Where Do They Belong? : Teacher Experiences with Twice-Exceptional Students in Streamed Gifted Classes

By Pamela Ramsay-Cohen

Copyright Pamela Ramsay-Cohen, April 2016
Abstract

Students who are considered both gifted and as possessing a learning disability face an unique set of concerns when it comes to their education. Student experience in this case depends heavily on how their teachers react to the range of strengths and challenges each student presents. Using an intersectionality framework to investigate educational perceptions of these students, this qualitative research study looks at the experiences three teachers have had with the twice-exceptional students in their streamed gifted classes in the public school system in Ontario. The study investigates their practice, and their strategies, and how these relate to their own perceptions of teacher identity. The key findings of this research study were that teachers view twice-exceptional students as belonging in streamed gifted classes, and in some cases these students are viewed as the ‘truly’ gifted. In spite of this, twice-exceptional students want to be perceived the same as their classmates and will at times forego assistive strategies and technology in order to minimize their differences. The need for differentiated education was felt by all the teacher participants, especially for those students who are twice-exceptional and this often took the form of Universal Design for Learning principles in the classrooms. The teacher participants also felt that the main benefit of streamed gifted classes was social and not academic.

Keywords: twice-exceptional, intersectionality, special education, teacher perception
Acknowledgements

I could not have completed this study without the advice and support I received from my academic advisors at OISE, Patrick Finnessy, Arlo Kempf and Peter Joong. Their advice and support was invaluable. I am especially appreciative to Erin Sperling for her advice and guidance in the creation of this study.

I would also like to thank my participants for allowing me to share their experiences, and their time.

I received guidance and encouragement from Rochelle Rabinowicz, and Veronica Ellis at just the right moments, for which I am very grateful.

And last but not least, I would like to thank my husband and my children. I would not have been able to complete this research study without your unending support and motivation.

You are my sargassum.
# Table Of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. iii

Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................. 1
1.0 Introduction – context ......................................................................................... 1
1.1 Articulation of the research problem ................................................................. 1
1.2 Purpose of the study ............................................................................................ 2
1.3 Research questions ............................................................................................ 4 
  1.3.1 Delimitations and limitations ....................................................................... 5
1.4 Background of the researcher ............................................................................. 5
1.5 Preview ................................................................................................................ 7

Chapter 2: Literature Review ...................................................................................... 8
2.0 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 8
2.1 Intersectionality .................................................................................................. 8
  2.1.1 History ......................................................................................................... 8
  2.1.2 Use in education ............................................................................................ 9
  2.1.3 Justification .................................................................................................. 10
2.2 The problematic nature of giftedness ................................................................. 11
  2.2.1 Definitions and identification ....................................................................... 11
  2.2.2 Controversy .................................................................................................. 14
  2.2.3 Streamed vs General education classes ....................................................... 15
  2.2.4 Identity/Equality issues ............................................................................... 15
2.3 Students with learning disabilities ...................................................................... 16
  2.3.1 Definitions and identification ....................................................................... 16
  2.3.2 Controversy .................................................................................................. 17
  2.3.3 Streamed vs General education classes ....................................................... 18
  2.3.4 Identity/Equality issues ............................................................................... 18
2.4 Twice-Exceptional students ............................................................................... 19
  2.4.1 Definitions and identification ....................................................................... 19
  2.4.2 Who decides which label takes precedence? ............................................... 20
  2.4.3 Classroom reality ......................................................................................... 21
  2.4.4 Identity/Equality issues ............................................................................... 21
2.5 Teachers’ identity ............................................................................................... 22
2.6 Teachers’ perceptions of ability and intelligence ............................................... 23
2.7 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 25

Chapter 3: Research Methodology .......................................................................... 27
3.0 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 27
3.1 Research approach and procedures .................................................................. 28
3.2 Instruments of data collection ........................................................................... 29
3.3 Participants ......................................................................................................... 30
  3.3.1 Sampling Criteria ......................................................................................... 30
  3.3.2 Recruitment Procedures ............................................................................. 31
5.4 Areas for further research

5.5 Concluding comments

References

Appendix A: Letter of signed consent
Appendix B: Interview protocol/questions
Appendix C: Observational note
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

You ask one of your students a question. He regales you with an erudite, insightful answer. He speaks well, and long, because it is a topic he loves. After your discussion you are confident that he understands the topic completely, and look forward to his report on the same topic. When his report arrives it is brief, with only simple sentences, and disjointed thoughts, and shows none of the mastery of his oral response. You wonder if the disparity is a matter of effort, or ability, because you know the student has been designated gifted.

The first misconception of giftedness is to equate it with excellence in the school environment. Many of the students who excel at school are not gifted. They are smart, and almost invariably, hard workers. Being labeled gifted does not mean you will do well at school. Or be a hard worker. There are any number of reasons why a gifted student may not live up to the stereotypes we hold about them, including learning difficulties.

There is no single definition held by researchers or educators of what it is to be gifted. The Ontario Ministry definition refers to an advanced intellectual ability that needs special consideration in a school setting. There is agreement that these children have character traits, and development patterns that are different from the norm, and that a key characteristic of any description of what it is to be gifted is an asynchrony of development (Silverman, 2007a). This asynchrony might be considered an academic disadvantage in itself, regardless of any further learning difficulties. Only recently has the idea that a student might be gifted, and also have a learning disability become accepted. Research regarding these twice-exceptional children is new.

1.1 Articulation Of The Research Problem

The Ministry of Education describes a learning disability as a neurodevelopment disorder having a considerable, constant effect on a student’s learning abilities, and skills (TDSB, 2013a). Lovett and Lewandowski, (2006) describe learning disabilities as the difference between the abilities of an individual, and their achievement. Research has shown that children with dyslexia display the same f/MRI results while reading, regardless of a high or low IQ score on a
standardized test (Horowitz, 2011), thus proving learning disabilities exist independently from IQ. This means that learning disabilities should be equally prevalent across a range of IQ test results in students.

Yet, students with learning disabilities are said to be far less likely to be enrolled in gifted and talented programs (Casey, 2014). “Twice-exceptional” students, those who are both gifted and learning disabled (LD), are “under-represented” for various reasons (Baum, Cooper, & Neu, 2001; Brody & Mills, 1997). Researchers feel there are students whose learning disabilities camouflage their gifted traits, and those students whose gifted traits camouflage their learning disabilities. Lovett and Lewandowski (2006), suggest a third category exists: those students whose gifted traits compensate for their learning disability, and thus appear to be average students at great personal cost and effort. This study focuses on these twice-exceptional students, and their experiences in streamed gifted classes, through the eyes of their teachers.

1.2 Purpose Of The Study

The purpose of this study will be to discover teacher experiences with twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes, and how these experiences inform their practices.

A key concern will be to discover how teachers of streamed gifted classes perceive the twice-exceptional students in their classes. Csikzentmihalyi, as quoted in Neihart (1998) suggests, “Therefore, what we pay attention to is no trivial matter; we are what we attend to.” (p188). I believe a teacher’s perception of a student as having learning difficulties or being gifted is hugely influential on whether a child navigates their academic career successfully. I hope to discover how these perceptions of ability and intelligence affect the education of a twice-exceptional student.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2009b) states that students deserve and are promised an education that fits their individual strengths and needs. Any course of education that does not recognize the strengths and limitations of the whole student, especially when these are extreme, as they are in the case of twice-exceptional learners, is short-changing students. Sometimes the academic grades of these students are considered acceptable on a normative level, even though
those grades do not reflect the student’s current depth of knowledge. As a result, the struggles of these children do not generate the same amount of concern as other special education students. The existence of learning disabilities and giftedness in a student can mean that they are marginalized in both learning spheres. Teachers especially, need to understand these children’s unique needs.

It is equally important to understand what these teachers view as the characteristics of a successful student in a streamed gifted class, and to whom these teachers believe their classes are best suited. Unfortunately, in research by the U.S. Department of Education (2014), only 1 percent of children in gifted and talented courses had an IDEA plan (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). In regular U.S. classes, the number of children with an IDEA plan rose to 7 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). If learning disabilities exist independently of intellectual abilities than clearly twice-exceptional students are an underrepresented population in these streamed programs.

Although online forums are filled with the perspectives of parents of the twice-exceptional, very little is available to describe teachers’ experiences with this group of students. And yet a student’s giftedness and/or learning disability, and any accompanying behaviour are most likely to be exhibited in the classroom. Therefore, how the needs of twice-exceptional students are accommodated in streamed gifted classes has not been widely explored. More background is needed to help teachers understand how the unique combination of factors in each twice-exceptional child generates an entirely new set of concerns, especially in the competitive world of the classroom. These students need teachers who empathize and work with them, without thinking these students are smart enough, or doing well enough, and therefore does not require assistance. These children need teachers to recognize their special criteria for growth. Any educational approach which considers only a student’s status as “gifted”, or “learning disabled”, without reference to how these qualities intersect in each individual cannot address the needs of these students.
Personally, I have always believed that children who are designated with learning disabilities or as gifted, can experience the demands of their learning style with as many negative connotations as positive. Much discussion of gifted children is of their “potential”, and I wonder to what extent twice-exceptional students are penalized or judged by teachers, and society for not fulfilling this potential.

1.3 Research Questions

I have chosen to focus my data collections on the textual analysis of semi-structured interviews, with three teachers who are currently, or have recently, taught streamed gifted classes in Ontario, as well as previous research literature.

I chose to interview three teachers, as I believe it to be a small enough group to generate a useful level of detail, while also allowing a wider range of teacher perspectives. Each participant was asked the same base set of questions, as well as some supplementary questions that arose from participant responses.

My literature review covered research into the learning of students with learning disabilities, those considered gifted, and the twice-exceptional. Research about the twice-exceptional student draws greatly on the literature of the other two fields so the inclusion of this research was necessary. As well my review covered research regarding teacher identity, and how teacher perception of ability and intelligence affects students.

What are teacher experiences with twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes and how does this experience inform their practice with these students.

1. How do teachers of streamed gifted classes perceive the twice-exceptional students in their classes?
2. What do teachers view as the characteristics of a successful student in a streamed gifted class, and to whom do teachers believe these classes are best suited?
3. How are the needs of twice-exceptional students accommodated in streamed gifted classes?

1.3.1 Delimitations and Limitations
For the purposes of this study, twice-exceptional shall refer to students who have been labeled by an educational psychologist as possessing both advanced learner status in one or more categories, as well as a wide enough discrepancy between at least two of these results to qualify as a learning disability, whether or not that causes a student to fall below accepted grade norms (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014).

The teachers surveyed are current or recent teachers of streamed gifted classes. Whatever perceptions of gifted, LD and twice-exceptional students that these teachers hold, it can be extrapolated that the opinions of teachers with less or no experience with gifted students would be far more extreme, since they would have less experience with the challenges of these learners. Identities and names will be masked so that participants may feel able to speak freely during the interviews.

I believe that twice-exceptional learners possess unique abilities and perspectives, and regardless of their potential, they are owed an education that builds on their abilities, increases their self-confidence and provides them with an equitable education.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

Researchers differ on their conclusions as to whether there is a stigma attached to the designation of being gifted. Davis and Rimm argue that society has an uneasy relationship with gifted children (as cited in Bianco, 2005).

I personally believe the stigma is real. I was designated gifted in the fourth grade. I attended streamed gifted classes from the fifth grade until grade 12. All of these streamed gifted classes were clustered within a neighbourhood school that also held non-streamed classes. In grades seven and eight, the parents of the non-streamed students demanded a separate science fair for their children, declaring it unfair that their children were forced to compete against “the gifted kids”. In grade 12 and what was then OAC, in Ontario the same eruption occurred, although this time it was over scholarships. In each case, the pressure came from parents, some of whom were incensed over the fact their children were begin asked to compete against us.
Those parents might have been surprised had they ever taken the time to meet us. My classmates were as varied in their habits, and scholarship as any classroom. There were perhaps more kids who always got As, but there were kids who were B students, and those who didn’t do any work at all. What we all shared was a ferocious curiosity towards information and subjects we were interested in. Contrary to popular thought, I do not remember ever hearing one of my classmates, or their parents brag about being gifted. As children we were well aware of our separateness from the regular school, and the setting was always uneasy in that we were never fully integrated into it.

I have come to believe that the measures of IQ that are usually used to determine giftedness are a way of capturing a manner of thinking rather than an outright academic advantage. This is not a view based solely on my own experiences, but that of multiple generations of my family. I was never diagnosed with a learning disability, but many members of my family have been labeled gifted, and several of those have learning disabilities. It is a common belief in my family that it would have been much better if they were “just smart”. Our perception being that those people who are good at school have a much greater advantage than any amount of intelligence could give.

Students are often measured by society, and the educational system on how well their achievements dovetail with their “potential”. In my school career assessment was continuous, and a student’s potential becomes a nebulous concept as it passes from teacher to teacher. You could line up the members of my family in two straight lines, those who in school met their “potential”, and those who did not. Those with learning disabilities, regardless of their intelligence would always have “not meeting potential” on their report cards.

As a result, I believe that gifted people with a learning disability, the twice-exceptional will succeed or fail based on the level of support and understanding they receive, not only from their family, but from their teachers, and the education system. Any promise of help for these students relies almost entirely on identification by teachers or educational psychologists (Cross, 2013; Brown et al., 2005). Teacher perception of these students matters.
1.5 Preview

Chapter 2 of this study will be a literature review on the intersections of the gifted, LD, and twice-exceptional learner, as well as separate forays into teacher identity and teachers’ perception of ability and intelligence. This will be followed by a review of the methodology and procedures used for the study in Chapter 3. My findings will be presented in Chapter 4 through a discussion of the participants involved, and the results of their individual interviews. The study will conclude with a discussion of the data collection, its implications, and next steps in Chapter 5.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter represents my review of the relevant literature which focuses on teacher experiences with twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes. As a result of the dual nature of the twice-exceptional student I will be reviewing the use of intersectionality to frame issues of identity, as well as discussing the nature of research regarding the constructs of giftedness, learning disabilities and the idea of twice-exceptional. In order to better understand the role of teachers in the classroom and their influences I will also be discussing literature on teacher identity, and teacher perceptions of ability and intelligence.

