# SUPPORT FOR PARENTS OF GIFTED AND TALENTED CHILDREN IN THE WESTERN REGION OF MELBOURNE

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**ABSTRACT**

Parents of academically gifted children can encounter a range of specific difficulties with the education system, professional services, family and friends. These increase the stress parents experience. Fewer social support structures are available to parents from either the education system or the rest of the community. This research explored the nature and usefulness of support for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne. First, by means of interviews with parents and second, through the development of a self-help/mutual aid support group. Twenty three parents (16 mothers and seven fathers) were interviewed. The data gathered from the interviews and the observational notes from the group were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings indicated that parents' well-being was adversely affected by different stressors from those usually experienced by other parents. Stressors such as the additional needs of their gifted children, the difficulties encountered with schools, educational policies, and the negative attitudes of giftedness in the wider community. The stress experienced was exacerbated by a lack of social and educational support together with the social stigma of being a parent of a gifted child. Parents reported major frustrations from their unmet social and emotional needs, which often resulted in them being isolated from others. To address this need, an informal support group was established. The support group is considered successful by its longevity and the formation of a sub-group and further proposed sub-groups. It is recommended more support groups be established to address support shortcomings in the western region of Melbourne. This helped to empower parents by providing networks of support and information, and assist with the promotion of psychosocial wellness for parents of gifted children and their families.

# DECLARATION

"I, **Sally-Ann Free**, declare that the PhD thesis entitled **"SUPPORT FOR PARENTS OF GIFTED AND TALENTED CHILDREN IN THE WESTERN REGION OF MELBOURNE"** is no more than 100,000 words in length, including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work."
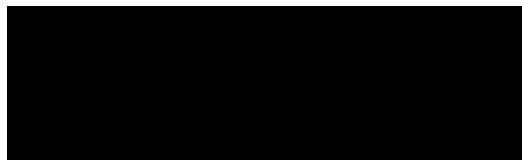
Signature: ███████████████████     Date: 1st September, 2014.

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## DEDICATION

To the parents of gifted children. You have my respect and admiration.

This thesis is dedicated to you.

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## CHAPTER 1

## 1.     Introduction

1.1     *Context of Research*

Parenting refers to the process of rearing children by promoting and supporting children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development, from infancy until adulthood (Davies, 2000). That is, parenting applies to aspects of child-rearing aside from the biological relationship (Davies). According to the American Psychological Association (2013), parenting practices around the world share three major goals. Firstly, that parents ensure their children's health and safety. Secondly, to prepare children to be productive adults. Thirdly, for parents to transfer their cultural values to their children (American Psychological Association). Because parents have such influence on their children, a high quality parent-child relationship is critical for children's healthy development (American Psychological Association). Furthermore, a parent's health and well-being is a vital factor that can influence their children's health (Waters et al., 2000). Indeed, children's health and development is linked to their parents' well-being (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010). Thus, parents' health and social and emotional well-being is of critical importance for themselves, their family and their interactions within the community (Davis et al., 2010; Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Li et al., 2012).

Becoming a parent and raising children is a complex process that encompasses nurturing, stimulation, discipline, activities, values and routines (Chase-Lansdale & Pittman, 2002). Along with the parenting process, a constant throughout children's lives is their reliance on their parents to provide and care for them safely and securely. In order to care for their children and be effective parents, parents need access to support and information to help raise their children (Tucci, Mitchell, & Goddard, 2005).

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Bringing up any child is not an easy task (Juul, 2013; Tucci et al., 2005). But parenting gifted children tends to have qualitative differences. This is because gifted children often have advanced cognitive abilities, more intensity, an awareness and inner experiences that are qualitatively different from other children (Silverman, 1992). In addition, gifted children often reach developmental milestones much earlier than other children (Gross, 1999; Ruf, 2009). This can have implications for peer relationships, school issues and educational matters (Webb, 2014). Furthermore, as limited information is available to parents of gifted children, greater demands may be placed on these parents (Fisher, Kapsalakis, Morda, & Irving, 2005, 2006; Fisher, Morda, Irving, & Kapsalakis, 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004) . The greater demands placed on parents tends to increase the frustrations they experience (Peralta-Gómez, Rodriguez-Burgos, & Omi, 2013). Thus, raising gifted children may involve a range of different challenges, than raising other children does (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

In order to explore the experiences of parenting gifted children, it is necessary to investigate the concept of giftedness. Although many definitions of giftedness exist, there is no one definition that is universally agreed upon. In the past, the development of giftedness has been proposed as purely innate (Galton, 1869; Terman, 1916). Nowadays it is more often agreed to be a combination of natural endowment and life experiences, so that giftedness is more often thought to be both innate and learned (2005). Mayer together with Felman (1986a, 1986b), Gardner (1983), Gagné (1985), Mönks and Mason (2000), Renzulli (1978), have theorised that giftedness is dependent on the individual's natural abilities and experiences, together with the individual's social and learning environments. In addition, according to the National Association for Gifted Children, in the United States

of America, giftedness, intelligence and talent are fluid concepts that may be perceived differently in different cultures and contexts (2014).

Moreover, it is often acknowledged that gifted children have the potential to perform at a level that is significantly beyond that of most other children of the same age (Stankovska, Pandilovska, Taneska, & Sadiku, 2013). The areas in which gifted children may excel often consist of problem solving, language, interpersonal or physical skills (Stankovska et al.).

It has also been widely recognised that gifted children often develop their intellectual skills in an asynchronous manner, that is, not at the same time as their social skills and motor skills develop (Alsop, 2003; Guénolé et al., 2013; Silverman, 1994, 1997). Dealing with the challenges of giftedness and asynchronous development can be daunting for parents (Silverman).

In addition, Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) contended that gifted children tend to exhibit heightened complexities and overexcitabilities. Thus, when asynchronous development occurs, the child's advanced cognitive abilities and heightened excitabilities combine to create an awareness and inner experiences that are quite different from the norm, and may be problematic (Morelock, 1992; Silverman). Yet, the number of gifted children is quite substantial. In 2013 there were 883,550 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) student enrolments within 2,226 schools in Victoria (State Government of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012). The Children of High Intellectual Potential Foundation guidelines regard 5% of the population as gifted (CHIP Foundation, 2010). Based on this, the population of gifted students in Victoria would be  at least 44,177 (FTE). Estimating the number of gifted children is helpful in identifying the scope of the problem that parents of gifted children may encounter. Formal methods of the

identification of giftedness can be of assistance for the child, the family and the school, and therefore play a role in the child's future development (Hansen, 1992).

Traditional methods of identifying gifted children are intelligence tests, achievement tests, aptitude tests and school grades (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). Giftedness is considered to apply to those individuals whose intelligence scores fall two or more standard deviations above the mean score of 100 and within the 98th percentile of intelligence scores (Osborn, 2012). Although intelligence test scores are most often recognised and accepted, other non-traditional identification tools may also be employed (Passow & Frasier, 1996). However, in many cases, parents have identified their children as gifted some time before any formal identification takes place (Cleaver, 2011).

Parents are more likely to identify their child as gifted, because they are often adept at recognising the qualitative differences they observe in their children (Alamer, 2010; Chan, 2000; Davis & Rimm, 2004). Silverman maintained that parents are excellent identifiers of giftedness in their offspring (2009). Numerous studies have also supported the effectiveness of parents in identifying their children as gifted (Heller, Perleth, & Lim, 2005; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Lewis & Louis, 1992; McGuffog, Feiring, & Lewis, 1987; Waters, Chitwood, & Silverman, 1986).

Following identification of their child's giftedness, parents realise they must deal with the challenges, and what is said to be the greater demands associated with raising a gifted child (Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). Guénolé et al' (2013) findings indicated that gifted children are regularly referred for clinical assistance to deal with their socio-emotional problems, underachievement and maladjustment. It is therefore not surprising that Keirouz (1990) reported raising gifted children presents a host of unique and additional problems for the parents, and tends to

make the process of child-rearing more complex than raising other children (Jolly & Matthews, 2012; Silverman, 1992).

Challenges for parents which are associated with raising a gifted child are often related to the child's development, interactions with the school, educational policies, and the larger community (Alsop, 1997; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Gross, 1999, 2004; Irving, 2004; Jolly & Matthews, 2012). Parenting a child is not done in the absence of systems and structures within the community that the parent lives in (Freisthler & Crampton, 2009). When related to Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1995, 2000), the conditions within a community environment give a particular meaning to parents' circumstances and experiences. Therefore, the interconnected aspects of the community that parents are embedded in, can have substantial effects, both on their lives and their children's lives (Edwards et al., 2009). Accordingly, these community-based factors have considerable importance when investigating parental experiences of bringing up gifted children.

Because gifted children develop earlier more intensely, and differently than other children do is a factor that has been investigated by Strip Whitney and Hirsh (2011). They contend that this early and intense development can lead to the gifted child feeling confused and frustrated (Strip Whitney & Hirsh). It has also been reported that it is more difficult for gifted children to find intellectual peers, within the same age group (Yewchuck, 1999). As well, some gifted children do not believe that other people understand or think the way they do (Delisle, Espeland, & Galbraith, 2002).

Many gifted children may experience anxiety, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and excessive perfectionism (Delisle et al., 2002; Guénolé et al., 2013). They may also be teased or ridiculed by their peers and others (Yewchuck, 1999). Thus gifted children may

feel unaccepted, strange and, inept which may lead them to become isolated, lonely, sad

and/or angry (Porter, 2005; Smutny, 1999; Strip Whitney & Hirsh, 2011).

Because gifted children differ from other children, particularly in their intellectual

development as well as their social and emotional development, parents are required to

manage these differences (Alsop, 1997; Lovecky, 1992). The differences that gifted

children have can also affect their school and educational experiences.

A widespread myth about gifted children is that they are eager and attentive

students in the classroom (Clark, 2008; Smutny, 2011). Whilst this may apply to some

gifted children, many more gifted students are inattentive, easily bored and may fail to

complete assigned homework (Clark; Harrison, 1999). In classes where little, if any,

provisions are made for their learning, gifted children are at risk of emotional and

behavioural conflict and underachievement (Whitmore, 1980). The educational needs of

gifted children often require instructional adaptations by teachers in order to nurture their

potential (Yewchuck, 1999).

It follows that teachers, the education system, and affiliated teachers unions are

important contextual components which affect large numbers of children, and their parents

(Ewing, 2010). Many teachers are members of Australian Education Union (AEU) and

also educate the majority of students. Therefore an investigation of the philosophy the

AEU may help to ascertain the context that education has for matters related to giftedness.

Be that as it may, teachers are often inadequately trained in giftedness (Gross, 1999). Even

with training, it is not unusual for teachers to ignore the needs of gifted children (Lassig,

2009).

It has been contended that most teachers are concerned with educational excellence

based on the principle of 'equity for all students' (Gallagher, 2003; VanTassel-Baska,

1997). But when it comes to the needs of gifted students, many teachers tend to view the

principle of 'equity for all students' as conflicting with excellence. Consequently, the

particular educational needs of gifted children are often disregarded (Gallagher;

VanTassel-Baska). Thus, in addition to educational matters, it can be said that there are a

range of complex issues that may affect parents who raise gifted children, which require

investigation. This thesis will attempt to examine these matters.

1.2     *Rationale*

Parenting gifted children often involve challenges that other parents do not often

encounter. Particular difficulties are frequently associated with educational issues and a

lack of understanding in the community. Because of these problems, it is not unusual for

parents to become stressed and isolated from others. Few studies exist that examine the

experiences and strategies to assist parents of gifted children. The current research will

address the gaps in the existing literature, firstly by examining the personal experiences of

parents including fathers, and subsequently, through the establishment and participant

observation of a mutual support group.

When exploring parenting gifted children, only limited studies have examined the

support of parents of gifted children (Alsop, 1997; Keirouz, 1990). The few studies that

have investigated the experiences of parenting gifted children (Alsop, 1997; Keirouz,

1990; Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991) have not specifically addressed the social

and emotional support needs of parents of gifted children. Hence, In order to address the

gap in the literature, this research aims to investigate the nature of parental support needs

and the challenges involved with parenting gifted children, with a particular focus on the

western region of Melbourne.

As the aim of the current research is to investigate the nature of parental support

needs and the challenges faced by parents of gifted children with a focus the western

region of Melbourne, this study addresses three research questions. 1). What difficulties do

the parents of gifted children deal with? 2). What are the support needs of parents of gifted children? 3). How can the support needs of parents with gifted children be best addressed? To address these research questions, an exploration of the experiences of parenting gifted children is necessary. Therefore, the first section of the current research will include interviews with parents of gifted children, whilst the second section will examine the establishment of a self-help/mutual aid support group strategy. In order to present the organisation of the thesis, the thesis chapters will be outlined in the following section.

1.3 *Structure of the thesis*

The previous section presented the theoretical foundations of this thesis. The thesis is organised into eleven chapters. Chapter two explores the phenomenon of giftedness. The characteristics of giftedness and talent are examined together with the theoretical models of giftedness and identification of giftedness. Following these investigations, the social and emotional issues associated with giftedness are explored, together with asynchronous development.

Chapter three is an examination of parenting. Because there is such a wide range of aspects involved with parenting, a variety of them will be discussed. These include parenting attachment, parenting behaviours, the biological and social aspects of parenting. Parenting as a goal state, parent education levels and parent support, will also be explored. In addition, different parenting styles and the problem area of enmeshment and individuation will also be investigated.

Chapter four focuses on the difficulties parents of gifted children have with child rearing. The parenting gifted children will be investigated, together with the factor of bullying. In addition, an examination of the associated contextual factors will show how the cultural and environmental circumstances affects parents, and why this makes it more difficult for parents to raise their gifted children in Australia. Also discussed in this chapter

is the perceived stigma and labelling that are often associated with parents of gifted children. Best parenting practices for gifted children will also be explored. Strategies which may assist families with gifted children will then be analysed.

Chapter five illustrates the differences in parenting that fathers have in relation to the parenting role. Presented are various roles of fathering and fatherhood, which include traditional fathers' roles, an exploration of Australian fathers, the child rearing practices of fathers, and fathers' level of engagement with their children. Issues of fathering competence and the notion of healthy fatherhood precede an examination of the value fathers place on education, along with the parental practices of fathers of gifted children.

Chapter six investigates stress and social support. Theoretical perspectives of social support are necessary in order to examine the experiences of parents of gifted children, who may lack the natural supports that other parents usually enjoy. The main effect model and the stress buffering model of social support are reviewed. Here the important functions of social support are examined. What social support parents of gifted children perceive and what social support they receive is discussed. In addition, the possible negative effects of social support are also reviewed. Support for families with gifted children is assessed, as are support groups and the supportive elements of mutual support and consensual validation. Twelve step programs will be discussed, together with the SENG program aimed at parents of gifted children is introduced. This will be followed by an assessment of the usefulness of self-help/mutual aid support groups.

Chapter seven provides an outline of the methodology of the research that was undertaken. Chapter eight locates the thesis research in the western region of Melbourne, and discusses its place, demographics and cultural context. Chapter nine provides a description and discussion of the findings. with reference to past research. Chapter ten reports on the social support group strategy and the researcher as the participant observer.

Chapter eleven connects the current literature and discusses the findings. Limitations and contributions made by the research are discussed. This is then followed by some recommendations for areas of future research. In the following chapter, the concept of giftedness will be investigated.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.	Giftedness

2.1	*Introduction*

Giftedness is a concept that is often misunderstood and difficult to conceptualise (Tuscano, 2000). Silverman referred to giftedness as "developmental advancement that can be observed in early childhood" (1993, p. 14). In this chapter giftedness and talent will be explored, defined and conceptualised. Controversies regarding identification are also investigated. This review will be undertaken in order to give an appropriate context and summary to better understand the concept of giftedness.

Davidson stated 'Giftedness is an odd construct' (2009, p. 81), because there is no uniform agreement on its meaning. It has been argued that views on giftedness are shaped by the culture of society, which determines what aspects of high intellectual potential are identified and valued (von Károlyi, 2006). Concepts of giftedness have been contested by theorists and scholars, because the determination of high intellectual potential is based on a variety of different definitions and theoretical models. Despite these differences progress has been made toward a more universal agreement on the definition of giftedness (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998; Stoeger, 2009).

An examination of commonly used definitions of giftedness reveals some similarities. These similarities include an individual's exceptional mental potential or ability (Freeman, 2001). This is more obvious with children of advanced mental ability, especially when they are compared with other children in the same age group (Freeman). Advanced mental ability is often categorised in psychometric terms (American Psychological Association, 2009; Clark, 1988, 1992, 2002, 2008).

Psychometrically, giftedness refers to the performance of an individual that is at least two standard deviations above the mean or higher, based on the percentage of the

population within the normal curve. This equates to an intelligence quotient (IQ) score of 130 or more, on a standardised IQ assessment, such the WISC-IV (American Psychological Association, 2009; Clark, 1988, 1992, 2002, 2008; Silverman, 1993; von Károlyi & Winner, 2005). The score may vary somewhat, depending on the type of test administered, such as the Stanford-Binet V (SB5) (Kearney, 2010). In a recent Australian study comparing the two tests, it was found that the WISC-IV scores tended to be higher than the SB5 (Wilson & Gilmore, 2012). However both types of tests are helpful in determining if a child may be considered to be gifted (Kearney).

Whether individuals have been assessed with an IQ score of 130 or more have often received interest from others throughout society (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998; Wolk-White, 2009). Decades ago, Russell (1959) recommended the universal use of the term 'gifted' to encompass a range of terms that included individuals that were considered to be *precocious, a rapid learner, of high ability, genius, highly talented, a prodigy, bright, brilliant, superior and/or with a high IQ*. It has been suggested that the terms 'above average intelligence', precocious, bright, or highly able may be more appropriate for those who are intellectually more developed than their age would normally indicate (Kearney, 2000). Even though these terms are also used, the term 'gifted' has become been the most recognised term in education, legislation and in psychometric terms (Clark, 1988, 1992, 2002, 2008). Therefore, the words 'gifted' and 'giftedness' will be the terminology employed within this thesis.

When examining giftedness, talent is a factor that is often inextricably linked with giftedness and is frequently regarded as the same construct (Brown et al., 2005). Because varying degrees of confusion have been generated within the gifted field, efforts have been made to differentiate between giftedness and talent, notably by Gagné (1995, 2004). Giftedness is most often considered as the outstanding intellectual or academic ability in

childhood (Miller & Cohen, 2012), and may often include outstanding physical, creative or social abilities (Department of Education and Training, 2014).

Gagné (1985), Renzulli (1978, 2003), and Gross (2004) have proposed that talent can be clearly differentiated from giftedness. Gagné described talent as the display of measurable achievement in a specific realm (1995). He further theorised talent as a "developmental construct" (2004, p. 124) that "designates the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities (or skills) and knowledge in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers who are or have been active in that field or fields" (2004, p. 120). That is, talent refers to outstanding performance or achievement, or an outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, which Gagné argues is a progressive transformation of gifts into talents (Gagné).

Consequently, giftedness was distinguished from talent by suggesting that an individual cannot become talented without being gifted. This way, natural outstanding abilities develop into expert skills or talents (Gagné). Talents include those found in performance, such as musical ability and artistic endeavours, unlike giftedness, which most often concerns itself with intellectual and academic potential. Nonetheless, giftedness and talent are often interconnected, or closely linked. Thus most gifted programs and organisations are intended to assist both gifted and talented individuals (Chessman, 2007).

Conservative estimates of intellectual giftedness indicate that giftedness is found in three to five percent of the population (Renzulli, 1982; Silverman, 2009). Yet, estimates of giftedness have been suggested by Gagné (1985, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2005), as present in up to 10% of the population. Alternatively, Renzulli and Park (2002) have theorised that giftedness could be present in 15 to 20% of the population. So, although the estimated population of giftedness can vary based on theoretical definitions, it is clear that

a substantial number of individuals in the population can be considered as gifted and may require specialised educational or support services (Gross, 2004).

Despite its wide acceptance, Gross (1999) advised that the term gifted can be particularly problematic in Australia. Because giftedness is often construed in Australia as an elitist term, which can have an associated derogatory, or belittling effect on the individuals concerned (Gross, 2004). Within this context, 'high intellectual potential' was selected by the CHIP foundation (Children of High Intellectual Potential) in place of the word gifted. The term 'high intellectual potential' was chosen by the CHIP foundation to avoid any implied elitism that was linked to the word "gifted" (Commonwealth of Australia Parliament Senate, 1988). The aversion to the word "gifted" was also discussed by Lesley Sword (2008).

