towards education. The few that did not possess a positive outlook seemed to change for the better after she reasoned with them and spent a lot of time to help them in their learning. She raised a point about certain students’ thinking that the school provided babysitting services to them which was consistent with the opinion of Phil, a friend of McLaren, who wondered whether “schools aren’t just glorified baby-sitting institutions” (McLaren, 2007a, p.152). Kara said:

The majority has a positive attitude towards education. A couple of students think that school is a babysitting service. I tell them that they are here to learn and my job is to teach them. Once they see that you are there to teach and help them when they are not totally on track, they lean towards that. It is not so much to deal with behavioural problems anymore but starting to work and move on to the next group. Those children are always in the low group. I spend a lot of time with them.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Teachers’ responses to the challenges of student diversity

My second clue to the complexity of teachers’ work was that the biggest challenge teachers faced was to cater for the needs of every child in a class with student diversity in terms of culture and academic ability. Teachers used their discernment to
do what seemed best to the teacher as well as the students. Thus different teachers responded in different ways to the challenge of student diversity. However, a common way used by eleven teachers (Aldwyn, Calla, Drusilla, Elma, Frida, Guda, Haidee, Neysa, Petrina, Radbert, Sorcha) to cater for the student diversity was providing open ended tasks for all students to encourage them to participate and complete the work up to their respective levels to which they were capable. Frida named it “the drop off system” because “kids fall off at the level that they can’t succeed”. Calla worded it more positively and linked open ended tasks to the child’s potential and thinking for oneself when she said: “Open ended tasks are set to allow each child to participate and to achieve to the child’s potential. Closed tasks with one answer do not develop students to think for themselves.”

A common practice to cater for the needs of the gifted and talented students was providing them with more breadth (Aldwyn, Bryce, Calla, Frida, Guda, Haidee, Idelia, Leona, Myra, Radbert) and depth (Drusilla) through extension activities, like extra sheets, games, computer programs and puzzles. These extension activities were also made available to other students who were interested. To cater for the diversity of gifted and talented students, Radbert commented on the importance of extension.

Those gifted and talented kids come in lots of different forms. You can get the gifted and talented kid who is an introvert, who won’t communicate. You can sometimes come across some who are autistic in some way, is not able to interact in a mainstream line with the other kids. Then you have some kids who are very verbal, with lots of history and have no fear of who they are. It is very difficult to pinpoint that. It is the challenge to make sure that they have something. Making sure that they have stages of extension is really important.

(Rabert: M, 39, 15)
Four teachers (Bryce, Calla, Haidee, Radbert) put the gifted and talented on Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) to extend them. Haidee said:

I had to provide him different reading materials and I had to give him individual planning like asking him to elaborate on topics so that he would elicit the information. He liked puzzles and he would buy books with puzzles and numbers in it. He could do all of these things. He was able to do some of these things in school. I extended him in Mathematics and Science. He was able to express his ideas because he had the freedom to do this in school. The other children also did the same or similar tasks but up to the level that they were capable of. His level was higher. It was difficult to plan to start with.

(Haidee: F, 48, 27)

A common focus among ten teachers (Aldwyn, Bryce, Calla, Elma, Frida, Haidee, Jolie, Kara, Leona, Myra) was to develop the higher order thinking skills of students, particularly the gifted and talented, and thinking outside the box (Haidee, Leona). Teachers (Aldwyn, Bryce, Calla, Elma, Frida, Haidee) in the first school to which I had access followed a whole school approach that focussed on developing critical and higher order thinking skills and Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences.

**Differentiating to cater for a higher level of ability**

Six teachers (Guda, Haidee, Kara, Radbert, Sorcha, Thirza) believed that something should be done for their gifted and talented students to cater for their levels and needs. Their provisions of appropriate learning opportunities for gifted and talented students reflected their recognition of the different academic needs of those students and their perceptions of equity as a needs-based concept. Two teachers (Guda, Haidee) developed different programs not to provide special treatment for just one gifted child but rather to benefit everyone. Guda prepared a separate program to meet the needs and advanced level of development of one very gifted and talented boy
who was “so far ahead” in her class in one of her previous schools. I noted that she used the phrases “way, way above”, “years above” and “so far ahead” to emphasise his degree of giftedness and talent. Guda revealed that although initially she did not know what to do for that boy, she consulted other more experienced teachers in the school, “did some research and spoke to the administrators.” It seemed that the gifted and talented boy inspired her to put in the time and energy to differentiate the lessons which she found worthwhile. She mentioned that she could use the lessons not only for that boy but for the rest of the class as well to challenge individuals to try to the level of which each was capable. Guda stated:

I had a very gifted child in Year Four. He had IQ tests and was bordering on the genius level. He is way, way above the rest of the class. He is years above the class, particularly in Mathematics. He did the same kind of Mathematics as the rest were doing but he would fly through so quickly. I always had something prepared for him. So it was a lot of extra work but it was worth it. Definitely for him, I had to run a separate program for him. I just had to because he was so far ahead, so far ahead. It was not that I was just making a program for him. He was the driving force so that other kids could go to do the work that he was doing after they finished. There was a definite need to cater for this kid because he was so far ahead.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

Haidee, who was aware that gifted children think differently from the rest of their chronological peers, emphasised that she utilised different strategies in her teaching program to meet the diverse needs of her students in the classroom. She explained:

The teaching program, I guess you might say, is not just to cater for the average child’s learning. It helps the class generally because the gifted child’s thinking strategies are quite different from the others. I teach different strategies to them.

(Haidee: F, 48, 27)
Kara planned and prepared extra worksheets for the gifted and talented, not to keep them busy but with a predetermined purpose. She said:

As for the gifted and talented students, I talk about them as my high group but they have not been identified as gifted and talented. They are willing to learn. They want to learn. They know the routine for the day. They are organised and they just want to succeed. Because they want to learn some more, I set aside extra worksheets but not busy work in case they finish early. A lot of teachers give busy work. When you finish, you can do it. A lot of planning includes the next step. What are they going to do after this? Where is it going to lead on to from the task they are doing at the moment?

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Sorcha evaluated the level of her gifted and talented student and differentiated the tasks to cater for development at the higher level. She recalled:

I know that I had a gifted and talented kid last year who was very, very strong. The little girl I had last year was really great. She was doing reading, writing and Mathematics at Year Seven level. She is so amazing. She is so good. I used to give her the same work as the other kids at first just to make sure that she had the basics. When she showed that she understood and knew that really well, then I would jump her up to a much higher level and let her work at a much higher level. I had another kid in the room who was not quite as bright as her but who liked to be challenged. Sometimes I let them work together. She could push the other one along as well which worked very well. She did exactly what the other kids were doing but at a higher level. She liked it that way.

(Sorcha: F, 32, 10)

‘A fluke’: Meeting students’ needs by chance and not by planning

While some teachers purposely developed differentiated programs and extra activities to meet the needs of their gifted and talented students, one teacher (Calla) varied approaches and activities to hopefully cater for the multiple intelligences of students by chance. Meeting the needs of gifted students according to her perspective
of giftedness based on Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences seemed to happen by chance rather than by planning for specific gifted and talented students. The notion of hopefully catering for different multiple intelligences implied a possibility of successfully aiming different activities/approaches randomly at different multiple intelligences and different gifted children as well as a hint of uncertainty of successfully meeting all the needs of gifted children. Calla stated:

There are so many gifted children and many types of giftedness. I vary activities according to different multiple intelligences. Hopefully by approaching one concept in different ways, I cater for different multiple intelligences. It is a juggling act.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

In addition, Calla used student focussed learning but she encountered unfavourable responses from some parents who preferred the status quo and viewed non-traditional teaching strategies as time wasters. She elaborated:

I use student centred learning to cater for different needs of students and set student centred activities based on different strengths of students. I introduce a concept, set the activities, get students to work and provide extension for the gifted and talented students. It is easier in junior grades to use student centred learning because the physical classroom is more conducive to cater for the smaller numbers of children and smaller children. Unfortunately some people see student centred learning as a strategy that is time wasting, not effective and less structured compared to the traditional method. A lot of parents do not value the freedom in student centred learning. A lot of parents compare their memories and biases of what school is like. They have the mind sets that “It’s good enough for me, so it’s good enough for my children”.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)
**Teachers face a dilemma in allocating their time to students**

There were teachers who said that because of the great demands of the average and weaker students for assistance and attention, they did not have time to cater for the gifted and talented students. They left these children to do independent work with not as much supervision or attention as the rest of their classmates. They seemed to assume that gifted and talented students could continue doing more pages of work on their own without any explanation or supervision from them. In a way, they addressed the diversity of academic ability though it seemed to disadvantage the gifted and talented in terms of teachers’ attention. Leona said that she faced a dilemma at times in her decision between providing attention to students at the two ends of the student spectrum. She explained:

> I don’t spend much time with them. I give them harder work. For me, they can do on their own. I concentrate on the weaker students. Most of the time, teachers are quite torn because you have your really smart and really weak ones. Most of the time, the smart ones are left on their own. If you finish, you just do and continue with the other pages, with the teacher not explaining nor spending time with them. I would spend time with my middle group and weaker group. I think that is a challenge for most teachers.

(Leona: F, 33, 4)

To many teachers, the issue of allocating attention to students seemed to be linked to the availability of time in the classroom. With such a wide range of students in the regular classroom, how much attention was the teacher going to allocate to each individual or each group of students? To them, time was an important resource which seemed insufficient to help the children learn. Calla indicated that not much time was available for each child, implying that certain children might be missed out in the classroom.
Calla stated:

It is difficult to engage every single learner in the classroom. With a class of twenty four to thirty two students, it is lucky if the teacher can spend five to ten minutes with a child in a day. It is a tricky thing to balance.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

**Teachers’ practices of equity**

My third clue to the complexity of teaching from the participants’ perspectives was that teachers found it hard to practise equity in terms of needs-based share of attention, time and learning opportunities. This related to the allocating and timing of teachers’ attention to students. Whose needs were catered for first/more depended on the teachers’ thinking and prioritising of needs of students and the school culture. In six cases (Elma, Guda, Jolie, Leona, Myra, Petrina), the priority seemed tilted in favour of students who needed help to achieve the benchmark, namely the minimum standards required of the Australian National Assessment Program Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests conducted at Year Three, Year Five and Year Seven levels. The prioritising seemed in line with Rawl’s (1971; 1999) second principle of justice and more in favour of those who teachers thought were the least advantaged students or more ‘needy’ children, namely those with educational needs.

Different terms like ‘weak kids’ (Jolie, Leona, Ozora), ‘weaker kids’ (‘remedial children’) (Idelia), ‘underachieving kids’ (Guda), and ‘bottom/lowest group’ (Kara, Ozora) were used to refer to students with those educational needs. Terms like ‘strong kids’ (Jolie, Ozora), ‘very, very strong’ (Sorcha), ‘bright’ (Myra), ‘brighter’ (Petrina), ‘higher/top group’ (Kara) and ‘more capable ones’ (Ozora) were used to refer to the gifted and talented. The antonyms used reflected teachers’ perceptions of
students located at the two ends of the student spectrum in a regular classroom in
terms of abilities, potential, performance and strengths which seemed to underpin
their conceptualisations of the gifted and talented.

Egalitarian principles underlying the notion of equity as equality of outcomes
seemed to affect the ways those teachers worked with students in regular classrooms
to assist who they perceived as underachieving students to meet the expected
benchmark or minimum average outcomes. Based on her experiences in a tough
rural school in which a lot of the students were underachieving, Guda emphasised
that tremendous effort, preparation and time were spent to bring the majority to the
benchmark (average level) to the extent that the minority or the Other (gifted and
talented students) were overlooked and left out while the rest of the students were
kept at the middle levels. She said:

The last school that I was in was – a pretty tough school which is one of the schools
on My School website that is really underachieving. The students are really, really
tough kids. A lot of them come from backgrounds that are less than ideal. As a result,
we had a lot of kids in school who were doing quite poorly for their age. At that
particular school, a lot of effort was put in to bring those kids up to the appropriate
level, particularly in response to the NAPLAN tests. A lot of preparation was going
on in the first term to bring those kids up to the average level. As a result of that, kids
that were gifted and talented would have been missed out because of the amount of
time and effort spent on the underachieving kids. The problem with NAPLAN testing
is that you concentrate so much on bringing the kids, who are underachieving, up to
the appropriate level and keeping those in the middle sort of level there that we do
forget the gifted and talented students.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

By focussing on the outcomes based on the needs of the majority or particular
groups of students and maintaining the rest of the class at their current levels of
development, those teachers seemed to ‘forget’ that all students including the
minority groups or the Other possessed academic needs. Without the provision of the appropriate individual attention and learning opportunities to all students, students with unmet academic needs could be underachieving as well. When teachers perceived the needs of some students to be more important than the needs of other students and addressed those needs at the expense of a meaningful education for the others, there existed an inconsistency in their practices of equity.

Within the context of this research, equity is a needs-based concept while equality is a concept based on sameness and equal shares. Elma preferred to spend more time and effort with students with academic needs but she did not perceive that all students have academic needs which require the appropriate attention, support and learning opportunities from her. While insisting on equity for some students in terms of more time and assistance to meet their needs, she did not perceive equity for other students in a similar way. There seemed to be an apparent confusion about who possesses academic needs and an inconsistency about what constituted equity. Elma stated:

I prefer to teach students who are struggling with their academic work rather than the gifted and talented students. Teachers tend to spend more time with children who need help and set other children on their own. I prefer to teach children with academic needs. They need the basic literacy in life. The more time and more help I give to those when young, the better off they will be. You want them to be successful adults with the necessary skills. That is the reason I like to spend more time with those with academic needs. Children who struggle academically need more support in the primary school.

(Elma: F, 46, 25)

Myra seemed to have developed an awareness of weaker students. She spent more time with students who would not do their work and less time with those who could
do their work. Myra indicated that:

I think I am more aware of weaker kids than the gifted ones. Weaker kids really stand out, compared to the stronger kids. There is a lot more work, time, effort and patience involved teaching weaker kids because they cannot be bothered with doing their work.

(Myra: F, 21, 0)

The school in which she was positioned, focused a lot on meeting the educational needs of the weaker students and helping them to improve their outcomes but seemed not to cater for the academic needs of students who were fast in finishing their work. Myra stressed:

We have heaps of help for the weaker kids and the ones who are poor but there is none for the higher end. There are obviously a few smart ones but not extremely smart ones. I don’t actually ask my colleagues about gifted and talented students but we are always talking about the weak ones all the time. I know that the lower end people are doing their work and taking the students out of class to get help. The lower end students get pulled out of class a couple of times a week and I have two teacher aides. So all the help is given to the kids at the lower end.

(Myra: F, 21, 0)

As a beginner/early career teacher, Myra sought advice from her more experienced colleagues who advised her to use the fast finishers to help her do posters or hang posters in the class. She was positive that:

We don’t have much resource for the upper end but more for the lower end. I just ask the other teachers what they do for fast finish activities. They just told me to do those things like getting them to do a poster that I want to be done or getting them to hang up a picture or drawing.

(Myra: F, 21, 0)

Myra also mentioned that one bright student who used to be a fast finisher slowed down in the course of time. Though she did not mention the reason for his slowing
down, I suspected that he probably conformed to the pace of the class to avoid the additional work assigned by the teacher to keep him busy. Myra concluded:

Not all the kids are that good. They are about the same. They are all average students. That boy is only the bright one. When he is done, get him to help the other kids. He slowed down in his work, took some time and ended up the same as the rest of the kids. We help those who obviously cannot do and those who can do on their own, we supervise how they think.

(Myra: F, 21, 0)

In Myra’s class, the bright boy seemed to be the least advantaged student because his academic needs were not catered for in terms of appropriate learning opportunities and attention. His slowing down and conforming to the rest of the class were signs of his underachieving in class. The statement “we supervise how they think” for “those who can do on their own” implied that the way able students think seemed to be controlled by teachers in that particular school. I gained the impression that either the bright boy eventually conformed to the status quo or was gradually ‘dumbed down’ by the schooling levelling practices.