2.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality research studies focus not on a ranking of identities but rather on the interdependence of the identities and how these identities are situated in their broader socio-historical environment (Bowleg, 2008).

2.1.1 History

Intersectionality is a feminist concept first outlined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 which explains how different sources of social injustice and oppression do not separately effect an individual but instead combine to create a synergistically unique form of stress or intersection of identities. These injustices can be the result of factors such as gender, class, race, or ability.

Intersectionality suggests that social inequity would increase for an individual with the addition of each stigmatized identity (Bowleg, 2008). It is thus difficult for an individual in this situation to identify a sole source of oppression, instead the various forces form a very personal form of inequality.

Despite this emphasis on the cohesive nature of the intersectional identity, in order to describe its effect on an individual it is necessary to understand the societal and historical pressures placed on each separate identity as well as gauging their combined effect.

Intersectionality must be used as 'a form of social critique' (Dhamoon, 2011, p.230) and a study of power dynamics (Dhamoon, 2011). This is especially critical because intersectionality
supports the idea that different types of oppression exist in conjunction with each other, not independently (Collins & Chepp, 2013)

2.1.2 Use in Education

The use of intersectionality as a conceptual framework in educational studies has been guided by social justice concerns and concerns with institutional oppression (Grant & Zwier, 2012). These studies imply that students' academic profiles cannot be explained through merely one facet of their identity and that academic success or failure for any individual student relies on multiple overlapping failures or successes. Intersectionality in terms of its use in education focuses on the intersection of three or more characteristics or processes which effect a student's academic experience. For example, the intersection of identities for a student who is both gifted and learning disabled and how they are perceived and judged by teachers and the education system.

Intersectionality offers a chance to look at academic procedures and processes beyond their efficacy in grading student abilities. It asks the education system to look at how we identify students, which characteristics are emphasized, which are ignored and how the education system weighs the importance of each (Grant & Zwier, 2012). Used effectively, intersectionality can be a way for the establishment to evaluate their relationship with students and create programs that meet the needs of the students, rather than the administration.

An educational study which uses intersectionality as its theoretical framework must acknowledge that all social relationships involve the transfer or denial of power. Cassidy & Jackson (2005) state that many school policies do not take into account how disruptive and inappropriate behaviour is culturally and socially defined and may be discriminatory for those who do not fit the cultural norms of the school. The effect of these policies is to place a school defined identity as troublemakers or disruptive forces upon these students. In many cases exceptional students like those who are gifted, who have learning disabilities or are twice-exceptional exhibit this type of atypical behaviour in academic settings.
What we see in schools in terms of resources, organization and special education have come about because of judgments society and the education system make about which features of education are important, what has historically been important and how that importance reflects current procedures and processes (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010).

2.1.3 Justification

Lisa Garcia Bedolla (2007) suggests that any interactions which bear signs of social stigma, oppression or disciplinary activities are clear flags of areas of society which would benefit from study. In addition, Grant and Zweir (2012) suggest that contentious political issues presented by the government also create interactions worthy of study.

In March of this year, tales appeared in The Globe and Mail newspaper speaking of the TDSB's financial woes (Ross, 2015). The Ontario government has stepped in and is forcing the board to make fiduciary changes to trim their budget. One of their budget trimming moves was the elimination of 250 staff jobs in total. One fifth of all jobs lost were special education jobs, the area of student programming that contains the funding for both gifted and learning disabled programs in Ontario. This is despite the fact that student demand has been growing greatly in the special education area. Trustees theorize that the province is attempting to make cost-saving measures by forcing the integration of special education students into regular classrooms (Ross, 2015).

In a follow-up article in The Toronto Star, by Kristen Rushowy (2015), parents of students with learning disabilities question why it appears gifted programming will remain untouched and imply that the TDSB is specifically exempting these students. One of the parents remarks, "I am very confused ... this is the last opportunity these kids have.". The clear implication is that gifted students have less serious issues to deal with and yet countless studies have bemoaned the treatment of gifted students by the same educational system (Silverman, 2005; Assouline, Foley Nicpon & Whiteman, 2010).

Since both groups represent students outside the norm, they rely upon the same special education funding and draw from the same pool of resources. It is common to see the same
groups set upon each other to determine who is the most deserving of funding. These groups are both marginalized in the same system but do not seem to turn their attention from intergroup competition to seriously question why education boards and systems do not fund either group adequately.

Intersectionality is meant to help us study the way systems are configured and critique who designed the systems, why the systems exist and what effect they have on society at large. It gives us a framework to propose alternative configurations (Dhamoon, 2011) and refuse to accept that any social conventions are inherent.

2.2 The Problematic Nature of Giftedness

The following two sentences might give a reader pause:

"All children are learning disabled."

"All children are twice-exceptional."

Very few people would consider these statements true, and yet when discussing the definition of giftedness in students, the following sentence tends to appear.

"All children are gifted."

There can be no argument that all children have a uniqueness and value inherent in themselves, no matter what their talents or gifts. But does that mean that all children are gifted? While few deny that children identified with learning difficulties deserve and need modifications and adaptations to the curriculum to succeed, there is very little sympathy extended to those children to whom learning appears to come easily (Foster & Matthews, 2004). Even if their need for differentiated curriculum is as great. The use of the term 'gifted' to describe this group of students is a highly contentious one, perhaps made more so by the lack of any one clear definition or specific agreement of what it is to be gifted (Davis & Rimm, 2004) or even consensus as to the nature of intelligence (Brody & Mills, 1997).

2.2.1 Definitions and Identification

The creation of a single definition of what makes a gifted student, 'gifted', feels like a revision of the ancient Indian parable about blind men describing an elephant. Each man touches
a different part of the elephant and so each experiences it completely differently from each other. When asked to describe to their king what an elephant is, each has a completely different response depending on which part of the elephant they had explored: tusk, leg, ear or trunk (Wang, 1995). The range of responses when asked to define giftedness is just as diverse (Piorto, 1999; Renzulli, 1978), although many people might say they 'know it when they see it'.

Some definitions of the gifted learner focus on their high levels of achievement, and ability when compared to other students of the same age. In the case of definitions put forth by school boards or ministries they often include references to IQ tests like the General Ability Index (GAI) or the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV). These definitions usually include threshold numbers to define those who are considered gifted. Despite the fact that most researchers agree there are far more factors at work, in most educational settings these test results are still the driving criteria in whether a student is considered gifted or not (Brody & Mills, 1997).

The Toronto District School Board proposes that giftedness in a student is present with an assessment from a psychologist at or above the 98th percentile on the General Ability Index (GAI) or the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV)- 4th Edition or functioning at the 96th or 97th percentile on the GAI and WISC-IV and also at the 98th percentile in the Verbal Comprehension Index or Perpetual Reasoning Index of the same test (TDSB, 2013b). When definitions are proposed by school boards, and government ministries they tend to focus on intellectual ability, IQ testing and an inability to fit into a regular school setting.

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines the term gifted as,

An unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of education potential indicated (OME, 2014).

Foster and Matthews (2004) champion a 'mastery' model of giftedness, defined as an ability which is subject-specific, and so exceptionally advanced that adaptation to the curriculum is needed. They like others include no temporal limits to their definition, so that giftedness may
come and go, as each student responds differently to areas of the set curriculum. There is widespread belief that such a definition better encapsulates gifted learners who are underrepresented in the current identified population, such as twice-exceptional students, as it requires only that a student be gifted in one aspect rather than in all areas. Nor does it force expectations of achievement or potential upon the student but instead treats giftedness as another learning style which needs to be accommodated.

Characteristics and personality traits considered typical of a gifted child are also used to define giftedness. Baum, Cooper and Neu (2001) in their definition concentrate on providing common characteristics of gifted students, including high levels of creativity, super- or abstract and problem-solving abilities and nonlinear learning styles. They also include the ability to keenly feel any failures or injustices. Tieso (2007) suggests that behavioural characteristics like intensity, both emotional and intellectual define gifted individuals from the rest of the population, although Tieso does not suggest that this should be the only facet through which gifted individuals are identified. She also suggests that gifted children may be more prone to Dabrowski's idea of overexcitabilities, and exhibit extreme reactions to stimuli. Many schools use checklists of these sorts of behavioural characteristics about a student as a preliminary identification tool to be completed by both parents and teachers.

Still others agree that the key factor of giftedness is asynchronous development, or an unevenness in a child's development (Little, 2001; Foster, 2014). They also reject the notion that all gifted children show an advanced level of attainment across all subject areas.

Renzulli (2013) describes his three-ring concept of giftedness, which uses the intersection of above average ability, creativity and task commitment to define what makes a person gifted. Renzulli has championed this definition of giftedness since 1978 and has heavily influenced attitudes towards the identification of gifted children. Although Renzulli specifies above average ability, his concept of ability is fluid and does not include a hard cap of what constitutes high ability. As well, the other two defining characteristics are considered equally important in the
creation of gifted behaviours. Renzulli recently added personality and environmental factors to the background of his model to explain why and when people exhibit gifted behaviours.

The common consensus between all these definitions is that there is no common consensus. For every suggestion of a definition of giftedness, there is another who suggests it is impossible to create any sort of cohesive list which would include all students labeled gifted. For the purposes of this study I will follow the definition of gifted as presented by the Ontario Ministry of Education as the teachers whom I will be interviewing are governed by this classification system.

Johnson, Kraft and Papay (2012) in their examination of traditional identification processes posits the theory that if a school board's gifted program caters to students who are high ability and high performance, then the program's identification procedure should be matched to those students whose social and academic needs would be best met by that program. In a program with such a defined focus expanding the selection criteria without changing the nature of the program would not benefit those gifted children whose strengths lie elsewhere. As the ministry's definition allows for both unusually advanced intellectual ability and the requirement of differentiated learning beyond the regular program, this definition should accommodate for a wide variety of gifted students, including the twice-exceptional. Whether this is born out in reality, is one of the questions I hope to address in this study.

2.2.2 Controversy

The idea of specialized programming for gifted students is one which is often questioned on moral grounds. Gifted is an exclusionary term, if some students are gifted, then others, inherently are not (Brown et al., 2005). There is no doubt that the term 'gifted' is as much an educational construct as learning disabled, or twice-exceptional. But no one denies that there are children with advanced development abilities in our education systems, just as no one would deny there are students who struggle through no fault of their own. Grouping children in grades and assessing their abilities according to the year in which they were born, is itself a construct.
As long as the education system insists on such constructs dictating a student's progress through school, the concept of giftedness must remain relevant.

2.2.3 Streamed vs. General Education Classes

Passow (as cited in Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2013) had a test for defensible education for gifted students,

Would all students want to be involved in such learning experiences?
Could all students participate in such learning experiences?
Should all children be expected to succeed in such learning experiences?

Passow's Test of Appropriate Curriculum considers that if the answer to all of these questions is yes, then the curriculum has not been differentiated for the gifted learner and their needs. I would add that if the answer to all of these questions is yes, then it should be an experience open to all students. Jennifer Riedl Cross (2013) maintains that education for gifted children should be, 'different to meet the needs of students, but not better than regular classes.' (p 118), to do otherwise would be unjust. This differentiated curriculum could be enacted in a streamed or a general education classroom, but there is some evidence that gifted students perform better academically and socially if placed amongst a group of their peers (Brody & Mills, 1997). In Ontario, there are streamed gifted classes available to students who qualify for each particular boards standards for entrance.

In the Paradise Valley School District in Arizona, peer or cluster groupings are enacted within the general education classroom, with gifted groupings occurring within a class of students of different abilities (Brules, 2015). Their gifted program offers accelerated pacing and flexible subject-specific groupings which can accommodate general education students and alter according to individual student's abilities and interests.

2.2.4 Identity/Equality Issues

Opinion divides on the issue of whether gifted children are advantaged or disadvantaged in the current education system. There is evidence that gifted education programs provide a form of white flight (Sapon-Shevin, 1994) and perpetuate societal inequities (Borland, 2005). Yet,
other researchers elaborate on the many ways in which gifted children are underserviced and disadvantaged by the current educational system because it is assumed that they will thrive no matter their conditions (Borland, 2005; Foster, 2014).

Discrepancies arise, should high achievement be a key component of giftedness? There is no absolute correlation between a person's abilities and their achievements. Until decisions are made as to what constitutes underachievement, there is no fair way of judging ability (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). Coleman and Cross (2005) believe that students who are underachievers for whatever reason cannot be considered gifted if they do not move beyond their recognized abilities to concrete achievement. If high achievement is a prerequisite of giftedness, then children with learning or physical difficulties are at a real disadvantage, in communicating their abilities through traditional channels (Dudley-Marling and Dippo, 1995).

If giftedness is a result of intelligence, then we need explanations about the overrepresentation of certain groups of students. There can be no doubt that environmental and societal forces are at play as all socio-economic and racial classes are not equally represented in the populations of gifted programs. The reliance on IQ results by school boards must certainly be seen as a significant barrier to entry. Cross (2013) suggests this lack of diversity may in fact self-perpetuate as underrepresented populations may refuse to join gifted programs when they may be the only representative of their peer group.

2.3 Students with Learning Disabilities

As Lovett and Lewandowski (2006) have stated, a learning disability can be defined as a discrepancy between what is expected of an individual because of their abilities and what they achieve or produce. As in the identification of gifted students, students with learning disabilities are meant to be assessed based on several criteria, not a single factor (Etscheidt, 2012).

2.3.1 Definition and Identification

The Ontario Ministry of Education, defines a learning disability as 'one of a number of neurodevelopmental disorders' that significantly and persistently hampers a student of at least average intelligence in their ability to learn. It further extends this definition to students whose
academic or social achievement is not in line with their intellectual abilities or whose achievements can only be reached through unreasonable effort. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario defines a learning disability as affecting 'one or more of the ways that a person takes in, stores, or uses information' (LDAO, 2011). They also emphasize that a learning disability is something which you will have for your entire life and which will not change but can be managed.

