Gifted First Graders in a Multi-Ability Classroom: An Interpretive Case Study

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GIFTED FIRST GRADERS IN A MULTI-ABILITY CLASSROOM:

AN INTERPRETIVE CASE STUDY

by

Cari Buckner

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Education

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2009
ABSTRACT

Gifted First Graders in a Multi-Ability Classroom: An Interpretive Case Study

by

Cari Buckner, Doctor of Education

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Dr. Martha T. Dever
Department: Teacher Education and Leadership

Young gifted students experience school in a variety of ways. They become bored in classrooms where they are not challenged. They can develop disruptive behaviors or underachieve in order to feel accepted by their classmates or teachers. Three gifted first graders in the teacher-researcher’s classroom participated in this case study. A variety of assessment tools were used to identify the student participants. Data were collected through teacher observations, videotaped classroom activities, videotaped interviews with students, audiotaped interviews with parents, and portfolios.

Data are reported and discussed within the frame of five themes that emerged: high parent involvement, social relationships, characteristics of the learning environment, student-centered learning, and asynchronous development. The classroom context is richly described as it is critical to understanding the data and transferability.

(155 pages)
A short time ago, a Navajo woman entered my office and asked if I would be interested in purchasing a Navajo rug. She described her journey of creating the rug, which included shearing the sheep, then cleaning and carding the wool, dying the wool rich shades of brown, black, cream, and red, and finally spinning the wool into yarn. When I asked her what the rugs looked like, she pulled two rugs from the bag she was carrying. The design of each rug was intricate. The weaving of the yarn was so tightly done that the pattern looked as if it were painted, instead of woven. The Navajo woman began creating her rugs with the natural resources of the earth combined with the traditional ideas and expertise and the support of her Navajo heritage. The Navajo weaver never draws the pattern for the rug she is about to create—the pattern exists only in her mind.

As I looked at her two beautiful rugs, I reflected over my journey in writing this dissertation. As I began, I started with the resources of those individuals who were pioneers in the field of gifted education. I observed and interacted with three delightful little boys who invited me to share in their explorations. Their unique experiences became the central pattern in the design of my study. Without the eager willingness of these three boys, along with the support of their parents, the beautiful pattern would not have developed. The dissertation tells their stories much like the Navajo rug tells a story of the Navajo people.

After the Navajo woman readies all of her natural resources, she uses her expertise to weave her ideas into a reality. In identifying the focus of my dissertation and
designing the methodology I would use, I relied on the expertise of the members of my committee. There were times when the yarn became tangled, was woven too tightly or too loosely, and I found it necessary to unweave parts that I thought were done so that the pattern would come out perfect. I especially want to thank the guidance and expertise of Dr. Martha T. Dever for her patience, guidance, and expertise. She has been with me on this journey from the beginning. Dr. Scott Hunsaker also provided direction and insight as this journey began. His expertise and guidance is appreciated. The other members of my committee, Dr. Sylvia Read, Dr. Francine Fukui Johnson, and Dr. Ann M. Berghout Austin provided insight that added intricate details as my dissertation was being woven. The members of my committee have provided a great source of knowledge and encouragement.

Making a Navajo rug requires endless hours of work. The Navajo woman is unable to finish weaving her masterpiece without the support of her tribe. Writing this dissertation has been overwhelming at times. There were times when I wondered if I would ever finish. Just like the Navajo woman depended on other members of her tribe, I relied on family and friends to encourage me when I became discouraged, listen to me when I needed to share discoveries and experiences, and help me celebrate small successes along the way. There are many members of my community to whom I owe my thanks. My parents believed in my abilities and encouraged me to begin this journey. They also would remind me that I could finish. Their support was never failing. There were also friends who believed in me and offered continued support. I met Jackie Nygaard when this journey began. He helped me survive statistics. He understood the
frustrations I felt through this entire process because he was going through many of the same feelings. He provided helpful insight and advice that was invaluable as I wrote this dissertation.

Ellie Lambert was instrumental in helping me transcribe my videotapes. Her time and efforts are greatly appreciated. My friends, Kalynn Snow, Roma Savage, Celeste Tolman, Jodie Kromroy, and Wendy Woolsey, have kept me energized on this journey by celebrating my small accomplishments along the way. I also thank Dennis Poll for our long-distance conversations. In these conversations, he acknowledged my efforts, helped me to escape from my writing for a brief time, calmed my anxieties, and then helped me to focus on my writing again.

Sandra Day O’Conner once said, “We don’t accomplish anything in this world alone...and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one’s life and all the weavings of individual threads form one to another that creates something.” I am very grateful to each person who supported and encouraged me while on this journey. Thank you!

Cari Buckner
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CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM

As I began a new school year, a feeling of immediacy permeated the school building. Educators, including myself, felt pressured to test students quickly. We were required to determine which students were performing below grade level, identify students who qualified to participate in Soar to Success®, Reading Recovery®, or should be served in special education classes. We set up schedules for programs that provided the interventions needed to bring students, who were identified as being below grade level, up to where they should be academically. Parents were informed of the identified needs of their students, and their signatures were obtained on required permission forms. Classroom routines were finally established, and the feelings of immediacy relaxed when low achieving students had been identified and placed in a variety of intervention programs. All students with unique learning needs had been identified and provided with interventions. Or had they?

While great efforts were made to assist those students who were performing below grade level, efforts are seldom made to identify the unique learning needs of students who were performing above grade level (Mendoza, 2006). For example, in my district, a common practice in elementary schools was to administer individual reading assessments to each student as well as reviewing Iowa Test of Basic Skills and State end-of-level criterion referenced test scores to determine the academic needs of students. However, the purpose of administering these tests was primarily to identify those students who were below grade level. Some teachers would assess all students until they
had identified each student’s instructional level, but this did not always happen because of time constraints, implementation of one-size-fits-all instructional programs, lack of concern for the progress of already advanced students, or limited teacher knowledge about recognizing and meeting the needs of advanced and/or gifted and talented students.

A 3-year collaborative study (Tomlinson, Callahan, & Lelli, 1997) questioned if traditionally used assessments provided information that is needed to meet the needs of high-risk, high potential learners. One component of this research study was a series of case studies of eight young gifted students over a two-year period. Researchers spent a minimum of six days observing the eight young students in their classrooms, and interviewed the parents. Findings from this study suggest that teacher views of high-potential learners must change if they are to develop appropriate and challenging learning experiences for their students. More specifically, teachers need to be more flexible in how they view high-potential learners. Teachers must think of high-potential learners in positive ways instead of negative ways, especially those students who come from culturally diverse or low economic backgrounds. They need to send a message to parents that these students are worth investing time and effort.

According to the National Association of Gifted Students (NAGC), gifted students need provisions to help them make positive progress in their learning, yet challenging educational experiences that provide opportunities for young gifted students to make cognitive growth are limited (NAGC, 2006). Teachers admitted that they spent much of their instructional time preparing their students to perform well on high stakes tests. Some acknowledged that their instruction was designed to aid low-achieving
students so that they could make maximum growth while gifted learners were expected to work and learn independently.

High-achieving young students are not always assessed effectively to determine what learning experiences they needed to enjoy success in their education, although some already demonstrated precocious abilities in oral language, reading, writing, math, and other academic subjects. Barone and Schneider (2003) conducted a 3-year case study of a gifted student in a third, fourth, and fifth multigrade classroom. The focus of the study was one student’s experience in developing literacy skills. The researchers discussed how the current high-stakes testing environment did not always create the most effective learning environment. In schools where teachers blindly followed mandated programs, they failed to meet the needs of those students who had mastered the lower level reading skills and needed more challenge. The school where they conducted their research had moved away from using scripted programs to instruct students in literacy and other subject areas. Even though it was not easy, the principal and staff of the school believed that every individual student mattered. They were not only committed to meeting the needs of their struggling students; they were also committed to meeting the needs of gifted students as well.

According to Mendoza (2006), classroom teachers often felt tremendous pressure to meet the needs of those students who struggle with learning. Although they would like to provide meaningful and challenging learning experiences for the gifted students in their classroom, teachers feel as though they are in the middle of a tug-o-war between the struggling students and the gifted students. The struggling students usually win the
teacher’s attention (Johnson, 2008; Phillips, 2008).

While young gifted students participated in class activities, they were often expected to work at their grade level. Classroom adjustments such as changing the rate, depth, or complexity of instruction for gifted students were rarely implemented in preschool and early elementary classrooms (Mendoza, 2006). The underestimation of young students’ abilities can have devastating consequences. If young students are not given opportunities to make best possible growth, they may never reach their full potential (Gentry, Rizza, & Owen, 2002; Hodge & Kemp, 2006).

Definition of Terms

Knopper (1999) once described giftedness in young students as attempting to pick up mercury; “Just when you think you have it all in place, it slides away from you” (p. 340). Many definitions of giftedness have developed and evolved. In 1972, Marland, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, defined gifted and talented students as:

Those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contributions to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas: 1) general intellectual aptitude; 2) specific academic aptitude; 3) creative or productive thinking; 4) leadership ability; 5) visual and performing arts. (p. 2)

Later definitions of gifted and talented evolved to include the social and emotional aspects of being gifted. In 1991, the Columbus Group, a group of educators, parents, and psychologists, recommended a definition of giftedness. This definition of giftedness focuses on the social, emotional, intellectual characteristics of the individual
(Silverman, 1997). The following is the definition of giftedness I use in this study.

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (p. 39).

Purpose and Objectives

This study was designed to address the question: How do gifted and talented first graders experience a multi-ability classroom? As I collected the data for this study, I specifically wanted to observe and interpret how gifted and talented first graders experienced school in a classroom where students exhibited a wide range of abilities. Observing gifted students will help teachers recognize and better understand how they experience learning. Results from this case study will provide insight and understanding to professionals who plan and implement effective instructional methods and stimulating learning environments for young gifted students. The literature review that follows is an overview of extant theory and research on young gifted students.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Purpose and Objectives for the Literature Review

My purpose for completing this literature review was to discover what is known about how gifted young students experience instruction in a multi-ability classroom. The review discusses asynchronous development of gifted students, teacher attitudes toward gifted students, characteristics of gifted students, and socioemotional vulnerabilities of young gifted students, developmental differences, and identifying young gifted students. I looked specifically for research about young gifted students in the primary grades, because my research focused on gifted and talented students in a first-grade classroom.

Asynchronous Development

The Columbus Group’s definition of giftedness is the definition that will be used in describing gifted students. This definition begins by stating, “Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm” (Silverman, 1997, p. 39). Asynchrony is a noticeably uneven development experienced internally because of different rates of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth, which is manifested due to a lack of fit with chronologically aged peers and community expectations. Asynchronous development does not apply only to highly gifted students. Degrees of giftedness vary from one student to another. Gifted students demonstrate greater discrepancies among the several
areas of their development than average students.

The literature describes two aspects of asynchrony in gifted students, internal asynchrony and external asynchrony. Within intellectually gifted students, both can be associated with the construction and organization of their mental and emotional abilities. Internal asynchrony is uneven development that takes place within the student. An example of internal asynchrony in gifted students might be that their cognitive and intellectual abilities are far more developed than their emotional, social or physical abilities. For example, it is not uncommon for a young gifted student to read several levels above grade level and yet be very awkward in physical activities (Kim & Cohen, 1999).

A second example of internal asynchrony is that a gifted student may see and think about the world differently. Young students with sensitive emotions may worry about world issues such as world hunger or global warming and yet feel afraid and helpless because they feel unable to solve the problem (Silverman, 1997). Further, gifted students may realize that their intellectual abilities are different from those of other students, which create inner feelings that they are different from their peers. These feelings can cause gifted students to isolate themselves from their peers because they do not feel accepted (Kim & Cohen, 1999).

External asynchrony is the uneven stages of development that exist between the gifted students and their peers. Gifted students do not move through stages of development at the same rate that most students do. They discover that they see unique ways to solve problems, and so they are able to solve problems quickly and easily. The
gifted student’s abilities may intimidate other students. Gifted and talented students may be socially excluded because they are looked at as being too different (Silverman, 1997). Gifted and talented students may perform at high levels intellectually, physically, and artistically, but may experience emotional and social challenges because these abilities develop at a faster rate than their chronologically aged peers (Smutny, 1999). They may be sensitive about comments others make about them (Kim & Cohen, 1999). Gifted students are sometimes laughed at when they see things differently from their classmates. Roedell (1990) urged teachers and school administrators to remember that young gifted students do not develop their abilities evenly.

Teacher Views of Gifted Students

The way that teachers view gifted students has a tremendous impact on the way that students learn in school. Research by Green (2002) explained that learning styles of underachieving students are significantly different from the learning styles of high achieving students. When students were taught according to their personal learning styles, their test scores improved and they had a more positive outlook about learning. During a 5-day experimental design study conducted by Cho and Ahn (2003), cognitive behaviors of gifted and nongifted students were observed and measured. The findings reflected that 5-year-old gifted students were superior in metacognitive abilities in comparison to 7-year-old nongifted students. Five-year-old gifted students were able to understand the assigned task as well as the strategies needed to perform the task successfully. The study concluded that when gifted students are provided with learning experiences, teachers need to consider the student’s metacognitive abilities in learning.
Gifted students probably do not require specific directions on how to complete a task successfully because they can generate or select the necessary tasks that are needed. In other words, gifted students can direct their learning.

Mooij (1999) conducted a mixed-method study to address how improving educational processes can prevent gifted kindergarten students from becoming underachievers. Mooij began with a longitudinal case study with a young kindergarten student to address his first research question, which asked: What are some difficult experiences a gifted student might have in kindergarten? Although the student’s teacher acknowledged that the student’s abilities in motor movements, reading, arithmetic and language were high, she felt he would benefit most from a regular kindergarten program of sand play. The mother met with the teacher and requested that her student be tested to determine if he would benefit from an accelerated program. After three months in school, his mother noticed that her student had become emotionally unstable and did not enjoy going to school. She contacted Mooij, a professor and researcher at the University of Nijmegen’s Institute for Applied Social Sciences, and asked him for help. The mother felt she needed help in communicating her concerns to her student’s teacher. Mooij observed the student working in his classroom for one morning. He also met several times with the mother and the teacher over several months. Each time Mooij met with the mother, he kept notes on the themes that emerged from their conversations. These themes, which included social contacts, sharing, motor movement, work attitude, and language, and information obtained through a literature review helped Mooij to develop student-based-instruction for the kindergarten student.
Phase two of Mooij’s (1999) study addressed what curricular and instructional methods could prevent student problems and what methods would promote performance of all students, including gifted kindergarten students. Mooij designed a questionnaire to study this second question. This questionnaire contained seven scales on cognitive, social, emotional, creative, athletic, and motivational characteristics. This questionnaire was given to both parents and teachers of kindergarten students. Teachers and parents were both asked to compare the observed student with other students who were chronologically the same age. The questionnaire was designed as a Likert scale: the parents and teacher were asked to score the student based on his or her characteristics.

At the end of this study, Mooij (1999) concluded that the student’s problems in school could be caused by forced underachievement. Motivational, social, emotional, and cognitive problems often result from the underachievement of gifted students in elementary schools and secondary schools. Many teachers will focus on the student’s behavior problems instead of focusing on their needs for a challenging and stimulating learning environment. As a result of this study, Mooij also concluded a benefit in screening kindergarten students was that the information collected helped the teacher to develop challenging learning experiences and to prevent underachievement. Mooij concluded that screening each student entering kindergarten would help teachers develop and implement student-based instruction that would meet the needs of each individual student.

A study conducted by Barone and Schneider (2003) described a third-grade gifted student in a multigrade classroom in an at-risk school where learning was open-ended
and flexible. Barone and Schneider noted that while there are many initiatives and policies in existence to help struggling learners attain grade level achievement, few initiatives or programs had been developed or implemented for the gifted learner. The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of how a gifted student’s academic needs in literacy were met in a multigrade, at-risk school environment. Data for this study were collected through observations, interviews, teacher journal, and artifacts over a period of 3 years.

This study identified six factors that supported the student’s literacy learning as well as the literacy learning of the other students in the class. Those factors were: (a) The school was managed to suggest a feeling of family. The sense of family encouraged teachers to care about and be responsible for their students’ learning over long periods of time. (b) A concerted effort was made to make strong connections between the family and the school. Parents volunteered to help in the school, and the teachers valued parents as educational partners. (c) Each day, large blocks of time were provided for the students to read and write. The students were invited to read books of their own choosing and write stories on topics they were interested. (d) Students were encouraged to work with each other in the classroom. Sometimes they worked with students on their own academic ability level. Other times they worked with students who worked at higher or lower levels of academic abilities. When the students worked together, they took turns being the expert or the learner. (e) Students were asked to reflect on what they had learned. They would often look through their portfolios with other students in the class and comment on the concepts they had learned. These conversations helped the students to focus on what
they wanted to learn next. (f) The last factor was that the students participated in open-ended learning activities such as writing in journals, writing responses to books they had read, and writing their own stories. The students were not expected to conform to set goals. Instead, they were expected to reach their own personal goals as learners.

**Characteristics of Gifted Students**

Three research studies (Harrison, 2004; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 1999) have identified multiple and varied characteristics of young gifted students. Hodge and Kemp conducted a 3-year research study to follow 14 preschool students who were identified as being potentially gifted. Data for this study were collected from questionnaires that were given to the teachers and parents of the students. Data were also collected from interviews with the students and from norm-referenced tests. The purpose of this study was to examine how early childhood teachers and parents perceive abilities and strengths of potentially gifted students and how these perceptions relate to standardized achievement tests. After studying the viewpoints of teachers, parents, and students who were identified as being gifted in the early years of school, the study showed that the picture of abilities of gifted students were sometimes accurate and sometimes underestimated. This study also revealed that students who were high achievers in class were more likely to be identified as being gifted, whereas students who had not yet developed high abilities sometimes were not assessed or taught in a way that would encourage them to develop or allow them demonstrate their true abilities.

Sankar-DeLeeuw (1999) conducted a case study of four gifted students between the ages of 5 years and 7 months to 5 years and 11 months. The focus of this study was to
identify characteristics of young gifted students and explore their educational needs. At the conclusion of her study, Sankar-DeLeeuw showed that characteristics of young gifted students fall into three categories: (a) characteristics that were identified by parents early in the gifted student’s life and also recognized by the student’s teachers, (b) characteristics that were reported by parents but not by teachers, and (c) characteristics reported by teachers but not by parents. Parents identified that their students demonstrated long attention spans and early language development. Some of the characteristics that teachers noticed were emotional vulnerabilities, poor social skills, and emotional immaturity. One of the key findings in this research study is that not all gifted students demonstrate the same characteristics.