Sword (2008) acknowledged that most "bright" individuals do not like the word gifted, because they do not relate to the embedded connotations of high achievement. Sword explained that, as a clinical psychologist dealing with bright people of all ages, she referred to the word gifted as a clinical label associated with individuals who have well above average intelligence. She further contended that as a clinical label, giftedness is like other labels, in that it can obscure the individual. Furthermore, Sword suggested that just as people with below average intelligence have different thoughts and feelings, the thoughts and feelings of people with well above average intelligence are also different. According to Sword (2008), those with well above average intelligence tend to have more complex, rich and deep thoughts and feelings which produces the potential for high achievement.

Be that as it may, Webb (2005) contended that it can be difficult to be gifted. Difficulties include educational matters. In principle, the educational arena is supportive of equal opportunity for all students, although Barbara Clark (2008) suggested that equal

opportunity should not mean the same opportunity. Institutions, including schools and organisations, embody the community's standards of equity and claim to provide an equal opportunity of education to the fullest potential of all, yet also deny gifted children the educational experiences to appropriately develop their abilities to the full potential (Clark). Equity is said to be present when all children have equal access to potential opportunities; based on reasonable standards of competence (VanTassel-Baska, 1997).

Equal access to potential opportunities is an admirable goal for the education of individuals, but worldwide progress in the education of the gifted is said to have been impeded (Williams & Mitchell, 1989). This may in part be due to the elitist connotations of giftedness, which can evoke emotional reactions and negative feelings in people, and may hamper the education of gifted individuals (Williams & Mitchell).

In addition, in a submission to an Australian Senate Enquiry into the education of gifted and talented children, Watters and Diezmann (2001) describe the Australian context of gifted education as one of inflexible school environments, teacher apathy and an opposition to gifted education. When gifted children are not adequately or appropriately educationally challenged, they may become bored, which can lead to frustration, discouragement, and even anger (Delisle, 2006; Gross, 2004). The effects of frustration, discouragement and anger can negatively impact the individuals concerned and may hinder their acceptance from others in environments such as home, school and work (Webb et al.). The rejection of giftedness can make life more difficult and complicated for gifted individuals (Webb et al.).

Moreover, individuals who have been assessed as being in the higher levels of intelligence scales are not rewarded or celebrated in the way the top tiers of performers are, such as elite athletes (Webb et al., 2005). Similar to Webb, Gross (1999) also contended such contradictions can be seen in the Australian culture. Gross reported that

Australian elite athletes are viewed in a positive context, and widely celebrated, but Australian individuals' intellectual exceptionality is not equally regarded (Gross).

With the exception of advanced sporting ability, to exhibit signs of advanced talent may result in individuals becoming targets of criticism, therefore, Australians tend to down play their achievements (Convict Creation, 2000). This is because Australia is often regarded as an egalitarian society, but the Australian sense of egalitarianism is less about utopian ideals of eradicating the gap between the rich and the poor. Egalitarianism in Australia acknowledges that success for individuals is acceptable, but that no one is entitled to a special status because of it (Peeters, 2004). Further, the egalitarian ideal makes Australian uncomfortable with the notion that success implies superiority, because the Australian culture dictates that people be modest about their success and humble about their achievements (Mackay, 1999). The egalitarian nature of the Australian culture influences the targeting of successful high achieving individuals, referred to as 'tall-poppies' (Peeters).

The first references to the term 'tall-poppies' in Australia was documented in 1864 in the Australian newspaper, *'The Empire'* ("The 'Honour' of Knighthood," 1864), when a man from Perth was reported as receiving a knighthood, for simply being present at the unveiling of a statue of Prince Albert. The article stated that "It is a pubic proclamation that you are a tall poppy, and that, in these days your head cannot be struck off...the consequence involves a serious embarrassment...". The article seems to infer that those who have been unjustly rewarded should be 'cut down' to deal with the negative effects of receiving an undeserved award. In relation to giftedness, it may be said that some consider that giftedness is an undeserved privilege or advantage (VanTassel-Baska, 2007). What is now referred to as the tall-poppy syndrome is suggested as having a considerable negative effect that the terms gifted and giftedness have (Gross, 1999). In Australia, the tall-poppy

syndrome refers to a social phenomenon which denigrates or 'cuts down' individuals who are considered to be tall poppies (Feather, 1989). A tall poppy most often refers to a successful individual, who frequently attracts hostility or envy (Feather, 1989; 1994). It may also relate to the notion conveyed by "The 'Honour' of Knighthood" article, where it is not acceptable for individuals to be seen as 'getting above others'. This is because most Australians prefer modest heroes (Davison, 1995).

Negative reactions such as hostility and envy to those who are gifted, are not uncommon (Buss, 2005). Reactions may also include retaliatory behaviour such as social ostracism or malicious gossip (Buss). Such negative emotional effects may affect psychological dysfunction, which in turn may lead to social isolation (Biordi & Nicholson, 2009; Klein, 2007). Thus in order to deal with the potential societal negative effects, it is important to understand the characteristics of gifted children.

## 2.2 *Characteristics of giftedness*

Gifted children have been found to have distinctive characteristics that vary from the norm, both qualitatively and quantitatively, behaviourally and intellectually (Cottrell & Shaughnessy, 2005). Commonly, gifted children may exhibit an earlier than usual interest in language and subsequent early language development. Other indications of a child's giftedness may include the child's large vocabulary, coupled with an excellent memory, an extensive knowledge and an avid reading ability. Additional markers of giftedness can be the child's deep curiosity, and the ability to learn quickly. In addition, the gifted child may have the ability to manipulate abstract systems of symbols, together with a higher than usual understanding of principles and relationships (Baska, Feldhusen, Van Tassel-Baska, & Seeley, 1989; Moon & Hall, 1998; Tuttle, Becker, & Sousa, 1988).

Furthermore, gifted children have varying affective or emotional qualities (Klein, 2007). Gifted children often have a desire for mastery and are naturally motivated. They

frequently display a sharp focus on their own interests, and tend to solve problems in original ways (Klein). Silverman (1993) developed a 'Characteristics of Giftedness Scale' that lists 25 traits of giftedness. Similar to findings by Alsop (2003), Moon and Hall (1998), and Moon, Kelly and Feldhusen (1997), the scale of giftedness was developed to help identify gifted children. In addition to Australia, the scale has also been adopted for use in the United States and the United Kingdom (National Association for Gifted Children, 2011-2013). It is considered that a child who exhibits 3/4 of the listed traits is likely to be gifted (See Table 1 below).

Table 1

*Characteristics of giftedness*

| Characteristics | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Reasons well (good thinker) | Learns rapidly | Has extensive vocabulary |
| Has an excellent memory | Has a long attention span | Sensitive (feelings hurt easily) |
| Shows compassion | Perfectionistic | Intense |
| Morally sensitive | Has strong curiosity | Perseverant when interested |
| Has high degree of energy | Prefers older companions/adults | Has a wide range of interests |
| Has a great sense of humour | Early or avid reader | Concerned with justice, fairness |
| Judgment mature for age at times | Is a keen observer | Has a vivid imagination |
| Is highly creative | Tends to question authority | Shows ability with numbers |
| Good at jigsaw puzzles | | |

(Silverman, 1993)

Notwithstanding the many positive characteristics of giftedness, an additional aspect that may distinguish gifted children from other children is overexcitabilities. Overexcitabilities occur when an individual reacts more strongly and longer than usual, to a small stimulus (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). That is, overexcitabilities can be irritants (Lind 2001). The overexcitabilities of gifted children can increase the existing

challenges and demands made on their parents, and be additional stressors (Lind 2001; Lamont 2012). For example, a gifted child may have a high sensitivity to clothing tags, to smells, and to classroom noise, which may become so distracting for the child that schoolwork can become secondary (Lind 2001). Thus, overexcitabilities can move gifted children toward conflict in their environment, (Moon, Kelly et al. 1997). In light of the overexcitabilities of gifted children, it has been suggested that stress managements techniques may be useful for not only the gifted child, but also for the parents (Lind 2001). It has been suggested that gifted characteristics are not limited to behavioural, social, emotional and psychological characteristics , but are also the associated with physiological characteristics.

Although contested by some scholars, some physiological characteristics are said to be common amongst gifted children (Benbow, 1986; Kolata, 1983; Temple, 1990; Winner, 1996; Wolk-White, 2009). Excessive testosterone or an unusual sensitivity to testosterone in utero may affect foetal brain development and affect certain abilities, such as left-handedness, language and mathematical abilities (Kolata, 1983; Marx, 1982; Winner, 1996). Because increased testosterone can affect left and right brain development differently, increased testosterone has been associated with giftedness in the areas of calculation and mathematic abilities, and also with creative abilities, such as music and art (Winner, 1996). Therefore, this evidence suggests giftedness may be associated with physiological processes. Yet, other theories have contended that the characteristics associated with giftedness have been developed from the interaction between genetic and environmental factors (Gagné, 1985; Renzulli, 1978; Tannenbaum, 1983; Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012).

Notwithstanding how giftedness has developed, the unique characteristics of gifted children appear to be different to those of other children (Lovecky, 1992). To better

understand the concept of giftedness and its associated characteristics, it is necessary to undertake an examination of the main theoretical models of giftedness.

2.3     *Theoretical models of giftedness*

To attempt to understand giftedness, it is important to have a clear idea of what giftedness consists of, where it originates from and how it can be assessed (Davidson, 2009). This is not an easy task. In 1986 Sternberg presented 17 conceptions of giftedness, which had grown to 24 by 2005. Yet also in 2005, Freeman advised there were over 100 definitions of giftedness. Clearly conceptions and definitions of giftedness Despite the debates and the great progress made, there is no single definition of giftedness or talent that is universally accepted (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998). Because there are so many models, definitions and conceptions of giftedness, it is appropriate to examine the most prominent ones used in the 21st century. Theoretical models and definitions of giftedness can be broadly categorised into five major areas: (1) genetic-oriented models, (2) cognitive oriented models, (3) achievement oriented models, (4) developmental models, and (5) systemic models of giftedness (Mönks & Mason, 2000).

First, are the genetic-oriented models of giftedness. Over a century ago, in France, Alfred Binet was a member of the French government commission investigating mental retardation (Roid & Barram, 2004). Together with Theodore Simon, Binet devised the first practical intelligence test, to assess general intelligence, which was known as the Binet-Simon Scale (1905). The Binet-Simon Scale was sensitive to various levels of cognitive development, and was a useful tool that could be administered during an interview (Roid & Barram).

Later, Lewis Terman developed a genetic-oriented conception of giftedness (Terman, 1916; Terman, 1921, 1922). Terman contended that intelligence was a genetically determined trait which was stable throughout the life of the individual. Terman

argued that high intelligence was necessary for highly able behaviour (Terman, 1916).

Furthermore, he viewed achievement as an observable result of giftedness (Terman).

Terman adapted the work of Alfred Binet to the American context (Roid & Barram, 2004). The Stanford-Binet Scale IQ (Intelligence Quotient) in 1916 was developed by Terman and his colleagues at Stanford University in the USA. Terman obtained his sample from teacher-nominated students in the State of California who then completed the National Intelligence Test (Jolly, 2008). Students who scored in the highest 10% were then administered the Stanford-Binet IQ measure by Terman in 1925 in his longitudinal 'Genetic Studies of Genius'. This study determined that 1528 children had an IQ of 135 or over (most with 140 or more). This identified children in the top one percent of intelligence in the population of the USA and indicated that children who possessed high IQ scores were not 'social misfits' as previously thought (Terman, 1925).

However, Terman also formed part of the eugenic ideology that was developed by Francis Galton (Stoskopf, 2002). Eugenics influenced educational reform in the USA in the early 20th century (Stoskopf). These days, the highly contestable theories of the eugenics movement are considered to be based on ideas which highlighted racialist thinking about breeding and immigration (Rury, 2000). However, there are those who still attribute giftedness predominately to genetic inheritance (Simonton, 2005).

Nevertheless, Terman made important contributions in the development and administration of standardised tests which embraced an individual's potential and his studies became widely accepted in educational settings (Stoskopf, 2002). Subsequently, more attention was focussed on gifted children and their need for more challenging instruction at school (Feldhusen). Although Terman made contributions to the study of intelligence and IQ measures, he also recognised the IQ measure was not without its

problems. Terman (1925) acknowledged there were not any scales that were capable of measuring all kinds of intelligence.

Several decades later, Sidney Marland (1972) authored a report concerning the education of gifted and talented children, which was submitted to the Congress of the United States. In the Marland report, the concept of giftedness was built on the foundation of Terman's biologically determined view of giftedness. Marland's report had expanded conception of giftedness into the socio-affective, creative and cognitive domains (Gross, 2004). Marland's report proposed that gifted children had outstanding abilities and could achieve high performance in six areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability (Davis & Rimm, 1998).

Marland's report of giftedness expanded the definition of giftedness from intelligence into other realms of high ability, such as achievements (Mönks & Mason, 2000). This expanded conception of giftedness builds on the foundations of Terman's (1925) work, but the definition omits some non-cognitive elements, such as motivation. It also does not have a clear operationalisation of different conceptualisations of giftedness (Mönks & Mason). In addition, the 1950s and the 1960s also witnessed the expansion of the definition of giftedness, with work done on creativity.

A further extension of the genetic-oriented approach of giftedness was Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences. He proposed that giftedness results from inborn abilities in conjunction with a supportive environment. Gardner identified that several intelligences are related to areas of ability. The seven areas are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner).

*Linguistic intelligence* refers to syntax, semantics, pragmatics, written and oral expression and understanding (Gardner, 1983). *Logical-mathematical* refers to deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning and computation. *Spatial ability* describes the capacity to represent and manipulate spatial configurations, such as thinking in images and pictures. *Musical aptitude* characterises the ability to hear themes in music, sensitivity to rhythm, texture, and timbre; pitch discrimination and the production of music through performance or composition. *Bodily-kinesthetic* defines the ability to use all or parts of one's body to perform a task or fashion a product. *Interpersonal* represents the ability to understand other individuals-their actions and their motivations.; it also includes the ability for an individual to act productively on the basis of that knowledge. *Intrapersonal* is the ability to understand oneself. *Intrapersonal* includes knowledge and understanding of one's own cognitive strengths, styles and intelligences and one's feelings and range of emotions (Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 1997). More recently, Gardner added two more intelligences to his theory of multiple intelligences. They are, *Naturalist intelligence*, which is the ability to recognise and categorise flora and fauna, and *Existential intelligence* which refers to the capacity and sensitivity to deal with deep questions about human life (Gardner, 2006).

In addition, Gardner (1999) contended that intelligence had a biological and psychological (biopsychological) way to process information. That is, a combination of emotions, behaviours and mental processes, which can then be used to solve problems or to create products. Gardner's conceptualisation of giftedness expanded on Terman's biological approach to include other domains of ability that determined giftedness. However, criticisms have been made of Gardner's conceptualisation of giftedness. Gardner himself points out that the theory lacks empirical results, because the theory was based on qualitative findings and idiographic analyses (Gardner, 1993).

Another genetic-oriented conception of giftedness which has had considerable influence, particularly in the educational arena, was developed by Françoys Gagné. The original Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (Gagné, 1985) has been refined over the years (Gagné, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005). The Gagné model defined giftedness as superior ability, while talent is superior performance or achievement (Gagné, 2003). That is, giftedness and talents were described by Gagné as:

> *The possession and use of untrained and spontaneously expressed natural abilities (called outstanding aptitudes or gifts), in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 per cent of age peers. Talent is described as the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities (or skills) and knowledge in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 per cent of age peers who are or have been active in that field or fields (Gagné, 2004, p. 120).*

According to Gagné (2003, 2004) gifts need to go through a five step process in order to become talent. Five elements and catalysts are necessary for this process to occur. The elements and catalysts interact with other catalysts in order to develop gifts into talent (Gagné). More specifically, the elements and catalysts refer to (G) the Gift, (EC) the Environmental Catalyst, such as socio-demographic factors and psychological influences, from parents, teachers and peers, or talent development programs, (IC) the Intrapersonal and interpersonal catalyst, such as traits and self management processes, (L/P) the Learning /Practice, and (C) Chance, because children have no control over their socioeconomic status of their family, their parenting quality, or the existence of any talent development programs. The interaction of the elements can result in the development of (T) Talent (Gagné).

The DMGT is used to help to identify individuals who are gifted and talented. Gagné contended the top 10% of the population as mildly gifted or talented and through progressive ten percents cuts for moderate, high, exceptional and extreme levels of

giftedness or talent. That is, although a gifted child may become talented in one or more fields, the Gagné DMGT (Gagné, 1985, 2003, 2004, 2005) model emphasises that specific talents such as musical performance, may develop from intertwined abilities from several domains, while excellence in a range of performance requires a synthesis, or consolidation of a range of different talents.

The DMGT has nevertheless been criticised (Peterson, 2007). Borland (1999) disagreed with Gagné's distinction between natural abilities and systematically developed abilities, and also argued the distinctions between giftedness and talent lacked meaningfulness and utility. Further, Borland questioned the terms giftedness and talent, because of the lack of agreement regarding what giftedness and talent mean (Borland). An additional criticism was made by Feldman (1999), who also disagreed with Gagné's psychometric and quantitative perspective of giftedness. Feldman favoured an evolutionary, developmental and historical approach, which viewed giftedness as broad general analytic capabilities, and talents as specific content-bound capabilities (Feldman). Feldman's approach will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Victorian State Government Education and Training Committee Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012) referred to Gagné's DMGT conception of giftedness as "the most frequently referenced and supported model [of giftedness] in the evidence" to the Inquiry (p. 16). However, other models also play a role in determining giftedness. Differentiating itself from genetic-oriented models of giftedness are cognitive conceptions of giftedness.

A conception of giftedness, which is cognitive-oriented, was theorised by Robert Sternberg (1985). Sternberg developed a triarchic theory of intelligence. The triarchic theory of human intelligence centres on three separate, yet related, psychological

processes: a) thought processes, b) memory, and, c) related abilities. More precisely, these three processes are first, 'selective encoding', which is a process in which relevant from irrelevant information is sorted. Second, 'selective combination', which refers to combining isolated bits of information into a unified whole, which may or may not resemble its parts. And third, 'selective comparison', which refers to the relating of new pieces of information to previously received information. Sternberg suggests that the better these skills are in an individual, the more intellectually gifted they may be. Markers of giftedness were considered as heightened performance, which can be demonstrated as knowledge acquisition, or problem-solving skills (Sternberg).

Furthermore, Sternberg (1985) made a distinction between three main types of giftedness. They are analytic, synthetic and practical giftedness (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991). Individuals with analytic giftedness have the capacity to dissect a problem and understand its parts. They tend to do well when tested with conventional tests of intelligence, because the tests emphasise analytical reasoning abilities. Individuals with synthetic giftedness are insightful, intuitive, creative, and proficient at coping with novel situations. Because people with synthetic giftedness do not view things the way others do, they are often outstanding in the areas of arts science and sciences. This does necessarily translate into a high IQ score. Individuals with practical giftedness have the ability to apply synthetic or analytic abilities to everyday and realistic situations. They are very successful in determining what they need to do in order to achieve success in a particular environmental setting (Sternberg & Lubart).

According to Sternberg and Lubart (1991) gifted individuals possess a blend of the three skills of analytic, synthetic and practical giftedness. However, some individuals, who may be extremely gifted in one area but not equally gifted in the other two areas, may experience frustrations. Therefore, it is important for gifted individuals to coordinate the

three abilities and have an understanding of when to use the appropriate ability. However, Sternberg and Grigorenko (1997) also conceded that there were difficulties with these three constructs of giftedness. This is because conventional tests of intelligence fall short of properly measuring the three skills of analytic, synthetic and practical giftedness.

Another conception of giftedness is an achievement-oriented conception. Joseph Renzulli developed an achievement-oriented conception of giftedness in 1978. Renzulli opposed Terman's early unifactorial genetic-oriented definition of giftedness (Lens & Rand, 2000). Renzulli viewed giftedness as, "human potential that can be developed in certain people, at certain times, and under certain circumstances" (Renzulli, 1990, p. 324).