2.3.2 Controversy

I have been unsettled by the undertone of judgment which runs through the fields of research for the study of giftedness and learning disabilities. There seems to be a constant battle to determine which students are 'truly' gifted or 'truly' learning disabled. To my mind this is the reason both fields have trouble defining their individual terms. Although there is less controversy surrounding a definition of the term learning disabled, there exists the same doubt in some circles as to whether learning disabilities are genuine or simply another educational construct. Susan Etscheidt (2012) outlines the history of the term learning disabled and claims it was created as a label to cover the mistakes of educational reform. She outlines the battle currently taking place about how to define the 'truly' disabled. The discussion around the 'truly' disabled centres on the separation of those who have a consistent disability, from those who have simply failed to learn. In the latter case this lack of progress is attributed to ineffective instruction, environment or lack of attention and not considered a learning disability (Heyd-Metzuyanim, 2013). The use of a discrepancy between expected ability and academic achievement to delineate a learning disability has been proposed and also criticized (Brody & Mills, 1997).

Etscheidt proposes that the United States recent response-to-intervention movement was in response to the growing numbers of children identified with a learning disability in an attempt to limit eligibility and the cost of funding learning disability programming.
I find it interesting that the gifted community tends to view gifted education as a protective space for students whereas it is evident many in the LD community view the learning disabled label as something which students must overcome to succeed.

**2.3.3 Streamed vs General Education Classes**

There is evidence that students with mild LDs can be assisted and taught effectively through a traditional classroom environment with assistance (Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009; Brules, 2015). But other researchers believe that intensive instruction by highly qualified special education teachers are needed for students with LDs to succeed (Brody & Mills, 1997). As with gifted students, some differentiated instruction with individualized educational foci is thought to be needed in order for a child with a LD to succeed in a general education classroom.

Once more, there are similarities with gifted students' academic experiences in that the school system as it is currently arranged does not always allow for a breadth of abilities and needs to exist, and be taught effectively within the same classroom. There is reason to believe that the difference in expectations and teaching methods within the same class can be great enough to place certain students at an unfair advantage.

In the case of teaching mathematics, Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013) suggests that direct instruction methods often used to indoctrinate concepts to students with learning disabilities may in fact be perpetuating failure in these students because they never have a chance to explore mathematic concepts in any meaningful manner.

**2.3.4 Identity Equality Issues**

Learning disabilities are always described in terms of education and the school environment, but that is only one facet of any student's life. As well, students with learning disabilities have their identities built for them around their deficits, and the ways in which they differ from the average student (Renshaw, Choo & Emerald, 2014). Neihart (1998) points out that students experience difficulties with self-image when they realize the extent of their differences with their peers. The larger these differences appear to the student, the more extensive the damage can be to the student's self-image.
Luna (2009) in her study of students with learning disabilities at an Ivy League university points out that while other differences such as race, can be seen as valuable to the educational establishment, learning disabilities are usually viewed as deficits. Since learning disabilities may involve accommodations such as extra time on a test, a scribe, or access to printed notes, there are often questions about how 'real' a learning disability is and how concessions are unfair to other students. In an environment like school where competition is implied, it may seem to both teachers and other students that students with learning disabilities are getting unfair advantages (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995; Luna 2009).

2.4 Twice-Exceptional Students

no two populations have suffered from more definitional problems than learning disabled and gifted. (Vaughn, 1989, p.123)

2.4.1 Definitions and Identification

The idea that students who have a learning disability may also be gifted and that the reverse might also be true, has been around academic circles for decades (Baum, 1990; Brody & Mills, 1997; Foley-Nicpon, Assouline and Colangelo, 2013). What is less certain is why it has taken so long for the idea to spread, not just to the general population, but to the general education population of teachers and specialists.

Baum (1990) identified three categories of children who might be deemed twice-exceptional: the first are children who have been identified as gifted but who are discovered to have a moderate learning disability; the second are children who may appear average as their gifted abilities mask their learning disabilities and the last are those children who have been identified as learning disabled but are discovered to be gifted.

Of all these groups, Baum (1990) asserts the most unassuming is the second, as they often go unnoticed in the general bustle of the classroom as their gifts compensate for their struggles. The first group is likely to experience problems (and be identified) in middle school when the workload becomes heavier and their gifts no longer completely compensate for their learning disability. The second group may never be discovered as long as their compensation strategies
hold their abilities to curriculum norms, unless behavioural problems call attention to them (Brody & Mills, 1997). The third group have been rated the most disruptive in classroom situations (Baum, 1990). All of the groups are vulnerable because they are at high risk of remaining unidentified because they do not fit the standard expectation of what a gifted child is (Morrison & Rizza, 2007; Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady & Dixon, 2007).

These groups of twice-exceptional students are among the most effected by how giftedness is defined. If high ability /high achievement is set as the benchmark for giftedness than they may be passed over due to test results and difficulties with expressing their abilities through traditional assessment methods.

Brody and Mills (1997) in their review of the special issues gifted learners with learning disabilities have state emphatically that these students have needs and concerns which vary greatly from those of all other learners. The uneveness of their abilities causes stress and unique learning and social challenges that can make school programs built solely for the gifted student or student with learning disabilities inappropriate and ineffective.

### 2.4.2 Who Decides Which Label Takes Precedence?

In order for a child to qualify for a Gifted Determination for Students with Learning Disabilities in the Toronto District School Board they must first be assessed with a learning disability. The assessment must show that the student is of above average intelligence and also possesses a processing deficit which creates academic hardship. At that point, if the student can also be found to have a WISC-IY or GAI score of at least the 84th percentile and a Verbal Comprehension Index or Perpetual Reasoning Index of the 98th percentile or above, they will be considered to fit the Learning Disabled criteria for Gifted identification (TDSB, 2013b).

The number of disabilities that might be encompassed by that definition is vast and includes disabilities that involve processing, dyslexia, ADHD or autism spectrum. From the research, deficits seem to loom larger for teachers and the school system, than strengths. Once a learning disability is discovered, or if a learning disability is discovered first, that label tends to define a child's pathway through the school system. Research suggests this pathway is completely
different from a child who is first labeled gifted and then later discovered to also have a learning
disability.

2.4.3 Classroom Realities

Brody and Mills (1997) outline some of the difficulties thought to be inherent in the
inclusion of twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes. The main concerns centre upon
the speed at which curriculum material is covered, the amount of academic output required and
whether students' disabilities would prevent them from engaging independently in the class.
There is also evidence that twice-exceptional students in these streamed classes had trouble
accessing the accommodations that were outlined in their IEPs due to teacher reluctance (Reis et
al., 2014).

Baum (1988) mentions that teacher perception of creativity is the primary defining feature
between teacher perception of high ability students from both LD/average and LD/high ability
students. But Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013) suggests that students with learning disabilities are not
encouraged by their teachers to explore mathematics beyond rote instruction. I do not believe we
can expect students to succeed if they are not given academic opportunities which extend beyond
fixing perceived deficiencies.

Studies have also shown that the type of rote instruction often utilized to ameliorate
learning disabilities is completely inappropriate for the twice-exceptional learner. Siegle and
McCoach (2005) stress that one of the major factors for underachievement in students is whether
or not they value their academic work. Students value work that is slightly above their current
skill set, which results in a difficult balancing act for those children whose intellectual abilities
are quite advanced but may also experience difficulties in processing or producing work.

2.4.4 Identity Equality Issues

Twice-exceptional children occupy a unique niche, and often times they find themselves
frustrated at completing tasks which are intellectually not difficult for them. Oftentimes, these
children are accused of being lazy, unmotivated, or disorganized or are told if they would only
apply themselves, they would be able to succeed (Berninger and Abbott, 2013).
Children who are twice-exceptional are often caught between two worlds. The accelerated production of academic work inherent in many gifted programs may not possible for them to achieve but the direct instruction that is usually recommended for learning disabilities is inappropriate and ineffective for them (Bandura, 1982; Little, 2001).

Bandura (1982) proposed the idea of self-efficacy, which is the opinion a person holds of their own competence. Self-efficacy increases when a student experiences success and as they become more confident of their ability to accomplish goals. In order for the goal to be a success the student must sense that the goal is a challenge but an attainable one. In the case of the repetitive drilling that is usually recommended to deal with learning disabilities, it does nothing more than further alienate the twice-exceptional student from wanting to learn, as these students perceive no intellectual value in those types of tasks.

Rather, Baum (1990) noted that the strengths inherent in a child's gifts should be emphasized in order to compensate as much as possible for any disability, as the learning disability will never go away but may be ameliorated through compensatory strategies.

### 2.5 Teachers' Identity

When we consider the effect which teacher identity has upon any classroom it is important to remember that identity is a co-created and fluid concept. The identities teachers create for themselves not only effect how they view their responsibilities and obligations but how they view their students (Stanford & Reeves, 2007). The very act of learning causes identities to shift and so it may be assumed that a classroom is full of many freshly constructed identities on a consistent basis.

A teacher's identity might be discerned by simple observation of their daily actions in the classroom and their interactions with their students (Kozleski and Waitoller, 2010). Teachers might also experience a clash between their self-efficacy and organizational restraints that prevent them from realizing their ideal (Hsieh, 2015). Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013) said, "Discovering that I, as a teacher, have a responsibility for my student's failure is not an easy experience." The idea of teaching as a profession and vocation is deeply held and can lead to
difficulties when a teacher's identity is tied to being in charge of ameliorating their students' difficulties and knowledge gaps (Kozleski and Waitoller, 2010).

The recent push for inclusive education from education systems, whereby the learning disabled, the gifted and the average student learn side-by-side can bring many new stresses and challenges to teachers (Cross, 2013).

In Southern and Jones' (2004) study of special education teachers for students who are learning disabled, he discovered that the teachers considered themselves a distinct sub-category of teacher. They perceived themselves as separated from their mainstream colleagues by their strong social consciences, their specialist training and a feeling that they were regarded with patronization by the other teachers as their charges were not as academically advanced (Southern & Jones, 2004). In this case teachers tied the low academic value placed upon their students to their own identity.

Davis and Rimm (2004), as well as Mills (2003), looked at teachers of the gifted and whether it was necessary for they themselves to be intellectually gifted. Rosemarin (2014) agrees with them that teachers of the gifted need to be intelligent, knowledgeable but also emotionally wise in order to teach effectively. But, of course, that is recipe for excellence for any teacher of any class. Cross (2013) in her analysis of social equity in gifted classes, argues that gifted education appears to be the most desirable education 'because it serves students at the highest ability levels.' (p.117). By extension, teachers of the gifted are assumed to be amongst the most proficient masters of their profession (Silverman, 1980). This has implications for the identities these teachers have assumed for themselves when Brody and Mills (1997) suggest that teachers of the gifted may not be willing to slow or adapt the pacing and curriculum of streamed gifted classes in order to accommodate twice-exceptional students.

**2.6 Teachers' Perceptions of Ability and Intelligence**

The response of others to the child's giftedness will have the most impact on the development of the self, since it is the reflection from others onto the self that fuels its differentiation. (Neihart, 1998, p. 189)
Teaching must be considered a political act due to the power wielded by the individual teacher in their classroom. Teachers choose student groupings, forms of assessment, and write report cards as well as filter students for special education testing, based upon their formal and informal observations (Kozleski and Waittoller, 2010). Teacher perceptions of high and low ability student vignettes changed dramatically when they were informed the students possessed a learning disability (Baum, 1988). As well, access to educational resources, and participation in internal classroom activities, in addition to external school activities all fall under the power of the classroom teacher (Brown, et al., 2005).

Due to the great power they hold over the students in their charge, teachers must be aware of the crucial roles they play in the daily lives of their students. They must monitor any prejudices they possess towards certain types of knowledge and how their preconceived notions of student behaviours may exclude others (Kozleski and Waittoller, 2010; Neihart, 1998). Neihart (1998) also emphasizes that certain types of giftedness like academic giftedness, are more greatly appreciated in school settings. Students who express their abilities in more diverse or creative ways are likely to be less appreciated. Formal and informal assessments need to be chosen wisely and teachers must examine their own perceptions of student behaviour in terms of pre-existing scales of desirability. This is particularly important as Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013) found that violations of standard interactional routines by either teacher or student can result in limitations in the types of participation to individual students.

Teachers must also remember that inclusive classrooms will present their own challenges. As the gate keeper to the wider world of education, teachers possess tremendous power and must view each student as an individual possessing their own unique approach to challenges and accomplishments (Rosemarin, 2014; Kozleski and Waittoller, 2010).

Schools are a critical filter to future opportunities and by applying educational labels to students schools can substantially alter a student's futures for good or ill (Cross, 2013). Some categorization is necessary to provide each student with the necessary tools for success, yet Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013) states that despite their ease of use, teachers should resist identifying
students into certain categories. Instead they should try to interact with their students individually and remember that teachers have a tremendous power to shape the self-identities which their students hold of themselves (Neihart, 1998). Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013), found that not only did teacher perception alter a student's view of themselves in the present, it also negatively altered how the student viewed her previous abilities as well.

In an award-winning research paper for the Council for Learning Disabilities, Margarita Bianco (2005), reported some startling results in a study she conducted to determine whether teachers' recommendations to gifted programs would be swayed by the application of a learning disabled label to identically described hypothetical students. She determined that while both mainstream and special education teachers were reluctant to refer learning disabled students to the gifted program, special education teachers were especially reluctant to do so. Teacher perceptions and stereotypes about gifted students are certainly partly to blame for the lack of these referrals as are stereotypes about students with disabilities (Minner, 1990). This is, however, particularly surprising in the case of the special education teachers who have specialized training and direct contact with children with disabilities on a daily basis, which has been proven to make them more sympathetic. Bianco (2005) does propose that the disconnect occurs between what teachers view as the likely requirements of a gifted program and the characteristics which they imagine a learning disabled student to possess.

What is most disturbing about this study is that teacher recommendations are one of the first steps in the identification of a gifted child (Bianco, Harris, Garrison-Wade, & Leech, 2011; Minner, 1990). Knowing that teacher perceptions are so easily swayed by labels is therefore, disappointing, but also a possible explanation for the imbalance in the number of learning disabled students represented in the gifted population.