Harrison (2004) conducted a phenomenological research study to better understand how young gifted students think. This study consisted of observing 15 gifted students between the ages of 6 months and 8 years. The findings in this study provided rich descriptions of how young gifted students think in connection to cognitive approaches, curiosity, intrinsic motivation, independent investigation, and creativity. Data were collected through analyzing drawings and paintings of students in the study in connection to characteristics of gifted students. Analysis of the students’ drawings along with comments of their parents and the students themselves revealed that drawing is a way for young students to express, explore, formulate and communicate their ideas. The results of the study also suggest that if teachers paid closer attention to the drawings of young students, they would be able to provide educational experiences that were more responsive to the unique characteristics and needs of each student.
These three studies, along with the support of the following additional professional articles, suggested that each gifted and talented student has his/her own unique set of characteristics.

Shaklee (1993) described the characteristics of gifted students using four primary identifiers. Her first primary identifier is exceptional user of knowledge. This primary identifier described a gifted and talented student who reasoned well, demanded a reason or explanation for why things were the way they were, had an advanced use of symbol systems, and displayed an exceptional use of knowledge. Shaklee’s second primary identifier was exceptional generator of knowledge. An exceptional generator is highly creative, demonstrates atypical thinking, is very self-expressive, has a sharp sense of humor, and is curious. A gifted and talented student who is an exceptional generator creates knowledge. Exceptional learner is the third primary identifier. An exceptional learner learns quickly and easily. This student has an excellent ability to remember and understand concepts that have been learned. Shaklee’s final primary identifier was exceptional motivation. A gifted and talented student who has exceptional motivation is someone who searches for greater knowledge and understanding. This student has a long attention span, is reflective, takes initiative, and often demonstrates leadership abilities.

Other professionals in the field of early childhood gifted education have identified individual characteristics of gifted and talented students. They suggest that some gifted and talented students make basic tasks more intricate or have exceptional memories (Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Robinson, 1998; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 1999), while others have the ability to make abstract connections in their learning, ask provocative questions, or have
unusual curiosity. Some young, gifted students are intensely curious. They are constantly asking thoughtful questions. They want to understand why things work and how things are. Many young gifted students learn concepts quickly and investigate topics of interest at a far deeper level than their typical classmates (Clark, 2008; Harrison, 2004; Hodge & Kemp; Morelock & Morrison, 1999; Mulhern, 2003; Sankar-DeLeeuw; Smutny, 1999).

The development of intellectual giftedness in young students has frequently focused on precocious oral language development as well as the early development of reading, writing, and math skills. Young gifted students often teach themselves to read at an early age (Clark, 2008; Harrison, 2000; Jackson, 2003; Maxwell, 1998; Morelock & Morrison, 1999; Smutny, 1999). Jackson explained that some students whose oral language development was advanced began talking when they are seven months old. She also pointed out that case study literature includes reports of highly intelligent students who do not begin talking early. For example, one highly intelligent boy did not begin talking early; however, once he began to talk, his oral language quickly developed from single words to complete sentences with no transitional stage. Although some highly intelligent students do not begin speaking until they are three or four years old, their language skills develop very quickly.

Socioemotional Vulnerabilities of Young Gifted Students

Research studies suggest that young gifted students often struggle with social, emotional, and motivational issues. Based on studies from his longitudinal case study of three kindergarten students, Mooij (1999) explained that young gifted students
experience emotional, motivational, social, and cognitive problems when play and learning experiences are not changed to meet their needs. Harrison (2004) conducted a phenomenological study to better understand how young gifted students think. One of the key findings in this study was that young gifted students often feel isolated because their thinking process is different from the thinking process of their peers. She suggested that the years between 4 and 9 could be very difficult for young gifted students. They cannot find peers who share their same interests and abilities. They experience frustration and boredom in the classroom. They may even become reluctant to manifest their unique abilities.

Young gifted students are often vulnerable to social and emotional problems. The more gifted a student is, the more likely it is that the student will face challenges of being unaccepted by other students (Roedell, 1986; Smutny, Meckstroth, & Walker, 1997). Gifted young students may begin to develop psychogenic issues caused by feelings of anxiety, isolation, and being misunderstood. Green (1999) stated that students’ emotions impact their learning and drive their attention. Stressful learning environments inhibit learning while positive classroom environments encourage chemical responses in students that help them to learn (Sylwester, 1994).

Roedell (1984), a gifted education consultant for the Northwest Gifted Education Center, stated that gifted students experience intensified vulnerability when they spend their school day in inappropriate classroom settings. It is important for young gifted students to feel accepted by their teachers, parents, and classmates. Early childhood teachers must validate gifted students’ advanced abilities and intellectual interests. When
a student’s giftedness goes unrecognized, the student may develop disruptive behaviors, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of isolation from peers. They may leave their work unfinished because they are interested in other projects or because they find the work uninteresting. Becoming a class clown might be a way for the gifted student to feel accepted by other class members. A gifted student may have emotional outburst, or hide or deny his/her gifted and talented abilities because of his/her highly sensitive nature (Harrison, 2004; Manning, 2006; Robinson, 1998; Roedell, 1990; Shaklee, 1999). The student may learn there is no reward for working harder than is necessary (Smutny, 1999).

**Developmental Differences**

Harrison (2000) conducted a longitudinal case study observing seven gifted students from the ages of 1 year to 8 years. The students in this study were initially identified by their parents and later identified by their teachers. Data were collected from drawings and paintings of the students identified for the study, parents’ documentation of their student’s feelings and perceptions of their artwork, and interviews with the students who were participants in the study and their parents.

The conclusion of this study suggested that while developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) provided a common focus for the instruction of young students, the strict adherence to developmental norms could result in underachievement and social isolation of young gifted students. Early childhood educators who are aware that young gifted students move quickly through the stages of development will provide learning experiences that meet each student’s unique needs.
Henderson and Ebner (1997) compiled research on the developing brain. Areas of the cortex react to changing stimulation, expectations, and challenges. They acknowledge that stimulation of the brain from birth onward lays the foundation for students’ ability to learn skills and information, as they grow older. If students are to reach their full potential, they need to actively participate in learning experiences where levels of difficulty adjust automatically to remain challenging. The brain reaches its optimal capability through developmentally appropriate interactions. At the end of their study, Henderson and Ebner identified several elements that should be included when providing interventions for gifted students. These elements include acceleration, career education, ability grouping, high-level curriculum materials, attention to cultural and social differences, attention to learning styles of each individual student, paying attention to the affective as well as cognitive development, highly individualized learning, independent study, and rapid pacing.

The National Association of Education for Young Students (NAEYC) developed a position statement (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) that provided a definition of developmentally approach practices that should be used in early childhood programs. The developmentally appropriate practice approach was developed to provide guidelines for early childhood education teachers. Bredekamp and Copple defined developmentally appropriate practice in two dimensions. One dimension referred to age appropriateness. This dimension provides chronological stages a student goes through from birth to age 8. The other dimension is individual appropriateness. Individually appropriate development
recognizes differences in personality development, language and cognitive development, and development of logical thinking.

Observing early childhood classroom practices helps us to realize that some common practices are not individually appropriate. Sometimes young students are asked to sit quietly at desks filling out worksheets. At other times, students may be shown a model of an art project and are asked to make theirs look just like the model. Students who enter first grade as very capable readers may be found sitting in a whole class learning activity where all students were taught how to identify the beginning sounds of words. As students develop literacy skills, they move through the sequence of skills at different rates. An early childhood teacher who is aware of the sequence of acquiring literacy skills can identify the skills the young student has mastered and then determine what skills the student should learn next (Aldridge, 1992). Gross (1999) stated that young gifted students may realize they have learned nothing new during their first year of school. Their intellectual and academic needs may remain unmet until they enter intermediate or even middle school grades.

Young gifted and talented students are special needs students who may not reach their full potential because the learning environment is not designed to meet their unique needs (Hodge & Kemp, 2002; Morelock & Morrison, 1999). A stimulating learning environment is the most favorable aspect in the development of giftedness. The brain needs appropriate intellectual stimulation. Some supportive elements that can be helpful in creating a developmentally appropriate learning environment for young gifted students are (a) awareness of the social and cultural differences, (b) identification of the learning
styles of individual students, (c) recognition of the cognitive and affective development of the student, (d) highly individualized reading, (e) opportunities to investigate real problems, and (f) student-directed learning. A learning environment with the elements described above would be developmentally appropriate. It would be a place of discovery that encouraged the learning function of the brain, allowing students who possess giftedness to develop their potential giftedness (Henderson & Ebner, 1997).

Smutny (1999) reminded us how important it is to recognize giftedness in young students and then design stimulating learning experiences that are individually appropriate for their needs. If the needs of young gifted and talented students are not met, they may become bored, frustrated, and depressed. Interventions are crucial for young gifted and talented students. Every student is worthy of being challenged in a developmentally appropriate classroom (Smutny et al., 1997).

**Identifying Young Gifted Students**

Schofield and Hotulainen (2004) conducted a 10-year longitudinal study in Finland to determine if early identification of gifted students could successfully predict academic excellence. In this study, 37 potentially gifted 6-year-old students were selected as the experimental group from a population of 208 students from the Joensuu Daycare Centre. The remaining 171 students became the control group. All students were assessed with the German Bruer-Weuffen Differentiation Test (BWDT), which measures five language-related differentiation abilities: optical, phonemic, kinesthetic, melodious, and rhythmical. When the participants were in ninth grade, researchers attempted to contact all of them to review their school history. Only 34 students from the experimental group
and 131 students from the control group were located.

Three important findings emerged from the analysis of this study. The first finding was that it is possible to identify students’ giftedness with the BWDT. Students who were identified as being gifted in this study continued to demonstrate high academic ability throughout their educational career. A second finding in this study disclosed that boys who were identified as being gifted felt pressure to underperform just as much as the boys who were found to be nongifted. The third finding in this study revealed that gifted students did not value their academic ability as a part of their self-worth. The researchers went on to suggest that gifted students do not value their academic abilities because they learn in an education system where high ability is not nurtured or celebrated. Instead, uniformity is stressed. Although gifted students may survive their formal school years, they may not develop their full potential (Schofield & Hotulainen, 2004).

Shaklee (1993) conducted a 3-year program evaluation of The Early Assessment for Exceptional Potential Project. The program evaluation assessed the impact and effectiveness of the EAEP in assessing and identifying exceptional potential in students kindergarten through third grade. The participants of the study included 33 primary classroom teachers and 801 primary classroom students. As the first year of the study came to a close, participating teachers stated that their enhanced observation skills had helped them become more aware of their students’ behaviors. At the end of the study, participating teachers acknowledged that before they were involved in the program, they visualized gifted students as being high achievers. They described gifted students as
being far ahead of the class in academic subjects, able to read extremely well, and finishing their work faster than other members of the class. After receiving the training in this program, they realized that they did not always recognize gifted students in their classrooms because of immature behaviors, timidity, and cultural diversity (Shaklee).

Early identification of gifted students is critical if their needs are to be met (Smutny, 1999; Whitmore, 1982). Because accurate identification is complex and difficult, the instruments and methods used to identify gifted students must be comprehensive and multidimensional (Kingore, 1993). Gifted students from advantaged backgrounds are easier to identify than those students who come from disadvantaged background. Identification procedures used with young gifted students fall into the following categories: (a) individualized intelligence tests, (b) group intelligence tests, (c) standardized achievement tests, (d) creativity tests, (e) checklists and scales, (f) grades and performance assessments, and (g) teacher and parent nominations. All instruments used to identify young gifted students are less than perfect (Colangelo & Fleuridas, 1986).

Supporters of early education for young gifted students contend that the early years of a student’s education are very important. They state that enriched, supportive, and stimulating environments should be provided. While some specialists on student development discourage the implementation of formal education for young students, most early childhood educators believe it is important for young students to be immersed in a learning environment that provides opportunities for exploration and stimulation (Colangelo & Fleuridas, 1986; Gentry, 2006; Gross, 1999; Harrison, 2000; Hodge &
Kemp, 2006; Manning, 2006; Smutny, 1999).

Summary of Literature

We know that many young gifted students experience asynchronous development. Some of their skills, behaviors and characteristics develop at a much faster rate than others. This uneven development may make it difficult for young gifted students to feel a sense of belonging in a classroom setting. Young gifted students may develop feelings of vulnerability when they are criticized or laughed at for viewing their world differently. Each young gifted student is different. One set of characteristics cannot describe every unique student. We also know that young gifted students experience challenges in their classrooms. The literature tells us that young gifted students experience frustration while learning in multi-ability classrooms. Young gifted students enter classrooms with high expectations of what they hope to learn, yet young gifted students often feel pressure to conform to the classroom culture.

This case study investigation will add to the literature on young gifted students. As I describe the experiences of the three students in this case study, we will develop a better understanding of how teachers can help young gifted students deal with feelings of boredom, frustration, and isolation. This study will also provide descriptions of classroom environments, instructional methods, and learning experiences that help gifted students maintain their excitement for learning in a multi-ability classroom.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODS

Research Question

My purpose for this study was to describe the experience of gifted first graders in a multi-ability first-grade classroom under my direction as a teacher-researcher. My research question was: How do gifted first graders experience school in a multi-ability classroom?

Research Method

I selected a naturalistic research paradigm in order to capture the emic perspective of the participants. I was interested in what they thought and felt about their experience in a multi-ability classroom. I used an interpretive case study method to observe how young gifted students experience school in a multi-ability classroom.

Case studies explain real life phenomenon, the details of which would be too difficult to capture within the boundaries of a survey or experimental study. Case studies can explore events for which there is no clear set of identified outcomes (Cresswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Case studies provide detailed descriptions of the event while illustrating specific elements being studied within the event. Case study research is a way of seeing that relies upon studying the phenomenon of choice in a natural setting. It is a powerful way for teachers to study their own teaching and their students in a way of improving and teaching and learning. Using a within-site case study as my research
design allowed me to observe three young gifted students in the context of a multi-ability classroom.

Methods and Procedures

Participants and Setting

The case for this study was three students selected from my first-grade class, made up of 20 students, primarily white and middle class. There was one ELL student and no resource students in this class. I was the researcher as well as the teacher of the class so I functioned as a participant-observer in the classroom. For the purpose of this research, I collected data while my students participated in a variety of learning experiences.

Selection of Participants

Because students are gifted in many ways, it was important to use more than one tool to identify the participants (Porter, 2005). The Kingore Observation Inventory (KOI; Kingore, 1993) triangulated with Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver, 2005), and the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT; Kaufman & Baer, 2006). These assessments were used to identify the three students to be observed in the study.

The Kingore Observation Inventory (Kingore, 1993) was developed to help educators identify students who have gifted potential. It helps teachers design an enriched learning environment. There are four primary objectives of the KOI. First, it is designed to enrich the learning environment by incorporating challenges for all students. Second, the Kingore Observation Inventory assesses all students’ learning needs to assist the
teacher in designing curriculum that will meet the academic needs of all students. Third, it is used as one tool to identify those students who need more challenging curriculum. Finally, the KOI provides a standard for teacher’s analytical observations to document insights about their students to other educators. Reliability/validity on the KOI is unavailable. However, the KOI evolved through ethnographic research over a 28-year period in hundreds of classrooms. The author worked with students in preschool through tenth grade (Kingore, 2001).

Since 1990, several school districts nationally and internationally have implemented the KOI assessment (Kingore, 2001). The KOI is an assessment technique that structures classroom observations, which focus on the strengths of students through evaluation of gifted behaviors (Kingore, 1993). It was not designed to label students, but rather to determine the individual learning needs of gifted students that extend beyond the regular classroom (see Figure 1).

Another tool that was be used to help identify gifted students was the Developmental Reading Assessment, K-3, 2nd edition (DRA; Beaver, 2005). The DRA is an assessment that is administered to students individually. The subtests of the test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Average</th>
<th>2 Above Average</th>
<th>3 Superior</th>
<th>4 Very Superior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Typical, does not exceed grade level</td>
<td>Above average Responses on tasks</td>
<td>Consistently exceeds grade-level expectations</td>
<td>Exceptional responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Characteristic performance of high-achieving students</td>
<td>Positively responds to task complexity</td>
<td>Demonstrates remarkable strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives appropriate responses.</td>
<td></td>
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*Figure 1. Holistic scoring rubric of the KOI observations.*
analyze the following reading skills: (a) phonological awareness: the student performs a variety of tasks, to demonstrate his/her awareness of rhyme, alliteration, and phoneme awareness; (b) metalanguage: students demonstrate their knowledge of the words used to talk about print language; (c) letter/high-frequency words: students must identify upper- and lower-case letters as well as graded lists of high-frequency “sight” words; (d) phonics: students correctly spell words, correctly identify words, and identify words that share certain characteristics with target words; (e) structural analysis and syllabication: students segment words into syllables, and analyze word parts such as prefixes and suffixes to determine the meaning of a word; (f) oral reading accuracy: while the student reads a passage of text aloud, the teacher makes notes of oral reading “miscues,” categorizing each type of oral reading error; (g) oral reading fluency: students read passage aloud, while the teacher makes notes of oral reading rate and oral reading expression; and (h) oral reading comprehension. The teacher asks the student questions about the text passage that was read and evaluates the quality of the student’s response using a rubric. The questions reflect a variety of comprehension skills.

A reliability study (Williams, 1999) on the DRA was conducted to examine its interrater agreement of teachers using the assessment and the internal consistency of the DRA instrument. Construct validity was also examined. A nationally representative sample of 306 students from kindergarten through third grade was included in the study. Each of the 127 teachers who participated in the study selected three or more students from their own classrooms. These students read assessment texts ranging from pre-primer to fifth grade level. The initial reading assessment was tape recorded and rated by
two additional teachers. The interrater reliability among all three raters (teachers) was .74 across students, text levels, and items.

The internal consistency was found to be quite strong for the five rating scale items, which were accuracy, comprehension, stage, phrasing, and reading rate, item separation (Cronbach’s alpha = .98), and across all three raters as well as for the DRA assessment texts (i.e., text separation reliability; Cronbach’s alpha = .97). Additional data were obtained to determine the construct validity of the DRA. The DRA instructional reading level was assessed by correlating individual scores on the DRA for the second grade population ($n = 2470$) at the end of the 1998-99 school year with the students’ scores from the fall of third grade on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. All correlations were significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) using Spearman’s Rho rank order correlation (Williams, 1999).