Though students were grouped according to ability in Myra’s school, they carried out the same activity. This implied the sameness principle underlying the practices in her school and the notion of equity as equality. However, the practices were based on the needs of the weaker students which reflected equity as a needs-based concept. The practice that students who completed their work early helped their teachers with preparation and display of teaching aids, instead of being provided with additional meaningful educational activities to meet their academic needs suggested a perspective of equity as equality of outcomes. The findings uncovered an apparent inconsistency in teachers’ practices of equity.
Reality: Teachers tend to overlook certain students

Thirza thought it impossible to cater for every child’s need nor provide equal share of time because of the complexity of the class. She attributed this to the diversity in her class in terms of academic ability and cultural backgrounds. To her, the reality was that teachers, as in the case of Elma, Jolie, Leona and Myra, would inevitably spend more time on certain students than on those who could work independently, particularly those who please teachers with their outcomes. Thus those students appeared to be left on their own and missed out on attention and reinforcement from their teachers. Thirza (who appeared to perceive equity as a needs-based concept) felt that it was unfair not to meet the needs of able compliant students. She pointed out that:

If you look at the way things are structured, you have thirty three children in the classroom and you got half an hour. If you give them equal time, they get less than one minute each and it does not work that way. You have a group of children, especially girls, not necessarily gifted and talented but able children who are compliant because that is their attitude. They want to please. So they are compliant and they want to do but they do miss out a lot of teacher time simply because the teachers know that they can rely on those girls, mainly girls, to do their work and not need a lot of extra help. In a sense that is unfair, isn’t it because they also need you to reinforce what they do? When you have inclusivity to include everybody, the makeup is so complex that no one person could adequately meet the needs of everybody within that group. It is just impossible. When you split the grade, you make it even more complex.

(Thirza: F, 65, 40)

Four teachers (Leona, Ozora, Petrina, Thirza) did not favour split classes because of the doubling of differences in developmental levels and academic diversity. In this context, a split class consisted of children from two year levels. These teachers commented that they found it hard to pitch their lessons to meet the diverse age and
developmental levels as well as the needs of all students and felt that they might unintentionally forget or overlook students at the two extreme ends of two student spectrums. They appeared to be aware of the danger of treating the ‘struggling’ students and the students with excellent outcomes as the Other when they catered for the academic needs of the majority. Ozora said:

I believe that split classes are really hard to cater for the students. You have the Year Twos who are quite weak and on the opposite end, some of the Year Threes are really strong. In between you have the strong Twos and the weak Year Threes. It is quite hard in terms of split classes because you have different outcomes they need to achieve and concepts that they should have grasped especially in a split class. It is quite hard for the teacher to teach them what they need to know. I guess they may forget the ones who are excelling in their work or forget the ones who are at the bottom of the class and struggling.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

Leona indicated that she focused on the majority of students at both year levels and the weaker students at the lower year level. This implied that the gifted and talented students at both year levels were left out in their development. She said: “Because I am teaching a split Year Two/Year Three class, I go for the levels of Year Two and Year Three and the tail end of Year Two. It is hard to pitch your level.” Petrina made a similar point about working with a huge range of students when she said:

You got younger and older, brighter and weaker kids. I try not to let it have an effect on the class. We always see that the weaker kids are catered for. You want to lift them up but equally bright kids could be supported as well. But it is something I don’t think we do that well. It is the weaker ones, the ones whose standards meant to be brought up to the accepted normal level. Unfortunately it is not the ideal world. It is very hard, working with a huge range.

(Petrina: F, 59, 39)
Like Thirza, Petrina perceived equity as a needs-based concept. She had the opinion that the academic needs of both weaker students and brighter children should be given due support to improve their developmental levels. However, she acknowledged that support given to the brighter ones was not satisfactory. Her comment “Unfortunately, it is not the ideal world” suggested that in the ideal situation, teachers should provide fair treatment and appropriate support to meet the needs of all children. However, Petrina felt that in real life complex regular classrooms, the brighter students seemed to be the unfortunate ones receiving little attention and support from their teachers. While teachers responded to the academic needs of weaker students and made the appropriate provisions to help them achieve higher levels of development, they did not seem to respond to the academic needs of brighter students in a similar way to assist them to achieve greater heights of excellence. By focusing more on those students who lacked the ability to achieve academically to raise their standards to be on par with the majority, and paying little attention to those who had the academic ability to excel, those teachers seemed to practise equality in the egalitarian context.

Some teachers indicated that they did not mind having split classes or academic diversity for other reasons. Four teachers (Elma, Frida, Jolie, Myra) liked using the gifted and talented or more able senior students to assist them to tutor the junior or weaker ones, partly because the gifted and talented students understood what their teachers taught and could explain to their peers better than their teachers, and partly because they finished their work early and had time to spare. So it appeared that gifted and talented students who had reached the benchmark were delegated the roles of peer tutors to assist the rest of the class to understand, catch up with the lessons and reach the benchmark.
Frida said:

A lot of time when I am teaching, I put the information out there and often kids do not catch the links at the right level. However, one or two catch the links and they get excited about it. I like having them in the class. They often understand ideas and can explain better to their classmates in other terms, more successfully than I can as a teacher. They make peer tutors, especially in their areas of strengths.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Elma, Myra and Jolie made similar points about using gifted and talented students as peer tutors. Myra indicated: “That boy is the only bright one. When he is done, get him to help the other kids.” Elma stated:

Yes, sometimes gifted and talented students stand out. They are responsible, more mature in their thinking and have initiative. Academically they seem to grasp ideas generally more easily. They become peer tutors because they can explain well to the other children.

(Elma: F, 46, 25)

Jolie assigned one bright student to assist a ‘weak’ student to read because she had no time to spend with the latter. She said:

I have one weak girl who cannot read a book. She wanted me to sit with her and read with her but there were too many kids needing help and asking questions. I had a strong kid who had finished her work. I asked her “Can you please sit next to her and help her?” I was glad I thought of that. There was no parent helper or teacher aide.

(Jolie: F, 22, 0)

Ozora knew of one teacher who liked the idea of peer mentoring in split classes but realised that an overuse of the practice resulted in the more able senior students resenting the task of peer tutoring and the children that they tutored. She recalled:

The older children in Year Three who were the more capable ones will be helping the Year Twos. I find that over a period of time, if you use it too often, the Year Three
students tend to resent the Year Twos. “Oh, we have to help again.” I think it is good if used in moderation.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

Guda sensed that the average students in the older year level showed resentment towards the younger gifted and talented classmate for making them feel less able. Thus they resolved to giving the younger child a hard time in non-academic areas by name calling him and putting him down when the gifted and talented child did not do well in sports. Guda said:

We have got a Year Six/Year Seven here in this school. If you have a Year Six student who is doing well, you can quite easily organise him to do what the Year Sevens are doing much to the disgust of the Year Sevens. Sometimes the older year group does not like particularly a younger person doing the same work as them because it may make them feel a bit inadequate. Sometimes it sets them up for having a hard time, though not all the time and not in all schools. They give little comments here and there. “Oh, you are very clever, smarty pants”. That kind of thing that tends to go on. When they go out for cricket at recess, the comment might come back “Oh, you are not so good at cricket after all”. Because he was not good at sports, because he was different from the other kids, he did not fit in a particular box. He had a hard time in terms of bullying. When he did fail at something, the kids took great delight in telling him and bringing him down.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

Two teachers (Guda, Petrina) made use of the older year level materials of split classes to cater for the academic needs of the gifted and talented in the younger class. However, the teachers did not mention how the needs of a gifted and talented child in the older year level of a split class were met. Petrina mentioned that parents of younger children preferred split classes but not the other way round, seemingly because of the spill over effect from the higher year level. This implied that parents of older children in a split class might be dubious about how teachers pitched their
lessons to cater for the academic diversity and the depth and breadth of contents for the older year level.

**Homogeneous classes seem to cater better for students’ needs**

Petrina believed that a homogeneous class would cater better for the needs of all students. She explained how teachers could collaborate to regroup students in homogeneous classes according to ability and assign different teachers to each group on a rotational basis. Then every teacher would have the chance to teach the bright as well as the weaker students. So it seems quite fair to each teacher. She mentioned that when a teacher teaches a group with the same ability, the advantage is that s/he does not have to think how to cater for all the different ends and could focus the majority of his/her attention and planning for any group assigned to his/her. However, because of the power relations in schools, she had to follow school practices determined by the school principal regardless of her beliefs, preferences and thinking. Petrina stated:

> I would prefer to see straight year level of classes where you won’t have this huge range like we have in a split class. Instead of a composite class, you have a more homogenous group. I have done in the past where you have a cross setting of the classes. So if you have three classes, you have one teacher taking the bright ones, one who takes the average ones and one takes the struggling ones. So instead of being spread out where it is really hard to cater, you can put them into similar groups. You can still always have groups within the groups but you can cater for them better.

(Petrina: F, 59, 39)

Petrina seemed to use the term ‘homogeneous’ in terms of having the same ability. In reality, there is no homogeneous class because of the cultural differences and academic diversity in any regular classroom. A homogeneous class might exist if all the students belonged to one culture and possessed the same ability at the same
developmental level. In the same vein, Jolie and Myra mentioned that several more experienced teachers in their respective schools preferred to stream heterogeneous classes into same ability groups to cater for the diverse needs of students. Jolie related that one teacher advised Jolie to follow her ‘best’ strategy of grouping children according to ability during her practicum.

The teacher said: “I have done years of whole class teaching and this is the best way for this Year Three class for this school”. She grouped the kids according to ability. The thing is that the kids are in groups with the same ability. Because of the same level, it is easier to play games and keep getting better at one thing and then another. If you have the strong kids and the weak kids in the same group, the weak ones will be struggling.

(Jolie: F, 22, 0)

Neysa, a beginner/early career teacher, found it frustrating to teach in the complex regular classroom with different ability levels. She did what she could and targeted her teaching at the majority. By teaching to the majority, the teacher missed out the Other (students at both ends of the student spectrum) as pointed out by Kara. Kara believed that all children regardless of their levels should be given the same focus and some time by teachers. Like Thirza, she thought it difficult to provide equal shares of time and attention to every child. Instead she allocated the time according to the needs of different groups of children and made it a practice to give attention to every child. Kara said:

If you look at both ends of the scale, you can have a really low group of students and a really high group. Both can be missed out in teaching. There might be some teachers who work in the middle with the thinking that those in the low group are not even going to get there while the high group is already there. I don’t think that way.

I think that your focus for the top group must be the same as for the bottom group and even for those groups in between. It is hard to divide equal attention and equal time to
all children but you can give some time to every child. In my five reading groups, I always make sure that my lowest group get my attention every day. I dedicate twenty minutes every day to my lowest group but not so much to my middle group. I make sure that I see each group twice or thrice a week, regardless of which group they are in. You have to give attention to everyone.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

From Kara’s perspective, teaching children, irrespective of their levels, is the job of a teacher. Thus she fervently believed that it was imperative to provide every child with an amount of the teacher’s time, make a difference in the child’s life and help the child improve. What caught my attention was that she practised mental rehearsal and reflexivity. Her way of thinking reflected her perception of fairness and equity as a needs-based concept and her position as a reflexive teacher. As Kara stated:

If you are teaching, that is your job. You go through that mental thinking: “This is my job. I am here to teach.” It doesn’t matter what level the child is at. You can’t miss any child out. You can’t give the same amount of time to every child but you must give them time, your time. Otherwise what are you there for? I am here to teach. I make a difference in the child’s life. If you have that in your mind for every single child, hopefully they will improve.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Idelia made a similar point about the difficulty in catering for all children in the regular classroom because of their wide range of levels of development and the dilemma teachers faced in helping students to succeed at their individual levels. Theoretically, teachers thought of students succeeding at their respective levels but to put the theory into practice in real life heterogeneous classrooms seemed overwhelming. Idelia said: “You want everyone to achieve success at their individual level. That is a hard thing in teaching because the levels are so wide.” Despite the difficulty, she catered for the needs of the gifted and talented and made time for
them. She expressed her preference to teach students with educational needs and felt that the gifted and talented were not so interesting to work with. Idelia said:

I prefer to work more with remedial children. That is where my passion is. I always have one or two children who are gifted and talented. I make sure that they are catered for. But they are usually very good kids. Often they really present things nicely, their work neatly, colour beautifully. Often they are girls. They work quietly. In some ways they are not as interesting as the weaker ones. Often gifted and talented kids are not so interesting.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

While six teachers favoured teaching the weaker students, by contrast Neysa preferred to teach the gifted and talented and was interested in gifted and talented education. She did an optional unit in gifted and talented education in her university in order to be in an informed position to teach any gifted and talented students that she might encounter in the future. As Neysa pointed out:

I did a unit in gifted and talented education. It was an option for me. It was something I found interesting. At the start, I did not know what to expect. I figured out that I am obviously going to encounter gifted and talented students in the classrooms and at that time, I did not know what I was going to do in that situation.

(Neysa: F, 21, 0)

During her practicum, Neysa had the opportunity to be in a class made up completely of gifted and talented children. To her, such a class was an ideal one because all the students were interested in and engaged with the learning and had their needs met. By comparison, some students in the regular classroom misbehaved, disengaged from the learning and refused to do their work. Neysa attributed their misbehaviours and refusal to do work to conformity to their peers. She commented:

I love to be a gifted and talented teacher. When you walk into a gifted and talented classroom, although there may be thirty students in there, it is quiet. No one is
‘mucking around’. No one is bored. No one is not engaged because the kids know that they are catered for. They know that they are stimulated. So they have no time to play around. You can literally sit there and do nothing because these kids could self manage themselves. So it is an ideal classroom. In the gifted and talented classroom, they are surrounded by students who want to learn. So the majority of the students want to learn as opposed to a normal classroom. I won’t say that the majority in a normal classroom do not want to learn. Some of them may ‘muck around’ because they do not want to do their work. A lot of peer pressure comes in to it. They face a lot of social issues like wanting to fit in. So when they are in an environment where everyone is learning, everyone is on the same page. They obviously do not have the chance or need to ‘muck around’.

(Neysa: F, 21, 0)

Calla proposed an increase in the presence of another adult in the classroom to cater for the needs of the gifted and talented and be the extra pair of eyes, seemingly for more effective supervision of the children. In addition, she suggested a reduction in the number of children in upper primary classes to bring about a proportionate increase in teacher’s time for each child in the class on the ground of justice. She explained that while the physical size of the classroom remained the same, the physical sizes of children increased with age, thus occupying more space in the classroom and reducing the space to move around for class activities inside the classroom. Her conceptualisation of justice was based on needs, especially the needs of the gifted and talented who might cause problems in class if their needs were not catered for. Calla expressed her view that:

I think that there is a need to reduce class size and provide more human time. Increase human time. I believe that there should be fewer students in upper primary classes to do every child justice. Reduce the student: teacher ratio. We do not need fully qualified teachers. Do not undervalue the presence of another adult who is capable of assisting like assistant teachers to assist the gifted and talented students.
We need two sets of eyes to develop the talents of the children and reduce behavioural problems and boredom in the classrooms.