2.7 Conclusion

The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century. (Hall, 1993, 361)
Stuart Hall presented this notion of living with difference as a way of expressing how cultural diversity would eventually become the new norm of the twenty-first century. I believe the same sentiment applies to the idea of twice-exceptional students. Their reality is messy and heterogeneous and not easily captured or defined. Although the twice-exceptional share characteristics of both gifted students and students with learning disabilities, their strengths and challenges mesh and meld in a way that is utterly different to either category. How teachers and the education system treat these students is not just an administrative task but a moral one which demonstrates how our greater society deals with difference.
Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

My research study, is a qualitative case study which focuses on teacher experiences with twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes, and how these experiences inform their practice with those students. In particular I endeavour to answer three questions,

1. How do teachers of streamed gifted classes perceive the twice-exceptional students in their classes?

2. What do teachers view as the characteristics of a successful student in a streamed gifted class, and to whom do teachers believe these classes are best suited?

3. How are the needs of twice-exceptional students accommodated in streamed gifted classes?

This research was begun to fulfill the requirements of my Master of Teaching program, for my own edification, and to provide some benefit to the teacher participants whom I interviewed. My hope is to provide my teacher participants with the opportunity to express and solidify their own education views and practices while reflecting on the questions this paper poses. I am aware that my own situation as a researcher may influence my efforts during the study.

My qualitative research study is an attempt to interpret the lived experiences of three teacher participants. The semi-structured interview format used in my interviews, was chosen to allow the teachers to fully express their personal experiences with twice-exceptional students (Creswell, 2013). Careful analysis of the individual responses given by the teachers was considered first. My interpretation of the interviews and other data arose from the comparison with information gathered in my literature review, as well as the pattern matching, coding and cross-case synthesis of all interviews (Baxter, 2008). The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed as the method of data collection. I relied upon the knowledge gained from my OISE Master of Teaching courses and from my professors in conducting this research.
My three participants have all taught streamed gifted classes, their experiences spanning a period of two to 25 years. They all teach in the public school system in Ontario and all have undertaken at least one additional qualification in Special Education.

In this chapter I describe my research approach and procedures and include an explanation of the instruments through which I collected my data, as well as individual descriptions of my participants. Sampling criteria and the procedures through which my participants were selected are also outlined. Finally, I have listed my data analysis procedures and the methodological strengths and limitations of undertaking a qualitative research approach using case studies.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study is a qualitative case study of three teachers and as such focuses on their experiences, as related by them. In trying to answer my questions about how teachers respond to twice-exceptional students I was open to all possible answers and endeavoured to use the data and a ‘bottom-up’ analysis process to guide my processing of their interviews. This inductive process was reliant on the rich, descriptive data gathering that is characteristic of qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Since this data relies so heavily on individual recollections and experiences, participants were provided with the transcribed results of interviews to verify accuracy.

Csikzentimihalyi, as quoted in Neihart (1998) suggests, ‘Therefore, what we pay attention to is no trivial matter; we are what we attend to.’ (p.188). In trying to understand how twice-exceptional students deal with the intersection of possessing traits of both giftedness and learning difficulties, the lived experiences of the teachers who guide them is of primary importance. As well, there is value in having these teachers take the time to focus and reflect on their practice as it relates to these students.

My approach to this research study began initially with a preliminary literature review of peer-reviewed scholarly documents. I conducted further research as new research areas presented themselves while creating this paper, and have added and revised research areas as needed.
To further my knowledge of twice-exceptional students and their interactions with the education system I attended lectures by Dina Brulles and Joanne Foster. I also attended the Association for Bright Children conference in February 2015. I believe these lectures and conferences are important because they reflect the current climate of education as it applies to gifted and twice-exceptional children and shines a light on which topics are currently under study and matter to educators and researchers. These professional activities also provided me with a broad overview of the field as it stands today.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

My primary sources of data collection were three individual semi-structured teacher interviews. The questions outlined in Appendix A were used as a framework for all the interviews. I allowed myself the flexibility to insert new questions should a participant introduce an important new issue or opinion relevant to my research questions. This allowed me to ask needed questions but also allowed the participants the freedom to express items of particular importance to them (Creswell, 2013).

As my research questions are based on the lived experiences of teachers and how they interact with twice-exceptional students, I wanted to draw upon their knowledge of real life teaching situations to supplement the book-based information I had already acquired.

I believe that teachers have a crucial influence on a student’s educational experience. Teacher perceptions are integral to how a child’s learning progresses, and how a child views their educational interactions, especially in the case of those in possession of learning exceptionalities. Conducting three interviews allowed me to cross reference data and themes between the individual responses (Creswell, 2013).

My interviews covered three main themes. I inquired about each teacher’s background and educational experience, especially as it related to special education knowledge. Secondly, I explored how the teachers viewed twice-exceptional children, and gifted children and whether the participants felt that the needs of twice-exceptional children were being met, or not met in the classroom. Lastly, I inquired as to whether teachers felt their streamed gifted classes could
accommodate twice-exceptional learners effectively, and if not, I allowed the teachers to discuss where they feel these students would be best served within our current educational system.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed and each interviewee offered the chance to review their transcription and make corrections or additions as they saw fit.

All questions were asked to all three interviewees. The interviews ranged in length from 18 minutes to 1 hour 12 minutes. Two of the interviews took place in school settings and one took place in a coffee shop. All the participants had considerable experience with teaching streamed gifted classes and were familiar with the terms used in the interviews including definitions of gifted, twice-exceptional and learning difficulties. Any additional questions that arose from these semi-structured interviews were recorded and included in the transcripts. The transcripts created from these interviews were made the best of my abilities and I consider them to be accurate. The addition of each participant’s comments on their transcripts, if any, were delineated and noted.

3.3 Participants

In order to conduct this research study it was necessary to create a set of sampling criteria for participants, methodological procedures on how to locate participants and guidelines on how participants will be treated during the research process. What follows is a look at these procedures and also a section for the biography of both participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

My study of teacher attitudes towards twice-exceptional children will focus on:

• teachers of streamed gifted classes
• with OCT accreditation
• with at least 5 years teaching experience
• at least 2 years experience teaching streamed gifted classes specifically
• willing to be involved in my research project
• willing to share personal examples, opinions and experiences relevant to the topic
It was necessary to institute some boundaries to this qualitative study so that I could clearly define the context in which I would be answering my research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2011). I chose these criteria because twice-exceptional students are statistically underrepresented in streamed gifted classes, therefore, the longer a teacher has taught these classes, the more likely they are to have had experience teaching a twice-exceptional student in this context. Also, a more experienced teacher may be more apt to suggest possible solutions and strategies on how best to educate the twice-exceptional, and is more likely to have concrete opinions on what strategies do and do not work.

I wanted my participants to be experienced with streamed and non-streamed classes so they would be able to make informed comparisons between how learning difficulties are treated in both cases. As differentiated education is a very popular educational idea but I wanted to know if my teacher participants had practical examples of how differentiated education practices translates into real life contexts. A teacher with a wider range of experiences is more likely to be able to answer such questions with practical examples.

What teachers consider the success characteristics of a student in a streamed gifted class tells us a lot about what expectations they have of a gifted student and what they consider the most important defining qualities of “giftedness”. In particular, the absence of these qualities in a student would imply failure. In addition, if twice-exceptional students fulfill the same tests and criteria for giftedness as other students, then they should be well-served in streamed gifted classes. There is a need to discover if teachers believe streamed gifted classes are for all gifted students or only gifted high achievers and whether they feel streamed gifted classes can serve students with differentiated needs.

3.3.2 Recruitment Procedures

I relied upon pragmatism and convenience rather than purposive sampling, and drew upon friends and colleagues for recommendations of possible teacher participants and solicited introductions to possible participants this way. I have known many people with children in various streamed gifted classes and first approached the teachers of these classes through email,
based upon expressions of interest. I did not want these approaches to be uncomfortable for the possible participant(s) and kept preliminary discussions professional (University of Toronto, 2010).

By being one level removed from a personal connection to these teachers, I wanted to give them a strong impression that their confidentiality would be fully respected and that our discussions would in no way impact their professional relationships with their nominator. I reassured the teachers that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could end their involvement in the study at any stage, without any negative impact to themselves.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

Jean

Jean is a teacher of 25 years, nine of those years spent teaching streamed gifted classes. She also worked for many years at the Ministry of Education as an education advisor. She identifies herself as gifted and is the mother of a child who is twice-exceptional. She is a strong proponent of the idea of growth mindset and believes that the benefits of this practice are important for any student. She practices differentiated instruction in her classroom on a daily basis, with many subjects covered at different levels and with different entry points. She acknowledges that the amount of work this requires is considerable and that it takes a toll on her personally.

Sarah

Sarah taught gifted classes for 6 years and is this year teaching a non-streamed academic class. She believes that many of the educational practices that first appeared in gifted classes are beneficial to any class, and are often adopted by other teachers. Sarah has had streamed gifted classes where the percentage of twice-exceptional students was approximately 75% of the class. She believes that the strongest benefit of streamed gifted classes is social, and that students in these classes feel most comfortable with each other, but that they should be encouraged to socialize with other students for their greater benefit.

Simon
Simon is in his second year of teaching streamed gifted classes, although he previously taught non-streamed classes. He expressed a strong fondness for his students, and their individuality. He believes that the range of abilities in a streamed gifted class can be just as wide as it is in a non-streamed class. He believes students in gifted programs are often viewed by other people outside the program with unrealistic expectations of perfection, which they cannot fulfill.

3.4 Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview was completed, in order to preserve the reliability of the data. I created an observational notes form which I employed during and immediately after the interviews to record descriptions of the physical setting in which the interview took place, as well as any events or activities which occurred during the interview or any participant reaction which I noticed. These observational notes included my own thoughts and reactions during the interviews and also any questions or changes which arose during the interview process.

Each transcript was read over numerous times, then I began a preliminary coding cycle to underline phrases and ideas that stood out or intrigued me (Saldana, 2012). My second review of each transcript involved colour-coding those phrases that appeared to me to bear a relationship with each other (Saldana, 2012). Once this colour-linking was complete, I begin looking for common patterns or anomalies to draw codes which would capture the essence of what my participants expressed (Saldana, 2012). I used this second round of coding material to compare each transcript to each other. I then attempted to draw out common groupings between each transcript and these groupings formed the basis of the themes that I have expressed in Chapter 4. As I progressed, I continued to refine the themes, and filtered them and the raw data by their usefulness in answering my research questions. I then used my literature review to elaborate on my key themes by comparing them to those already held by scholars. I compared how these themes related to what existing scholarly literature said about the educational experiences of the twice-exceptional and noted any similarities or contrasts between the two types of data. I also opened myself to the possibility of ‘null’ data, because should any major themes or ideas held in
the relevant literature, fail to materialize in my interviews, their absence could be equally telling. For my findings in Chapter 4, I chose quotes and examples from each interview which I felt best represented each participant’s experiences and opinions.

I chose to view my research questions and coding through a framework of intersectionality, because I believe that being twice-exceptional is not the same as having learning difficulties and/or gifted traits. The intersection of these two identities creates a complexity of experiences which produces situations that are not typical of either identity when considered singly (Grant & Zweir, 2012). As a result of these unique experiences I believe that issues surrounding the education of the twice-exceptional are issues of social justice as individuals tend to ‘emphasize or ignore certain aspects of identity’ (Grant & Zweir, 2012), based on their environment.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

I am guided in this research study by the OISE Master of Teaching Program’s ethical review approval procedures. As a result, only teachers will be interviewed. I will not be conducting classroom observations, as they would involve younger participants and are not covered under the ethical agreement which the Master of Teaching Program has negotiated and for whom the possible risks outweigh any gains that might derive from such studies (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Participant were required to sign a consent letter to give permission for their data to be used in this study before an interview could take place, and guarantees of confidentiality of identifying information were given to all participants, including the use of pseudonyms.

Each participant was given a letter of informed consent to be read, agreed to and signed before the interview process began. Two copies of each consent letter were made with each participant given a copy, and one copy retained for the study’s records. In terms of data storage, all audio files and transcripts are to be stored on my password-protected computer and phone for a period of 5 years, after which time the files will be destroyed.

All participants were given detailed information about the content of the study, the consent process and I attempted to address any confidentiality concerns that the participants
might have. All information which might identify the participants, their schools, or students has been excluded. Each participant has been provided with a pseudonym in order to preserve their privacy, so as to not expose participants to unnecessary personal or professional risk (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Participants agreed to allow my course instructor, and my research supervisor to review their transcripts and other data, for the sole purpose of the completion of this study.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that I designed to make the participants feel comfortable and respected as valued partners in this study. I am aware that my use of participant data for my paper could have created an unequal power relationship between myself, and the participant(s), to my benefit (Glesne, 2011). With this in mind all participants were reminded before the interview that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could choose at anytime not to answer questions for personal or professional reasons. There were no known risks for participants in terms of this study but I was mindful of physical reactions and possible emotional triggers when necessary.

Each participant was made aware that they would be able to revise or add to their answers should they choose to before data analysis began, and that transcripts of their interviews would be available to them for review. As a researcher, I am aware that my own experiences may make me construe participant’s actions or answers in ways in which they may not intend. This chance to review their transcript gives some of that power back to the participant (Creswell, 2013).

No changes were made to the interview procedures outlined in the consent form, so no new consent form was needed.

Appendix A contains all semi-structured interview questions that were asked during the interviews.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Limitations

Certain limitations are inherent in any qualitative research study. Qualitative research by its nature is meant to be personal, naturalistic and descriptive. In this instance, I interviewed three individuals to hear about their personal experiences and opinions as they pertained to twice-
exceptional students. By necessity these experiences are those of individual participants and are not generalizable to other teachers or other schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). My research study is not able to predict or illuminate the experience of all teachers but it can add to the existing body of information.

In this case the small sample size of my case studies may be judged to be a limitation. My participants are drawn from urban areas and as such they may reflect a wholly urban set of circumstances that are not applicable to a more rural setting. As I was not able to conduct classroom observation or student interviews, as per the parameters of the Master of Teaching program, I could only hear and analyze the perspective of educators and thus, cannot vouch for the perspective of students.

There were some time constraints and difficulties in finding participants as the interviews were to be conducted in the autumn which is an extremely busy time of year for any teacher.

With all the possible issues that might be raised by participants about this topic I needed to focus on those areas with I felt best answered my research questions. Several interesting avenues of study that presented themselves during the interview and coding process had to be set aside, not because they were less important than the areas I chose, but because I needed to limit the scope of this paper in order to deal with my research questions in a timely and just manner.

