The Renaissance Teacher: Identifying Students Perceptions of Exemplary Teachers

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THE RENAISSANCE TEACHER

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EXEMPLARY TEACHERS

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THE RENAISSANCE TEACHER IDENTIFYING STUDENTS’
PERCEPTIONS OF EXEMPLARY TEACHERS
ERICA WIGTON

ABSTRACT

The focus on the achievement gap for minority students is an issue facing many school districts across the county. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation highlighted the fact that many minority students are not achieving at or above expected levels in classrooms across America. Teacher quality is found to be an important ingredient of a thriving school. This reflects the NCLB requirement that all schools employ effective and highly qualified teachers. However, teachers cannot be evaluated merely on their credentials, such as attaining graduate degrees or the number of years of teaching experience. Furthermore, politicians, teachers, and economists have proved unsuccessful in eradicating this dilemma of developing successful teaching practices in the classroom.

The students themselves may be instrumental in providing valuable information as to what constitutes an effective teacher. Students are seldom interviewed to determine and define what characteristics are vital for an effective educator. The purpose of this study was to identify educational practices and teacher traits that sixth grade students in a diverse suburban school district find successful.

Case study methodology was employed for this research. The students were interviewed utilizing semi-structured interview questions. These tools were used to determine the perceptions of exemplary teaching from the perspective of sixth grade at-
risk and non at-risk students. By utilizing data from the interviews, participant’s
drawings, and teacher observations, themes emerged and were analyzed through a
constructivist framework.

Hands on learning, technology, differentiation, humor, and nurturing teachers
were the findings that suggest that schools need to ensure teachers are employing
these strategies in their classrooms. The research also suggests that the perceptions of
the students themselves must be considered when attempting to improve education
and when providing insight to politicians, administrators, and educators.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When I was a third and fourth grade teacher, I thought it would be wonderful to have my own secretary. I could have used the help with all of my copying, data recording, filing, and returning phone calls. Additionally, at times, I also thought that I would even be a better teacher if I had a degree in psychology. This would allow me to better understand and assist students with certain academic or emotional issues.

Today, teachers need to be multifaceted because it takes so many different roles and talents to be a truly exemplary teacher. There are a multitude of skills that an educator must master in order to drive students to reach their maximum potential. Quality teachers are the key ingredient to a successful school and improved student achievement. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore, from a student’s perspective, what qualities and tools are most significant for a teacher to be considered exemplary.

Teacher quality is vital if we want all students to grow academically. The ability of quality teachers to increase student performance is well-settled. Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) illustrated that a student moving from an average teacher to a teacher
who ranked in the upper eighty-fifth (85th) percentile would accelerate four percentile ranks. This is approximately the same effect upon a student’s achievement growth if class size were cut in half. Moreover, Sanders and Rivers (1996) demonstrated the importance of quality teachers in a situation where the teachers followed students from third through fifth grade. In analyzing the students’ math scores, the researchers found that students performed fifty (50) percentile points better with teachers determined to be in the top fifth, in terms of effectiveness.

Eric Hanushek (2009), an economist at Stanford University, estimates that students instructed by a poor teacher learn only one half of an entire year’s curriculum in one year, whereas students taught by an excellent teacher will double their learning over the same time period. Moreover, a student will benefit more from an exemplary teacher in a low-rated school than a poor instructor in an excellent school. Some studies have suggested differences in teacher test scores could be a determinant. However, less than half of these studies have proven to be statistically significant (Hanushek 2009). Moreover, resilience research suggests that a teacher can have a positive impact on student achievement (Werner & Smith, 1998). Although this research is compelling, one must examine what attributes of teachers that schools will select in the future when trying to recruit quality teachers.

The aforementioned research supports the theory that quality teachers are an important ingredient in successful student achievement; however, a close examination of the research indicates that the researchers do not definitively know what constitutes or predicts quality teaching. Studies which simply examine students who are making
large gains in the classroom do not necessarily assist researchers in choosing the best criteria to select quality teachers. Researchers must rethink what constitutes quality teaching as well as the factors and traits that need to be researched.

The issue arises as to how schools can effectively find and evaluate good teaching prospects. Teacher compensation in our current educational system fails to reward quality teaching. As an example, the salary for a poor teacher is most often similar to the salary of a quality teacher given the same amount of experience and level of education (Hanushek, 2009).

Other proposals to assist at-risk students are equally problematic. At-risk students are those who are educationally disadvantaged due to lack of exposure to educational experiences by the school, community, or family, and risk failing academically (Pallas, 1989, Brough, Bergmann, and Holt, 2006). Thus, young people are at risk, or educationally disadvantaged, if they have been exposed to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences in the family, school, or community. Simply cutting class sizes in half to help at-risk students is economically unfeasible since the schools would be forced to hire twice the amount of teachers and construct double the amount of classrooms. Moreover, the use of teacher evaluations, the requirement of advanced degrees, and the awarding of tenure, have proven to not significantly correlate with higher student achievement in the classroom (Hanushek, 2009).

Since the dilemma of how best to teach all students has not been solved by educators, economists, or politicians, one should ask the students about their most memorable learning experiences in the classrooms and their most meaningful
relationships with their teachers. Students themselves may assist educators and administrators in gaining insight into the most important qualities of an effective teacher. This study allows student voice in evaluating and discovering those teaching strategies and qualities that are most effective. Student perception might prove helpful to educators who examine policies and instructional strategies for both at-risk and non-at-risk students.

A high quality teaching staff is an important characteristic of elementary schools that are helping underprivileged students achieve in the classroom. The retention of teachers with the level of expertise and knowledge to work with students of poverty is of the utmost importance when schools strive to improve student achievement (Haberman, 1995; Holloway, 2002). Quality teaching may be the most vital ingredient to successful student achievement and this qualitative case study strives to understand what the students themselves believe constitutes effective teaching.

Problem

Many of our nation’s schools are underperforming, especially those with students who have diverse needs or backgrounds. Reform initiatives and new instructional techniques have been implemented in an attempt to assist at-risk students in achieving success in the classroom, but little progress in closing the gap has been made. Small school initiatives, such as school accountability testing, have not solved the problem of the achievement gap (Ravitch, 2010). However, schools are still striving to reach the needs of all students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress
NAEP still reports large discrepancies in achievement between African-American students and their white counterparts (Ferguson, 2004).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) put enormous pressure on schools to ensure that all students achieved proficient levels on state testing. Additionally, the government has placed stricter qualifications for teachers and requires more school accountability. This legislation has created a need to unveil methods that will ensure all students will succeed regardless of race, ethnicity, income or language. The NCLB legislative goal is for each child to make adequate yearly progress and meet all state standards by the year 2014. Many schools are reporting wide gaps between minority students and their Caucasian counterparts. According to the NCLB initiative, “Lawmakers may mandate change, but educators ultimately determine its success or failure” (Check, 2002, p.82).

Research suggests that teachers are one of the most important factors of predicting how students achieve. Teacher quality is essential for student achievement, especially among African-American children and those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, properly defining teacher quality causes much debate. According to Gordon, Kane and Staiger (2006), whether a teacher is certified or not does not predict student achievement. Additionally, Hanushek and Rivkin (2005) reported that simply attaining a master’s degree does not predict teacher quality in the workforce.

In order to eliminate the achievement gap, many are reporting that a teacher gap must first be eradicated. “Quality Counts” (2003), a report from Education Week,
asserts that states are not recruiting competent teachers focused on helping minority students. Additionally, students from high poverty schools are more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers. This is alarming since minority students who are assigned to highly effective teachers show cumulative gains in achievement (Gordon, et al., 2006).

NCLB contains several policies that make schools accountable for student achievement. In order to achieve school accountability, schools are evaluated under test-based accountability. The components of test-based accountability include: goals, measures, targets, and incentives (Sunderman, Orfield, 2007, p. 25). The students are measured by performance standards which determine how well students have learned the standards. Targets are also in place so that one hundred percent of the children are proficient as a long term goal. The sanction of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) means that lower performing schools will have to make huge improvements to meet the same goals as higher performing schools.

Since the report entitled, A Nation at Risk, public schools are criticized for not being equitable and for failing to provide a curriculum that allows all students to be successful. NCLB can be interpreted as building upon A Nation at Risk. Seed believes that both, “A Nation at Risk,” and, “No Child Left Behind,” foster “approaches to developing a strong teaching force [that] do not mesh well with what we know about good teaching” (Seed, 2008, p. 587). McGuinn (2007) argues that the compromise between Republicans and Democrats created a shift toward an expanded federal role in our schools, as well as a mandate that our schools become more accountable for the performance of disadvantaged students.
As a current educator, I have attended countless meetings which delivered multiple strategies for teachers and administrators to close the achievement gap. Currently, different assessment techniques, student monitoring systems, differentiation, and culturally relevant teaching are all popular topics among educators and at the conferences. After examining all of these techniques, and believing that they may have an impact on student achievement, I wonder why the student voice is missing in all of these strategies and techniques. Students are rarely asked by teachers what methods or teacher characteristics are beneficial for them in the classroom. Although there is not one method or concept that is going to make the achievement gap magically disappear, it is crucial that student voice be included in any educational reform that affects teachers and classrooms.

Student voice is an important element in educational reform. To bring student voices into school reform, schools should more closely reflect the democratic structure of our society (Dewey, 1938). There should be a movement to collaborate with students in order to help schools improve. Unfortunately, the simple structure of our schools suppresses student voice. All too often the teachers and the administrators are seen as omnipotent by society.

Teachers and administrators must respect the students. Once trust is obtained, it is important for educators to improve our schools. Cook-Sather (2006) believes that involving students in school decisions would facilitate school reform by helping them with their future. Collaboration among teachers and students would create a symbiotic
relationship. As such, both parties would benefit if they could collaborate and identify methods to assist student learning.

One must also ask whether or not at-risk students have differing needs in the classroom than other students. Do at-risk students need more culturally relevant teaching practices or more rapport opportunities? Many studies do not give at-risk students the opportunities to discuss what educational environment, teaching strategies, and management procedures are most conducive to their success in school. Students need to voice their preferences to enable educators to provide better learning environments. The study addresses the problem that schools do not have adequate information on how students view quality educators.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to add the voice of students, especially those who are at-risk for academic failure, to assist educators and administrators in analyzing policies and implementing procedures that will help in the complex issue of eliminating the achievement gap. There is not one solution that will help solve the difficult problem plaguing many schools in America today. However, student voice is not considered when thinking about how to solve the problem. Student voice could provide insight on educational practices that are effective and meaningful to students. Additionally, students may feel empowered when asked to give their perceptions of best instructional approaches that will help benefit students. Another goal of the research is to investigate what teaching strategies or characteristics that students consider ineffective.
Teachers are a vital resource in our educational system. Given the current climate in which schools face increasing budgetary restrictions, new programs are difficult to implement. Examining the perceptions of students will help administrators best utilize teachers and, thus, maximize student learning. Rather than restructuring schools, which takes a huge monetary commitment from a school system, building our knowledge of student perceptions of exemplary teachers can enhance at-risk programs that are already in place in schools with limited financial resources.

Finally, trying to discover student perceptions of their best and worst teachers will help fill a gap in the current research literature. Examining the similarities and differences of student perceptions of teachers and teaching may also provide answers to what is lacking in their current education. Also, the students may need stronger student–teacher relationships than their teachers recognize.

Although it is difficult to measure what specific qualities comprise a quality teacher, it may prove useful to examine what students perceive to be important qualities for an educator to possess. This study strives to examine the perceptions of both at-risk and non at-risk students. The intention of analyzing the two groups is to look for commonalities and differences. Possibly, at-risk students require greater attention to a certain strategy and less of another. An examination of the similarities and differences will give the researchers better understanding of how to alleviate the achievement gap that exists in so many classrooms in America today. Additionally, the study aims to discover the perceptions of exemplary teaching of fifth grade students to help schools raise the academic achievement of their students.
Research Questions

Researchers are starting to consider the opinions of students during their own academic journeys (Cook-Sather, 2006). However, studies do not usually draw from the opinions of elementary school students who are academically at risk for underachieving. As an educator, I feel compelled to ask students to give their opinion as to what qualities exist in their most exemplary teachers.

Specific research questions emerged from research on teacher effectiveness as well as from my own experiences as an educator of at-risk students:

1. How do non-at-risk and successful students in the classroom describe exemplary teaching?
2. How do non-at-risk and unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?
3. How do at-risk successful students describe exemplary teaching?
4. How do at-risk unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?

Significance of the Study

Although students are the clients that schools are trying to serve, only until very recently have they been considered in educational reform efforts. The purpose of this study is to listen to the needs of fifth grade students and provide insight on their perceptions of the best teaching techniques and teachers. Utilizing the perspectives of fifth grade students is a unique component of this study. Typically, research studies examine the perceptions of older students to shed light on teaching and other aspects of education. However, it is important to learn from students at a young age. It is at
this young age when critical skills and positive learning habits must be formulated. Skills such as reading are developed at this early age and are vital to the academic success of the student. Additionally, motivation is shaped during the primary years and carries students throughout their academic career. Hence, it is essential for educators and policy-makers to consider the perspectives of elementary school-age students. The results of this study may be utilized to assist teachers, administrators, and universities in the preparation of our nation’s teachers.

Certainly, if teachers take the time to be vigilant and listen to their students and their needs, they can attempt to present curriculum in a manner that will assist students to become more engaged and motivated to learn. Professional development programs should focus on the needs and wants of our students. Though many would expect students to desire less school work and more play time, this is not what students crave. Gathering student insights will assist teacher preparation programs. All reform efforts must be focused on the key stakeholders in today’s schools -- the students themselves.

“Best practice” is a term often used by educators to define what research-based strategies have proven to be most effective in the classroom. Zelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) summarize the key principles of the best practices in teaching. Several key points will be utilized in this study. Initially, the curriculum must be student-centered and directed to the interest and questions of the students. This philosophy matches the concept of differentiation. Students also need be actively engaged with hands on learning materials in a social environment in which they learn from each other. Finally, a classroom should incorporate the constructivist approach in which the children’s
understanding and experiences with a topic are used to guide the teachers in helping students shape their thinking of complex concepts.

**Pilot Study**

In order to help guide the literature review, a pilot study was conducted. Four (4) fourth grade students were interviewed at an elementary school in the same school district in which the actual study took place. The four participants were able to narrow down several concepts for this study. The objective of the pilot study was to help shed light on the research questions of students’ perceptions of great teachers. The students were more than willing to elaborate about educational experiences that were personally meaningful to them. Without knowing the academic terminology, students in the study were able to focus upon major concepts that are popular in education today. In the interviews, students were able to discuss their preferences of culturally responsive teaching, differentiation, and technology use in the classroom. Additionally, the students were able to discuss management techniques that helped the class and themselves to stay on task and motivated to learn.

After gathering evidence from the fourth graders in the pilot study, the following themes emerged:

1. Effective At-Risk Instruction/Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies
2. Technology
3. Differentiation
4. Student Voice
The following paragraphs will briefly outline these key concepts that will be explored in greater depths in the review of literature.

**Culturally relevant teaching strategies.** Culturally relevant teaching, as discussed by Ladson-Billings (1994), asserts that curriculum should be relevant to a diverse group of students in order for these students to achieve to their potential. Teachers need to be cognizant that students bring different amounts of cultural capital to the classroom (Boudieu, 2005). Cultural capital is the differences in knowledge, experience and or connections one has acquired through the course of one’s life that enables him or her to succeed.

According to Ladson-Billings, successful teachers are teachers who build upon the strengths of their students and do not dwell upon their weaknesses. The effective teacher understands the cultural capital that the child brought into the classroom and builds upon the child’s strengths. In order to best accomplish this task, teachers must know the child outside of the classroom setting.

Learning about students outside of the classroom walls cultivates a more effective student-teacher relationship. A strong student-teacher relationship is vital for a teacher to best assist at-risk students. Teachers, however, must be willing to invest the time in order to achieve a positive rapport with their students, whether in the morning before school, at lunch time, after school, or even on the weekends.

According to Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings acknowledges that teachers understand that we live in a non-equitable society. Moreover, effective teachers help students deal with the inequalities that they will face outside of the classroom.
Teachers “make sure that the children see themselves not as the stereotype that others may hold to them, but as bright, capable, intelligent people that they are” (Delpit, 1995 p. 241).

At-risk students emphasized the importance of student-teacher relationships more than other students. For example, playing kickball or success at recess were activities that their favorite teachers performed. Accommodating the needs of at-risk students is of critical importance in the United States. It is well documented that students from lower socio-economic groups are not performing to the same levels as other students (Ferguson, 2004). Research on specially targeted methods of teaching to assist at-risk students is abundant. As an example, culturally relevant teaching practices are now utilized to target at-risk students who come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Technology. Technology utilized in a constructivist learning approach may also enhance critical thinking skills. Ferguson (2002) believes that schools should provide computers to at-risk students to assist them in their learning. Typically, schools utilize computers as a “drill and skill” device or as a part of whole class instruction through the use of video tapes. However, technology should be used in a cooperative learning and constructivist method. According to Padron and Waxman (1995), cooperative learning is proven to be an effective instructional approach. As such, at-risk students will benefit from the experience of other students. Technology can be used as a collaborative tool and not simply to teach explicit skills. Students utilizing technology should be placed in group settings. This type of collaborative working environment, in which the students
work together on real world activities, will be more personally meaningful and assist the students’ learning.

The roles of the instructor and the student shift in a constructivist environment. Instructors become facilitators and the learner has a greater role in their own learning. The success of technology integrated into a constructivist classroom environment is dependent upon teachers developing a student-centered pedagogy. Rakes, Fields, and Cox (2006) state that “teachers use existing technology to transform classrooms into dynamic centers of purposeful and experimental learning that intuitively move students from awareness to authentic action” (p. 53). Students gained more positive perceptions of their learning when given technology in a constructivist environment. Cardon (2000) found that hands-on learning prompted student interest. Similarly, the students in the pilot study suggested that technology helped them to understand concepts better than direct instruction. Technology, combined with a shift towards a more student-centered environment, can have a positive impact on student motivation, participation and, ultimately, their learning.

It is important that the use of technology in the classroom is not merely limited to students using computers in the classroom. In addition, the teacher should include cameras, videos, video cameras, satellite connections, and Smart Boards into the classroom environment. All of these types of technologies are used in more schools to assist teachers and students in the learning process. Teachers in these schools work collaboratively with students in small groups or individually. Olson, Means, Rufus (1993) found that technology aids teachers in presenting more complex tasks. Additionally, the
use of technology can help students attempt more difficult tasks and take more risks in
the classroom.

In the elementary school where the pilot study was conducted, there are many
classrooms with Smart Boards. A Smart Board is a large interactive white board which is
connected to a computer. The school also uses an individualized math program on the
school’s computers to help the students build solving problem and general math skills.
Both the Smart Board and the CCC mathematics programs were included in the
drawings of the students that participated in the pilot study.

The use of technology in a constructivist setting for at-risk learners can be linked
to both the constructivist theory and socio-historic views of learning. Both views reject
the didactic model for learning. Each view supports discovery learning and cooperative
learning as key focal points during instruction. Moreover, each view helps to prepare
students for the world of work in a global society.

**Differentiation.** Differentiation is a new buzz word flooding the education
community. Differentiated instruction is the teacher’s accommodation of the different
needs of diverse learners in the classroom. Differentiation helps all learners in the
classroom (Tomlinson, 2001; Cole, 1995).

Student responses in the pilot study tie in well with the concept of
differentiation. In the interviews, the students affirmatively stated that they enjoyed
receiving class assignments that best met their individual needs. One student noted
that he received more difficult math problems than the other students on the same
mathematical concept.
There are many differences among students who are of the same age. Some students are kinesthetic learners while others may learn better individually. The setting of this study contains a diverse student clientele in both academic and socio-economic levels. As such, it is difficult for the teachers to reach the needs of all students. Many of the teachers at this elementary school have been exposed or trained in differentiation. Differentiated instruction is used in many classrooms where teachers become increasingly proficient in understanding the uniqueness of the individual needs of the students.

Differentiated instruction helps to engage students and motivate them to learn. Additionally, differentiation is a process that assists teachers in tapping into a child’s experiences and strengths. In this teaching strategy, whole group lessons are not the norm. Rather, students are grouped by interest, readiness level or learning preferences. The needs of all of the students in a classroom are considered so all students can learn. Tomlinson (2003), one of the leaders of differentiated instruction, suggests that relationships are an integral part of the strategy. “Connecting with each child is at the heart of differentiated teaching, because this approach to teaching does not accept learners as interchangeable parts” (Tomlinson 2003, p. 22). The student-teacher relationship is vital to reaching students, especially those who might be prone to academic failure.

Differentiated instruction allows a teacher to respond to a student’s individual characteristics. It builds a community of learners, both collectively and individually. One might expect that differentiation is a topic that the students miss when asked about
their learning experiences. However, in the participant interviews, the students described it as being an important component to their learning. A quality teacher believes in each child and does not question their educability. However, the teachers might question whether the teaching strategies used in the particular lesson are effective. As such, the teacher will reflect and think of new ways to best reach the student so that they can fully understand the concept.

**Student voice.** Today, many classroom environments do not allow students to have the freedom to voice their opinions, express ideas, or ask many questions. Foucault viewed schools as placing restrictions upon the freedom and intellectual endeavors of the students. Further, he viewed schools as participating in the growth of disciplinary power. He asked, “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (Foucault 1995, p. 228).