(Calla: F, 42, 22)

**Students at Educational Risk (SAER)**

My fourth clue to the complexity of teachers’ work was that gifted and talented students seemed to be at educational risk in regular classrooms in schools. Many teachers acknowledged that gifted and talented students were at educational risk. Yet due to their personal preferences/priorities or priority of school ethos and behavioural management, many teachers tended to leave them out. Guda expressed her concern about not providing adequate learning opportunities for the average students and gifted and talented students to progress in their academic development when teachers focussed on assisting underachieving students to reach the benchmark. She said:

> I worry that we are not doing the best for gifted and talented students. We are so busy getting the students who are underachieving to be average rather than moving our average students as well to be more average and the above average kids to be even more above average. That is a big concern for me.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

Idelia commented that ‘good’ gifted and talented students like her daughter were students at educational risk. She explained that ‘students at educational risk’ (SAER) was a term initially used for students who did not achieve the minimum standards, but ironically the same term was also applicable to those at the top of the class who were not provided with learning opportunities to develop maximally according to their potential. As a mother and teacher, she expressed concern about catering for the
educational development of gifted and talented students like her daughter and not leaving them out in class. Idelia shared that:

My daughter is gifted and talented. I know that a lot of time she got left out in class. She is quiet as well and did not get the pushing she could have from teachers. Her teachers tell me “I have nothing to tell you. She is so good.” The problem with gifted and talented students – you have to be careful not to leave them out. Often they get left out because they do not need much help. My daughter was a SAER because she was not being extended in school. The danger is that the gifted ones are good students and teachers tend to leave them to do work independently and concentrate on the rest of the class.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

While some teachers appeared to allocate less attention to the ‘good’ or compliant students in some classrooms, the gifted and talented who did not fall into the ‘good students’ category might attract more attention from their teachers and distract their peers and teachers with their misbehaviours. Thus they interrupted the lessons and further reduced the time for teaching and learning as teachers had to spend time to manage the behavioural problems. Some teachers attributed the misbehaviours of these particular gifted and talented to being not stimulated in class (Bryce, Neysa), disengaged, bored, having nothing to do after they finished their work (Calla, Leona, Neysa) and refusing to do work that was too easy for them. Calla, Leona and Neysa brought up a link between disengagement in class and behavioural problems among gifted and talented students whose academic needs were unmet by classroom teachers. This gave me the impression that those were some danger signals given by certain gifted and talented students whose needs were probably not met by the teacher and were like their ‘good’ counterparts also at educational risk. Neysa said:

I think that most are at educational risk because they are not stimulated in any way. They are not encouraged to want to learn though they may be inquisitive. Some might
be dormant and definitely at risk. If they are at risk, they are going to ‘muck around’ in your classroom. They are going to distract the others. It all adds up. If that issue was identified and dealt with, there would not be issues surrounding them like other children not doing or finishing their work and not understanding what is going on because they have been distracted.

(Neysa: F, 21, 0)

**Hide and seek: Teachers seek students who hide their giftedness**

The data analysis revealed a game of hide and seek between some gifted and talented students and their teachers: the students hide while their teachers seek them out. The complexity of and diversity of gifted and talented students seemed to complicate teaching and baffle some teachers. Three teachers (Guda, Quenby, Radbert) felt frustrated that some gifted and talented students preferred to hide their abilities and potential and did not seem to want help from their teachers. Guda said:

> It can be really difficult. I had gifted children who I did not know were gifted because they consistently underachieved until someone told me that they chose not to go to PEAC. Then I realised that they were gifted. It can be quite frustrating to teach them.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

Guda and Radbert found it hard to develop the giftedness in some gifted and talented students, especially girls, who preferred to underachieve, do the minimum to please the teachers or act dumb in order to be popular or cool. Radbert felt very frustrated about very clever students who chose not to achieve to their potential and dumb themselves down because they wanted to fit in with their peers and be cool. He said:

> Instead of pigeonholing gifted and talented kids as those who always listen, sit up beautifully and do all that, often there is another group who are very clever, very socially steady and want to fit and be cool and still have those talents they don’t use. I feel that there are many kids who have talents and are gifted in areas that are not expressed because they do not want to be different and they want to fit in. So it can
be very frustrating for a teacher, very frustrating because you know how far they can
go but they choose not to go. It is a conscious choice not to extend themselves
because especially in Year Seven and upper years, we move from a teacher centred
approach to student centred approach. They choose a context that they are interested
in for their learning stuff. They still achieve the outcomes we want.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)

Guda was concerned about the influence of media which apparently promoted the
celebrity worship in certain schools that it was cool to be ‘dumb’ on the students and
felt the urgency to stop that ‘dumbing’ down of students. She said:

In the past, it has been “Being dumb is cool”. We need to stop this celebrity worship
thing because it is so influential particularly for upper primary and secondary kids.
We need to stop all that and say: No, it is actually not cool to be dumb.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

Reflections on the complexity of teachers’ work

In summary, work as a regular classroom teacher seemed to be not that easy and
straightforward but rather it was complex and complicated by the type of students,
schools and socio-cultural environments that teachers encountered. Gifted and
talented students seemed to be at educational risk when teachers found it hard to
practise equity in terms of providing the attention, time and appropriate challenging
learning opportunities based on the needs of those children in the regular classroom.
The complexity of teachers’ work was also pointed out by researchers like Kincheloe
schools”. A teacher had to manage multiple roles in and outside the classroom.
Teachers in this study who coped well with the demands of their work seemed to be
hardy and tough in nature as well as willing to work hard. Their work seemed
endless and five teachers indicated that they had to bring home work to do outside
school hours because time in school seemed insufficient for the work that they had to do.

**Catering for student diversity**

One of the biggest challenges teachers faced was to cater for the needs of every child in a regular classroom with student diversity in terms of cultural differences and academic ability. Reflexive teachers in this study catered for the needs of gifted and talented students in different ways. Eleven teachers provided open ended tasks for all students to cater for the different levels of academic ability. Six teachers developed different programs for their gifted and talented students, some of which were made available to other students in the same class. Two teachers used materials from the higher year level in split classes to cater for the academic abilities of gifted and talented in the year lower level in the same classroom. The underlying assumption was that the younger gifted and talented students were one year ahead of their chronological peers. Six teachers in one school followed a whole school approach to develop critical and higher order thinking skills in their students, including the gifted and talented. Bloom’s Taxonomy underpinned the whole school approach. The perspective of giftedness underlying their approach aligned with Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences. Thus despite the uncertainty about the definitions for ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ and the nature of giftedness, twelve teachers did plan for the development of abilities at different levels through open ended tasks, differentiated programs and materials of a higher year level. Four teachers in two different schools followed the school ethos which focused on programs for the weaker students but made no provisions for the gifted and talented. Three teachers in tough schools spent most of their time managing behavioural problems and felt that they did not have sufficient time to teach, let alone to cater for the needs of the gifted and talented. One teacher
taught to the majority, thus neglecting the Other. Others streamed heterogeneous classes according to three main academic ability groups (bright, average and weaker students) who were taught by different teachers.

Whether the needs of children, including the gifted and talented students, were met depend on the type of class, environment, school and students in the classroom as well as teachers’ perspectives. A conducive classroom environment and well behaved students seemed to make a difference to a teacher who wanted to teach. The reality was that some schools in which teachers were positioned were tough places. Neither were all students well behaved although they all needed a meaningful education that could give them the awareness of the real world around them and a hope for a better future. It depended on individual teachers’ thinking about what/who they were in school for and how to make a difference to the learning environment. As Kincheloe noted: “Every minute of every hour teachers teach, they are faced with complex decisions concerning justice, democracy and competing ethical claims” (2004, p.1). Teachers seemed to make choices and decisions according to their discretion, preferences and perceptions about what seemed fair under different circumstances. However, what seemed fair for one group of children might disadvantage other groups of children in the same classroom, especially when equity was misunderstood as equality in terms of same treatment or same outcomes by certain teachers.

Practising equity in terms of needs-based share

Six teachers found it hard to practise equity in terms of needs-based share of attention, time and learning opportunities. A common way of thinking among teachers was to spend more attention, time and effort with students who would/could
not do their work to catch up and not much time with gifted and talented students who they believed had the capacity to learn on their own and do work at a faster pace. This practice was also not uncommon in schools in the United States of America (Davidson & Davidson, 2004). As Davidson and Davidson stated: “at most schools, meeting the needs of low-ability students keeps teachers from meeting those of high-ability students. Excellent teachers can satisfy both, but they won’t have an easy time” (2004, p.134). Their opinion that meeting the needs of both weaker and highly abled students might not be easy, or in other words hard, tough or time consuming, concurred with my findings. Davidson and Davidson further commented that “Neglecting bright children so that the slower children can catch up is done, appallingly enough, in the name of ‘justice’” (2004, pp.51, 52). What seemed ‘appalling’ was the claim of “justice” by teachers with what Davidson and Davidson termed a “false sense of equality” (2004, p.51) for the slower ones to help them achieve the same outcomes. As they indicated, underlying “the false sense of equality” was the perception of giftedness that “all children are gifted” and the refusal to “challenge the brightest students because such nurturing would smack of elitism” (2004, p.59). This reminded me of Calla’s perception of giftedness that “All children are gifted in one way or another”. What also seemed appalling to Davidson and Davidson was “squandering childhoods in the name of the bad idea that levelling is more important than excellence” (2004, p.59). Levelling seemed to be done at the expense of an appropriate education for gifted and talented children in schools.

The education of gifted and talented students is a matter of equity and social justice. All children possess needs for an education which matches their abilities and individual levels of development without any restraint or constraint. Similar sentiments were expressed by researchers (Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Gross,
2004; VanTassel-Baska, 2003; Winstanley, 2006). Davidson and Davidson stated that “True social justice means providing an education that challenges all students to the extent of their abilities – gifted children included” (2004, p.23). Whether it was fair to the gifted and talented for teachers to waste their time waiting for and assisting the slower students to catch up with the average students or not was not mentioned. Slowing down and restraining the fast ones at the same outcomes threshold while trying to speed up the slow ones to reach the threshold seemed paradoxical. Many researchers highlighted the practice of double standards in the educational development of the gifted and talented compared to their peers at the other end of the student spectrum as well as their peers in the realm of music (Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Gross, 2004; Ruf, 2005) and in the sports arena. In any race, no fast athlete is slowed down or restrained from crossing the finishing line because s/he has to wait for the slower ones to catch up. In the realm of music, neither younger students nor talented musicians are slowed down in their practices and progress through the grades to wait for and/or tutor their non-musical or slower peers to catch up.

Society seemed to give due recognition to the best performers in sports and music but render little recognition to the gifted and talented in school, thus reflecting traits of egalitarianism based on an equal-share perspective underpinning the perspectives. This was evident in Elma’s school where outstanding students in sports and music were announced publicly and applauded during school assemblies but gifted and talented students were not given due recognition. Elma said:

*We congratulated the fifteen Year Four students who are identified as gifted in the PEAC testing but we don’t put this little group of them up on a pedestal. We tell them*
that they have done a wonderful job but we do not make any announcement to congratulate them.

(Elma: F, 46, 25)

**Gifted and talented students at educational risk**

Gifted and talented students seemed to be at educational risk in regular classrooms, especially those in which teachers focussed on the weaker students and/or used the gifted and talented students as teaching assistants. A common assumption was that gifted and talented students could do work on their own and continue doing more pages of work without any explanation or supervision by their teachers. A common practice was to assign the gifted and talented students as peer tutors or teacher helpers for the weaker students. How much the gifted and talented actually learnt through doing more pages of work ahead of their peers or peer tutoring the weaker students was not mentioned. Some gifted and talented students might deliberately slow down to avoid the extra work given by teachers to keep them busy. Extra work which might not necessarily be appropriate work for them could be regarded as a penalty for finishing the same work at a faster pace.

While some gifted and talented students did not appear to complain about being left to do work on their own, others showed their boredom and restlessness by distracting their peers with their misbehaviours or refusal to do work. They attracted teachers’ attention in a different way. When needs are not met, attention is not given and the remaining time is not filled with meaningful things to do, some students are not likely to cooperate with teachers. The issue that gifted and talented students were at educational risk in regular classrooms constituted a recurring concern raised by educators and researchers in Australia (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Gross, 2004; Kronborg, 2002; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and
Education References Committee, 2001; Senate Select Committee, 1988) and in many parts of the world (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Davis & Rimms, 1989; Gallagher, 2003; Rimm, 1995; Roberts, 2008; Rogers, 2007b; Ruf, 2005; Smith, 2006; Tannenbaum, 2000; Whitmore, 1980; Winter, 2007) in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

The controversy seemed to be about provisions for the gifted and talented to engage them in meaningful learning at a more advanced level so that they do not feel bored and misbehave in class. Two teachers in my study believed in accelerating the gifted and talented for their wellbeing and educational development even though one of their school principals was not in favour of accelerative practices. In two schools, acceleration was practised and the gifted and talented could skip grades according to their abilities. In one particular school, the teachers supported gifted and talented children who attended PEAC programs by helping them to catch up. However, many teachers did not seem to favour acceleration whether in terms of doing work of a higher year level or not positioning the gifted and talented in grades with their chronological peers. Their objections seemed to be linked to the perception of a lockstep curriculum for all students and egalitarian principles. Their concern was the adverse social or emotional consequences to their development or the boredom of learning the same thing the following year. By contrast, the literature suggested the reverse to be true. Research suggested that when gifted and talented students were placed at the higher grades appropriate to their abilities, their parents strongly believed that the children were academically and socially in the right classes (Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Gross, 2004; Ruf, 2005). Acceleration did not seem to cause any social or emotional difficulties to those children (Robinson, 2004; Rogers, 2004). Instead those children became happier and more motivated to excel.
(Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Gross, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Ruf, 2005). The implementation of the lockstep curriculum for all students and objections to acceleration for the gifted and talented restrained their academic and social development; and caused boredom, behavioural, emotional and even health problems. The danger that the ongoing process of not being challenged to use their potential/abilities might cause the gifted and talented to lose interest in motivating themselves or caring any more about their own development (Judith Shuey, Head of Program for the Exceptionally Gifted, cited in Davidson & Davidson, 2004). This repeated Clark’s (2008) warning that the gifted might lose their giftedness if they did not use it. Much research has been conducted in the area of practices and acceleration for the gifted and talented but the same problem seemed to continue because of individual teachers’ personal priorities, perceptions and conviction about educating children.

How individual teachers view a teacher’s work in educating children, despite the hardships and demands, seemed to make a difference in the education of the gifted and talented. Their thinking seemed to be linked to their feelings and their doing the work as a job, and/or deriving fun and joy from doing the work and catering for the needs of all children. When teachers work hard to target meeting individual students’ needs and find joy in their work, they feel happy as I reflected with the smiling mouth of Tan’s Model 2. On the other hand, there might not be any joy in the work which tended to be done as a job as reflected in the inverted mouth of Tan’s Model 1. Under what circumstances does a teacher think of his/her work as a task/job that needs to be done regardless of his/her feelings or as a source of enjoyment and joy to him/her?
Given my impressions of what is hard with respect to a teacher’s work, I had dealt with the confusion and difficulties reflected in the left eye of Tan’s Model 1; issues of equity on what seemed unbalanced or deemed fair/unfair in the right eye of Tan’s Model 1; the hard work involved in teaching to target at the needs of all children, including the gifted and talented, reflected in the left eye of Tan’s Model 2 and the attempts to balance in order to be fair in the right eye of Tan’s Model 2. Initially I planned to write separate chapters on “What is hard?” and “What is fair?” However, in the process of writing, I found it hard to separate the two themes which overlapped in many areas of teachers’ thinking about their work. Thus I combined the themes in this chapter since being fair or practising equity in terms of needs-based seemed hard, too. I can also apply my proposed models to reflect the facial expressions of children in the regular classroom. When teachers target the teaching at the learning needs of all children and practise equity, children would enjoy the lessons and feel happy and catered for (proposed Tan’s Model 2). The reverse is also true (proposed Tan’s Model 1).