**Strengths**

The strengths of using a qualitative research case study approach to the question of how teachers view twice-exceptional students in their streamed gifted classes are that the small sample size enabled me to concentrate on the personal day-to-day experiences of currently practicing teachers. As the goal of my research is to understand how experienced teachers believe twice-exceptional students are best taught, I believed that more descriptive and intensive findings would arise from a smaller sample size. I also believe that a focus on three teacher participants will allow a degree of interaction with the participants that would not be possible in a broader study or survey format.
As my study is meant to be an individualized study of three teachers’ experiences rather than a study that generates broader, more generalized theories, I believe the use of three case studies is wholly appropriate.

I also believe that interviewing teachers allows them to articulate their opinions and practices and be heard. The process is a reflective one and so may allow a teacher the time and space to solidify and validate their own knowledge and experiences.

I believe that focusing my research study upon the educational interaction between teachers and twice-exceptional students allowed me to pursue my research question more rigorously than would have been possible otherwise. This narrower focus also allowed me to not only read current scholarly research, but also cover seminal important past works. This focus was refined over the length of the study and allowed for a deeper experience with the literature.

I had the opportunity to strengthen my research and interviewing skills as this study progressed, as well as increase my abilities in data analysis and coding, with the support of more experienced researchers and professors. At the end of this project I have a much more realistic view of how theory and reality mesh in the classroom, and have sound and vigorous examples to carry into my own teaching career.

3.7 Conclusion

A qualitative research study is by necessity a product of the interaction of individuals. It is my hope that I represent my participants honestly, ethically and responsibly and that they too derive benefit from partaking in the interview process. I have gained new insight of the literature through their experiences and broadened my understanding of how theory and practical considerations meld in a classroom. I also discovered examples of effective teaching strategies which I will be able to pass on to my fellow teacher candidates and which I will find instructive in my future career. In Chapter 4, I will be addressing the research findings of my data collection.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

The findings outlined in this chapter arise from the face-to-face interviews of three Ontario teachers who are teaching or have taught streamed gifted classes. Participants were asked about their experiences teaching children in streamed gifted classes, and their opinions on the characteristics and needs of these students. I analyzed each case separately, and then drew cross-case comparisons filtered through the main question of this paper, *how do some Ontario teachers respond towards the twice-exceptional students in their streamed gifted classes?* In order to answer this question, I have focused on the intersectionality of identities inherent in a student who is both designated gifted, and possessing a learning disability. I believe teachers’ perceptions of these students’ identities is crucially important to how the education system responds to the needs of twice-exceptional children. Discovering how teachers respond to these labels will I believe shed light on the educational experiences of twice-exceptional students.

For the purposes of this chapter I have integrated the results of the three different interviews under five common themes along with corresponding subthemes. My findings begin with a discussion of student identity as gifted for the simple fact that my participants are teachers of streamed gifted classes. The students in these classes who are twice-exceptional are placed there because they fit the selected criteria for the board’s gifted program, irrespective of their learning disabilities. This is significant in that placement in this program designates one as a student of high intellectual ability, regardless of any challenges introduced by the same student also possessing a learning difficulty. I will discuss the perceived identities of the gifted student, as it intersects the identities of those students deemed twice-exceptional. In addition, I will investigate how each teacher’s identity shapes their approach to educating these students and which classroom practices and strategies they have found most beneficial. Lastly, I will discuss the surprising impact of empathy and investigate the importance of the streamed gifted classroom to twice-exceptional students.
4.1 Student Identity as Gifted

I will begin with a discussion of the sense of identity students who are designated gifted exhibit in a school setting as seen by their teachers, and how these identities are shaped by other teachers in their schools, their parents and other students. Based on this constructed identity I will discuss what each teacher suggests the perceived needs of these students are, and as a result, how their educational expectations of these students manifest in a school setting.

4.1.1 Self-perception

There is continuous discussion over a common definition of what it is to be gifted, and very little consensus amongst researchers. However, I have gathered a list of common characteristics that are often used to describe those designated gifted. Tieso (2007) describes them as overexcitable and intense. Baum, Cooper and Neu (2001) list common characteristics as being high levels of creativity, superior abstract and problem solving, nonlinear learning styles and a concern with justice.

As a child, I also was designated gifted, and my expectations before the interview were largely based on my personal experience. Each teacher participant over the course of their interviews provided a window into how these children picture themselves.

Jean is a teacher of 25 years standing, 9 of them teaching in the gifted program. She also identifies herself as gifted, and is the mother of a twice-exceptional child. She believes that the gifted students she has encountered truly notice a difference between how they approach the world as compared to their peers, and sometimes this results in elitist behaviour on the part of her students. Jean says, “They believe they should be all level 4 in everything, and everything should be perfect. Work should be easy.”

Sarah has taught gifted students for 6 years and believes that gifted students surround themselves, “with peers that are very much like them” for comfort.

Simon is entering his second year of teaching a middle school streamed gifted class, and his students often, “talk about how they feel a pressure to succeed academically. And how they feel like they are just regular kids”.
4.1.2 Teacher perceptions of gifted students

Neihart (1998, 189) states “The response of others to the child’s giftedness will have the most impact on the development of the self, since it is the reflection from others unto the self that fuels the differentiation.” The perceptions of teachers must therefore produce a large impact on their students.

I was very interested to note how closely aligned my three participants were in describing the traits of gifted students. All participants volunteered that they found gifted students work at a faster pace, arrive in the classroom with a lot of prior knowledge connected to personal interests, and exhibit both challenging behaviour, and personality “quirks”, as both Sarah and Simon described them. All the participants mentioned social issues as a common perceived trait amongst the gifted students they knew. Simon described them as “sort of outsiders in the general school population”, and ascribed that to their “higher intellectual ability”, and being more mature than their peers.

All of the teacher participants mentioned immediately the wide spectrum of academic ability that was present in their classrooms. This reflected my own personal experiences from grade 5 to 12 in an Ontario gifted program, but varied from the literature I had read, which seemed to represent the students in streamed gifted classes as rather homogenous high-achievers. Jean believed her current class contained, one third, “who really doesn’t have any clue what I’m talking about”, one third who would possess the type of knowledge she would expect to be common for a grade 5 student, and a third who already “knows it, and is above and beyond”. Simon mentioned that his classroom had a huge variety of abilities, and Sarah believed that “just 25 [percent] are, there’s no LD, no behaviour, no autism, they’re just bright in themselves”.

Jean summed up her impressions after years of teaching streamed gifted classes:

So they’ve got this incredible intelligence, a lot of them, this different way of thinking, this ability, but it’s not matched by their behaviour. It’s not matched by their ability to get their work done. It’s not even sometimes matched by their own belief in themselves.
4.1.3 Others’ perceptions of gifted students

It became apparent to me after concluding the three participant interviews, that the opinions and perceptions of other teachers, educators, parents and students in the school system as reported by my participants, more closely resembled the data I had found in my literature review than their own opinions. Foster and Matthews (2004) state that most people believe that to be gifted is to be someone to whom learning comes easily. The responses of my participants reinforced this idea in their discussions about how the gifted student is perceived by others. Sarah encapsulated the gulf that exists between the participants and the general community, “many make the assumption that gifted students are automatically bright”. This interpretation of bright versus gifted was repeated by all the participants at various points, and will be further explored in Chapter 5.

Jean believed from talks with her students, and writings they had shared with her that many parents in her community had pushed their children to be tested, and identified as gifted. For these parents, being gifted meant being good at everything. Simon echoed this sentiment when he talked about how his students felt that after they had been labeled gifted, “all of sudden there were more expectations on them. External from parents and society”. Previous classmates of the students also now categorized them, “Oh, now, you’re in the smart class”.

Even amongst fellow educators in their schools, the participants felt their students were often misjudged, “they’re kind of seen like weird kids”, said Simon, “and as a really hard group to engage”. All the teachers remarked that they found the expectations and perceptions of other educators were not totally reasonable. Jean felt that many educators expected her students to not simply be gifted, but “near perfection”, and role models for the rest of the school.

4.1.4 Perceived needs of gifted students

When it came to the needs the three participants perceived in their students, much of the teachers’ focus was not on their intelligence or achievement but instead on how important learning and social skills were to these children. Simon and Jean both remarked on the need to keep these students interested and engaged in what they were learning. Simon in particular noted
that because learning can come so easily to gifted students they can have a “disengagement” with school itself.

All three remarked on how isolated their students were from the other students in their schools who were not part of the gifted program. All felt it was important to encourage their students to integrate and expand their social circles. Simon mentioned that his students could form bonds with the other students in formal situations like sports teams, or clubs, but did not have links to other students in non-school ways. Both Jean and Sarah mentioned that their classes stuck together at lunch hours and socialized as a group.

Jean who teaches a grade 5 class, pointed out that sometimes she needs to model problems or procedures to her class, despite the assumption by many that gifted students would not benefit from this method, and instead reiterated that their age, and stage of development was just as important as their IQ.

4.1.5 Expectations of gifted students

The standard expectation of a gifted child includes high academic achievement, and abilities to do things beyond what is age-accepted behaviour (Morrison & Rizza, 2007; Neumeister, et al., 2007).

In contrast, both Jean and Simon strongly asserted their need to evaluate their students based on the appropriate grade standards of the Ontario curriculum and exemplars, not, as Simon said, “against an idea of where I think they should be as gifted kids”. Jean had the Ontario achievement chart posted at the front of her room, and said that she referred to it a lot with her students, because, “there’s no such thing as a gifted level or a gifted level 3”.

Simon said that expectations from the school differed from his own in that outside the classroom they were expected to excel as leaders in the wider community as well as academically. Remembering a previous class with a much wider spectrum of abilities he mentioned that some students would have to have limitations put on papers and presentations to prevent the eighth graders from going to grade 12 extremes, while at the same time he was “really trying to have some of my students produce any work whatsoever”.

The same sort of dynamic was echoed in the classroom of Jean where “because of their ability to work faster, and because of their identified strengths”, she expected certain students to go above and beyond expectations for their grade. On the other hand, by the end of that year, she had 3 or 4 students in the same class who were still unable to reach high proficiency (level 3) with writing, despite months of concentrated effort.

4.2 Student Identity as Twice-Exceptional

Student identity is strongly tied to not only how students view themselves, but how they are viewed by the community at large. The educational community created by the coalition of teachers, school administration, and other professionals, has a huge impact on the expectations facing twice-exceptional students and how their needs are perceived.

4.2.1 Twice-exceptional versus dual-identification

As I entered into discussions with special education professionals it was interesting to learn that although most of the literature I had reviewed referred to children labeled both gifted, and as having a learning disability as “twice-exceptional”, in Ontario the more common term within the education system is “dual-identification”. I personally preferred the term twice-exceptional, as it seemed a more positive and less medical term, and I wondered if “dual-identification” arising from medical terminology, would represent a more clinical world view towards these students. I assumed from the literature I had read, that the connotations of a more clinical interpretation would be negative for the students. Cross (2013) concluded that the recent push for inclusive classrooms, where students of all abilities learnt side-by-side would bring new challenges and stresses to educators and students. Casey (2014) found that twice-exceptional students were much less likely to be represented in gifted and talented school programs. But, upon concluding my interviews, the truth in the classrooms of these three teachers is far more complex, and startling.
4.2.2 Self-perception

Much research has been conducted on the effect of learning disabilities on the self-image of students. Neihart (1998) states that the larger the differences between a student and their peers – the more damage will be done to the student’s self-image.

As mentioned earlier, Jean had noticed over a number of years that the gifted students she taught felt the differences between themselves and their regular stream peers keenly. I had originally assumed that this feeling of difference inherent in being labeled gifted would thus extend to encompass those students who also possessed learning disabilities. In terms of how these twice-exceptional students perceived themselves, that turned out not to be the case. Jean said of these students:

I can present you with the technology, and say that this is going to help you, but if you look around your peers and none of them is doing that…And you really, would really rather try or you don’t want to be made to look different from the rest of the class, because you already feel different from the rest of the class. It can become a stumbling block

4.2.3 Teacher perceptions of twice-exceptional students

As the mother of a twice-exceptional child myself, it was refreshing to interview Jean whose daughter is also twice-exceptional. We both held an equally strong belief that to be gifted is to be twice-exceptional, with few exceptions. The same pattern of thought that people label gifted can with a twist, or an intensification, become an issue in school. Jean mentioned that she saw 2 distinct camps in gifted classes: the high-achieving, hard-working bright students and the others. In her opinion:

the students I would say are truly gifted are not the ones that are your standard, really high-achieving, good students. They are often the ones that are struggling in a variety of ways.

This view is not often borne out in the literature surrounding the gifted or the twice-exceptional. In most cases, research bemoans the lack of representation of students with learning
difficulties in streamed gifted classes. Some believe that the stereotypes that teachers hold about gifted students and students with disabilities are to blame for the lack of representation of the twice-exceptional in streamed gifted classes (Minner, 1990). Berninger and Abbott (2013) felt the twice-exceptional were held back by teachers’ perception of them as lazy, unmotivated and disorganized.

In my interviews with my three participants, none of the teachers held such a view. I cannot speak for the province-wide proportion of students who are nominated for gifted testing by their classroom teachers, but these three teachers present a picture of the streamed gifted class as populated by the twice-exceptional. Sarah reported that of her streamed gifted class, 75% had a learning disability, or behavioural issue, or were considered to be on the autism spectrum. Simon had quite a few students who exhibited traits on the autism spectrum, some of them diagnosed and some not diagnosed, and mentioned repeatedly how his previous year’s class of super high-achievers were rather atypical for gifted learners.

Simon also distinguished between groups of students considered under-achieving in his classes. He called the first group “so-called underachieving”, and said that most of that group had learning disabilities, as well as a gifted designation. Of the second group he described them as “just generally, actually underachieving, where there is no communications delay or anything like that”.