Limiting the voice of students in the classroom may not only be a cause of the achievement gap, but also a reason for poor student performance. School systems should listen to the student perceptions of what increases their motivation to learn and become better problem solvers. Teachers must not only treat students fairly inside of the classroom, but also should collaborate with them in their pursuit to become better educators themselves. Allowing students the freedom to speak and construct knowledge will inevitably have a huge impact on their learning. In requiring students to become responsible for their own learning, and evolve into autonomous thinkers, shouldn’t they have a voice in shaping their classrooms? Constructivist ideology will not
only transform student learning, but hopefully transform schools and teachers so that every child will succeed in the classroom.

Definitions

The following terms are defined to provide clarification for the readers for this study.

*At-risk* - Although many controversies surround the definition of an at-risk student, for the purpose of this study the definition of an at-risk student includes students who come from families that qualify for free and reduced lunch. Research suggests that the socioeconomic status of a child is one of the biggest influences of their ability to succeed in school.

*Successful students* - For the purposes of this study, a successful student is one who scored in the accelerated category when they took the 5th grade Ohio Achievement Assessment or OAA. Other categories of the OAA are basic, limited, proficient, accelerated, and advanced. Students who score in the accelerated category show they have a definite understanding of the Ohio Academic Standards.

*Differentiated Instruction* - This is an instructional approach to accommodating the diverse needs of each and every student in our classrooms (Strickland, 2007; Nelson, 2001). Teachers who use this approach are responsive to the students’ learning styles and are cognizant that students learn at different rates. Also, if students have difficulty learning material, teachers should make accommodations to ensure mastery. Carol Tomlinson (2007), one of the experts on differentiated instruction, believes that
teachers need to address four (4) primary student traits in order to ensure mastery learning. These traits are: readiness, interest, learning profiles and affect.

*Culturally Responsive Teaching* - This is defined as a teaching method in which a teacher not only understands that students have different learning styles such as in differentiated instruction, but further, takes into account the student’s cultural knowledge and home experiences when teaching (Villegas and Lucas, 2002).

*Nation at Risk* - President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education published an influential report that stated that the students in the American public school systems are severely underachieving. It was a major shift in public perception that all children are to be educated and not simply sorted by levels of skill (Ravitch 2000).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* - This legislation was created, in part, as a response to a “Nation at Risk.” NCLB is arguably one of the most influential educational reforms in our country’s history. The active role of the federal government ensures that all students succeed academically. In order to close the achievement gap, schools had to implement reforms proposed in the NCLB (Check, 2002, Ravitch, 2000,)

*Traditional* - Traditional teaching is used in this dissertation to describe a more didactic, direct instruction approach to learning, rather than a more progressive approach to learning such as the one John Dewey (1938) advocates.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this review of the literature, I discuss the concepts that emerged from the pilot study conducted by Wigton. The pilot study enabled the researcher to narrow the focus of the research study to the following categories: Effective at-risk instruction/culturally relevant teaching; uses of technology in the classroom; and differentiation of instruction. The importance of student voice in school reform literature is also discussed. Finally, in this review, an examination of the purpose of this research is conducted within the context of the theoretical framework of Constructivism.

Effective Instruction of At-Risk Students

The demographic composition of today’s classroom has been transformed since the 1970s. The Census Bureau reports that twenty eight percent of the population of the United States is comprised of persons from diverse backgrounds, which includes non-white, and/or non-native born citizens. This number is predicted to almost double by the year 2050. As such, now more than ever, our nation’s teachers need to be prepared and ready to teach students that are at-risk (Check, 2002).
Accommodating the needs of at-risk students is of critical importance in the United States. It is well documented that students from lower socio-economic groups are not performing to the same levels as other students. Research is abundant on specially targeted methods of how to effectively reach at-risk students. As an example, culturally relevant teaching practices are now utilized to target at-risk students who come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that responds to the growing diversity represented in today’s classrooms (Villegas 1990, Gay 2000, and Ladson Billings 1990). Culturally relevant teaching methods assist the achievement of all students by nurturing their strengths which are used to build their academic growth. The attributes that define the pedagogy of the practice are the following: high expectations; acknowledging the cultural heritage of the students and how it affects their learning; and, connectedness between home and the classroom (Villegas, 1990, Ladson Billings, 1990).

The incongruence between the cultures of students and their teachers might explain why many minority students are not achieving at rates comparable to white students (Howard, 2003). The ethnic background or race of the students is a factor that needs to be taken into consideration by teachers in the classroom. Teachers need to be cognizant of the backgrounds and home life that a student brings to the classroom. Howard suggests that teachers need to be more reflective of how their own cultural background affects their teaching, and if their own perceptions of culture influence their teaching in a positive or negative manner (Howard, Villegas, 2002). There are many characteristics that teachers need to examine when trying to evaluate how their own
culture affects their teaching methods. Villegas believes the following six (6) strands are necessary to help define a culturally responsive teacher:

1. An awareness of the diverse world we live in and how people are influenced by their social reality
2. Having resources available for students and seeing differences as a positive trait rather than an issue to overcome
3. Belief that teachers can be catalysts for positive change
4. Understanding how students develop their own knowledge
5. Knowledge of the personal lives of the students
6. Using student strengths to build upon what they already understand.

Villegas acknowledges that culturally responsive teaching is a process that requires dialogue and reflection for the process to become inherent for teachers.

Culturally relevant teaching, as discussed by Ladson-Billings (1994), asserts that curriculum is made relevant to a diverse group of students. Teachers need to be cognizant that students bring different cultural capital to the classroom (Bourdieu, 2005). Cultural capital is the knowledge, experience and or connections one has acquired through the course of their life that enables them to succeed more than someone from a less experienced background (Coleman, 1989). Currently, due to a lack of implementation of teaching strategies that respond to this concept, student coming from homes where importance is placed on their native non-English language will be severely disadvantaged in many schools across the United States.
Learning about students outside of the classroom walls cultivates a more effective student-teacher relationship. A strong student-teacher relationship is vital for a teacher to best assist at-risk students (Villegas 2002, Ladson Billings 1994, Ferguson, 2004). Teachers, however, must be willing to invest the time in order to achieve a positive rapport with their students, whether in the morning before school, at lunch time, after school, or even on the weekends.

Not only do the most effective teachers know their students well, they also understand how their students construct knowledge (Villegas, 2002). This idea fits well within the constructivist framework of this study. Weaving the constructivist framework into the characteristics of culturally relevant teaching can promote academic achievement among African American students. In order for teachers to create an environment where students feel safe to identify their feelings and perceptions on topics, a solid student-teacher relationship must exist. Villegas suggests that inquiry learning also helps students construct knowledge in a meaningful manner.

Inquiry learning was originally proposed by Jerome Bruner (1959). Unlike direct instruction, students use their environments to generate questions in order to discover important concepts to connect to each other. The theoretical underpinnings are derived from the constructivist views (Ormond 1995). Examples of discovery learning include activities such as science experiments or student driven study to help solve a question. When students observe key concepts in a content area, rather than being told, it becomes more personally meaningful. Additionally, because students are
manipulating and observing the concepts, information is more likely to be stored in their long term memory (Ormond, 1995).

Villegas believes that inquiry based instruction not only engages students, but informs students that they are intelligent problem solvers who are capable of becoming intellectuals. Inquiry based instruction aids in the core ideas of culturally relevant teaching. It conveys the message to students that they are capable and, additionally, creates high expectations. Moreover, inquiry based instruction makes content more relatable to the students. Culturally relevant teachers understand that students come into the classroom with different experiences and backgrounds. Having students derive their own methods to arrive at solutions to problems assists students in matching their own individual learning style as well as their strengths as learners. First and Crichlow (1989) also found that successful teaching of minority students included a more democratic approach. Students need to be involved in the decisions in the classroom. Teachers should have high expectations for their students and not perceive them as victims. Effective teachers give higher level tasks to all of their students because they know the value of challenging their students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Ladson-Billings’ ethnographic study of eight teachers provides insight into the effective practices and beliefs of superior teachers which principals, colleagues and parents found to be highly effective. Teachers used cooperative learning and did not have preconceived notions of the prior knowledge of students. Higher-level thinking skills are developed. The teachers in the study found teaching to be an art form and a conduit to give back to the community. Teachers and students shared in the knowledge
in the classroom. One of the focus points of the teachers was recognizing student race and culture in the classroom.

Cooper (2003) studied successful white teachers of African American students. The research was designed to examine the beliefs of successful teachers and compare these to the literature that describes culturally relevant teaching. The teachers were chosen based upon a communication nomination method. This method was similar to the method used by Ladson-Billings. Three teachers were ultimately chosen for the study.

Cooper found that the beliefs and practices of the participating teachers were significantly compatible with the beliefs and practices of effective black teachers. A strong theme of the research study was literacy development. Basic skills in both reading and writing instruction were vital to the effective teachers. Additionally, management style was another theme that arose from Cooper’s findings. Management style was described as firm, but nurturing. Also, high expectations were consistent among the teachers. According to Cooper, cultivation of a community of learners is another tenant that is important for successful teachers. The study concluded that white teachers can be effective teachers of African American students if they maintain high expectations among the students.

Cooper also refers to the cultural synchronization in teaching, a term coined by Irvine (1990). Cultural synchronization is the connection between the cultures of students and their teachers. Cooper maintains that although cultural synchronization is vital in terms of language and behavior, it is also equally important to maintain high
expectations. However, Cooper asserts that a mismatch can occur when the learning style of students does not reflect the normal teaching practices of Eurocentric values.

The essence of this current study is to discover what students think make an effective teacher. Howard (2001) also wanted to know what students thought about teaching and, specifically, culturally relevant practices. When African-American elementary students were asked about culturally relevant practices, the students responded favorably. Three major findings emerged from Howard’s study. Initially, students indicated that caring teachers with positive attitudes towards their students were favorable. Also, teachers who created a nurturing, family-like classroom were well-liked. Lastly, the practice of engaging students was a notable effective teaching practice among the students.

The idea of democratic classrooms is another theme that resonates with culturally relevant pedagogy. Banks (1995) defines it as equity pedagogy in the classroom. The teacher must create an environment where all students from diverse backgrounds develop the skills to function as, and maintain, a democratic society. According to Banks, developing the skills alone is not enough. In addition, the students must become reflective citizens of a classroom society in which everyone’s thoughts and ideas are valued. Through this idea of equity, the relationship between a teacher and the students is transformed. The teacher is not perceived as the all-knowing person in the classroom, a perspective that perpetuates a society where the current power structure is limited.
Villegas believes that students are never going to be truly successful if schools continue to produce winners and losers. Class structures can also make it difficult for at-risk students to navigate through today’s society. Payne discusses the rules of middle class of which many students are unaware. She suggests that due to economic limitations, many students cannot perform to their potential in school. Payne also believes that creating relationships is integral for the success of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Payne, 1998).

According to Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings acknowledges that teachers understand that we live in a non-equitable society. Moreover, effective teachers help students deal with the inequalities that they will face outside of the classroom. Teachers “make sure that the children see themselves not as the stereotype that others may hold to them, but as bright, capable, intelligent people that they are” (Delpit, 2003 p. 241).

Steele and Aronson (1995) believe that the awareness of stereotypes can psychologically threaten the success of African-American students by promoting low academic success and the overall disengagement in academics (Aronson, et al., 2001). The authors wanted to learn if students could change stereotypes used against them when teachers instructed the students that intelligence is malleable. After the instructional sessions, the students who received such instruction enjoyed and valued academics more than their counterparts that did not receive the special instruction. In another study, Harper (2007) wanted to determine if a relationship existed between a student’s racial beliefs, which are central to their self-concepts, and their academic
achievement. After using the MMPI, the authors found that students who did not possess high racial beliefs had significantly higher GPA’s than their peers who demonstrated a high racial self-concept belief.

Oakes (2002) also discusses how teacher stereotypes toward certain students lead to student tracking. Stereotypes can inhibit students from achieving higher order thinking skills. These stereotypes can lead to tracking on their perceived ability. Though the original work of Oakes was written many years ago, many of the power themes are still rooted in our educational system today. Though tracking may not be instituted in our schools, to the extent it was a generation ago, it is widely apparent that the practice is still occurring in today’s schools.

There now exists a disproportionate amount of African-American students in the special education classes of our nation’s classrooms (Blanchett, 2009). Although special education students come from all ethnic backgrounds, “African American and other students of color are disproportionately represented and are at risk for being labeled in the high incidence disability categories of mild mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, and emotional behavioral disability categories” (Benson & Martin, 2003). Even in the elementary school in which I work, the same phenomenon is apparent.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is vital to improving the inequalities that currently exist in today’s classrooms, but it will not completely alleviate the inequalities. Nieto (2003) is in favor of the approach but believes it “...can become a Band-Aid to serious problems that require nothing short of major surgery” (Nieto, 2004, p. 7). Nieto advocates that in order for multicultural teaching to be truly successful, it needs to be
partnered with a rooted passion towards social justice. According to Nieto, although culturally relevant pedagogy is a step in the right direction, other factors need to be included in the pedagogy in order to lessen the achievement gap. These factors include the sociopolitical context and current school policies and practices.

Teachers need to understand that students are facing threats of stereotypes and not ignore the reasons why students may not achieve at certain levels. In order to address these issues, many schools attempt to fix management, school structure, and curriculum. However, improved teacher education must also be utilized to address these most critical components in order to help students achieve. These crucial components include: how teachers feel about their students; the materials that the teachers present to their students; and, an understanding of the social injustices which occur daily in our society.

**Use of Technology in the Classroom**

Given the abundance of teaching strategies and manipulatives that may be accessed by teachers, the topic of technology in the classroom could be so extensive as to be without focus. However, the pilot study brought some focus to topics that were important to the students. For example, in the pilot study, all of the fourth grade students were asked to draw a memorable learning experience. In response, all of the participants except one included some sort of technology in their drawings.

The use of technology in the classroom was brought to the forefront in 1998, when it was discussed by a panel convened by the United States Congress. At that time, Congress directed the Department of Education to examine promising educational
technology programs. The panel met for almost two years and created a set of standards as to what constitutes an excellent technology program. The panel concluded that an excellent technology program must do the following: Address significant educational issues; improve learners; assist all students; and increase achievement that otherwise could not be achieved without technology. The Congressional panel further concluded that technology should facilitate organizational change and be sustainable and adaptable for other learning institutions.

One of the most dramatic changes to our schools has been the implementation of technology. However, the increased use of technology in the classroom is not a novel concept. Over one hundred years ago, in his laboratory school at the University of Chicago, John Dewey wanted students to be active and engaged learners. Many schools today have an abundance of manipulatives, and technology is yet another tool to assist students become problem solvers and active in their learning.

Research has shown that students learn by actively constructing knowledge. When students are learning passively, they become negatively affected. According to Padron and Waxman (1995), students that receive direct instruction possess passive resentment. Additionally, the students are confined to using rote skill memorization, rather than higher order thinking skills. Many of these technologies can support research, communication, analysis and individualized instruction more effectively than standard chalkboards and textbooks. Schools that utilize technology in classroom instruction also provide students with a method of learning using a variety of intelligences (Gardner, 1993).
However, more technology could be used, on average, in cooperative learning and constructivist methods than is usually the case. For example, in a study conducted by Becker (2000), the researcher found that only five percent of the thousands of teachers who responded were using technology in “exemplary” ways. Padron and Waxman (1995), state that cooperative learning is proven to be an effective instructional approach. At-risk students will benefit from the experience of other students. Technology needs to be used as a collaborative tool, and not simply as a method to teach explicit skills. Students should be placed into group settings and work together on real world activities that will be more personally meaningful. Learning using cooperative groups aligns with the theoretic underpinnings of this research and was inspired by Vygotsky. Although some believe that technology hinders student group participation, many of today’s technologies are more social and interactive than ever before. Networking technologies, internet, digital video and webcams offer an array of opportunities for students to interact with each other and other students from different schools.

**Technology and achievement.** One of the more recent trends in technology has been the use of the interactive white boards in the classroom. A white board is connected to a computer and the students are able to manipulate images with their fingers. Additionally, students and teachers are able to write directly on the white board with a marker pen. The Interactive White Board (IWB) is appealing because it can display video, animation or text. In the pilot study, the participants drew white boards in their drawings when prompted to show a time that was memorable in the classroom.
The data on interactive white board use has been mixed. Marzano and Haystead (2009) found that particular students in the primary grades saw an improvement in mathematics. Specifically, the group performed well under certain defined conditions. Initially, the teacher must have ten or more years of teaching experience. Secondly, the teacher must have used technology for at least two years. Finally, the teacher must have used technology for at least seventy-five percent of the classroom time.

Another longitudinal study conducted in the United Kingdom found that high performing students benefited from white boards, while low performing students using the IWB showed little effect in achievement in the area of mathematics (Swan, Schenker, Kratcoski, 2008). Native American students were also examined to see if positive effects occurred in the area of geometry when IWB’s were used in the classroom (Zittle, 2004). Zittle did find significant gains in aptitude in the students who used the white boards compared to the students who did not.

More positive findings in the use of technology in the classroom were discovered when the West Virginia computer education program was investigated. Mann, Shakeshaft, Becker, and Kottkamp (1999) followed 900 students from kindergarten through fifth grade to examine the impact of technology on student achievement in the areas of spelling, vocabulary, reading and mathematics. Surveys and achievement test scores were retrieved from the third through fifth graders. Additionally, interviews and observations were collected from the kindergarten through fifth graders. Eighteen schools had a choice to determine if the schools should implement computers into the classrooms, computer laboratories, or a combination of them.
According to the study, students that utilized computers experienced statistically significant gains. Additionally, when the computers were available in the classroom, the students showed higher test score gains, especially in the area of mathematics. Moreover, the teachers became more pleased with the computer program over time.

The use of technology in the classroom is apparent in the pilot study responses. Interestingly, students in the pilot study included computers assisting students with mathematics in their drawings. The students drew the math program McREL, a computer program in which the students receive math problems based on their level as determined by the computer.

Computer assisted instruction (CAI) was investigated in a longitudinal study by Campuzano, Dynarski, Agodini, and Rall (2009). This study revealed mixed results in certain areas of achievement as the students demonstrated gains in mathematics but not in reading. Wenglinsky (1998) studied a sample of approximately 7,000 eighth grade students utilizing technology and found that math scores improved up to fifteen weeks above grade level. However, only a three to five week improvement was gained in mathematics by the 6,000 fourth graders sampled. The researchers controlled teacher characteristics, class size and socio economic status in the study.

In another study by Blok, Oostad, Otter and Overmat (2002), the researchers found that reading improved when students aged five to twelve learned to read through the use of computer assisted instruction. Technology can also assist students with their writing abilities. Writing motivation and content were investigated by Vincent (2001). In this study, the researcher wanted to examine the possible impact of a visually rich
computer program on the writing of fifth grade students. The sample consisted of six (6) fifth grade children who showed preference in visual learning styles. The students used a program named Micro Worlds in a constructivist setting. The study found that student writings increased in length. Moreover, the content and linguistic structures in their writings demonstrated substantial growth. The study concluded that children who prefer to learn visually can enhance the complexity of language production with visual rich technology. The motivation of the individual participants to write also increased.

**Equity in technology.** Even though technology in the classroom is a hot topic in education, equity in computer use is still in question. Of note, about two thousand K-12 public school teachers in the United States were surveyed to find that they reported having five or less computers in the classroom (National Education Association, 2008). “For technology to become a reliable tool for teaching and learning and to integrate technology fully into the instructional process, educators and students must have adequate access to computers inside the classroom” (National Education Association, 2008, p. 12).

There may be a large discrepancy in access to technology between affluent and impoverished schools. Minority concentration of students in the public schools impacts access to and the distribution of computers. By the end of 2006, the overall national ratio of students to instructional computers was 3.7 to 1; however, the ratio was 4.1 to 1 in high minority schools as opposed to 3.5 to 1 in low minority schools (Education Week: Technology Counts, 2007). Knapp and Glenn (1996), report that the needs of impoverished schools must be addressed so they can offer the same opportunities for
the use of technology as schools in more affluent areas. Given the fact that technology might impact the achievement of disadvantaged students, or those who are typically at-risk of dropping out or academic failure, schools need to be sensitive and ensure that all students have equal opportunity to utilize technology in the classroom (Ferguson 2002).

Schools with disadvantaged students are also more likely to be concerned about compliance with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Due to the high stakes and negative consequences that occur if schools are not considered effective, schools are more likely to have a more “drill and skill” approach to learning (Simkins, 2006). Test accountability and lack of professional development have hindered risk-taking in technological fields. Though NCLB mandates that students become technologically proficient, the United States Department of Education has not updated any reports since 2002.

“Teaching to the test” is inevitably causing the curriculum for students to become more about the testing itself than about problem solving and authentic learning. Even if technology is incorporated into the classrooms, it is often used in a more “drill and skill” approach, rather than for more deep thinking and inquiry type lessons. Though the technology literature is still inconclusive about the effects of technology on achievement, the evidence has lead researchers to ask students about their own attitudes on technology in the classroom. Asking students their opinions as to whether or not technology is useful in the classroom might give educators greater insight on how to most effectively use technology in lessons.
There is some research that suggests that technological innovations have not transformed the classroom dramatically (Cuban, 2001). This research is based upon the fact that there is no solid concrete evidence to show that technology is making an impressive mark on student achievement. Muir Herzig (2004) found that technology did not have a significant impact on at-risk student achievement. However, the researchers found that the teachers’ use of technology in the classroom was minimal. Implementing technology in the classroom is a complex process. Many teachers need a great deal of professional development in order to integrate it successfully. This is due largely to the fact that teachers have not been properly trained in the use of technology in the classroom. Moreover, teachers need to change their perspectives and become more open-minded to the use of technology in the classroom (Levin & Wadmany 2006).