I continue in the next chapter to unravel teachers’ feelings as they thought and talked about their work, in terms of job or joy. I believe that while children have the potential to learn and change, teachers also have the potential to learn, critique prevailing circumstances and be the agents to bring about a transformation for the betterment of the children as well as for themselves. The demands are enormous, the work is tremendous, difficult, seemingly impossible but can be made possible under certain circumstances. While some teachers like Thirza enjoyed the challenges they faced in difficult schools, some did not. Thus in the next chapter I outline the ways individual teachers viewed a teacher’s work despite the difficulties and demands, and
the steps they took to make a difference between doing the work as a job, and deriving fun and joy from doing the work.
Chapter 8

Exploring the ‘joy’ of teaching

Introduction

Given an overview of teachers’ thinking in the previous chapter about what was hard in a teacher’s work, I continue in this chapter to probe further into another area of teachers’ thinking about their work in general and the education of gifted and talented students in particular. How did the teachers in my study regard their work: as a job or with joy? As teachers expressed their individual thinking about their work, they revealed their emotions underlying their expressions. No one seemed neutral or unaffected emotionally by the demands and nature of a teacher’s work. There seemed to be two pools of feelings: pleasant or unpleasant. Words like ‘fun’, ‘happy’, ‘enjoy’, ‘joy’, ‘good feeling’, ‘exciting’, ‘interesting’, ‘rewarding’ conveyed pleasant feelings interrelated to happiness, pleasure and joy derived from doing something and achieving one’s aims. For the purpose of this study, I grouped them all under ‘joy’. On the other hand, words like ‘demanding’, ‘difficult’, ‘distressing’ and ‘frustrating’ implied unpleasant feelings related to dissatisfaction, worry, anxiety, stress and unhappiness derived from the work and possibly not achieving one’s aims in doing something. In the second instance, the unpleasant work seemed to have become a chore or job that had to be carried on a regular basis, whether one liked it or not. Thus this chapter is about how teachers perceived their work: as a job or with joy. Under what circumstances did teachers view their work as a job or with joy? The first part of this chapter focuses on the enjoyment/joy expressed by teachers
while the second part is about their experiences described largely as negative. The third part of this chapter is on my reflections on teachers’ feelings about their work.

**The ‘joy’ of teaching**

Fourteen out of twenty teachers (Aldwyn, Bryce, Drusilla, Frida, Haidee, Idelia, Jolie, Kara, Leona, Myra, Ozora, Quenby, Radbert, Thirza) commented that they loved/enjoyed teaching. Bryce said: “I enjoy teaching. I like to be in the classrooms too much.” What he meant by ‘too much’ was not mentioned and in hindsight I should have followed this up. What struck me about Bryce during the interview was his face beaming with friendliness and excitement while relating his experiences and he displayed keen interest in my study. Drusilla was another teacher who shared her experiences with so much enthusiasm that I sensed her passion radiating through her face. I told her that and she replied: “I have a passion for education in general. I don’t think it finishes.” By this, I interpreted that she meant the passion is ‘unending’. Myra, Radbert and Thirza indicated that teaching was fun. Radbert said: “I love it. It is good fun although it has its moments.” Thirza recalled her teaching in a particular primary school “which was very difficult but lots of fun and always interesting”. Frida appeared to have forgotten to switch off her teaching mode at home until her father had to remind her not to repeat what she said. She said:

> I love teaching. I am teaching at home as well. My father told me that you don’t have to tell me twice. I have to reiterate that I am a teacher. I have to say twice to ensure that you understand.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Thirza enjoyed teaching and working with children. She said:

> I enjoy teaching anybody. That is why I am still teaching. I enjoy children. I always
have an excellent career as far as I am involved with children. I do one day of voluntary work at school. I have three days when I am available to do relief teaching. I enjoy teaching.

(Thirza: F, 65, 40)

Four teachers (Kara, Ozora, Idelia, Thirza) believed that one has to love children if s/he takes up teaching. They did not teach for the money but they said that they taught to make a difference in the lives of children. Idelia indicated:

There is always more work involved. Most teachers do not do it for the money. The majority of teachers do it for the children. They want to see kids change for the better. They are very dedicated. It is one of those jobs that you have got to be wanting to do.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

Kara mentioned that some teachers did it for the money, which seemed great as opposed to Idelia who stated that the money seemed insufficient for the enormous work involved. She said:

I met some teachers who focus just on the pay packet. They are on a different level than me. It is great to get the pay but that is not my goal. My goal is the education of the children in my classroom.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Two teachers (Kara, Ozora) had aspired to become teachers because of the difference one of their respective teachers made in their individual lives. They in turn hoped to make a difference in the lives of the children they encountered in their classes. Kara said:

I absolutely love teaching. I am born to be a teacher. When I was five years old, I adored absolutely this teacher. She made a huge difference in my lifestyle. I am here to teach. I make a difference in the child’s life. If you have
that in your mind for every single child, hopefully they will improve. I take teaching to make a difference.

(Kara: F, 44, 8)

Ozora hoped to follow the footsteps of the teacher who made a difference in her life. She had the opinion that it was “a lot of fun to make an impact on a child’s life – a positive impact I hope”. She stated:

I love teaching. It is what I always wanted to do when I was young. Going to university, doing my practical and finally coming out to do teaching, I guess it confirmed that I like teaching. I went into teaching because I used to look back and said: “This teacher was really good because he taught me how to do this. He really looked after me.” I want my students to look back and think in the future and say “Miss Ozora helped me to do this. Miss Ozora helped me when I was struggling”. Just like what I did when I looked back. I want the kids to have a good education.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

Most teachers enjoyed teaching gifted and talented students

Twelve teachers (Aldwyn, Bryce, Drusilla, Frida, Guda, Haidee, Leona, Neysa, Quenby, Radbert, Sorcha, Thirza) enjoyed teaching the gifted and talented. Haidee said: “I enjoyed it very much.” Leona’s reason was the hunger to learn exhibited by the gifted and talented when she said: “It is a joy to teach gifted children because they want to learn. They are hungry for learning and want to learn more.” The word ‘hunger’ implied a strong desire/longing for knowledge and the need to satisfy the hunger pangs so that they would not be under/malnourished, starving or stunted in their development. This hunger, if not satisfied adequately and appropriately, could potentially precipitate dissatisfaction, boredom and ill health. Bryce felt intrigued by the potential of the gifted and talented. He said: “I love teaching gifted and talented students. There are bright kids out there. I just love teaching them. I wonder what
they are doing in the future when they have the skills now.”

Aldwyn enjoyed the challenge to learn more in order to cater for the needs of the gifted and talented. He felt good when gifted students had “light bulb experiences” and understood what he taught. He said:

I feel happy to teach gifted and talented students as they challenge me to learn and know more to cater for their interests. It gives me a good feeling to see the light bulb experiences in gifted students who understand what I explain in class. The light bulb experiences make the difference in the day for me as a teacher.

(Aldwyn: M, 55, 35)

Frida felt excited when gifted and talented students understood what she taught, and they became excited in the process of learning. She said:

It is a joy to have gifted and talented students. A lot of time when I am teaching, I put the information out there and often kids do not catch the links at the right level. However, one or two catch the links and they get excited about it. I like having them in the class. They often understand ideas and can explain better to their classmates in other terms, more successfully than I can as a teacher. Yes, I enjoy teaching them. When they get excited about learning, I go home and say “Such and such got this today”. I think it is exciting to be working with gifted and talented students.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

**Some teachers found the gifted and talented fascinating**

While Frida found it exciting to be working with gifted and talented students, five teachers (Guda, Kara, Quenby, Radbert, Thirza) found the gifted and talented interesting. Radbert said:

I enjoy teaching all kids. Gifted and talented children are challenging, interesting and complex. Sometimes you hope that you are not holding them back. I enjoy teaching them a lot, mainly the conversations, the one to one stuff to get them a bit further.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)
Thirza found the gifted and talented fascinating because of their unique ideas. She said: “Generally I find those kinds of children fascinating. They bring things which you possibly have not thought about and that is what you need to deal with that kind of child anyway.”

Quenby commented that she waited in eager anticipation for the entrance of a gifted and talented child into her class to make life very interesting, indicating an interest in teaching the gifted and talented. She said:

There is one coming on Monday from another school to my class. His IQ is 142. We have been warned about him. He is coming with problems. He is very bright but socially inept and makes inappropriate comments. So life is going to be very interesting.

(Quenby: F, 60, 40)

Although it involved more work in preparation, Guda liked teaching the gifted and talented because of their interesting insights and contribution to class discussions. In response to the question “Do you like teaching gifted and talented students?”, she answered:

Yes, I do. They add a lot to the classroom in terms of classroom discussion. They often have really interesting insights. Although some gifted and talented students can be quite challenging at times, especially the ones who are underachieving, some achieve very well. You have to do a lot more work because you have to prepare for them. Yes, I do quite like it.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

By contrast, even though Idelia said that she liked teaching the gifted and talented, she was quite adamant that they were not so interesting in comparison to the weaker ones for two main reasons. First, the gifted and talented identified by her were ‘very good’ students who seemed to please her with their work. She seemed to assume that
“very good girls” who do their work quietly, nicely and neatly are gifted and talented. Second, her passion and preference were for remedial children. She said:

I do like teaching the gifted and talented but I prefer teaching remedial children. That is where my heart lies. I prefer to work more with remedial children. That is where my passion is. I always have one or two children who are gifted and talented. I make sure that they are catered for. But they are usually very good kids. Often they really present things nicely, their work neatly, colour beautifully. Often they are girls. They work quietly. In some ways they are not as interesting as the weaker ones. Often gifted and talented kids are not so interesting.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

Ozora did not make a stand whether she liked teaching the gifted and talented or not but she implied that she did not mind teaching them provided that she was equipped with appropriate skills to teach them. She revealed that she would feel vulnerable and cautious in the presence of a gifted and talented child who might know more than her. Ozora stated:

I don’t mind teaching gifted and talented students. If I do, I like to have professional development to have the skills to teach gifted and talented students. I always have the concept that gifted and talented students are probably smarter than I am. You have to be careful what you teach to them. Just in case you teach something wrong and they say “No, this isn’t the way to do it.” Yes, I won’t mind teaching them.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

My impression was that Ozora felt inadequate to teach gifted and talented children because she seemed to have the preconceived idea that she was not as smart as them. The statement “You have to be careful what you teach to them” seemed to imply that she took extra caution to ensure the accuracy of the contents of her teaching and the methods used to avoid being corrected by gifted and talented children, for teaching the wrong thing or in the wrong way. Perhaps she did not want to be embarrassed in
front of the other students who might get the idea that their teacher was not that knowledgeable which might affect her position of authority as their teacher in the classroom. On the other hand, this implied that without a gifted and talented child in the class, a teacher might at times become careless, teach the wrong thing and get away with it without being corrected for making the mistake.

**When students are happy, teachers feel happy**

Five teachers (Aldwyn, Drusilla, Idelia, Radbert, Sorcha) believed in making their students happy. It appeared that when their students were happy, these teachers felt happy, too. Thus teaching and learning became a joy and enjoyable to them. Radbert said: “You need constant feedback from the kids to make sure that you are getting out of them what they want and they are happy. As long as they are happy thinking, it is good.”

Three teachers (Frida, Idelia, Thirza) believed that when students could cope with what teachers were doing at their individual levels and pace, students would feel good about themselves and thus feel happy in the classrooms. Thirza stated: “I always thought that you got to make children feel good about themselves”. Frida made a similar point about making students happy, by assisting them to feel confident and good about themselves. She said: “They need the teacher to recognise that they have that something to give them the self-confidence and the good feeling about themselves.” These teachers worked hard to cater adequately for the students’ individual needs, pace and potential and motivate them in their learning to avoid their feeling bored, disengaged, frustrated or misbehaving in their classes. They reflected on how to have happy students and become happy teachers themselves in their classroom.
Idelia stated:

You need to have kids who are happy where they are. It is hard work. You have got to have everybody feeling good about themselves and reading on their own levels. They can cope with what you are doing. It is a big challenge for the teacher in the classroom. Sometimes children do not benefit by over giving them or under giving them work to do. Sometimes they can become bored and become behavioural problems. Sometimes when you are explaining to the class what to do, they are already doing the work. When you finish explaining, they have already finished and ask “What do I do now for the next forty minutes?” They can become show offs and move about and become a problem. They start talking, feel bored or not happy and wander around the classroom, disturbing people. They are not working to their potential. You got to have things to extend them.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

Drusilla preferred her students to have additional time to add the depth to their work and feel happy with their work, than to hand in on time something with which they were not happy because of insufficient time to add the details to it. Three teachers (Leona, Petrina, Radbert) made their lessons fun and interesting so that their students enjoyed learning and were happily engaged in the classrooms. Radbert who found it fun catering to the needs of gifted and talented students, said: “It is always fun, formulating problem solving programs for people like that. I like teaching them. Making sure that they have stages of extension is really important. It is challenging, fun and interesting.”

The assumption underlying their thinking seemed to be that students enjoyed learning that was perceived as fun. Petrina believed that “kids in primary school need to be having some fun” and added that pressuring children to do more of the same kind would spoil the fun of learning. However, Leona mentioned that sometimes duties other than teaching like writing reports interfered with the fun part of
teaching. Leona said: “All you want to do is teach and make it fun and not be bothered with all this reporting stuff”.

When parents were happy with what teachers did for their children, teachers seemed to have peaceful and possibly collaborative relationships with parents. One teacher (Haidee) made the parent of a gifted and talented child in her class very happy with her work, which resulted in a fruitful collaboration with the parent to develop projects and programs which were not solely for her child’s development but also open to other children in her child’s class to participate. Haidee recalled:

One of the boy’s parents was a teacher. So she was checking to see all the time but she was very happy with what I was doing. She and I worked together to help the children in the class, not just this boy but other children who were a bit better at school. She helped to work together with me to do projects at school.

(Haidee: F, 48, 27)

Some teachers found teaching frustrating in certain situations

Certain situations faced by teachers were not enjoyable and thus did not produce joy in their work. Instead teachers commented that they felt frustrated or distressed. The work became a chore/task/job that they had to do on a regular basis. There seemed to be three main groups contributing to the unpleasant feelings towards a teacher’s work: students, school administrators and parents. Three teachers (Guda, Quenby, Radbert) felt frustrated when their advice, attempts and efforts to help certain children in their learning were rejected. Guda, who felt frustrated teaching unmotivated students, said:

I came across particular gifted children who were not motivated to learn. That can be quite frustrating because I know that they could do so much better. Sometimes they are not an issue in terms of behavioural management. Sometimes they can be quite
challenging. Sometimes they can be quite rude. It can be quite frustrating to teach
them. If you just show me that you can do something, I will give you more work to
do. I will try to change things around a little bit for you. If you cannot prove to me, I
don’t know where you are at and I don’t know what to give you. It can be quite
frustrating. You know that they are wasting their talents.

(Guda: F, 33, 6)

The phrases “could do so much better” and “wasting their talents” implied that the
students possessed the ability/potential to perform at a higher standard but were not
achieving at the level that they were capable of, seemingly due to the lack of
motivation. From Guda’s viewpoint, it was frustrating because the students did not
seem to “do something”. If they were to do something, she would give them “more
work to do”. It appeared to me that perhaps they did not want to do more work or be
given more work and probably used the strategy of doing less work to avoid doing
more of what they did not like to do. The reason why the students were not
motivated to learn was not provided by Guda although she did mention the students’
rude and challenging behaviours. Teachers might find the disciplining and
conforming processes frustrating when students did not want to conform. On the
other hand, students might also feel frustrated for being disciplined for
underachieving and misunderstood as deviant. A way to motivate these students to
learn is to find out where their interests lie and develop educational programs to
incorporate their interests as well as literacy and numeracy skills and make learning
fun and relevant to their interests.

Quenby had taught a gifted and talented student whom she believed was influenced
by his father to undervalue education and misuse his intelligence to disrupt lessons
and manipulate situations, much to her distress. She reminisced:

You don’t see the potential coming out of him. The attitude at home was “Education
never did anything for me”. This is what the father is telling him. “So use your intelligence to cause as much fuss as possible”. It was really very distressing. He used to come into the school and say to me: “My father says ‘Education never did anything for me’. So why should I have to do anything?”

Honestly at times, I feel like shaking him. Just use your brains and do it properly. You beat your head against the wall as much as you tried. You have to lock them into a system where they actually do some work for you. So they can be very, very bright and they are not going to do very much with it, which is very unfortunate. It is quite difficult. It is very, very difficult. It is really hard to get things from him. You can do it but it takes a lot of time and effort.