It was reported by the Ministry of Education in Ontario (2009a) that nearly 14% of all students in that province received special education programs or services. Many of the interviewers mentioned that their streamed gifted class had a similar ability ratio to a regular streamed class. The Ministry also reports that 79% of those students receiving special education services spend more than half their time in regular classes. It may be that in Ontario, the push from the Ministry for inclusive classes has permeated all streams of education, and explains the high proportion of the twice-exceptional in these three classes, which directly contradicts the research literature in this respect.
4.2.4 Others’ perceptions of twice-exceptional students

Again, as was the case with the perception of others regarding gifted students, once you move out of the streamed gifted classroom, the participants’ views on how others’ perceived their students was much closer to the reported problems in the research literature.

Sarah said it most succinctly, “many make the assumption that gifted students are automatically bright”. And while that might seem contradictory to some, bright was used by Sarah repeated as a euphemism for focused, hard-working and high-achieving, three qualities that describe every A+ student but do not describe every gifted student.

Jean says that issues arise when a child enters the gifted program with executive functioning, social or emotional issues that prevent them from achieving at the highest level. This often presents a dichotomy to parents, teachers and administrators who associate the gifted program solely with high-achievement.

4.2.5 Perceived needs of twice-exceptional students

In order to discover whether twice-exceptional students could be accommodated in streamed gifted classes I thought it was first necessary to discover what teachers perceived the needs of these students to be. Reis, Baum & Burke (2014) had argued that the twice-exceptional in streamed classes had trouble accessing accommodations in IEPs due to teacher reluctance. I wanted to explore this with my participants. Every gifted child receives an Individual Education Plan, a specialized education map meant to help diagnosis problems, solutions, and a way forward for each student. In a streamed gifted class there are as many IEPs as students, but whether these IEPs were followed was something I wanted to inquire about.

Again, my three participants confounded the research I had done, when I asked them how they dealt with closing the ability gap between students. Simon mentioned he would do all the “things you would do in a regular class”, and outlined a program of increased one-on-one meetings, more help with organizational skills, and increased oversight on workflow and due dates. An alternative solution was suggested by Sarah, who ventured that once the source of the student’s problem was discovered, it might be solved by access to technology, and increased peer
grouping. Jean referenced Universal Design for Learning, and said that after she had completed a diagnostic to see where a student was at, many solutions could be implemented to help the student, but that she often implemented the solution for the whole class because often, “it is good for everybody”, and “then it’s not singling them [the child having problems] out”.

4.2.6 Expectations of twice-exceptional students

Most of the literature which I had studied on the nature of education for the gifted, and for those students with learning disabilities, dealt specifically with imbalances and inconsistencies with how individual students were treated across an education system. In this instance, the common theme across all the interviews was the idea that variety in abilities will be present in any classroom, general stream or gifted stream, and teacher responses must therefore be individualized and focused in order to make teaching effective for the student and practical for the teacher.

All the participants emphasized the importance of diagnostics in helping individual students reach their potential, and fulfill the requirements of the curriculum. Simon said that when assigning independent projects in his grade eight class he knows that certain students can be handed the entire project with instructions, and fulfill all the requirements with minimal supervision. Others definitely need more guidance, and need the project broken down into much smaller steps. His expectations for success are similar for each student, but how they reach that goal will be very different.

Jean brought forth the idea of the bell curve that underlies much of society’s assumptions about ability and output, and how norms predict a certain percentage will always be at the bottom. It is an idea she rejects, and says that she always knows exactly what she wants a student to show her, and that when faced with difficulties, she figures out how that student can show the same knowledge in an accessible way.

Simon outlines this differentiated response:

The thing about enrichment is that it’s as far as they can take it themselves, and it’s going to be different for different kids. I mean some are going to write this 15 page paper, and a
model of a cell that is, like, three-dimensional and you plug it in, and it does whatever.

And other kids aren’t right?

4.3 Teacher Identity

As gatekeepers to the world of education, teachers possess tremendous power (Rosemarin, 2014). Therefore, how a teacher views themselves, impacts how they perceive their responsibilities, and their expectations of themselves, as well as their concepts of what constitutes student success (Stanford & Reeves, 2007).

4.3.1 Personal versus professional

Jean attributes her success to her extensive training, her 25 years of experience, and the fact that she was identified as gifted as a child. She is also the mother of a child who has been identified as twice-exceptional. She believes that she thinks in the same way her students think, and that it is easier for her to meet their needs because she understands them on a personal level. She participated in enrichment activities as a child that she felt were poorly executed. Jean is okay with the fact her students are beyond her in certain subjects, and in fact, she says, “I celebrate that. I think it’s awesome”.

Simon thrives off the quirkiness and strong individual personalities of his students. He understands their need for singular obsessions and passions, and believes he can really relate to them that way. He loves their questioning and the intense engagement his students can show. He also feels guilt sometimes that he is forced by curriculum to hold some of his students back, because “I feel some of them are super-capable”.

Sarah likes the way her students think and watching their thought processes develop over time.

4.3.2 Teacher beliefs

It was interesting to note that although there were startling similarities between the terms and ideas that the three participants of this study gave, the beliefs that they exhibited through their responses to my questions were significantly different from each other. Kozleski & Waitoller (2010) state that a teacher’s identity might be discovered by observation of their daily
actions in the classroom and interactions with students. By the same premise, I believe each participant’s beliefs might be discovered through their vocabulary, and the ideas that are repeated in their interviews.

Sarah believes strongly that the strategies and techniques used currently in gifted classes will eventually migrate into regular stream classrooms. She was adamant that the strategies she used in her previous classes could benefit any student.

Simon was very similar in that he believed that many of the practices he uses with his students could be easily transferred to a regular stream class. But even more strongly he believes deeply in treating each student as an individual, with individual strengths and weaknesses. He reiterated many times, that each class is different from the last because of “the makeup of the kids that are in the classroom”. He is wary of making “blanket statements” about his classes, and uses qualifiers to modify statements he feels only apply to a certain number of students.

Jean is a strong supporter of growth mindset. She believes in effort, and application, and tries to instill in her students the knowledge that they do not have to be great at everything.

I don’t get it perfect, and I don’t get a hundred, that doesn’t make me somehow deficit as a human being. It doesn’t mean I have a problem. It means that I need to grow

She also has a healthy respect for what her kids might already know and believes in the power of research and observation for helping her classes.

4.3.3 Sense of responsibility towards students

Each of the participants exhibited a strong sense of responsibility towards their students, although again the focus of that responsibility was different for each teacher.

Simon feels a strong need to respond to his students. He believes his job is to make sure that the materials and help he provides get to each student when they most need it. He relies on frequent interactions with his students to see how they are doing.

Jean feels she needs to be accountable. She wants to know how each student is managing and how she can help them progress. She worries about the strategies that are often given to twice-exceptional students, and whether they are closely monitored enough for success.
Sarah believes that her primary responsibility is to engage and challenge her students. She has a healthy respect for their personal knowledge and believes it is her duty to help her students dig a little deeper at concepts they may already feel they know.

4.3.4 Expectations of themselves

Any course of action must be sustainable to be effective. Teaching can be a very intense profession because the cost of failure is bore by the students. Teachers can experience difficulty when their sense of responsibility collides with the limitations of what is physically, intellectually and emotionally possible for one person (Kozleski and Waitoller, 2010).

Although Sarah, is currently a teacher of grade four and five, as a former grade eight teacher she supports the idea of a rotary system as most effective for both teacher and student. In this manner, she feels individual teachers can focus their attentions on those subjects they are most expert and effective in, and students benefit by getting the best person for the job. Her need to engage and enrich means she doesn’t believe that one person can be all things to all people.

Simon, creates motivation in his grade eight class by trying his best everyday. He encourages his class to engage in extracurricular activities that support their interests and strengths. He is well-aware of his boundaries with the curriculum and resists accelerating those students who are already competent at an activity, instead he looks for ways to challenge them.

Jean thoroughly plans her activities beforehand so that her class can work independently, each student moving through the curriculum at a pace that best suits their own learning style. This allows her to spend lesson time interacting with her students, and giving them lots of feedback. It’s effective for her, but it exacts a toll. “I work all the time. Constantly. I am. Literally, day by day, minute by minute, lesson plan by lesson plan”. For her the effort is required because she believes it’s unacceptable for some kids to “not get it”.

4.3.5 Concepts of student success

Teachers have the power to alter a student’s future (Cross, 2013). So it is important that the qualities they reinforce in their classrooms are qualities that will help a student expand their skills and keep progressing. So it is fitting that each participant chose learning skills to define their
concept of a successful student, rather than intellectual prowess.

The same concepts each participant holds dear for themselves manifests itself in their definition of success for their students. Jean believes in the growth mindset, and sets herself a rigorous class schedule. Her concept of student success is having children understand the importance of time management, grit and perseverance. As a result, she explicitly teaches her students these skills and encourages them to believe that anyone can improve with practice.

Bianco (2005) suggests that a disconnect occurs when teachers view the success criteria of a gifted program as not meshing with the characteristics they imagine a student with learning disabilities to possess. So should a school board set high achievement as the exclusive focus for its program, there is little benefit Johnson, Kraft and Papay (2012) argue, in permitting students to enter for whom this goal is an ill fit. It is heartening therefore that all the participants chose skills which they believed were not innate but in fact skills which must be learnt and practiced.

Sarah believes focus is key, “because when you’re not focused, you can’t contribute. When you’re not focused you can’t pick up the knowledge.”

Simon chose organization and responsibility as the criteria for a successful student. But most tellingly, he said, “but they need skills that all students need, they need to be organized, they need to have study skills…All the learning skills aspects of the curriculum”. So it appears that the characteristics for success in a streamed gifted class are the same required by any successful student.

4.4 Teacher Practice

My research findings on teacher practice in this study centre on diagnostics or how teachers assess their students abilities and strengths, as well as the accommodations they make in both assessment and teaching techniques and strategies. My participants were very vocal on the part that technology plays in their classrooms and the challenges that come with its use.

4.4.1 Diagnostics

Teachers must view each student as an individual possessing their own unique approach to challenges and accomplishments (Rosemarin, 2014; Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010). So
diagnostics can play a large part in effective teacher practice. Each of the participants relied heavily on personal observation, assessment, one-on-one conferences with their students and research into a student’s previous years to gather data when facing challenges with one of their students. The purpose of these diagnostics is to discover what skills or knowledge a student needed next in order to improve. “So it’s kind of just trying to understand every student as a learner, and then, kind of going from there as a teacher” said Sarah. This diagnostic stage was especially important for Jean, who considered it a preliminary step before instituting any new strategy.

### 4.4.2 Accommodations

Accommodations in the sense of adapting a teaching approach, strategy, or assessment can be a sensitive subject for teachers. Brody and Mills (1997) suggest teachers of the gifted may not be willing to accommodate twice-exceptional students by slowing or adapting the pace of streamed gifted classes. This no longer appears to be an issue in an era so focused on differentiation to accommodate the needs of all learners. Simon mentioned that in his grade eight class he has some students who are working with grade six language accommodations. “I have kids with LDs. I have kids with behavioural, like designated behavioural modifications, and so I would differentiate for them as I would in a regular classroom”. With the Ministry of Education’s focus on inclusion, it would appear that accommodating different learners is no longer a choice, but a reality that teachers have embraced wholeheartedly. Jean discussed accommodations in terms of assessments, and made it clear her focus was on having a student demonstrate their knowledge, not necessarily the manner in which it was done. She also allows her students to choose different types of assignments and different tiers of assignments based on each student’s personal learning journey.

### 4.4.3 Techniques and strategies

Out of all the techniques and strategies that the participants suggested, the simplest and most labour effective, came up time and again: giving student breathing room, and more time to finish tests, and assignments. Removing this time barrier was a by-product of the independent
work sessions that Jean favours for science, where each student can take a different journey, through a different tier, as long as all necessary steps are completed. These sorts of sessions require thoughtful planning in order to create a range of attainable goals that fulfill curriculum requirements while still providing for a spectrum of abilities (Bandura, 1982).

Other strategies drew more heavily on a teacher’s personal time and effort like: one-on-one conferences, frequent feedback, verbal questioning for testing purposes, scribing when necessary, and sometimes direct instruction if a concept needs breaking down. Jean uses conferences with small groups as well if she notices a number of students have the same issue. She uses these conferences to deduce what the challenge is and what further strategies she might use to help her students progress. At the same time she is doing this, the rest of the class is allowed to continue on with their own work, and even move on to another assigned task if they are finished. Sarah uses feedback to help her students debrief after problem-solving, and to help them analyze which strategies worked best for them.

Baum (1990) states that compensatory strategies should focus on strengths and avoid direct instruction and rote learning. Simon often employs differentiated ability groups for this purpose, as he finds his students are, “very co-operative, they know each other very well, and they will help each other out”. In the same vein, the use of strategic seating to increase a student’s ability to concentrate was suggested by Sarah.

All the participants agreed that inquiry-based projects were often successful in providing different points of entry to a subject, along with chunking information, breaking down assignments, and the use of graphic organizers. Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013) suggests direct instruction may be perpetuating failure because it does not give students the chance to interact with mathematical concepts in a meaningful way, but Simon sometimes combines it with discussions in math. He uses the time to have students discuss the processing skills required for the operation, and what tools are necessary to solve it.
4.4.4 Technology

The most popular technology used to accommodate different types of learners was the computer, whether desktop or tablet, and the software it runs, such as speech-to-text software. Other pieces of equipment that were regularly used were data projectors, and document cameras.

With regards to software use Jean mentioned that for her class, speech-to-text depended heavily on how articulate the 10 year old using it was, and that iPads were great when they were all functioning and connected properly to their WiFi, otherwise they were, “actually a hindrance”.

All participants agreed, however, that if it was a question of fine motor skills, or a learning disability there were few reasons not to allow the student to do his work on the computer if the student was familiar with its use.

4.4.5 Challenges

The common thread to the participants’ answers as to whether they found technology useful to bridge ability gaps in their classrooms was whether the student knows how to use it and whether it is working properly. Jean pointed out that children have to be taught to use all new technology first, and that if something goes wrong with one computer that student, “can spend an entire 40 minute period trying to get to the task instead of doing the task. And so that’s my issue.”

Sarah noted that advances in technology meant that students have “gone from zero to a hundred without exploring everything on the way up” and so many students in her class didn’t even know how to use a keyboard.