**Professional development opportunities with technology.** More attention has been placed on how to aid teachers in their quest for integrating technology in the classroom. Means and Olson (1993) set forth certain conditions precedent in order for implementation to be successful. According to the researchers, the appropriate technology must be accessible to the teachers. Additionally, implementation may take many years as well as a great deal of professional development on the part of the participating teachers. Lastly, extra support needs to be available for teachers in order to sustain technology innovation in the classroom. Sandholtz (1990) opines that teachers need additional time to experiment with technology in order to create powerful learning experiences for their students. Teachers require experience in order to gain confidence using new technology. Another reason for mixed results in the area
of the use of technology in the classroom is the differing technological resources available as well as the variation in the use of technology in schools.

Levin and Wadmany (2006) further assert that much of the research deals with teacher views of technology, rather than the attitudes of the students. Interestingly, technology is also aligned with the constructivist method of teaching. Researchers have found that constructivism and technology is a powerful pair in education. Their findings suggest that the views of students on technology align with the constructivist ideology. According to the research, students believed that the authentic computer assisted activities were optimal (Levin and Wadmany 2006).

Recently, promising research regarding the positive influence of technology on student achievement is emerging. Technology is particularly powerful in our increasingly changing world. Moreover, technology offers students and educators a powerful tool to assist the learning process. Students who are in technology enhanced classrooms are more engaged in their learning. Apple (1990) asserts that students are more excited about learning when technology is integrated into the curriculum.

In those situations in which technology did not have a significant impact on teaching, a lack of professional development is often to blame (Muir Herzig, 2003). Studies in which teachers received professional development and the students were using technology demonstrate positive gains in achievement. (Wenglinsky, 1998). Wenglinsky determined that both higher order thinking skills in connection with technology, and professional development, were statically significant in both fourth and eighth grade students.
Effective technology use in the classroom will occur with increased prospects for teachers learning how to use it effectively. Teachers require a commitment from school leaders in order to make appropriate changes in their teaching methods. Dwyer, Ringstaff, and Sandholtz, (1997), investigated teachers over a four year period and found that most teachers are more traditional in their teaching because they were taught in traditional classrooms. According to the research, even when moved into technologically advanced classrooms, the teachers maintained an inner struggle to implement new technology as a result of their own instruction without technology as a student.

In the first year of the study, teachers learned how to use the technology and how it would align with their current teaching practices. According to the teachers, student motivation seemed to increase. However, student test scores remained stable. In year two of the study, the teachers discovered that utilizing technology in their instruction offered them additional time to perform problem solving activities with the students. Teachers also reported to take more risks in their teaching methods. The third year brought about even more apparent changes. Teachers gained confidence and began to team teach and allow students to work on more interdisciplinary projects. Technology allowed the teachers to move away from traditional thinking. Accordingly, technology use in the classroom assisted the students in becoming active learners, although some teachers in the study had difficulty with the technology and expressed doubts. However, as a result of support from the schools, many of the teachers became
experts on how to use technology successfully in a more interactive learning environment.

Using technology in the classroom setting to assist students with their coursework is a challenging task for schools or teachers to undertake. A variety of technologies and methods of implementation exist for schools to consider. More research needs to be accomplished in order to decipher which technology programs are most effective.

In conclusion, the implementation of technology in the classroom is most successful when the following standards are included: alignment of teacher pedagogy with the use of technology; the school’s importance of technology integration; teacher comfort in using the technology; and, a proper support system in place to help teachers utilize technology effectively.

The research on the use of technology in the classroom illustrates promising gains in student achievement. However, technology needs to be implemented and supported successfully. While this is encouraging, the real value lies in identifying which technological innovations are most promising. The beginning of this process of determination could be a quantitative approach. However, asking the students which technologies engage them might also provide insight on the current research. Additionally, asking students how to use technology advantageously might offer teachers ideas on how to utilize it in a more constructivist manner, rather than in the traditional rote “drill and skill” type of instruction. Student and teacher collaboration in
their quest for the implementation of technology in the classroom will be invaluable to foster both student and teacher achievement.

**Differentiation of Instruction**

Differentiation is an instruction approach designed to meet the needs of all students. It is a responsive approach rather than a “one size fits all” style of teaching.

![Differentiation Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** Differentiation of Instruction

One of the pioneers of differentiated instruction is Carol Tomlinson, professor of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Professor Tomlinson has written over 200 articles and many books on the topic. In 2004, she was named Outstanding Professor at University of Virginia. Tomlinson wrote that being a responsive educator is vital “for a country built on equity and excellence.” Tomlinson argues the traditional model of teaching is unrealistic for students. For example, she asks, “Is it reasonable to expect all second graders to learn the same thing, in the same ways, over the same life span?” (Tomlinson, 1999).

Teachers use four key components when differentiating instruction: assessment, grouping, learner profile, and a strong curriculum (Tomlinson, 2003). Ongoing assessment is an important first step in the process. Teachers begin by assessing
student readiness of a topic in order to assist students in their academic growth. A teacher assesses the proficiency of the students as well as their prior learning and life experiences regarding the topic. Tomlinson (2003) also advocates that teachers must assess student attitudes about the school and their peers. Assessing on each topic is more flexible than ability grouping. Certain students may be more proficient in certain academic areas than others and, therefore, groups in the classroom will continue to change.

Flexible grouping is another key element in differentiated instruction (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, Gable (2008). Students are grouped based upon their knowledge of a certain topic or their curiosity in the subject. The teacher takes into account student interest and gives the student a choice when grouping. Whole group instruction is used, however, it is supplemented with small group work, flexible grouping, scaffolding and cooperative work (Tobbin & McInnes, 2008). Cooperative work and scaffolding is supported by the social learning theory which focuses on interaction among peers as a tool which learners are taught through discussion and language experiences. A language experience is the vehicle through which learners experience new knowledge via social experiences (Vygotsky, 1986).

Learner profile is another key ingredient to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction. A teacher needs to address how a student learns best. Preferences include auditory, visual and tactile, as well as preferences that vary according to culture and gender. Differentiation based on a student’s learner profile is allowing a student to work in a manner in which he or she can best understand a topic.
Each individual is wired to learn better in some areas than others. The key concepts that encompass differentiation apply many of the best practices of quality teaching.

Differentiated instruction is student centered rather than teacher centered instruction. The teacher presents and organizes the information and then decides how the students will best learn. Teacher centered instruction employs the theory that the teacher will understand the instruction better than the individual learner. The learner focused instruction method is sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of the students and helps student perform based on their current understanding of a topic (Wellman, and Lipton, 2003). Ongoing assessment is performed to help guide instruction and design daily activities that will help all students achieve.

Schools across the country are using Response to Intervention (RTI) to assist struggling students. RTI supports many of the tenets of differentiated instruction (Walker-Dalhouse, Risko, Esworthy, Grasely, Kaiser, McIlvain, Stephan, 2009). Response to intervention is a method of academic intervention designed to meet the needs of all students. It was developed in accordance with IDEA to help identify struggling students early in their academic careers prior to evaluating them for specific learner disabilities. In RTI, instruction decisions are driven by data (Reutebuch, 2008). The goals of the intervention are to improve the outcomes for both regular and special education students. Many schools using the RTI model are using differentiated instruction to help the diverse learners in the classroom. As in differentiated instruction, RTI mandates that teachers pursue ongoing assessments to see how each child is performing and to target individual needs.
Tiered instruction is a high preparation approach according to Tomlinson (2001). This type of instruction is appropriate to student readiness. “It is expected that differentiated instruction will reduce the over representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education” (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009).

Using tiered instruction along with other high preparation approaches such as learning contracts and curriculum compacting are methods which help each student grow based on their needs. In the learning contracts approach, teachers and students set forth a list of goals and methods which the student can demonstrate and reach their own personal learning goals.

Curriculum compacting is specifically designed to help high achieving students. Compacting might eliminate the topics that certain students might have already mastered. This allows more opportunities to move on to more challenging and advanced content. The pace of this instruction is more rigorous and provides students the prospect to learn about the topics through the use of supplementary materials. Curriculum compacting recognizes that students come into the classroom with different readiness (Reiss, 1992).

**What the Research Concludes**

In recent years, more research has been conducted on differentiated and achievement levels. Tieso (2005) studied thirty one (31) fourth and fifth grade math teachers and 645 of their students. Students were pre-assessed on math topics before each unit. Based on their results, students were grouped based upon their prior knowledge of the subject. Additionally, teachers used supplemental materials in
conjunction with the textbook. The control group was taught solely with the textbook and whole group instruction. After an ANOVA was conducted, researchers found that the treatment groups performed at higher levels on the post-test than the control group. The researchers concluded that the flexible grouping, in accordance with curriculum supplemented with materials other than a textbook, may significantly assist student achievement.

Differentiated instruction has also proven to raise achievement levels in the area of reading (Tobin & McInnes 2008; Baumgartner, Lipowski, & Ruch, 2003). In a qualitative research study of students, Tobin and McInnes wanted to investigate how differentiated instruction helps the needs of underachieving literacy learners. The researchers also addressed how teachers understand the literacy needs of the struggling second and third grade readers. The teachers utilized different methods of differentiated instruction, but met the needs of all of the various literacy needs in the classroom. Teachers provided extra scaffolding and tutoring. One teacher used guided reading and literacy centers while the other incorporated a menu of activities for the students to choose from and provided text that fit the needs of the students.

A quantitative study performed by Baumgartner, Lipowski, and Rush (2003) found that the targeted students demonstrated growth in all reading areas including, decoding, comprehension and phonemic awareness. The differentiated instruction strategies included: choice of tasks, flexible grouping, opportunities for independent reading with a wide variety of text in the classroom among elementary and middle
school students. The researchers noted that student perceptions about reading and their own abilities also improved.

Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Today’s Schools

Beecher and Sweeny (2008) used the case study approach in one elementary school which bordered a large city. The population of the school was diverse and included forty-five percent of the students receiving free lunches and thirty percent listing English as their second language. The school was considered to be failing according to state tests. Prior to the study, the school used a remedial paradigm to teach students. During the study, the authors observed how the school integrated differentiated instruction into the new curriculum over a period of eight years. The researchers retrieved data from staff meeting agendas, the new strategic plan created by staff and community, materials from professional development meetings, and the documents created for curriculum. Additionally, the researchers analyzed tests scores from the state. According to the authors, staff development was integral to the success of the new initiative. Teachers were trained through coaching, modeling and planning time in order to instill and create the new curriculum. Analysis of the school’s state report card found that students improved in all subject areas and the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds narrowed from sixty-two percent to ten percent.

In another qualitative study, Tomlinson (1995) followed the journey of middle school teachers through the differentiated reform initiative in their school district. The school is an affluent community in the Midwestern part of the United States. The
school’s population is comprised of both gifted and learning disabled students. The goals of the study were to observe how the teachers responded to the changes and to determine why the teachers reacted in a certain manner. Triangulations were used through multiple sources collected by the author. Interviews, field notes, the researcher’s reflective journal, records of emerging and evolving themes, and transcripts of the interviews were utilized. At the conclusion of the study, Tomlinson became a participant observer. She observed classrooms and then became a leader in some of the staff development sessions conducted by the administrators of the school.

In her study, Tomlinson describes how some of the teachers initially resisted the changes due to the fact that the test scores were high. Additionally, some teachers did not comprehend the basics of differentiation. Many myths needed to be clarified. After a working differentiated curriculum was created, the teachers felt overwhelmed by the additional work.

Tomlinson discovered several key barriers that were affecting the teachers. The first barrier was the school’s administration. The initiation for change came from the administrators and not from the teachers. Also, teachers were worried that the reform would soon fade away and be replaced by a new initiative the following year. Moreover, the teachers lacked models for differentiated instruction. The study found that many teachers did not make observable progress after the first year of implementing the changes. However, there was a small group of teachers who made remarkable changes. As time progressed, more teachers became part of the reform. The traits these teachers
shared included: the teachers were inquirers about students, and the teachers believed that disturbance was a sign of growth.

VanTassel- Baska, Feng, Brown, Bracken, Frenc McGowen, Worley, Queck and Bai (2008) examined teachers’ instructional behavior change through research based curriculum implementation and attendance at professional development sessions over a period of three years. The participants included six districts and seventy-one teachers in Title One schools. A total of sixteen experimental teachers and fifteen comparison teachers were studied. Except for gender (two were male while the rest of the teachers were female), the teachers’ age, ethnicity and experience varied greatly. The instrument used to assess the teachers’ instruction was a Classroom Observation Scale-Revised. Another instrument was the Student Observation Scale, which was utilized to assess student engagement. The experimental teachers attended a conference in both summer and winter and also had to implement language arts curriculum developed by the College of William and Mary.

Observations were made of both groups of teachers twice a week. The observers scripted the lessons and rated the lessons based upon Classroom Observation Scale-Revised. The results of the study indicated that the experimental teachers implemented the differentiation strategy far more often than the comparison teachers. The study also concluded that the teachers require a minimum of two years for a change in instructional methods in order to shape their beliefs for the benefit of students and the effectiveness of implementing the strategy.
Wertheim and Leyser (2002) studied 191 female Israeli teachers of various grade levels. The subjects ranged from prospective teachers to those working on their third year in the classroom. The purpose of the study was to investigate the efficacy and beliefs of educators and their choices of instructional strategies in the classroom. The researchers also sought to see if there was a relationship between their beliefs and choice and their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of differentiated instruction. The researchers used the teacher self-efficacy scale developed by Gibson and Dembo (1985) and questions about instructional interventions. The results of the study revealed that teachers who possessed more self-efficacy were more inclined to use differentiated instruction. There was no significance between the instructional approach and the perceived effectiveness of differentiation.

In studying school reform and implementing innovations into the classroom, the School Characteristics Inventory (SCI) was evaluated for effectiveness. The SCI model is based on Sternberg’s contextual modifiability. The teachers studied came from a national sample of middle school teachers who were implementing differentiated instruction. Further, the study was mixed to see if the instrument was reliable. The characteristics of the schools were assessed utilizing Sternberg’s mineralogy metaphor. Basically, if the school is a rusted iron, the school does not want to implement any type of change. The optimum rating is lead. These schools have high self efficacy and desire deep, physical and structural change.

Research conducted by Tobin and McInnes (2008) wanted to answer the following question: How do teachers come to understand and address the literacy
needs of academically diverse learners? Additionally, how may differentiated instruction address the needs of struggling learners in the regular classroom? The research used the case study approach to study ten teachers in second and third grade classrooms in a district in Canada. The participants attended two separate three hour workshops. The workshops assisted the teachers with differentiated instruction and provided them with useful materials and strategies. The researchers utilized field notes, video and audio recordings, and collections of students assignments. There were a total of three separate forty-five minute classroom observations, as well as follow up interviews with the teachers. Member checks were employed to offer the teachers perceptions of the recording of their lessons. Two teachers in the case study were closely examined and used many of the differentiated strategies in the reading and writing areas of their curriculum. The authors suggested that the teachers were successful at differentiation because it closely coincided with their current pedagogy and beliefs.

**Summary and Implications**

Differentiated instruction is designed to meet the needs of all students to best assist them in achieving academic success. Currently, many teachers teach utilizing the methods in which they were taught, which includes a predominately whole class teaching model with heavy reliance on text books and direct teaching methods (Tomlinson, 2003). Additionally, many challenges exist when trying to implement differentiated instruction in today’s classrooms. The myriad of challenges include: providing a variety of resources, different reading levels of texts, space, organization,
classroom management and providing ongoing assessment to understand the needs of each student. Many teachers who understand the importance of this type of instruction have difficulty implementing the technique and eventually revert back to archaic teaching methods. In order to achieve successful implementation of differentiated instruction, it is critical for teachers to have ongoing support, the opportunity to collaborate, and the availability of professional development opportunities.

**Student Voice**

Delpit (1988) discusses the “Silenced Dialogue,” which occurs when minority parents and teachers feel as though their voice is not given merit or credit when educating children. The researcher further discusses the dialogue when she asserts that a child’s ideas and culture should be examined and not ignored by our educational system. Delpit states that, “children have the right to their own language, their own culture. We must fight cultural hegemony and fight the system by insisting that children be allowed to express themselves in their own language. It is not they, the children, who must change, but the school. “To push children to do anything else is repressive and reactionary” (Delpit, 1988 p. 291).

Delpit’s idea is closely tied to culturally relevant teaching practices. She believes that instead of trying to have children change their values or heritage to assimilate within a school, the schools should accommodate and embrace the culture and attitude of each individual student. Schools must not only consider different voices in order to improve their academic growth, but they must also ask students how to change the system and listen to their unique individual experiences and perspectives.
The culturally relevant approach to instruction is related to the constructivist view of teaching, in which teachers listen to the preconceived notions of their students. By cultivating this type of thinking, the teacher cultivates a classroom environment where students speak freely without fear of being put down. Motivational and self-determination theory also supports active engagement and critical feedback. There is a strong relationship between motivation and learning (Sands, Guzman, Stephens, and Boggs, 2007). Self-determination theory aids motivation that emphasizes self-motivation and development of personal goals.

The notion of democratic schooling is a core ideology of public schooling. “If we are truly interested in understanding what supports or detracts from students putting forth more effort, becoming engaged in learning experiences, and achieving at higher levels, then it only makes sense that we would include students in our inquiry” (Sands, Guzman, Stephans, & Boggs, 2007, p. 327). Dewey (1916) believed that students who are stakeholders need to obtain ownership of their learning in order to break open barriers such as class culture and race. Students must participate in their own individual interests. The concept that today’s citizens are not taking an active role in their community or are becoming less politically active is apparent (Putman 1995). Schools need to prepare students to learn proper civic behavior that can facilitate their growth in a global society. Though some schools might prepare students in community service activities, schools often fail to develop leaders in these activities (Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Listening to unique student perspectives not only benefits our schools but also helps the individual student (Mitra, 2008). It provides the student with a strong sense of
ownership. However, despite the benefits, “past studies do not provide an understanding of the process by which student voice can make schools more democratic places geared to involving youth in decision making” (Mitra, 2003 p. 290).

Student voice in the 19th and 20th century was not regarded as important in shaping the school process (Lodge, 2005). However, Cook–Sather (2006) reports that student voice has gained momentum over the past fifteen years. The author believes, “that young people have unique perspective on learning, teaching and schooling: that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults and that they should be afforded opportunities to acutely shape their education” (Cook-Sather, 2006 p.361). Student voice is an important term that has been discussed by educational researchers, but not included in many of the education reforms (Kozol, 1991; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2009). Hence, asking the students themselves for their voice in school improvement could motivate them to increase their efforts and assist educators in obtaining advice on how best to assist the students. Student voice also assists with student assessment and teacher training (Fielding, 2001). Research conducted in several countries such as England and Australia indicates that students who worked with adults on school reform have led to both assessment and curriculum changes that have had a positive effect on school improvement (Ruddick & Flutter, 2000).

Student voice is important to school reform, but needs to be developed and shaped by school administrators (Yonezaza & Jones, 2007; Lodge, 2005). Yonezawa and Jones report that in the San Diego Unified School District, students were involved with data collection, analyses and presentation. In this school district, student work was
cultivated and the voices of lower socio-economic teens were heard. Students were trained in qualitative research techniques and reported their findings from interviews and classroom observations to the principals. In developing student groups to help school reform efforts, the principals involved in the project had several concepts to consider: what is the purpose of the student researchers; how will the outcomes be evaluated; will the students be trained; what adults will help cultivate the teams; and, what is the role of the principals?

Lodge (2005) argues that school improvement activities need to include improvement in both learning and teaching activities. Lodge not only believes students are involved in designing research but may possibly initiate research as well. When students discuss their observations and interviews, they become cognizant of their own strengths and weaknesses in learning.

In the Five Elms Primary School Project, many of the student views on learning mirrored many current educational best practice strategies (Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). These strategies include collaborative work and an active learning process. The researcher found that students do reflect upon their own learning and are eager to discuss it when given an opportunity.

In the Whitman High School project, students were involved in analyzing the data (Mitra, 2008). The adults who participated in the project found student participants particularly helpful, especially in translating the focus group responses into “adult friendly” terms. The focus groups developed a Student Forum which allowed the teachers to become aware of student views and needs and helped bridge the
communication gap between teachers and students. The student leaders in the reform spent a great deal of time helping with teacher research, assessment and textbook adoption.

Students in the forum also served as classroom experts. The students provided teachers feedback on how students might receive lessons and offered insights on how to make lessons more meaningful to students. Ultimately, students in the groups helped teachers understand what strategies appealed to the students and why some students might ignore other teaching strategies.

Both the teachers and students found the Student Forum experience valuable and both groups benefitted from the process. Teachers were inspired by student insight and the students felt a stronger connection to teachers, helping to nurture and build genuine relationships. Mitra believes the project was successful because of the culture of Whitman. She considers several organizational contexts that must be present in order for student voice to make a positive difference: students not criticizing the core of a teacher’s practices; keeping students away from external threats; building relationships with teachers in the school; and, supporting the adults who supported the student forum.