(Quenby: F, 60, 40)

The phrase “shaking him” suggested the intention of making him awake and aware of the world around him in his time, not his father’s time, and think for himself. Another phrase “beat your head against the wall” implied the futility of her efforts to educate him, and the pain and hurt she might have experienced in the process. The third phrase “lock into a system” seemed to imply fixing someone in a position without an option to move away but has to stay there for a purpose. Despite the difficulty and distress in educating the student concerned, Quenby found the case interesting and persisted in getting him to do work.

Radbert felt frustrated teaching gifted and talented students who deliberately chose not to perform to the levels that they were capable of in order to fit in with their chronological peers. Like Guda, he felt that they were wasting their giftedness and talents. He said:

I feel that there are many kids who have talents and are gifted in areas that are not expressed because they do not want to be different and they want to fit in. So it can be very frustrating for a teacher, very frustrating because you know how far they can go but they choose not to go. It is a conscious choice not to extend themselves.

(Radbert: M, 39, 15)
Petrina felt disappointed when her professional advice was ignored because of top-down directives to follow the status quo as in the case of maintaining a lockstep curriculum for the gifted and talented based on the child’s chronological age. Petrina was one of the few teachers who believed in acceleration for a gifted and talented child to locate him/her at a year level where s/he benefits. She disagreed with the double standards practised in her school which permitted a Year Three child with educational needs to be located at a lower year level which fitted his/her needs, but did not allow a Year Two gifted and talented child to be relocated at a higher year level that fitted the child’s academic needs. She said:

At the end of the scale I have a little girl who is again admitted to the school this year really struggling. She is in Year Three but she is enrolled as a Year Two. That is where she fits. Because of her Year Three age, she is enrolled for NAPLAN and the principal’s words were: “How many times you have to hit the parents in the face with how unwell she is doing?” No, she is not going to do NAPLAN because she is functioning as a Year Two. I have difficulty in following that line of thought which says that children at the other end of the scale cannot be accelerated. We are not thinking about 99.9%. I can count on one hand over my nearly 40 years of teaching, children who I consider can benefit from acceleration. I think lip service is paid to cater for the needs. I can’t see why for a particularly bright child, an all rounder, a very bright child, he or she cannot be accelerated.

(Petrina: R, 59, 39)

Out of twenty teachers interviewed, only one teacher (Radbert) mentioned that grade acceleration was practised in his school, when he gave two examples of gifted and talented students skipping two year levels to cater for their higher levels of academic development and being located with older, rather than their chronological peers. Two teachers (Calla, Idelia) favoured extension and enrichment activities over grade acceleration for the gifted and talented and believed that gifted and talented students should be positioned with their chronological peers. While two teachers (Guda,
Petrina) used subject acceleration in the form of work of a higher year level in a split class to cater for the younger gifted and talented children in the same class, two teachers (Calla, Idelia) expressed their disapproval of the practice. Calla stated:

If the teacher recognises giftedness within the classroom, the child can be extended not forward but laterally so that the child has a widening base and breadth of knowledge. Rather than pushing them ahead and saying “You are so clever, you can do Year 6 and Year 7 work”. That is not working on their giftedness nor developing in them a love of learning. The ability to self manage their giftedness, extend the knowledge base laterally is more important than pushing or accelerating the child through the curriculum. I am not a firm believer of acceleration. A lot of people think that the gifted child should be accelerated through different year levels. I feel that giftedness goes hand in hand with their social and emotional development. An academically gifted child can cope with curriculum years ahead of where their age group is but socially and emotionally to their detriment. You need to cater for them with their peers and in age appropriate groups. A gifted child who accelerates through the curriculum lacks the ability to interact socially and struggles to maintain friendships. The child becomes an isolate. The social damage for the gifted child outweighs the academic gain.

(Calla; F, 42, 22)

Idelia cautioned against using the same material for a higher year level for a younger gifted and talented child who might feel bored doing it again the following year.

You have to be careful with gifted and talented students and not use the materials that the teacher next year will use. You either go out of that box and do something different or extend kids sideways. You give lots of activities that will keep them working hard and extending them, not necessarily upwards but sideways. You have to be careful, otherwise the child will be bored doing the same thing again next year.

(Idelia: F, 47, 27)

The concern expressed by Calla and Idelia was the possible adverse effects on the social and emotional development of the younger child. This was not surprising because it appeared to be a common reason given by educators who were not in
favour of acceleration, whether based on grade or subject, for the gifted and talented. On the contrary, research suggested that acceleration like grade skipping benefitted the gifted and talented and did not cause any social or emotional damage (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Rogers, 2007b; Rogers, 2007 cited in Sousa, 2009).

Petrina implied that more successful teaching was carried out in homogenous classes which seemed to cater better for the needs of all children than split classes with a mixture of students from two year levels. She said:

I would prefer to see straight year level of classes where you won’t have this huge range like we have in a split class. It is very hard, working with a huge range. All you can do is tear your hair out and worry about certain things. Instead of a composite class, you have a more homogenous group. I feel that some of my successful teaching has been done like that.

(Petrina: F, 59, 39)

The phrase “tear your hair out and worry” indicated the extent of anxiety, distress, frustration and suffering faced by Petrina as a teacher in a split class environment. She did not seem to be the only one in her school complaining about the class environment or suggesting an alternative way. She pointed to power relations existing in schools in which teachers obey and carry out top-down directives given by the school principal whether they like it or not. They do not feel empowered to make changes to the existing practices. Petrina stated:

We present very often that there is a better way of doing but it was the trendy thing to have split classes and that was what happens. When you are in school, you do what you are told. You might not like it. You can complain but he is the boss.

(Petrina: F, 59, 39)
Some teachers focused less on the gifted and talented

Some teachers seemed aware of the academic diversity in the classroom and the need to cater for the needs of all students while others did not. Jolie, Myra and Ozora commented that they tended to spend more time and attention on the weaker students or misbehaving students and less time with the gifted and talented. Thus in such cases, the gifted and talented appeared to lack teachers’ attention, guidance and time. It seemed to be up to each teacher to decide what seemed appropriate in the classroom situation which appeared to be unpredictable. An imbalance of time for all children in the classroom seemed to exist when the focus of the school was in favour of levelling practices and helping students with learning difficulties to reach the benchmark. Ozora said:

In our school, we do not focus so much on the gifted and talented. We focus more on helping and supporting students with lower learning ability. A lot of students in this school struggle with reading and writing.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

Leona felt ambivalent about educating the gifted and talented. She found it a struggle to provide sufficient guidance and time to the gifted and talented. Leona said:

To be honest, I find that gifted children are actually lacking. They lack [teachers’ attention and guidance] because teachers concentrate so much on the weaker ones. I feel that we do not give them enough guidance because teachers are so strapped for time, strapped with administrative work and just having to do everything. Sometimes for the really smart children, teachers give them extension and let them do independent work. But are they getting enough guidance? That is the lack we have for gifted children.

Sometimes you struggle. But whether you can guide them their thinking, and the time to sit down and spend quality time with them and work as a group, you cannot because you just don’t have that enough time. You just have to really make sure that
while the middle ones are doing their work, you just focus on one or two weaker ones. In our school, we give a lot of attention to the weaker ones rather than the smarter ones. We have remedial programs for kids that do not know but we do not have the same programs for the gifted ones at school. It is up to the teachers.

You are mainly concentrating on the weaker ones because they are not gaining. You want to bring them to point A but for the gifted ones, you want to bring them to point C. It is hard because you want to sit them down and the weaker ones would want to ask questions and ask for help. Because most of the time, we focus on the weaker students, the middle and the gifted students will miss out.

You want to spend as much time with the gifted with the weaker ones but you cannot. As much as you may have that plan, you do not know what will happen on that day. That day somebody might have some issue, be in a bad mood and come with a home problem and they do not cooperate with you.

(Leona: F, 33, 4)

By contrast, six teachers (Aldwyn, Bryce, Drusilla, Idelia, Neysa, Ozora) believed in being fair to students, whether the majority, weaker students or gifted and talented students in terms of attention, opportunities to learn, supervision and work expectations commensurate with their abilities. Four teachers expressed fairness in terms of equal shares like providing all students the same treatment (Bryce, Idelia, Neysa, Ozora) or the same resources (Aldwyn). Idelia said: “I do not give her more praise than anyone else. I don’t give her more opportunities than anyone else.”

Aldwyn believed that “Gifted and talented students should be treated similarly to students with disabilities in terms of resources”. Neysa said:

Obviously there is a plan for the one child that is struggling but there is no plan for the gifted and talented students. They tend to do it for the struggling child. I don’t think it is fair that the teacher should do that.

(Neysa: F, 21, 0)
Ozora had the opinion that:

I think that gifted and talented students should be given the appropriate attention like the students at the other end. You know that these children have grasped the concepts and they can do work on their own. For children who are struggling, we tend to spend more time with them rather than with the child who has grasped the concept. I know a lot of teachers will give them busy work. “You finish early. Here do some colouring”. Sometimes it has learning benefits. Most of the time, they keep the children busy to keep them from disrupting the class or telling others the answers.

(Ozora: F, 21, 0)

Aldwyn, Bryce, Neysa and Ozora compared students from the opposite ends of the student spectrum, namely the students with educational/special needs and the gifted and talented. Bryce said:

I do not treat them differently from other children in the class. I treat gifted and talented students and the children with learning disabilities the same. We identify them but we do not treat them differently. We provide well for them.

(Bryce: M, 47, 27)

While Bryce emphasised that he provided the same treatment to students from both ends of the spectrum, Drusilla stated that “I don’t treat students all the same anyway. I give students opportunities to learn.” To Drusilla, equity did not mean providing all students the same treatment but rather learning opportunities.

**Reflexive teachers think deeply about their work**

Teachers who thought deeply about their work were reflexive in nature. They could turn around any unfavourable circumstance and transform it into one in which they engaged their students in meaningful learning. Frida tried her best to understand her students, discovered what they were good at, showed concern for them and
established a relationship with them. She found that approach more effective than exercising her authority as a teacher. She said:

Occasionally I get a child whose personality does not gel with me. I try especially hard and put in real effort to find something I do like in him/her. There is an old saying that states “Kids don’t care what you know until they know that you care”. You got to establish that relationship first before they listen to you. You need to establish the relationship.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Bryce found that the diversity of students he encountered yearly made teaching interesting and challenging, and that teaching the same student cohorts as well as teaching the same way would be boring. The implication was that certain teachers could be bored by teaching the same audience or the same style over a period of time as much as certain students could be bored in class with doing more of the same work. From his reflections, he gave me the impression that he was a thinking teacher, one who was not comfortable with the status quo, one who was aware of the world around him and was open to new ideas and flexibility in teaching styles which differed from “the way he was taught” by his teachers. Instead he transformed the curriculum and his teaching styles to match contemporary times and advances in technology, and to avoid becoming bored or stale as a teacher. To Bryce, a teacher should be prepared to face the challenge to teach any class to live up to his/her calling as a teacher. Bryce said:

The spectrum of students that I teach varies from year to year. Every year I accept whatever class that is assigned to me as a challenge. If you cannot accept the challenge to teach any class, you cannot be a teacher.

I modify my teaching styles to suit the class. If you continue teaching in the same way that you are taught, teaching will be boring. You need to be flexible, change and accept what is happening and think of new ideas. If not, you may get stale. Teachers
have to be flexible, pick up new ideas and not be stale in their thinking. If you don’t accept the challenges, you cannot be a teacher.

(Bryce: M, 47, 27)

Aldwyn believed that while some teachers who were termed “unthinking teachers” by him accepted and implemented the standard curriculum, others analysed and modified the curriculum so that students could understand and become autonomous learners, instead of depending on the teachers for information. In this study, such teachers are understood as the transformative ‘thinking teachers’. Aldwyn said:

Not much can be done at school level due to the dumbing down of the curriculum and mediocrity. The curriculum is reduced. “Unthinking teachers” implement the curriculum. Not all students can become average learners. Flexible experienced and thinking teachers take the bits and pieces of the curriculum, take their own initiative to think about how to incorporate in their teaching together with other things they do, to provide an education that makes sense to the students. They teach students to become autonomous learners and know where to access the information and knowledge. Teachers always try to do what is best for their students.

(Aldwyn: M, 55, 35)

Aldwyn seemed to disapprove of the ‘banking system of education’ (Freire, 1972 cited in Lankshear, 1993) and the ‘dumbing down’ (Kincheloe, 2004) of the curriculum which he stressed was reduced to cater for mediocre achievement and average students. This implied the probability that the initial curriculum was of a higher standard for above average students, and that the standard was lowered to cater for the average learners to which students from both ends of the student spectrum did not belong. If teachers just implement the curriculum per se, without modifying it for students who are not average students, they do not seem to be thinking about the consequences of what they are doing and the unsuitability of such a curriculum for some students. Thus he labelled them ‘unthinking teachers’. The
gifted and talented and above average students would be restrained at the average level, implying their achieving below their potential and conformity to the lower expectations of the curriculum. Not all would conform obediently, thus precipitating other issues related to unmet needs of certain groups of students like boredom, misbehaviours and no joy in learning. On the other hand, students with educational/special needs would have to be pulled up to meet the average/minimal expectations and standards. It seemed that many teachers appeared entangled in the implementation of the standard curriculum and spent much time pulling the weaker students up to become average students, while keeping quiet about the average ones and seemingly pulling the gifted and talented down to the level of the average students.

Aldwyn’s comment about “the bits and pieces of the curriculum” seemed to imply a fragmented curriculum which probably did not make much sense in the disconnected form but which thinking teachers could put together and/or modify with other resources to make sense to their students. Aldwyn portrayed ‘thinking teachers’ as those who did not follow the curriculum blindly, but instead developed their own curriculum to make learning meaningful and encouraged their students to think, find out for themselves and become autonomous learners. He identified himself as one of them. Aldwyn struck me as a ‘critical thinker’ (Shor, 1993) and a ‘reflective teacher’ (Grant & Zeichner, 1984 cited in Hayon, 1990) who exercised his capacity as a professional teacher to determine suitable strategies, content and courses of action to bring about meaningful learning in the classroom (Buchman, 1990) and “whose reflective self-analysis leads to action” (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992, p.75). Aldwyn demonstrated an awareness of the ‘factoid syndrome’ mentioned by Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins (1992, p.19) which seems to occur when students
learn fragments of information which he termed ‘the bits and pieces of the curriculum’ that did not make sense to students about the world beyond the classroom.

Frida, as another ‘reflective teacher’, believed in teaching what was currently relevant to the interests and the lives of the students. She practised grouping students with similar interests together so that they had something in common. Frida said:

I think that whenever I do something, I like to link it to what is currently going on. I talk about what is current and relates it to them. I go to find the information from newspapers. I work from what students are interested in and extend from there. Listen to what the kids are talking about. Identify their interests at the beginning of the year and write down their interests. Get a sense, a feeling of what the child is, what they like and match them in groups with similar likes in terms of interests.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Frida reflected on her teaching style before and after each day and ensured a continuity in the learning of each child at his/her pace and potential. She used different approaches to meet the needs and developmental levels of her students.

Frida said:

When I go to work, I think: How am I going to get that concept through today? If I did not go through today, I recognise the need to reteach from another angle. It is not about teaching a block of work – which is tested at the end of the term and having the attitude: “Too bad if you cannot get it at the end of the year”. I look at the continuity of learning for each child to ensure that each child understands before he/she develops to the next higher level. Students are at different learning levels. The ones that progress faster are guided to achieve the maximum that they can. Whatever activities that I set up, I provide opportunities for students to show their capacity.