Renzulli (1978, 1986, 1990, 2005) developed a theory of giftedness that he referred to as the 'Three-Ring Conception' of giftedness (see Figure 1). The three-ring conception of giftedness is a theory in which Renzulli presents the main dimensions of human potential required for creative productivity. The 'Three-Ring Conception' of giftedness is derived from the conceptual framework of the theory which refer to three interacting clusters of traits, which are above average ability, task commitment, and creativity, and their relationship with general and specific areas of human performance. The three rings were later set in a houndstooth background in 2005 (Renzulli). The revised schematic diagram represents the interaction between personality and environmental factors that give rise to the three rings (Renzulli).
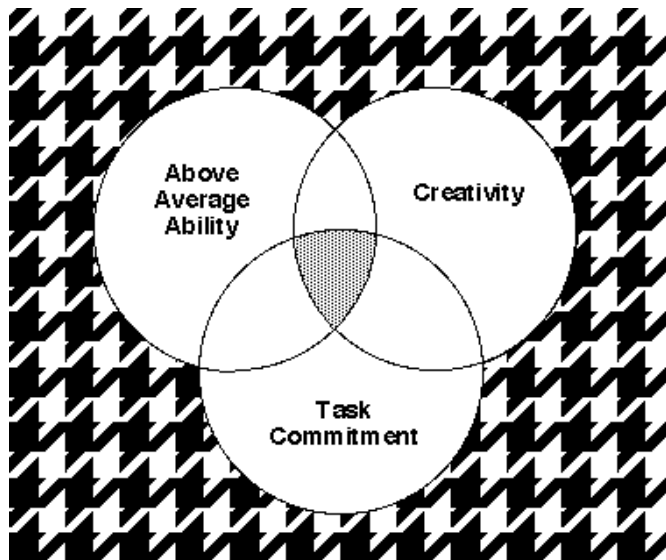
(Renzulli, 2005)

*Figure 1* Three-Ring conception of giftedness

According to Renzulli (2005), children who display the necessary three traits have

the required ingredients of giftedness, but they must also have the capabilities that are

necessary in order for giftedness to develop. Renzulli suggests that gifted behaviour

consists of thoughts and actions which results from an interaction among three basic

clusters of human traits, as described here:

> *An interaction among three basic clusters of human traits-these clusters being above average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance (Renzulli, 1978, p. 261)*

It has also been contended by Renzulli that children who are capable of developing

interactions amongst the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities,

resources, and encouragement above and beyond those ordinarily provided through regular

educational programs (Renzulli, 2005).

However, Renzulli's 'Three Ring Conception' (Renzulli, 1978, 1986, 1990, 2005)

of giftedness theory has been criticised for not sufficiently allowing for underachievement,

which often occurs with gifted children (Gross, 2004). This is important, because underachieving gifted children can become demotivated in the school environment (Gross). Another criticism was made by Delisle (2003), who contended that Renzulli's (1978) three faceted theory of giftedness was based on data obtained from accomplished adults, and, therefore did not show any correlations between the traits or experiences of children with a range of IQ scores, and later life achievements. Franz Mönks considered the Renzulli 'Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness'(Renzulli, 1978, 1986, 1990), which strongly emphasised personality traits, neglected the interactive nature of human development (Mönks & Mason, 2000).

Mönks (2000) subsequently developed a theory by building on, and extending the 'Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness' by Renzulli. Mönks employed a multidimensional approach known as the 'Multifactor Model of Giftedness' which included personality and social determinants, the environment, and also considered the emotional aspects of ability (Mönks, 1998; Mönks & Katzko, 2005; Mönks & Mason, 2000). The 'Multifactor Model of Giftedness' consists of personality and environmental factors (Mönks; Mönks & Katzko). The task commitment factor in Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness' was replaced in Mönks's conception of giftedness by motivation. Motivation includes factors such as task commitment, anticipation, risk taking, planning, future time perspective, and emotional aspects (Mönks & Mason, 2000).

Within the 'Multifactor Model of Giftedness' (Mönks, 1998; Mönks & Katzko, 2005) personality characteristics must be stimulated and developed in a social context. The three most important contextual environments for a child are the family, the school and their peer group. The family can foster and stimulate giftedness but also suppress giftedness when it is not identified. Schools that do not identify children's specific abilities and potentialities adversely affect children's development (Lens & Rand, 2000). It was

also contended that gifted children may not be accepted by their peer group, which can negatively affect their psychological development and their academic progress (Lens & Rand).

As with Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 1978, 1986, 2005), a similar criticism of Mönks Multifactor Model of giftedness (Mönks, 1998; Mönks & Katzko, 2005) was made. Gross (2004) questioned the Mönks Multifactor Model of giftedness because it did not make allowances for under-achieving gifted children. Van Tassel-Baska (2005) challenged these gifted theories, and those which include the factors of motivation, task commitment and creativity. Van Tassel-Baska argued motivation, task commitment and creativity are not parts of giftedness, but that they arise from the development of talent (VanTassel-Baska). Feldman (1986a, 1986b, 2000) has provided an alternative developmental model of giftedness.

Feldman (1986a, 1986b, 2000) proposed a conception of giftedness within a developmental psychology framework titled the 'Non-Universal Theory' and is broader and more inclusive than the study of giftedness. He presented giftedness as a phenomenon with developmental characteristics which were similar to other developmental phenomena. Feldman asserted that obtaining gifted, or expert levels of performance, required an individual to move through higher level stages of domains of ability, which are not reached by everyone (Feldman, 2000).

Feldman's Non-Universal Theory of giftedness proposed a continuum of domains of ability (Feldman, 1986a, 1986b, 2000). The continuum is based on the number of people who master these stages, from the largest (universal) to the smallest (unique) (Feldman). The continuum consists of 'universal', 'pancultural', 'cultural', 'discipline-based', 'idiosyncratic' and 'unique' domains of ability (Feldman, 1986a, 1986b, 2000).

That is, Feldman, regarded those who master all stages within a domain of ability as gifted.

Each stage is distinct by major mental reorganisations, as Feldman stated:

> *For the average person, the number of stages or levels that he or she will master in a given domain is obviously fewer than for the 'gifted' individual. Another way of approaching the issues is to think of certain domains as being less likely to be selected for mastery than others; in doing so, 'giftedness' might be revealed not only by the number of levels one achieves, but by the domain within which an individual chooses to pursue mastery (Feldman, 1986a, p. 291).*

Feldman questioned the notion of the intellectually gifted as determined by IQ scores, and particularly individuals who were considered to be child prodigies (1986b). He also contended that prodigies develop their talent from opportunities that were available in their environment, and then by achieving expert levels of performance (Feldman, 1993). In acknowledging the role that chance has in the development of giftedness, Feldman (1986b) also proposed supportive environmental factors are required for giftedness to develop. He suggested that families, teachers and schools, and cultural factors are vital in the process of prodigy development (Feldman). According to Feldman, the factors of families, teachers and schools, direct, shape and organise the world of the promising child. As well, he contended the cultural context affects the expression of the child's potential, because the child exits in a particular sociocultural, historical and evolutionary context (Feldman). In addition to these factors, the individual must possess a strong desire to achieve. He argued that giftedness and prodigy development involve a system of critical transitional points in the child's developmental processes. Feldman provides an example of a musical prodigy who, with sufficient environmental support and resources began as a composer, and transitioned into also becoming a gifted performer. So Feldman views of the combination of familial, school and cultural systems, together with opportunities and developmental process, for giftedness to emerge. Thus Feldman's developmental theory of giftedness is

understood to be within a system of contexts and transitions, yet more complex systemic theories of giftedness have emerged.

One systemic theory of giftedness is Albert Ziegler's actiotope model of giftedness (Ziegler, 2005; Ziegler & Heller, 2000; Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2011; Ziegler, Stoeger, & Grassinger, 2011). The actiotope model of giftedness was devised as a way of explaining human actions (Ziegler, 2005; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2011). The actiotope is highly complex and dynamic in nature (Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012). It was developed as a direct analogy of the biotope, which can be understood to be an adaption to a range of environments (Ziegler & Stoeger, 2011). The environment is also an important factor in gifted theories developed by Gagné (1985), Gardner (1983), Feldman (1986a, 1986b), Mönks (1998) and Sternberg (1985). Adaptation in the actiotope theory suggests that more and more complex actions can be carried out in increasingly complex environments, and are thus accompanied by an increasingly complex set of skills (Ziegler & Stoeger, 2011).

Ziegler proposed that the actions of a person change the environment, and therefore, the actions needed to be considered as talented, gifted or showing excellence change with the progression of time. The main elements of the Actiotope model of giftedness are listed here:

*Actions* consisting of a sequence of partial actions, each of them being a composition of parallel and multiple actions, which require regulation on several levels.

The *action repertoire* is understood as the sustainable possibilities for action an individual is capable of executing.

The *subjective action space*: What people believe they are able to do. (Girls for instance often underestimate their action repertoire).

The *goals*: What people want to do. Every person has several goals, the most important for the gifted are the development of excellence, and the employment of an excellent action repertoire.

The *environment* characterized by a rapid alteration of domains. The interactions among the components generate a quest for equilibrium and adaption of the individual to the environment. This results in the ability of the individual to generate various actions, to recognise when action will be successful and to realise when an action was successful (Ziegler, 2005).

Furthermore, because Ziegler and Phillipson considered measuring aspects of giftedness as 'flawed'and 'inadequate' (Ziegler & Phillipson, p. 5), they argued the current approaches that attempt to understand giftedness are based on the mistaken view that understanding exceptionalities is required to understand the components of giftedness. Indeed, in opposition to many established giftedness theories such as Gagné (1985), Renzulli (1978), and Sternberg (1985), Ziegler advised that 'Gifts and talents are not personal attributes'(Ziegler, 2005, p. 418). In contrast, the actiotope systemic approach of understanding exceptionalities focuses on the interactions of these components to first understand that the system leads to exceptionality, before the components of giftedness can be understood (Ziegler & Phillipson).

Shortcomings of the actiotope model of giftedness were recognised by Ziegler (2011), who acknowledged the model's highly complex nature. Ziegler also conceded the actiotope model of giftedness does not provide an adequate explanation of individual differences in self-regulated learning processes (Ziegler et al.).

Clearly, over time, many theories, conceptions and models of giftedness have been developed with a range of differences and levels of complexity. Although there are many

different theories, conceptions and models of giftedness, it is helpful that there are also a range of consistencies which aid in the understanding of giftedness.

The overview presented in this chapter of the major theoretical models of giftedness has shown there is a vast range of variations and differences within the construct of giftedness. It is evident the conceptions and definitions of giftedness have become more numerous and much more complex over the years. There is no universally agreed upon definition of giftedness. Yet, according to Souza (2009), most researchers agree that "Giftedness derives from a well-above average level of intelligence, in one or more observable behaviours" (p. 9). Moreover, a more recent and comprehensive determination of giftedness has been presented by Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and Worrell (2011) in this way:

*Giftedness is the manifestation of performance that is clearly at the upper end of the distribution in a talent domain even relative to other high-functioning individuals in that domain. Further, giftedness can be viewed as developmental, in that in the beginning stages, potential is the key variable; in later stages, achievement is the measure of giftedness, and in fully developed talents, eminence is the basis on which this label is granted* (p. 3)

This section has presented various concepts of giftedness. Giftedness that is proposed as genetic, or inherited, which foundational in the giftedness theories of Terman (1925), Gardner (1983) and Gagné (1985) and the report by Marland (1972). Marland's report regarding giftedness also included cognitive aspects, such as those that were later were comprehensively developed by Sternberg (1985) in his cognitively-based theory of giftedness. Additionally, the factor of the environment which refers to the family, school and cultural context, is couched in a number of gifted theories, such as those developed by, Gardner (1983), Gagné (1985), Renzulli (1978), Feldman (1986a, 1986b), Mönks and

Mason (2000), and was also included in the Marland (1972) report as a definition of giftedness. The element of chance is shared amongst some theorists, such as Renzulli (1978), and Gagné (1985) and Feldman (Feldman, 1986a, 1986b). Renzulli's factor of task commitment was replaced by the factor of motivation in Mönk's Multifactor Model Of Giftedness (Mönks & Mason, 2000). Whilst Feldman's (Feldman, 1986a, 1986b) theory that intelligence is formulated within a developmental psychological framework, where transitioning to levels of mastery are achieved by a fewer number of individuals has some similarities with Gagné's (1985) DMGT. Adaptation to situation and circumstances is a aspect of giftedness, shared by Sternberg's (1985) triarchic theory and the Actiotope of giftedness theory by Ziegler (2005). Thus, within these gifted theories, there are a range of commonalities, some with varying levels of emphasis on particular aspects of giftedness, such as the environment, that are involved in the phenomena of giftedness. The theory that presents most of these factors within one cohesive and integrated theory, is the DMGT by Françoys Gagné (1985).

Compellingly, the DMGT was found to be the overwhelming choice of a model of giftedness for Victorian schools, families and associations in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012). As the current research is based in Victoria, it is therefore appropriate for the current research to recognise the DGMT as the preferred model of giftedness in Victoria. Although the DMGT has been presented together with a range of other models and definitions of giftedness, it can be said that the identification of a child as gifted is a most important early step in a child's life.

2.4    *Identification of giftedness*

Identification of a child as gifted is important because identification has the rippling effect of consequences for the child, siblings, parents, family, education, school, organisations and the larger community (Alsop, 1997). Yet, there is a great deal of

confusion regarding the identification of giftedness, due to the differing views of giftedness (Brown et al., 2005).

Predominant views of giftedness include the notion that giftedness is absolute or static, as with the genetic-oriented conceptions of giftedness. Alternatively, that giftedness is relative, where degrees of giftedness can be developed by individuals at different times, under certain circumstances. Or, that giftedness is a dynamic state where giftedness within the individual may vary, subject to different performance and learning situations (Brown et al.).

Because gifted children may not be identified, they can be disadvantaged by the failure to provide for their particular learning needs (Hansen, 1992; Watters & Diezmann, 2003). Nevertheless, opposition to the process of identifying children as gifted is common in Australia (Geake & Gross, 2008). It is within such an oppositional environment that parents often first informally identify giftedness in their children (Silverman, 2009). Gross (1999) advised that parents have been found to be consistently and significantly more successful at identifying giftedness in their children. Yet, parents who have tried to discuss their child's early literacy and numeracy skills to school staff, have been regularly disregarded, or actively disbelieved by them (Gross, 1999). In contrast, the official policy of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2004) suggests that parents, caregivers, students, peers principals, teachers, counsellors and community members can be included in the identification process.

It has been recognised by an Education and Training Committee in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012) that identification is a vital step in providing an appropriate pathway for a gifted children to realise their potential. Children who have not been properly identified as gifted can be prevented from accessing appropriate educational programs or services which cater for gifted children

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(Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee). Furthermore, because children may have not been identified as gifted, and not in appropriate school programs, they are at higher risk of 'dropping out' and leaving school early (Educational Research Service, 2008).

Identification acts as a preventative mechanism for serious negative consequences which may occur, if a gifted child's educational needs are not properly met (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012). The negative consequences are behavioural problems, underachievement, disengagement from education, and mental health problems, such as depression (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee).

Consequently, if children are not properly identified, they are more likely to also experience social and emotional difficulties (Ballering & Koch, 1984; Saranli & Metin, 2012; Wellisch & Brown, 2012). In order to avert possible future negative outcomes, there are a range of tools and measures to identify children who are gifted. They include classroom evaluations, academic grades, behavioural checklists, interviews and anecdotal evidence, and formal psychometric assessments (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004). While this may be so, identification within the school environment can be problematic. This is because teachers are often inappropriately trained to identify and cater for gifted students, which can hinder the identification of students' giftedness (Rowley, 2012).

In order to help prevent future problems and the consequences associated with the lack of suitable identification, formal identification processes of giftedness may be necessary. Formal identification of giftedness is often undertaken, although not necessarily required, by psychologists in the United States (Silverman, 2012). However, in Australia, psychologists are required to attend to formal identification of giftedness, by the

administration of specific assessment tools (Department for Education and Child Development, 2012). A formal assessment of giftedness is most often determined following the administration of one of the two most widely used psychometric assessment tests. The psychometric tests are the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales, Fifth Edition (SB5) which generate an Intelligence Quotient, or IQ score.

The WISC-IV and the SB5 psychometric tests both meet reliability and validity criteria (Wilson & Gilmore, 2012). Psychometric IQ tests primarily focus on the individual's general potential to solve problems, adapt to changing circumstances, think abstractly and gain from experience (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009).

IQ scores are calculated in terms of a distribution of scores within the population. The normal distribution of both children's and adult's IQ scores on the bell curve of the population locate the mean $\bar{x} = 100$ and the standard deviations SD=15. Two standard deviations above the mean IQ=130 is the generally accepted score of giftedness (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). The bell curve showing the distribution of intelligence scores within the population is shown in Figure 2.
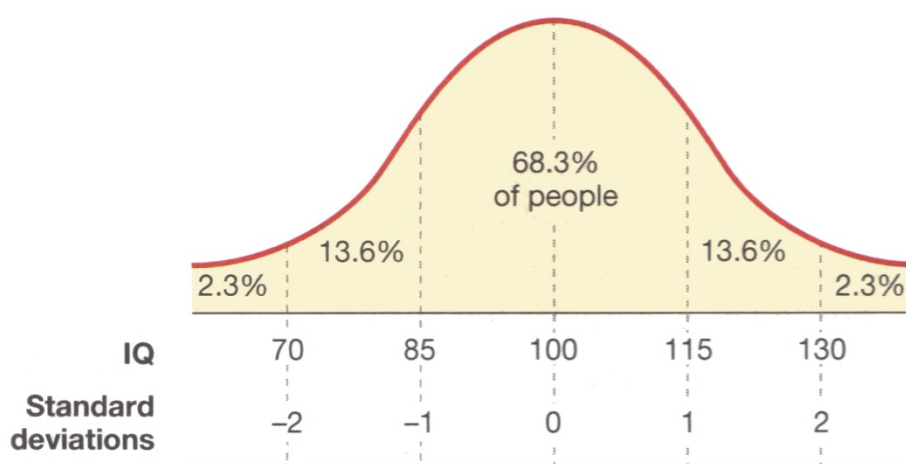


(Gazzaniga, Heatherton, & Halpern, 2011)

*Figure 2*. Bell curve representing the distribution of intelligence scores within the population from the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale.

However, IQ tests are not universally accepted. Criticisms of IQ tests have been made. Children need to concentrate for extended periods of time when completing an IQ test, which may be difficult for children with short attention spans and poor motivation (Hoffnung et al., 2010). Hale, Fiorello, Kavanagh, Holdnack and Aloe (2007) argued that intelligence tests represent different cognitive constructs that may obscure an individual's neuropsychological status. In a further criticism, Silverman (2009) contended IQ tests are unitary, when intelligence is multi-faceted, making measurement problematic. Additionally, intelligence tests have been criticised for only measuring a narrow range of intellectual abilities (Feldhusen & Goh, 1995; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986). Moon and Hall (1998) have argued that intelligence tests measure a constricted range of intellectual abilities, which are not often related to real world activities, therefore may limit their value. Furthermore, IQ tests have been criticised because they tend to emphasise convergent thinking, and present problems that have precise answers, which disadvantages divergent, or creative thinking individuals (Hoffnung et al., 2010).

The merits of IQ tests have been further questioned by other scholars. Wolk-White suggested that IQ test performance is linked to familiarity with the materials of the test and therefore may influence the meaningfulness of the test (Wolk-White, 2009). Additionally, with tester styles such as warm (open concerned and interested) and cold (uninterested, uninvolved and aloof) tester styles can influence the scores by up to 15 points (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2005). Moreover, it has been argued that some cultural and linguistic diverse social groups cannot be accurately tested using measures that have been standardised in the western world (Benson, 2003; Mistry & Rogoff, 1985; Suzuki & Valencia, 1997; Wolk-White). That is, IQ tests can be more culturally appropriate for children from certain cultural backgrounds than others. This could be because children raised in homes where English is a second language, may attend school with different skill sets than other

children (Kaufman & Sternberg). Modern conceptions of giftedness have developed to
include factors other than intelligence, such as natural abilities, competencies,
intrapersonal factors, and the environment (Kaufman & Sternberg). Nevertheless, IQ tests
remain valuable tools used to predict individuals' achievement (Gresham & Witt, 1997;
Prifitera, Saklofske, & Weiss, 2005).