Studies conducted in the United States and Australia found that many students perceive inequalities in schooling and found that students did not find school authorities responsible for the real world that existed outside of school. Students reported that their voices were not sought after and there was a communication and perception gap between the school board and the student body (Mitra, 2009).
Additionally, the study found that students wanted their families to play a larger role in the discussions about their perceptions about school and teenage life. Mitra (2009) wants schools to include both parents and students in the discussions to aid the parents in understanding that schools should be a more democratic place where student voice is valued and learning experiences can be connected to the real world.

Spencer and Boon (2006) performed a qualitative research study to determine how students would characterize their own effective and ineffective learning experiences based upon their own personal experiences in the classroom. The participants included four (4) male high school students in the ninth and tenth grades, three (3) Caucasian students in the tenth grade, and one (1) Asian student. Each student interviewed attended a different high school, and all of the high schools were located in a suburban area of a Mid-Atlantic state. The researchers used handwritten notes, audio tapes, and transcription to obtain and analyze the data.

After examining the responses of the student participants, the researchers found that building an effective student-teacher relationship was integral to the most exemplary teachers. One aspect of the student-teacher relationship that proved especially valuable was the teacher’s use of humor in the classroom. Additionally, mutual respect and communication were also deemed important by the students. The students expressed their opinion that teachers must effectively communicate their desires to the students in the classroom. For example, the students wanted the teachers to communicate their desire for the students to command greater respect and to take control of the class. In terms of instructional techniques, hands-on activities and
group work were cited as the most memorable learning activities. Also, lessons that
were authentic, and created a real life connection, motivated the students to achieve.

The researchers were not surprised by many of their findings. The students did
not merely describe one teacher, but rather shared their experiences from a variety of
classroom experiences. Moreover, the students interviewed provided more positive
than negative information on effective teaching techniques. Obviously, a limitation of
the study is the limited number of student participants interviewed.

In contrast, Bae, Holloway, Li, & Bempechat (2008) wanted to explore how
student perceptions of their teachers differed among high and low achieving, low
income, Mexican-American students. Eleven (11) ninth grade students from a rural area
in California were interviewed for the study. The researchers utilized the theoretical
perspective of Brophy and Good’s model (1970) of teacher expectancy in the study.
One of the integral parts of the model explains that student treatment influences the
manner in which students achieve and behave over time. The study is particularly
interesting because it asks students how they formulate their own self-concept based
upon the different treatment they receive from their teachers. One of the questions of
the study is whether teacher expectations influence high and low risk achievers and,
additionally, whether teacher expectations influence the orientation of at-risk students
towards school and learning activities. The study also determined that student
perceptions about what it means to be a good student differed among the low and high
achievers. Additionally, the perceptions of students of their teacher’s expectations of
both good and bad students did not differ among the two groups of students.
In Bae’s study, students were also asked to evaluate hypothetical teaching scenarios. According to Vaughn, Schumm, Niarhos, and Gordon (1993), fourth through sixth grade elementary school students were recruited for the study. The schools were in a metropolitan school district in the southern United States. The study wanted to examine the effectiveness of the Students’ Perceptions of Teachers (SPT) Scale. This quantifiable scale asks students about the desirability of homework, instructional techniques, lectures, books and exams. The results suggest that the SPT scale was equally effective among primary students and secondary students. After examining the validity of the scale, the researchers used both SPT and student interviews to measure student opinions about their teachers. The results of the study indicate that students preferred teachers who used differentiated instruction in the classroom. High achievers preferred teachers who made a greater effort to accommodate different needs at a much greater rate than lower achievers.

Listening to student perceptions of experienced teachers will provide educators with insight and knowledge as to what might promote student engagement in the classroom. Accepting student voice and having them become active participants in schools is a powerful concept. Student learning will increase if instruction is aligned with the needs of individual students. Student voice is a strong mechanism to create more democratic situations for today’s students. Student voice can also facilitate a student’s civic engagements and encourage them to take more leadership roles and learn to articulate their best learning experiences and perceptions. Increasing their voice has the power to make breakthroughs and extend student influence by keeping their
learning in the heart of education. If educators desire leaders that our society demands, they must balance student voice with responsibility.

A review of relevant research attunes observers to the possible ways that students will describe their teachers and their suggestion for good teaching. For example, at-risk students might voice their preference for technology and instruction that fits their individual needs, and a strong relationship needs to be present to attain knowledge. From the pilot project, several teaching themes emerged. Students want teachers who utilize their cultures to complement teaching, use the latest technology in the classroom, differentiated their instruction, and are attuned to the voices of the students they teach.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study was to understand the perspectives of fifth grade students on exemplary teaching. The researcher used student voices to arrive at a better understanding of what students want in their instruction. Finally, the research determined if at-risk and non at-risk students have the same opinions of what qualifies an excellent educator. By listening and making sense of student voices it is hoped that administrators and experienced teachers can develop professional development programs that encourage exemplary teaching and discourage teaching methods that students perceive to be problematic.

This section presents the research questions, a brief review of the pilot study, the research design for the dissertation study, theoretical perspective, demographics of the participants, data analysis, and summary. The following questions were investigated in this study:

1. How do at-risk and successful students in the classroom describe exemplary teaching?
2. How do at-risk and unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?
3. How do non at-risk successful students describe exemplary teaching?
4. How do non at-risk unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching.

**Pilot Study**

There were two reasons that the pilot study was conducted. First, the responses derived from the pilot study interviews helped shape the literature review for the current study. Secondly, pilot study responses were utilized in drafting the interview questions for this research study.

The findings of the pilot study suggest that all students want a charismatic, caring, calm teacher who views students with confidence and in a positive light. Additionally, the students’ drawings demonstrated that technology is important in their instruction. The pilot study responses also suggest that at-risk students need a strong personal relationship with their teachers in order to learn effectively. This factor did not arise as poignantly among non at-risk students. All students reflected positively to differentiated instruction.

The pilot study offered the researcher some insight on student perceptions of exemplary teachers. The results further guided and shaped this case study. The researcher chose to conduct a case study in order to understand and interpret student perceptions of exemplary teaching. The fifth grade students are the bounded system that is the focus of this case study. Note: One of the non at-risk students from the pilot study participated in the current study.
Theoretical Perspective

This dissertation used constructivism as the theoretical basis for the research study. In recent years, constructivist practices have been advocated as a successful approach to teaching. One of the theoretical underpinnings of the study is constructivism. Constructivism is an educational approach that allows students to voice their feelings and opinions in an educational setting. Constructivism allows the educator the opportunity to discover the student’s current understanding of the topic. Each one of us has our own individual understanding of a topic. These individual experiences shape our knowledge of certain topics. Dewey notes that, “It is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have; that this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning” (Dewey, 1938, 74). When we take in new data or new situations we either mold it to our current understandings or form new knowledge of the topic (Ormond, 1989).

Recognizing that we learn by generating new insights is a difficult concept for teachers to grasp. Educators not only have to listen and invite students to ask questions and become a risk-taker in the classroom, but also construct situations where student acuity is challenged and formed. However, this learning structure is not utilized in the majority of our nation’s classrooms.

Traditionally, most classrooms are lectured or teacher directed. Quite simply, either the teacher talks and the students listen, or the teacher asks questions and the
students answer. In this system, students are discouraged to ask each other questions or facilitate discussions. This is not entirely the fault of the individual teacher. Time constraints make it difficult for teachers to deviate from traditional teacher-directed methods and to engage the students in prolonged discussions. As such, teacher dominated classrooms are still the norm. Dewey (1938) expressed his critique of teacher directed instruction and the environment of traditional classrooms:

“Straitjacket and chain-gang procedures had to be done away with if there was to be a chance for growth of individuals in the intellectual springs of freedom without which there is no assurance of genuine and continued normal growth” (Dewey, 1938, p. 61).

The classroom environment has not dramatically changed since Dewey’s writings. Although cooperative learning is something that educators say they are doing, many classrooms are not properly arranged to accommodate this type of instruction. Many classrooms today still contain rows of students as well as an abundance of textbooks. Textbooks are another resource that teachers use to disseminate information. However, when the teacher focuses their lesson on the textbook, other perspectives on issues or topics are not discussed among the students in the classroom (Apple, 1988).

Traditionally, schools have lower expectations for at-risk students. Students that are underachieving academically are usually in didactic classroom settings in which the teachers utilize a rigid curriculum. According to Padron and Waxman (1995) students that receive direct instruction possess passive resentment. They are also confined to using rote skill memorization, rather than higher order thinking skills. A constructivist
view as opposed to a didactic one promotes the belief that children construct
knowledge through meaningful experiences that help them connect prior knowledge.
Skamp (1998) (as cited in Aubusson, Boddy, & Watson, 2003) opines that constructivism
can foster motivation and critical thinking skills.

The researcher will use Piaget’s notion that children construct knowledge, as
well as Vygotsky’s model of construction which involves the idea that two or more
students working together to construct meaning and understanding is known as social
constructivism. Both ideas of constructivism relate to students constructing ideas about
education and adults listening to their voices in order to discover their feelings and
conceptions of exemplary teachers. Powell and Kalina (2009) state, “to be effective,
both theories of constructivism need to be explicit in communicating concepts so that
students can connect to them” (p. 241). Constructivism teaching practices are
becoming more prevalent in teacher education courses across the country and are
demonstrating great success in helping student learning (Gordon, 2009; Richardson,
1997).

Constructivism is a learning theory that views learning as a process of one
creating meaning and understanding of one’s experience (Ormond, 1999). Historically,
learning was thought of as only involving direct instruction in which the students are
passive and simply regurgitate facts. Contrary to direct instruction, constructivism helps
learners take information and internalize concepts and make connections to prior
learning experiences (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Brooks argues that true understanding of
a concept is only accomplished when students can process new information and link it
to prior experiences in order to gain more complete understanding of topics. The constructivist notion is more abstract due to the fact that it is difficult to capture another person’s understanding and lead them to broader, more abstract ideas. Many schools are trapped into using the traditional approach to learning because it is easier to measure and evaluate.

Constructivism is a learning theory discussed by Jean Piaget. It is important to note that his theory not only focuses on children accumulating knowledge but how children arrive at this new found knowledge (Gordon, 2009). Piaget believed that knowledge is not isolated into discrete pieces of information. On the contrary, he believed that children use prior knowledge to construct an overall understanding of how something operates or works. According to Piaget, when children learn, information is organized as a person’s schema, which is defined as what a person understands about a particular topic. Student schemas are modified over time as experiences increase and ideas can be interwoven together.

One of the core ideas of Piaget is that children learn knowledge through assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation occurs when a child can take an object and incorporate it into their existing scheme (Miller, 2002; Ormond 1994). For example, a child may take a teddy bear and stick it into their mouth. They are taking the object and bringing it into their perception or scheme. Accommodation occurs when a child has to modify or change their existing scheme because of the object. For example, a child’s perception of the world might be flat but because of a globe that is discussed with them they might change their existing perception about the world.
Miller states that objects like computers and manipulatives are essential in assimilation and accommodation. A child might learn about gravity because they drop an object on the floor. Each student will come to the classroom with different prior knowledge or schemas. The responsibility for accommodations and assimilation of new information is on the students themselves. Another key concept discussed by Miller is the idea of equilibrium and disequilibrium. A child may need to have their view shaken a little bit and feel disequilibrium in order to learn. A child must have a cognitive conflict to shift from one stage to another.

According to Piaget, the first stage of learning is the sensorimotor stage. This occurs between birth and two years of age. During this stage, a child’s schemes are based on their behaviors and perceptions. Their schemes do not include objects that are not in their immediate view (Case, 1985).

The second stage of learning development is the pre-operational stage. This occurs between the ages of two until about six or seven years of age. During this stage, a child’s schemes include objects that are not in their immediate view. However, adult-like logic is noticeably absent (Case, 1985 Ormond, 1994, Powell and Kalina, 2009).

The third stage of cognitive development described by Piaget is the concrete operational stage. This lasts from age six or seven until eleven or twelve years of age. During this stage, children start to acquire logical thinking skills. However, children are thinking more concretely than abstractly (Case 1985, Ormond, 1994).

More abstract thinking occurs during a child’s formal operations stage. This occurs between the ages of eleven or twelve until adulthood. Children begin to
synthesize and think abstractly and problem solve. Their reasoning skills are not limited to black and white thinking and they are able to symbolize. Though there has been criticism of the ages and abilities of Piaget’s cognitive stages of development, many of the concepts are revered by many theorists and assist educators in understanding the basic levels of cognitive development that occurs in children.

Piaget believed that children are highly active organisms who have to reflect on their own experiences in order to create new structure and knowledge (Case, 1993; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Case (1993) states, one should “rarely, if ever, force learners into a position where they are expected to take a passive role toward the acquisition of their new knowledge” (p.220).

Vygotsky is another theorist who believed that knowledge is constructed by learners. His theory is known as social constructivism. This theory again focuses on the process of how knowledge is obtained. The development of the knowledge is determined by economic, social, and political forces (Gordon, 2009). Further, knowledge can take form in a cognitive apprenticeship (Ormond 1994; Case, 1985). Cognitive apprenticeships involve a student and teacher who work together to accomplish a task or solve a problem. The teacher and the student discuss and analyze the task together and create a systemic way to approach the problem. They are constructing knowledge together. The teacher is increasing the competence of the student by scaffolding, eventually allowing the student to work on the task independently.
Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development involves the zone of proximal development (Ormond, 1989). By assisting children in learning, as in cognitive apprenticeships, the child learns a concept in the easiest manner. Once a student is able to accomplish a task with a teacher, their knowledge will increase and they are capable of accomplishing more (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Scaffolding is necessary when helping children in their zone of development and helps support the child to reach the next level of understanding of the topic (Vygotsky, 1962).

In the pilot study conducted by the researcher, many students expressed the idea of scaffolding in their interviews. For example, one child expressed greater understanding of comparing fractions when the teacher was sitting next to them and drawing two squares to help display the fractions visually. Also, the teacher used money to help the child understand math concepts. This one-on-one activity helped the child gain understanding within their zone of proximal development when trying to compare fractions.

Teachers should not only work with students in a one-on-one situation but also in cooperative groups, according to Vygotsky. Cooperative learning is a central idea in the social constructivist classroom. Piaget saw the individual constructing ideas utilizing their own experiences, while Vygotsky believes that learning is a social experience.

Another explanation of constructivism described by Vygotsky is social constructivism. Social constructivism involves two or more students working together to construct meaning and understanding on a particular problem or task. Support and guidance can help children develop an increased ability to understand a topic or
complete a task. When asked to draw pictures of their best teachable moments, many
students in the pilot study drew pictures of students working in groups or talking in a
circle. Social constructivism is one of the more popular learning theories that being
incorporated into today’s classrooms.

The current structure of the educational school system is not supportive of
constructivist teaching practices (Gordon, 2009). The idea that students need to be
silent and quietly sitting at their desks in the traditional classroom does not facilitate
classroom discussions and active engagement. Even our current political structure is not
conducive to the constructivist teaching practices. Teacher must teach to the
standardized testing and many feel pressure to only have their students memorize as
many facts as possible. This test and data driven school culture is facilitating the
traditional, basic drill and skill approach (Gordon, 2009).

In constructivist classrooms, teachers look for what students generate,
demonstrate and exhibit (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). This takes more time and resources
then the traditional classroom which relies heavily on textbooks and workbooks. In a
constructivist learning environment, emphasis is placed on large concepts and primary
resources and manipulative materials are utilized in the instruction. Additionally, in
constructivist classrooms, students are viewed by the teachers as thinkers with prior
knowledge on topics, rather than as blank slates as in traditional classrooms. Teachers
need to work harder to truly integrate constructivism pedagogy into their classroom. In
order to accomplish this shift in pedagogy, teachers must truly know their content and
design activities that will generate discovery learning (Gordon 2009; Cohen 1988). Even
lifelong educators may have a difficult time juggling the management, content knowledge and culture of the constructivist model (Gordon, 2009).

Teachers need to be mindful of their learning environment when teaching in a constructivist classroom. Understanding the students and their knowledge of the topics is integral in lesson planning. This differs from the traditional model in which a planned curriculum is presented in a linear manner. Learning is typically situated in real life contexts and problems are posed in an authentic and relevant manner.

Another important idea in a constructivist classroom is to respond to the student responses. In a traditional classroom, teachers will validate a correct response or tell the students that they are incorrect. However, in a constructivist classroom, the teacher seeks the student’s viewpoint to gauge the student’s current understanding of the topic. This is critical because if the teachers can understand the misconceptions, they may provide counterexamples to assist the students in truly comprehending the topic. A teacher simply saying, “No” and then giving the correct answer does not assist students in understanding concepts. In fact, mistakes help provide powerful teachable moments that will foster deeper understanding. This is a shift from the behaviorist perspective to the learning process. For constructivists, learning is a process rather than just having the correct answer (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Teachers need to observe how students derive answers. Many students come up with the answer via different methods. This is one of the strengths of using a constructivist approach.

It is vital that effective teachers create a constructivist learning environment that incorporates both the learning theories proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget’s
cognitive constructivism theory focuses more on the individual child and subject while Vygotsky’s theory is more social in grasping meaning of concepts. Both theories are integral in an active learning environment and can be used interchangeably and effectively in classrooms. The goal of the theories is to provide an environment in which the child can take risks so that he or she can reach their full potential. Both views promote experiences that require students to be scholarly participators in their own learning process (Gordon, 2009). Students start to take more ownership of their learning and, in turn, will become motivated to increase their learning. The more teachers are comfortable using constructivism teaching methods such as inquiry, discussion, and observation, the more students can become capable of taking charge of their own learning and having a strong voice.

In this study, the researcher truly wanted to know how the students perceive classroom and teachers that they felt were exemplary. The researcher wanted to try to understand their point of view using dialogue and drawings to help investigate how students would characterize their best teachers. Part of this process was to inquire of the students and ask for examples in order to alleviate misinterpretation for the teacher. The more the researcher tried to gain understanding through dialogue and conversations with the participants, the more insight and thoughtful responses were obtained. It is paramount that the teacher gains perspective on how the children construct their ideas of who the best teachers are and how the participants came up with the characteristics of the best teachers. In both constructivism and social constructivism, effective learning occurs when clarity begins and the shift from
disequilibrium to actual understanding of the topic is clear. It is vital that the researcher grasps clarity in order to learn how the student truly feels about uncovering the best methods for learning. Additionally, it is equally important for the students to be motivated in their own learning and understanding of how they learn best. This will help them become more motivated in their own learning process.

**Defining a Qualitative Case Study**

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context (Stake, 2005). Case studies are a type of qualitative research. It differs from other types of research in that the researcher conducts an intensive analysis and description of a single unit or system bounded by space and time. Through case studies, researchers hope to gain in-depth understanding of situations and meaning for those involved. Merriam (1988) suggests that insights gained from case studies can directly influence policy, procedures, and future research.

Overall, the need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. Specifically, the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events, such as an individual life cycle, small group behavior, organizational and managerial process, neighborhood change, school performance, international relations, and the maturation of industries. Case study designs may also be classified as exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive (Yin, 2003).
Exploratory case studies seek to define research questions of subsequent studies or to determine the feasibility of research procedures. These designs are often a prelude to additional research efforts and involve field work and information collection prior to the definition of a research question. The questions usually focus on “what” and “how many” (Yin, 2009). The goal is to hypothesize what might be relevant in future studies.

Explanatory case studies seek to establish cause and affect relationships. Their primary purpose is to determine how events occur and which ones may influence outcomes. “What?” questions are exploratory, and “How?” and “Why?” questions are explanatory (Yin, 2009). Histories, experiments and other case studies are preferable in this type of case study design. Questions focus on development over time rather than on frequency (Yin, 2009).

Descriptive designs attempt to present a complete description of a phenomenon within its context or when the phenomenon is predictive about certain outcomes. The investigation of prevalent political attitudes is an example of a descriptive case study. Since a goal of the current research is to investigate attitudes of students, it fits well into a descriptive case study. Further, descriptive designs attempt to present a complete description of a phenomenon within its context (Hanock & Algozzine, 2006). Similarly, the current research study focuses on the complete description of exemplary teachers within an elementary school context.

Stake (1995) distinguishes three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. In an intrinsic case study the researchers only focus on the individual or
group subjects. Intrinsic case studies do not attempt to make future generalizations. The researcher studies the participants only to learn about that particular case (Stake, 1995).

The researcher in an instrumental case study is interested in a certain pattern or behavior. For example, an instrumental case study will be utilized to better understand a future case study (Stake, 1995). Finally, in a collective case study, the researcher strives to choose several participants in order to formulate overall generalizations (Stake, 1995). In both the instrumental case study and collective case study design, the researcher's goal is to try to allow for the generalizations or findings to help solve a bigger problem. Since the goal of the current study is to generalize the findings to solve the problem of how to best define the characteristics of exemplary teaching from the perspective of an elementary school student, the study is collective. Additionally, the study is collective since it examines perceptions of at-risk and non at-risk students and cross references these perceptions to understand and explain general phenomena.