The third identification tool was the Torrance Tests for Creative Thinking (TTCT; Treffinger, 1985). This assessment was developed to identify and evaluate the creative potential of individuals. I will be using the figural test with my first graders. This test has three subtests that include: (a) picture construction, which is scored on originality and elaboration; (b) picture completion, which is scored on fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration; and (c) parallel lines, which is also scored on fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. The TTCT has shown reasonable reliability for group and research purposes.

The TTCT is intended to be a measure of creative thinking abilities. The TTCT was reviewed by Treffinger (1985). In several studies of the test-retest reliability, the
reliabilities have ranged from .50 to .93. There have been few findings that differed from these test-retest reliability studies. Realizing that creative thinking is very complex, TTCT shows reasonable reliability for group and research applications.

There is also evidence that TTCT scores relate positively to other current criteria of creative thinking (Treffinger, 1985). Although the TTCT scores only represent specified creative thinking abilities, they have been positively and significantly correlated with creative achievement criteria in many studies a variety of time frames (Treffinger).

Although it is not recommended to use the TTCT in clinical applications, the strengths of the TTCT are in research and evaluation applications. The TTCT can be used to assist in instructional planning and to determine the possible strengths of higher scoring students. The TTCT provides useful insights into many dimensions (Treffinger, 1985).

The TTCT-Figural seems to present adequate reliability and validity (Cooper, 1991; Treffinger, 1985;) for the purposes of the test. Although questioned, the scoring procedures have been revised and improved. It has less limitations and cautions to apply, and is more researched and analyzed than any other instrument (Swartz, 1988; Treffinger). The TTCT-Figural provides helpful insights into creativity if the tests are used with good judgment by qualified individuals (Swartz; Treffinger). Based on these three measures, three students within the class were identified as gifted. The three students selected for this study are designated with an asterisk (see Table 1).

All three of these assessments helped me to identify those students with advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity that combined to create personal experiences
Table 1

*Student Scores on Identification Instruments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>DRA</th>
<th>TTCT</th>
<th>NP Torrance figural norms</th>
<th>KOI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (M)*</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (M)*</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (M)*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (F)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (M)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (M)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (F)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (M)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17 (M)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 (M)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 (M)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 (M)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that were different from the experiences of other students. Taylor 1(M) demonstrated advanced cognitive abilities in reading, math and problem solving skills, and sense of humor. He demonstrated intense task commitment and energy in personal projects. His advanced abilities and knowledge make him vulnerable in settings where he is different from the norm.

Jay 2(M) also demonstrated advanced cognitive abilities in his oral language
skills, reading, abstract thinking, and mathematical operations. He acknowledged that he was different from his peers and sometimes required validation from others to feel like he fits into the classroom setting.

Johnny 3(M) was the last child selected for this study. The decision to include him in this study was difficult. He struggled with reading and writing. It was difficult for him to conform to classroom structures. As I continued to observe him in the classroom setting, I noticed he had advanced cognitive abilities. He had a large and descriptive speaking vocabulary and discussed problems such as global warming, recycling, health care, and personal relationships. He was creative, curious and innovative. He was often made fun of by other children in his neighborhood because he was so different. I could see it would easy for a classroom teacher to focus on his delayed written language development and nonconformity instead of recognizing his gifted abilities. I felt that Taylor, Jay, and Johnny all fit into the Columbus Group’s definition of giftedness.

Entry and Reciprocity

Creating a feeling of community in my classroom was a top priority for me. We began each year by building a unique classroom culture where all of the students felt safe and valued. Our classroom was a place where the students and teacher continuously learned from each other. As the teacher, I let each student know I valued his or her knowledge, expertise, and experiences that they brought with them to our classroom. I told my young students that they were the experts on how they learn best. I encouraged them to share with me specific problems they might have in learning at school. I told them that if they could tell me what made reading difficult or ways that school could be
more interesting, their knowledge and ideas would help me to help them. I wanted them to feel that school was a safe place where they could share their ideas and express their feelings. The students identified for this study were made to feel that their actions and experiences were not being judged, but would allow others to view their school experiences as if looking through their eyes.

Data Collection

This research began when I was preparing for my first-grade class in the fall of 2007. I began recording notes in my reflective journal as parents came to visit with me before school officially began. I made informal observations of all the students as they participated in a variety of learning activities.

I added data sources after I received permission from the Utah State University Institutional Review Board and after I acquired parental and student consent forms. The three students selected for this case study were treated as a bounded system by the number of gifted students my classroom.

As I began collecting data, I wanted to be a good observer and listener. Yin (2003) suggested that in case studies, listening referred to making perceptive observations and acquiring large amounts of new information without bias. Case studies required the collection of data from multiple sources (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin). The additional sources of data collection for this research study consisted of videotaped recordings of classroom activities, audiotape recordings of students’ conversations and parent interviews, and videotaped recordings of students sharing their project portfolios (see Table 2).
Table 2

Data Collection Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>When collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective journal</td>
<td>I began keeping my reflective journal before the first day of the 2007-2008 school year. Parents came to visit with me about their students. I recorded events, observations, personal feelings, accomplishments of students, class projects, and special needs of individual students. Writing in my journal was an ongoing process throughout the year. Field notes in my reflective journal became my main data source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video recordings</td>
<td>These took place after I received permission from the Utah State University Institutional Review Board and parental consent forms to videotape students in our class. Over a 5-week period from April 7, 2008 through May 9, 2008, we videotaped whole class reading instruction, guided reading groups, teacher-student writing conferences, peer writing conferences, whole class read-alouds, math games, math instruction, art projects, library, recess, physical education class, social studies and science.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent interviews</td>
<td>Held during the week of April 28 to May 4, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student portfolios</td>
<td>Videotaped the week of May 5 to May 11, 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflective journal. A primary source of data collection was recording observations in my reflective journal. A few years ago, I began carrying a journal with me as I moved around the classroom. It became an invaluable tool to me as a teacher because I used it to record my observations of students, jotted notes to help me remember concepts I had taught individual students, and notes to help me know what students needed to be taught next. I used my journal to record behaviors of individual students as well as whole class behaviors. When I listened to a student read, I recorded the running record of the text in my journal. I also recorded key observations from conversations I had with individual students or parents of the students in my class. I believed that all of the notes thoughts written in my journal were helpful in planning learning experiences for the students that I taught in my class.
As a participant/observer in this research study, I had daily opportunities to take advantage of the spontaneous conversations and learning experiences that took place in my classroom. I interacted with the students identified for this study to better understand their experiences. As a participant/observer, my reflective journal became a critical piece of my data collection. My reflective journal included photographs and physical descriptions of my classroom. It contained photographs and descriptions of my students, as well as running records of students’ reading, writing conferences, math observations, and records of personal conversations with students and parents when I wanted to remember important information that was discussed. I recorded conferences I had with parents before school began and at parent teacher conferences. I also wrote reflective observations about the students in my class. I would often describe behaviors I had seen, questions I wanted to answer, and possible solutions to my questions.

I often wrote down frustrations that I was feeling. One of my greatest frustrations I had throughout this school year was my inability to meet the needs of my gifted students the way I believed I should. I had several students who struggled with reading, writing and math. Two of them had difficulty identifying all of the letters of the alphabet. Two other students seemed to make no progress in their reading at all, even though several interventions had been tried. Other students struggled with emotional problems. Three little boys were in families going through negative transitions. Another student would become very upset with a situation in class. He would become so angry and frustrated that he would shove everything off of his desk and onto the floor. He would then physically flip his desk over. There were many times when I felt like I spent a lot of
my time trying to meet the needs of these students who appeared to be more at risk. Their needs demanded my constant attention. I felt like I often neglected my other students when I responded to the needs of my AT students.

I also wrote about dilemmas and decisions I made about my research throughout the year. I had arranged for an adult to come in and help me with videotaping. This became frustrating when unscheduled fire drills and other unplanned school events interrupted our plans so I eventually set the video camera up on a tripod to videotape the boys in whole class or small group settings. Making this decision opened up opportunities I had not originally thought of when I began videotaping. Setting the video camera on a tripod allowed me to videotape with more spontaneity. I videotaped the boys while they were working independently on their assignments instead of being locked into a rigid schedule. This also permitted me to view their classroom experiences as they directed their own learning.

I made a real effort to write down as much as I could in my reflective journal, however this was a challenge because my first graders often needed my personal assistance so I was not able to write down as much as I would have liked to. I often took my journal to school assemblies and recess to write down some of the events I had observed. The students often said so many profound things. Sometimes I felt very frustrated and thought that I should keep a small tape recorder running at all times in my pocket so that I wouldn’t miss anything that the students said.

_Videotape recordings_. One form of data collection was video-recorded interviews with the boys identified as participants in the study. The interview protocol included
questions to determine what they liked about school, what made their school experience frustrating, and how school could be improved. The complete interview protocol is found in Appendix C.

Another form of data collection was to videotape learning experiences the three boys participated in with each other and with other students in the class. These videotaped recordings documented the boys’ learning experiences during reading workshop and guided reading groups, writing workshop peer conferences and writing conferences with the teacher, math lessons, and science, social studies, art projects, library time and physical education. Every effort was made to capture these learning experiences as they naturally occurred in the classroom. A note was sent home with all of the students in the class to obtain permission from the parents to videotape their child for this study. A copy of this note can be found in Appendix B.

*Audiotape* recordings. A third form of data collection was to conduct audiotaped interviews with the parents of the three boys identified as participants in the study. The purpose for audiotaping the interviews was to preserve the accuracy of the information provided by the students and their parents. Interviews are an important source of information in case study research methodology because they allow the researcher to pose open-ended questions in a nonthreatening setting (Yin, 2003). These interviews with the parents provided an additional perspective to my own observations of how these gifted first graders viewed their school experience. The parents were interviewed once during the study. The questions used in this interview asked parents to share positive and negative experiences their student has had at school, if they have ever noticed their
student making personal adaptations to feel more accepted at school, and what elements have contributed to their student’s positive experiences at school. The complete interview protocol is found in Appendix D.

*Student portfolios.* The fourth source of data was collected from student portfolios. A research study by Shaklee and Viechnicki (1995) suggested that portfolios are effective tools when evaluating young students. The student portfolios created in our classroom included stories and nonfiction text that were written during the school year, math assignments, and photographs of large or three-dimensional projects the student created. The student was videotaped while describing the artifacts in his portfolio his reasons for selecting these particular artifacts.

*Data Analysis*

I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data collected from videotaped learning experiences, interviews, classroom observations, student portfolios, and my reflective journal. I began writing in my reflective journal before the first day of school. Some of the first entries described conversations I had with parents about their students. As the school year began, I described students’ behaviors, social skills, academic abilities, creative abilities, and analytical abilities. As I periodically reviewed my reflective journal, some commonalities emerged. One commonality was that parents were very concerned about their student’s experience in school. Some parents expressed the concern that their student needed to be challenged. Another parent expressed a hope that I would be able to see beyond the student’s behaviors and notice his unique abilities. A student behavior that emerged as a commonality was the desire the students had to
make decisions about their own learning.

In my journal, I wrote about experiences where the students enjoyed designing their own creations instead of following very specific directions. I noticed that some students were willing to take risks, while others were reluctant to go beyond their comfort zone. Some students expressed unique ideas, while other students produced products that were copies of the examples they had seen. I also wrote about relationships that developed between students in our classroom. Some students made friends easily. Some students were selective in choosing their friends. Some chose to be autonomous. All of these anecdotal records and more provided a resource that directed my thinking and planning as I continued to collect data for this study.

*Phase 1.* Open coding or memoing was used initially to identify categories or themes that emerged from the data collected through videotapes, classroom observations described in my reflective journal, parent interviews and student interviews. I began memoing transcripts of videotapes and audiotapes using Microsoft Word. I also coded the observations I had written down in my reflective journal. My reflective journal was two hardbound notebooks. On the front side of each journal page, I wrote my observations, anecdotal records, and other information I felt was important to my research. On the back of each page, I drew pictures and charts and glued in photographs to help me visually remember the events I wrote about. I left a one-inch margin on the outside margin of each lined page to attach sticky notes. On the sticky notes, I identified themes, and wrote down notes and questions that came to mind as I reviewed my journal. The left two thirds of the paper consisted of transcriptions or journal notes. The right third of the paper was used to
record categories or themes that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2002). As I analyzed the data, several initial themes emerged, such as student directs conversation, enjoys being challenged, self-selects reading books, independent, sense of humor, and enjoys sharing what he knows with others (see Figure 2).

**Phase 2.** I then used axial coding to connect the categories and themes in phase 1 that were similar to each other. I identified five themes, which I used to write a narrative that describes how each gifted student in this study experienced first grade. The five themes that emerged from the constant comparative method were (a) high parent involvement, (b) social relationships, (c) learning environment, (d) prefer student-directed learning, and (e) asynchronous development. Chapter V will contain rich descriptions of our classroom, the students who were observed throughout this study, and their learning experiences (Stake, 1995).

**Phase 3:** Last, selective coding was used to determine a central phenomenon that linked all of the sub themes together (Creswell, 1998, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). After all of the data were coded and categorized, the central phenomenon to emerge was that all three of the gifted first graders in this study had a positive experience in a mixed ability classroom because what they were learning was meaningful and connected to their lives.

**Verification Strategies**

Creswell (1998) presented eight verification procedures that are used in qualitative research. He recommended that at least two of these verification procedures be implemented in a research study. I have used six of these verification procedures in
The first graders in this study had a positive experience in a multiability classroom because what they were learning was meaningful and connected to their lives.
my research study. This research study took place in my first grade classroom. While conducting my research, I was able to develop trusting relationships with the students in my class. As a participant-observer, I not only observed the class culture, I was a part of it on a daily basis. This setting allowed me to have prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the participants in this study (Cresswell, 1998).

Triangulation of classroom observations, videotaped recordings, audiotape recordings, student and parent interviews, field notes, and student portfolios were used to verify the findings that evolve in this study. I used these multiple sources of data to determine if each student’s experiences were consistent when viewed through different perspectives.

Since this research took place in my first grade classroom, I asked a peer in my doctoral program to serve as my peer debriefer. In his education career, he has been a middle school math teacher, an assistant principal at a middle school and is currently a university math professor. He is familiar with qualitative research methods. Every one or two weeks by phone and email, he went through my writing to expose my biases and clarify my interpretations and descriptions. In his judgment, he felt that my interpretations were supported by the data. He also examined my transcriptions of classroom activities and interviews and observation notes. He examined my data as it had been coded and categorized as well as my findings and interpretations. In Appendix E, you will find a letter where he notes questions he raised that were answered, and he acknowledges the trustworthiness of my conclusions.

In Chapter IV, I describe my researcher bias. It is important for the reader to
understand my position as a researcher. As a participant/observer in this research study, I explain my beliefs, training, and past experiences with young gifted students so the reader will see how my position effects the outcome of the study (Creswell, 1998).

Member checking was used with the parents who were interviewed to gain some external validity in the study. The parents reviewed the transcripts of the interview for accuracy. They were invited to make corrections or alternative interpretations to the text (Stake, 1995). I did not use member checking with the students in the study because I believed it would be difficult for first grade students to determine if the draft represented the transcribed event fairly.

The sixth verification procedure that was used in this study was rich, thick description. I used very visual, detailed, descriptive language to show the participants in the study as well as their experiences. The rich descriptions help the reader to transfer information from the described setting to other settings because of shared characteristics (Creswell, 1998).
CHAPTER IV

CONTEXT

Classroom Setting

In my 29 years as an elementary teacher, I have learned many teaching strategies and educational philosophies that have helped me meet the needs of students on many levels. I have reflected on my education and implemented best practices to meet the needs of struggling readers. Because of these experiences, I can provide high support for students who require more explicit instruction in reading strategies they can use to become proficient readers. I have also had extensive education related to gifted and talented students. I have earned a gifted and talented education endorsement, taught gifted education endorsement courses, and presented at gifted conferences.

As a classroom teacher, I have had the valuable experience of working with many bright and gifted students. I have discovered that they often process information differently.

“Caleb just figures things out differently,” proclaimed Brenda, one of my first graders, to her mother with her hands on her hips. “Miss B shows him how to do something once and he’s got it.” Brenda snaps her fingers. “Just like that!”

First grade is a critical year for a student. It is a time when typically developing students demonstrate abilities such as: sorting blocks by color, shape, and size; improving the use of memory strategies; learning new words at a rapid rate; understanding right and wrong; and improving reasoning ability (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).
What about Caleb, a gifted first grader and other students like him? He reads and comprehends books such as Roald Dahl’s *The BFG*, Beverly Cleary’s *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, and Ralph Fletcher’s *Fig Pudding*. He solves 5-digit addition and subtraction problems with regrouping and logically explains how to solve multiplication problems. He thinks differently than the typical first grader. As his teacher, I recognize that what is academically developmentally appropriate for most first-grade students is not developmentally appropriate for Caleb. I realize the importance of identifying and providing learning experiences that will entice, support, and stimulate Caleb as well as other young gifted students academically, socially, and emotionally.

The first thing I do to meet the needs of all students, and gifted students in particular, is create a stimulating learning environment. At the beginning of each school year, I try to set up my classroom in such a way that it will invite students to be in charge of their own learning, to develop independence. As you enter my classroom, you notice a commercial poster of Jack Sparrow taped to the door near the display of fun books. Attached to the Jack Sparrow poster is a sign that reads “Read mates! Savvy?” Pillows covered with Caribbean-themed fabric lay on the floor near the book display of fun books and on top of trunks used to store Shakespeare and opera costumes for student performances. There is an 18-inch doll of Jack Sparrow sitting on a filing cabinet. As students move around the classroom a voice suddenly cries out, “I’m Captain Jack Sparrow.” A few minutes later the voice asks, “Can you sail under the command of a pirate or can you not?” The students crowd around the filing cabinet and stare at Captain Jack Sparrow with looks of curiosity and wonder.
There are literally thousands of books strategically placed around the classroom. Six 3-shelf bookshelves are located at the front of the room underneath the whiteboard. The top two shelves of each shelf support baskets of student take-home leveled reading books ranging from pre-emergent books with one word on each page to challenging novels such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* by J. K. Rowlings and *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. (See Appendix A for a list of children’s literature cited in this study.)