An IQ score can assist in understanding the fundamental differences in an
individual's mental processing (Gross, 2004). When examining the degree of giftedness,
the population distribution dictates the majority of the population will be of average
ability. The moderately gifted population will exceed the highly gifted population, the
highly gifted population will considerably exceed the exceptionally gifted population and
the profoundly gifted population (Gross). In many cases, the more profound the giftedness,
the farther from the norm the gifted child is from his peers. This can intensify the issues
that face gifted children and their parents (Gross). The levels, IQ range and prevalence of
giftedness are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*The population of intellectual giftedness*

| Level | IQ Range | Prevalence |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mildly (or basically gifted) | 115-129 | 1:6-1:40 |
| Moderately gifted | 130-144 | 1:40-1:1,000 |
| Highly gifted | 145-159 | 1:1000-1:1million |
| Exceptionally gifted | 160-179 | 1:10,000-1:1million |
| Profoundly gifted | 180+ | Fewer than 1:1million |

(Gross, 2004, p. 7)

## 2.5 *Social and emotional issues of giftedness*

The lack of understanding of the nature and significance of gifted children's
intellectual differences may lead to gifted children being perceived by others as 'bad' or

'weird'(Sword, 2008). Without understanding, gifted children may attempt to deny or ignore their differences, which can lead to social isolation and emotional problems (Sword). The social and emotional issues related to giftedness may be associated asynchronous development, and is a particular aspect of giftedness that may be problematic.

### 2.5.1    *Asynchronous development*

In literal terms, asynchronous means out-of sync, or not occurring at the same time (Silverman, 1997). The construct of giftedness as asynchrony can be described as uneven development, complex intensity, heightened awareness, vulnerability which brings with it the risk of social alienation (Silverman). Gifted individuals may be out of sync with the average population because of their differences and of what is expected of them at their age and circumstance (Robinson, Zigler, & Gallagher, 2000). For example, Honeck (2012) presented an example of a child who may have an in-depth discussion with an adult regarding dinosaurs, and then turns around to hit a classmate for not sharing a toy. Silverman (1997) advised that a child may be physically mature, such as an 8 year old who has the mental maturity of a 14 year old child.

Asynchrony has significant consequences for gifted individuals, and others in their lives, such as family and friends (Robinson et al.). Such a mismatch in development presents unique challenges for the child and parents to deal with (Osborn, 2012). Because many gifted children are so different to their peers, they may not be included in social activities, such as attending birthday parties, which can substantially affect the child's social and emotional development, and consequently, may also affect the family (Silverman). Furthermore, because the familiar norms of development do not apply, substantial adjustments are needed in parental expectations, school settings, and also with the activities gifted children participate in (Robinson et al.).Therefore, a more complex life

is implied because of the difficulties and complexities associated with asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997).

The developmental discrepancies of giftedness as asynchrony offer an understanding of inner experiences of the gifted. It also provides a framework for responding to the developmental differences of this cohort, through their lifespan (Silverman). Moreover, the specific educational needs of gifted children are interwoven with particular social and emotional matters that both differentiate, and effect gifted children (Sword, 2008).

Compared with other children, gifted children's heightened sensitivity and emotionally intensity can provoke anxiety and pain for them (Sword, 2006). In addition, there are some social and emotional issues that are more prevalent for gifted children (Robinson, Reis, Neihart, & Moon, 2002). For example, many young gifted children do well in the family environment and when they enter school then may become less enthusiastic to learn, and may become underachievers (Robinson et al.). Also, some gifted children may never learn strategies that foster effort and perseverance, which could help them to achieve academic goals that other children learn. Such skills can also be useful to assist with later life issues (Robinson et al.). It does not help that there is a lack of suitable educational programs for gifted children (Gross, 2004). Moreover, because gifted children often have difficulty finding friends they share similarities with, they are more likely to be affected by loneliness and the societal pressure to be like other children (Robinson et al.).

A factor that can assist with mediating the social and emotional difficulties gifted children have is the home environment (Neihart & Tan, 2011). Gifted children may also experience anxiety and pain that stems from their social and emotional difficulties (Sword, 2006). The home environment plays an essential role in understanding and nurturing a child's giftedness, by building psychological resources and the mental energy to deal with

their challenges in life (Neihart & Tan, 2011). Most often the responsibility falls to the parents to take steps to meet their gifted child's needs (Neihart & Tan). But the difficulties experienced by gifted children can also lead to anxiety in the parents of gifted children (Sword). This suggests parents also need support with the social and emotional aspects of their child's giftedness.

Giftedness is not always readily understood. Giftedness, with its particular set of characteristics can be confused with talent and is often incorrectly used interchangeably. The number of theoretical models of giftedness is growing and are becoming more complex, and in some cases, becoming somewhat contradictory. Additionally, the process of identification of giftedness is not a straightforward matter, because of the confusion about giftedness in the community. Moreover, because of the nature of giftedness and the asynchronous development of the gifted child, social and emotional issues may arise which impede the gifted child in reaching his or her potential. Considerable support for the gifted child's parents, family and the community is necessary to positively develop the gifted child's potential. In order positively and fully develop the potential of a gifted child, parents have an important role to play. Indeed, the experience of raising a gifted child may be one which is both distinctively challenging and also rewarding.

# CHAPTER 3

## 3.  The experience of Parenting

Parenting is defined by Masud Hoghughi as "purposive activities aimed at ensuring the survival and development of children" (2004, p. 5). The word parenting originates from the Latin verb 'parere', to bring forth, educate and develop, and is more concerned with the activities in developing and educating rather than who attends to the tasks. Parenting indicates a process that involves interactions by adults with children, which often denotes a biological relationship of a mother or a father to a child. Nonetheless, adults may also parent children who are not their own biological children. This is because parenting is an emotional form of nurturing care-giving, which is aimed at promoting children's welfare (Hoghughi, 2004).

As stated earlier, parenting is more than ensuring a child's survival and development (Hoghughi, 2004). Parenting refers to the activities involved in raising a child, rather than the biological relationship between a parent and child (Davies). Importantly, parents are entrusted with the task of preparing their children for the physical, psychological and economic conditions which they will live in (Bornstein, 2002). Moreover, parents are intricately involved in the process of supporting and promoting the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of a child, from early infancy until adulthood (Davies). These key processes are required to raise children into adults who are independent individuals (Raeff). Ideally, parenting inspires and maximises children's potential (Kretchmar-Hendricks, 2006).

The broad contextual societal, cultural, historical and economic forces affect how parents behave, which in turn influences the development of their children (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). In order to discuss the experience of parenting gifted children, it is necessary to first discuss the broader aspects of parenting.

Parenting issues will be examined, which will include parenting behaviours, parental

support, together with parenting styles, individuation and enmeshment. Parenting

behaviours will be addressed in the following section.

### 3.1 *Parenting behaviours*

Although parents engage in countless types of activities, major parental behaviours,

with some variances, can be categorised into seven major categories. These categories are

nurturance, teaching, monitoring, discipline, language, materials, and managing children

(Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). In order for parental behaviours to be effective, parents

need the support of others in the community to obtain knowledge and skills to raise

children (Dwivedi & Dwivedi, 1997; Heath, 2004; Tucci et al., 2005; Whitmore, 1986).

Others in the community include both medical and educational professionals, family,

friends and neighbours (Alsop, 1997).

Childhood, family life and community life are all subject to considerable

transformation in contemporary social and economic settings (Tucci et al., 2005). The

constant throughout is that children rely on their parents to provide and care for them

safely and securely (Tucci et al.). Parents are critical in assisting with the growth of infants

to become effective citizens (Collins et al., 2000). Hence, parental behaviours influence

familial and non-familial environments and play vital roles in children's development

(Collins et al.). Thus, it is up to parents to navigate life's emotional and environmental

challenges on behalf of their children (Tucci et al., 2005). Furthermore, parents play an

integral role in promoting children's emotional, social and academic competence and

capacity (Hutchings & Webster-Stratton, 2004). However, it is also important for parents

to consider themselves as properly supported in order to effectively bring up their children.

3.2     *Parent support*

Parents who receive mental and physical support and parents who perceive themselves to be supported, tend to have better health than those who do not (Heath, 2004). Much support in the form of advice is available to assist parents. However, because there is so much information this can be overwhelming for some parents (Brazelton, 1992). Despite the extensive amount of parenting information available, or perhaps because there is too much information or conflicting information, not all parents are well prepared to meet the challenges of parenting (Tucci et al., 2005). Tucci further contended that up to 70 percent of parents in Australia consider themselves to be under pressure to parent correctly, and that all parents should be provided with better access to services and support within the community. Parents necessarily rely on various other sources of support to rear their children, which include babysitting, childcare, family and schools (Yuan, Brillhart, & Lightfoot, 2012). Therefore several forms of support are needed to assist parents to raise their children. In addition to support, the parenting style adopted to raise children is a factor which can affect parents' child rearing abilities and the outcomes for their children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

3.3     *Parenting styles*

The importance of parental influences on a child's social and instrumental capabilities has been recognised since the 1920s (Darling, 1999). The construct of 'parenting styles' is used to explain normal variations in parents' attempts to socialise and control their children. Definitions of parenting typology were established by Diana Baumrind in 1966 and were further developed in later years (Baumrind, 1967, 1968, 1971, 1991).

The parenting style model by Baumrind centres on issues of control (Darling, 1999). Parents may choose different methods to socialise and manage children, with the

underlying assumption that a parent's principal role is to influence, teach and control their

children (Darling). Parenting style includes two important fundamentals of parenting,

which are parental responsiveness, also referred to as warmth and supportiveness, and

parental demandingness (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Parental responsiveness refers to the extent to which parents foster individuality,

self-regulation and self assertion by being attuned, supportive and agreeable to the child's

needs and demands (Baumrind, 1991). Parental demandingness, which is also known as

parental control, refers to the "claims parents make on children to become integrated into

the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and

willingness to confront the child who disobeys" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62).

According to the levels of parental responsiveness and parental demandingness,

four typologies of parental styles were categorised as: authoritarian, authoritative,

indulgent, and uninvolved (Darling, 1999). The four typology model of parental styles was

developed by Macoby and Martin (1983), following a review of Baumrinds' (1967, 1971)

tripartite model of parenting styles which was comprised of authoritarian, authoritative and

permissive parenting styles (Smetana, 1995; Steinberg, 2005). Although the literature has

referred to other parental styles, such as permissive and neglectful (Dornbusch, Ritter,

Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Rodriguez, Donovick, & Crowley, 2009), and

*laissez-faire* (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993), they are all largely based on the four major

parental styles (Garcia & Gracia, 2009).

All the parental styles reflect different patterns of parental values, practices and

values, within a clear balance of responsiveness and demandingness (Baumrind, 1991).

Parental styles are important because they have been found to predict children's well-being

within the realms of social competence, responsiveness, academic performance,

psychosocial development, and behaviour difficulties (Darling). The four major parental styles will now be further examined.

### 3.3.1    *Authoritarian parenting style*

The first of the major parental styles is known as 'Authoritarian'. Authoritarian parents are directive and highly demanding, but not responsive (Darling, 1999). These parents expect their orders to be carried out without question or explanation, and are obedience-oriented and status-oriented. Children with authoritarian parents live in well-structured and well-ordered environments, and are accustomed to clearly stated rules (Baumrind, 1991). Some parents who practise the authoritarian parenting style include the use of physical and psychological punishment as disciplinary measures (Baumrind, 1996). Behavioural compliance and psychological autonomy are not considered mutually exclusive, but rather as interdependent objectives (Baumrind). Behavioural compliance refers to attending to others requests or expectations (Marchant, Young, & West, 2004). Psychological autonomy refers to an individual's awareness of being separate from others, who self-regulates their behaviours, and also has independent thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). Authoritarian parents can be divided into two camps: (1) authoritarian-directive, who are directive, greatly intrusive and autocratic, and (2) non-authoritarian directive, who are less intrusive (Baumrind; Weiss & Schwarz, 1996).

In intrusive authoritarian-directive homes parents are typically traditional, controlling, and firm (Baumrind, 1991). An example of a highly intrusive authoritarian-directive parent could be one who requires children to lodge their mobile telephones into a 'phone basket' at an appointed time, to prohibit its evening use, and also for the parent to examine their children's text messages and other telephone usage. In contrast, a non-authoritarian-directive parent would not have a 'telephone basket' or view text messages

and telephone call information. This parent would set clear boundaries, such as the hours and time frame allowed for mobile telephone usage.

An authoritarian-directive parent may respond to a child's transgression, such as fighting with siblings over a television program, and could shout out an immediate ban of television viewing for a set time period as a punishment (Samalin, 2006). This 'Do it because I say so' style of authoritarian parenting dictates solutions and prevents children from an opportunity to engage in problem-solving behaviours by learning to cooperate (Samalin). With this example, children may become resentful and in fear of expressing their thoughts and feelings. The authoritarian approach may force children to obey and work in the short term, but over time children may become more disobedient and defiant when disciplined in this manner (Samalin, 2006).

When examining parental style, Weiss and Schwarz's (1999) used five personality measures that consisted of Agreeableness, Extroversion, Conscientiousness, Openness to experience and Neuroticism. Results indicated that children from authoritarian-directive homes were significantly less open to experience than those from non-directive families. Furthermore, in addition to resentment and fear (Samalin, 2006), the children were significantly more neurotic than children from more unengaged parenting styles (Weiss & Schwarz). An alternative parenting style that tends to be less rigid and controlling in nature than the authoritarian parenting style, is the authoritative parenting style.

### 3.3.2   *Authoritative parenting style*

The second parenting style is 'authoritative' and is more democratic (Baumrind, 1991). Authoritative parents are demanding, but are also responsive (Baumrind, 1967, 1971). These parents monitor and impart clear standards for their child's behaviour. They are assertive, but not restrictive and intrusive. Discipline is often supportive, rather than punitive. Authoritative parents want their children to be assertive, socially responsible, to

self-regulate and be cooperative (Baumrind; Weiss & Schwarz, 1996). The authoritative parenting style applied in an early parent-child relationship has been suggested as a predictor of higher academic achievement and better adjustment to university (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

Applying the television viewing example, an authoritative parent may respond calmly, "If you two can work out a way to share your TV time, you're welcome to watch, if not, the TV goes off". The authoritative parent firmly states a consequence that will result if the fighting continues, but also respectfully guides the children to manage their own solution, and then follows through. Should the parent not follow through, then the parent's statement becomes a worthless threat that the children will likely ignore (Samalin, 2006). Another parenting style that is less structured that the authoritative parenting style, is known as the permissive, or indulgent parenting style.

### 3.3.3    *Permissive or indulgent parenting style*

A third parenting style is classified or 'permissive', 'indulgent' or 'nondirective' (Baumrind, 1967, 1971, 1991). These parents are more responsive than demanding, and are non-traditional and lenient. They allow considerable self-regulation, do not insist on mature behaviour, and avoid confrontation. Permissive parents share some similarities with authoritative parents (Baumrind). Both authoritative and permissive parenting styles are emotionally supportive and responsive to their child's needs and are consultative with decision-making. The difference is that permissive parents are not demanding and do not assign many responsibilities (Santrock, 2009). Instead, their children are generally self-regulated and are not required to meet adult-imposed behaviours, and thus need less assistance from adults.

Many studies have viewed permissive parenting more negatively than authoritative parenting (Baumrind, 1991; Beau & Adam, 2006; Santrock, 2009). The permissive

parenting style has been correlated with a higher risk of illicit drug and alcohol consumption by their children (Baumrind). However, it is not always clear that a permissive parenting style is inferior to an authoritative parenting style. A recent study in Spain which examined parental styles (Garcia & Gracia, 2009), did not find any differences between adolescents raised in a permissive style of parenting and an authoritative parenting style. Garcia and Gracia concluded that in Spain, the optimum parental style is the permissive or indulgent one. The findings were based the adolescent outcomes, which were equal or better than with the authoritative parenting style. However, the findings were regarded as limited, because the study was in one geographic location, and preliminary, because the findings were not based on longitudinal or experimental data. Some aspects of the permissive or uninvolved parenting style can also be found in another parenting style, known as the uninvolved or laissez-faire parenting style.

### 3.3.4    *Uninvolved or laissez-faire parenting style*

The fourth parenting style is known as 'uninvolved' or '*laissez-faire*' (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993), and is low in both demandingness and responsiveness (Baumrind, 1991). A minority of parents who may be regarded as employing an uninvolved parenting style might be assigned as rejecting-neglecting and be neglectful parents, however, the majority of parents in this category are within the normal range (Baumrind; Darling, 1999; Weiss & Schwarz, 1996). An example of uninvolved parenting could be when a teenage child requests to go out drinking on the weekend with friends; the uninvolved parent's response, may be, "Whatever" (Rosenthal, 2004). Hence, there has been an increased percentage of substance abuse that has been correlated with children that have been parented with an uninvolved parenting style (Mounts, 2002; Rosenthal).

Baumrind (1991) proposed that parenting style is a typology, and not a linear blend of responsiveness and demandingness, and that each parenting style is greater than a sum

of its parts (Darling, 1999). In addition to differing on responsiveness and demandingness, parental styles vary to the extent and use of psychological control (Darling). Psychological control refers to attempts to control and interfere with the psychological and emotional development of children through parenting practices, such as the withdrawal of love, guilt induction and shaming (Barber, 1996; Darling).

Both authoritarian and authoritative parents have high demands that include what they consider to be appropriate behaviour (Darling). Authoritarian parents have an expectation their children will agree to their judgements, without question. Authoritative parents, in contrast, are more open to negotiation and provide more explanations. Therefore, authoritative and authoritarian parents are both equally high in behavioural control, whilst the authoritarian parents are higher in psychological control, and authoritative parents are lower in psychological control (Darling). The literature overwhelmingly endorses the authoritative parenting style as the better quality parenting style, whilst the strengths and weaknesses of the other three major styles of parenting are suitably acknowledged (Baumrind, 1993; Coplan, Hastings, Lagacé-Séguin, & Moulton, 2002; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Dwairy, Achoui, Abouserie, & Farah, 2006; Querido, Warner, & Eyberg, 2002; Taylor, Dowdney, & Woodward, 1998; Weiss & Schwarz, 1999). Individuals who raise children with particular parental styles may influence how a child individuates, or distinguishes oneself from others.

3.4     *Individuation and enmeshment*

Psychological individuation is a key developmental task of adolescence and has been conceptualised as gaining autonomy, while maintaining relatedness to the mother and father (Kruse & Walper, 2008). Conceptualisations on the constructs of individuation and enmeshment in family research have accepted the considerable impact these factors have

in family dynamics (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Green & Werner, 1996; Levpušček, 2006; Rowa, Kerig, & Geller, 2001).

Whilst it has been recognised that an authoritative parenting style has better mental health and well-being outcomes for children, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles have been associated with mental health problems in adolescents (Dwairy et al., 2006). The psychological and social development of children relies considerably on how children are raised by their parents (Dwairy & Achoui, 2006). Psychological autonomy, and the mental health of adolescents is influenced by the parental style practiced by the parents within the cultural environment. This greatly effects how parents' behaviour and children's behaviour interact with each other within the workings of family life (Dwairy & Achoui).

Psychological individuation is considered a healthy path of development (Erikson, 1950; Levy-Warren, 1996) and was considered by Erik Erikson to be a process that moves toward autonomy in a child's second stage of development (Erikson, 1950). Individuation theory contends that parent-child relationships change to become less close as a result of life course transitions that lead to more autonomy (Bucx & Van Wel, 2008). Life course transitions may include becoming financially independent, leaving the family home and living with a partner (Bucx & Van Wel). Families with children who have difficulties with the process of psychological individuation are considered 'emotionally fused'(Bowen, 1978), or 'enmeshed families' (Minuchin, 1974).