**Setting.** Interviews and the drawing exercise were conducted at Winslow Elementary School (a pseudonym). The school district is a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, and includes affluent families. The researcher previously taught for seven (7) years in a different school in the same district and is currently an administrator in the district. Winslow Elementary school is comprised of 840 students. Fifty-five percent of the population is African-American. Also, thirty percent of the students participate in the free breakfast and lunch program. Many students who are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program are considered at-risk in their state and research based
assessments. In order to help these students, Winslow offers early morning and after school tutoring. The students at Winslow know they are cared for as a result of all of the extra tutoring and clubs that are offered by the school. The school is rated excellent by the state of Ohio even though it has a high percentage of lower socio-economic students.

Participants. In selecting the participants for the study, the researcher worked with the Director of Research and Evaluation for the Winslow district to help find students in the following subgroups. Parents were called by the researcher and read a script over the phone asking for their consent. Additionally, they were given written consent letters that need to be signed. Students were read a script to ask for their consent and were asked to sign a consent form as well.

1. Three successful at-risk students
2. Three successful non at-risk students
3. Three unsuccessful at-risk students
4. Three unsuccessful non at-risk students

All the students interviewed for the study came from the Winslow School and were racially and gender balanced. The cohort does not include special needs students. “Successful at-risk students” were determined by the scores they received on the Ohio Achievement Assessment. In order to determine whether or not students were at-risk, the economic category of free and reduced lunch was utilized. Students who receive a free and reduced lunch come from families considered in poverty. These students are considered at-risk due to the lack of resources the families can provide for their
children. Lower socioeconomic status families experience more daily stress, have lower access to nutritional food, are transient due to eviction, and have parents who are less likely to engage their children in conversation (Jencks and Phillips, 1998).

“Successful non at-risk students” were identified as those students with Ohio Achievement Assessment scores in the accelerated range. Also, these students did not come from households that qualified from free and reduced lunch. Students who were labeled, “unsuccessful at-risk students,” obtained scores which placed them in the limited category on the Ohio Achievement Assessment. These students also qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. Lastly, students who were categorized as “unsuccessful non at-risk” obtained a score on the Ohio Achievement Assessment that placed them in the limited category. These students were not eligible for free and reduced lunch.

The Director of Research and Evaluation compiled the Ohio Achievement scores and free and reduced lunch status, and if the students possessed an IEP in an excel database. The researcher then sorted and acquired students from the database who fulfilled the four categories that were described in the paragraphs above. The researcher then picked students from the list compiled by the Director of Research based upon balancing gender and race. Additionally, the researcher chose students who were in the district for at least three years, which decreased the number of participants. Finally, the researcher randomly selected students from the list.

Both at-risk and non at-risk students are chosen for the study to determine if their responses are similar or if there are noticeable differences among their interviews.
After the literature review, the researcher suspects that at-risk students might have different needs than other students in the same class.

Table 1

Racial and Gender Identity of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Successful At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benet</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Successful At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyle</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Successful At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chayanne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Unsuccessful At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Unsuccessful At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Unsuccessful At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Successful Non At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Successful Non At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Successful Non At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Unsuccessful Non At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Unsuccessful Non At-Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Unsuccessful Non At-Risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the study there are four groups of participants. In order to locate participants that met the criteria, the researcher met with the Director of Evaluation and Research in the district in which the participants were students and the researcher was an administrator. The researcher was able to narrow the participants into a group of forty, after finding some of the students were not in the district anymore. The researcher also
wanted to choose participants that have been in the district for most of their academic careers. The group dwindled down to twenty students. Finally, after an examination of the files and interviewing Winslow’s teachers about some of the participants, a final group of twelve students was developed. In selecting the group, we were able to select a variety of students in terms of behavior in the school. After identifying the students, the researcher met with each of them. The researcher asked the participants about themselves, but also requested the assistance of teachers to help with the description. The researcher reviewed past report cards with previous teachers’ comments. The following table demonstrates the participants.

**Interview questions.** The interview questions were designed to elicit information about student perceptions of quality teaching. Some questions derived directly from the literature concerning students’ perceptions of exemplary teaching. After the questions were drafted, input was requested from other teachers and qualitative researchers. The students were assured that their responses will not be used against them in order to ensure truthful responses. During the interviews, care was exercised to prevent any undue influence on the interviewees through body language. Further, note taking and tape recording will be employed in the interviews. Immediately after the conclusion of the interview, the researcher transcribes the interview and added any observations that were made during the interview as well as personal anecdotes.

Before interviewing each participant, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received. After receiving notice of IRB approval, the interviewing process
commenced. After interviewing each participant, the audiotape capturing the interview was locked up in a secure file cabinet in the researcher’s office. No other person had access to this secure, locked file cabinet. After transcribing the interviews, the files were saved on the hard drive of the researcher’s computer. These files were further secured by a secure, private access code.

**Analysis of Drawings**

The analysis of drawings was another method for the researcher to gain greater understanding of a student’s feelings towards a teacher and their classroom instruction. Burns and Kaufman (1972) believe that this non-threatening strategy can be a noteworthy approach to understand a child’s world. “Young children usually express themselves more naturally and spontaneously through actions rather than through words. Thus, figure drawing provides an excellent method of exploring the world of the child.” (Burns & Kaufman, 1972 p. 13). The authors also note that cultural hindrances will not affect the drawings and a child’s ability to articulate what they are truly feeling. The drawings will allow the researcher to gain a more comprehensive view of how the students define exemplary teachers.

Burns and Kaufman suggest that researchers look at the student drawings through a symbolic perceptive and, further, opines that one does not need a degree in a psychology to analyze the drawings. Although their opinion has been criticized, she has been a clinical psychologist for many years and many researchers still use her analysis as their approach to understand student drawings. In this study, the researcher asked the
students to “Draw a detailed picture of a time in a classroom where you felt you learned a lot from your teacher.”

In this investigation, all students were given the same instructions. The Kinetic School Drawing methods as set forth by Murphy, Deli and Edwards (2004) served as a guide to assist the researcher in evaluating the entire picture in the drawings. After examining the entire picture, the researcher circled all the particulars of each drawing. For example, the researcher looked for items that were identified in the pilot study. For example, did the students draw technology? After the researcher examined the interviews data, reviewed the student drawings again to see if they corroborate what was stated during the interviews. Items in the student drawings include classroom decor, method of instruction, and student behavior. Also the researcher looked for any omissions, such as if many of the students in the classroom are not included in the drawing.

Student responses to the pictures also served as a guide to understand the drawings. After the child has completed the drawing, the researcher inquired about the drawing to further assess the child’s perceptions about the teacher and the classroom environment. The questions that were administered after the drawings were, as follows:

1. What is this figure doing in this picture? (The researcher will ask about each figure in the drawing)
2. What does each person make you think of?
3. How do you feel about the teacher in the drawing?
4. If you could change anything about this classroom, what would that be?

The drawings were used as a tool to substantiate what was stated by the participants in the interviews, and to see if any of the same themes arose.

**Collection of the Data**

The student interviews and drawings were collected in my office during the academic school year. My office is not located in the main office, so privacy was maintained. Students selected a time, whether during a special, lunch, or after the school day ended. Sometimes I would sit at my desk or sit in a chair next to the participant. All of the interviewees were smiling and happy to share their thoughts about exemplary teaching. The teacher interviews took place in their classrooms during the school year; however, after the students had left for the day. Teachers are usually too frazzled during the school day to have a real discussion about instruction. During the interviews, I would usually let the teacher know that I intended to visit their classroom to observe a situation that was described during the interviews. For example, some students discussed how they liked the voice teachers used when reading aloud so I would come and watch during this time.

**Analyzing the Data**

The process of analyzing a case study has been defined as, “essentially taking something apart” (Stake, 1995, p. 71). According to Stake, the taking of first impressions and observations, and thereafter giving meaning to them are vital to us as researchers (Stake, 1995).
In terms of analyzing data, the study utilized the four procedures advocated by Stake (2005). Initially, categorical aggregation, or the searching for a collection of instances from the data, will be utilized. Using this procedure, the researcher examines the data and looks for relevant meanings to emerge. Open coding was utilized to transfer these meanings into themes. Initially, each theme was color-coded. The second procedure is direct interpretation, which is a process of extracting the data and then placing it back together in more meaningful ways. The researcher used axial coding to collapse certain themes together. Eventually, naturalistic generalizations emerged and conclusions developed through vicarious experiences so well constructed that they felt as if the experience is my own. Usually, meaning comes from an incident or description that occurs with great frequency (Stake, 1995).

After the data becomes saturated and new information collected is redundant, the researcher checked with the students and used member checking to determine if responses to the interview questions and drawings were properly analyzed. All researchers want to provide validation for their study. Triangulation assisted a researcher in achieving this goal. Stake suggests that the researcher should describe the case so well, that an outsider could observe the same characteristics as the researcher.

Stake has certain triangulation protocols to confirm the findings of the research. Data source triangulation is the examination of data findings from another perspective in order to verify the original data. For example, the researcher might want to independently observe a teacher that a student is describing in order to validate what
the student is saying about the teacher. When at all possible, data source triangulation was utilized to gain a clearer understanding of what defines an exemplary teacher.

Member checking was another tool that provided reflections and interpretations of the data. Although Stake notes that it is difficult to obtain valuable feedback, when participants take the time for a thorough review of the researcher’s data and findings, improvement occurs in the research. Excerpts of the findings were read to the participants and they responded orally to my observations and provided feedback on my analysis.

Researcher’s Perspectives

As a current administrator in the school district in which the study occurs, the researcher has an insider’s knowledge regarding the teachers that the students discussed in their interviews. This proved to be a powerful tool during this study. For example, in the pilot study, a student mentioned a sewing project in which she participated. The researcher was immediately familiar with the project as a result of her relationship with the teacher. Also, when another student discussed playing kickball with a teacher, the researcher once again knew that the teacher played almost daily with her students. Thus, the researcher’s past teaching experience in the Winslow school will allow for the filling in of some missing information that may not be received from the student participants.

The researcher’s past position as a teacher at Winslow also allowed her to be fortunate enough to attend a number of local and out of state conferences that discussed effective instructional practices to assist student achievement in the
classroom. Recently, the researcher attended the Minority Student Achievement Network in Michigan to learn about the needs of students who come from diverse backgrounds. The conference focused on learning the cultural differences of students and how to best reach African-American students and their individual needs. Moreover, the researcher attended a conference in which the presenters discussed how best to assess and monitor at-risk students so that they are not improperly labeled as special education students. Each conference is useful to the researcher’s overall knowledge as a teacher.

In the study, the students were asked what instructional techniques that they found to be most powerful. Is it the student-teacher relationships, authentic activities implemented in the classroom, or both? It is the opinion of the researcher that some teachers become overwhelmed with instructional strategies and types of assessments to such a degree that they lose sight of the relationships with their students. Hopefully, the study brings to light the importance of teachers taking the time to form meaningful relationships with their students and listening to student opinions and ideas about effective teaching.

As teachers, we simply cannot ignore the viewpoints of our students. We must allow them to participate in their own learning and give them the opportunity to have their voices heard. Far too many researchers forget to ask the students their opinions and feelings about classroom practices.

The researcher’s own learning experience in elementary and high school was a motivating factor to conduct this research study. Motivation to learn for the sake of
learning only evolved in the researcher’s college years. Although this researcher can only blame herself for the majority of her lack of motivation throughout her academic career, teachers are partly to blame as well.

Although, the researcher believes that attending an all girls’ institution from kindergarten through twelfth grade was challenging, many of the classrooms did not adhere to best teaching practices. For example, many teachers utilized direct instruction rather than differentiated instruction. Additionally, tools of technology and manipulatives were missing in many of the classrooms. The classes that were most effective utilized the hands-on approach with active dialogue between the students and teachers. In conducting the research, the researcher examined if today’s students can articulate the learning experiences in which they excelled, and whether their answers corroborate with the researcher’s most exemplary learning experiences as a child. The research will also assist the researcher and other teachers to reflect upon and implement best teaching practices.

**Overcoming Bias**

In order to overcome bias in this study, open-ended interview questions were utilized. Also, discussing the interviews and drawings with the student participants eliminated the appearance of bias. Another strategy to increase the validity of the study and eliminate bias is to incorporate quotes from the participants to provide the reader with vivid and thick descriptions of the student’s perceptions.

As teachers, all of us must genuinely desire to become the best educators possible. Therefore, teachers must listen and learn about student perceptions, rather
than placing their own preconceived notions about best teaching practices in their own head without any student input. In the study, the researcher continued to reflect upon best teaching practices to prevent potential bias.

**Summary**

In this chapter, it is explained how the pilot study shaped this research. Furthermore, the researcher will provide thorough definitions and explanations of different types of case studies and clearly define what distinguishes the present case study. Most importantly, the author describes the methods of the present study through a discussion of the research context, participants, validation, and personal perspective of the setting.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The research is designed to examine student perceptions of excellent teaching. More specifically, the goal of the study is to compare at-risk students’ views of exemplary teaching with the views of non at-risk students. As discussed in the literature review, many components are necessary for teaching to be effective. The purpose of this study is to gain understanding of which qualities and traits that students deem necessary for a teacher to possess in order to be exemplary. Data utilized in the study were acquired through qualitative data collection methods including interviews, examination of drawings, and observations.

The title of this study, *The Renaissance Teacher*, conveys the idea that emerged from the data that a teacher needs to be well educated as well as excel in many different types of roles in order to flourish in the classroom. There are six sections in this chapter, each titled with different “occupations” in which teachers must be accomplished. Thus, the first section, *The Carpenter*, is a discussion regarding the importance of hands-on learning to children. The second section, *IT Specialist*, discusses how children found technology particularly helpful when teachers used it during
lessons. The third section, *The Judge*, reveals how teachers need to be equitable in the classroom. In the fourth section, entitled, *The Doctor*, a discussion is offered regarding how students feel that teachers need to give an individual prescription approach to teaching. The fifth section, *The Comedian*, sheds light on the benefits to students when teachers inject humor into their lessons. Finally, the sixth and final section entitled, *The Nurturer*, explains that teachers need to provide a warm and caring environment for students to prosper.

Each section will address all of the research questions. The research questions for this study are, as follows:

1. **How do at-risk and successful students in the classroom describe exemplary teaching?**
2. **How do at-risk and unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?**
3. **How do non at-risk successful students describe exemplary teaching?**
4. **How do non at-risk unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?**

**Successful At-Risk**

One group of students in the study is labeled as successful and at-risk. These students were selected from the school’s free and reduced lunch data and Ohio Achievement Assessment. These students receive a free and reduced lunch and scored in the proficient category on the Ohio Achievement Assessment.

Sam is a white, sixth grade student. His long dark hair usually gets in his face. Sam lives with both of his parents. Currently, his dad is trying to find a job and his mom is studying to be a nurse. Sam is a little disorganized but participants a lot in class. He
receives mostly A’s on his report card. He is also involved in Science Club and plays soccer.

Benet is an African-American sixth grade student. She is tall for her age and has a sweet demeanor and typically has a smile on her face. She lives with her mother, stepfather and her sister. Her mother stays at home and her dad is a funeral director. She receives mostly A’s and B’s on her report card. She enjoys coming to school to socialize with her friends.

Lyle is an African-American boy who lives with his mother, grandmother, brother, two dogs, and five cats. His mother works part time and is studying to be a speech therapist. He is also doing well academically, receiving A’s on his report card. He enjoys school, but also loves playing sports like basketball.

**Unsuccessful At-Risk Students**

The following participants were placed in the unsuccessful at-risk category. They are performing in the basic category in the Ohio Achievement Assessment. These students are also receiving free and reduced lunches from the school.

Cheyenne is an African-American girl who is a sixth grade student at Winslow Elementary. She lives with her mother and grandfather in a house. Her mother will not tell Cheyenne her profession. Her grandfather sells medical supplies. She has difficulty getting along with other girls and respecting her teachers. However, when discussing her year with her favorite teacher Mr. Anderson, she reports that she didn’t get in any trouble. Her grades are mostly C’s and D’s.
Amelia is a Caucasian sixth grade student at Winslow. She lives with her mother in an apartment. Amelia visits with her father on the weekends. She enjoys school and attending after-school drama club on Thursdays. She typically receives C’s on her report cards and her behavior is good.

Tyson is an African-American boy who lives with his father and his father’s girlfriend in an apartment. He has an older brother at the high school in the same district. He very much enjoys going to school because of his strong relationships with his friends. He is respectful to his friends. He is receiving mostly D’s on his report card. Tyson makes good choices in school and is respectful to adults.

**Successful Non At-Risk Students**

The following students are in the successful non at-risk category. These students were selected as a result of their accelerated scores on the Ohio Achievement Assessment. Students in this category do not qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Talia is an African-American female who lives with both parents. Her dad works in sales and her mom makes personalized stationary and note cards. She has a fraternal twin brother in the same grade but with a different teacher. She is always smiling and very polite and tries her best in all academic areas in school. She receives mostly A’s on her report card.

Bryson is a Caucasian boy who is an only child. He lives with both of his parents. His mother is an attorney and his father is employed at a bank. His speaks very articulately for his age and is a voracious reader. He is the only child in the school to successfully complete an individualized computer based mathematics program.
Tyler is an African-American sixth grader who lives with both of his parents and his older brother. He is very polite and participates in drama and art club after school. He receives A’s on his report card. Tyler’s mother works for a prominent hospital in the area and his father is a teacher.

**Unsuccessful Non At-Risk Students**

The last three participants in this study are unsuccessful non at-risk students. They were chosen because they did not score well on the Ohio Achievement Assessment. Their scores fell within the limited category. Additionally, they are considered non at-risk because they do not qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Samira is an African-American female sixth grader at Winslow Elementary school. She lives with her mother, father, and her older sister. She is very polite and is described as helpful among her teachers. She receives some B’s, but mostly C’s on her report card.

Daniel is a Caucasian sixth grader who lives with his mom and younger sister. His father is not allowed to see him. He has had a good year with his current sixth grade teacher, but has had some behavior problems in the past according to his teachers.

Melvin is an African-American sixth grader who lives with both of his parents and his older brother. He routinely receives B’s in math but struggles in reading, receiving mostly C’s and D’s. He is a shy child but is very sweet and respectful to all of the adults in the building.
Data Collection and Analysis

All of the sixth grade students were interviewed in my office. At the time of the interviews, my position in the school was as the Academic Advisor for fifth grade students; therefore, the sixth grade students did not know me very well. Additionally, in my position, I did not handle any sixth grade disciplinary matters and, as such, my role in the school did not hinder the students’ candor and truthfulness during the interviews. Further, my gentle disposition usually facilitates frankness with the students when speaking with them at the school. Students were interviewed during their free time. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher also took notes during the interview.

As described in the methodology chapter, the researcher uses the four procedures described by Stake. In analyzing a case study, Stake suggests to initially utilize categorical aggregation. After the interviews were completed and transcribed, I placed each transcript in folders entitled, “successful at-risk,” “unsuccessful at-risk,” “successful non at-risk” and “unsuccessful non at-risk.” I read over the transcripts, line-by-line, and noted on the front of each folder topics that came up in frequency in each of the transcripts. Secondly, I copied the transcripts into four different colors of paper. I copied the successful at-risk students on light yellow paper, unsuccessful at-risk students on light blue, successful non at-risk on pink, and unsuccessful non at-risk on white. With my pilot study in mind, I was searching for evidence that supported themes that emerged from the pilot study. I underlined or highlighted each theme that arose in a designated color. Lastly, I copied the transcripts again in the designated color, light
yellow for successful at-risk students and so forth. I then took a copy of these transcripts to look for topics with minimal regard to my themes from my pilot study. Thereafter, the topics were formed into more themes. Direct interpretation was used to extract the data and put it into more meaningful ways for the researcher. Highlighted and underlined sections that occurred in frequency were placed into topics folders. The six folders were titled, Technology Hands-on, Fairness, Differentiation, Cultural Relevance, and Humor.

**Outliers**

Some of the participant responses are not covered in this study and fall outside of the listed occupations due to the fact that the responses were only discussed by one or two students. For example, one participant mentioned how she would teach only one concept per week. During the interview she said it would make it easier to understand material if students were only presented one subject at a time. However, this was only mentioned by the one participant and, later, she did not believe that this was a good idea when I asked her during the member checking process, as she did not believe that her earlier idea would be practical in the classroom. Additionally, the physical environment was mentioned during a couple of the interviews. Students noted that they enjoyed posters with inspirational quotes and Samira mentioned how spelling and vocabulary words were hanging from the ceiling and were used during lessons. However, because only a couple of students mentioned this during the interview process, an entire section or theme was not devoted to this information.
Figure 2 demonstrates the summary of the findings of the study. The participants were divided into two main groups of at-risk and non-at-risk for this illustration. As shown, at-risk and non at-risk students believe their ideal teachers use hands-on materials, are equitable, provide differentiated instruction and are funny. Technology and culturally relevant teaching are the two areas where the two groups differed in their responses. Technology was more important to non at-risk students while culturally relevant teaching practices were valued more by the at-risk student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hands On</th>
<th>Equitable</th>
<th>Differentiation</th>
<th>Humor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All participants mentioned activities and projects that allowed the students to manipulate objects as something their favorite teachers did often in the classroom.</td>
<td>Students believed all teachers need to be fair and impartial when administering consequences to students</td>
<td>All students want teachers to meet their individual needs and be a stockholder in either how they are learning a topic, or the topic itself</td>
<td>All subjects described their favorite teachers as amusing and animated</td>
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<th>How do they differ?</th>
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<th>At Risk</th>
<th>In regards to</th>
<th>Non at Risk</th>
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<td>One student described technology as being a great tool while the others never mentioned it or didn’t think it was worth the expense</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>All six subjects discussed how technology enhanced their learning during lessons. Smart boards were a tool they found to be particularly useful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students want caring teachers. Also, having extra time with a teacher including the teacher staying and helping them during recess was valuable.</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>The relationship piece was not as important to the non at-risk students. Students like teachers who motivated them to try their best.</td>
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Figure 2. Summary of the findings of the study
The Carpenter

Hands-on learning is a term that is used in the educational community to describe activities that allow children to manipulate materials in order to learn a new concept. Hands-on learning lessons usually allow students to investigate and inquire about real world phenomena (Dewey, 1938). This theme did not emerge so powerfully in the pilot study. However, it was addressed as one of findings because the topic became prevalent during the interviews for the study. Many of the participants stated that hands-on lessons were most effective and that they would implement manipulatives themselves if they were a teacher.