The classroom take-home library is set up so that once the students have been assessed with the DRA or a bimonthly running record on benchmark-leveled books, they can independently select books they want to read at home. The students also select six to eight books to go in their independent reading tote trays. They will read these books in class during reading workshop. During reading workshop, the boys and girls practice reading self-selected books that are on their independent reading level.

After creating a stimulating physical environment for my students to work in, I then try to get to know each of the students in my class and begin to build a learning community in our classroom. During the first few weeks of school, I develop many structures and guidelines to create a community of learners where everyone teaches, everyone learns, and everyone cares. Each year our classroom community develops a little bit differently. This year we began learning about each other while reading and discussing books about pirates, making our own pirate books, and learning color words and number words through pirate activities. One morning each student designed a poster with his pirate name and a list of favorite pirate activities. The next afternoon each
student in our class designed a pirate island. The island was constructed on an upside-down paper plate. Chewing gum, shoestring licorice, Skittles®, Hershey’s Kisses®, fruit roll-ups, and other treats were used to create their islands. White vanilla icing was used to glue the objects onto their island. During math time, we sorted pirate fruit snacks. Each of these learning experiences provided an opportunity for the students to get to know each other in a safe, creative learning environment where they began to trust and value each other.

These learning experiences were planned and implemented so I could observe the creative and academic abilities of my new students. As I walked around the room and talked to the students individually about their work, I began to identify those students who were very creative. I noticed that some students had high abilities in literacy. Others were advanced in math skills. I wrote my observations down in my reflective journal, knowing that these observations would help me to determine effective ways to meet the needs of the students in my class. I realized this class needed a lot of structure. There were 14 active little boys who were constantly moving and six quiet, well-behaved little girls. Several students had been placed in my class because they struggled with literacy skills. Some students had parents who had recently gone through difficult divorces, while another student had watched his parents be arrested and taken to jail. One student would become angry and express his anger with outbursts of violent behavior. Sometimes he would shove everything off his desk. Other times he would flip his desk upside down. Two other students bottled all of their emotions up inside. These students required a high level of teacher assistance in an environment where they felt safe from harm or abuse. At
times, I felt overwhelmed in meeting the needs of each individual student. There were many times during the year when I felt like I neglected the needs of my gifted students because of the critical needs of all the other students in our class.

After each of these initial observations, I realized once again how unique each student was and that each student had a different set of abilities. I used the data I collected from these initial activities to plan learning experiences so that each student’s needs were addressed. I also tried to plan learning experiences around big world topics that would be of interest to my young students, keep them enthusiastic about learning, and provide opportunities for the students to extend their own learning beyond the identified core curriculum.

This past year our class theme was exploring our world as pirates. We learned about map skills as we created and used pirate treasure maps. We recognized, read, and wrote nonfiction text and identified solid geometric shapes as we explored the solar system. We compared and contrasted the desert region we live in with the desert region of ancient Egypt. Our year was filled with explorations about the world we live in. When focusing on space, dinosaurs, human body, ancient Egypt, or other topics, I provided books on a variety of reading levels so that each student would feel successful learning about that topic. There were math games at a variety of different ability levels so that the students could play games that supported their own learning.

Throughout the school year, I observed the accomplishments and struggles of each student. For some students I found it necessary to reteach a concept in a more concrete way. For other students, I moved forward to a more challenging concept.
Student Participants

Three students were selected to be participants in my research. I have used the pseudonyms Taylor, Jay, and Johnny to represent them in this study.

Taylor

Taylor was the oldest student in his family. He had a 5-year-old sister and a little brother who was 2. At the beginning of the school year, I talked to Taylor so that I could get to know him better. I wrote notes in my reflective journal as I went over a questionnaire he had taken home (see Figure 3).

“Taylor, what do you like about yourself?” He dramatically grabbed his paper away from me and looked over it for a few seconds.

“Well, I’m funny. I usually try to do my best. I’m really smart. I like to play sports and I am a big brother.” His face was very expressive with his big blue eyes and a mischievous grin that spread across his face.

\[\text{I like that I am funny.}\]
\[\text{I like to try my best.}\]
\[\text{I like that I am smart.}\]
\[\text{I like to play sports.}\]
\[\text{I like that I am a big brother.}\]

Figure 3. Taylor’s questionnaire.
“Taylor, what kinds of books do you like to read?” I asked.

“I like to read chapter books.”

“Are there any special chapter books that you like to read?”

“I like to read books about the jungle. I also like to read about dinosaurs and space.”

“Reading about the jungle sounds very interesting.

In my recorded interview with Taylor’s mother, I learned that Taylor enjoyed solving challenging math problems and that he picked up new math concepts quickly. She also said that Taylor could make sense of small and large numbers and could solve math problems using abstract thinking instead of concrete thinking. After observing Taylor in class during math time, I gave him and a few other students who showed highly developed math skills an end of first grade math test. Taylor did extremely well, so I decided to have Taylor and four other students in the class work on math concepts from a second-grade math book.

Taylor was a very easy going student. He had a gentle, kind, caring personality. Sometimes he found it frustrating to play with other boys in the class who were aggressive and rough. However, Taylor was a problem solver. When difficult situations arose on the playground or in the classroom, he would find a peaceful way to solve the situation. He might walk away and create a new game that he could play or he might handle the problem by being humorous. Taylor had a very well-developed sense of humor. One day at recess, Taylor and his friend, Jay, were walking around the playground singing in very animated voices: “I’m a Barbie girl in a Barbie world while
Jay

Jay had blonde hair and blue eyes. He was the youngest student in his family when he entered our first-grade classroom. That changed when his family welcomed a new baby sister in December. Jay had a sister who was 2 years older than he, a teenage sister, and two teenage brothers. His dad was an architect. His mother took care of her family as she met their many demands. She also helped students in our class one day a week. She usually spent her time helping students whose reading abilities were above grade level. She provided these students with challenging and meaningful activities as they continued to develop and improve their reading abilities. She would guide students like Jay through discussions about the books they were reading.

Jay’s mother visited with me before the school year began and expressed her concerns about Jay. She was very articulate as she described Jay’s academic abilities with me. I wrote down notes in my reflective journal so that I could remember all of the things we talked about.

Jay is a very unique student. He has advanced math and reading abilities. He understands and comprehends new math concepts very easily. Sometimes he can even figure out new math concepts on his own without receiving instruction. He solves math problems quickly in his head and doesn’t rely on counting objects or using manipulatives. He loves to do challenging math problems.

“Could you tell me about Jay’s reading abilities?” I asked.

Jay is a very good reader. He reads chapter books and he will read for long periods of time, especially when he is reading a book he is very interested in reading. Sometimes it is difficult for him to stay with longer books. If you can help him choose challenging books that are shorter in length, that will really help him.
“What do you think would help Jay to have a successful year in first grade?” I asked her.

I would like to see Jay participate in learning activities where he is challenged. He is a creative student and he needs a safe learning environment where he can express that creativity. He also needs opportunities to learn new concepts in math and science.”

A week into the school year, I had an opportunity to formally confer with Jay and learn more about him. We sat down at the table, and I handed him the questionnaire I had given him on the first day of school to take home, complete and return to school (see Figure 4).

“Jay, I’ve noticed lots of great things about you since we started school. You have a great imagination. You work very hard in school and you have a terrific sense of humor. Can you tell me some things you like about yourself?” I asked him. Jay looked over the paper quietly. His lips moved as he read each word silently on the page. He then looked up at me and began to read loudly, quickly, with enthusiasm.

I like My family.
I like My friends.
I like My eyes.
I like My school.
I like that I am smart.

Figure 4. Jay’s questionnaire.
“I like my family! I like my friends! I like my eyes! I like my school! I like that I am smart!” His finger skimmed quickly from left to right across the page each time he read a sentence. He looked up at me when he was finished.

“Jay, what kinds of books do you like to read?”

“I like to read Magic Treehouse books. My favorite Magic Treehouse book is *Vacation Under the Volcano.*”

Jay demonstrated advanced math abilities. He had good number sense and could recognize numbers through 1,000. He could already add and subtract two- and three-digit numbers. He also did extremely well on the end of first grade math test, so I placed him in the challenge math group. Jay had good athletic skills and enjoyed playing soccer as well as tag games. As a class leader, he looked for the positive in most situations. He solved problems with humor.

*Johnny*

Johnny was a unique student, an independent student. He had many different levels of development. He had advanced cognitive abilities. His emotional and physical abilities were not as well developed as his intelligence. Sometimes he would lie on the floor and suck his thumb or cry when he was feeling confused or frustrated. His mother agreed.

He’s been like that since he was little. His body is that way too. His mind is starting to mature, but his body is not mature. He is about six months behind in his physical development. It was determined by doctors that he is constitutionally small. He didn’t talk at all for a long time. Then, at age 2½, Johnny started talking in full sentences.

The first week of school, I had the students participate in pirate activities. One afternoon, I had provided the students with paper, ship patterns and popsicle sticks to
create a pirate ship. I walked around the room, observing the students working. As I got closer to Johnny’s desk, I heard him singing.

The green ship is under the green sun.  
There is a green fish swimming around the green ship.  
There are green palm trees on a green island.  
There is only one red flag with a blue shark in the picture.  
Everything else is green.

Indeed, everything in his pirate picture was green except for the red flag with the blue shark. I recorded this experience in my reflective journal.

After about a week of school had passed, I sat down with Johnny to get to know him a little bit better. I found the questionnaire he had taken home on the first day of school and then returned. His mother had filled it out for him (see Figure 5).

“Johnny, what do you like about yourself?” He slid his chair over next to mine and looked over the paper.”

“What does it say?” Then, looking up at me, he said, “Maybe we could read it together.”

“I like my brown eyes. I like that I can draw. I like that I go to 1st grade now.”

“Johnny, can you tell about one of your favorite books?” I asked.

“One of my favorite books is Power Rangers.”

“How do you like to read? Do you like to read to read by yourself? Do you like to read with a friend or do you like to read with a large group of people?”

“Well, I like to read lots of different ways. At home I like to read with my mom, my dad, and my brothers.”
Figure 4: Johnny’s questionnaire.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Participating in this study as a teacher/researcher, I observed and interacted with the students in my first-grade class and collected and analyzed the data. Five themes emerged during the study: high parent involvement, learning environment, social relationships, prefer student-directed learning, and asynchronous development. Each of these themes connected to the central phenomenon of the study: connectiveness between learning and individual lives.

The study suggested that high parent involvement, learning environment, social relationships, student-directed learning, and asynchronous development were all important themes that impacted the experience of the three gifted students. The high parental involvement provided a bridge that connected home with school. Parents, students, and the teacher worked together to help the students have a successful year. The learning environment was stimulating and embraced the needs and interests of the students. It was a very student-centered environment. The class became a learning community. The students developed relationships. They acknowledged and respected their individual differences while learning to help and care about each other.

The students played an important role in their own education, such as conducting parent-student-teacher conferences. In these conferences, they identified their strengths and areas where they wanted additional help. The student-directed learning helped me to recognize that even thought the students had great intellectual and creative abilities they had other areas of development that required more support and direction. Implementing
each of these themes into the structure of the classroom provided a learning environment where the skills, topics, and experiences connected student learning to their individual lives.

High Parent Involvement

The three students in this study were not the only students in my first-grade class who had supportive parents. Most of the students in my first-grade class had parents who genuinely cared about them and spent quality time. As the school year began, I had opportunities to visit with the parents of the students in my class at back-to-school night, SEP conferences, and conversations with parents who dropped by to see me as I was preparing for the beginning of school.

A couple of weeks before school began, Jay’s mother came to explore our school and see what it had to offer in comparison to their neighborhood school. Jay and his family lived outside of our school boundaries, but because they were building a new home that was within the school boundaries, they had the option to attend our school. After taking a tour of the school, Jay’s mother commented that she had a really good feeling about the school. “This school has an organized, calm feeling. I feel really good about this school. The other school had boxes all through the hallways. It seems very cluttered. I don’t see how they will be ready to start school.”

Near the end of the year, I interviewed Jay’s mother.

Jay often learns concepts on his own, explained his mother. I worry about my ability to meet his needs. He’s able to transfer what he learned in one situation to another situation. He’s attempting to do things that his sister who is 2 years older is doing. He shares a bedroom with his 16-year-old brother. His brother is
learning French. Every night Jay’s brother tells Jay ‘je t’aime (I love you.). Jay replies back, “je t’aime aussi (I love you too).

As I introduced new concepts to the rest of the class, I quickly discovered that Jay already had a complete understanding of many topics. He often made comments like, “My Dad already told me that.” This suggests that Jay had a lot of interaction with his father. Jay’s parents, as well as the rest of his family, played a very active role in his education. I recorded this experience in my reflective journal because Jay’s mother requested that her son be placed in my class. I wanted to remember the things she told me about him.

Throughout the school year, I watched Taylor to learn how he experienced school. One of the first things I observed about him was his supportive and involved parents. Each time there was an extracurricular activity at our school such as the PTA Reflections Contest, Science Fair, or book fair, Taylor’s parents were there to encourage and assist him. One of these activities was a Buccaneer Bazaar, which our school held three times during the year. The Buccaneer Bazaar was a school event that provided an opportunity for students to learn more about the world of work by creating innovative businesses, applying for a business license, organizing and setting up their business and then setting up a bank account to keep the profits they had acquired from their Buccaneer Bazaar business. Taylor’s Mother helped him design a creative and innovative business for all three bazaars. One business he created was “Taylor’s Tattoos.” I recorded this conversation when I interviewed Taylor.

“Taylor, can you describe one of your favorite days at school?”

“The Buccaneer Bazaar,” he replied
“Why was this day one of your favorite days?” I asked.

“Because I won an award for having a creative business.”

Taylor’s parents also supported his academic development. They provided guidelines to help Taylor choose quality reading books as well as support if he encountered any difficulties in his reading. Taylor read many challenging books during the school year such as *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* by Beverly Cleary, *Magic School Bus: Twister Trouble*, by Ann Schnieder, *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, by Roald Dahl. At the end of the school year, he wanted to read *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets*, by Dav Pilkey. In our interview, Taylor’s Mother expressed some concerns about his reading the Captain Underpants books.

I said as long as – cause I don’t like Captain Underpants because it seems disrespectful, but as long as I don’t hear him talk like that, then it’s OK. But, I think they just like the silliness and that’s OK. I did ban him for a couple of months not to get them at the library. Then, as his reading picked up, I said, “Well if you’re going to read it, then go ahead. But, I don’t ever want to hear you call anyone Poopypants or any of the other stuff. He just checked out another one from the library yesterday.

“Are there other books you’ve read at home that you think he’s really enjoyed?” I asked.

He has a lot of Magic Treehouse [books] that he reads a lot. He has a reading light in his room – and the boys share a room – he usually reads, I would say he reads at least an hour by himself. He read some *Spiderwick* [Chronicle] books and we have actually listened to *Fablehaven* books on tape. He’s started reading *Fablehaven: Grip of the Shadow Plague*. I just said if you don’t recognize a word, because there is so much make-believe talk, I said come check with me and I’ll explain what it is. That’s what he’s reading at home right now.

Johnny also had high parental involvement in his life from the time he was born.

“What kinds of experiences did you provide for Johnny when he was very, very young?” I asked his mother in our interview near the end of the year.
Johnny had really bad eczema all over his face for the first six months of his life. The eczema irritated him. We spent a lot of time holding him and comforting him with a lot of physical touch. Then, as he developed and his language skills did not come to fruition, we are very verbal around our house and we would verbalize everything. We’ve always talked about feelings and we’ve always talked about hard things. We’ve always talked about the world around us. Johnny likes science shows so we watch nature shows and we do a lot of camping. We go out and find stuff. We’d look at eggs and we’d look at lava. We’d look at differences and we’d try to give him tactile and emotional experiences, you know try to use the other senses.

As I met with Johnny’s mother at our November parent-teacher conferences, I told her about some of the events we had coming up in our class. She told me that either she or her husband would be sure to come to the activities. She explained how their work schedules allowed for at least one of them to be home with their students at all times. One of Johnny’s parents was always present at class activities and celebrations such as student-led conferences, authors’ party, and our class opera, “Party at the Haunted House.”

Even though these parents supported and participated with their student in school-sponsored activities such as buccaneer bazaars, scholastic book fairs, authors’ parties, science fair and student-led conferences, they also added to the education of their students. They were aware that their student’s intellectual, social, physical, and emotional development was uneven so they provided additional experiences such as regular trips to the county library, family fieldtrips, assistance with homework, setting up play dates with other students, and encouraging them to participate in soccer and baseball.

Social Relationships

The second theme that emerged from the data was the social relationships Taylor,
Jay, and Johnny developed.

Taylor had good social skills and interacted well with the other students in the class. He adapted easily to a variety of situations in the classroom environment. His positive outlook on life helped him to find the good in most situations. During an interview, Taylor’s Mother explained that the beginning of the school year was difficult for Taylor.

School was really hard for Taylor at the beginning of the school year. He felt like he was being picked on, but after we talked about it, I think he was all right. I think a lot of the boys in the class play really rough. Taylor doesn’t and a lot of that is our family dynamics where Taylor is our oldest and he’s around a lot of older people.

Taylor did enjoy being the center of attention. One day, in December, my first graders and I were talking about Peter Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker Ballet. I explained the story as we looked at the illustrations in a picture book.

The story of the Nutcracker is told through music and dance. It’s a story that takes place at Christmastime. The story begins with the Stahlbaum family having a Christmas party. Fritz likes to tease his sister, Clara. Godfather Drosselmeyer gives Clara a nutcracker. Fritz chases Clara around the party and snatches the nutcracker away from Clara and breaks it.

“I’ve seen the Nutcracker before,” announced one student.

“So have I!” several other students yelled out.

“I could dance the Nutcracker,” Taylor proclaimed as he stood up and did a humorous demonstration of an arabesque.

“Which character would you be in the Nutcracker Ballet?” I asked.

Without hesitation, Taylor responded with a big grin on his face, “All of them!” He stopped dancing for a moment and then began dancing on his tippy toes. Teasing
Taylor just a little bit, I asked him when he would like to perform the ballet for us. “I’ll do it tomorrow!” The rest of the students cheered with delight.

“Taylor does have a well-developed and witty sense of humor,” I shared with his Mother in our interview. “Sometimes I wonder if the other students in the class understand his humor.”

Taylor has a lot of older cousins on my husband’s side that he spends time with, his Mother commented. They think he’s really funny. He’s used to being around adults a lot. Even when he was little, he would purposefully do things to make us laugh, so he’s just got a funny personality.