In terms of the other types of challenges they found in their classrooms on an everyday basis, numbers and resources became an issue. Jean thought that if the school board believed gifted was “truly” special education, then there would not be 27 children in her class. While Sarah pointed out that being a special education teacher at the present time meant knowing you had no additional resources like an education assistant to help you.
Simon pointed out that engaging thirty children everyday in any class could be a challenge. If those children were underachievers it could be made even harder. He said in the case of actually underachieving, sometimes if they are working on something that is not what the class is working on but it’s productive work in another area that they are actually engaged in then I would allow that.

4.5 Empathy

Empathy is an important quality for any teacher, and I would argue that it is most important in the classroom, where emotions can run high because of events at school or home.

4.5.1 Student as individual

Rosemarin (2014) has suggested that teachers of gifted students need to be intelligent, knowledgeable, and also emotionally wise. This is a counterpoint to observations by both Borland (2005) and Foster (2014), that because of persistent stereotypes around gifted students they are often assumed to thrive no matter what their education conditions.

As Jean recounts, that was not her experience as a child,

It [enrichment] was pulling me out of a regular class, and then I’d get behind, and so I developed gaps in my education. So I also have a great awareness of the kids who have gaps, and what that makes them feel like, and try to address those gaps.

One of the most remarkable statements of empathy I have heard came from Simon as he discussed a student he had had in his class, who had obviously affected him greatly. Simon said the student had had a lot going on at home, and at school, and so the child disengaged from everything. Eventually, Simon decided he needed to change his goals for this student in the short term, and he asked himself, “how can we get through a day that is as pleasant and peaceful as possible, with some learning at the same time”.

4.5.2 Age-appropriateness

One of the recurring themes that appeared throughout my interviews with my three participants was the need to constantly remind themselves that despite the intellectual abilities of
the students they were teaching, these students were still children. Simon said, he always tried to treat his class as regular kids, and have the same expectations he would expect from a regular grade 5 class. “I would never say, “Oh, you should do this because of this designation.” The need to assess the children in the streamed gifted classes based on exemplars, and the relevant grade level of curriculum, instead of their giftedness was also mentioned by Jean. Sarah found that despite their intellectual abilities it was still difficult to have her grade eight students understand why she could not teach them grade nine and ten math. “A lot of kids don’t understand that…It’s a totally different type of math.”

Jean had perhaps the most poignant example of what it is like to be a 10 year old gifted child, and how she tries to look at the situation.

How do you deal with it when you’re 10 years old and you do have this passion, or this knowledge, or skill, that surpasses your 47 year old teacher? How are you going to approach that so that it’s socially palatable, and you don’t just come across like an obnoxious 10 year old?

4.5.3 Student-to-student

The bonds of empathy run from student-to-student in the grade eight class of Simon. He mentioned the deep understanding and patience his class has developed for each other because the majority of them have been together since fourth grade. He says there is an acceptance and comfort with other people’s “quirks”, that he has not seen in other classes. As well, he has noticed that the students feel comfortable asking question regarding sexuality and gender issues in class that he does not think would be the case in a regular classroom. The downside of this closeness, Simon says is that although they are very comfortable with each other, interacting with people outside their class can be difficult for them.

4.6 Importance of streamed gifted classes

One of the main goals of this research paper was to discover whether teachers of streamed gifted classes believed these were the best environments for twice-exceptional students. Brody & Mills (1997) found that gifted students performed better academically and socially if placed
among peers, but I had read conflicting accounts about whether that was true for twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes.

Among my participants it was universally agreed that all gifted students, including the twice-exceptional, were best served in streamed gifted classes, but not for academic reasons. Although Simon mentioned that he feared gifted students were left out in regular classrooms, and given busy work to do instead of meaningful and engaging curriculum, each of my participants suggested that their overriding concern for suggesting a streamed gifted class was purely social in nature. Both Simon and Jean worried that there were a few children in each of their classes who would not be able to thrive in a regular class.

Sarah believed that the strategies and techniques in use in gifted classes would eventually be adopted by regular classes, but that socially the streamed gifted class, “was truly needed”. Simon said that students needed to feel safe to be who they were, and that many of the behaviour issues that gifted children exhibit in a regular classroom disappear when the child is placed in a streamed gifted class.

Jean did sound a cautionary note, “I see the elitism. I see the kids who think that if you’re not gifted, the children in the regular program are beneath them.”

Cassidy and Jackson (2005) warn that many school policies do not take into account that what is labeled socially disruptive and inappropriate behaviour is socially defined and may be discriminatory towards those who do not fit cultural norms. Sarah put forth the same thought when she pondered on the fact that there were no “gifted” sections in university and life, and it was equally necessary for these students to learn to interact with different people.

4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, it was intriguing to discover that my participants shared a common understanding of what it is to be gifted, and that being twice-exceptional was encompassed by that definition. The participants defined giftedness through a manner of thinking rather than simply high achievement and related how they felt external perception of students in streamed gifted classes was often unrealistic and damaging. All three teachers felt that these students
needed to be engaged and interested to learn, and that social skills were an important area to
develop. It was reassuring to learn that they expected their students to be judged by their
appropriate grade expectations in the Ontario curriculum, rather than a standard devised from
their students’ designation.

Realizing that research and the education system relied on two different labels for
children who are twice-exceptional was a revelation. It was intriguing to realize that even in their
streamed gifted classes, twice-exceptional students could still feel different and would attempt to
tone down visible differences. My participants touched on the difference between high achieving
bright students, and the “truly” gifted, and it was startling to realize that being twice-exceptional
in some manner was actually the norm in these three streamed gifted classes. The three teachers
discussed underachieving students and possible underlying causes, and reiterated how damaging
old stereotypes of what it is to be twice-exceptional are. It appears that all the participants accept
IEPs, accommodations, and modification as the new normal, and have integrated these changes
into their daily practice.

The discussion surrounding each teacher’s identity and beliefs reiterated the fact that
these are based on both personal and professional experience. It was interesting to see how each
teacher’s personal themes repeated through their beliefs, their sense of professional
responsibility, their expectations of themselves and their concepts of what constitutes a
successful student.

As an extension, these beliefs were carried into each teacher’s professional practice. The
role of diagnostics was important to the daily practice of each teacher and lead to common
techniques, and strategies, which were used by the participants to even out student challenges.
Technology was deemed a benefit and a challenge, depending on the state of the equipment, and
the readiness of the student to use it appropriately. Class numbers and lack of resources were also
keenly felt as challenges as they are in any classroom. I was startled to see just how similar each
participant’s strategies were.
The examination of the role empathy plays in each teacher’s relationship to the students in their class made it clear that this empathy arises from personal experiences, viewing each student as an individual, and recognizing the effects a student’s life beyond school can have on their school life. Based on my own personal experience, it was refreshing to hear that participants believed that a student’s abilities do not affect their maturity level or the stages of development appropriate for their age. It is important also to recognize that the bonds between students are equally important in creating a productive and safe classroom.

Research shows that gifted students do best surrounded by their peers. If this holds true for twice-exceptional children as well they are well-suited to the classrooms of these three teachers full as they are with other student with exceptionalities. Each participant believed that these classrooms allowed their students to navigate their strengths and weakness with teachers who recognize their uniqueness, and can provide concrete strategies to assist them in an empathetic manner.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

My research has been focused on teacher experiences with twice-exceptional students in streamed gifted classes and how these experiences inform teacher practice with those students. Over the last two years I have conducted a literature review, and three interviews with experienced Ontario teachers of streamed gifted classes. In this chapter I review the key findings that arose from my research, and analyze how these results differ or dovetail with the research literature available on twice-exceptional students, and teacher practice. I examine the implications of these findings, and discuss how the experiences of these three teachers can inform the discussion surrounding the perception of twice-exceptional students in educational settings. As well, I discuss what the collection of this information means to me as a beginning teacher about to embark on my own teacher practice. I have found that the philosophical views expressed by my participants have had a profound effect on my own views on how strongly teacher perception can be tied to the classroom experience of any student.

Based on the knowledge of these experienced teachers, and the research I have conducted in the literature surrounding the twice-exceptional, I also make recommendations to teachers, administrators, schools, and other stakeholders on best practices regarding the teaching the twice-exceptional. It is my sincere hope that these suggestions will be helpful to not only other beginning teachers, but to all professionals involved in the education of these children. As mentioned by all three participants, the perceptions and actions of those educators, and administrators outside the streamed gifted class can have a profound effect on the students inside it (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2013).

This research has been eye-opening for me personally, and there are many aspects of this area of study that I would like to see pursued. To this end I highlight aspects and areas of further research that I believe would be beneficial to the educational community.
5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

One key finding of my research is that the lived experience of my participants teaching congregated gifted classes in Ontario was very different to that outlined in research originating in the United States (Casey 2014; Baum et al., 2001; Brody & Mills, 1997). My participants described classes where a high ratio of their students were twice-exceptional, “gifted with LD”, “gifted with behavioural”, and “gifted with autism”. In one case, one of my participants Sarah, described a class where approximately 75% of her class had learning difficulties as well as being designated gifted. Upon investigation the Toronto District School board where the participants’ classrooms are located, has a proportion of students in their gifted programs which is seven times the ratio of adjacent boards (TDSB, 2013a). Although the TDSB did not report on what proportion of those students were twice-exceptional, they did report that the gifted exceptionality was the second fastest growing group in their board. Therefore it may be that the ratios of twice-exceptional students in my participants’ classrooms are a localized phenomenon. The Ottawa-Carlton District School Board, did mention that their numbers of dual-exceptionalities, students who were gifted and also possessed another exceptionality, were likewise high (OCDSB, 2010).

Another significant discrepancy was the terminology used to describe the twice-exceptional. Research literature as well as online forums, use the term “twice-exceptional” to describe students who have both learning disabilities and gifted characteristics. Some school boards, use the term, “dual-exceptionalities”. The Ministry of Education in Ontario uses the term, “dual-identification”, which arises from medical terminology. This effect of these different terms for students who are designated as having a learning disability and giftedness, can be complex. Mitchell, (2010) argues that the use of medically derived terms serves to problematize students. While being interviewed, my participants consistently referred to these students as, “gifted with…”, most often. As my participants were teachers of congregated gifted classes, it was to be expected that the gifted designation would be foremost in their mind (Grant & Zwier, 2012). It is also noteworthy that the same terminology was applied to students who were, “gifted with behavioural”, or “gifted with autism” which were almost always mentioned as a separate
category from “gifted with LD”. This identification of students as primarily gifted, is important because one of the greatest risks for twice-exceptional students is to have their identities remain unidentified because they do not fit common expectations of gifted students (Morrison & Rizza, 2007; Neumeister et al., 2007). As well, studies have shown that teachers can be swayed in their perception of a student’s abilities by the labels placed upon the student (Bianco, 2005; Minner, 1990).

All of the teachers I interviewed believed that twice-exceptional students belonged in their congregated gifted classes. In fact, Jean, a teacher of 25 years stated, “the students I would say are truly gifted are not the ones that are your standard, really high-achieving good students. They are often the ones that are struggling in a variety of ways”. This separation between those who have a consistent “true” disability, from those who have simply failed to learn is echoed in Etscheidt, (2012) and Heyd-Metzuyanim (2013). Heyd-Metzuyanim says difficulties cannot be considered a learning disability if they result from, “a lack of progress attributed to ineffective instruction, environment, or lack of attention”. All three teachers also emphasized the wide range of abilities and motivation that existed in their students. This awareness foretells a greater acceptance of who is best served in a congregated gifted class (Grant & Zweir, 2012). Simon had quite a few students who exhibited traits on the autism spectrum, and mentioned repeatedly that his previous year’s class of super high achievers were rather atypical for gifted learners. Research bears out the belief that children designated gifted will not show consistent high achievement (Foster, 2014; Little, 2001). Johnson, Kraft and Papay (2012) have stated that unless the aims of a gifted program meet the needs of an individual student, there is little benefit for that student to congregate. By holding a wider concept of giftedness, my participants show that the congregated gifted classes they teach have aims beyond simple high achievement for their students.

As well, the participants I interviewed understood the barriers facing these students, whether from personal or classroom experiences. Jean empathized through her own experiences at school, “It [enrichment] was pulling me out of a regular class, and then I’d get behind, and so I developed gaps in my education”. Simon alluded to the high expectations that accompanied the
gifted label, and described some of his students, as “so-called underachieving”, and added that most of that group had learning disabilities, as well as a gifted designation. He compared them to students who were “actual underachievers”, whom he defined as having no executive function issues or the like to prevent them from achieving. This distinction is important because Simon does not equate underachievement with possessing a learning disability. If high achievement is considered a prerequisite of giftedness then twice-exceptional children can be at a significant disadvantage in terms of entry and continuation in a congregated gifted class (Renshaw et al., 2014).

My participants also tried to ameliorate these barriers through their teaching practices. They spoke with eagerness about their attempts to differentiate for the students in their class, rather than expressing the reluctance to adapt their practices to the needs of the twice-exceptional that Reis, Baum, & Burke, (2014) discuss. Common practices were giving extra time on assignments, and projects; direct instruction; the use of diagnostics and observation; accommodations such as scribing; the increased use of feedback, including one-on-one conferencing; and the use of technology and UDL to help level the playing field for these students. Each teacher participant rejected the notion of acceleration as an effective tool in their classrooms, which is significant, as acceleration of curriculum has been described as deleterious to gifted students with learning disabilities (Bandura, 1982; Little, 2001). As an addendum, all three participants believed that the twice-exceptional students in their classes did not want to be singled out for differentiated attention, even in their congregated classrooms. This is supported by the literature, which maintains that the larger the perceived differences a student detects, the more extensive the damage can be to a student’s self-identity (Renshaw et al., 2014; Neihart, 1998). It is therefore crucial that students be taught that learning disabilities are something that can be managed, despite the fact that they will not go away (LDAO, 2011; Baum, 1990).

All three participants believed that the biggest benefit of congregated classrooms to their students was social, and that a few of their students would be unable to thrive if placed in a regular class. Brody and Mills (1997) raise this very subject, and state that gifted students
perform better if they are placed amongst their peers. As most of my participants reported a large percentage of their classes contained twice-exceptional students, I believe we can apply the same principle. Simon, also spoke to the disappearance of some behavioural problems when a gifted child was placed in a congregated class. But each of the participants also spoke of the relative isolation of their classes within the larger school environment, and Sarah, in particular worried that they would in life and university, be unable to interact outside a “gifted” context. This seems a common concern, as the participants mentioned that while their students socialized well within their class, they were often isolated from students in non-gifted programs in their school.