(Frida: F, 57, 34)

Drusilla believed in making gifted and talented students aware of the differences between the present/prevailing circumstances and the future to which they would be
heading, and implementing the preparations required to bridge the gap to equip them for the world in their future. The underlying assumption was that the *status quo* in current times might not be maintained in the future and thus a strong foundation in basic knowledge and appropriate changes were deemed necessary to prepare students in this present world for a smooth transitioning into their future. The preparation and transformation would take time. Drusilla’s approach reflected her position as a ‘critical thinker’ and ‘reflective teacher’ who aimed to assist her students develop the Freirean ‘critical consciousness’ (Shor, 1993) that she herself has so clearly developed. Drusilla said:

> There is a need to look more at things that are going on and how to tap on expertise in the community for the education of the gifted. This takes a lot of time. We explain to them where reality is now and where the future may be and the gap between the present and the future. What is going now is not what will go on in the future. Keep in mind that they must have the basic facts. They cannot go on to the next level without basics. You got to have the knowledge and know how before applying them.

(Drusilla: F, 56, 36)

**Reflections**

In sum, many teachers loved teaching and believed in making their children feel happy and good about themselves and finding joy in learning. However, certain situations faced by teachers were not enjoyable and thus produced little joy in the work. This did not mean that teachers who did not find joy in teaching under certain circumstances were not effective teachers. Many teachers seemed aware of the academic diversity in the classroom and the need to cater for the needs of all students, but some felt ambivalent about educating the gifted and talented. How individual teachers determined the nature of the classroom environment and emotional responses of their students impacted, directly or indirectly, on their
personal emotional responses to teaching as a job or joy. It was hard work to target their teaching to hit the bull’s eye to meet the needs of all students and be fair to each child so that every child learns at his/her own pace and level to bring about fun and joy in the learning atmosphere in the class and joy in teaching the students.

As Whitton (2002) said, the teacher, learner and curriculum have to interact for learning to occur. For learning to occur, the teacher has to modify the normal curriculum to cater for the different levels of abilities and needs of individual students (VanTassel-Baska, 2003), whether in terms of learning opportunities (Tomlinson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1995 cited in Renzulli & Reis, 2006), different tasks/activities (Winebrenner, 2001) or differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1995). Tomlinson (1995) stated that as teachers differentiate instruction, they stop dispensing knowledge, but instead organise learning opportunities. Winebrenner (2001) made a similar point about learning through differentiating the curriculum when she stated that differentiation provides students with different tasks and activities that lead to real learning for them.

I believe that what really matters is the child. Each child possesses different learning needs which a teacher has to address to inculcate fun/joy of learning/teaching. The challenge is how to strike a balance in the light of the hard and equity factors in a teacher’s work in order to move away from the prevailing *status quo* to a transformed situation in which students enjoy learning and teachers enjoy teaching. The transformation from the *status quo* to the ideal situation is an ongoing process, which depends on the class, school and catchment area in which the teacher is positioned. The change is not impossible as some teachers are already in the process of making their lessons fun and interesting so that their students enjoy learning and
are engaged in the classrooms. In the process of thinking about their work and students, teachers demonstrated their progression towards becoming thinking and reflexive teachers who critiqued their teaching and their students’ learning, managed the demands of a teacher’s work, and made changes to target their teaching to meet the needs of all children fairly within the time in classrooms, and infused the classroom atmosphere with a joy of learning and teaching. Thus they played the roles of agents of change in the classroom to help every child learn meaningfully at his/her own pace appropriate to his/her level of development.

I continue with my final reflections, concluding comments and recommendations in the next chapter concerning the links between thinking teachers and teachers’ thinking about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students.
Chapter 9

Final reflections

Introduction

I drew on Paulo Freire’s perspective of critical consciousness in education and a critical interpretivist paradigm to provide a theoretical framework for me to analyse the ways teachers thought about giftedness and their work with gifted and talented students in regular classrooms. This framework enabled me to identify ‘thinking teachers’ who developed a critical awareness of the world around them, reflected on their roles as educators, and felt empowered to change any inequalities in practices that put any child, including a gifted and talented child, at educational risk in their respective classrooms. Freire perceived critical consciousness as “the highest development of thought and action” portrayed by individuals who “think holistically and critically about their conditions” (Shor, 1993, p.32). He contrasted a critical thinker who practises critical thinking and is conscious of what is happening in the world around him/her with a naive thinker who conforms to the contemporary world (Freire, 1972 cited in Lankshear, 1993).

In Chapter 1, I wrote about the reasons for my search for thinking teachers who thought deeply about their roles in educating children, particularly gifted and talented students. What struck me in my study was that thinking teachers constituted a group of teachers who empowered themselves to critique the taken for granted ways of doing teachers’ work and think of ways to change schooling practices into a meaningful education for all children. This particular group of teachers reflected on their thinking, transformed their ways of teaching gifted and talented students, and
improved their education of gifted and talented students in regular classrooms by taking into account the healthy academic, emotional and social development of the students. The underlying aim of these thinking teachers, as I perceived it, was to cause a shift from the existing unfavourable/less favourable practices/beliefs to favourable/more favourable ones, from reductionist pedagogy to critical pedagogy, from superficial thinking to dialectical thinking and from a deficit paradigm to a growth paradigm. As I mentioned in Chapter 7, one of the challenges teachers appeared to face was how to move away from the prevailing status quo of a teacher’s work towards a transformed situation in which students enjoy learning and teachers enjoy teaching. Thinking teachers in my study were of the opinion that they should be fair to all students, including gifted and talented students, in terms of providing appropriate learning opportunities to cater for their individual abilities and needs, so that every child learns happily and develops at his/her own pace. This did not mean that each student received the same amount of attention or resources but that teachers strove to give each student what s/he needed in the educational setting. Several teachers expressed their views that when their students were happy, they felt happy as well. This state of ‘happiness’ appeared to be one where the activity was dynamic and both teachers and students were actively engaged in teaching and learning. The data in Chapters 7 and 8 suggested that teaching to meet the needs of all children involved developing a hardy nature, diligence, hard work and fairness.

In my study, an obvious characteristic of thinking teachers was their reflexive nature. They critiqued their classroom situations, thought deeply of their positions as teachers and agents of change, and developed lessons to cater for the needs of their gifted and talented students as well as those who were not considered as gifted. These teachers found their work with gifted and talented students interesting and
fascinating. Several teachers felt that the presence and insights of such students motivated them to learn more. They provided challenging learning opportunities not only for the academic development of those identified as gifted and talented but also for other bright students in the same classrooms.

Freire brought up an important link between consciousness and reflection. He stated that “When consciousness appears there is reflection; there is intentionality towards the world” (Lankshear, 1993, p.96). When teachers develop a critical consciousness of the world around them, they will reflect on their teaching and contents of their lessons. The reflection is done with the intention of changing the contents to become meaningful to the students and targeting their teaching styles to match the learning needs of all students. These reflexive teachers seemed to echo the views of Culley and Portuges (1985) as well as Grant and Zeichner (1984). Culley and Portuges stated that “We know that . . . changing what we teach, means changing how we teach” (1985, p.2 cited in Adams, 2007, p.15). Grant and Zeichner claimed that “reflective teaching occurs when you question and clarify why you have chosen your classroom materials, procedures and content” (1984 cited in Hayon, 1990, p.59). They believed that a “reflective teacher is dedicated and committed to teaching all students” (Grant & Zeichner, 1984 cited in Hayon, 1990, p.59).

**From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers**

The data in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 shed light on my second specific research question: Under what circumstances did teachers’ thinking change them into thinking teachers? and allowed me to understand more fully the circumstances where teachers’ thinking changed them into thinking teachers. My data analysis showed that teachers were transformed into thinking teachers when they realised that the
taken for granted practices of providing the same treatment to all students in regular classrooms did not meet the needs of the gifted and talented. When those teachers became critically aware that the standard curriculum was not suitable for gifted and talented students whose intellectual abilities tended to be years ahead of their chronological peers’, they had to treat gifted and talented children differently from the rest. Six teachers realised that if they did not treat their students differently, some gifted and talented children would be likely to feel bored, misbehave in class and ultimately underachieve. Thus those thinking teachers prepared other challenging learning opportunities to engage their gifted and talented students in learning and develop those students’ abilities to the higher levels of excellence of which they were capable. Changes happened just as Slater suggested: “When the old no longer serves the purpose for which it was intended, it is time to seek new options” (2002, p.64). Thinking and teaching are not necessarily static processes which remain frozen and unchanged over time. Thinking teachers utilise their capacity to determine and implement appropriate learning opportunities to nurture their students. This capacity in teachers was described by Buchman as “teachers’ capacity to determine suitable courses of action and the dispositions and processes that presumably underlie that capacity”, for example “imagining and remembering, interpreting and giving meaning, judging and willing, caring and feeling” (Buchman, 1990, p.46).

Ten teachers in my study realised that they had the power to change former ways of doing things that were no longer suitable for gifted and talented students, and they became transformative agents to facilitate a meaningful education for their students. As Kincheloe suggested, empowerment occurs “when teachers develop the knowledge-work skills, the power literacy, and the pedagogical abilities befitting the
calling of teaching” (2004, p.19). In many cases, empowerment occurred after the teachers in my study developed a critical awareness and questioned the prevailing practices that deskilled them as teachers and ‘dumbed down’ their brightest students. Then they stepped forward as active agents of change, thus confirming Kincheloe’s assumption that “To be critical is to assume that humans are active agents whose reflective self-analysis, whose knowledge of the world leads to action” (1995, p.75), as well as Fain’s belief of the emancipatory role of thinking teachers. Fain stated:

> It is my belief that … those of us who are called to education because we understand its emancipatory powers seek liberation for the students, for colleagues, and for ourselves. It is my conviction that emancipation and liberation result when professionals seek out and participate in what I call authentic professional engagements, …”

(Fain, 2002, p.130)

My data analysis also suggested that teachers who developed critical consciousness in themselves and their students and focused on problem solving and higher order thinking skills in their teaching and learning, reflected the characteristics of a Freirean critical teacher (Freire, 1970). Freire explained:

> A Freirean critical teacher is a problem-poser who asks thought-provoking questions and who encourages students to ask their own questions. Through problem solving, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions. In this pedagogy, students experience education as something they do, not as something done to them. They are not empty vessels to be filled with facts, or sponges to be saturated with official information, or vacant bank accounts to be filled with deposits from the required syllabus. … The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.

Four younger teachers who did not have any professional development in gifted and talented education prepared special enrichment materials to cater for the interests and abilities of their gifted and talented students who were far ahead of their peers. They also encouraged the latter to attend supplementary withdrawal programs like Primary Extension and Challenge (PEAC) courses and supported them to catch up with class lessons that they missed while at PEAC courses. One of the teachers consulted his former school principal who had knowledge about gifted and talented education. Another consulted high school teachers concerning teaching materials of higher grade levels to suit the advanced levels of their gifted and talented students. In the process, the teachers assumed the roles as “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1989 cited in Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1992, p.34) who were aware of their capacity as professional teachers and were empowered to strive for an appropriate education for gifted and talented students. They matched their teaching styles to the learning styles of their students to develop their giftedness and talents. From their thinking about their teaching practices, they stepped forward as ‘thinking teachers’ of the gifted and talented.

However, my data also suggested that the other teachers who have not yet become ‘thinking teachers’ were at different developmental stages in their teaching profession. Six teachers followed, either on their own accord or upon advice from more experienced teachers in their schools, existing practices in their respective schools that focussed on the needs of certain groups of students and/or used gifted students as their teaching assistants. These teachers provided a variety of reasons for their practices. Two teachers felt inadequate to teach gifted and talented students. Three teachers felt overwhelmed by behavioural management problems in tough schools and disabled to teach according their lesson plans, let alone cater for the
academic needs of gifted and talented students. Whether they were critically aware of the inequalities of provisions and practices in school or not, three teachers did not feel empowered to make changes to the *status quo*. Even though she might disagree with the underlying principles, a teacher said that she had to follow directives from the top because “he is the boss”. Perhaps in certain cases, constraints or circumstances blurred the critical awareness of their latent capacity to empower themselves to make learning meaningful for all children, including the gifted and talented. Perhaps these teachers have not yet had the opportunity to think about why they are following taken for granted practices without close examination and to explore alternative ways of doing things. The potential entanglement in taken for granted practices and power relations at work was pointed out by Fain (2002). Fain said:

> We find ourselves caught up in a work culture that we often accept without examination and which often controls us beyond our awareness. Those of us who consider ourselves to be professional find that we are caught between the autonomy associated with professional practice and the conditions imposed upon us by the structures in which we practise. … It is my belief that those of us who enter the enterprise of education in order to survive are often crushed in the workplace, …

(Fain, 2002, p.130)

One teacher had the opinion that certain gifted and talented students who misbehaved in class due to boredom might not have been stimulated to learn. Six teachers realised that they had to occupy gifted and talented students who finished the work ahead of the others with extra work to prevent their feeling bored and misbehaving to distract the rest of the class. Thus when viewed with the proposed Tan’s Models of teachers’ thinking about teachers’ work as a lens, teachers in this
study were found to be at different developmental stages in the experiential process of becoming ‘thinking teachers’.

When I commenced my research, my initial focus was on how/when/why teachers’ thinking about giftedness and their work changed them into thinking teachers. While analysing the data, I realised that there was a group of teachers whose thinking about giftedness appeared to remain unchanged despite exposure to pre-service/in-service training and/or professional development in gifted and talented education. They might reflect on what they did in the classrooms but they appeared to maintain their personal conviction about what they thought giftedness was and who gifted and talented students were. Underlying their thinking of giftedness and education of gifted and talented students, as I perceived it, were egalitarian principles about what constituted equity. Some viewed the notion of equity as equality which focused on having equal shares and providing the same treatment for all children. According to Braggett (1994), when teachers think that providing extra learning opportunities to the gifted students gives them an unfair advantage and widens the academic gap between them and the rest of the class, they tend to expect the gifted students to accommodate themselves to the normal curriculum and receive the same education as the rest of their peers.

Six teachers in my study found it hard to practise equity in terms of needs-based share of attention, time and learning opportunities. While these teachers spent more attention, time and effort with students who would or could not do their work to catch up, they did not perceive the needs of gifted and talented students in the same way. They felt that gifted and talented students had the capacity to learn on their own at their faster pace. This perception that gifted and talented students will manage
without extra attention is a common misconception surrounding gifted education (Braggett, 1994; Porter, 2005). This practice is not idiosyncratic to the teachers in my research as research in the United States of America demonstrated (Davidson & Davidson, 2004). Four teachers assigned gifted and talented children who finished the class work earlier as teacher helpers and/or peer tutors to their peers. Other teachers remarked that some gifted and talented students resented being frequently used as peer tutors while others slowed down in their work, seemingly to avoid the extra work as teacher helpers or peer tutors. Davidson and Davidson (2004) suggested that gifted and talented students who conformed to the pace of the majority were underachieving in school.

I came to the conclusion that teachers’ thinking matters in the provision of an appropriate education for the gifted and talented. In my study, teachers’ thinking seems to be affected by the swing of the pendulum between excellence on one end and mediocrity on the other end. When some teachers in my study thought of motivating gifted students to achieve excellence, they tended to provide appropriate conducive learning opportunities and a more advanced differentiated curriculum to meet the educational right, needs and abilities of their students. The reverse seemed also to be true when they did not honour the rights of gifted and talented students to a continuity of appropriate learning opportunities.

I strongly believe that gifted and talented students deserve appropriate attention, identification and recognition from teachers and an education that matched their learning needs and interests to develop their gifts into talents. My results suggested that in practice, how a teacher identifies gifted and talented students and what a teacher does in the classroom is influenced by his/her personal conviction, priorities
and conceptualisations of equity and giftedness. This coincided with the views held by Hong and Milgram that “the way giftedness is conceptualised influences the process of identification of the gifted and determines the special educational opportunities provided for them” (2008, p.xi).

**Teachers’ thinking and their conceptualisations of giftedness**

This brings me to my first specific research question: How does teachers’ thinking affect their conceptualisations of giftedness, gifted and talented students and their education in regular classrooms? Although there was little consensus about a definition for giftedness and talent, all teachers associated giftedness with an above average ability. Based on that type of conceptualisation of giftedness, many teachers expected their gifted and talented students to produce outcomes of a better quality than their chronological peers for the same type of work. Most teachers in my study positioned the ability to produce better outcomes as a mental process or brain function associated with thinking.