Taylor enjoyed helping other students in class. Because of his gentle, patient personality, he was a very effective peer tutor. His strong reading abilities enabled him to help struggling readers in our classroom. He used concrete examples to model good reading strategies. When I asked Taylor how he felt about helping other students, he said that it made him feel good inside to help others.


“I feel good because I’m helping others.”

“Do you feel o-okay about helping others in our class or does that keep you from doing some of the projects and activities that you want to do?” I asked.

“I still have time to work on the projects I want to do,” said Jay.

While interviewing Jay’s mother, I asked her if she had ever observed him making personal adaptations in order to fit in or feel like the other students in the class accepted him.

Jay feels more confident and comfortable with himself as a person. Because he
feels good about himself, he is able to work, play and interact with the other students in the class. He dislikes being called names by other students even when they are just joking around. Jay’s self-confidence enables him to handle situations where he might be easily offended or feel threatened.

I recorded the following experience in my reflective journal. Jay enjoyed playing with other students at recess time. Some of the boys in our class were rough and aggressive and played competitive games. However, when they played competitive games like soccer, they often ended up spending their recess time fighting over the rules, whose turn it was to have the ball or that the teams were not evenly matched. Other students in the class invented games that connected to concepts we were studying in class and involved dramatic play. Jay was selective in choosing what activities he would participate in at recess and as well as what friends. Jay often chose to play with those students who created new games.

In January, we were learning strategies that would help us to read and write non-fiction text. Several of the students were writing non-fiction books about animals. One day I observed Jay playing a game with some of the other students in our class. They had created a game about animals. The students were hopping around the playground like frogs. All of a sudden I heard,

“I’m a cobra!” said Allan.

“I’m an anaconda!” shouted Billy.

“I’m a coyote!” yelled Taylor.

“I’m a coyote!” echoed Jay.

“Anaconda is the biggest snake on Earth!” announced Billy. They all continued happily and contentedly in their dramatic play, incorporating facts they had learned about
animals with their creative abilities.

During an interview with Jay, I asked him to describe one of his favorite days at school.

It was one day when we were outside. Taylor thought up a game about bats. He said we should pretend to be bats. I said, How ‘bout we make up a game of bats and owls? The owl chases the bats. Whoever is the bat, well you have to hug them to turn them into an owl.

“Why was this one of your favorite days?” I asked.

“Because I made up the game!” Jay responded

Taylor and Jay seemed to adapt easily to a variety of social settings. They worked and played well with other students in the class. They also worked well independently. However, they seemed to thrive when they had the opportunity to work together in class. They enjoyed reading their tote tray books together. They co-authored stories together. The friendship that developed between Jay and Taylor in our first grade class was a very important part of both Jay and Taylor’s first grade experience. Their academic abilities were very similar. I would often find them huddled together in isolated corners of the classroom giggling about a book they were reading or inventing a story of their own. They would also take turns going to each other’s house after school.

“Jay and Taylor play every Friday,” explained Taylor’s Mother. “They spend a lot of time together. Jay and Taylor don’t feel isolated because they each have someone in the class to read with and do math assignments together.” Whenever I would begin talking to Taylor about his reading, a writing project or even his portfolio, Jay would always appear and become a part of the discussion. One day I was talking to Taylor about his portfolio. He was telling me about his Solar System.
“This is the Solar System,” explained Taylor. “The white line shows where the planet orbits around the Sun.”

“What is that planet?” asked Jay, who had suddenly appeared at Taylor’s side.

“It’s a dwarf planet,” replied Taylor.

Taylor and Jay experienced genuine acceptance from their peers. They developed a strong friendship with each other and shared similar academic abilities. Johnny was more autonomous. Although he worked well with other students in the class, he often chose to work alone. While talking to Johnny’s Mother one day, I asked her if she had ever observed him changing his behavior in order to conform to the classroom setting or to get along with other students in the class. Johnny’s mother shared some frustrations he sometimes experienced with other students.

Johnny sometimes has problems with other students in the neighborhood. He often ends up being a target because he thinks outside of the box or he’s sucking his thumb. He went for two months without sucking his thumb at all and he was really proud of that. Then, he started sucking his thumb again. He doesn’t care what the other kids say, but when it comes to his play, not only is he bright – he’s also very tenderhearted and sweet and compassionate. He’s one of my most loving students. If someone is in trouble, he’s going to be there to help her or take care of her.

Johnny’s mother provided more insight into his school experiences.

I think his first experience in kindergarten was that he had a very rigid teacher and she wanted everyone to fit in and conform. He is learning how one person acting out can affect the whole group. I see him conforming more along those behavioral lines. I don’t know if you see that. He talks to me about some of the things that happen in class and I think, Wow! He’s really getting that in order for the group to be able to do certain things, every member has to do their part.

One day I asked Johnny to describe a frustrating day he had experienced at school.
That’s when we were playing hand soccer. Not today. A couple of days ago, Jessie stole the ball from me and then another person stole it from him and kicked it. I never got the ball back and I automatically quit. I quitted. Now I don’t play hand soccer. I just play the normal soccer with my friends. If anyone else wants to join, they can. They just have to follow the rules.

“What is hand soccer?” I asked

“Soccer you play using your hands,” answered Johnny.

“Is that the difference?” I asked.

“Yea. And plus, you can’t go past the line. That is the part I hate. You’re not allowed to dribble and you have to kick a goal in.”

I often noticed Johnny working with other students in the classroom. On one occasion, the students were doing partner reading during reading workshop. After Johnny had made good progress in his reading abilities, I asked him to read with another student in the class who was struggling with his reading. I walked around the room listening to the students read and then conferring with them about the reading strategies they were using. Then I approached Johnny and his partner, Jessie.

Johnny was sitting on top of a quilt-covered trunk. Next to him was a large wicker basket filled with pillows. His partner, Jessie, was sitting next to him on the floor. I sat down on the floor next to Jessie. Johnny had a sheet of lined newsprint paper clipped to a clipboard in one hand and a red marker in the other hand. He was taking a running record of Jessie reading *Rosie’s Walk* by Pat Hutchins.

“Now, read that book again,” Johnny directed his partner.

“Teacher, some of these pages don’t have any words,” announced Jessie, looking at me.
“No words. Just pictures,” echoed Johnny while he looked intently at the piece of paper attached to his clipboard.

“So, I guess you don’t have to read those pages,” I suggested. “Or could you look at the pictures to understand the story?”

“He’s looking at pictures and making up the words when there aren’t any words, announced Johnny.

“Jessie, would you mind reading Rosie’s Walk for me?” Jessie began reading the book. He struggled over each letter in the first word. While Jessie attempted to read the text, Johnny made a series of horizontal lines, X’s, and checkmarks on his paper.

“R-r-r-o-o-o-ster,” read Jessie.

I said, “You know what Jessie? This book is called Rosie’s Walk.” I turned to the cover of the book and showed Jessie the word, Rosie. Then I showed him the same word on the first page of the story. “If that word says Rosie, what do you think this word might say?”

“Rosie!”

“That’s right!” I cheered. “What did Rosie do?”

“He walked around the puddle,” Jessie said after looking at the illustration.

“It starts like puddle,” I acknowledge. “But it says pond.”

“Rosie walked around the pond!” Jessie read triumphantly. Johnny held up his paper filled with red marks (see Figure 6).

“This is how he is reading,” Johnny announced.

“Can you tell me what all of these marks means?” I asked Johnny.
“A line like this means middle. That means the middle,” explained Johnny. “An X means bad. And a check is the best you can get. He has lots of middles and checks.”

In our classroom, Johnny felt safe to move around the classroom and participate in conversations with other students. Sometimes he helped other students with stories they were writing or a math problem they were working on. There were other times when
he asked other students in the class for help. One day, Johnny was working on a story. He wanted to give the characters Mexican names so he went to a girl in our class who had Mexican heritage. When he came to read his story to me, he could not remember the names of his characters.

“Carla,” I called. “Could you come and help Johnny and I for a few minutes?”

She walked back to the horseshoe table where Johnny and I were working. “Johnny is having a hard time remembering the names of his characters. Do you remember what they are?”

“One is named Alex,” said Carla.

“This one’s named Alex,” said Johnny as he pointed to an illustration in his story.

“Okay. What is the name of another character?” I asked.

“Another character’s name is Lehi,” said Carla.

“Lehi. Thank you Carla. You’ve been very helpful. Johnny, you were talking about someone named Jose’. Is there a character in your story named Jose’? I bet this one is Jose’,” I said as I pointed to a name written on one of the pages.

The social relationships that Taylor, Jay, and Johnny developed during the year shared some similarities. All three boys were accepted and even respected by the other students in the class. The other students recognized their intellectual and creative abilities. Taylor, Jay, and Johnny also recognized the abilities and talents of other students in the class. The class became a community of learners where they helped each other become successful. We all celebrated individual and group successes.

There were also differences in the social relationships that developed. Taylor and
Jay had similar abilities and interests. They developed a strong friendship that extended beyond the classroom. Their experience in first grade was a very happy one because they could work together academically and play together socially. Johnny often worked independently. There was no one like Johnny. He was intelligent and creative. Although Johnny did not have a close friendship with another student in the class, he worked and played well with other students in the class.

Learning Environment

Another theme to emerge was the impact that the class learning environment had on Taylor, Jay, and Johnny.

In a parent interview, Taylor’s mother commented,

I appreciate the learning environment you’ve created in your classroom. You’ve created an environment where it’s OK for the kids to take risks. You’ve created an environment where kids can try things and succeed and that’s OK. In some classrooms, they might not be able to do that. It’s got to be this way and this is how it is going to be. I like that you’ve made it so safe.

I learned more details that described Taylor’s school experiences while interviewing his Mother. During our interview, I asked her to share some of Taylor’s positive school experiences.

Let’s see. There’s been a lot. He really likes the hands on projects like doing the Egyptian Burial Tomb (see Figure 7). It was a big hit. Anytime you did anything with Spiderwick we would hear about it. He really, really enjoyed that. And, all the extra things they do— assemblies. He’s always pretty excited to tell us about that. Anything that’s a little bit out of the norm. And math. All things math. But I’d say the hands-on stuff—especially the burial tombs. He talks about that a lot. And he wants to go to Peru because I guess you talked about it” (see Figure 8).
Figure 7: Taylor’s burial chamber.

Figure 8: Taylor’s Peruvian mask ancient cultures.
During a November parent-teacher conference, Johnny’s mother discussed some of the positive effects our classroom learning environment had on her student.

I think I mentioned at the beginning of the school year that I needed a teacher who will see beyond Johnny’s independence and not view his independence as something negative but as something you can tap into and promote and encourage in a positive way. He still needs to follow the rules. He needs to realize that when he’s in a classroom, he can’t always be doing projects. He also needs to learn social skills. Johnny has learned to love school this year. He has enjoyed the fun projects that you have done. He’s really enjoyed picking his own books. He’s really enjoyed having independence when deciding how he’s going to contribute. You’ve given him some latitude. He seems to be more of a broad spectrum learner. I think that’s helped him.

During a math period, I gave the boys in the challenge math group an assignment where they were asked to subtract two-digit numbers without regrouping. The assignment was asking the boys to find out how many of each exercise the coach wanted the players to do. Taylor and Jay finished the assignment quickly. They showed it to me when they were finished.

“Wow! This is great,” I told them. “Do you have something that you would like to do now?”

“Yeah,” replied Taylor and Jay. “We want to go do this now.”

“You want to go do the exercises?” I asked in a surprised voice.

“Yeah!”

“OK.” They moved to a corner of the classroom behind my desk and began to do the exercises on the math assignment. Then, they started creating new math problems from the original problems on their math paper (see Figure 9). It was quite amazing to watch them create their own math challenge. They extended their math assignment in a way that showed they could apply the math skills they were learning. They felt safe and
free enough in our classroom environment suggest interesting alternatives for their own learning.

Our classroom-learning environment was centered on big, real topics such as exploration of space, ancient civilizations, and dinosaurs. We learned reading and writing strategies, math concepts through the study of these topics. The big topics provided a high ceiling that invited the students to extend their individual learning. Taylor, Jay, and Johnny felt safe in extending their own learning. They were not limited to doing only class assignments. The stimulating learning environment invited Taylor, Jay, and Johnny to explore areas of interest that extended beyond the outlined first grade curriculum. They could apply a learned math concept to an independent project. They could research a topic of interest. They could create three-dimensional art projects.
Prefer Student-Directed Learning

Taylor’s Mother explained that she believed it was important for Taylor to have control in his learning.

Taylor likes to have ownership of his learning. I just think for him, anything that he physically has ownership in will make a big impression on him. He likes to design his own projects and teach others about what he has created. He will always be right in the middle showing people what to do. He’ll take charge. That’s comfortable for him. Anything that he feels he’s in charge of or has some ownership in, he’ll do really well with.

Even at the end of the school year when Taylor and I were talking about his portfolio, he wanted to direct the conference. We sat together at the horseshoe table and looked at the work he had decided to keep in his portfolio. I wanted him to explain to me why he had selected each paper. Taylor often chose to direct our conversation in a different direction.

“This paper shows where I learned to handle money,” said Taylor as he turned the page. “Oh! I really liked this page! You had to think of problems that equaled 5, 3, 2, 6, 7, and 9.” As Taylor turns the page, Jay walked over to the table and stood next to Taylor. “These are subtraction and these are addition,” Taylor explained as he pointed to the math page. Then, he turns the page. “This is cents – counting money. That’s just counting. This was really hard.”

“What is this?” I asked Taylor. Does 8 + 8 = 1?”

“What?” Taylor asked in surprise as he looked over the paper.

“You forgot to write the 6!” giggled Jay. Jay and Taylor giggled together.

“I can’t believe you let me do this!” Taylor laughed as he looked directly at me.
“Now I’ll go over my science. First, I’ll show you my favorite math page.”

Taylor loved to do riddle math pages. These are math pages that have a riddle like, why did the bird fly south? In order to find the answer to the riddle, the student has to solve the math problems correctly.

“Why is this your favorite math page?” I asked Taylor. Taylor never responded to my question. He moved onto the science section of his portfolio.

“O-Kay. Back to science. Back to science. O-Kay. This is the Solar System.”

“Isn’t this the Moon?” I asked Taylor.

“Well, I put all of the other stuff in there. The Moon. By Taylor. Earth is the third Planet from the Sun. The Sun is the closest star. There are many comets. The moon has craters. People have gone to the moon” (see Figure 10).

Jay asked, “Didn’t the first man on the moon...:

“...play golf?” Taylor finished Jay’s question. “Yea. He played golf on the moon. I want to do that when I grow up.” Taylor focused back on his portfolio. “This is the solar system and this white line says where it circles around you know (see Figure 11).

Figure 10. Taylor’s art project of the moon and other objects in space.
“What is that planet?” asked Jay.

“It’s a dwarf planet,” replied Taylor.

“This seemed like a test,” Jay announced as he pointed to Taylor’s solar system.

I was a little surprised by Jay’s observation. Making the solar system was a way for me to determine how much the students knew about the sun and the planets that orbit around the sun. “Say that again,” I said.

“This is like a test because you have to be listening to know which planet goes where in the solar system. You have to know which planet is the right one.”

“I think it’s one of the dwarf planets like Ceres and Pluto,” I interrupted.

“Yea,” said Taylor. “They’re dwarf planets Oh. What is this? Oh, that’s the moon. That’s the earth.”

“That’s the moon?” exclaimed Jay. “You put the moon on there?”
“I just felt like it. That’s Jupiter, the biggest planet I ever saw.

“Yea,” said Jay. “It’s a big planet.”

“That’s a comet. Star. Star. Star. Star. Taylor! Hey! I’m in the solar system!”

I tried to refocus the conversation and get Taylor to tell me why he had put these artifacts in his portfolio.

“Taylor, what are some of your favorite things you’ve learned about in first grade this year? What are some of your favorite projects?” Taylor got really excited when he came to the next page in his portfolio. One day in class I had read the book, *Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing* by Judi Barrett. After we had read the book, I asked the students to suggest something that first graders definitely shouldn’t do. This page illustrated Taylor’s creative response to my question.

“Oh! Oh! This is one of my favorites! This is funny! First Graders should definitely not breathe air (see Figure 12)! So everyone, quit breathing!”

*Figure 12*. Taylor’s first graders should definitely not breathe air.
Taylor held his breath. Jay panted like he was out of breath. Then they both burst out laughing.

Jay likes to invent new games to play outside at recess. He and some of the other students in the class had made up games about the solar system, dinosaurs, sharks, and volcanoes. One day we read the book *Meteor!* By Patricia Polacco. At recess I observed Jay and Taylor playing a new game they had just invented. They were playing in the sandbox located on the kindergarten-1st grade playground. All of a sudden I heard Jay yelling, “There’s a meteor alert! There’s a meteor alert!” as he ran out of the sandbox.

Jay entered first grade writing complete sentences (see Figure 13). In writing workshop, he enjoyed making decisions about the characters and problems that developed in his stories as well as writing nonfiction text about topics of interest. One of his writing projects was about dragons (see Figures 14 through 21)

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 13.* Jay’s writing describing himself as pirate. This was written at the beginning of the school year.
A Knucker dragon has a Knucker's tail. He can swallow a horse and cart hole. A Knucker's tail is capable of knocking over trees.

Figure 14. Jay's dragon story page 1.

A Krak. Dragón's jaws are lined with pointed fangs.

Figure 15. Jay’s dragon story page 2.
Figure 16. Jay’s dragon story page 3.

Figure 17: Jay’s dragon story page 4.
Each one of awful Heds Speak in a different voice. He has 10 Heads. Hercules killed him with poison darts.

Figure 18. Jay’s dragon story page 5.

The Shew-lungs Jaws has Breath that can make a cloud that could turn into fire or water.

Figure 19. Jay’s dragon story page 6.
A glaurungs jaws will flame a shot
As hot as lava.

Figure 20: Jay’s dragon story page 7.

Jawz aurch as the moon and
Sun when we Have an eclips.
It makes the has eaten them.

Figure 21: Jay’s dragon story page 8.
One day, while sitting in our authors’ circle, I invited the students to share what they were writing about in their fairytales.

“Jay, tell us about your story.”

“My story is called, ‘The Three Little Pigs.’ They were in the forest and the wolf finds them and they get this rocket launcher. It has like 50 rockets and they shoot it and blow the wolf up.”