Successful non at-risk students gave a lot of detail of hands-on projects that they enjoyed creating in classrooms. When Talia was asked during the interview, “What did this great teacher do to help you understand?” She replied, “It was hands-on.” When asked to elaborate, she replied, “Mrs. D had us make craters of different sizes using marbles and toothpicks.” Talia also described another teacher in third grade who utilized bottle rockets in a lesson. According to Talia, each Friday, a group of students would have the teacher use a device to lift the group’s bottle rocket into the air. Thereafter, the group would measure the distance the bottle rocket would go and then try to add or delete one thing from their bottle rocket to make it fly a farther distance. Talia described this bottle rocket activity as most memorable and it was the first thing she discussed when I asked her about a couple of her favorite teachers. Her response was, “When I had Mr. S and we did bottle rockets.” After talking with this teacher, I
learned that this activity is a staple for his students at the end of the year. The bottle rockets are used to teach Newton’s laws of motion.

Bryson described one of his favorite activities that he did in first grade for St. Patrick’s Day. “We made traps for the leprechauns that were living in the ceiling. I made one where there was a gold coin in the bottom of the box.” Even though Bryson is now in the 6th grade, he still remembers an activity so many years ago for a multitude of reasons. He described enjoying making the box out of Lincoln logs and having to come up with a way to lure the leprechauns into the box.

Interestingly, in some of my interviews, the students remember the activity but not the learning concept behind it. For example, Bryson described a demonstration in the science lab as, “Mrs. W accidently, at least I think it was an accident, made this foam rise up and it landed in front of me.” When I asked what concept he was learning about, Bryson responded, “I think she was doing it for show, but that wasn’t part of what we were learning, I don’t remember though, I think it was…” The student was describing a teacher in the district. Upon speaking with Mrs. W, I learned that the experiment was presented to instruct the students on the concepts of physical and chemical reactions. The foam was an example of a chemical reaction because it made a small and new material.

Tyler also discussed at length an experiment he performed with his fourth grade teacher using Mentos and coke. Each group had different items, such as Play Dough, coke, baking soda, and vinegar and used these items to cause physical reactions. Bryson
also described a science activity in which hands-on learning was an engaging way for him to learn. According to Bryson,

Instead of just learning something, he would have us learn something interesting. Instead of saying these are the steps of the scientific method; he would incorporate that in a super cool experiment to see what paper plane goes the farthest or something.

The drawings created by the non at-risk students reiterated the idea that hands-on learning was important to them during lessons. Tyler drew a picture of his teacher lifting off the bottle rocket a student created. Also, Talia had a group of students working on creating different sized craters using toothpicks and marbles. Again, all three of the successful non at-risk participants described learning using hands-on materials for their most memorable and exemplary learning activities.

Unsuccessful, non at-risk students also discussed utilizing hands-on activities during their lessons. Samira expressed this, when she stated, “we were not sitting around Ms. K’s room, we were always doing stuff and she explained it really well.” She mentioned fun science projects and performing plays as highlights during the year with one of her favorite teachers. Daniel described a project with his teacher in which the students built boats and measured the distance the boats moved in gutters in their classroom. Although Daniel is now in sixth grade, he still remembers vividly a project he completed during his third grade year with Mr. H. When I interviewed his third grade teacher, I discovered that he often uses hands-on lessons to help students understand concepts. Additionally, when this teacher instructed fourth grade, he had the students
build bird houses out of wood. Mr. H is a well-respected teacher and is now in charge of the International Baccalaureate curriculum for his building.

The International Baccalaureate program works with schools to create a rigorous curriculum and assessment that helps students gain better understanding of world cultures. Their mission is to have students create a more compassionate world through active participation and inquiry. This curriculum is designed around student inquiry and projects. The subject of “projects” was a topic that was collapsed into hands-on learning.

Projects were also described by unsuccessful non at-risk learners. Daniel talked about creating an animal as one of the reasons why he thought Mr. H was a great teacher. Daniel stated, “We did a lot of stuff outside, we made-up our own animals...I made a dinosaur and wrote about it.” Making skeletons was another hands-on activity that was discussed during an interview. Britney declared that they had to make skeletons in her fourth grade class with Mrs. B. When I asked the teacher about the assignment, she explained that students complete this assignment during Halloween. Students are learning about measurements and measuring to the closest ¼ inch. As one of the final projects, students work in pairs to measure major body parts. For example, the students measure fingers and feet. The students then take those measurements and work with the art teacher to draw those parts. Then they take cut the parts out and put them together with fasteners to make their own skeleton.

Mrs. B is the teacher that Britney discussed and was the one who helped students with this project. After talking to Mrs. B, there are many hands-on lessons she
uses in her daily regimen. She uses play money to help teach fractions and unfix cubes
to help teach multiplication. She also has students design a trip where they would visit
different locations across Ohio and calculate the gas, lodging, and food cost of the trip.

Both groups of non at-risk students described hands-on activities as something
they really enjoyed. Without much probing, hands-on was mentioned among the
participants when the researcher first asked them why the teacher was great. The next
few pages will reviews how at-risk students feel about hands-on lessons.

Hands-on was another theme that emerged from the interviews with successful
at-risk students. Benet surprisingly used the word “hands on stuff” when asked what
lessons were memorable to her. She described a lesson she particularly enjoyed with
her science teacher. “She let us make circuit boards. We need to put the wires together
right so the light bulb worked.” Benet also drew this activity when asked to draw a time
she learned a lot in a lesson. After talking to this fourth grade teacher in the district, I
learned this lesson was designed because of the new implementation of the
International Baccalaureate program. The program advocates for inquiry based learning.
Mrs. H said this was open inquiry. Students had to work in groups using the tools
provided by the teacher to make the light bulb light up. Having students become
problems solvers gives the students confidence that they are capable learners. It also
creates an environment in which the students are the center of instruction. Inquiry
learning also makes the curriculum more relatable to students (Miller, 2002; Stone,
2004).
Student centered projects were also important to Sam. When asked about memorable in-class that you thought were really great, he responded, “in Mrs. W’s class we did a lot of big projects... Lots of things to do...new project to do. . .not just a math sheet.” Sam encounters many math sheets during math instruction. When asked to provide more detail about the projects he did in this particular class with Mrs. W he stated, “We did penny memories.” When I inquired about penny memories, Sam replied, “We had to write memories that were funny, unique or sad things that happened to us.” Mrs. W spends the end of the year having the students write about important memories throughout the childhood. She models and reads students exemplars that students have written in the past. All the students last year successful turned in at least a dozen stories that were compiled and bound in a volume by the teacher.

Upon reflection, the interview questions requesting the students to give an example of a lesson which is memorable might be leading some of the students to state specific projects. Of course, experiments and projects are more memorable because they are generally not a daily occurrence in any classroom. However, the comments of “not just another math sheet” or “just sitting around,” “we are always doing stuff,” and “makes learning more fun,” illustrate that children value lessons that are more constructivist and built upon prior knowledge. Talia aptly stated, “If you do something memorable you will remember it. If it’s not interesting, you won’t remember it.” Inquiry and hands-on materials allow children to build understanding, rather than just being told information.
Students in the unsuccessful at-risk group, like Daniel, also described hands-on learning as something they enjoyed from their favorite teachers. In describing lesson from Mrs. A, Daniel responded, “When we were learning fractions, we used pieces to help us understand.” The fraction lessons Daniel is referring to is called the “fraction kit” that Mrs. A uses to help students compare commonly used fractions. The strips are a visual presentation that will provide and help students understand fractions. Britney stated that one of her most memorable lessons was the one in which she, “met in groups and there were old cameras in the middle of the table and I got to see old stuff in person and it was exciting.”

**Summary.** The section, *The Carpenter*, addresses the concepts that all students value and most acknowledged that hands-on learning helped them understand concepts and made learning more memorable for them (Powell & Kalina, 2009). This is not a new concept for teachers. Hands-on instruction is now commonly referred to as “inquiry” and “project-based” lessons. Definitions of "project-based instruction" include features relating to the use of an authentic ("driving") question, a community of inquiry, and the use of cognitive (technology-based) tools (Blumenfeld, Fishman, Krajcik, Marx, & Soloway, 2000). This type of instruction is one of the best practices of teaching (Stone, 2004).

When comparing the at-risk group to the non at-risk group, the theme of hands-on learning is just as strong in each of these groups. The idea of hands-on learning is also mentioned in both successful learners and non successful learners during the interviews. This is a powerful idea. When a student is already successful, they still
believe that hands-on, project-based lessons are interesting and memorable. When describing their favorite teacher, students included these projects when describing why the teacher was exemplary. Typically, in the educational community, the use of hands-on based learning is thought to help or re-teach unsuccessful learners (Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rodgers, 2002). This sentiment needs to change. All learners, whether at-risk, non at-risk, successful, or unsuccessful, should be exposed to this type of instruction.

**IT Specialist**

As discussed in the literature review, technology is an important tool that has a positive effect on student achievement (Marzano & Haystead, 2009). Technology can be another tool that can help clarify concepts to children, both visually and kinesthetically (Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997). Technology is a theme that emerged in both the pilot study and in the current study. However, technology is not a topic that permeated among all the groups. According to the answers and drawings of the students, teachers need to know how to best incorporate technology into their lessons.

Both non at-risk successful and unsuccessful students reported that technology is an important ingredient in their lessons. All of the participants mentioned the importance that technology played in their lessons. Talia mentioned, “...loved using the tons of computers in Mrs. D’s classroom.” Ms. D’s classroom is unique as she has ten computers in her fourth grade classroom, while other fourth grade classrooms usually have only three to four computers. Also, in Ms. D’s room, a computer was always used by the students in collaboration with the teacher. Students worked in small groups with
the teacher and manipulated objects on the Smart Board to help solve problems. For example, students would move fractions with their fingers on a number line. Though Talia’s answer might be influenced by what she was exposed to in the classroom, other students in the study did not have as much access to technology as Talia. However, Talia is now in 6th grade and still remembers enjoying and placing value on the technology her room offered. Bryson also enjoyed a teacher because of the technology she used in the classroom. He responded that Mrs. J was, “really different and a good teacher because of the technology she used.”

Tyler enjoyed going to the computer lab and completing an individual math program. He also enjoyed when his teacher, “helped him with (math)” problems in the computer lab. Again, technology was something that stood out for Tyler, but, interestingly, the technology was being used within the scaffolding of the teacher. Tyler also stated that the Smart Board was utilized by his teacher, Mr. S, in many of the math lessons. Another student, Lyle, enjoyed taking turns going up and using the Smart Board. He further mentioned using math websites as one of his favorite activities. Technology was also something he enjoyed using when he had to search for information regarding snakes. Tyler’s classroom was one of the first in his school to receive a Smart Board, also referred to as an interactive white board. The novelty could be one of the reasons he enjoyed using it so much. He did not mention any other type of technology in his response.

In reviewing the responses of the unsuccessful at-risk students, one student mentioned how Smart Boards were, “...great to have in the classroom.” Brittany said it
was fun to work on the Smart Board because it helped her understand concepts in a “different way” and she added that, “all classrooms should have one.”

Successful at-risk learners did not stress technology as being an important tool or used in any memorable or exciting lessons. Lyle stated, “There’s nothing you can do on a white board that you can do on a Smart board, but the white board is cheaper.”

Certainly a Smart Board may be utilized in many more ways than a simple white board, however, Lyle may not have been exposed to the different methods in which a white board can display information and be used as an interactive tool. It might be theorized that their schools did not offer technology; however, all of the participants had access to Smart Boards in their classrooms and participated in the computer lab twice a week. Possibly, their teachers did not utilize them during their lessons so these students were not exposed to technology as much as the non at-risk students. All participants have spent all their school years in the district.

**Summary.** Technology was an important tool for the non at-risk students, but not as powerful of a tool for the at-risk students. These findings are surprising since the literature describes how technology can help achievement and captivate at-risk learners to be more successful (Ferguson, 2002). Possibly, the teachers for this group did not implement technology as frequently or did not use it in a useful manner. It is also possible that the at-risk learners needed a human to help explain topics. Technology was deemed important to both at-risk and non at-risk participants when a teacher utilized it within a small group setting or one on one.
The Judge

During a trial in a court of law, a judge is required to be fair, unbiased, and respectful to all parties. A judge is someone who administers justice after listening to the arguments of the different parties. According to the research, the student participants desired many of the characteristics of a judge. They want someone to hear all the facts or ideas and distinguish between a truth and a lie. These same qualities should make a teacher more effective in the classroom. According to the participants, the best teachers were fair and treated all students equally.

When speaking with the successful non at-risk students, the word “fair” was frequently mentioned in all of the interviews. Talia said that her favorite teacher was “fair.” When asked to provide an example how her favorite teacher was “fair,” she said that the teacher, “made sure everyone got a turn. She gave us respect.” Bryson reiterated the same point and stated if he were going to be a teacher he would be, “fair.” According to Bryson, his worst teacher can be described as, “meaner it was like they (teachers) like some students more than other students. Like they were meaner to some students and nicer to other students when they did something wrong, so that was kind of mean of them I think.” Tyler responded that his favorite teacher managed a classroom well. He added that, “everyone didn’t get in trouble.”

“Everyone getting in trouble” was also deemed unfavorable for the unsuccessful non at-risk group. Samira stated that she really dislikes it when a teacher, “gives everyone else more homework if one student does something wrong.” Daniel wants a
calm composure from his teacher and he stated that if he were a teacher, he wouldn’t “yell a lot.”

Successful at-risk students like Benet stated that if she were a teacher, “she would try to be fair.” Her favorite teacher “was nice to all of us. She gave us respect.” Benet also noted that she dislikes it when everyone receives a punishment when only one or two “students were involved in something bad.” Sam asserted that his least favorite teacher, “screamed a lot. The whole class got in trouble when it was just a few kids talking.” “No yelling,” was volunteered as an unfavorable quality by Lyle as well.

The unsuccessful at-risk students deemed screaming to be very unfavorable. Interestingly, the sentiments were almost identical. Brittany stated she doesn’t mind if a teacher gets upset with the child who is talking but should not, “get mad at the whole class.” Daniel stated that if he were a teacher, “the whole class wouldn’t get in trouble if one person did something wrong.” Students feel that a major injustice occurs when teachers apply an individual consequence to an entire class.

**Summary.** In summary, the idea of being fair and giving every student a consequence for the poor behavioral choices of only a few students was mentioned by all of the participants in the study. Teachers need to be impartial and reasonable when working with their students (Murphy, Deli, & Edwards, 2004). There was not any difference among the at-risk and non at-risk students regarding this issue. According to the participants, their best teachers listened and treated everyone with respect.
The Doctor

A medical doctor is an extremely intelligent individual with vast knowledge of issues regarding human health. Patients trust doctors explicitly to give a correct diagnosis and appropriately treat their own particular symptoms. Students expressed a desire that their favorite teachers possess some of the same skills that a medical doctor possesses. Students feel that a one size fits all approach is not acceptable in managing an entire class. A doctor does not treat every patient with a cookie cutter approach. Depending on the symptoms, physicians will individualize treatment for each of their patients. The same sentiment applies with classroom instruction. Students enter a classroom with various symptoms and it is imperative that the teacher evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each student in order to best assist each individual student reach their fullest potential. The idea of individualized instruction and having students take more ownership in their learning is differentiation (Levy, 2008).

The idea of choice is important in differentiation. Students may choose a topic based upon their interest in the topic, and still fill the requirements of the project. For example, a student might be able to pick any mammal they might want to research (Tobbin & McInnes, 2008). For the non at-risk students, choice was something they discussed as being important for them. Brittany declared that “Mrs. H let us create our own dinosaur, and we can choose how to report about it.” When I asked her to explain further she responded, “We had different jobs... news guy, singer, and teacher.” Mrs. H has attended many differentiation conferences in which activities, such as the one Brittany described above, were discussed. The concept of choice and how to choose the
format of how you present the information is known as RAFTS (Role, Audience, Format, Topic). Daniel also discussed creating a math poster with Mrs. D. According to Daniel, he could choose the format as to how to present his information: PowerPoint, poster, report, or comic strip. Having students take ownership in their learning is important, but also giving them preference on how they are presenting information is just as vital. Both successful and unsuccessful non-at risk students described these parts of differentiated instruction without knowing the terminology.

Successful non-at-risk students also described concepts of differentiation without ever stating the concept. The idea of assessing learners to evaluate their current understanding of a topic is one of the major concepts of differentiation. Tomlinson (2003) advocated that the assessing of each topic is important because it facilitates grouping that is flexible and not fixed. Talia stated that Mrs. D was a great teacher because she went “at our own pace.” Bryson talked about being in a math group in Mrs. B’s class that offered, “Very hard logic problems.” He also discussed working in math groups in Ms. T’s class as being fun. Though Bryson is very bright, the teachers he believes are exemplary are the ones who best meet his needs by challenging him with more difficult lessons. Notably, Tyler opined that a bad teacher is one that does not “help us and just teaches the whole classroom.”

At-risk students also illustrated the importance of differentiation in their interview responses. Amelia stated that Mr. S helped her with reading because of the grouping of students. Even though Amelia was in fourth grade at the time, Mr. S still assessed how students read and grouped them accordingly. Amelia asserted that her
reading group, “...helped me out with my reading.” Mr. S’ reading groups change throughout the year as he regularly assesses student fluency and comprehension and adjusts the reading groups accordingly. Tyson also described differentiation beautifully in the area of Language Arts. He stated that his favorite teacher “would pick topics to write about and whatever level you were on she would work from that level to make you better. She just wouldn’t pick a level for the entire class. She would pick a level just for you.” Cheyenne also mentioned spelling groups helping her with her lessons. She responded that, “Mr. A helped with my spelling, we were in groups, and he also had words hanging all over the wall.” If differentiation were performed regularly with these students, they might achieve more academically. Unfortunately, they were only able to name one teacher who taught using this approach.

For successful at-risk learners, the prescription approach of direction was equally important. Benet stated one of her favorite teachers would differentiate math instruction: “Mrs. L gave me harder stuff. Sometimes in math it’s the same stuff over and over again. I got better at math because it was stuff on my level.” Mrs. L, would also help her through one on one instruction, “I do better one on one. She would help me reach my goal.” According to Benet, Mrs. L makes each student write down a goal in the beginning of the year, and keeps on coming back and reminding students of their individual goals. Additionally, Benet stated that Mrs. L., “would really explain it to me... Some teachers don’t have enough time and I don’t get it.” Sam concurred and reported he dislikes it when a teacher “talks and you can’t understand it because they don’t put a lot of detail in it.” A focus of differentiation is that a student should master material
before the teacher teaches something new. The students that completely understand
the concept move on, and students that need to learn it, will try to learn using a new
strategy (Wellman and Lipton, 2003).

Some teachers move through curriculum too quickly to ensure that it is taught
before standardized testing and the participants picked up on this issue. The student
participants favored teachers that took the appropriate time to carefully explain lessons
in the classroom. Lyle stated that one of his favorite teachers, “...really explained
things...She gave us examples and told us other ways to do things.” Sam also
mentioned the idea that a good teacher, “shows how to things in different ways.”
When I asked Sam to provide an example, he responded that, “Mr. A. would act things
out.” In this case, Sam knows that acting things out helps him gain a better
understanding of topics. Lyle also derived how the visual representation of concepts
helped him understand topics, noting the posters around the room that the teacher
referred to when teaching adjectives and new vocabulary words. Lyle also liked the
model he needed to make of the plant and animal cells. Lyle further mentioned that
when a teacher teaches things, “step by step’ it is helpful.” Other participants also
mentioned that the effective and best teachers “give a lot of detail” and “didn’t go too
fast.”

Summary. In summary, each group of participants found differentiation is an
important strategy for teachers to employ in the classroom. The non at-risk students
mentioned that having choice on topics and how to present information was valuable.
Meeting each student based on their current proficiency on a topic was important to
successful non at-risk students, as well as for the successful and non successful at-risk students. Successful at-risk students also desire teachers who will present information in a multitude of ways, whether by kinesthetic, visual, or auditory.

The Comedian

Humor was a powerful theme that emerged from the interviews with the participants in this study. A comedian can capture an audience and make them laugh. Students want teachers to behave in the same manner. Who would not want to come to school or a job and laugh? Laughter is universal and helps people bond together because everyone enjoys comedy. Comedians also shed light on their own lives and mock themselves in many of their acts. Students in this study responded favorably to this type of self-deprecating humor. The student participants mentioned that they enjoyed humor in the classroom in which the teacher revealed a more personable side of themselves and were not afraid to mock themselves in front of the class.