Enmeshment is the tendency of individuals within families to be engaged in over involved and overly close emotional relationships (Jones, 1991). This is a negative state and often refers to parents that have an over involved parenting style and may become enmeshed with their children. Enmeshment has also been described as 'a measure of psychological control' over others (Barber & Buehler, 1996, p. 433). Salvador Minuchin (1974) developed a central organising metaphor of a family structure consisting of

interpersonal and subsystem boundaries to refine some family therapy concepts (Green & Werner, 1996; Minuchin, 1974). He described the family structure as an "invisible set of functional demands that organises the ways in which family members interact" (Minuchin, 1974, p. 51). Family systems were organised into the spouse subsystem, the parental subsystem, and the sibling subsystem. Boundaries were determined as the rules that defined who participated and how they participated, within the family subsystems functioning (Minuchin).

Clear boundaries encouraged functional relationships with others and facilitated with adjustments to needs both within the family and outside of the family (Green & Werner, 1996). Boundaries that develop to become unclear and widespread were regarded as enmeshment, whilst rigid boundaries that promoted separation was viewed as abnormal. Both the unclear and the rigid boundaries were regarded as dysfunctional (Green & Werner). Enmeshment was defined in this study as "involving excessively rapid and intense emotional reactivity that blocked individual family member's autonomy" (Green & Werner, p. 4).

Enmeshment has also been described as family patterns that facilitate emotional and psychological melding among family members, which delays the individuation process and the development and maintenance of psychosocial maturity (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Greenberger & Sørensen, 1974).

The literature generally supports the view of enmeshment as a lack of self/other differentiation (Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978). But it has also been argued that enmeshment can be described as a manner of extreme care giving and closeness, with separation and withdrawal at the opposite ends of the scale (Minuchin et al., 1978). The extremes of care giving and closeness if constant, may be risk factors, but they can also be considered as functional processes for short periods of time (Green & Werner, 1996).

It has also been found that enmeshment is present in some families with gifted children who have obtained counselling (Thomas, 2006). Hence, the risk factors of dysfunctional parent-child relationships may be more prevalent with parents of gifted children.

It has been reported that the role of a parent is complex and multifaceted (Hoghughi, 2004). As a child develops the parenting role adapts and changes to deal with the changing needs of the child. An important factor for parents when they raise children is the support they receive, and the parenting style they adopt, because this can affect outcomes for children. The authoritative parenting style is regarded as the optimum parenting style. Avoiding parental enmeshment with the child and promoting the child's individuation are also favoured, in order to achieve the best results for children. These factors are also important when considering the parenting of gifted children. Nevertheless, parenting gifted children holds some distinct differences and challenges that parents of other children are not often required to deal with. The qualitative differences with parenting of gifted children will be examined in the following chapter.

# CHAPTER 4

## 4.    Parenting gifted children

*"What we didn't know was that our children seemed different from most others, and this made us seem different too. In our isolation we had no idea that our experiences were quite normal for families of gifted children, that we were part of a community of people-like-us".*

-Kate Distin, author and parent of two gifted children (2006, p. 13)

Gross (2004) has contended that parents may be the most important factor of a gifted child's development. Raising gifted children presents unique challenges to parents and the family unit as a whole (Free, 2006). These challenges can be found throughout the community and most often within the education system, professional services, family, friends and acquaintances. A range of difficulties further compound the situation for these parents. The difficulties often include bullying, together with more contextual factors, which include the tall-poppy syndrome, philosophies of the Australian Education Union (AEU), stereotypical views of these parents, and the stigma that is often associated with parents of gifted children. Appropriate parenting practices and strategies to assist parents have been shown to be helpful (Free, 2006).

Marwan Dwairy's (2004) study of 118 gifted and 115 non-gifted adolescents in Israel determined that the parents of the gifted children tended to be more authoritative and less authoritarian in parenting style. The gifted adolescent's attitudes towards their parents were more positive, they exhibited higher self-esteem, less identity disorders, phobias and conduct disorders than the non-gifted cohort (Dwairy).The authoritative parental style correlated positively with the mental health of the gifted and non-gifted adolescents, while the authoritarian style of parenting negatively impacted on the mental health of the gifted, but not the non-gifted adolescents (Dwairy).Thus, the more authoritative the parental style

benefits gifted children and the more authoritarian the parental style, the increased

negative affect experienced by gifted children (Dwairy).

Gross (2004) also found that the authoritative parenting style is an important factor

for parents who raise gifted children. She reported that this parenting style values,

encourages, and facilitates the growth of a child's gifts and talents. Furthermore, Papalia,

Olds and Feldman (2008) reported that parents with the most successful children, (defined

as children with higher academic achievement, social skills and self-esteem), raise their

children with an authoritative parenting style, where parents have high expectations and set

limits for their children.

In addition, it has been contended that healthy parent-child relationships and

interactions promote vital and positive development of gifted children (Morrow & Wilson,

1961; O'Neill, 1978). Gross (2004) argued that the family played an important role in

shaping a gifted child's attitudes, aspirations and values, which in turn promoted a gifted

child's talent development. Similarly, an analysis by Feldman and Piirto (2002) contended

the closeness of the family and the degree to which the family considers itself a family has

substantial meaning. That is, the more family support that is extended to a gifted child's

talent, the higher the likelihood of significant achievements by the child (Feldman &

Piirto). Thus, parenting style, healthy parent-child relationships and support may help

parents to raise their gifted children, but these parents are also challenged by a range of

difficulties.

4.1    *Difficulties of raising gifted children*

Difficulties of raising gifted children can be found within the family environment

and extend to the wider community (Alsop, 1997). It can be said that many parents share

the joys and concerns of raising their children with other parents, family and neighbours in

the community (Adler, 2006). However, many parents of gifted children feel constrained

to share their experiences, as other parents have difficulty understanding their concerns (Adler). Parents of gifted children experience difficulties because they are like many other parents, who expect to deal with average ability children (Clark, 2008; Colangelo & Dettman, 1983; Delisle, 2001). This is because the recognition and handling of gifted children's exceptional social, emotional and intellectual needs are different from average ability children, and present particular challenges for parents (Moon, 2003; Moon & Hall, 1998; Sebring, 1983; Silverman & Kearney, 1989).

Some parenting difficulties were stated in a Canadian study by Lupart, Pyryt, Watson and Peirce (2005). This study found that the problems of parenting gifted children arise from parents not knowing how to meet their child's needs, and that parents are often patronised by school administrators when they advocate for their child. These findings have been echoed by research conducted in Australia (Alsop, 1997; Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004)

Keirouz also reported that parents of gifted children are also required to manage a range of problems specifically related to their children, such as their interactions with schools, family members and others in the community. Also requiring parents' attention were the social and or emotional difficulties that their gifted children often experienced (Keirouz, 1990). Keirouz (1990) suggested that parents have a range of unique concerns regarding their children's development.

Six major areas of concern for families with gifted children were determined by Keirouz (1990). The first concern was dealing with family roles, relationships, functioning, daily life and lifestyle. The second problem was issues regarding roles and relationships of siblings within the family. The third concern was issues concerning parents' feelings and self-concepts relative to their child's abilities and achievements. The fourth problem was issues that may be created between the family, friends and the community. The fifth

concern was educational issues that may develop between the family and the school. The sixth problem was issues dealing with the child's social, emotional and cognitive development. Keirouz devised a measure known as 'The Parent Experience Scale' (Keirouz, 1989) to help identify the specific concerns of parents of gifted children. Although the Parent Experience Scale was developed and subsequently utilised in a clinical setting at Purdue University, it was not published (Steinberg, personal communication December 5, 2013). The scale assisted counsellors with counselling sessions and was also used as a metacognitive aid to help parents to steer their way through the range of difficulties associated with bringing up a gifted child (Keirouz).

In addition to the six major areas of concern reported by Keirouz (1990), it was reported that dealing with the special circumstances of families with gifted children can risk healthy family functioning (Mathews, West, & Hosie, 1986). Mathews et al. evaluated interaction patterns in average, non-clinical families of gifted children and compared data with a norm group. This research concluded that it was not necessary to advise psychological treatment for most families with gifted children, as those families were found to have overall healthier family functioning levels than the norm group (Mathews et al.).

Indeed, in a later study Shore, Cornell, Robinson and Ward (1991) also reported that despite the problems experienced by parents of gifted children, they did not require counselling, to assist with their difficulties, but rather required more informational support.

In addition, parents are not often prepared to cope with the substantial responsibilities and obligations, together with the financial burden of raising a gifted child (McMann & Oliver, 1988). The cost of raising gifted children may include additional materials and extracurricular enrichment programs and classes that are on a user pays system, such as WiseOnes and G.A.T.E.ways (Gifted and Talented Education) (Parliament

of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012). Under the circumstances, it is not unusual for parents to experience difficulties in providing for a gifted child's needs (Colangelo & Dettman, 1983). Parents may often feel an increased weight of responsibilities, compared with other parents (Feldman & Piirto, 2002). Moreover parents have reported they need assistance with meeting their child's educational needs, as well as their own parenting needs (Morawska & Sanders, 2009).

Parents become considerably stressed over concerns they have for their gifted children (Klein, 2007). Complications arise when parents advise their child's giftedness to others, such as other parents and teachers, and are then doubted and disbelieved (Delisle, 2002; Webb & DeVries, 1998). Research by Gross and Geake (2008) suggested the implicit negative attitude by teachers towards gifted students was rooted in a deep concern that gifted children are potentially antisocial and disruptive. A change of teachers' attitude was considered to be indicated. Geake & Gross advised that this could be facilitated by teachers attending suitably designed professional development programs.

As a clinical psychologist and educational consultant in giftedness, Dr Barbara Klein has shared her insights in a 2007 paperback publication. She reported that when parents raise the matter of their child's giftedness with their child's teachers, that some teachers become stressed. This is because teachers may feel pressured by the negative stereotype gifted parents have (Klein, 2007). Additionally, some teachers may become adversaries, instead of supporters, and parents may be confronted with the scorn and disbelief of educators. Additionally, the confusion about the standards and measurements of giftedness have been described as, "a diversionary strategy to wipe out the problems of the gifted child entirely" (Klein, p. 41). According to Klein, this is because gifted children require too much undivided attention. However, Klein also contended that parents of gifted children are in many instances, also gifted, and that parents can deal with some teachers'

disinterest and take remedial action to advocate for their children (Klein). Adjusting to a child's giftedness is not limited to teachers. Parents also experience an adjustment process when learning of their child's giftedness.

In early research by Ross in 1964, it was reported that parents' reactions of shock and disbelief when their child had been identified as gifted, which were similar to the reactions parents had when they were informed their child had a learning disability. When parents learnt their child was not a 'normal' or 'average' child, parents needed help to adjust and were required to learn to cope with the mismatch between the image of 'a child' and the reality of the parent's child (Ross). Similarly, Ross, Colangelo and Zaffran (1979) later reported parents experiences of confusion, anxiety and uncertainty about the best ways to manage their gifted child.

A study by Dettman and Colangelo (1980) concurred with Ross's (1964) findings and also suggested it was not the giftedness that the parents reacted to, rather, it was their child's different qualities, which increased parental concerns about their child's happiness and social adjustment. Of most concern was the fear that parents felt ill-prepared to deal with the needs of their gifted children (Dettman & Colangelo). In addition to parental ill preparedness, are the range of problems and difficulties parents encounter as they raise their gifted children.

One particular issue that parents are often required to deal with when raising their gifted children is bullying. Parents of gifted children have often been bullied when they were children (Peterson & Ray, 2006). Therefore, parents tend to be more mindful of the adverse effects of bullying (Peterson & Ray, 2006). This may compound the difficulties parents of gifted children already deal with (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). This is important, because it has been shown that bullying can generate serious emotional suffering in some

gifted individuals (Peterson & Ray). It is therefore prudent to examine bullying more closely.

4.2    *Bullying*

Contrary to reports in the modern media, bullying is a phenomenon first raised over 160 years ago (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011). Bullying most often refers to the recurring verbal or physical actions which have a hostile intent, and which also involve the power differential between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 1993). Previous studies reported that many school aged children, experience bullying (Olweus; Pepler et al., 2006; Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2011). Although bullying often happens in a school environment, the bullying dynamic can extend beyond peers, teachers, parents and the community (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007). Bullying can also occur via the internet, by emails, or through social media (Sawyer et al., 2011). Beane (2008) contended the prevalence of bullying is between 10 and 27 per cent of all school students, with rates of bullying consistent throughout the world.

The bullying of gifted children differs from bullying of other children (Davis, 2012). This is because many gifted children are often more sensitive and intense than other children. Gifted children's interests and behaviours can make them more vulnerable to bullying (Davis). Furthermore, high achieving children who are not valued in the school environment, or who are regarded as odd by others, makes it more likely that they will be mistreated by their peers (Peterson & Ray, 2006). Additionally, gifted individuals may often be targeted because they are considered by the community to be privileged students who get more than their share of recourses and additional help (Peterson & Ray).

When examining bullying and gifted children, Peterson and Ray (2006) reported that up to two thirds of gifted children had been bullied. Continued ostracism leads to social exclusion and rejection (Williams & Zadro, 2005). Social exclusion and rejection

are also forms of bullying (Smith et al., 2002). Such social exclusion and rejection can lead to ongoing psychological and interpersonal problems which can influence all aspects of the affected individuals' lives (Smith et al., 2002).

In a recent study which examined parents' experience of bullying, Cooper and Nickerson (2013) reported 90.3% of parents advised seeing and/or engaging with bullying behaviours in their youth. Similar numbers of parents reported being victimised, or acting as bystanders of bullying. Because bullying experiences can be recalled long after the bullying incidents occur, parents' subsequent levels of concern for their children tend to be reflected by their own previous bullying experiences (Cooper & Nickerson). Findings of the Cooper and Nickerson study suggest that parents' previous experiences of bullying predicted some of their current views, concerns, responses and strategies when dealing with their children's bullying experiences. Furthermore, parents who experienced or witnessed bullying when they were younger, were more likely to respond to their child's experience of bullying (Cooper & Nickerson).

Responses by parents to their child's bullying experiences in the Cooper and Nickerson (2013) study included talking to their child, suggested coping strategies, increasing supervision of their child, and engaging with their child's school. It was also found that parents who experienced bullying during their childhood may tend to overcompensate their bullying experiences, by ensuring a number of strategies are employed to prevent, or to intervene with their children's bullying experiences (Cooper & Nickerson). Strategies advised by parents to cope with bullying, included; (a) resisting the bullying by avoidance or ignoring the situation, or (b) to seek help from adults that were either parents or teachers: (c) for the child get help from friends, or, (d) for the child to make fun of the bullying situation, or, (e) for the child to fight back the bully. In addition, one third of the parents indicated they would contact the parents of another child following

the bullying incident. Parents' reactions tended to depend on their recollections of their earlier experience of bullying, together with the impact the bullying had on them (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013).

Moreover, bullying is considered a risk factor for psychological well-being and social adaption because of the long term consequences of the bullying experiences (Olweus, 1993). The consequences of bullying as suggested by Rigby (2003) include four negative health conditions. The negative health conditions are (1) low psychological well-being, (2) poor social adjustment, (3) psychological distress and (4) physical unwellness.

Similarly, a meta analysis that examined bullying and associated psychosomatic problems conducted by Gini and Pozzoli (2009), reported that individuals who had been bullied frequently suffered from psychosomatic problems, which had far reaching consequences. The far reaching consequences for the victims of bullying include low self-esteem, low self-worth, depression and suicidal ideation (Gini & Pozzoli). Notably, children who were often victims of bullying were up to three times more likely to attempt suicide in early adulthood, when compared with children who were either not victims of bullying, or who were bullied less often (Staubli & Killias, 2011). Furthermore, Gini and Pozzli have proposed that bullying is a matter serious enough to be considered as a significant international public health issue. Thus the effects of bullying can be considered to be serious, with effects that are not limited to the bullied child, but extend to the parents and other family members (Peterson & Ray, 2006). Be that as it may, the direct effects of bullying and other difficulties parents experience as they bring up their gifted children are embedded in a range of contextual factors that will be discussed in the next section.

4.3    *Contextual factors affecting parents of gifted children*

In addition, to the difficulties or challenges parents face in raising their gifted children, there are broader contextual factors that have been found to have an effect on the

parenting of gifted children. These factors include societal attitudes such as the tall-poppy syndrome, the philosophy of the AEU, and stereotypical views of parents of gifted children. It is argued that these contextual factors have an effect on how gifted children, and in turn their parents, are perceived by the wider community, and provide substantial challenges for parents. In addition, there are socioeconomic factors which may limit parents' ability to provide for their children.

### 4.3.1    Tall-poppy syndrome

The tall-poppy syndrome can be found in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, but it has a particular prevalence and importance in Australia (Klyver & Bager, 2012). The tall-poppy syndrome is most often regarded as an Australian characteristic, and refers to the general national intolerance of individuals derided as 'intellectuals' and thus labelled as 'tall poppies' by other Australians (Gross, 2004). The tall-poppy syndrome has also been described as the pleasure derived from seeing conspicuously successful individuals 'cut down to size' (Peeters, 2004). As Peeters proclaimed, "Thou shalt not be a tall poppy" (2004, p. 71).

Similarly, Gross (1999) described tall poppies as individuals that develop faster, or reach higher levels of achievement than their peers, and are then 'cut down to size' to conform to the majority, just as tall flowers are cut down for uniformity in a flower bed. "The cultivation and cropping of excellence" is how Spathopoulos (2009, p. 38) referred to the tall-poppy syndrome. McCarthy (2009) defined the tall-poppy syndrome as jealousy of an individual's success, and tall poppies as people who have an inflated sense of self worth. In keeping with the context of the tall-poppy syndrome, Australia has been referred to as the home of the "decapitated tall poppy" (Kissane, 1999, p. 8).

Therefore, it is not unusual that the tall-poppy syndrome has been consistently aligned with gifted individuals (Gross, 1999, 2004). When Alsop (1997) examined matters

concerning families and giftedness, she contended there was little reluctance of children and parents to be associated with enhanced athletic skills, but not so for enhanced intellectual skills. This can be illustrated by the 'hero' status afforded to some Australian sportsmen and sportswomen (West, 1987). The population of intellectual heroes is virtually excluded, with the odd rare exception, such as the under-publicised 'Young Tall Poppy Science Award' (Australian Institute of Policy and Science, 2013). Such is the strong influence the tall-poppy syndrome has, that it has become well entrenched in the Australian culture (Sekiya, 2008). Understanding why this has such influence requires some further investigation.

It has been proposed that the foundations of the tall-poppy syndrome were historical, and began when convicts were transported to Australia as a punishment for various crimes committed in Britain, across 80 years from 1788 (McCarthy, 2009). The convicts grew resentful of the 'free settlers' from England who had personal wealth but limited prosects in their home country. Convicts and free settlers struggled to survive in the harsh Australian environment. Although both the convicts and the free settlers struggled, the free settlers denied convicts equal opportunities and the normal rights of citizens, as they clung to the British class system. This state of affairs created great resentment against people with social position and wealth, which has been transferred across the generations since, as effectively cutting down those regarded as tall poppies (McCarthy).

In 1989, Feather conducted a study in Australia to examine the phenomenon of the tall-poppy syndrome. Feather concluded people were happier about a high achiever's fall on a performance scale, than an average achiever's fall on the performance scale. In addition, a global measure of tall poppy attitudes suggested negative attitudes were more

common amongst subjects with less self-esteem, and those who did not regard achievement and social power highly (Feather).

The suggestion made by Colangelo (2002) and echoed by Gross (2004), is that there is pressure on gifted students in America and Australia to hide their academic achievements. This pressure is a result of a perceived hostility towards intellectual elites; and that this prevents individuals from celebrating intellectual achievements (Colangelo, 2002; Gross, 2004; Webb & Kline, 1993). It should be noted that the tall-poppy syndrome is not directed at all high achieving individuals. For instance, the achievements of individuals such as elite sportsmen or sportswomen, or exceptional musicians, are often widely celebrated. In contrast, the cutting down of tall-poppies in Australia is most often directed at the minority of intellectual and artistic elites (Gross).