Johnny was determined to do things “his way.” It was a policy in our school that the outside classroom doors remain locked and that students stay outside until the first school bell rang at 8:55 a.m. Early in the school year, Johnny discovered the one door of the school that was left unlocked and made it easy for students to enter the building without being detected. However, the third time he entered the building, the school counselor caught him. This experience was written in my reflective journal.

“Hello,” Mrs. Smith said when she found Johnny walking through the empty hallway. “Where are you going? I don’t think you are supposed to be inside the school yet.”

“My teacher lets me come in before the bell rings.”

“Who is your teacher?”

“Miss B.”

Mrs. Smith walked the rest of the way to the classroom with Johnny. When they entered our classroom, she said, “Is it all right for, what is your name again?”

“Johnny.” He had already hung up his backpack on one of the coat trees that were placed around the room, and sat down at his desk.
“Is it all right for Johnny to come in this early?”

“Of course,” I replied. Mrs. Smith left. Johnny pulled a book out of his desk that he had checked out from the school library.

At the beginning of the school year, I gave all of the students a math assessment to determine which math concepts they already knew and which math concepts we needed to cover in class. Through these assessments, I discovered three boys in our class who had advanced math skills. I decided to put them in a math group where I could provide them with more challenging concepts. One afternoon, Johnny approached me about the challenge math group. He lovingly called the boys in the group challenge “math-ers.”

“Miss B.,” said Johnny. “I need to be in the challenge math group. I just don’t learn as much as in the regular math group. It’s just not challenging enough. I need something to challenge me.”

“Johnny,” I replied. “I’ve noticed that you don’t always get the regular math assignment finished. I’m afraid that challenge math would be very difficult for you.”

“I would do much better if I was a challenge math-er!” I decided to let Johnny try the challenge math group. I had parent volunteers who worked with this small group of students while I worked with the other students in the class. Monitoring Johnny closely, I observed that even though the challenge math was difficult for him, he rose to the challenge. He remained focused on the task and put forth a great deal of effort to complete the tasks. Even though he had to work harder, he was far more successful in completing the challenge math assignments than he was in completing the regular math
Johnny tended to think outside of the box. It was not uncommon for him to be creating a setting for a story he had heard or design a home for some dinosaurs he had brought to school. One day he brought several of his stuffed animals to school. During reading workshop, he had the stuffed animals sitting in a semi-circle on the floor. He had identified a book from our classroom-leveled library for each of the stuffed animals to read. He sat with the stuffed animals on the floor and helped them with their reading.

Sometimes it was difficult to get Johnny to focus on his schoolwork because he had this amazing idea in his brain that he wanted to work on instead. One day in class I was feeling a little frustrated with Johnny. I wanted him to read his tote tray books during reading workshop. He was absorbed in a new creative project. I knelt down next to him for a serious conversation.

“Johnny, I know you really want to work on your creative project, but during reading workshop, I really need you to work on reading your tote-tray books. Can you think of a way that we could solve this problem?”

With very little thought, he responded, “I know! I could come to school early and work on my creative projects before school starts then I could do my reading during reading workshop.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Do you think we could try that?” I asked.

“Sure!” Johnny stuffed his creative project in his desk and skipped across the room to get his tote-tray books. I found that it was often necessary to negotiate with Johnny. Johnny’s mother added to this observation when I asked her how I could help
him have a successful school year.

“Give him the latitude to think how he thinks,” she responded. “Also, structure. He doesn’t need control. I’ve learned with him that I need to give him latitude and opportunities for decision-making.

Johnny was extremely creative. He was always designing projects. I learned that he did better when there were open-ended options to projects we worked on in class. I always encouraged the students to create projects that included their own uniqueness.

“Boys and girls, as you work on your projects today, see what you can do to make yours different from everyone else,” I suggested.

“Can we use our creativity,” Johnny asked.

“Oh yes!” I replied. “Use your creativity.” Johnny seemed to thrive in this type of learning environment where he could direct his own learning.

In October, our class talked about the importance of being a good friend. We talked about the legend of the Mayan Circle of Friends, which promises that if you give a clay sculpture of three to seven friends holding hands to a person you care about, you will have a friend forever. I gave each of the students a large circle cut out of poster paper. Around the outside edge of the poster paper circle was ring of paper students holding hands. The boys and girl were asked to design clothes for each of the figures on their circle of friends’ project. To finish the project, I would help the boys and girls add crepe paper streamers and to hang from the bottom glue a copy of the legend on the back. All of the boys and girls went to work immediately designing clothes for the ring of students on their paper. All of the students, except Johnny. Johnny began drawing lines going
different directions from one side of his poster paper circle to the other side of his poster paper. The lines intersected at various points. Soon, Johnny had several sections created on his paper plate circle. Looking closely, I discovered that he was making the shell of a turtle. Instead of dangling his streamers from the bottom of his creative project, he placed them artistically on the outside of his turtle’s shell.

In November, while learning about Native Americans, the students made totem poles. All of the students made their totem poles into an 18-inch long vertical cylinder. They created four animal heads that were stacked one on top of the other. Johnny’s totem pole was an 18-inch wide horizontal cylinder with the head of a bird in the middle and wings coming out of either side of the head.

At the beginning of February, we celebrated the Chinese New Year. For one of our projects, we made a wreath with the Chinese Horoscope animals. The planned activity was that the students would cut out the animals and staple the around the edges of a paper plate with the center cut out. Before all of the students had reached their seats after listening to the instructions, Johnny was already creating something different from the assignment that was given. Instead of using a paper plate, he walked over to the paper tray and selected a piece of brown construction paper. He sat down at his desk and began to cut an imperfectly shaped circle. He drew his own Chinese Horoscope animals on his wreath and then completed his project by drawing a bow on the bottom of his wreath.

One day we were conferring about a story he was working on in writing workshop. His story was called “The Attack of the Chicken and the Evil Diaper Monster.”
Miss B: Johnny, would you read your story to me? Start here and read it all the way through.

Johnny: The three super rangers are named Alex, Jose’, and Lehi. The attack of the chicken and the evil diaper monster.

Miss B: Who is that? Alex? Alex is attacking his enemies.

Johnny: He is...he is...

Miss B: Could his name maybe be Lehi?

Johnny: He is attacking his enemies. (Johnny turns the page). He is attacking his enemies. (Johnny turns to the next page.) The three super rangers. (Johnny looks up at me after he finishes reading his story.)

Miss B: Tell me what you think of this story. Once upon a time, there were three pigs. They were named Ichabod, Indigo, and George. One day the big giant wolf came. He built a straw house. He built a stick house. He built a brick house.

Johnny: That’s not how it went. I got this from a different book.

Miss B: Tell me about the really cool part of your story.

Johnny: The really cool part is like the fighting. The chicken gets killed!

Miss B: But, you don’t even tell us about the chicken getting killed. You need to add that.

Johnny: OK! We can add it. Let’s just say the hero stabbed the bad guy in the neck. That’s the book I got it from, Power Rangers. That’s my favorite show!

Miss B: Does this happen in the movie, Power Rangers?

Johnny: No. It’s a different series. I want to make it a little more different from the power rangers.

Miss B: So how is this different from the Power Rangers movie?
Johnny: It has different bad guys and I kind of added in Captain Underpants because I got some of my ideas from Captain Underpants.

Miss B: What did the chicken and Captain Underpants do to make the three Superheroes so angry? Why do the Super Heroes want to fight these guys?

Johnny: These guys make the super heroes angry because the Super heroes want peace so there wouldn’t be much people banging on their town. They try to destroy the chicken and the diaper monster.

Miss B: So Johnny, this is a really cool story. The super heroes want to have a way to have peace, but you don’t ever tell us that in your story.

Johnny: Maybe we could write it on the back.

Miss B: So you need to think about what you want to tell us in your story. The super heroes want to have peace throughout the world. That’s what you want to tell us about.

Johnny: How about the country?

Miss B: OK. Do you want peace among the country, in the country, throughout the country?

Johnny: Among the country! Let me show you at the very end. The chicken is archenemies with the super rangers because the rangers want to make peace in the land so there is no badness or robbers. But, the chicken and the Diaper Monster want to build a dungeon because they don’t want peace. But the Rangers want peace and in the end they win.

One day I asked Johnny if there was anything he would like to learn in class.

Johnny: If we could learn like, middle school stuff. If we could learn harder stuff. I would love to learn to do harder stuff like this. \( N + 9 = 18 \), Then you have to figure out \( N \). \( N + 9 = 18! \)

Miss B: So, what is \( N \)?

Johnny: Nine!

Miss B: That’s right! Did you know that \( N \) doesn’t always equal nine? \( N \) can be any number. If I write down \( N + 3 \) equals five, what does \( N \) equal?”
Johnny: N equals 2!

Miss B: So N is the missing number! You figure out what the N is and then you gotta figure out what the plus actually is. Do you want me to show you something really confusing?

Johnny: He nodded his head yes.

Miss B: When you’re doing middle school math, this is what you would do. We have N + 3 = 5. Then, we would write N + 3 – 3 = 5 – 3. We’d have to put minus three on both sides.

Johnny: I’m gonna make it into a nine so that 3 + 3....

Miss B: Wait. What is three minus three?

Johnny: Um. Three minus three. That’s three take away three. Zero!

Miss B: Good, Johnny. Now we have N plus zero equals...what’s five take away three?

Johnny: Two!

Miss B: So N equals two. This is what they call a proof in algebra. You learn this in middle school and what you’re trying to do is find the answer for N.

Johnny: Let’s do that for math today. So, whoever can do that for math today, whoever can find what that is passes to be a challenge math-er.

At the end of the school year, I sat down with Johnny to have him tell me about his portfolio.

Miss B: Tell me why you put these math papers in your portfolio.

Johnny: I put this paper in because I wanted to see how good I can count to 100. This is when I was in the challenge math-ers. (Johnny turned to the next page.)

Miss B: What are you learning on this page?

Johnny: It’s teaching me hundreds, tens, and ones. (Johnny turned the page.) This is teaching me the highest number and the lowest number.
(Johnny turned the page again to a picture of the Solar System.)

Miss B: Tell me about this (I pointed to the solar system, see Figure 22).

Johnny: This is my solar system. These light marks, some are black holes. Some aren’t. But there’s actually black holes all over the place. Oh Yea! That’s the biggest black hole. Then there’s the Sun Goddess. She’s trying to make the black holes in half. They’re trying to take over all of the planets. They’ve taken out all of these planets. Now they just have to take out Earth and this planet.

Miss B: Johnny, can you describe one of your best days of school?

Johnny: Can it be a day in the future?

Miss B: (I was a little surprised by Johnny’s response.) How can your best day at school be a day we haven’t had yet?

Johnny: It’s our fieldtrip. All fieldtrips would be my best day at school. I like going on fieldtrips, but I thought you weren’t supposed to go on fieldtrips until you were in 2nd grade.

We did have an upcoming fieldtrip planned to visit the Ancient Dinosaur Track Museum and Albertsons.

Figure 22. Johnny’s solar system.
Taylor, Jay, and Johnny all demonstrated that they wanted ownership in their learning. They liked to choose the books they read, topics they wrote about, where they worked in the classroom, and activities they selected to work on when their assignments were completed. All three boys liked to design their own projects. When they designed their own projects, they talked animatedly about them. When they did assignments I had given them, they did not exhibit much excitement about their learning. Taylor and Jay liked to direct the discussion in their guided reading group. They also liked to create math activities that applied concepts they had learned.

Johnny wanted to make decisions about his learning. He expressed his opinions about what learning situations would help him most. He negotiated terms so that he could do those projects he valued while still completing tasks that would help him become a more proficient reader and writer. Taylor, Jay, and Johnny felt empowered because they had a voice in the activities they participated in at school.

Asynchronous Development

The last theme to emerge in this study was the observance of asynchronous development. Asynchronous development is when there is uneven development between the cognitive, physical, psychosocial and social domains. This asynchronous development can cause a gifted student to feel out of step with other students. All three students demonstrated some uneven development.

I observed asynchronous development while watching Taylor and Jay play a math game. To play this game, a player would draw a card that asked a mathematical question.
The player had three answers to choose from. The correct answer was printed on the back of the card along with the number of spaces the player could advance on the game board.

Taylor and Jay had selected a math game that required them to make measurements. Both Taylor and Jay had high abilities in math, so it was interesting to observe Jay’s social behavior in this situation. Even though Jay had the ability to do the math problems easily, his behavior suggested that there was uneven development between his intellectual abilities and his psychosocial development. He demonstrated egocentric behaviors such as a desire to always be first and the need to always win.

Taylor:  I get to be black, and I’m going first this time since you went first last time.

Jay:      Okay.... I got black.

Taylor:  You can’t be black.... I’m black...sorry dude.

Jay:      Okay. I’m white. White can color over black so I’m first now!

Taylor:  Hey!

Jay:      White can color over black so I’m going first now . . .

Taylor:  Okay...so, what are we doing now?

Jay:      Using rulers (taking out new cards).

Taylor:  Make sure they’re side down...are they side down? (He grabs deck and checks through the cards to make sure they are all the same way. Jay takes deck and places it on the table. Taylor draws first card.) What is shortest?  Foot. B. (Flips card over).

Jay:      Wrong! 6 inches!

Taylor:  I didn’t see that. Dummy me.

Jay:      (draws card) Okay...16 ½  B. (flips card.) 2 spaces!
Taylor: (draws card) I hope this is more than 2 spaces. That’s easy, B. 2 spaces.

Jay: (picks up Matt’s card). Wait. I wanna read the question. How tall is the ceiling...8 inches, 8 yards, 8 feet. That’s easy! They tell you the answer! (He draws another card). Three feet is...(flips card over while Taylor is not looking) three feet is...C. I said C. C!

Taylor: Si?

Jay: C (points at card). I said C. (flips card over to show Matt). C. 3 spaces.

Taylor: (draws card as Jay pulls it to look at the back of it) How much is it?

Jay: 4! (Jay looks at the back of Taylor’s card to see how many spaces Taylor will be able to move if he answers the question correctly. Jay is manipulating the game so that he can win.)

Taylor: Awesome! (maps out strategy on the board).

Jay: Uh uh...that would not be fair, Taylor.

Taylor: Okay...1½ would be…. A. I don’t get this. The answer is A. (Taylor counts his spaces twice.)

Jay: (draws card) Which is longest, 1 yard or 3 feet...wait...I wanna see something (pulls prior card out of the pile and reads that 3 feet is equal to 1 yard). Okay! Then it is one yard. A or C. It’s gonna be A or C.

Taylor: No. It’s 4.

Jay: Oh! Yeah! It’s 4! Cause 4 feet is longer than 3 feet, and 3 feet equals 1 yard! It’s B. 2 spaces. I’m so lucky!

Taylor: (draws card) Easy. (Jay tries to pull the card.)

Jay: You’re going for 4 spaces.

Taylor: C. The answer is C. Uno, dos, tres...3 spaces.

Jay: Let me see the card. One yard. 3 feet. Okay...you move.

Taylor: Okay...let me do it.

Jay: (draw card) Okay. Easy. A. 2 inches. C. 2 spaces. (Taylor is concerned
about his place on the board. They have some discussion and his playing piece is replaced somewhere on the board. Jay retrieves his card and looks at it again.) C. (flips the card) 3 spaces (and moves his piece again...unbeknownst to Taylor).

Taylor: (draws card). Oops! I read the answer! (he puts the card back and takes another).

Jay: Look where I am.

Taylor: Which is shorter...1 foot or 15 inches?

Jay: Look where I am.

Taylor: B. 2 spaces (flips card before answering.)

Jay: Look where I am. (Matt moves 2 spaces). I’m really far...(draws card) 2½. A. 4 (moves his piece). I’m gonna win... AGAIN! And you got to go first! (Taylor draws card and is reading the question. Jay tries to look at the card.

Taylor: C. 100 yards. C. 1, 2, 3.

Jay: (points to piece) Look where I am! (draws card). 5.5 inches. C. (moves piece).

Taylor: (draws card). Which is longer... 5 yards or is it 5 feet?

Jay: Whichever you choose.

Taylor: I think its 5 yards. One. (moves piece).

Jay: (draws card) 1 inch. B. Yep... 2. 1, 2. One more space and I win.

Taylor: (draws card) 8½ ...spaces.

Jay: Look where I am.... Hopefully, I’ll get it wrong... (draws card). Oh, 1 foot is 12 inches. B. Come on. (moves piece). I won! (Taylor takes his turn and moves 1 space.)

Taylor: You have to keep playing. (draws card). How much is a...? It’s 1 inch. A.

Jay: (Jay picks up cards). Look at this...they’re flipped over...don’t ask me
why.... I did not see the answer. (reads card) ½. B. Moves 2 spaces.

Taylor: I just had this one. (exchanges card) 5 ½. B. 2 spaces.

Jay: Okay... B. 2 spaces.

Taylor: 12 inches is...1 foot. Okay.

Jay: I win again.

Here is another example of Jay’s asynchronous development. Once again, I could see Jay’s need for recognition and reassurance from others to feel that other students in the class accepted his response.

One day I was reading Once There was a Bullfrog by Rick Walton aloud to the class to introduce our study of compound words. In the story, the author writes about a boxcar.

“What is a boxcar?” I asked the students.

“Oh,” said Jay. “I said a boxcar and I was right! It’s sort of like a train...a part of a train. I made a boxcar once, but it was really a plain box.”

“You’re right, Jay. A boxcar looks kind of like a box. It has a roof and closed-in sides. It’s a car on a train that is used to carry things.”

Jay leaned over to his friend, searching for confirmation, and said, “See? I was right!”

Taylor and Jay could read, understand and discuss abstract thoughts and ideas. Even though they were capable of understanding abstract concepts, they preferred to share their ideas and knowledge in concrete ways. When they talked about their reading, they liked to connect to the pictures in the text to explain their thinking. Here again, we
see Jay’s need for reassurance and recognition. Jay, Taylor and I discussed their reading of Captain Underpants and the Talking Toilets by Dav Pilkey.

“Tell me what’s been happening in your book,” I asked.

“Well,” said Jay. “There was a Science Fair thing, but it’s not really called a Science Fair.” He looked over at Taylor who was flipping quickly through the pages of the book. Taylor said, “It’s called a…a…a…”

Jay finished Taylor’s sentence and blurted out excitedly, “An invention convention! And there’s this kid named Elvin, or something like that?”

“Melvin,” Taylor said supportively.

“Yea!” says Jay. “And didn’t they make something like a Frendy?”

“It was the Patsy 2000,” replied Taylor.

“What is the Patsy 2000?” I asked, dramatically.