During the interviews, I sensed an uncertainty among the teachers about the distinction between the two terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’, and the nature of giftedness, whether it was natural or trained. Individual teachers perceived giftedness in diverse ways and identified children as gifted and talented according to their individual perceptions. Certain teachers possessed mis/perceptions and expectations of gifted and talented students as organised, well behaved, good at doing things, all rounders, perfectionists and teacher pleasers. What I found alarming was the attendant danger for many students to be not regarded as gifted and talented owing to their teachers’ perceptions of giftedness. Thus the development of their giftedness and talent was not catered for.
By contrast, six teachers were critically aware of the presence of gifted and talented students in their classrooms. Those teachers realised that, if their students’ needs were left unmet, certain gifted students manifested negative attitudes, behaviours, feelings and social emotional problems like aggression, boredom, incomplete work, underachievement, and unhappiness. Those students also constituted the ones at educational risk. In this study, their mis/behaviours appeared to be misinterpreted and not identified as gifted by some teachers with contending perspectives of giftedness. On the other hand, two teachers in my study noticed that some gifted students underachieved because of peer pressure and did not respond to their teachers’ attempts to assist them to develop their potential gifts.

The analysis of my data suggested that teachers were either not aware of or not influenced by the definitions for the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ in the Western Australian Education Department’s gifted and talented policies which had the potential to clarify their uncertainty and dissonance about the nature of giftedness and the distinction between the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’. It could be argued that the definition used by the Department of Education, which is Gagné’s (1985, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004) definition, is one that delineates the differences between the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ and emphasises the role of the environment, chance and teaching context. Teachers who used the terms interchangeably seemed unaware of the distinction between the two. This is perhaps not surprising because the literature revealed that too many definitions which constituted “a bewildering array” made it hard for researchers or teachers to reach a consensus on what constituted giftedness (Coleman and Cross, 2005, p.5 cited in Subotnik et al., 2011, p.7). As Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and Worrell remarked: “It is ironic that one of the most vexing
questions in the field of gifted and talented education is how to define giftedness” (2011, p.7).

Two teachers in this study who indicated that they had some professional development in the field of gifted and talented education held views about giftedness and gifted education that one would expect to be incongruent with having undergone professional development in the area. One of them who stated her perception that “All children are gifted in one way or another” mentioned that she attended the Department’s initiative programs for Talented and Gifted Education in the 1990s and had a copy of the resource package, namely Primary Teaching TAGS (Talented and Gifted Students) file in her office. The other teacher (a Gifted and Talented Coordinator) held the views that the educational needs of weaker students are more important than those of the gifted and talented and that gifted and talented students make good peer tutors for the weaker students.

To misjudge a child as not gifted/talented because of certain conceptualisations of giftedness and talent when the child later turns out to be gifted and talented is a potential source of injustice to the child in terms of not having his/her needs met, underachieving and not developing the giftedness and talent. On the other hand, to misjudge a non-gifted child as gifted appears not to harm the child but instead seems to boost that child’s achievement. As Renzulli (1984) pointed out, most enrichment tasks based on thinking skills could benefit a group larger than the gifted and talented. Undoubtedly, a diversity of gifted and talented students exists in regular classrooms. The dispute about who were gifted and talented among the participants in this study seemed to arise when certain teachers preferred to hold fast to their own expectations and beliefs.
Education of gifted and talented students in regular classrooms:

Challenges faced by teachers

One of the biggest challenges teachers faced was to cater for the needs of every child in a regular classroom with student diversity in terms of culture and academic ability. How does a teacher teach all students, including the gifted and talented in regular classrooms? The analysis of data in this study led me to conclude that whether the needs of children, including the gifted and talented students, were met or unmet depended on the type of class, environment, school and students in the classroom as well as teachers’ perspectives and preferences. Eleven teachers provided open ended tasks for all students to cater for the different levels of academic ability. Six teachers developed special programs for their gifted and talented students, some of which were made available to other students in the same class. Two teachers used materials from the higher year level in split classes to cater for the academic abilities of gifted and talented in the lower year level in the same classroom. Ten teachers focused on developing the higher order thinking skills, multiple intelligences, critical thinking and problem solving skills of their students. Teachers in two different schools followed the school ethos which focused on programs for the weaker students but made no provisions for the gifted and talented. Teachers in so called ‘tough’ schools mentioned that they spent most of their time managing behavioural problems and felt that they did not have sufficient time to teach, let alone to cater for the needs of the gifted and talented. One teacher taught to the majority. Two teachers streamed heterogeneous classes according to three main academic ability groups (bright, average and weaker students).

Two teachers in my study believed in accelerating the gifted and talented for their wellbeing and educational development even though one of their school principals
was not in favour of accelerative practices. In one school, acceleration was practised and the gifted and talented could skip grades and access the level of education suited to their abilities. In another school in which a beginner/early career teacher had undertaken her teaching practicum, a few teachers took the initiative to run a separate school based program for gifted and talented students across three grades (Year One to Year Three).

Many teachers in this study did not seem to favour acceleration and disapproved of students doing work of a higher year level. They firmly believed that the gifted and talented should be positioned in grades with their chronological peers. Their objections seemed to be linked to the perception of a lockstep curriculum for all students and egalitarian principles of treating all students the same. They said that they were concerned about the adverse social or emotional consequences to the students’ development or the boredom of learning the same thing the following year. This concern was unfounded as much research suggested academic and other benefits of acceleration (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davidson & Davidson, 2004; Davis & Rimm, 1989; Gallagher, 2003; Gross, 2004; Kronborg, 2002; Neihart, 2007; Rimm, 2006; Robinson, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Ruf, 2005; Senate Select Committee, 1988; Smith, 2006; Tannenbaum, 2000; Whitmore, 1980; Winter, 2007). Rogers noted that “Not only was academic achievement more positive for the grade-skipped learners, but also their social adjustment and academic self-esteem were more positive” (2004, p.55). Research also suggested that acceleration did not harm the child socially or emotionally (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Neihart, 2007; Robinson, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Rogers, 2007b; Rogers, 2007 cited in Sousa, 2009). Robinson stated that “Acceleration did not seem to affect social interactions, self-acceptance, or
identity, nor did it relate to social and emotional difficulties” (2004, p.63). Neihart pointed out that:

Studies of these forms of acceleration consistently fail to find evidence of any negative social or emotional effects for nearly all accelerants (Brody et al., 2004; Cornell et al., 1991; Gross, 1993, 2003; Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Robinson, 2004; Rogers, 1992), and numerous studies have identified social or emotional benefits. (Neihart, 2007, p.331)

Twelve teachers stated that they enjoyed teaching gifted and talented students while two teachers did not state their preferences as they taught whoever was present in the classroom. One teacher in this study commented that she felt vulnerable in the presence of gifted and talented children and anxious about being corrected by the latter for making mistakes in her teaching. This finding was not surprising as previous research also suggested the presence of different types of feelings among teachers who taught gifted and talented students (Croft, 2003; Galbraith & Delisle, 1996). Some teachers “love to have gifted students in their class. Some don’t” (Galbraith & Delisle, 1996, p.19). Others were indifferent to the presence of gifted students in their class (Croft, 2003). According to Galbraith and Delisle (1996), teachers who loved to have gifted and talented children in their classes acknowledged the fact that some students might know more than them in certain domains and were open to corrections when they erred in their teaching. These teachers accepted the gifted students’ opinions and perspectives with openness and understanding, resulting in mutual learning. To mask their vulnerability, some of the teachers who did not like the presence of gifted and talented children in their classes became defensive or even nasty in their approach towards the gifted and talented students who were more knowledgeable than them (Galbraith & Delisle, 1996).
Six teachers in my study specifically stated their preferences to teach weaker students rather than gifted and talented students because they believed that the weaker students needed more assistance and they found the gifted and talented less interesting. They did not seem to perceive that gifted and talented children also needed their assistance. Thus they appeared to place less importance on the needs of gifted and talented students in their classrooms. The myths that gifted and talented children would do well on their own without additional assistance from teachers and that the educational needs of gifted and talented students matter less than the needs of weaker children (Braggett, 1994; Porter, 2005) lingered on into the 2010s as reflected in the thinking of six of the teachers in the present study.

There was a concern among many teachers in my study that certain teachers did not make any provision for the intellectually gifted students in their regular classrooms to cater for their capacity to learn at a faster and more advanced level. This concern was echoed in the literature about Australian schools (Braggett, 1994; Gross, 2004; Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001; Senate Select Committee, 1988). Elbaz made a point similar to this concern about the education of gifted and talented children when he posed the questions: “What are the pupils doing?” and “What could they be learning?” (1990, p.34). His questions implied that children might not be learning in schools. This resonated with my findings as some teachers expressed their views that gifted and talented students were students at educational risk (SAER) in regular classrooms in schools. They acknowledged the existence of underachievement among different groups of gifted and talented students. These teachers talked about gifted and talented students cruising along by doing the minimum work to please teachers, or being left on their own in the classrooms by
other teachers. They were aware that some students masked their giftedness and underachieve to fit in with their peers.

In Chapter 7, I outlined what teachers themselves thought were the possible prevailing factors which hindered them from providing the appropriate gifted and talented education to gifted and talented students in regular classrooms in schools. An area of concern for them was the nature and demands of teachers’ work. How do teachers think and feel about the situation they face in the classroom and their workload? Teachers used the word ‘hard’ repeatedly to describe their work. Working as a regular classroom teacher seemed to be hard and not that straightforward. They felt that teachers need to be hardy and tough in nature in order to survive diverse classroom and school environments as well as manage the learning needs of a class of different children, which could exceed thirty in number. As three teachers indicated, teachers must love children. Otherwise they are in the wrong profession or are working for the money rather than for the students. A teacher’s work also seemed endless. The literature outlined concerns that we might be expecting too much from teachers to cope with the complexity and demands of their work (Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2007a; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001). Are we expecting too much from our teachers to cope with the complexity of their work and student diversity in regular classrooms? My research revealed that many teachers expressed their desire to teach and make learning fun but felt constrained by time and the demands of multiple tasks other than teaching.

One teacher suggested the presence of another adult in the classroom to keep an eye on the children to reduce the occurrence of behavioural problems and assist the
teacher in providing attention to students. A teacher, like any other human being, is not endowed with super vision that can notice every child at any one time in any position in the classroom. An extra pair of adult eyes and hands in the form of a teaching assistant makes the teacher’s work less hard in regular classrooms. The issue of large classes and teacher to student ratio is nothing new as it has been discussed before (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001) a decade ago, but it is a recurring matter that has yet to be resolved.

None of the participants in my study mentioned their employers’ policies or guidelines on gifted and talented education. The participants might not have been aware of the role of the teacher in the education of gifted and talented students as outlined in *Gifted and Talented Guidelines, 1 March 2011*.

The teacher’s role is vital in providing learning opportunities appropriate to the needs of gifted and talented students. The teacher should:

- provide for identified students in all cases they teach.

(Department of Education, 2011, p.6)

Without a shadow of doubt, teachers faced many challenges, difficulties and time constraint in their work but it is their responsibility to do their best to provide appropriate learning opportunities for the gifted and talented in their respective classrooms. If gifted students are not provided with the opportunities to learn at an appropriate faster and more advanced level suited to their capacity, then their teachers have to re-examine their own complicity in curbing the growth of those students’ gifts into talents and wasting their time in school.
Steps to the future of gifted and talented education

Teachers, school principals, policy makers, the Department of Education and teacher education institutions must address issues concerning gifted and talented education. First, all teachers need to be made aware of their roles and responsibilities as teachers in the education of gifted and talented students as outlined in the *Gifted and Talented Guidelines, 1 March 2011* and the mandatory gifted policy, *Gifted and Talented, 27 July 2010*. It is their responsibility to identify all gifted and talented children and provide the appropriate learning opportunities to develop them (Department of Education, *Gifted and Talented Guidelines, 1 March 2011*, p.6). They have to acknowledge the right of gifted and talented students to attend learning programs relevant to the development of their abilities (Department of Education, *Gifted and Talented Guidelines, 1 March 2011*, p.6). As Start stated, “all children have an equal right to develop maximally; the equal right to develop, however, should not be confused with a right to equal development” (Start, 1986 cited in Gross, 2004, p.24).

A way to develop the critical awareness among teachers is through professional development at the school level as well as the mandatory inclusion of gifted and talented education at the pre-service level. According to the policy, it is the legal responsibility of school principals to “verify that teachers provide the necessary teaching and learning adjustments for identified gifted and talented students to achieve optimal education outcomes” (Department of Education, *Gifted and Talented Guidelines, 1 March 2011*, p.4). Since practice seemed to lag behind the theory, it is imperative that school principals and the Department examine and monitor the situation and education of gifted and talented students in regular
classrooms. My research suggested that there is a need to honour the right of a gifted and talented child to learning opportunities on par with his/her abilities.

According to Gallagher (2000), the preparation of teachers to teach gifted and talented students seemed to be haphazard, short in duration and to lack rigor and depth, depending on the types of gifted workshops, courses, conferences and staff/professional development offered. Teachers themselves are expected to take the initiative to seek the additional appropriate preparation in gifted and talented education (Feldhusen, 1997 cited in Gallagher, 2000). If the “teacher’s role is vital in providing learning opportunities appropriate to the needs of gifted and talented students” as specified in Gifted and Talented Guidelines, 1 March 2011 (p.6), then pre-service and in-service teachers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. This point was confirmed in the literature as VanTassel-Baska and Johnsen stated:

To ensure equity and systematic talent search and programming, it is essential that teachers are educated in the relevant theory, research, pedagogy, and management techniques important to developing and sustaining classroom-based opportunities to learn for these students.

(VanTassel-Baska & Johnsen, 2007, p.182)

Moreover, school principals and the Department of Education need to identify teachers who have a passion and willingness to teach gifted and talented students to teach classes with such students. They would need support and preparation through appropriate professional development and education opportunities to equip them with the knowledge, skills and competency to educate and nurture those students. My research suggested that the ways teachers think and feel about the presence of gifted and talented students in their classrooms along with their beliefs about
giftedness influence how they approach their work with these students and have implications for students’ emotional and intellectual development. To ensure a sufficient availability of gifted and talented specialist teachers to serve in schools, there is a need to identify, prepare and educate teachers who loved teaching gifted and talented students through appropriate professional development or opportunities to become specialist teachers through postgraduate courses at universities. In sum, gifted and talented students deserve thinking teachers to provide the appropriate learning opportunities to develop their giftedness and talents. It is up to the education authorities like the Department of Education to ensure that there are sufficient thinking teachers to teach the gifted and talented in regular classrooms.

**Limitations of the present study**

There were limitations in the present study that need to be taken into consideration. The small sample of twenty teachers who participated in this study between December 2009 and July 2010 was not representative of teachers in Australia. Because the participants were self selected, they constituted a different kind of sample. This study was conducted at a particular moment in time. Teachers in Australia now live in a time of rapid educational changes. The implementation of ‘The Australian Curriculum’ (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, May 2012), the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited, August 2012) and the National Professional Standards for Teachers (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, February 2011) is likely to impact teachers’ thinking about their work with students.

Underpinning The Australian Curriculum to guide education in Australia are the
goals of the ‘Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians’
(Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs,
December 2008). The two goals are:

**Goal 1:**
Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

**Goal 2:**
All young Australians become:
- successful learners
- confident and creative individuals
- active and informed citizens

It is currently not an easy time for teachers to think about the educational changes, the high performance and development expected of them and the ways to address the needs of individual students in their classrooms in order to improve student outcomes. Further research is required to examine the impact of the educational changes on teachers’ thinking and their transformation into ‘thinking teachers’ in the education of students.