In dealing with the tall-poppy syndrome and the negative environment for gifted children, it is of no surprise that many parents have difficulty facing the predicament of rearing gifted children in Australia. The difficulties often begin after a child has been identified as gifted, and is the start of a long period of psychological adjustment by the parents (Dirks, 1979). Many parents acknowledge that their child develops differently from an early age (Gross, 1999). However, parents are not often well equipped to deal with their child's different development (Colangelo, 1988; May, 1994; Morawska & Sanders, 2009). As a result, parents may experience turmoil from the problems and concerns related to the child's giftedness (Colangelo; May). Moreover, compounding the problems and concerns of parents, is the matter of dealing with teachers and school staff, many of whom are members the Australian Education Union (AEU).The AEU has some bearing when examining support and the experience of raising gifted children in the Western region of Melbourne, which will be outlined in the next section.

### 4.3.2   *Philosophy of the AEU*

It has been argued that the tall-poppy syndrome is of particular relevance when examining the Australian experience of parenting gifted children. The tall-poppy syndrome is often coupled with the Australian ideologically unacceptable premise; that gifted children with different learning capacities often require differentiated teaching in educational settings (Gross, 2004). Politicians, community groups and teachers' unions such as AEU have been said to undermine, and have even attacked, existing programs for gifted children, because the programs were viewed as elitist and irrelevant (Gross). In terms of membership, the AEU has been reported to be the third largest trade union in Australia (Spaull). Membership of the AEU consisted of 186,000 people in 2013 (Australian Education Union, 2013). Members of the AEU include kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers, secondary schools teachers, principals, and allied staff. The AEU is a nationally organised union with a federal office with associated bodies in every state or territory in Australia (Australian Education Union).

As the AEU represent the bulk of educational staff, it is the body that may be the most representative of the membership's views on educational matters (Graham & Garsed, 2009). The AEU has been active in its involvement in a range of educational matters, including government inquiries. Merrotsy (2003) contended that the AEU's responses to government inquiries for the education of gifted children have been negative and unproductive. It has been suggested that the AEU is guided by the philosophy that 'every child is special', and therefore a diverse learning environment was favoured for all children (Martin, 2001). Because of this stance, the AEU opposed special programs for gifted children where the programs involved large amounts of in-school time, or other selective educational methods. Furthermore, the AEU contended that it was undesirable to create divisions by classifying some children as gifted, because this method segregates

students and establishes competition for resources.(Martin). In addition, the AEU has been found to refer to giftedness in inverted commas (Bluett & Henderson, 2011; Fitzgerald & Durbridge, 2001). Apart from direct quotations, inverted commas are most often used to signify slang or an invented or coined expressions (American Psychological Association, 2001). Therefore use of inverted commas tends to infer that giftedness may be odd or fictitious, and opens the concept of giftedness to be questioned.

In fact, Fitzgerald and Durbridge (2001), authors of the AEU submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Children in 2001, refer to "conceptual confusion, but great political influence of the 'notion of giftedness'", and that "the concept is usually deeply flawed" (p. 2). Moreover, Gross (2004) described the "disturbing levels of misinformation and hostility towards gifted and talented students evident in the policies and public pronouncements of the Australian teachers' industrial unions" (p. 36).

In their most recent submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students, the AEU stated, "In a pedagogical sense, all children should be taught as 'gifted', not just students classified as such" (Bluett & Henderson, 2011, p. 1). This statement is in opposition to the established literature which favours a differentiated curriculum for gifted students (Gagné, 1991, 1993, 2000; Gagné, 2007; Gross, 1999; Kronborg, Plunkett, Kelly, & Urquhart, 2008; Lewis & Louis, 1992; Moon et al., 1997; Peterson & Morris, 2010). Indeed, it is the preference of the AEU for high achieving students to remain in their regular class. The rationale for this preference is that the high achieving students will serve to motivate other students in the class by sharing their accomplishments (Bluett & Henderson, 2011). Conversely, this scenario may also prompt bullying behaviour by other students, who may resent high achieving students (Peterson & Ray, 2006).

More recently, the AEU has recognised the loss of high achieving students from government schools to private schools, which has negatively impacted on government schools' academic results (Australian Education Union Victorian Branch, 2012). Despite the drain of high achieving students to private schools, the AEU advise that parents should not be obliged to enrol their gifted children into private education to access gifted programs. Nonetheless the AEU does not endorse separate gifted programs outside of the classroom (Bluett & Henderson, 2011). This suggests that private schools may be more desirable educational institutions for gifted children for two reasons. First, because there may be more gifted children who attend private schools, and second, because private schools may have the financial resources to be able to provide a wider range of resources and programs. In fact, the Victorian Education and Training Committee Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students (2012, p. 50) reported a "flow" of gifted students transferred from public schools to private schools, which has had a negative impact of the education system overall.

Nevertheless, the AEU endorses the need for more education courses for teachers to help them better identify and cater for students of "various categories" (Bluett & Henderson, 2011, p. 2). Presumably, the "various categories" include gifted students. The AEU further stipulates that "Identifying and catering for potentially gifted and talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds should involve systematic and system-wide measures to improve educational outcomes of all students" (Bluett & Henderson, p. 6).

Overall the AEU's position on giftedness is open to debate, because of its entrenched opposition to the widely accepted modes of educating gifted children. This is problematic because the AEU is representative of many thousands of teachers across Australia, and therefore has considerable influence. Conversely, the AEU's stance on improving awareness by educating teachers in giftedness, together with the promotion of

better systems to identify and accommodate gifted students and their learning needs are valuable and worthy undertakings. Nonetheless, the influence of the AEU may affect how gifted children and parents of gifted children are perceived by the wider community. Indeed, parents of gifted children tend to be viewed in a less than positive manner and in a stereotypical manner by others, which will be discussed next.

### 4.3.3    *Stereotypical views of parents of gifted children*

It is not unusual for parents of gifted children to be stereotyped as 'pushy' parents , or as parents who 'hothouse' their children (Morrissey, 2011). 'Hothousing', is also known as 'pressure parenting' (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, Rescorla, Cone, & Martell-Boinske, 1991). The goal of the 'hothousing' of children is for children to acquire skills and knowledge earlier than is typical (Hyson et al., 1991). 'Hothousing' occurs when parents pressure their children to gain skills and knowledge more rapidly than they should (Quart, 2006). It has also been reported that some parents of gifted children have unrealistically high expectations and focus much of their attention on the performances of their children (Hills, 1987; Minuchin, 1987).

Hyson et al. (1991) examined the 'hothousing' beliefs of 90 mothers of pre-school children. Twenty nine mothers were found to have high levels of 'hothousing' beliefs. These mothers achieved high scores for critical, perfectionist, controlling and directive behaviours, in contrast with the other group of 61 mothers, who scored lower in all the 'hothousing' behaviours. Hyson et al suggested that although some parents are overambitious, and 'hothouse' their children, many parents of gifted children do not exhibit such behaviours.

In another investigation, Margrain (2010) explored parent-teacher partnerships for gifted early readers in New Zealand. Data was obtained from interviews with 11 parents of gifted readers. The findings indicated that parents had the ability to identify their

children's talents and strengths, and were responsive to their children's needs. In addition, parents of gifted children in this research provided the essential resource of time with their children, as well as supporting their children's needs. Moreover, it was found that the common assumptions that parents of gifted children 'hothouse' their children, or are overtly 'pushy', were dismissed. Similarly, when Winner (2000) investigated the contention that 'hothousing' practices compels children to achieve, she argued that "It is impossible to drive an ordinary child to the kinds of achievements that are seen in gifted children" (p.6). The notion of 'hothousing' was also examined by Gross in her research with highly gifted children (Gross, 1998; Gross, 1999, 2004).

Gross (1998) maintained that people do not question when a child who walks or talks early, but when early reading is coupled with unusually mature speech, a common community reaction is that the children have been 'hothoused'. Furthermore, Gross reported that teachers assume that children who enter school and have the ability to read have been taught by their parents, and some teachers may express views on this. Comments such as, "It's not fair to hothouse her like that" (Gross, 1998, p. 5) are commonly made by teachers, and often in the presence of the children concerned.

In addition, Gross (1998) also determined that it was not unusual for highly gifted children to teach themselves to read before the age of four from a variety of sources, including television, street signs and many other sources of available media. Margrain's (2010) study also negated the assumption that parents 'hothouse' their children and are 'pushy' parents. These studies have indicated there is little evidence to support the commonly held perception that parents 'hothouse' their children to increase their abilities (Gross, 1999; Margrain, 2010). Nevertheless, many parents of gifted children are not only perceived as 'hothousing' their children, but they are also regarded negatively as 'pushy' parents, particularly when they try to support the needs of their children (Quart).

Pushy is defined as excessively or unpleasantly self-assertive (Moore, 1997). 'Pushy parents' are suggested as being intrusive and enmeshed with their children (Wolk-White, 2009). That a parent of a gifted child is regarded as 'pushy' can be problematic (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012). For example, the statement that there is a "modern disease" of "pushy mothers", may have been merely a newspaper by-line which was originated by a celebrity mother (Paul, 2010, p. 3), but the hype does not often match the reality. Indeed, the unfavourable label of a 'pushy parent' tends to stereotype parents of gifted children, and compounds the difficulties many parents of gifted children experience (Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

In addition, parents of gifted children often need to advocate for their gifted child's needs with school staff. This is usually due to the lack of adequate educational programmes available at the schools. When this occurs, is not unusual for the parents to be regarded as 'pushy,' (Cross, 2007; Gross, 1998; Gross, 1999; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2007; Silverman, 1999).

The challenging interactions with educational professionals can be one of the most difficult relationships parents of gifted children have to contend with (Alsop, 1997). The difficult relationships between parents and schools are not assisted by the negative attitude towards gifted students and gifted education from teachers and schools in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012). Parents concerns tend to be rejected or ignored. When parents raised their possibility of their child's giftedness with the teachers concerned, the parents are often labelled as 'pushy parents'. "Seventeen of the 18 participants in the Committee's Parents' Forum indicated they had received such responses from their child's school" (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012, p. 83). Consequently, the concept of the 'pushy parent' appears to remain firmly entrenched in the educational arena.

Further afield in the USA, an example of the 'the pushy parent' experience was conveyed by James Delisle. Delisle, and his wife, were "written off as malcontents, pushy parents, who couldn't see beyond their own child's whining", (Delisle, 2006, p. 56). This attitude was conveyed by the school staff to Delisle who, together with his wife, held five degrees in education and had 30 years of teaching experience including teaching gifted children and counselling gifted adolescents (Delisle). This example indicates that parents of gifted children may regarded as 'pushy' irrespective of their qualifications, or knowledge in education or giftedness. In addition to the stereotypical perceptions that parents of gifted children have in the community, are socioeconomic factors which can affect the parenting process.

### 4.3.4    *Socioeconomic factors*

Together with broader contextual factors, socioeconomic factors may also have an effect on the ability of parents to raise their gifted children. Socioeconomic status (SES) is a factor that has considerable relevance when examining giftedness and gifted families. SES refers to:

> *"An individual's position in society as determined by a variety of factors including income, education, occupation, and accumulated wealth. It describes an individual's or a family's ranking on a hierarchy according to the access to or control over some combination of valued commodities such as wealth, power, and social status" (Sirin, 2010, p. 911).*

In their submission to the Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students Lipson and Black (2011) contended that if a child is living in a low SES circumstance, it can be difficult for them to be identified as gifted and then for them to be properly supported. Furthermore, they advised that equating giftedness with wealthy households effectively denies the gifted living in the lower SES western region of Melbourne (Lipson & Black).

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It has also been argued that giftedness is under-represented in groups which are not included in the mainstream culture (Ballam, 2009; Borland & Wright, 2000; Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000). That is, more children in families which are located in less affluent regions, and diverse cultures, such those found in the western region of Melbourne, are associated with educational and economic disadvantage (Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2007).

The western region of Melbourne has been reported as having the lowest educational levels in Melbourne (Melbourne's West Area Consultative Committee Inc., 2005). Although the education levels are low, the western region of Melbourne is located in a developed area (Regional Development Victoria, 2012). Many children who live in developed regions, but are economically disadvantaged, have been unintentionally, chronically and systematically under-represented in programs for the gifted (Borland & Wright). The economically developed countries of New Zealand and the USA have people living in developed regions which are also in economically disadvantaged environments, which compare with Australia.

Though this research is based in the western region of Melbourne, comparisons can be made with Ballam's (2009) New Zealand paper, which contended that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are underrepresented and under-recognised. Ballam reported that the New Zealand's Ministry of Education (2000) recognised that students from low socioeconomic environments and the associated condition of poverty, can negatively affect the realisation of a child's potential and that these children are underrepresented in gifted programmes. In contrast with the positive environment that financial advantage offers, poverty and conditions associated with it, can have significant impacts on the realisation of an individual's potential in New Zealand (Ballam).

Similarly in Australia, families in the western region of Melbourne earn lower incomes than other regions of Melbourne, with an average per capita disposable income of $29,800 (Regional Development Victoria, 2012). The timing, depth and duration of poverty are factors that are inextricably linked with educational outcomes (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Friedman, 1994). Lower income families experience higher degrees of stress psychologically which may also negatively influence outcomes (Ballam; Friedman). Like Australia, families in New Zealand that live in challenging neighbourhoods in inadequate housing may believe they have a lack of control over their circumstances (Ballam). Therefore, the financial circumstances of a family play a role in educational results for children (Ballam).

Financial factors affect the choices which are available to gifted children (Ballam, 2009). Choices for gifted children may include school electives and extracurricular activities. Ballam suggested many parents have good intentions to support their gifted children, but, financial pressures could become the central focus for the family. Thus the problems associated with financial pressures may negatively impact the family (Ballam). Australia and new Zealand are not the only countries affected by low socioeconomic factors.

Further afield in Kansas, in the USA, Friedman (1994) also reported that low socio-economic status families with gifted children often experience increased degrees of stress. In addition, gifted children from low income families can be at risk of failing to reach their potential, because of the barrier of poverty (Friedman). The problems associated with families with gifted children and low socioeconomic status is not restricted to regions in New Zealand, the USA and Australia. But because of the similarities, comparisons between the countries help us to understand that socioeconomic issues and the stressors related to financial problems and can be a considerable difficulty that many families with

gifted children deal with. In addition, parents of gifted children may also be affected by stigma and labelling.

### 4.3.5    *Stigma and labelling*

Stigma has been described as an attribute that extensively discredits a person, reducing him or her from a whole and usual individual to a tainted one (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatisation takes place when a person has, or is believed to have, an attribute or characteristic that suggests a social identity which is devalued in a social context (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Stigma has been correlated with factors that include poor mental health, low social status, and physical illness (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Parents of gifted children are subject to, and vulnerable from, the stigma which this differentness holds (Alsop, 1997). As parents are confronted by the stigma of raising gifted children this can adversely affect their parenting (Coleman, 1985). This makes parenting even more difficult, particularly in an environment where parents are effectively cut off from the supports that other parents enjoy (Alsop, 1997; Porter, 2005).

Coleman developed a framework containing basic assumptions and ways of thinking about the stigma associated with giftedness employing the Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm (SGP) in 1985. The SGP contended that gifted children want normal social interactions, but believe people treat them differently. Because the gifted children perceive themselves as being treated differently, this influences how others interact with them. Gifted children's strategies to deal with this differentness include the manipulating the information others have about them through in order to cope more effectively (Cross & Coleman, 1993). Parents of gifted children also develop strategies to deal with the stigma and attitudes of others, such as not informing others of their child's giftedness and not sharing their gifted children's accomplishments (Free, 2006; Irving, 2004). The stigma that many parents of gifted children deal with can negatively affect their everyday lives .

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Based on their experiences, stigmatised groups of individuals develop shared understandings of their stigmatised position in society (Crocker et al., 1998). One of the shared understandings is that stigmatised groups develop is an awareness that they are viewed as diminished, or of less value, than others. Furthermore, the stigmatised groups' identity, may make it more likely that the stigmatised groups could be victims of discrimination (Crocker et al.).

Stigma has also been described as a label which has been found to be multifaceted (Hershey & Oliver, 1988; Manaster, Chan, Watt, & Wiehe, 1994; Robinson, 1989; Whitmore, 1986). It has been argued that the potential for gifted children to be stigmatised can be mediated through social informational control (Cross & Coleman, 1993). That is, gifted children and their families may hide their child's giftedness to influence others' perceptions. Through this process gifted children become aware of being labelled (Cross & Coleman, 1993).

Labelling is a social process which involves society and the individual (Robinson, 1989). Labelling theory hypothesises that labelling refers to a description of an individual's particular characteristics, and that this may have a significant effect on the labelled individual's behaviour (American Psychological Association, 2009). Kissane (1999) suggested that the word gifted is a "curse of a label" (1999, p. 8). This is because Kissane contended that the concept of giftedness implies a rich endowment for an individual, without the need for extra attention or assistance. Yet, it is more often the case that gifted children require specialised attention to cater for their needs (Kissane). Since giftedness is often regarded as a negative label, gifted children (and by association, their parents) may be labelled by others including students, teachers and school administrators (Cross & Coleman, 1993). In addition, some parents may also label their gifted child (Keirouz, 1990; Silverman & Kearney, 1989). Moreover, family members may label and

reject a gifted child, particularly if the family members feel intimidated by the gifted child's capabilities (Dahlberg, 1992). As a result of the numerous problems, it is not surprising that parents of gifted children are in considerable need of support.

Community interventions have been shown to be an effective strategy when dealing with stigmatised groups of individuals (Blignault, Woodland, Ponzio, Ristevski, & Kirov, 2009). The Blignault et al. study focussed on Australian populations of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals with mental illness, where such populations turned to traditional healers to in an effort to be 'normalised' (Blignault et al., 2009, p. 228). Parallels could be drawn with parents of gifted children who may consider giftedness to be a curse and a label (Kissane, 1999), which may stigmatise parents of gifted children. Because giftedness differentiates parents of gifted children from others it places additional burdens on raising their children (Klein, 2007). Due to the differences, stigma and misconceptions associated with the parents of gifted children, it is necessary to understand what the best parenting practices are for parents of gifted children.

## 4.4 *Best parenting practices for gifted children*

A parenting practice refers to a specific behaviour that parents uses to rear a child (Spera, 2005). Bornstein, Hahn and  Hayne (2011) define parenting practices as language, sensitivity, affection and play. An exploration of the theories of best parenting practices for gifted children was undertaken by Olszewski-Kubilius (2002). She found that family dynamics is the most important factor for gifted children to reach their potential. Parental practices within the family dynamic that were the most beneficial include: practices that encourage and support accelerative learning practices, facilitating learning with others of similar abilities, interests and motivation, mentoring and coaching to deal with stress and criticism (Olszewski-Kubilius). In addition, an important role for parents is to assist their gifted children to establish social networks. Social networks can provide emotional support

for their gifted children's abilities. Parents can do this by enrolling their gifted children in after-school and holiday programs, which are populated with peers who may help to provide the necessary social and emotional support (Olszewski-Kubilius).

Parents who can demonstrate an enjoyment of learning and undertake work, can positively influence their gifted children (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002; Olszewski, Kulieke, & Buescher, 1987). Parents who exhibit risk taking and coping skills when problems and failure occur, can show that success requires hard work over a sustained time, and provide valuable models for their gifted children (Olszewski-Kubilius). Notwithstanding, parents who value and encourage their children's independent thought and expression, together with their children engaging in a range of recreational, cultural and intellectual pursuits, may assist with the development of their children's potential (Olszewski-Kubilius). The Olszewski-Kubilius study illustrates that raising gifted children can be a costly financial proposition which can add to the burdens a family may experience, but that families which are intact and happy, with moderate levels of stress are more likely to facilitate the development of children with a high IQ, into productive, competent and well-adjusted individuals (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002).

Earlier, Bloom (1985) identified that many parents of gifted children emphasise the value of academic performance. Positive home influences include where parents of gifted children encourage their children's school activities, involve themselves in the child's educational activities, and provide stimulating opportunities (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000). This range of parental involvement challenges their children which helps to develop their children's talents. Conversely, a risk factor for gifted students can be unrealistic parental expectations, which could develop as over-involvement or enmeshment (Pfeiffer & Stocking).