Taylor, holding a small book in his hand, explained, “You put something on the screen and…”

“They made a comic book,” interrupted Jay. “And he pops out of there!”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Terrible Toilet 2000!” Jay and Taylor sang out their response in unison.


“The Patsy 2000 makes everything come to life.”

Jay and Taylor would often explain abstract or complex ideas with concrete examples.

George and Harold would put a comic book in the Patsy 2000 and a character
comes to life,” explained Jay. “George and Harold got in trouble. The Principal told them they had to write sentences on the board, so George and Harold put chalk into the little tubes and then put the tubes in the Patsy 2000.”

“Show her this,” Taylor suggested while pointing to an illustration on the page.

Jay read, “After about three and a-half minutes, every chalkboard in the room was completely filled” (Pilkey, 1999, p. 45).

“In three hours!” Taylor repeats excitedly.

“And then there’s something really bad that happens to them,” Jay flipped through the pages of the book. “There it is, the big mistake...right there!” Jay began reading, “Too bad!” Mr. Krupp shouted with delight. You boys are officially suspended!” (Pilkey, 1999, p. 61).

Below is another example showing asynchronous development. I was observing Taylor and Jay read challenging books and yet chose to discuss the books in concrete terms. In their book, Captain Underpants and the Attack if the Talking Toilets Taylor attempted to explain how the talking toilets could eat a doormat.

Jay: They can eat the doormat!

Taylor: I can’t eat something flat like this – referring to his book laying own flat on the table.

Jay: I can (he picks up his book and demonstrates).

Taylor: No, I mean like this. (Taylor lays his book flat on the table and demonstrates how difficult it would be to eat them because the talking toilets didn’t have hands they could use to lift the book up to their mouths.)

While Taylor and Jay entered first grade with high reading and math abilities,
Johnny entered first grade with advanced content knowledge of many subjects such as global warming, functions of the human body, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. He also had tremendous creative ability. While interviewing Johnny’s mother, she shared that Johnny was delayed in his language, emotional, and physical development. Yet, his intellectual development was advanced. His ability to read and write had not developed at the same rate as other aspects of his intelligence. He had great stories with intricate plots waiting to be shared, but lacked the ability to write them. He was interested in adding to his advanced knowledge about the world through non-fiction books, but was unable to read books beyond a pre-emergent level. This was very frustrating for him because his knowledge about the world was vast. He would often sneak home challenging non-fiction books for his home reading rather than taking home a book on his independent reading level. The emergent level reading books were not interesting to him.

Even though Johnny found reading and writing challenging, he knew how to access resources to learn more about topics that interested him. I recorded one such example of this in my reflective journal when we were studying the Solar System at the beginning of the year. Each student in the class made a picture of the moon. Pieces of sandpaper were used to create the craters on the moon. At the bottom of his project, Johnny wrote: “The moon. Solar eclipses are rarer than lunar eclipses. For more information about Space, check this website: www.space.com.” I discovered that when you connect to this website, amazing graphics appear on the screen to share the mysteries of space through videos and photographs.

Jay’s emotional abilities had not developed at the same rate as his intellectual
abilities. When Johnny felt overwhelmed with expectations or felt hurt from the actions of other students in the class, he would lie on the multi-colored rug, curl up in a fetal position, and suck his thumb.

Taylor demonstrated the least uneven development. Jay demonstrated asynchronous development between his intellectual development and his social skills. Johnny demonstrated the most discrepancies in his development. Although he had high intellectual development, he was developmentally delayed in his physical, emotional, and language development.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion of Research Findings

My intention in this chapter is to discuss my findings of how gifted first graders experience school in a multi-ability classroom. In conducting this research, I have identified some factors that may help teachers understand the needs of gifted students in their classrooms. This discussion begins with some insights I acquired as a result of this study about the identification of gifted young students. Then I connect the major themes that emerged, high parent involvement, social relationships, learning environment, and student-directed learning and asynchronous development with extant literature.

Identifying the Gifted Student

Identifying young gifted students can be difficult because identification procedures are imperfect (Colangelo & Fleuridas, 1986; Harrison, 2004; Hodge & Kemp, 2002). Many classroom teachers lack specific knowledge about young gifted students (Manning, 2006). The classroom teacher needs to be knowledgeable about characteristics and behaviors of gifted students just like she needs to be aware of characteristics and behaviors of students who have difficulty decoding words when reading or calculating sums in mathematical operations. The teacher needs to assess students’ abilities and determine an educational plan that would challenge them and help them to continue learning.

As I reviewed the variety of assessments used to identify the participants for this
study, it was clear that one or two formal assessments could not be used to determine the
gifted abilities of young students. Taylor and Jay both had high academic skills. They
were both easy going and rarely complained about the activities we did in class. They
would do whatever they were asked to do in class. As the teacher, it would have been
much easier for me to ask Taylor and Jay to complete the same work that the rest of the
class was working on. Instead of differentiating their assignments and instruction, I could
have asked them do the same activities that all of the other students were doing. If I had
done that, Taylor and Jay would have spent their first grade year practicing skills they
had already mastered.

The importance of understanding and recognizing the characteristics of gifted
students became especially evident as I observed Johnny. Mooij (1999) concluded in his
study that teachers often focus on a student’s behavior problems instead of focusing on
their needs for a challenging and stimulating learning environment. There were days
when I was very frustrated with Johnny’s behavior in class. He would often make choices
to do things very different from what the rest of the class was doing. He made a turtle
when the rest of the students made a circle of friends. He designed habitats when the rest
of the students read their tote tray books. He begged me to let him do challenge math
when I felt he was not ready. Even with all of my background in educating gifted and
talented students, I initially missed seeing Johnny’s gifts and talents.

At the beginning of the school year, I gave all of the students in my class the
Torrance Test for Creative Thinking to identify their creative abilities. During the
administration of the test, Johnny announced in a frustrated voice, “This is not my kind of
creativity!” He wanted to cut and glue, but the test only permitted him to add details by drawing with pencil or crayon. I did notice while scoring the tests that Johnny had indeed found a way to cut and paste additions to his pictures. I could have made Johnny redo his test because he did not follow the instructions. Instead, I chose to be more observant, to ask him why he made the decisions that he did and to search for ways to celebrate his uniqueness instead of requiring him to conform to what the rest of the class was doing.

As I observed him more intently, I discovered he had tremendous knowledge about real world issues. He sometimes talked about the human body and functions of different body parts, the need for recycling, and global warming. I was always amazed at how easily Johnny would stand up spontaneously in front of the class to teach them something. I remember one day when we were talking about compound words after reading and discussing the book, *Once There Was a Bullfrog*. Johnny jumped up from the rug and walked to the whiteboard. He said, looking at the class, “You take the word “pair” and put it with the word “it” and you have the compound word pair-it.” I wrote the two words on the whiteboard as he spoke.

Johnny struggled with reading and writing and he did not realize that he had not spelled the word “parrot.” However, he demonstrated to the entire class that he understood that a compound word is two words combined to make a new word. After Johnny shared his example with the rest of the class, other students eagerly came to the white board at the front of the classroom to share their compound words. Johnny’s example empowered the other students in the class.

I met with Johnny’s mother for a parent-teacher conference in November. I told
her about this study and that I wanted to include Johnny as one of the students in the study. I went on to tell her that I felt Johnny was a student who would quickly be seen as a student with behavior problems and never be seen for the unique abilities that he did have. I asked Johnny’s mother how she would feel about Johnny participating in my study. Her response was, “Thank you for seeing my son the way that I do.” I could have easily labeled Johnny as a behavior problem and punished him for those very same behaviors that actually led me to identify him as being gifted.

**High Parent Involvement**

Parents play an important role in the development of their young gifted student. As their child’s first teacher, parents need to provide to a nurturing environment where the child feels free to explore and be themselves (Smutny, 1999). Harrison (2004) noted that curiosity and a desire for stimulation is evident throughout the early childhood period. Henderson and Ebner (1997) stressed that providing a developmentally appropriate and stimulating program helps promote the potential of very young gifted students. As I worked with the three students in this study, I noticed that their parents were very involved in providing a home environment that stimulated the exploration and learning of their students.

**Learning experiences.** Taylor’s mother developed a student-centered approach in her home. She provided many learning experiences for Taylor such as, going to the county library regularly and inviting him to make decisions on his own. An example of this is when she gave Taylor the opportunity to use his decision-making skills on shopping trips while learning the value of money. I happened to be visiting at Taylor’s
home after a family shopping trip.

“Taylor, show Miss B. what you bought!” Taylor left the living room for a few minutes and then returned with a pair of secondhand roller blades.

“Look,” Taylor exclaimed excitedly. “They only cost three dollars!”

“The two middle wheels are missing, but he thinks he’s figured out how he can skate on them,” Taylor’s Mother laughed.

“Wow, Taylor!” I said. “That’s quite a bargain. Are you afraid to skate on them? I would be.”

“No. I’m not scared. It’ll be fun!” guiding his selection of books by suggesting titles and authors she felt would be appropriate for him at his age.

Johnny’s parents also created and participated in learning experiences that encouraged learning. Johnny’s mother was a social worker and had extensive background in early childhood development. She was very aware of Johnny’s development as he was growing up. As a baby he had a severe case of eczema on his face when he was first born. His parents spent a lot of time holding him and comforting him. His language development was delayed. Henderson and Ebner (1997) stated that providing an enriched environment from early infancy through preschool could have long-lasting effects on intelligence and academic achievement. Johnny’s family planned camping trips and other experiences that invited him to use his sense of touch, sense of smell, sense of hearing and sense of sight. Johnny’s mother mentioned that her work schedule and her husband’s work schedule were set up so that one of them would always be at home with their students and that at least one of them would always be available to attend our class
activities such as our opera, Authors’ Breakfast, and student-led conferences.

While Jay’s parents were also involved in Jay’s development, they seemed to take more of a parent-centered approach. Jay’s mother tended to have more of a parent control on Jay’s learning. She had many concerns, as a parent. As mentioned in chapter four, where I describe the context of the study, Jay’s mother spent a lot of time at the beginning of the school year looking through two elementary schools to determine which school would provide the best learning environment for her student. At parent-teacher conferences, she explained her concerns about another student in our class, in regard to her son. As I was getting ready to place students in classes for the coming school year, she requested that another student not be placed in the same class as Jay. At the end of the school year, when I interviewed Jay’s mother, she talked about the new home her family was getting ready to move into. Her family was moving into a high socio-economic area. She described her new neighbor’s very elaborate home and expressed her concern that her new neighbors would not have the same values that she wanted to instill in her students.

*Reads with child.* Each family encouraged their child to read independently while providing support when it was needed.

*High expectations.* In the findings section of this study, I described Jay as a student who often needed others to reassure him that his answers were right. Although I have no answer to explain Jay’s behavior, I have wondered if his home environment made him feel that he must always give the right answer to please Mother and Father. Could that explain why Jay often sought positive reinforcement in class? I also wondered
if Jay was sometimes reluctant to take a risk on creative projects because he often received specific directions from his parents. Jay’s parents were very aware of how quickly he learned and understood new concepts. They realized that Jay needed to be challenged in the classroom and were involved in selecting the best educational setting possible for him. They had resources, which enabled them to provide valuable learning experiences for Jay outside of the classroom.

*Social Relationships*

Another important piece of evidence to emerge was the social relationships that developed. Harrison (2004), Kim and Cohen (1999), and Roedell (1984) noted that young gifted students often feel isolated because their thinking process is different from the thinking process of their peers. Manning (2006) and Harrison (2004) suggested that it is important for gifted students to participate in learning activities where they can interact with other gifted students.

*Work with other gifted children.* Taylor and Jay found social satisfaction in pairing with each other. Working together was an important part of how Taylor and Jay experienced school. They became good friends as they worked together, often found huddled together in corners of the classroom researching their next “all about book,” reading and giggling over Captain Underpants’ wild escapades, or solving complex math problems. Sometimes they could even complete each other’s sentences. As the school year progressed, they spent at least one day a week at each other’s house where they often played chess. Perhaps this indicates that they felt alike and that they enjoyed some of the same things.
Autonomous. Johnny, however, did not have deep social relationships and often worked independently on his projects. He liked to direct his own learning. Sometimes it was difficult for me to get Johnny to focus on class assignments. He was much more interested in his latest creation. Johnny got along well with other students in the class. But, there were a few times when the other students made comments that would upset him and he would cry. He was very tenderhearted and may have felt social isolation.

Helping and working with other students. Perhaps helping other students was a way that these students made social connections. All three said that they liked to help other students in the class because it made them feel good. I often asked Taylor and Jay to help other students with their reading and math. They would do so willingly, but would often become frustrated because the student they were helping had difficulty staying focused on their reading and math. I tried to be sensitive to Taylor and Jay’s individual needs. Sometimes I asked Taylor and Jay to work with other students in the classroom because I wanted them to feel that they were an important part of the class community. There were other times when Taylor and Jay were free to work with each other on projects of their own choosing because I also realized they needed to be challenged in their own learning.

Teaches others. Johnny often helped other students without an invitation. He would walked around the room, talk to other students about their writing and then offer suggestions they could use to improve their writing. He was very good at making suggestions on ways other students could make the story more exciting, adding interesting details or adding new characters. He did not like others to tell him what to do,
so it was interesting to observe how much he tried to direct the learning of others. He would conduct a writing conference with one student and suggest possible plots to improve the story. While working on an art project, he would offer suggestions to another student on how they could use a variety of mediums to make their product more unique. Johnny taught other students in the class with such finesse. He approached the students with his tray of ideas much like a waiter shares the desert tray with his customers. Johnny shared his ideas and then let the student choose to reject or accept the idea.

When a student’s giftedness goes unrecognized, the student may develop disruptive behaviors, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of isolation from his peers (Harrison, 2004; Manning, 2006; Robinson, 1998; Roedell, 1990; Shaklee, 1999). As I observed Johnny work with the other students in the class, the other students never rejected his suggestions or help. They seemed grateful for his ideas and often commented how creative Johnny was. The students and I recognized and celebrated Johnny’s unique abilities. I believe our support and confidence in him helped experience first grade in a positive way.

**Learning Environment**

*Child-centered.* A child-centered learning environment emerged as important in this study. According to Henderson and Ebner (1997), a stimulating learning environment is the most favorable aspect in the development of giftedness. After a student’s giftedness is recognized, it is important to design stimulating learning experiences that are individually appropriate for that student’s needs (Smutny, 1999). These participants
enjoyed the exhilarating, inviting, and safe learning environment in our classroom.

According to Cho and Ahn (2003), methods implemented to help the student make personal discovery should be individualized and based on the student’s learning styles. Students should feel safe and accepted in a classroom where involvement, interaction and socialization are provided. A child-centered classroom should help students understand the risk and rewards that exist when acquiring knowledge.

Safe to take risks. Taylor, Jay, and Johnny felt that the classroom was a safe place where they could explore their own interests. All three students wrote stories based on their own interests. Taylor wrote stories about sharks and super heroes. Jay wrote stories about dragons, his own version of the three little pigs. Johnny wrote stories about Egyptian hieroglyphics and the three Super Rangers. Taylor and Jay felt comfortable in playing challenging math games when they had free time, while Johnny would spend his time designing with any resource he could find including scraps of paper from the paper recycle box. Johnny was a strong supporter of recycling. He would use any and all papers placed in the recycle box regardless if something was printed on it or if it had been cut. Taylor and Jay often worked together while Johnny was content to work on his own.

Stimulating environment. Young gifted students may not reach their full potential because the learning environment is not designed to meet their needs (Hodge & Kemp, 2002; Morelock & Morrison, 1999). Roedell (1984) stated that gifted students might experience an increase in feelings of vulnerability when they work in an inappropriate classroom setting.

As described earlier, our classroom was built around the theme, “exploring our
world as pirates.” Posters, books, games, pillows, blankets, and toys set the tone for a safe, stimulating environment. Student choice, opportunities for personal exploration and study, informal settings for students to share and discuss ideas, ask questions and do further exploration were provided.

Child-Directed Learning

Henderson and Ebner (1997) discussed that student-directed learning is an important element that is needed to create a developmentally appropriate learning environment for young gifted students. Barone and Schneider (2003) and Cho and Ahn (2003) noted that gifted learners should reach their own personal goals as learners.

Project ownership. Taylor and Jay often followed the directions I gave them for their learning experiences, but they did like to direct their guided reading discussions, create math activities, or invent new games. Taylor and Jay were excited when they actively and personally connected their learning experiences to their individual lives.

Creativity. Johnny took an even more active role in directing his learning. I often had to negotiate terms with him, in order to have him do assignments or activities I knew would help him develop as a reader and a writer. Johnny consistently directed his learning. When all of the students worked on art projects, Johnny creatively and thoughtfully made them his own through elaboration or completely changing the outcome. He liked to make decisions about his personal learning. There were occasions when Johnny and I worked more like a team than a teacher and a student.

Directed discussions. Another example of student-directed learning emerged while I was talking to Taylor, Jay, and Johnny at the end of the year about their
portfolios. Whenever we came to a math page or another page I had assigned them, their responses about completing in the activity were minimal. When they came to a page showing something they had personally designed, descriptive stories explained all of the amazing things going on in their artifact. They demonstrated a lot more ownership for projects they had designed. They created knowledge as they connected their learning to their individual lives.

Asynchronous Development

Asynchronous development is the uneven development of a student’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Gifted students have greater discrepancies among their domains of development than average students (Silverman, 1997).

Connect to illustrations. When we met for reading, Taylor and Jay would excitedly flip through the pages of the book to shared events in the book. Their discussion of the book usually connected the illustrations in the book. I reflected back on the many times I moved young gifted students into pictureless novels and wondered if a better practice would be to have them read picture books with complex themes such as *Sister Anne’s Hands*, *Sophie’s Masterpiece: A Spider’s Tale*, *Pink and Say*, *Faithful Elephants* and *The Banshee Train*.

Intellectual/emotional development. While interviewing Johnny’s mother, she shared that Johnny was delayed in his language, emotional, and physical development. Yet, his intellectual development was advanced. He stories had great intricate plots but, but lacked the ability to write them. He was interested in adding to his advanced knowledge about the world through non-fiction books, but was only able to read books
on a pre-emergent level.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrated that these gifted first graders connected what they were learning to their individual lives. They learned in a stimulating, student-centered learning environment where there was choice and ownership. They learned when they had opportunities to work with other gifted students, when they interacted with other students in their class and when they had opportunities to work independently. They learned when their parents provided home experiences that stimulated and extended their learning. Furthermore, gifted students learn when they can direct their learning. Being able to select the books they read, write about self-selected topics, design projects and games, all give a personal purpose to their learning, because they build on their existing knowledge and abilities. Another important factor is realizing that although gifted are highly skilled in some ways, they may need teacher support and instruction in other ways. When a knowledgeable teacher recognizes the special needs of a young gifted student has due to asynchronous development, she will implement an educational plan designed specifically to meet that student’s needs (see Figure 23).