**Concluding comments**

This research meant a lot to me personally. Through it, I gained a deeper understanding of the different perspectives and practices related to gifted and talented education. In my search for ‘thinking teachers’, I came to the conclusion that teachers’ thinking matters in the provision of an appropriate education for the gifted and talented. The ways teachers think and feel about the presence of gifted and talented students in their classrooms along with their beliefs about giftedness
influence how they approach their work with these students and have implications for students’ emotional and intellectual development. Whether the needs of children, including the gifted and talented students, were nurtured or neglected depended on the type of class, environment, school and students in the classroom as well as teachers’ perspectives and preferences. How a teacher identifies gifted and talented students and what a teacher does in the classroom is influenced by his/her personal conviction, priorities and conceptualisations of equity and giftedness.

To the participants, their participation in this study provided an opportunity to examine more closely their personal beliefs, ideas and opinions about equity, giftedness, gifted and talented students and to reflect meaningfully about how they worked with those students. They appeared to be at different developmental stages along the continuum of ‘thinking teachers’ as the process of becoming a ‘thinking teacher’ was an ongoing experiential process. The participants in this study were transformed into ‘thinking teachers’ when they realised that the taken for granted practices of providing the same treatment to all students in regular classrooms did not meet the needs of the gifted and talented and began to question the prevailing practices that deskilled them as teachers and ‘dumbed down’ their brightest students. Those ‘thinking teachers’ developed a critical awareness that all students are different and have individual needs and that students require different appropriate learning opportunities to meet their needs. When these teachers perceived equity as a needs-based concept, they tended to abandon the taken for granted ways of thinking of giftedness and equity as equality, changed unsuitable taken for granted ways of teaching and provided a chance for all students to develop optimally and achieve excellence at their respective levels.
Although there was little consensus about a definition for giftedness and talent among the participants, all the participants associated giftedness with an outstanding ability to produce outcomes of a better quality than their chronological peers for the same type of work. However, not all teachers made provisions for the gifted and talented students in their respective regular classrooms to cater for their capacity to learn at a faster and more advanced level. Issues troubling teachers and/or their gifted and talented students like the complexity of teachers’ work, inequity in provisions, underachievement, masking of giftedness and boredom in certain regular classrooms which were uncovered in 1988 (Senate Select Committee, 1988) and recurred a decade later in 2001 (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001), continued a decade later in 2011. If unchecked and depending on the suitability, conviction, perception and priorities of teachers, the same issues might continue to haunt the education of gifted and talented students in schools in years to come at the expense of certain gifted children.

Stakeholders such as teachers, school principals, policy makers, Department of Education, teachers’ educational institutions need to plan, step forward and implement their plans to bring about a transformation in the thinking of teachers to dispel misconceptions of giftedness and talent. I argue that it is at the level of teachers’ fundamental beliefs about giftedness that we need to see the transformation as these fundamental beliefs propel teachers’ work with gifted and talented students. I also argue that when teachers’ thinking is transformed first, their critical pedagogy will transform the status quo of gifted and talented education. How true it is when Henry argued that: “What we teach, how we teach, and why we teach are manifestations of our commitments to justice and equity” (2011, p.273). We need
‘thinking teachers’ to act as the transformative agents to make a real difference in the status quo to transform the learning environment so that students enjoy learning meaningfully at the appropriate pace and level according to their interests and needs. Gifted and talented students, like all other students, need alert, compassionate, competent, knowledgeable and passionate ‘thinking teachers’ to educate them and equip them with the appropriate knowledge and skills in their journey from childhood to adulthood (Cline & Schwartz, 1999; Hegeman, 1994; Roberts, 2008).

It is important for policy makers, educators and curriculum planners to have healthy and balanced perspectives toward key issues in gifted education to ensure the wellbeing of the diversity of gifted and talented children in our society. A balanced perspective means equal valuing of the diverse needs of individual students, their affective, cognitive, aesthetic, leadership and social development and providing a continuity of appropriate educational opportunities, curriculum differentiation models and effective teachers for the gifted and talented students. Teachers of the gifted and talented need to realise their duty to help them develop their abilities and talents fully, re-examine their own attitudes so as not to be frozen in the past and step forward with constructive actions to accept the children for who they are and what they can be. Governments and the community need to support them with the resources and funds for teacher education and professional development in gifted education as well as gifted programs.

A teacher can arouse a child’s curiosity to learn and inspire the child to want to learn more and excel. On the other hand, a teacher can hinder a child’s interest to learn and cause the child to disengage from learning. Teachers are important role models in a student’s life in school. We need teachers with a passion to teach children and
the commitment and compassion to cater for their diversity of needs, interests and abilities. We need thinking teachers who do justice to the education of every child, including the gifted and talented, and support the gifted child’s right to a continuity of appropriate educational experiences that cater for his/her present and future needs and make a real difference.

Teaching is about how and what to teach so that every student in the classroom understands and learns. None is neglected or misunderstood. A teacher holds a position, which may be static or dynamic, depending on his/her boldness and power to maintain/change the style and content of his/her teaching with respect to the learning styles of students. The teacher holds the key to providing a conducive and safe learning environment, the appropriate curriculum and the success of the education of the gifted and talented. The student holds the key to learning: to want to learn and to keep on learning. Like the two keys for a safe deposit box in the bank, the two keys have to match and work together in synchrony to unlock the door leading to the growth paradigm of gifted and talented education for the student. The growth paradigm is to prepare every student, including the gifted and talented, during the journey in life, from childhood to adulthood, to becoming a happy, knowledgeable, efficient, effective, skilful, purposeful, confident and mature citizen of the world to come. It is the accountability of the teacher to match the teaching key to the learning key to be fair to the gifted and talented students. It is time for teachers to put aside ways of thinking that deter the matching, and step forward as thinking teachers to choreograph a meaningful education for gifted and talented students in regular classrooms in schools. How education could achieve its meaning and purpose for gifted and talented students in regular classrooms, as I perceived it, depends on the ways teachers think and thinking teachers who make a difference.
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Publications.


Information letter

Educating gifted and talented students:
From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

Dear Teachers

We invite you to participate in a research study concerning teachers’ thinking about giftedness and gifted education. This study is part of my course for a Doctor of Philosophy in Gifted and Talented Education, supervised by Dr Nado Aveling and Dr Susan McKenzie at Murdoch University.

Aim of the study
We are interested to find out what teachers think about giftedness, gifted and talented students and gifted education.

What the study will involve
If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed individually at your convenience at your school premise. It is estimated that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes. You will be audio taped during the interview. All the audio recordings, consent forms and data will be kept in a safe and secure place in the chief supervisor’s office at all times and are accessible only to the investigators of this study.

Upon completion of the study, all data and information will be stored in a safe and secure environment in the chief supervisor’s office for a minimum of five years. At the end of the five years, all the data and information will be disposed of in a manner that ensures the privacy and confidentiality of every participant.

Voluntary participation and withdrawal from the study
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you consent to participate in this research study, it is important that you understand the purpose of the study and the interview that you will be asked to undergo. You may withdraw at any time without discrimination or prejudice. All information is treated as confidential. No names or other details that might identify you will be used in any publication arising from the research. If you withdraw, all information that you have provided will be destroyed.
Benefits of the study

It is possible that there may be no direct benefit to you from the participation in this study. While there is no guarantee that you will personally benefit, the knowledge gained from your participation may help others.

If you are willing to consent to participation in this study, please complete the consent form. If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact either myself on the number provided below or my supervisors, Dr Nado Aveling on 93606261 or Dr Susan McKenzie on 93602527. My supervisors and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns that you may have on how this study will be conducted. Alternatively you can contact Murdoch University’s Human Research Ethics Committee on 93606677 or email ethics@murdoch.edu.au. We would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this research project.

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 221107) and the Department of Education and Training.

Yours sincerely

Haw Hwa Tan
Ph. D student
Murdoch University
Email : h.tan@murdoch.edu.au
Appendix 2 Consent form for teachers

Consent Form

Educating gifted and talented students: From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

1. I agree voluntarily to take part in this study.

2. I have read the Information Sheet provided and have been given a full explanation of the purpose of this study, of the procedures involved and what is expected of me. The researcher has answered all my questions and has explained the possible problems that may arise as a result of my participation in this study.

3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to give any reason.

4. I understand that I will not be identified in any publication arising out of this study.

5. I understand that my name and identity will be stored separately from the data, and these are only accessible to the investigators. All data provided by me will be analysed using code numbers.

6. I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.

7. I consent to this session to be audio taped.

8. I agree to be contacted for a follow up interview. I will like to be contacted at the following phone number ______________________ (_______a.m./p.m.) or email address ______________________ for the purpose of this study.

9. I would like to receive a copy of the feedback from the study. Please contact me at ____________________________

____________________    __________________    ___________________
Name of participant          Name of investigator         Name of supervisor
(Please print in BLOCK letters)

____________________    __________________    ___________________
Signature of participant     Signature of investigator  Signature of supervisor
Date   ___/___/______    Date    ___/___/______      Date   ___/___/_____

Convenient time for interview: Weekday _______________ Time________a.m./p.m.
Venue for interview  ______________________________________________
Appendix 3 Information letter to School Principals

Date

{Insert title and name}
Principal
[Insert name of primary public school]
[Insert postal address]

Dear [Insert title and surname of Principal]

Educating gifted and talented students: From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

My name is Haw Hwa Tan and I am writing to you on behalf of Murdoch University. I am conducting a research project that aims to find out what teachers think about giftedness, gifted and talented children and educating the gifted and talented in regular classrooms in primary schools. The knowledge gained from their participation in this project may help others. This project is being conducted with my supervisors, Dr Nado Aveling and Dr Susan Mckenzie, and Murdoch University.

The research is approved by Murdoch University Human Ethics Committee (Approval No. 221107), and has met the policy requirements of the Department of Education and Training as indicated in the attached letter. Moreover, I have a valid Working with Children Check which will expire on 10 December 2010.

Your school is one of twenty primary schools in Perth that will be approached for their participation. I would like to seek permission from you to conduct an information session in your school at a time convenient to your teachers to invite them to take part in the project. During the information session, I will talk about the purpose and context of my project and circulate the information letters and consent form to teachers to invite them to participate in the project. It is estimated that the information session will take approximately 20 minutes. I would be very grateful if you could kindly help me to inform your teachers about the invitation and list down the names of teachers who are interested to participate in the project.

I seek access to regular classroom teachers and the School PEAC Coordinators. The teachers will be invited to participate in interviews which will be conducted individually at their convenience at your school premise, to avoid impinging on formal schooling time of both the students and teachers. It is estimated that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped. I will keep the school’s involvement in the administration of the research procedures to a minimum. However, it will be necessary for the school to inform the teachers of the date, time and venue of the information session.

Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If any teacher decides to participate and then later changes his/her mind, he/she is able to withdraw his/her participation at any time without discrimination or prejudice. Upon his/her withdrawal, all information that he/she has provided will be destroyed. There will be no consequences relating to any decision by an individual or the
school regarding participation. Decisions made will not affect the relationship between the research team or Murdoch University.

All information is treated as confidential. Appropriate safety measures will be taken to ensure that the individual participants will not be identifiable. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the confidentiality of all participants. Information that identifies anyone will be removed from the data collected. The data is then stored securely in a safe and secure place in the principal supervisor’s office, and is accessible only to the investigators of this project. The data will be stored for a minimum period of 5 years, after which it will be destroyed in a manner that ensures the privacy and confidentiality of every participant.

The identity of the participants and the school will not be disclosed at any time, except in circumstances where the research team is legally required to disclose that information. Participant privacy and the confidentiality of information disclosed by participants is assured at all other times. The data will be used only for this project, and will not be used in any extended or future research without first obtaining explicit written consent from participants.

Consistent with Department of Education and Training policy, a summary of the research findings will be made available to the participating school and the Department upon completion of the project and submission of the thesis for examination.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with the research team, please feel free to contact me on the number provided below or my supervisors, Dr Nado Aveling on 93606261 or Dr Susan McKenzie on 93602527. My supervisors and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns that you may have on how this study will be conducted. If you wish to speak with an independent person on the conduct of the project, please contact Murdoch University Human Ethics Committee on 93606677 or email ethics@murdoch.edu.au.

I will contact you shortly to discuss the matter further. I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance in this research project.

Yours sincerely

Haw Hwa Tan
Ph. D student
Murdoch University
Email : h.tan@murdoch.edu.au

Attachments

Consent form for the School Principal
Information letter for teachers
Consent letter for teachers
Name list of interested teachers
Murdoch University Human Ethics Committee approval letter
Name list of interested teachers

Title of research project

Educating gifted and talented students: From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

Name of Primary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of teacher</th>
<th>Phone contact/ email address</th>
<th>Preferred day and time of interview</th>
<th>Preferred venue for interview</th>
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If you have any comments, please state in the space below. Thank you.
Appendix 4 Consent form for School Principals

Consent Form

Educating gifted and talented students: From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

1. I have read this document and understand the aims, procedures and risks of this project as described within it.

2. For any questions I may have had, I have taken up the invitation to ask those questions and I am satisfied with the answers I received.

3. I am willing for this school ________________________________ to become involved in the research project as described.

4. I understand that participation in the project is entirely voluntary.

5. I understand that this school is free to withdraw its participation at any time, without prejudice and without affecting the relationship with the research team or Murdoch University. I understand that upon withdrawal, all information that the school has provided will be destroyed.

6. I understand that this research may be published as journal articles, provided that the participants or the school are not identified in any way.

7. I understand that the school will be provided with a copy of the findings from this research upon its completion.

Name of School Principal
(Please print in BLOCK letters) ________________________________

Signature ________________________________

Name of School ________________________________

Contact details: Phone ________________________________

Email ________________________________

Date _____/_____/_______
Appendix 5 Interview guide

Interview Guide

Educating gifted and talented students:
From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

This study has a qualitative research approach with an inductive data analysis and emergent design. I will conduct interviews, which are open ended and unstructured, with teachers to find out their thinking and experiential knowledge about giftedness, gifted and talented students and gifted and talented education. Moreover, I will not be restricting their responses to any predetermined descriptors.

The seven main focus questions that I will use in my interview guide to generate data are:

1. Please tell me what you believe about giftedness.
2. Who do you think is a gifted and talented child in your classroom?
3. Please tell me how you feel about having him/her in your classroom.
4. Please tell me what kinds of things you do for him/her in the classroom.
5. Please tell about your experiences with gifted and talented education.
6. Have you had any pre-service or in-service professional development in this area?
7. Do you have anything else to add?

The questions revolve around teachers’ experiences, opinion and knowledge of giftedness, gifted and talented students and gifted and talented education. As the interviews progress, emergent themes may appear in my findings which may possibly prompt me to include questions concerning them to subsequent participants.
I anticipate that as teachers relate their experiences to me, they may cover common themes like:

- Awareness of gifted and talented students. Who they think are gifted and talented students.
- Perceptions of giftedness. What they believe about giftedness and talent.
- Gifted and talented education. What they know about gifted and talented education.
- Attitudes of teachers. How they feel about having gifted and talented students in their classrooms and react towards them.
- School provisions. What type of curriculum and learning activities they use to teach the students, including the gifted and talented.

However, I also anticipate the possibility of other themes emerging from teachers’ perspectives and experiences that are different from the common themes mentioned above. In the event that if any of these emergent themes is/are not covered by any participant, I will probe as necessary.
Appendix 6 Teacher demographics form

Teacher demographics form

Educating gifted and talented students: From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

Dear Teachers

In each category, please tick the box that applies to you.

1. Age

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<th>Ticks</th>
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2. Teaching experience (number of years)

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3. Professional development

a. Have you had any pre-service professional development in Gifted and Talented Education?

If your answer is “Yes”, please specify the type and level of pre-service professional development that you had in this area.

___________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________

b. Have you had any in-service professional development in Gifted and Talented Education?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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</table>

If your answer is “Yes”, please specify which type you had.

___________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________

Name of participant ____________________________________________

Date of interview     _____/_____/20____