According to successful non at-risk students, being funny and capturing the attention of students with humor is a vital trait shared by their favorite teachers. Bryson stated that two of his favorite teachers, “well, they both had a really good sense of humor.” “Funny” was a commonly cited characteristic of favorite teachers. Tyler described how his 6th grade teacher, Mr. F, conducted an experiment on maggots and reaction of the maggots in ginger ale. According to Tyler, in front of the entire class, “Mr. F took the maggot and dropped it in ginger ale and the ginger ale bubbled, he ate them.” According to Tyler, the class looked on in horror and shock when Mr. F consumed the maggot. Later Mr. F explained to the class that the maggot was actually a
 raisin. Talia said she remembers her favorite teacher’s “bad jokes. They were so bad that the whole class laughed. They were really sarcastic.”

For unsuccessful non at-risk learners, humor was equally important. Samira stated that her favorite teacher, “liked to joke a lot.” Brittany also mentioned how her favorite teacher was funny. When asked to provide an example, she responded that the teacher, “took another teacher’s Steelers football and hid it in their classroom. The class then wrote a random note to the class whom they had taken it from.” When I asked the teacher about his Steelers football being held for ransom, he stated that the humorous episode went even further. His class took the other teacher’s rocking chair and hid it in the assistant principal’s closet. Though both teachers are good friends, they both agreed that their classrooms very much enjoyed when they played tricks on each other. Both teachers insisted, however, that they did not “lose instructional time on these items,” as a lot of the pranks were performed during recess or after school. Having teachers create a fun environment definitely makes class memorable and exciting for students.

Fun environments are also created when teachers read books in character, according to students who are successful and at-risk. Lyle mentioned how he really enjoyed how Mrs. F. “read in character.” Additionally, Sam mentioned how he enjoyed that Mrs. M., his favorite teacher, loved reading books and “it didn’t matter if the books didn’t have pictures, because she would read in funny voices.” The researcher had the opportunity to observe read aloud time with this particular teacher and it was amazing how her voice inflection changed as well as how animated she became during the
readings. Though the book she read, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, is a very humorous book, the teacher acted out the different roles and dialogue perfectly. Benet also discussed how much she enjoyed poetry in her third grade class taught by Mr. S. When I went to observe the poetry readings, the class would work together to help with fluency and vocabulary. Moreover, I witnessed hilarious moments when the teacher would recite the poem in a country twang, or sing to the students in a terrible singing voice, and the students would plead for him to stop. Thus, all of the successful at-risk students believed that having a sense of humor was something their most memorable and exciting teachers had in common.

Unsuccessful at-risk learners also mentioned the hilariety of their beloved teachers. Tyson stated that his favorite teacher liked to joke a lot and Amelia added that her favorite teacher was funny, weird, and, “would make the class laugh.” As an aside, Amelia told me she has more disciplinary problems now in 6th grade, however, she did not have any problems with her prior humorous teacher. Cheyenne said her favorite teacher, Mrs. R, was, “crazy, goofy, kinda funny.” When I observed Mrs. R, she is stern, however, she does joke around in a sarcastic manner. For example, Mrs. R will say things like, “I was a contestant on American Idol” and the students will laugh and realize she is just joking. Cheyenne also mentioned that if she were a teacher she “would make it funny and tell funny stories while we were learning.”

According to Arnon and Reichel (2007), the personality of a teacher may vary in importance depending on the age of the student. However, the authors state, “it appears that younger pupils tend to perceive the personality of the teacher as a
dominant attribute of a good teacher, while college students tend to respect the knowledge component” (p. 36). Perhaps the age of the student impacts what they believe is important in an ideal teacher, but certainly among 6th graders, a personable teacher with a good sense of humor are important attributes for a successful teacher to possess. The idea of humor as being a pertinent trait to students is discussed in Spencer and Boon’s research. Though it may be noted that the participants in the study made a distinction that they were not made fun of but rather the environment was comfortable and the teacher was personable to the students. The authors discuss the importance under the heading of teacher student relationships. Though the two are interrelated in a way, the teachers that were described by the students in this study presented topics and content in a way that was comedic, either in the voices they used to read certain characters or in the jokes they made to the classroom during instruction.

**Summary.** In conclusion, all of the participants enjoy a teacher who can laugh, make jokes, and sing to their students. The positive energy that these teachers exude in the classroom is clearly contagious with their students. Quite simply, the participants really enjoyed learning from teachers who are happy and who work to create a friendly classroom environment.

**The Nurturer**

_The Nurturer_, like a mother, takes care and protects their offspring. One might think of a nurse who will spend time with the patient and make them feel better through patience and understanding. Students who participated in this study desired a teacher to be nurturing in varying degrees. Many of the culturally relevant teaching
ideas discussed by the students are described in the theme of caring discussed in this section.

For the successful non at-risk students, the word caring was not articulated during the interviews. Caring was illustrated when the students said they preferred a teacher not to yell. Students in this category would describe a teacher who was, “nice to all of us and rarely yelled.” Once again, equity ruled as the idea of a teacher being fair to the entire classroom and not just a select group of students was important to these students. Additionally, students in this category mentioned they liked it when the teachers would drive them to give their best efforts. Tyler mentions how Mr. S, “pushed me and gave me a look so I wouldn’t stop working.” “The look” was also mentioned by Grayson in his interview. He noted that, “the teacher could have a very stern look on you that sort of made you want to improve your work.” Students did not want their teachers to just accept their work even though it was above average. The successful non at-risk students consistently approved of teachers who continuously push them to reach their fullest potential.

Teachers with high levels of motivation skills were not mentioned by the unsuccessful non at-risk category. These students mentioned, however, that they did not like teachers who yelled at their students a great deal. These students further noted that if they were a teacher, they would not scream at students and Daniel said he would give those treats at the end of the week. Caring and nurturing were not powerful themes mentioned among these participants.
Though caring was not mentioned as a powerful theme by these non at-risk subjects, additional probing or a questionnaire may have revealed different responses and, possibly, a preference as a trait for their favorite teachers to possess. However, nurturing attributes such as spending extra time with a student or building an especially close teacher-student relationship were not mentioned as important attributes of a teacher by the non at-risk group.

Caring is a very important attribute among the at-risk group of subjects. All of the students describe exemplary teachers as “caring.” Caring was demonstrated in a multitude of ways by the at-risk group of students.

Successful at-risk learners described their favorite teachers as those who spent extra time with their students. Lyle stated that Mrs. D, “would sometimes eat lunch with us.” Tyler mentioned how Mr. S would, “play soccer with us at recess.” When I spoke with Mr. S, I discovered that he played soccer in high school and he understood the importance of exercise during recess. Mr. S stated, “it helps me get to know the kids on a different setting.” He went on to assert that playing soccer with the students helps in building a relationship with students and in creating a controlled classroom environment, “because the kids know I care about them.”

Sam stated that his favorite teacher “cared about students.” When I asked him how he displayed this attribute, Sam responded, “He would stay in at recess to help me.” The attribute of a teacher spending extra time with students by staying inside at recess was also discussed by Lyle: “She would stay in at recess and she did a good job at helping us with our (math) problems.” Benet discussed a time when her grandma was
sick and she remembers fondly when her teacher talked to her at recess about her grandma. Being a friend and caring were also described as qualities that were important to Benet.

Comforting was also deemed an important attribute by the unsuccessful at-risk students. Tyson stated that his favorite teacher, “would say something when we were mad or sad, she would comfort when something was wrong.” Caring was also shown when a teacher would play kickball or soccer at recess with the students. Tyson said Mrs. R, “was really good at kickball and would play at recess with us.” Also, when I asked Amelia how her favorite teacher showed she cared she responded, “like on Friday she would shake your hand and spin you around and all the excess brain would come off that you didn’t need over the weekend. She also was with us during her lunch - she was with us all day except for specials.”

Student-teacher relationships are a strong component of culturally relevant teaching practices (Villegas 2002, Ladson-Billings 1994, Ferguson, 2004). Caring teachers were also found to be crucial in the study conducted by Howard (Howard, 2001). In his study, students indicated that a teacher promoting a family-like atmosphere was very favorable. In this study, the students believed teachers to be caring if they spent extra time with them and showed an interest in them outside the classroom. Cheyenne remembered how her second grade teacher had her class over to her home after a field trip. The student-teacher relationship is important to many students (Spencer & Boon). However, in this study the theme emerged for the at-risk students and not for the non at-risk subjects. The at-risk students in this study valued
the extra time a teacher spent with the class to get to know the students better and for the students to get to learn about their teacher as well.

**Drawings**

The drawings were completed by students for the researcher to examine. As discussed in the methodology chapter, Burns and Kaufman report that children can, at times, express themselves better with drawings than with speech. The researcher used the drawings as a tool to substantiate what was stated in the interviews. The following provide examples of what some of the students drew.

Almost all the drawings substantiated all of the researcher’s findings and provide more evidence of the skills that a teacher needs to possess in order to be thought of as exemplary according to students. The idea of hands-on learning was presented in almost all the student sketches. Students were either building or experimenting with objects in their drawings which included drawings of students making circuit boards or lifting off a rocket.

Even when students were portraying hands-on activities in their drawings, technology was present in at least half of them. Computers and the interactive white boards were the only types of technology students represented. Interestingly, the interactive white board was always used in a small group or one on one setting in the drawings. This illustrates that the student participants desire technology used in cooperative activities. Although students who were at-risk did not stress technology at all during their interviews, one student did draw an interactive white board in their drawing. Also, the theme of fairness, which was an undeniable theme that emerged in
the interviews, was a difficult theme to be determined by the researcher in the student drawings.

Though it was difficult for the researcher to determine where equity was present in student drawings, comedy was prevalent. Teachers singing silly songs in the drawings or performing experiments that were just funny, rather than scientific, were drawn by some of the participants. Other student drawings represented student-centered classrooms. For example, Benet’s sketch had students seated in their classroom with voice boxes. She stated that the picture represents students asking questions to another student presenting a project in the front of the class. There was no teacher drawn in the room. Her drawing substantiated the idea that projects are something she values and that the room is student centered. When asked what the project was about, it was an inventor that the Benet chose to study for an International Baccalaureate unit. The idea of choice is important in differentiated instruction. The concept of caring was a theme that Chayanne and Tyler illustrated in their drawings with voice boxes that had teachers praising students. Many of the drawings were depicting a scene the students discussed during their interviews.
Table 2

Examples of At-Risk and Non At-Risk Student’s Drawings by Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Non At-Risk Students’ Drawings</th>
<th>At-Risk Students’ Drawings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hands-On Learning</strong></td>
<td>Students working on building an experiment with Mentos and Coke</td>
<td>Student working on a project the title of the drawing provided by the student states <em>Hands On</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technology</strong></td>
<td>A students drew a teacher and students writing math problems on a Smart Board</td>
<td>Teacher working on a Smart Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
<td>Not supported in drawings</td>
<td>Not supported by drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differentiated Instruction</strong></td>
<td>Teacher standing next to student who is working on a dinosaur paper. A topic he chooses to write about.</td>
<td>Teacher standing behind a student who is writing her individualized spelling words down a piece of paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humor</strong></td>
<td>Teacher dropping raisins in ginger ale and telling the students they are maggots. Student reported the teacher then ate the “maggot”</td>
<td>Teacher reading a story to a group of students. Student told researcher the story was read in a “funny voice.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring</strong></td>
<td>Teachers working with students during recess.</td>
<td>Teachers working one on one with a student. Teachers giving students praise in voice box stating “you got it”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data analysis revealed six broad categories that were present in the students’ descriptions of their exemplary teacher. Table III provides a visual description of these categories. Students in all the categories conveyed that the best lessons used materials that related to the real world and involved inquiry. Students also agreed that a teacher must be fair and equitable in the classroom. Consequences should be different and not administered to the entire class for the transgressions of a few. Differentiation also needs to occur in the area of instruction. Students want a step-by-step clear understanding on how to learn material and not feel rushed by the teacher. Teachers need to move through the lessons at the students’ pace and provide the students choice in their lessons. Students also prefer a teacher who creates a comfortable environment where students and teachers are allowed to laugh. Lastly, non at-risk students voiced that technology was a tool that helped them gain understanding of concepts, while at-risk students did not indicate that technology was particularly useful. The student teacher relationship was also noted of high importance among the at-risk participants, while not described by the non at-risk participants as critical.

Chapter V will address the implications for teachers, school administrators, and university teacher preparatory programs of the results of student perceptions of exemplary teachers presented here. Students need a voice and to have an ownership in their education, as ultimately it belongs to them. Students in this study voiced that the ideal teachers use hands-on materials, technology, and differentiated instruction. Moreover, their ideal teachers were fair and amusing.
Chapter V

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a brief summary of the research study and a discussion of the findings as they relate to the theoretical and conceptual framework shaping the research. The summary and discussion are followed by remarks on current and future practices at Winslow Elementary School. In addition, the purpose of this chapter is to make recommendations to administrators and university as to what training and current teaching practices are needed in order to facilitate student success, as well as to highlight issues that may arise to make future practices more difficult, and how to effectively navigate through these problem areas. Lastly, the chapter concludes with the limitations of research and gives recommendations for future study.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding about students’ perceptions of exemplary teachers. The study investigated which teachers were deemed “successful” in the minds of both at-risk and non at-risk students. More specifically, the two groups of students were compared in their responses. The following questions guided this study:
1. How do non at-risk and successful students in the classroom describe exemplary teaching?

2. How do non at-risk and unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?

3. How do at-risk successful students describe exemplary teaching?

4. How do at-risk unsuccessful students describe exemplary teaching?

The answers to the research questions address the problem statement, that poor teachers are contributing to the achievement gap that exists in our nation’s educational system. A successful teacher can make an enormous impact enhancing student achievement. On the other hand, inappropriate teaching strategies are hindering the true potential of at-risk students (Ferguson, 2002). Although a great deal of research focuses on the opinions of teachers as to what are the most successful teaching strategies, the opinions of the students themselves, as stakeholders in their education, must be examined as well (Mitra, 2008).

The students in this study were both African-American and Caucasian and were from economically diverse households. The author interviews participants were interviewed and observed teachers. Some of the teachers mentioned in the interviews were subjected to follow up interviews to inquire about certain details on classroom lessons discussed. The qualitative research method of case study was employed because case study offers a vividly rich description of bounded phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). The phenomena in this case were the 6th grade students at Winslow Elementary School. The case study called for a vivid description of the participants as well as the
context, in order to find out what is, “inside their heads” (Merriam 2002). I asked the students questions which addressed their beliefs of how they define successful teachers.

After analyzing the interviews and gaining clarity about the students’ favorite teachers through classroom observations and filed notes, certain themes of personal characteristics and teaching practices emerged. The following themes were previously discussed in detail in chapter four, and are briefly summarized here:

**Hands-on.** All students in each category believed that hands-on, inquiry based, and project based lessons were the ones that they vividly remembered and enjoyed participating in. During the interviews, students used the term, “hands-on” to describe their most treasured teachers. This is somewhat unusual given the fact that hands-on instruction is not always utilized for all groups of students. Often, at-risk students are taught utilizing direct instruction (Kozal, 2005). Also, even though very intelligent students performed well in the classroom, they also stated that there was value in using hands-on materials during their lessons.

**Technology.** Students described technology as being an important ingredient for them to attain knowledge. However, not all of the students in this study placed equal importance on technology. Non at-risk students cited technology in the classroom as an important tool and described it as being utilized during their favorite learning experiences. Moreover, students liked when technology was used in a constructivist manner. For example, the students gave more favorable responses to teachers who had students manipulate objects on the Smart Board in order to solve a problem, rather
than simply reading PowerPoint presentations to the students. Additionally, students that drew a Smart Board in their drawings showed a teacher and a student working on the Smart Board together. The students also cited technology as a tool that facilitated discussion when used in a small group setting. Interestingly, at-risk students did not describe technology as being an important tool when they were discussing their favorite teachers.

**Equity.** Both at-risk and non at-risk students describe their favorite teachers as being fair and equitable. According to students, one of their least favorite strategies from a teacher is when an entire group gets penalized when a single or a only a few students participated in making an inappropriate choice. Students liked it when a teacher utilizes differentiation management on a case-by-case basis and does not simply scream at everyone for another student’s poor choices.

**Differentiation.** Both at-risk and non at-risk students felt that their most exemplary teachers utilized differentiated instruction. For the non-at-risk students, having choice on the subject area was important and meaningful. For the at-risk students, having teachers not rush through concepts and thoroughly explaining each concept and moving at the child’s pace was mentioned as being something their favorite teachers accomplished. Tomlinson (2003) believes that student centered instruction is a key element of differentiated instruction. Teachers must now where learners are and then present and organize the information so the individual learner and grow.
Humor. All students who participated in the study described their best teachers as having a sense of humor. Non at-risk students described their favorite teachers using humor by reading aloud in funny voices or singing humorous songs to the class. At-risk students were equally enthusiastic about teachers who provided humor during instructional time, in terms of being sarcastic and adding enthusiasm to the classroom. In conclusion, all the participants in the study discussed their favorite teachers as having a sense of humor.

Caring. The word “caring” was mentioned by all of the at-risk participants. At-risk students described their favorite teachers as caring because they spent extra time getting to know them personally either through playing soccer with them, eating lunch, staying after school, or staying in during recess to assist them with their homework. Non-at-risk students liked teachers who pushed them to perform well. However, the nurturing component was not as prevalent in their responses. The theme of caring correlates well with Ladson-Billings (1994) in describing culturally relevant teaching practices. Ogbu (2003) reiterated this idea when he states that students “are more concerned with how...teachers care for them than with teachers’ expertise or knowledge” (p.53).

Students believe it is important that their teachers care about their education (Gay, 2000). At times, teachers simply want to turn to a formula to help student make better behavior choice or to motivate them to turn in more homework. However, there is no magic formula to help students become better learners. Yet, a teacher who demonstrates a caring attitude towards their students appears to have a better chance
to motivate them to succeed in the classroom. As soon as the student senses that their
teacher does not care, the student may start to lose his or her motivation and desire to
learn. Studies have demonstrated that student motivation increases when they are
trying to please students’ teacher (Nieto, 2003). Therefore, it follows that students who
appreciate a caring teacher will increase their motivation to learn in the classroom.

All of the themes emerged from listening to the voice of the students in the
interviews. This relates well with the theoretical perspective of constructivism. In order
to teach using the constructivist approach, teachers must initially listen to students and
their current view and understanding of concepts in order to help them gain full
understanding (Gordon, 2008). Currently, school boards, administrators, and teachers
have the largest voice in the educational community. However, as reflected in this
research study, students can offer some insightful thoughts on effective classroom
instruction.

Current Practices and Implications for Administrators at Winslow Elementary

In regard to the themes that emerged during this study, Winslow Elementary
does provide examples of hands-on instruction, the use of technology in the classroom,
equity, differentiation, and the qualities of humor and a caring nature among the
teachers. However, upon examination, there are gaps in these areas that should be
addressed by the staff.

Teachers at Winslow are currently utilizing some hands-on, inquiry-based
lessons. As a current administrator in the building, I have the luxury of observing
teachers daily by performing walkthroughs or just simply observing classrooms. One of
the biggest obstacles for Winslow is the setting in which the hands-on learning is occurring. By in large, hands-on instruction is only taking place within the school’s honors program. For example, in the honors language arts program this past year, students were learning about the Silk Road. As such, one of the in-class activities they were able to perform was the bartering of goods among each other as they do along the Silk Road. Additionally, in the honors math program, students are using authentic problems and solving them in groups. Students are using manipulatives to reach their understanding of these problems. Also, in the science lab, the students are able to perform many hands-on experiments. For example, when learning about the path of light the students have an opportunity to use lasers in groups to discover how light actually travels.

The difficulty is that hands-on learning opportunities are not being accessed by all of the students at Winslow. First, projects such as the Silk Road should be occurring in all classrooms and should not be limited to the honors program. Also, in our other Language Arts classes, we recently purchased a basal program for the teachers to use. Though the program has some wonderful technological and reading resources for the teachers, the teachers feel overwhelmed by the content of the program. The program has too much for the teachers to cover they do not have time to implement authentic lessons. Moreover, due to time constraints, when implementing the new reading program, teachers will not have ample time to complete projects. These projects take time and, unfortunately, time is limited as the Language Arts teachers currently only have a fifty seven minute program.
In math, some of the rich problems solving opportunities were taken away from the regular math curriculum due to the at-risk students having deficiencies with their basic math skills. Since many of these at-risk students are struggling, the teachers at Winslow feel the need to focus instruction on basic math facts and basic decoding skills. As with the language arts classrooms, time is a big obstacle. In science labs, the students only attend every two weeks. As such, the great hands-on projects that occur in the science lab such as dissecting pig eyes and working with lasers occur infrequently. It is best for hands-on lessons to be used in all subject areas and with all students in order to have the greatest impact.

The question becomes how to help the building incorporate more hands-on, inquiry-based lessons. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program that is beginning to be implemented in the school district will help facilitate more discussion among administrators and staff on effective instruction techniques. In order to be accepted into the IB program, teachers need to create lesson plans that answer an essential question. The IB program seeks lessons that are authentic and inquiry based.