5.2 Implications

What follow in this section are the broad implications of this research study on the larger educational community, school boards, administration and teachers, as well as the personal implications my research in this area has on my development as a beginning teacher.

5.2.1 Broad implications

These interviews have illuminated situations that in some ways differ greatly from research literature studying American gifted and talented classrooms. This is especially true in terms of the representation of twice-exceptional students in these classes. All of my participants described a high ratio of their class as being twice-exceptional. For example, Sarah believed that in her class, “just 25 [percent] are, there’s no LD, no behaviour, no autism, they’re just bright in themselves”. These findings are in direct contradiction with research from the U.S. Department of Education (2014), which states only 1 percent of children in their gifted and talented classes fell under The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This under-representation has been backed up by many researchers (Casey 2014; Baum et al., 2001; Brody & Mills, 1997). However, it should be noted the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009a) reported in 2006-7 that 13.92% of the total student population in Ontario were receiving special education programs and services. It is a possibility that Ontario has a broader definition of both learning disabilities and giftedness, and thus a larger proportion of children in the general population are identified, or there are simply a higher proportion of twice-exceptional students. There was a lack of hard evidence in
the breakdown of twice-exceptional students in congregated gifted classes in Ontario. Regardless of the reason, it was a very startling discrepancy to find based on the literature I had researched.

Teachers and administrators need to be aware that a congregated gifted classes still needs to be differentiated, and that a congregated class will have high-achievers, and low-achievers like any classroom (Foley-Nicpon et al, 2013; Brody & Mills, 1997; Baum, 1990). They also need to be aware that having a learning disability, or behavioural issue should not exclude a child from joining a congregated gifted class. A class like this might be exactly what they need to thrive, given that all three participants mentioned a widespread acceptance and support of differences by their classes, which is important (Hall, 1993). But again, educators must realize that even in this supportive environment twice-exceptional students may not want to stand out and may refuse assistance to minimize differences with their peers (Renshaw et al., 2014).

And finally, all education professionals need to realize that their own opinions and perceptions can have a huge effect on teachers of streamed gifted classes and their students (Bianco, 2005). Neihart, (1998) states that the response of others, “will have the most impact to the development of self”. These perceptions are often rooted in stereotypes of the “gifted”, and tend to represent the extreme ends of the personality spectrum, from “perfect”, and “leaders” to “weird”, or “difficult” (Tieso, 2007). The negative implications of education professionals maintaining these stereotypes are greater for twice-exceptional students as these expectations do not correspond to their reality, as told by my participants.

5.2.2 Narrow implications

The findings of my research study were both surprising and reassuring to me. After reading accounts of American research literature that emphasized the negative impacts of the education system on twice-exceptional students, it was a shock to hear that the real-life experiences of my three participants were so different.

In terms of my own practice, I would like to further explore some of the daily teaching practices of my participants, and how their effectiveness in a classroom setting.
But, I believe that the expressions of empathy that were expressed by my participants were one of the most affecting aspects of my interviews. Simon when he spoke of a student in his class who had completely disengaged due to other factors in his life said he asked himself, “how can we get through a day that is as pleasant and peaceful as possible, with some learning at the same time”. This thought has been with me since the interview was completed. It strikes me that Simon’s point of view allows for compassion, and acknowledges a student’s whole life as a reality, not an aside to their educational life. This is a viewpoint I am determined to emulate.

I was also impressed by the amount of effort Jean puts into creating engaging, and differentiated instruction each day. Her classroom was a marvel of differentiated instruction, and her use of independent subject stations allowed students to approach each project in a manner, and level that allowed them to progress, which would be best practice to suit any class of diverse learners (Cross, 2013).

5.3 Recommendations

Some recommendations that have arisen out of this study are that teachers need to be aware that old stereotypes of gifted students are still held by some of their fellow teachers, administrators, parents, and students themselves. These stereotypes of the high-achieving, academic, leader who is practically perfect can be difficult for children who do not fit that mould (Rosemarin, 2014). Educators must watch themselves for preconceived ideas that may exclude certain students (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010; Neihart, 1998). As well children should be treated as individuals, with unique strengths and weaknesses, and encouraged to view themselves as works in progress, rather than as existing in an unchanging state of giftedness (Foster, 2014). To that end teachers should help students to explore strategies, technological and otherwise, that would mitigate or eliminate certain learning difficulties. These strategies should also include encouraging their students to develop learning skills, such as organization, to better work with their difficulties.

In addition this emphasis on a growth mindset would help minimize any discomfort twice-exceptional students might feel in utilizing technology or approaches which help
ameliorate their educational challenges. In a classroom where all students are allowed to learn and be taught in a differentiated manner there is no norm established and thus no stigma attached to using different methods to attain educational goals.

This study has brought to the fore the need for governmental bodies, and school boards to halt current methods of funding. At the present time in Ontario, all manner of exceptionalities are forced to draw from the same funding pool. There exists an enforced hierarchy of need amongst the various student groupings. This funding model encourages competition for scarce resources rather than collaboration between equally vulnerable student populations. Students with exceptionalities deserve a funding model that will meet their unique needs and guide them to academic success.

5.4 Areas of further research

In reviewing my research, what strikes me is how much I have left to learn about the experience of teachers and twice-exceptional students in our classrooms. In particular, the classroom reality of my participants was vastly different from that outlined in the literature in terms of the representation of twice-exceptional students. Instead, of being under-represented in these congregated gifted classes, the twice-exceptional students were sometimes the majority. Of further interest to me would be to delve into the proportional representation of twice-exceptional students in congregated gifted classes across Ontario, in order to see if what my participants experienced was a localized phenomenon or a broader trend.

I would like to more fully understand how widespread the favourable opinions of twice-exceptional students held by my participants are in Ontario. I think it would be beneficial to see if the twice-exceptional are thought of as the “truly gifted” in a broader context, as there is a comparable view reflected in studies that the asynchronous development characteristic of gifted children is in itself, a disadvantage if not outright disability (Foster, 2014; Borland, 2005).

In the same vein, I was intrigued that more than one of my participants used the phrase, “just bright” to describe those children in their classes who received good marks, worked hard, and appeared to have no systemic difficulties. The use of the qualifier, “just” would seem to
imply that these students are lacking something that my participants see in their other students. Again, it would be beneficial to probe the views of other educators, to see how deeply this perception is held amongst them, and whether it ties back into the idea that my participants expressed of gifted students possessing strong “quirks” (Tieso, 2007).

Of course, this study has only viewed the classroom experience of teachers, and so it would be helpful for further research in a Canadian context to be done on the experiences of twice-exceptional students from their perspective. Given the importance which research gives to the need for students with learning disabilities to feel a sense of acceptance and support from their teachers in order to succeed academically, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent twice-exceptional students feel accepted in congregated gifted classrooms (Heyd-Metzuyanim, 2013; Neihart, 1998). Whether these students still feel a sense of “other”, or need to hide their difficulties in this context would have an impact on what accommodations or strategies they would accept from their teachers to ameliorate any difficulties (Renshaw et al., 2014). As well, if twice-exceptional students do in fact make up the majority of the students in these congregated classes, then it would be important to find out how that affects how students view their own identity.

Finally, given that my participant teachers all stressed that the real benefit of these congregated gifted classes was social, and not academic, discovering how these social benefits could be measured in a definable, trackable way would be important to proving the worth of these classes. Such definable benefits could prevent the funding cuts and removal of services that effect these programs when school boards face monetary limits (Ross, 2015). Also, my participants had real fears that the separation of these students into their own group meant that they would be ill-equipped to deal with people unlike themselves. This would be an area that would benefit from further research.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The acknowledgement of twice-exceptional students is still a work in progress. This paper can only deliver a small window into the experiences of teachers with these students in streamed
TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

69

gifted classes, and how these relationships mould and inform teacher practices. Although my literature review on this topic was helpful and enlightening, my picture of how twice-exceptional children are viewed, and guided by their teachers would have been woefully incomplete without the real-life experiences of my three participant teachers. The perspective of my participants, each of whom teach in Ontario, was very different to that presented in research focused primarily on the American experience.

In addition, I found the various terms used to describe twice-exceptional students helped me better understand the different parties involved in the education of these children, as the terms used by researchers, educational ministries, school boards, and teachers varied from each other.

My participants acknowledged and accepted that twice-exceptional students belonged in their streamed gifted classes and that a congregated class is the same as any classroom, in that there can be wildly different levels of achievement and ability present. The barriers facing these students in their educational journey were understood by my participants, either through personal experience or from their time in the classroom. These teachers used various strategies to flatten these barriers, through the use of diagnostics, pedagogy, learning skills, and technology.

The biggest benefit of the congregated gifted classroom, according to my teacher participants, for all their students was viewed to be primarily social in nature, and not academically based. Discovering an effective means to measure the benefit of this social grouping of students will be necessary in the future, not only to expand our understanding, but also as a means of measuring the true worth of a congregated gifted class to the twice-exceptional children within it.

What I have come to understand through the completion of this study is that all educational professionals need to acknowledge the tremendous effects their perceptions of these students can have on each student’s educational career. Reflection on preconceived ideas of what it means to be gifted, to have a learning disability, or possess both will be necessary for educators, in order to prevent the preemptive exclusion of certain students from these
congregated gifted programs. Empathy, and compassion have a place in this educational trajectory, as well.

Further research into the broader Ontario experience of these students and their teachers would be very helpful in order to deepen our understanding of any systematic barriers to student success. Investigation into the twice-exceptional student’s experience within the Ontario education system would also be an important addition to the research literature.
References


Foster, J. (2014). Supporting and Encouraging Gifted/High-Level Development. Lecture presented at OISE, Toronto, ON.


Appendices

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW

Date: __________________________

Dear __________________________,

I am currently a second year Master of Teaching graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto. As a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program, I am conducting a study on how teachers accommodate twice-exceptional students in their streamed gifted classes. Your input would be most appreciated, and would provide, I believe, an experienced and knowledgeable perspective to the research on this topic.

The purpose of this study is to develop our research abilities while investigating topics of interest to teachers and their profession. Participation in this study would involve being available for a 45-60 minute interview that would be audio recorded at a location and time of your convenience. I will also forward a transcribed copy of your interview for your review. Any additional insights or clarifications you might have at that point would be added to the data collected. Data collection for the study will involve case study interviews, journal entries and field notes.

The data collected will be used primarily to create a final paper to be submitted to the Master of Teaching program and to conduct informal presentations to other teacher candidates. Presentations at conferences or publication based upon the data collected is also a possibility. My research supervisor for this study is __________________________. My course instructor is __________________________, and he/she will be assisting with her/his experience in the research process.

Your name, school or identifying information will not be used in any written work, oral presentations, or publications. Any information you provide will be confidential and any primary data will only be known to myself, my research supervisor and my course instructor.

Should you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question at your discretion during the interview. At any point during the interview process, even after signing this consent form, you may decide to withdraw from participating in this research without affecting your relationship with the researcher, OISE, or the University of Toronto.

I will destroy the data recording of any interviews five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project.

Please sign the attached form if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Your help is very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Pamela Ramsay-Cohen (researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________

Name (printed): ______________________________

Date: ______________________________
Appendix B – Interview Protocol

Hello, (name of participant).

It’s so nice to finally meet you. I wanted to thank you for participating in my research study on how teachers accommodate twice-exceptional students in their streamed gifted classes. I’m looking forward to hearing your perspective on this issue given your particular knowledge and experience in this area.

I wanted to remind you, that as stated in the consent form you have already signed, that you will be provided a pseudonym and any identifying information provided in this interview will not be used in my research paper. Your identifying information will be seen by myself, and my course instructor and research supervisor in the course of their assistance with this project but your confidentiality in all cases is assured.

Also, at any time during the interview feel free to decline to answer any question. It is not my intention to make you feel uncomfortable or to make this an unpleasant experience. If you decline to answer any question, I will simply move on to my next question without inquiry. The transcript to this interview will be provided to you to review when it is completed but before I undertake data analysis should you want to make additions or clarifications.

Let’s begin.

1. What school do you currently teach at? What classes do you teach?

2. How long have you been teaching at this school? How many years have you been a teacher?

3. How many years have you been teaching streamed gifted classes?

4. What lead you to teach streamed gifted classes?
   a. What training if any did you receive before you began teaching these classes?

5. In what ways does teaching a class of gifted students differ from a non-streamed class?
   a. What are special obstacles or challenges you have faced teaching your gifted classes?

6. To what extent would you consider gifted students high achievers?
   a. What would you say their areas of strength are?
   b. Their areas of weakness?

7. Are the expectations for students different from those in a non-streamed class?
   a. In your opinion, are these expectations realistic for your students?

8. When you encounter differences in students’ abilities, what strategies do you find useful in bridging the gap?
   a. Does technology (eg. calculators, laptops) play a role in everyday work?
b. How about peer tutoring or cooperative activities in your classroom?

9. Do you often need to differentiate your curriculum?
   a. How does this differentiation show itself in your classroom?
   b. How are your expectations in terms of results, modified as a result?

10. Which do you feel is most important for the gifted learner, acceleration or enrichment? Why?

11. How do you view the use of acceleration in the classroom?
    a. If used, what factors influence your decision to accelerate a student?
    b. If used, how do you use acceleration in your classroom?
    c. If used, which subjects are most often accelerated?

12. How do you model enrichment in your classroom?
    a. Are these activities undertaken by all students?
    b. If not, what factors influence your decision?
    c. Which subjects are most often the focus of enrichment activities?

13. What qualities do you feel a gifted student must possess to succeed in a streamed gifted class?

14. Do you believe that the needs of gifted students can be met in one classroom setting?

I would like to thank you again for your participation in my project. I truly appreciate your assistance and willingness to share your knowledge with me.

Thank you.
Appendix C – Observational Notes

Date:

Place:

Time:

**Description**

Physical Setting:

Events/Activities of Note:

Participant Reactions:

**Reflection**

My Thoughts:

My Reactions:

Changes Necessary:

Questions