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As discussed earlier, enmeshment can lead to psychological problems and negative outcomes for both parents and children (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000). The psychological problems included anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Additionally, gifted students were observed to respond to their parents enmeshed parenting style by lying and stealing as form of rebellion (Pfeiffer & Stocking). It was also reported that some parents of gifted children narcissistically try to experience life rewards by living their lives vicariously through their children. By doing so, undue pressure and excessive parental intrusiveness can be created. The outcomes of such parental intrusiveness include the child rebelling with disobedient, attention-seeking, oppositional-defiant, attention-seeking and aggressive behaviours (Pfeiffer & Stocking). The dangers of parental over-involvement as evidenced in an intrusive authoritarian style of parenting suggest a marker of possible negative outcomes for gifted children. Because gifted children often have additional needs and rely on their parents to assist them, they may be especially vulnerable to their parents, particularly those who have an authoritarian parenting style (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000).

The factor of parental enmeshment was omitted from the Bloom (1985) study and the Olszewski-Kubilius (2002) study. Nonetheless, the Olszewski-Kubilius (2002) findings also concur with the Bloom (1985) study, because Olszewski-Kubilius suggests home influences, including parental style and mentor encouragement, have greater importance than school influences on the development of gifted children. In addition, the authoritative parental style, with its emphasis on the listening, and encouragement of children, in an environment with appropriate limits and boundaries, is considered the best parental style to raise gifted children with (Dwairy, 2004). Furthermore, Brooks, Gunn and Marksman (2005) also reported that parental encouragement, discipline and being taught well taught, were of great importance for children to highly achieve.

In addition to parental encouragement, Olszewski (2002), Csikszentmihalyi et al (1997) concluded that there was a second positive factor common amongst families with gifted children. This factor was the family environment which supported their gifted child's academic pursuits and individual needs. Parents' opinions regarding their child's academic performance may also be influenced by the parents' educational levels, parenting style and ethnic background (Dornbusch et al., 1987; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). Parents' educational levels are a theme in Gustin's (1985) research.

Gustin's (1985) study on research mathematicians resonates today. He reported that warm, loving, conscientious parents who encouraged their children's curious nature and facilitated their education were common in the study. Comments from parents included, "Letting them [the children] become what they want to be", "I have strong feelings against pressuring children", and parents advice given to their children such as, "Be your own person", and "Get the most out of your abilities" (Gustin, p. 273).

Although 70 % of the parents of the mathematicians were generally highly educated, three fathers and five mothers had levels of high school education. Four types of supportive parent groups emerged from the study. One group were mainly invested in the moral support of their children. A second group ensured sufficient materials were available to support their children's interests. A third group worked with their children on projects and had discussions in maths or science areas. A fourth group were directly involved in organising specific opportunities, such as summer programs or early college admission (Gustin, 1985).

The majority of the mathematicians were first-born, or only children (Gustin, 1985). This is in keeping with the established literature that an unusually high proportion of gifted children are first born (Gross, 2004; Paulhus, Trapnell, & Chen, 1999; Sulloway, 2007). The findings recognised that a supportive environment in childhood encouraged

curiosity and intellectual pursuits, which was helpful in the development of future eminent mathematicians. Another factor that was suggested as helpful, were high levels of family socio-economic status, which assisted with obtaining the required resources to foster their gifted children's academic performance (Gustin).

There is little disagreement that gifted children need the appropriate environment to fully develop. Klein (2007) stated, "Giftedness is like a flower that blooms from season to season, dependent on the environment that nurtures and protects it. The better suited the environment for the particular talent; the more likely it is to flourish" (p. 41). A supportive and nurturing familial environment, are vital for gifted children to grow and develop their potential (George, 2012). In order to accomplish this goal, suitable parental practices that encourage and facilitate the gifted child's learning, such as an authoritative parenting style, are of crucial importance (Dwairy, 2004; Snowden & Christian, 1999; Speirs Neumeister & Finch, 2006). Although there is a general acceptance that suitable environments and supportive parenting is favourable for raising gifted children, appropriately targeted strategies may be helpful for families with gifted children.

4.5     ***Strategies to help families with gifted children***

Whilst much of the literature is directed at how parents should raise their gifted children and support them educationally (Alvino, 1995; Clark, 2008; Delisle, 2006; Jolly & Matthews, 2012; Morawska & Sanders, 2009), little research is aimed at assisting parents to support and manage their experiences of raising gifted children. Some of the difficulties associated with families with gifted children, and the limited strategies that have been developed to assist parents of gifted children are discussed here.

Pfeiffer and Stocking (2000) identified five difficulties and risk factors that were associated with gifted children and their families. The first risk factor was the child's asynchronous development, which may lead the child to be particularly vulnerable, both

socially and emotionally, and may make them feel 'out of place'. The second risk factor was the unrealistic expectations of teachers and parents and their excessive use of praise. The excessive praise tended to produce a mismatch between the child's levels of giftedness and the child's ability to reach particular levels of eminence and later success. Pfeiffer and Stocking contended that this risk factor is especially important because it can lead to later defiance, power struggles, hopelessness, depression, underachievement, and possible drug and alcohol use. In addition, the third risk factor was parental over-involvement or enmeshment, where parents tend to live their lives through their children, creating too much pressure on the gifted child. This may elicit rebelliousness in the form of oppositional-defiant and disobedient behaviours from the gifted child. Fourth, was the frequent mismatch of a gifted child's educational environment and their capabilities, which may provoke problem behaviours or boredom in the gifted child. Last, that gifted children, particularly those who are highly gifted, are vulnerable to emotional and social problems difficulties with the peers; which may be overlooked by parents and teachers, and result in such as a lack of suitable peers and/or a lack of acceptance by the peers. In addition, a gifted child may exhibit what seems to peers as an arrogant attitude, because of the gifted child's use of an advanced vocabulary (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000). Therefore, there is a requirement for parents and school staff to be aware of the risk factors that influence the vulnerability of gifted students and mediate appropriately (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000).

Strategies to deal with the five risk factors and difficulties advised by Pfeiffer and Stocking (2000) are four-fold. Initially, for parents teachers and administrators to provide current information about the needs and challenge the myths associated with gifted children, including that gifted children do not require special educational assistance. Second, because parents of gifted children encounter a range of problems in the school and community, therefore families and schools should work together to coordinate and obtain

educational opportunities for the gifted child's optimal development. Third, the use of a practitioner to provide motivation and encouragement for the gifted child. The practitioner would serve to stimulate the gifted student's interests, in order to identify areas where the gifted child can achieve success. Fourth, for school staff to recognise when normative adolescent behaviour has been complicated by intellectual giftedness, and provide therapeutic support and interventions where necessary (Pfeiffer & Stocking). One therapeutic strategy devised was the McMaster model of family functioning (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983).

The McMaster model of family functioning was developed by Epstein, Baldwin and Bishop in 1983, and is still is regarded as effective and useful (Carr, 2012). It was previously recognised that most parents of gifted children face special circumstances that are different from other families, and that this brought with it a risk of healthy family functioning (Mathews et al., 1986). The McMaster model of family functioning was formulated as a structured problem-centred method of family therapy. The course of therapy begins with a systematic assessment. The therapy continues with a task-focussed approach, to assist families replace problem family interaction patterns. The task-focussed approach encompasses clear communication, effective and collaborative problem-solving, and connectedness within the family (Carr).

Mathews et al. (1986) evaluated interaction patterns in families with gifted children and compared data with a group of non gifted families which had previously participated in a validation study of the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) (Epstein et al., 1983).The McMaster FAD is a questionnaire consisting of seven scales which measure : (1) problem-solving, (2) communication, (3) roles, (4) affective responsiveness, (5) affective involvement, (6) behaviour control, and (7) general functioning.

The findings of Mathews et al.(1986) reported families with gifted children had a significantly higher level of adjustment on six of the seven FAD scales, but did not find significant differences in the affective involvement scale. Mathews et al. concluded that family therapy treatment for most families with gifted children was not necessary. This was because families with gifted children were found to have overall healthier family functioning levels than the comparison group (Mathews et al.).

An Australian study by Marowska and Sanders (2009) examined parenting gifted children, based on a version of the Triple P Positive Parenting Program. The Triple P program is considered to be helpful for parents with children who have problematic behaviours (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully, & Bor, 2000). The Triple P program is a parenting and family support strategy designed to prevent serious behavioural, emotional and developmental problems in children, by aiming to improve knowledge, skills, and the confidence of parents through positive parenting practices. Over nine sessions, parents are taught 17 core child management strategies; ten strategies are designed to foster children's development and confidence, such as talking with children, physical affection, praise and attention. Seven strategies were formulated to assist parents manage children's misbehaviour and include the use of behaviour charts and logical consequences, such as time-out. A six step planned activities routine is also taught to enhance parenting. Activities include planning ahead, rulemaking and formulating rewards and consequences. Role-plays, feedback and homework tasks are methods employed to assist with educating parents in this program (Sanders et al., 2000).

The study by Morawska and Sanders (2009). utilised a modified version of the of the Triple P program that was developed for parents of gifted and talented children. Because gifted children are considered to be more vulnerable in developing behavioural and emotional problems (Neihart, 1999), modifications were made to the Triple P

program. Changes were made in order address the role that parenting has with problem behaviours of gifted children.

Upon completion of the nine weeks, parents evaluated the Gifted and talented Tripe P program. Parents acknowledged the program had assisted with their children's behavioural issues. Nonetheless, the parents advised the program did not meet their needs. The Gifted and Talented Triple P program did not specifically address the concerns of parents coping with raising a gifted child. Parents wanted help with their gifted child's behavioural issues. Parents also wanted help dealing with the emotional, physical and mental challenges can be exhausting for some parents of gifted children. Findings from this study indicated a clear need for future approaches and strategies to specifically and properly address the needs of parents of gifted children. Aspects to be addressed should include ways of parents of gifted children to cope and manage their time and emotions because the ability to attend to their own needs was compromised, due to their attempts to meet their children's needs as best they could.

The Morawska and Sanders (2009) study contributes to the existing literature and helpfully identifies that parents of gifted children have their own set of particular needs. These needs are not currently addressed in other programs or interventions and are only partially addressed in programs that focus on problem behaviours of children. Although serving an important purpose, formal parenting programs and therapeutic interventions may not always be suitable for families with gifted children, as Mathews West and Hosie (1986) and Shore et al (1991) reported. More recent research has also acknowledged that therapeutic assistance is not always the most suitable method of dealing with difficulties associated with parenting gifted children (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

In the USA (Rimm, 2006), the UK (Clark & Callow, 2013) and Australia (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012), it has been suggested that enrichment programs developed by organisations for gifted children can be helpful, but a support strategy where the central focus is on the parents of gifted children is often overlooked. A parent-focussed mutual support strategy could provide an opportunity for parents to meet with other parents of gifted children. This approach may help parents to share information, validate their experiences and seek solutions to the problems encountered with raising their gifted children (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

Strategies which provide support are needed because parents play such an important role in their gifted child's life (Alvino, 1995; Clark, 2008; Olszewski et al., 1987; Rimm, 2006). Strategies are especially necessary in the Australian culture, where the tall-poppy syndrome encourages high achievers to be 'cut down to size' to fit in with the majority, and make it more difficult for parents to raise their gifted children (Gross, 1999). Moreover, the AEU appears to support concept of the tall-poppy syndrome within an educational framework (Bluett & Henderson, 2011). This may tend to compound the already complex situation for parents, as they navigate their way through schools, education and government departments. The socioeconomic factors relevant to the western region of Melbourne population also impact parents of gifted children, and particularly impinge on those with low incomes (Lipson & Black, 2011). Coupled with this are the common misconceptions that parents 'hothouse' and push their children (Alsop, 1997; Gross, 2004). It is unsurprising that parents feel stigmatised and labelled, by simply being parents to children who are gifted. It stands to reason that in the current climate, best practices for parenting gifted children, together with the engagement of targeted strategies may provide some relief and assist parents of gifted children. The prevailing conditions

suggest that parents of gifted children have little choice but to intervene and advocate for their children, despite the multifaceted challenges they face (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

When exploring the challenges parents experience whist raising gifted children, the parent most often referred to is the mother. Usually, when investigations of parents of gifted children occur, a parent who is often unnoticed, or disregarded, is the father. This is largely due to the few studies available that focus on the parenting of gifted children, with some exceptions (Blanchfield, 2002, 2005; Hébert, Pagnani, & Hammond, 2009; Lee, 2010). Fathers' contributions as individuals, parents and family members are vital when examining the key role they play within the family system, particularly in a family with a gifted child.

# CHAPTER 5

## 5. Fathers

*"Fathers are not male mothers."*

William Pollack (1998, p. 113)

Fathers of gifted children tend to experience their relationship differently than mothers of gifted children (Rudasill & Callahan, 2008). Only limited research is available that explores fathering of gifted children. The current research hopes to further explore this particular parental aspect. This review will also suggest some differences that appear to exist for fathers gifted children. An exploration of the fathering dynamic, with reference to the Bateman Principle, will be undertaken, as well as an investigation of a range of fathers roles and competencies, together with educational values and the practices of parenting gifted children.

### 5.1 *The Bateman Principle*

Stereotypical and ideal images of how archetypal fathers in the USA and western countries can be related to the Bateman Principle. The Bateman Principle (Bateman, 1948) originated from biological research into fruit flies and found males invest less energy into fathering offspring than females. This formative biological research has influenced evolutionary theory in prescribing stereotypical sex roles in human beings (Brown, Laland, & Mulder, 2009). Although there are obvious differences between male adult human beings and fruit flies, the Bateman principle has some parallels with the culture of generations of fathers, their fathering roles and practices.

### 5.2 *Roles of fathers*

Lazicki-Puddy and Roberts (2006) contended that major shifts in society has changed the definitions and roles of fathers within the past 50 years. Throughout the

decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the typical expectation of the father's role was the 'breadwinner and disciplinarian'. Whereas in the decade of the 1970s, there were expectations that fathers would increase their participation in the household responsibilities, although this did not necessarily occur (Lazicki-Puddy & Roberts). In the 1980s, the notion of the nurturing and emotional father was more emphasised. During later decades, a number of fathers tried to find a balance amongst many different roles. Roles include the still unusual 'stay-at-home fathers', and some fathers with single parent responsibilities. Many of the role variations occurred largely in response to economic and political changes that took place from the 1960s to the 1990s. Although all fathers roles were based on the traditional father's role, in more recent decades many fathers have tried to find a balance among the more traditional and modern approaches to fathering (Lazicki-Puddy & Roberts).

Traditionally, the role of the father has been that of a provider (Frieman & Berkeley, 2002). Modern fathers are becoming more engaged in childrearing but as previously advised, they are still predominately regarded as the 'breadwinners' (Lee, 2010). The male 'breadwinner' model was founded on a set of assumptions about male and female contributions within the household, that is, men had the primary responsibility to earn income, and women were to care for the young and elderly (Lewis, 2001).

Many men were raised by fathers who prioritised work obligations at the expense of child obligations (Frieman & Berkeley; McKenry, 1986). Men who now want to prioritise caring for their children first, and work second, are dealing with the situation that many women have dealt with. That is, the considerable difficulties involved in the hard choices that need to be made with regard to caring for children and work (Frieman & Berkeley).

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In a more recent Korean paper, Seon-Young Lee (2010) reported the traditional role of the father is slowly developing more of a focus on child involvement. The Lee study also reiterated the traditional model of fathers as primarily providing financial support, but acknowledged that fathers' roles and effective father figures should be re-examined and redefined. This could be done by taking into account the changed demands on families in the context of cultural, ethnical, societal, familial, and personal variables that help to shape the role of a father (Lee).

Fathers' roles were previously viewed as limited with the father's occupation having much influence (Lee, 2010). However, gradual modifications to the traditional 'breadwinner' father role have slowly occurred. This is important, because fathers have not often been fully acknowledged by scholars, researchers, or educators beyond their traditional 'breadwinning' role. In addition, fathers impact on children's development, has not been a major concern of (Lee, 2010).

When Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) examined fathering they suggested it was a social role that was often performed by men inadequately. Their approach emanated from a 'general deficit paradigm' that was derived from research on men and fathers (Hawkins & Dollahite). Within the deficit paradigm, fathers are unwilling to be involved with parenting and unwilling to change (Hawkins & Dollahite). Extending the deficit paradigm is the contention that children who grow up without the active involvement of the role of a committed father may experience negative school, behavioural and emotional effects and have general poor developmental outcomes (Horn, 2006).

It stands to reason that the involvement of fathers in their children's' lives can be related to the amount of time fathers spend with children (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Shwalb, Nakazawa, Yamamoto, & Hyan, 2010). The factor of time spent with children is of considerable importance when examining father's roles.

More fathers are also gradually spending more time raising children, which is considered encouraging by Kalenkoskiand Foster (2008). Conversely, this may also be viewed as discouraging. This is because the increase in time spent by fathers raising children is marginal, when compared with the time spent by mothers raising children (Kalenkoski & Foster). That fathers spend less time with children reinforces the stereotypical representation of the 'distant father', that is, fathers who are less engaged with care giving and other parental activities (Hewlett & Macfarlan, 2010).

In some countries perspectives based on traditional images of fatherhood such as the Confucian view of the 'strict father' in Korea (Ryu, 1994) are gradually being replaced by a more complex view of fathering styles, roles and characteristics (Lee, 2010; Shwalb et al., 2010). In the USA changed social factors have influenced the transformation of fathering roles (Marsiglio, 1995). The changed social factors include the greater participation of women in the workforce and the progression towards a more service-based economy (Marsiglio).

Lamb (2010, p. ix) suggested the more complex views of fathering roles have stemmed from "drastically changing social landscapes", in most continents of the world. Lazicki-Puddy and Roberts (2006) advised cultural and familial ideologies affect the roles that fathers' play, together with the activities conducted with their children, such as physical play. But fathers involvement with their children is considered to be different across cultures (Lamb, 2010). It is therefore appropriate that fathers' roles and practices should be investigated in the context of the Australian culture, where this research took place.

### 5.2.1 *Australian fathers*

A range of factors influence fathering practices in Australia, such as the recognition of the importance of the relationship between a father and child, together with the

prominent contribution fathers make to the family (Baxter & Smart, 2011; Craig & Mullan, 2012). Craig and Mullan contend that there is an expectation are that fathers will become increasingly active and take a 'hands-on' approach to fathering their children, in addition to the traditional role of being financial providers (Craig & Mullan).

Furthermore, in Australia, when men are to become fathers, they often receive information and advice from their partner and also from others, such as friends and family (Boyce, Condon, Barton, & Corkindale, 2007). In addition, when men do become fathers, their fathering role may be guided by popular Australian paperback books. 'A man's guide to raising kids' by Michael Grose (2000) and 'Raising boys' by Steve Biddulph (1997) would appear to be the dominant texts. More than a million copies of 'Raising boys' have been sold (The Book Depository, 2010). It is not unusual for these books to be purchased when a male becomes a father. Although of some value, recognising the importance of active parenting and co-parenting (Grose), the information contained within these books may influence and shape many fathers' cognitive and behavioural fathering processes. Furthermore, they reinforce a range of staid traditionalist views, such as "Childcare is not good for boys" (Biddulph, p. 11), "Mothers are usually the primary parent, but a father can take this place" (Biddulph, p. 11) and, "Many men would rather miss a parent-teacher interview or helping a child with homework than miss watching him or her play sport" (Grose, p. 54).

Thus, it could be said that in some ways Australian fathers' parenting perspectives and practices do not appear to be developing at the same rate as contemporary fathering practices found in Europe (Featherstone, 2009). This seems to be at odds with the developing pace of the modern Australian culture and more contemporary child rearing practices by fathers.

### 5.2.2    *Fathers and child rearing*

Opportunities and constraints available to fathers continue to differ according to class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and age (Featherstone, 2009). Traditionally, many fathers assume a minimal level of responsibility with child rearing (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Even though the culture of fatherhood is changing over time, and the expectations of the fathers' child rearing behaviours have increased, fathers have responded slowly, and have only gradually increased their participation in child rearing and levels of responsibilities (Daly, 1993; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004).

Other research (Kalenkoski & Foster, 2008; Pleck, Masciadrelli, & Lamb, 2004) noted fathers in the USA spend consistently less time with their children than mothers do. Australian fathers have been reported as spending an average of six minutes per day with their child (Kalenkoski & Foster). Furthermore, the father and child activities tend to be more enjoyable than routine household activities (Sayer et al., 2004). The Kalenkoski and Foster study and the Sayer et al. study, support earlier research by Daly in 1993. Daly argued that the lack of more involved parenting by fathers may be attributed to the lack of male parental role models. Daly also suggests the strong central role a mother plays also contributes to the lack of father involvement.