**Connectiveness Between Learning and Individual Lives**

**Transferability**

Taylor, Jay and Johnny had a positive, happy experience in our multi-ability classroom. The themes of high parent involvement, social relationships, learning environment, prefer student-directed learning, and asynchronous development provided
Figure 23. Factors contributing to a positive experience in a multi-ability classroom.
specific guidelines teachers can implement to more effectively meet the needs of gifted students.

*Teaching children who are developing asynchronously.* Revisiting the Columbus group’s definition of giftedness, reminds us that “giftedness is the asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm” (Silverman, 1997, p. 39). Johnny, Jay, and Taylor each experienced asynchronous development. Their advanced cognitive abilities united with their passion to learn created an awareness that they were different from the other children. Even though Taylor and Jay had high abilities in reading, writing and math,

I knew I could not ignore their need for challenging learning experiences, expecting them to spend their time at school practicing skills that were too easy. I also realized that I could not focus only on Johnny’s struggles with reading and writing or his behaviors as I planned instruction for him. When I planned instruction, I needed to combine their advanced cognitive abilities with learning experiences that challenged them and enabled them to continue learning.

*Invite parent’s insight and support.* Smutny (1999) noted that parents play a critical role in their gifted student’s life. Their encouragement and direction helps their student develop inner strength, determination, and self-efficacy. I worked with the parents to form a strong connection between school and home. After I became aware of the student’s needs, the parents and I discussed an educational plan that would provide optimal learning opportunities for the student. As the parents and I worked together, I
learned more about the student’s interests, learning styles, and personality while parents were aware of our classroom experiences and planned family activities that extended and enriched the student’s learning.

*Provide a safe place for caring friendships to develop.* Creating a place where all students felt safe and valued is a very important event at the beginning of the school year. On the very first day of school, we began constructing a community of learners where diversity was celebrated. I often shared a story with my students about the many times I have tried to water ski and I just cannot get up on those skis! I help them to realize that each one of us has something we cannot do without help and each one of us has something that we are very good at. I invite them to develop relationships and friendships so that we can all learn from each other throughout the school year. The students learn quickly that because we are all different, we learn differently. They recognize that some of their classmates like to learn independently while others like to work in pairs or groups. They recognize that some students are quiet and shy, while others might be loud and humorous. Recognizing that we all have differences makes it okay for students to learn in their own way and on their own level.

*Design an inviting learning environment.* Whitmore (1982) explained that the teacher and the curriculum create an invitational environment. She goes on to say that creating a learning environment that invites students to enjoy success should be the goal of every teacher.

My classroom was designed to encourage exploration and adventure. Posters of dinosaurs hung on the classroom walls to help us identify dinosaurs we excavated from
chocolate cupcakes. Enlarged photographs of statues found in the Egyptian tomb of Ramses II were displayed on bulletin boards during our imaginary trip to Ancient Egypt. While in Egypt, each student designed his own Egyptian burial chamber. Students could be found laying on their tummies while reading and discussing a nonfiction book about the planets in the Solar System. Informational texts were easily accessible around the room and the students were free to read and discuss these books with each other. I believed we could investigate any topic that interested us as a class or as an individual and so did the students in our class. I often asked the students to “think like a scientist” and they did.

*Give students ownership of their education.* Barone and Schneider (2003) believed that gifted students should set and reach personal goals as learners. At the beginning of the school year, I used a variety of assessment tools to determine the abilities and needs of my students. It would have been easier for me to plan the curriculum for our class based on the academic needs of my students. However, I believe that school has a more personal value if students learn to read by reading about topics of interest. Besides assessing their academic needs, I visited with each student to learn what they like to do in their spare time, what kind of books they liked to read and personal interests. Then I would begin to plan the school year.

As the school year progressed, I talked to the students individually about their progress. Sometimes they wanted to set new goals. Sometimes they identified areas where they needed additional help. There were other times when they felt they were not being challenged. I made adjustments to meet their needs.
I encouraged the students to take responsibility for their own learning. They chose the books they wanted to take home and read with their parents. They selected the books they practiced reading in reading workshop. They had a variety of educational activities they could work on when their assignments were completed. These activities were on a variety of levels to meet the needs of individual students. Some students chose to practice math facts. Some students wrote stories. Other students worked on letter sounds or onset and rime patterns. The students felt empowered when they directed their learning because then they could connect what they were learning to their individual lives.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Student’s Literature References
Student’s Literature References


Appendix B

Permission Note
Gifted First Graders in a Multi-ability Classroom Project
Video and Audio Taping Classroom Consent Form

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I have initiated a study on giftedness in young students that is trying to better understand the needs of bright first grade students. Three specific students from our class have been selected for this in-depth study. I will be observing these students in our classroom over the next few weeks.

In my research I would like to use a video camera and audio recordings to get a better record of my participants, their interaction with other students in the classroom, and how they participate in learning experiences. Your student may appear in some of the footage. I would like to assure you that if your student should appear in the videotapes, anonymity for your student and yourself is assured. At no point will your student’s name or picture be used in this research. The names of participants will not be used in any public document.

You and your student are under no obligation to participate in this study and you may refuse to participate in the video and audio taping aspect at any time. You may change your mind about allowing your student to be recorded simply by contacting me. If this happens once the tapes have been made, then I will remove the tape from the data collected for the study. The video and audio-tapes will be used for research and educational purposes only; there will be no monetary gain from the use of these videos.

If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be happy to discuss this research project with you. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Cari Buckner
Doctoral Candidate, Utah State University

Permission Slip

I understand that Cari Buckner will be videotaping in her classroom. (Please sign one of the two blanks.)

I give permission for my student to be in the classroom while it is being videotaped.

(Parent Signature)

OR

I do not wish for my student to be in class while it is being videotaped.

(Parent Signature)
Appendix C

Interview Protocol
Interview Questions for Parents of Participants:

1. Would you mind sharing with me some of the experiences your student has had at school this year?

2. What aspects of the school day do you think contribute to your student having a positive or successful day at school?

3. How does your student demonstrate excitement about what he is learning about school?

4. What aspects of the school day do you think contribute to your student having an unhappy or frustrating day at school?

5. Have you observed your student making personal adaptations in order to feel happier or more successful at school?

   If so, how do these adaptations make your student feel about himself?

   (a) About going to school?

   (b) About his classmates?

6. How would you describe your student’s experiences at school this year in First Grade?
Interview Questions for Student Participants

1. Can you describe one of your best days at school this year?

2. Why was this one of your best days at school?

3. Describe a frustrating day at school. What made this day frustrating?

4. There are many ways we can learn things at school. Can you tell me how you think you learn best?

5. What challenges you the most at school? Do you like it when you are challenged? Why?

6. How do you feel about learning with the rest of the class?

7. How do you feel about learning in small groups – like in math and reading?

8. Are there changes you would like to make so that school would be a better place for you learn?

(a) What would those changes be?
Appendix D

Informed Consent
INFORMED CONSENT
Gifted First Graders in a Multi-ability Classroom: An Interpretive Case Study

Introduction/Purpose: Professor Martha Dever and Cari Buecker, research assistant in the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University (USU) are doing a research study to find out more about how gifted first graders experience school in a multi-ability classroom. The purpose of this research is to observe how gifted first grade students adapt, conform, synthesize, and respond in a classroom where children work on many different academic, social, emotional and physical levels. Some children are just beginning to identify letters of the alphabet, while others are reading books written on a third grade level. Some children are learning to write numbers 1 to 10 while other students are adding two digit numbers with regrouping. Some children have advanced physical abilities and some children have highly developed creative abilities.

We are asking your permission to allow your child to take part in this research study because your child, ___________________________________ has been identified as one of the students we would like to observe in this research study. There will be a total number of 3 students identified as gifted and talented to participate in this research study. These students were identified as gifted based on classroom assessments which include Developmental Reading Assessment, Kingorc Observation Inventory, and Torrance Test for Creative Thinking.

Procedures: During this research study, your child will be observed as he/she participates in classroom learning experiences. If you permit your child to participate in this research study, the following will happen. Your child will be video-taped while participating in a two week period of typical classroom activities (e.g. class meetings, whole class instruction, small group instruction, individual instruction, independent practice time, read alouds, reading workshop, writing workshop, math, and all other classroom experiences) to provide an accurate representation of what happens in the classroom and how your child experiences these class activities. Some things I will watch for are (1) how your child adapts or conforms to classroom learning experiences, (2) demonstrations of frustration, excitement, boredom, interest, etc.

Some of the video-taping that goes on in the classroom will involve whole class settings to observe how the identified students interact with other members of the class. The other children do recognize that those students in the study are very smart and often turn to them for help. They also realize that these students have some amazing abilities. I do interviews with all of my students in reading and writing at least twice weekly to help me meet their needs, so I don’t think they will view my interviews of the students in the study as anything out of the ordinary. I have sent home permission notes to all of the parents of the students in my class to video-tape. All students will be video-taped at some point in the study except for one child. Her parents requested that she not be video-taped. I have made arrangements for her to work in another classroom when we are video-taping. These experiences will be transcribed and analyzed.
INFORMED CONSENT
Gifted First Graders in a Multi-ability Classroom: An Interpretive Case Study

Your child will be interviewed once a week during school time about his/her experiences in the classroom and how he/she feels about school for the length of the study which will be two months. These interviews will be audio-taped and then transcribed.

Although parents are not participants in this study I would like to interview the parents once every three weeks over a period of nine weeks. These interviews will be arranged at a time and place that is convenient for you. The questions for these interviews will be developed while observing and interviewing your child. The questions will help me to focus on how your child experiences first grade. Your insight and perceptions of your child’s experiences in school will be a significant contribution to the research study. These interviews will be about 30 – 45 minutes in length. Further discussion will describe how your child has demonstrated gifted abilities in academics, thinking abilities, etc. Your response, as parents, will be highly respected and wishes followed.

Risks: Participation in this research study involves minimal risk; however, some risks that include:

1. From classroom assessments administered to identify the strengths and needs of each child, your child has exhibited some gifted abilities. Every effort will be made to create challenging and valuable learning activities for your child. As your child participates in this study, he/she may become frustrated when tasks are too difficult or bored when tasks are not challenging enough. In an effort to minimize this risk, I will observe your child’s responses to assignments and then make necessary adjustments to make the work more appropriate for his abilities.

2. Other children in the class may exhibit attitudes such as jealousy, intimidation, and resentment because your child has been identified as being gifted. In an effort to minimize this risk, our class will sit down and discuss how all people are different. Even though we are all different, we need to treat each other with respect. We will discuss how each member of our class has special talents and abilities. I will also make every effort to recognize and celebrate abilities and accomplishments of each child in the classroom so that no of the children feel left out or unappreciated.

3. A child may not be acknowledged as being gifted when leaving the study and moving into the second grade and the curriculum may or may not be tailored to meet his/her needs. In order to minimize this risk, I will meet with your child’s teacher for the coming year. I will share accomplishments, unique talents and abilities, and individual needs that your child has and offer suggestions the teacher might try to provide an optimal education for your child.

Benefits: Parents and children in the study will be given the opportunity to voice their concerns, experiences, and feelings in connection with young gifted children. Their insight will be instrumental in planning learning experiences for the participants in the study as well as helping young gifted children in the future.
INFORMED CONSENT

Gifted First Graders in a Multi-ability Classroom: An Interpretive Case Study

Explanation & Offer to Answer Questions: Cari Buckner has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach Professor Martha Dever at (435) 797-0394 or Cari Buckner at (435) 673-6266 (home) or (435) 628-4814.

Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence: Please do not feel pressured to have your child participate in this study. Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw your child from this study at anytime without consequence. This will not affect any services you are now receiving or may receive in the future. Neither you, as parents of the child or your child will be treated any differently if you should decide you do not want your child to participate in this study. You may be withdrawn from this study without your consent by the investigator if it appears your child is experiencing frustration or discomfort while participating in the study.

Confidentiality: Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only Dr. Martha Dever and Cari Buckner will have access to the data which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked study room. Personal, identifiable information (audio and video tapes) will be kept until December 31, 2008 and then they will be destroyed.

IRB Approval Statement: The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has reviewed and approved this research study. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights, you may contact the IRB at (435) 797-1821.

Copy of consent: You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and keep one copy for your files.

Investigator Statement: “I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered.”

Dr. Martha Dever, Principle Investigator
(435) 797-0394

Cari Buckner, Student Researcher
(435) 628-4814

Signature of Parent/Guardian: By signing below, I consent to participating in this study by being interviewed once every three weeks about my child’s school experiences. I also give permission for my son/daughter to participate in this study.
INFORMED CONSENT
Gifted First Graders in a Multi-ability Class

Parent/Guardian Signature ____________________________________________________________________________ Date __________

Child/Youth Assent (for those between 7-17 yrs of age): I understand that my parent(s)/guardian is/are aware of this research and that permission has been given for me to participate. I understand that it is up to me to participate even if my parents say yes. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not have to and no one will be upset if I don’t want to participate or if I change my mind later and want to stop. I can ask any questions I have about this study now or later. By signing below, I agree to participate.

Name ____________________________________________________________________________ Date __________
Appendix E

Letter from Peer Reviewer
LETTER FROM PEER REVIEWER

February 1, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

Cari Buckner has provided me the digital transcripts of the video and audio recordings from her case study of three gifted first graders. In addition to the transcripts, Cari also provided her memos and reflective journal entries that she wrote during the study and analysis. As I do not live near Cari, the review was conducted through email correspondence and telephone calls. Through the process, if I requested clarification Cari was able to provide it without any difficulty.

In reading the findings section of the dissertation concerning Taylor in conjunction with the transcripts, I was able to trace experiences shared by Taylor and his Mother back to the video and audio transcripts. The incident related to Taylor’s portfolio was examined and evident in the data. I was able to trace the emergence of themes regarding Johnny in Cari’s reflective journal. An audit trail was sufficiently kept to facilitate the review process. I verify that from my perspective, the stated themes are accurately based on the raw data of this study.

Sincerely,

Jackie Nygaard
CURRICULUM VITAE

CARI LEE BUCKNER

Family and Consumer Sciences/Education Departments
Dixie State College
225 South 700 East
St. George, Utah 84770
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EDUCATION:

Utah State University – Doctor of Education     expected 2009
• Curriculum and Instruction
• Dissertation Title: Gifted First Graders
  In a Multi-ability Classroom: An Interpretive Case Study

Southern Utah University         1999
• Reading Endorsement

Utah State University           1998
• Early Childhood Endorsement

Utah State University – Master of Education 1993
• Masters Project: Teaching Shakespeare in Elementary Classroom
• Gifted and Talented Endorsement

Brigham Young University – Bachelor of Science 1979

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Family and Consumer Sciences/Education Instructor 2008 – Present
Dixie State College
• Courses taught
  * Human Development Across the Lifespan
  * Introduction to Early Childhood Education
  * Principles of Early Childhood Education
  * Literacy Acquisition for Young Students
  * Assessment for Young Students
  * Curriculum for Young Students
* Education for the Gifted and Talented

Bloomington Elementary, St. George Utah
• First Grade
• Combined First/Second Grade
• Literacy Coordinator/Reading Specialist
• Fifth Grade Teacher (Language Arts, Math)
• Reading Recovery Teacher
• Kindergarten

Bloomington Hills Elementary, St. George, Utah
• Reading Recovery/Literacy Groups/Book Buddies
• Third Grade
• Combined Third/Fourth

Elementary Teacher 1993 - 1995
Santa Clara Elementary, Santa Clara, Utah
• Second Grade Teacher

Graduate Student/Graduate Assistant 1992 – 1993
Utah State University, Logan, Utah
• Completed Master of Education Degree
• Taught Level III Social Studies Methods Courses
• Mentored Level III undergraduate students working in classrooms

Elementary Teacher 1979 – 1992
Santa Clara Elementary, Santa Clara, Utah
• Second Grade Teacher, twelve years
• Combined Second/Third Grade, one year

Other Teaching Responsibilities
• Teacher of Utah State Office of Education Literacy Lab Class 2000 – 2001
• Facilitator of Utah State Office of Education Literacy Lab Class 1999 - 2000
• USU Graduate Extension Courses 1996 - 1997
  Creativity in Education, Elem.
  Methods and Materials in Gifted Education (Both taught in St. George.)
• Consultant, State Office of Education
  Writing Workshop 4-Day Workshop Inservice (Hurricane, Utah)
  Writing Workshop 4 Day Workshop Inservice (Moab, Utah) Of Education
  Writing Workshop 4-Day Workshop Inservice (Parowan, Utah)
USU Graduate Extension Courses  
Methods and Materials in Gifted Education, Elem.  
(Ephraim, Utah – 1995; Moab, Utah – 1996)

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

• Utah Writing Project Teacher Consultant. (2004 – 2006)
• Editorial Review Board of The Utah Journal of Reading and Literacy  
  (1995 – present)
• Early Childhood Issues – National Council of Teachers of English  
• Revision Writing Team of Utah State Language Arts Core. (1994 – 1997)

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

• Co-presenter with Carol Avery at National Council of Teachers of English, Indiana  
  Indianapolis  
  November 2004  
  “A Responsive Writing Workshop for Kindergarten and First Graders

• Co-facilitated Week-long Utah Writing Project in Tooele, Utah  
  2004

• Presenter at Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Students. (75th, Salt Lake City, Utah, April 9 – 13, 1997)  
  “Meeting the Needs of Gifted Students in the Inclusion Classroom.”  

• Presenter several times at Intermountain Gifted Conference, Logan, Utah

• Presenter several times at SUU Reading Conference, Cedar City, Utah

PUBLICATIONS

• “Inspiring Young Writers with Picture Books.” Bookbag


• “Meeting the Needs of Gifted Students in the Inclusion Classroom.”  
  ED409687 EC305733 Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Students. (75th, Salt Lake City, UT, April 1997)
PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

• National Council for Teachers of English
• International Reading Association
• National Association for Educators of Young Students
• National Association for Gifted Students
• Utah Association for Gifted Students