The International Baccalaureate program will assist in building hands-on instruction but additional help is necessary. The administrators in the building must clearly articulate to the teachers that hands-on lessons are not optional, but rather are essential and should be used frequently. Manipulatives should be ordered and presenters should be invited to the school to demonstrate to the staff how to use them in lessons. Some of these steps have recently occurred as a result of the changes made by a new principal in the building. For example, this past year, the new principal at
Winslow had teachers attend a two day workshop that discussed hands-on problem solving for math students. At the workshop, the presenter discussed the importance of having stations with manipulatives. As a result, the teachers are using the stations more frequently in their lessons and have picked up additional practice pointers to use in the classroom.

Technology use in the classroom is currently increasing in Winslow Elementary School. The current principal has ensured that all classrooms have the latest classroom technology including a Smart Board and an Elmo. Additionally, the principal of Winslow has ordered more computers for the building.

An Elmo is a sophisticated overhead projector which allows a teacher to place a sheet of paper on the device and then magnify it to a screen and show it to the entire class. Teachers have become comfortable using the Elmo and use in their daily lessons. The Elmo also provides an opportunity for students to speak more freely in class since they are able to demonstrate their work using the Elmo and explain how they derived an answer to a particular problem.

The Smart Board is only used by only a handful of teachers during their lessons. Typically, a teacher at Winslow will either use a short video clip to the class to introduce a lesson or a game like Jeopardy is played before a test on the Smart Board. This study illustrates that students thought technology was used effectively when used in small group setting, which substantiates much of the research which states that the use of technology in the classroom assists students (Becker, 2000, Cuban, 2001).
An individualized math program called Success Maker is also utilized by teachers at Winslow. Also, a couple of new programs were implemented this year including a web based individualized math program entitled *Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces* (Aleks). Aleks uses adaptive questioning to determine the strengths and weakness of student math skills. This year, some of the special education students started using *Read 180*, which is an interactive program to help students with literacy development in particular phonics skills. *Reading plus* is another web based tool assessment and learning system that determines what a student knows and doesn't know in reading.

Although only the non at-risk students in this study liked technology during their lessons, it is this author’s opinion that more at-risk students would note their approval of technology if teachers used it more interactively with at-risk students rather than only during a whole group instruction. In order to have teachers use technology more as a manipulative, which was deemed integral for the at-risk students in this study, teachers will require additional professional development to guide their efforts. Fortunately, as a current administrator who had a Smart Board for all three years in my classroom, this author assisted teachers during common planning time by demonstrating different methods to use the whiteboard in their classrooms, including strategies on how to research web based lessons and to allow students to manipulate material on the Smart Board. In fact, this author has given two in-service presentations to the Winslow teachers demonstrating how to integrate the interactive Smart Boards into the classroom learning environment. However, further intervention is required
such as mandating that the Smart Boards be used in small group settings. Thereafter, administrators must perform walkthroughs to check to see if teachers are using the Smart Boards in the correct manner.

Students in the study indicated that they do not like it when their teacher penalizes the entire class for the mistakes of a few. This practice of purposeful behavior management is seen in many classrooms. For examples, some of the teachers use the marble system. In the marble system, a teacher will punish the class by removing a marble when an individual student does something wrong. However, when students make positive choices such as lining up quickly and silently, the teacher adds marbles. The teachers who use this system were some of the same teachers described as exemplary by the students in the study, so these management techniques are not always detrimental. However, individual systems need to be put in place as well. Many teachers do incorporate both individual and whole group systems and it’s typically during times of teacher frustration that a whole group becomes penalized for the acts of a few. Currently at Winslow, a climate survey was completed that attempted to demonstrate when teachers become frustrated. Moreover, committees were formed to help maintain and support the positive climate of the school.

At a building level, there is differentiation in terms of student placement at Winslow Elementary School. Students that score in the top five percent on a standardized norm referenced test are placed in an enriched program. The enriched program is considered an honors program in which students are placed based upon
ability. Though differentiation is more than ability grouping, students are grouped in certain classes based upon their skill level.

Differentiated instruction is also practiced within the individual classrooms of Winslow Elementary School. As an example, special education students usually receive differentiated instruction in terms of having less work to complete or by working in small groups with the teacher in order to gain better understanding of topics. A couple of the teachers differentiate instruction well by assessing students each week on a concept and grouping the students by their readiness level. These teachers then provide students with activities that support and help them grow based upon their current level. However, many classrooms in Winslow still provide the same instruction for all the students and, thus, must increase their commitment to differentiated instruction.

In reading, classroom instruction has not been differentiated effectively at Winslow Elementary School. The students in the class typically all read the same book and complete the same assignments. In order for reading instruction to be more effective, students should be assessed on their reading levels. Thereafter, reading instruction should align with students’ current needs. Winslow has currently spent thousands of dollars on a new literacy program. Though textbooks and a packaged program did not seem ideal to me at first, there are many resources in the program that can make differentiation easier for teacher to implement. Leveled readers and guided reading lessons facilitate teachers to have students work in groups based upon their
readiness level. While this is a positive development, the reading program nonetheless has little space for hands-on activities.

Student choice is another area of differentiation. This area is illustrated within a project called, Math Fair, which is completed by the students in Winslow’s enriched program. The project commences with the students choosing a topic of their choice to study in-depth and present to the class. Some teachers allow students to write reports on a topic of their own choice; however, student choice is not abundant in the school. In order to improve in this area, professional development opportunities, guest speakers, and videos will have to be shown to the staff. Aspects of the enriched program that utilize differentiated instruction could be expanded to all students in the school.

There are a handful of teachers who add humor during their lessons or during the school day. Interestingly, a couple of these teachers are the most requested by students. Parents report that their children literally run to these classes every day. The question becomes, how can you make teachers more humorous in their classrooms? The current principal is a good role model in this regard. For example, he will issue humorous reports on the school loud speaker, such as, “there is no school tomorrow” when the next day is, in fact, a Saturday; or, “there is an unidentified object in the sky, go outside and play” when it was the first sunny day for a while in Cleveland. His laid back, but serious, demeanor can transpire throughout the building. Many teachers praise his ability to be positive.

Implementing humor into classroom lessons would appear to be challenging. Although teachers in the building can follow the lead of its leader, it may be difficult to
change a person’s basic demeanor. Placing articles in individual teacher’s mailboxes citing research that suggests that adding humor in the classroom can be beneficial. However, it will be difficult to implement the increased use of humor in lesson plans in the entire building. As such, it might be beneficial for the students themselves to voice their opinions of humor to our staff.

Many teachers at Winslow truly care about the education and welfare of their students. For example, many of them will stay after school or inside at recess to help students with homework. They also do a nice job of communicating to individual parents about strengths and weaknesses of a child. Students do appreciate the efforts of the teachers by staying after school with the teachers and expressing their appreciation for these after school opportunities.

However caring the teachers appear, an element that appears to be missing is a true understanding of the home lives of the children at Winslow Elementary School. There is simply too much concentration on homework at Winslow. A special education teacher reported that even though she stays after school with a special education child, as soon as the child gets home, nothing gets done. Unfortunately, this particular special education child has had to watch her mother get physically abused by her boyfriend the same year. It appears to be unfair to students in these types of familial situations to be forced to go home and complete assignments. Additionally, many students at Winslow go home to an empty home. The current principal of Winslow wants me to conduct home visits. In the school system we have had professional development with Ruby Payne. Although her research now has been discredited, her insights about the home
life of at-risk students can help teachers become more empathetic and caring towards the entire student population that we serve. Caring needs to be articulated through the leaders in the building, including teachers and administrators. At times, it is readily apparent to this author that it is difficult for teachers to remember all the obstacles students face on a day to day basis and how these obstacles can disrupt a student’s learning. Although it is important to have high expectations for students, empathy is necessary. (Neito, 2004; Gay, 2000).

High expectations for staff are equally important. A recent strategic plan in the district wants buildings to develop a positive behavior plan also known as PBS. This plan not only makes students mindful of what behavior looks like in common areas such as the cafeteria and hallways, but also asks teachers to develop a plan of what appropriate behaviors look like in these areas. The district not only is asking students to be cognizant of how they behave, but is also expecting the same of its employees as well.

For professional development, clear constant vision of the leaders will make it possible for themes to be successfully implemented in the building. Again, because of the number of themes, implementation seems difficult. However, with the new implement of the International Baccalaureate system, many of the themes can be tied to the implementation of the program. For example, hands-on, inquiry based lessons are required for approval by the International Baccalaureate program. Additionally, there are technology components to IB as well. IB schools also require students to learn and understand what are called learner profiles. These include traits such as open-minded, inquirer, caring, and principled. As the teachers have to teach these traits to
children, it helps remind them to exude these traits as well. Time is such an issue for student and teacher learning. The IB program can help initiate some of the changes by putting many of themes together rather than compartmentalizing them. If administrators at Winslow talk to their staff about all the themes presented in this date, the staff would become overwhelmed. However, if the themes are immersed into the current IB program, it might not seem so overloading.

Most importantly, a cultural shift in learning how to make changes will positively impact Winslow Elementary or any school. This study is about the student voice. Student voice should be taken into consideration in meetings and discussions among staff on how to make schools a more successful place for students to learn. For teacher evaluations, one optional piece is to have students answer a questionnaire. Additionally, students in the Winslow district were asked to fill out a climate survey about their school. The results of this survey will be presented to staff in the upcoming months.

The aforementioned techniques are a beginning; however, they are not enough to fully implement student voice. Teachers and principals should ask students for their input more often. They will feel more ownership and ultimately have greater urgency to learn and respect the place where they are learning. Committees should include some students. Additionally, parts of faculty meetings should include students. The current principal has had students come in to meetings to show staff a new way to teach particular math concepts. He basically teaches the students in front of the staff. Teachers were also able to ask students what they liked or disliked about the teaching
approach. We have also included students in meetings with new families discussing what they liked about Woodbury. Learning their insights, but also asking for recommendations, could provide great insight and ultimately help schools.

**Implication for Teachers and Administrators**

The implications for this research can go beyond the scope of Winslow Elementary School. Overall, the result of this study does imply that the personal qualities of teachers are important to the attitudes of students towards teachers. The idea that a teacher’s identities are entrenched in their students is supported by Nieto (2003). As described in chapter four, teachers need to encompass a variety of different skills in order to be exemplary in the eyes of their students. Teacher education programs should incorporate course work in the following disciplines:

**Carpentry.** Teachers in all education programs should have to implement lessons that incorporate manipulatives that will help children gain better understanding of the concepts being learned. Of course, many elementary teachers have access to and use tools to help children. But in the later grades, this practice becomes obsolete. Except for the science experiments in the upper grades, many teacher education programs do not emphasize the necessity for using hands-on materials with middle or higher school students. Materials should be given to the aspiring teachers and it should be mandated that they use them in their instruction at all grade levels.

**Political science.** In order to become fair and equitable like a judge, preserve teachers will have to study and learn that this is important when managing and teaching a classroom. In this author’s previous student teaching and preservice teaching
experiences, classroom management was not explicitly taught. Classes should include having teachers read studies on how excellent teachers display fairness to students as well as specific management techniques on how to structure a classroom that promotes fairness. Many students in this study expressed dislike when the whole class receives a consequence for the mistakes of a few. The one-size-fits-all approach for classroom managements is not deemed favorable by many students.

**Pre-med.** The idea of being able to prescribe a specific treatment to individual students was a powerful theme from all the participants. However, as a formal classroom instructor, this author understands that this can be an arduous task. Teacher education programs need not only to express the importance of differentiation, but to provide concrete examples of how it looks among different grade level and subject areas. With inclusion becoming more popular in every school district around Ohio, teachers now more than ever need to teach to the individual student rather than the give the same material to the entire class. Teacher education programs need to show teachers on how to group students effectively and how to teach the same concept using a variety of approaches since each learner equates knowledge differently. Research in differentiation is helping teachers plan and create lessons that will help all students learn to their potential (Tomlinson, 2003).

**Communications.** How do you teach a rising educator to become more humorous in the classroom? Although it may prove impossible to change an educator’s personality, it is important to communicate to teachers that they do not have to be an alien to their students. Teachers should be told they can show their strengths and
weakness in the classroom and become more humanlike to their students, rather than inaccessible and stern. Students might relate more to teachers that are more genuine and authentic.

**Nursing.** Students in education programs also need to be taught the importance of how to becoming nurturing and caring like a nurse. Although skeptics might state that teachers do not know their content well enough, this author disagrees. Students, especially those who are labeled at-risk, will not listen or care about the content being taught if they think the teachers don’t like or care about them. It is not the content knowledge that teachers are lacking but the lack of empathy. Many teacher education programs have a multicultural education class, but many lack the sensitivity component that is necessary for this class to be useful. A more comprehensive multicultural education program is necessary, one that has teachers identify their beliefs and has them immersed in racially and economically diverse schools. To be considered for a teacher education program, a screening interview could also be administered to see if teachers have the desirable traits. Ferguson (2004) attests that teachers play a central role in how African-American students feel about their academic success. Education programs should make it more difficult for teachers to enter. In top performing nations, the acceptance rate is one applicant for every six to ten people (Tucker, 2011).

**Teaching.** Teaching is a craft that requires great skills, and students in this study recognize all the different jobs an exemplary teacher most perform in order to teach well. The true renaissance teacher needs to be proficient in many areas as shown by this dissertation. Although many teacher education programs last only a mere semester,
pre-service teachers should be required to be student teaching for an entire year. Many of the top ten educational nations have pre-service program raise the qualities of their teachers (Tucker, 2011). Finland and Singapore make each pre-service teacher work with a master teacher required for a year (Tucker, 2011). During this time, they should have to take the classes described above. Not only do teachers need to know the content, but they must transform into intellectuals who can clearly communicate the content using hands-on learning, technology, equity, detention interaction, humor, and empathy in their classrooms.

**Summary.** Administrators can also benefit from this study as well. During interviews, they can probe to see if teachers will be caring and will better understand that not all students come into the school with the same traits. Principals can assess if individuals are willing to learn the culture of the students and show how humor and empathy helps all students achieve. Administrators also need to examine if their non-tenured teachers are using the practices described in this research. If not, principals need to explain in detail what is expected and support them in their efforts to become more competent. School leaders must hold teachers highly accountable as well, and not grant tenure to teachers who are below the level of excellent. Administrators also need to make a commitment to model desirable behaviors and model what is necessary for a classroom to be successful. For example, staff meetings should be hands-on, technological, and be differentiated. Leaders can present in a way that is humorous without losing the content of the meeting.
Limitations and Future Research

Although this study cannot generalize how every student would describe their favorite teacher and teaching practices, the interviews of the students contained in this study suggest that students have remarkable insight on what works in a classroom. The differing ages of the students is a limitation of the study as some participants may not be able to distinguish between exemplary teaching and their favorite teachers. It is my opinion that many of the participants may have simply chosen their “favorite” teacher. However, because the teacher was their favorite, the researcher devised the students were open to learning many concepts the year they were with their favorite teacher. Because the participants were in the district since their first grade year, the participants had the ability to get to know the teachers they were describing. The teachers described in the study have outstanding reputations. Additionally, I was able to personally observe some of the teachers and I would describe many of them as exemplary as well. Though many of the students’ exemplary teachers were also their favorites due to their ability to use differentiation and create an outstanding environment for learning, the current testing climate in our educational system is forcing teachers to spend more time on skills and test preparation than what students deem as excellent teaching.

Another method to determine what students think is outstanding teaching is using a mixed method approach. Giving students a questionnaire or survey could help substantiate the findings of the interviews. Another limitation is the participants’ experiences. Some of the participants’ experiences and exposure to different teaching practices may have altered results. For example, if a student never had a teacher use
technology properly, they might not see the benefit of using technology in the classroom. Additionally, a quantitative study could identify which theme that emerged in this study was the most powerful to the student. For example, is the relationship with a teacher more critical than differentiation to the student?

Another limitation in the study was the lack of inclusion of students with disabilities in the study. A future study could compare special education students to non-special education students to examine the similarities and differences. Many schools across the nation are struggling to have students with disabilities meet adequately yearly progress (AYP) goals set by the state. Including special education students in a study could also provide insight on which types of teachers are best assisting these students in the classroom.

Additionally, the sample could include different grade levels of students. It might also be interesting to study the academic growth of students with a teacher they believed to be exemplary. Did they show more growth during the year where they had this teacher, or did their growth remain the same year after year regardless if they felt they had a great teacher or not. In a couple of interviews in which students expressed that they had sometimes made poor behavior choices at school, in the years that they had teachers they felt were great, their poor behavior choices subsided. An examination of student behavior could be examined from the years in which students felt they had excellent teachers with years they did not.
Conclusion

This research has reaffirmed many of this author’s theoretical beliefs of exemplary teaching. As an administrator, this author is now in position to take these findings and develop new methods of implementation. Although it is so easy to tell everyone what should be done to improve teachers and ultimately increase achievement, this author is in a position to help shape professional development activities and promote dialogue that relates to the findings of the research. Although funding, time, and teacher resistance may be roadblocks, many of the findings can be implemented. Modeling hands-on, technology, equity, differentiation, humor and culturally relevant pedagogy through my interactions with staff and students is integral. Listening to student voice to help shed light on curriculum and afterschool programs will be beneficial to both principals and teachers. Student voice can help narrow our focus and needs of our building and shed light on how personal characteristics and teaching skills can assist the achievement levels of all students. Teachers and administrators are fortunate to be able to work with students and build on their strengths using the tools and traits students themselves have described as valuable.
REFERENCES


Sunderman, G. L., & Orfield, G. (2007). Do states have the capacity to meet the NCLB mandates? *Phi Delta Kappan, 89*(2), 137-139.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview questions are designed to elicit information about students’ perceptions of quality teaching. Some questions came directly from the literature concerning students’ perceptions of exemplary teaching. After drafting the questions, I requested input from other teachers and qualitative researchers. Upon consideration of their input, the following final interview questions were composed:

1. Try to think of a two great teachers you have had. They don’t have to be current teachers
2. Describe the teachers in detail. Don’t only include physical characteristics, but their personality.
3. Why do you think the teacher was great?
4. What do you remember most about the teacher?
5. What did this great teacher do to help you understand?
6. Think about the most memorable in-class exercises that you thought were really great. What made these experiences memorable for you?
7. What type of activities was the class doing during this memorable and exciting experience?
8. What materials were used in the lesson? For example, were calculators, blocks, computers, books and/or cameras used in the lesson?
9. Describe, in detail, the classroom setting in which you think you learned a lot of important concepts.
10. If you were a going to be a good teacher, what would you do in your classroom?
11. What are some things you dislike from a teacher when you are trying to learn?
12. What was your relationship with the teacher from which you learned the most?
13. What did the teacher do to make you feel comfortable or to help build that relationship?
14. Draw a detailed picture of a time in a classroom where you felt you learned a lot from your teacher?

16. Please describe your drawing and what the teacher and students are doing in the drawing. What is this figure doing in this picture? The researcher will ask about each figure in the drawing.

17. What does each person make you think of?

18. How do you feel about the teacher in the drawing?

19. If you could change anything about this classroom, what would that be?
Dear Student:

My name is Erica Wigton and I am performing research on student perspectives of quality teaching. The goals of the study are to examine common themes of what students think make a great teacher. During the study I will be asking you questions and create drawings of your experiences with exceptional teachers. The interview questions and drawings are open-ended and should not take longer than one hour to answer.

Answering the questions and creating drawings is voluntary, which means you do not have to take part if you don’t want to. Nothing will happen to you if you decide not to participate.

If you agree to participate you will be asked questions at Lomond School. The questions will ask you about your experiences of what you have felt have been your best teachers. You will not be able to put your name on the drawings and your answers will be completely private.

Please read the following and sign below if you agree to participate.

I understand that:

- if I don’t want to be interviewed that’s ok and I won’t get into trouble
- anytime that I want to stop participating that’s ok
- my name will not be known and my answers will be completely private

Signature: ___________________________________________

Name: ___________________________________________ (Please Print)

Date: ___________________________________________

There are two copies of this letter. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other one. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

For further information regarding this research please contact
Dr. Carl at (216) 687-5370 or J.C.CARL@csuohio.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216)687-3630.
APPENDIX C

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Please allow me this opportunity to introduce myself. My name is Erica Wigton and I am the Academic Advisor for fifth grade students at Woodbury Elementary School. Currently, I am pursuing my doctorate degree at Cleveland State University. As part of my studies, I am performing research on student perspectives of quality teaching. The goals of the study are to examine common themes of what students think make a great teacher.

Participating in the study is completely voluntary and your child may withdraw from the study at any time. There is no reward for participating in the study. Additionally, there will be no consequences to your child if you choose not to participate. Any risks associated with participation in the study are no greater than those of daily living. We will also seek your child’s assent to participate in the study before he or she begins. Should you agree to allow your child to participate, I will be asking the students questions and requesting them to create drawings of their experiences with exceptional teachers.

- The interview questions and drawings are open-ended and should not take no longer than half an hour.
- The interview of your child will be audiotaped and transcribed for the researcher to review and analyze.
- Your child’s responses to the questions will be confidential. Confidential means that although the researcher may know who your child is, no identifiable information will be maintained and only the researcher / research team will know who is participating.

For further information on this research please do not hesitate to contact me at (440) 479-7634, email: ericawigon@hotmail.com. For further information regarding this research please contact Dr. Carl at 216-523-7303 or J.C.CARL@csuohio.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or child’s right as a research participant you may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216)687-3630. There are two copies of this letter. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other one to your child’s school.

“By signing below I agree to allow my child to participate. “

Signature: ____________________________________________________

Name (please print): _____________________________________________

Date: _________________________________________________________