In addition, it has been suggested that a partner's lack of confidence in the father's parenting skills may influence the degree of the father's involvement (Phares, Rojas, Thurston, & Hankinson, 2010). This may lead to reduced parenting participation by the father (Phares et al.). Moreover, it has been reported that mothers are more deeply involved in child rearing than fathers, due to mothers conforming to the conventional mother's role (McKeown, 2001). A conventional mother's role traditionally involved more contact with children and the community, than the conventional father's role of less

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involvement with children and the community (McKeown). Thus the matter of father involvement will be discussed further in the subsequent section.

### 5.2.2.1 *Father involvement*

Father involvement has been defined by Cook and Jones (2007) as the participation of a father in his child's life. Cook and Jones defined eight aspects of father involvement. The first four factors are related to time. The first factor is one-on-one time with the child, the second is time spent with the child when others are present, the third is time spent assessing a child's needs whilst with the child, whilst the forth is time spent getting information about the child's needs. The additional four factors are related to affection and time. They include the amount of affection given to the child, the amount of time spent reading to the child, time working for the purpose of improving a child's life, and time spent helping the child's mother (Cook & Jones). A fathers involvement in their child's life assists with the promotion children's physical well-being emotional areas (Cook & Jones, 2007; Farver & Wimbarti, 1995; Kerns & Barth, 1995). Furthermore, Aldous et al. (1998) contend that if father involvement is established early in a child's life, it will often remain consistent throughout the child's life (Aldous et al., 1998).

This finding was supported by McBride Schoppe-Sullivan and Ho (2005). From a sub sample of 1334 families, a significant relationship was established between aspects of a father's involvement in the child's education and student achievement. The relationship found was beyond what was accounted for by mothers' involvement. Specifically, school-level and family-level resources and child achievement were partially mediated by fathers becoming involved, or more involved in their child's education at school (McBride et al., 2005). Moreover, several studies have contended that children with highly involved fathers had characteristics which included increased cognitive competence, greater empathy, a more internal locus of control and less sex-stereotyped beliefs (Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 1997;

Pruett, 1985; Radin, 1994). It is clear that the involvement of a father in a child's life is

valuable, but more so, if the father is also a competent parent (Bradford & Hawkins, 2006).

### 5.2.2.2 *Fathering competence*

It has been argued that parental competence is the most important basis for a

child's development (Petermann & Petermann, 2006). Competent fathering is generated

from interpersonal experiences that have been observed and encountered throughout a

male's lifespan (Bradford & Hawkins, 2006). Competent fathering has been considered as

a combination of caring activities that include a number of cognitive, affective and

behavioural components (Bradford & Hawkins). An instrument that measured competent

fathering, known as the 'Inventory of Father Involvement' (IFI), was developed by

Hawkins et al. (2002). This self-report measure was designed to extend broader and richer

conceptualisations of father involvement that go beyond the time fathers spend with

children (Hawkins et al.). Hawkins et al concluded that the IFI was helpful in obtaining a

deeper understanding of father involvement, although more refinements were needed to

further develop improve the IFI. Employing the yardstick of 'time spent with children'

indeed has value, but it does not measure other important factors that include the quality of

the time spent, the degree of parental competence, or the factor of father involvement.

Dick (2004) argued that it is equally important to understand the type and quality of the

relationship a father has with his children, because these characteristics influence parenting

skills and competence.

Belsky, Robins, Gamble and Lewis (1984) argued parental competence could be

measured by three major determinants of parental competence, which can be appropriately

applied today. These determinants are: patience, endurance and commitment. Inclusive of

fathering, parental competence was defined as having two central components of

sensitivity and involvement; that is, the parent must be sensitive to the child's needs in a

suitable manner (Belsky, Robins, & Gamble). Good parenting is often implied, but Belsky, Robins, Gamble and Lewis contended that:

> *Competent parenting is defined as that style of child rearing that enables the developing person to acquire the capacities required for dealing effectively with the ecological niches that she or he will inhabit during childhood, adolescence and adulthood (p. 251).*

When examining competent fathering, longitudinal studies provide valuable data. The longitudinal study by Bradford and Hawkins (2006) posits fathering as a developmental process, and that good fathering is competent parenting. The context of the father being involved in a loving and committed relationship is of key importance in developing parenting competencies (Bradford & Hawkins). Thus, parental competencies play a role when examining what is involved with fathering gifted children. The notion of 'Healthy fatherhood' also merits investigation when examining fathers and fathering practices.

### 5.2.2.3 *Healthy fatherhood*

When investigating fathering practices, it is suitable to determine what is deemed to be healthy fatherhood (Gurian, 1996). Healthy fatherhood acts as a preventative measure for children's problems that can emerge in later life. Following an examination of young male culture in the USA, Gurian proposed a four-step model of healthy fatherhood, which will now be outlined.

The first step in the model of healthy fatherhood (Gurian, 1996), was the father's earliest possible involvement with the infant child. The second step was the father establishing himself a positive and stable identity in the community. The third step was for the father to communicate a sense of tradition and heritage to his son, while allowing his son to develop a separate identity overall. The fourth and final step was that the father

needed to learn the process of 'letting go' and also understand the transition from boyhood to manhood, and that it was essential to provide increasing respect and independence to the son. By implementing these practices Guirian argued that the father and son relationship would be transformed into a peer relationship; that of two adult men of equal emotional power.

It was further suggested by Gurian (1996) that the community should embrace the distinctive role of fathers in young boys' development, and should also help men to expand their parenting role, in more comfortable ways. Gurian suggested this is, because some men feel uncomfortable talking about their feelings, and proposed a model of 'Love through Action'. This referred to the notion that men may be very good at sharing their feelings through joint father and son activities. He further emphasised that men should take all steps needed to stay close to their sons throughout their lives and let them know they are loved (Gurian, 1996). Although these steps appear to oversimplify the concept of healthy fathering, they may help to engender positive regard for both the father and the sons.

Fathers tend to direct more attention to their sons than their daughters, whilst daughters with brothers got more attention from their fathers than daughters without brothers (Harris & Morgan, 1991).It has also been found that fathers are more inclined to reward daughters for compliant and positive behaviours and reward boys for more assertive action (Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993). Consequently, this suggests that parenting may be different for a father than a mother, although clearly more investigations are needed for conclusions to be made. Of particular relevance in this study, is the fathering of gifted children, which will be examined in the next section.

### 5.2.3   *Fathering gifted children*

Although the body of research on fathering has grown over the last two decades, fathering a gifted child has scarcely been studied; hence, the need to further address it in the current research. The little research that does exist on parenting gifted children has commonly focussed on empirical indictors that are often found in gifted children. Research in Germany that examined mothers and fathers separately in 2006, did not find any significant differences in fathers of gifted children's perception of various aspects of the family system, when compared with families with average-ability children (Schilling, Sparfeldt, & Rost). This is at odds with other research that has examined parenting gifted children, and the widely accepted differences that this holds (Adler, 2006; Clark, 2008; Colangelo & Dettman, 1983; Coleman, 1982; Davis & Rimm, 1998; Hackney, 1981; Keirouz, 1990; Meckstroth, 1992; Rimm, 2006; Silverman, 1993, 1997).

Studies that have examined parents of gifted children and their relationships with their children have primarily relied on evidence given by the mother, rather than the father. A study that was specific to fathering a gifted daughter was conducted by Blanchfield (2002), which examined the relationship between fathers and their gifted daughters. A theoretical model of father support of giftedness was then developed that was comprised of seven factors. They were, a) intervening conditions influencing support, b) causal conditions fostering support, c) phenomenon of father support, d) context fostering support, e) context in which support is received, f) action/interaction strategies, and g) consequences of support, together with associated subcategories.

The supportive relationship between a father and a gifted daughter was found to be fundamental for the daughter's best possible development. Furthermore, where fathers held high expectations of their daughters and provided advocacy, encouragement and guidance, the daughters exhibited persistence, perseverance, and a sense of emotional

stability (Blanchfield, 2002, 2005). Whilst invaluable, the research is limited, as it is centred on the father and daughter relationship, excluding the father and son relationship. A later study examined the factors involved in successful males and the associated father and son dyad.

Hébert, Pagnani and Hammond (2009) looked at the father and son relationships of 10 prominent gifted men, in an effort to identify the factors that influenced talent development. The prominent men concerned were Carlos Santana, Jerry Seinfeld, John Edwards, Ron Franklin, Tim Russert, Carl Lewis, Paul O'Neill, J.C.Watts Jr., Franklin Graham and Bart Connor, all leaders in their fields. Similar to the Blanchfield study, six themes were recognised that were integral in understanding the father-son relationships and were considered to be helpful for educators and parents of gifted males (Hébert et al., 2009).

The six themes identified were the unconditional belief of the father in the son, a strong work ethic, encouragement and guidance, maintaining high expectations and fostering determination, pride in the son's accomplishments, and finally, mutual admiration and respect. Both fathers and sons held each other in high regard and respected each other. The sons admired the fathers approach to life in general and how they overcame difficulties. The sons also admired their fathers devotion to their families and how the fathers supported the development of talent in their children (Hébert et al., 2009). Hence this study emphasised the important and influential role that fathers have on their children, and how fathers can affect their child's talent development.

It has been considered by some scholars that fathers are the most important source of information regarding the meaning of male success (Cox, 2006; Hébert et al., 2009; Pollack, 1998). This suggests that by properly examining the relationship between fathers and their gifted sons that fathers may gain some guidance into ways that may help their

son's to achieve what the fathers perceive as success. By doing so, this may help fathers support their gifted sons' development (Hébert et al.). Another study by Seon-Young Lee (2010) also examined the role of fathers of gifted children, but this study was undertaken in South Korea, where more traditional roles of fatherhood are well established.

Seon-Young Lee (2010) examined fathers and their roles in the talent development of their gifted and talented children. It was argued that parental involvement was imperative in order to foster giftedness or talent in a child's early years and that fathers are an important influence on their child's academic development. When Lee looked at fathering as separate to parenting, fathering was shown to influence the sons gender role identity, morality, psychological well-being and initiative (Lee).

Whilst it is encouraging that some studies exist that examine fathers' roles in their child's giftedness, they are few and limited. Perhaps the difficulty in recruiting fathers for such studies could be a factor. In her study of parents relationships with their gifted children Lisa Wolk-White (2009) encountered difficulties recruiting father participants, despite considerable efforts made. Her study of 123 parents of gifted children was comprised of 100 mother participants and only 23 father participants. Nevertheless, the Blanchfield (2002, 2005), Wolk-White (2009), Hébert et al (2009) and Lee (2010) studies bolster the minimal knowledge that exists regarding fathers of gifted children, and are helpful in increasing our understanding in this area. An area that fathers of gifted children have been said to value is education.

### 5.2.3.1 *Fathers' educational values*

Karen Ablard's study (1997) delineated parental roles, and also argued that fathers were more likely than mothers to measure academic success. The fathers in the Ablard study were found to be more likely to have attained higher level degrees than mothers (Ablard). Gottfried et al. (1994) asserted that the higher educational socioeconomic status

was consistently shown with the families of gifted children, when compared with the families of non-gifted children, and that this was more likely to be related to the higher levels of education by both the father, and the mother.

That fathers value high education levels more than mothers, was a contention supported by Cho and Yoon (2005) who examined family processes within a sample of young South Korean gifted children. Choo and Yoon's findings were consistent with an ealier study by Collins and Russell (1991), who ascertained that fathers were more involved in their child's scholastic achievements and future career pursuits than mothers. They also found that fathers were instrumental in their child's development of academic skills. Fathering that motivates and develops children is of great importance when examining fathering gifted children, because of the impact these fathering practices can have.

### *5.2.3.2*                    *Practices of fathers of gifted children*
As suggested earlier, fathers of gifted children may value higher education more than mothers, and exert added pressure on their children to achieve. It should also be noted that hereditary factors may play a role in giftedness, but also that hard work and an individual's strive to succeed also contribute towards an individual's achievement (Galton, 1869; Hollingworth, 1926; Renzulli, 1978; Terman, 1925). Persistent hard work and the realisation of opportunities in life were factors that were evident in the practices of fathering gifted children.

Karnes and Shwedel (1987) compared attitudes and practices with fathers of nine young gifted children and fathers of 10 young non-gifted children. Although a small study, it offered some rare and valuable insight of the practices of fathering gifted children. Attitudinal and behavioural differences between fathers of gifted children and fathers of non-gifted children were factors in the findings. Differences were found in six thematic

areas: thematic analyses of reading emphasis, oral language emphasis, psychomotor emphasis, concern for the child's self-esteem, and encouragement for independence were all higher amongst the fathers of gifted children (Karnes & Shwedel). Fathers of gifted children were also found to spend more academically oriented time with their children, reading three times as long to their children. These fathers spent only 2.5 hours a week on personal hobbies, in comparison with the 6 hours spent by fathers of non-gifted children (Karnes & Shwedel, 1987).

In addition, Karnes and Shwedel (1987). Found that more fathers of gifted children reported unconditional positive regard for their children (56% compared with 20% of fathers of non-gifted children) and 100 per cent of the fathers of gifted children expressed interest or fascination with their children's questions and curiosity, compared with 70 per cent of the fathers of the non-gifted children. Yet, with the additional time and commitment that are dedicated to raising their gifted children, fathers also indicated that more difficulties were experienced rearing their children (Karnes & Shwedel, 1987). Other studies (Alsop, 1997; Clark, 2008; Colangelo & Dettman, 1983; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004; Keirouz, 1990; Silverman, 1993, 1997) which were focussed on both parents of gifted children concur with the findings of Karnes and Shwedel.

As discussed, the best fathering practices for gifted and non-gifted children are similar, and are of immeasurable importance throughout the term of fatherhood. Well considered fathering practices should be implemented, regardless if the child is gifted or not. Significant positive correlations have been found between nurturing responsive fathering and a child's increased cognitive competence (Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 1997; Pruett, 1985; Radin, 1994). These positive constructs can foster a child's heightened empathy for others, together with an improved internal locus of control throughout childhood

(Blanchfield; Pleck; Pruett; Radin). This suggests a long-term optimistic outlook for children of fathers that adopt best fathering practices. Furthermore, it is recommended that both parents engage with parenting styles which are positive, provide motivation and are also respectful, in order to achieve successful parenting of gifted children. However, it has also been reported that parents who have gifted children tend to experience a range of difficulties that may be stressful (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). The following section will examine the factors of stress and social support.

et.

# CHAPTER 6

## 6.    Stress and Social Support

### 6.1    *Stress*

From the third century B.C., Hippocrates, known as the father of medicine, was reported to have said,

> *Men ought to know that from the brain and the brain only arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and tears. Through it, in particular, we think, see, hear, and distinguish the ugly from the beautiful, the bad from the good, the pleasant from the unpleasant. To consciousness the brain is messenger (McEwan & Lasley, 2002, p. 17).*

### *6.1.1    Overview of stress*

Stressors can range from slight, to life-threatening (McEwan & Lasley, 2002). An effective method of dealing with stress that is overwhelmingly accepted is social support (Cohen, Pressman, & Anderson, 2004; Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991). In order to better understand the roles of stress and social support, an examination requiring an overview of the historical, biological and psychological factors involved with stress and social support is necessary.

Hans Selye colourfully described stress as "the spice of life" (Selye, 1974, p. 83). However, when the word 'stress' was originally introduced into the English language in the 14th century it was a description of a modified form of distress, or strain (Hayward, 2005). Its early usage described one's experience of economic adversity and social hardship. The notion of stress remained obscure until it was adopted by physicist Thomas Young in the 18th century (Hayward). Engel (1985, p. 3) reported that "Young defined stress as "the ratio of force within the elastic body which balances an external applied

force, to the area over which the force acts". Following the contributions made by Young, more studies of stress took place.

French physiologist Claude Bernard in the 19th century described the biology of stress as an active process of fighting back, as the body of a living organism adapts to maintain or restore equilibrium (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The notion of stress as a physical phenomenon became more popular in the next 100 years as the concept of stress expanded into other scientific disciplines (Brantley, Thomason, & Goreczny, 1995). Early in the 20th century Walter Cannon (1929) developed the 'fight or flight' term that describes the human response to threat.

### 6.1.2 *'Fight or flight' response to stress*

Otherwise known as allostasis (McEwan & Lasley, 2002), the 'fight or flight' term suggests two essential behaviours take place when a threat occurs (Bracha, Ralston, Matsukawa, Williams, & Bracha, 2004). Following the perception of a threat, the 'fight or flight' sequence of events first begins with a freeze response, otherwise referred to as hypervigilance (Gray, 1988) The freeze response is when an individual is on a watchful guard, or is hyper-alert. Furthermore, the freeze response is associated with fear, and happens when an individual stops, looks and listens. Second in the sequence of 'fight or flight' response is an attempt to flee. If the attempt to flee is not successful, it is followed by a third response, which is the attempt to fight. The sequence of events of events is more accurately 'flight or fight', rather than 'fight or flight', but this order is rooted in the misconception that it is a human being's first instinct to fight (Bracha et al.). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the 'fight or flight' sequence of events should be updated. The proposed update would include the freeze response and tonic immobility, also known as the fright response. It has been suggested to change the term from 'fight or flight' to 'freeze, flight, fight and fright', because it builds on, and more clearly defines Cannon's

findings made in earlier stress research (Bracha et al.). Some thirty years after Cannon's work in stress responses. When the research conducted by Hans Selye (1950), reported physiological response patterns in laboratory animals, and the importance of the construct of stress became more evident in the physical sciences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Selye's investigations into stress will be further explored in the following section.

### 6.1.3    *General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)*

Selye's (1950) findings reported that severe stress can manifest as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). When a stressor is presented, the GAS can manifest in an individual by causing mind-body alterations in three stages. The first stage of the GAS refers to the alarm reaction, when an individual becomes, anxious, frightened or greatly concerned. To cope with the stressor various physiological changes occur in the body; respiration and heart rates increase together with an increase in metabolism. The ensuing heightened arousal state may lead to headaches, sleep disturbances, stomach disorders, diarrhea, fatigue and a suppressed appetite. Subsequent to the increased energy usage and sense of alertness, the body becomes more susceptible to illness due to the reduced levels of the body's resistance (Rampey, 2009).

The second stage of the GAS (Selye, 1950) is the resistance stage (Rampey, 2009). This stage may last minutes, hours or days. The resistance stage occurs when the body tries to adapt to the stressor and the physical alterations that took place during the alarm stage have settled down. At this stage, the body has an increased resistance to illness, but because the body is still experiencing stress, staying in the resistance stage can lead to physical and psychological exhaustion. This is referred to as the exhaustion stage (2009).

Should the stressor not be removed, the exhaustion stage of the GAS (Selye, 1950) takes place. This is when the body is extremely susceptible to disease, and in some severe cases, the person may collapse, or possibly die. Some differences in the stress response

have been found in later research, but Selye's basic findings have continued to be supported (Rampey, 2009). A few years after Selye's studies, Harold Wolff (1953) described stress as a "dynamic state" within an organism.

When viewed as a dynamic state, stress refers to the continual relationship between an organism and its environmental influences, rather than just what is occurring within the organism (Lazarus). The factor of the environment and its influences later became foundational in the studies of stress in humans (Thoits, 1995). Following these studies, stress was also considered to be a defence mechanism.

As the biological process of defence, stress has strong similarities with psychological stress states experienced by an individual (Lazarus, 1966). The dynamic state of stress indicates important processes. These processes includes resources for coping and dealing with stress, and can also include increased competence, and management against adversity (Lazarus). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) later reported that psychological stress refers to a particular relationship between the individual and the environment that is assessed by the individual as taxing, or exceeding his or her resources and endangering the individual's well-being. Following on from the studies by Lazarus and Folkman, the concept of stress was further refined by Aneshensel in 1992.

Aneshensel contended that the concept of stress refers to a state of arousal that has emanated from the presence of socio-environmental demands (Aneshensel, 1992). These demands may overburden the usual adaptive capacity of an individual, or the lack of available means to achieve a desired end (Aneshensel; Lazarus, 1966; Menaghan & Kaplan, 1983; Pearlin & Kaplan, 1983). Similarly, Marcovitch (2009) advised that stress is a term that commonly refers to any factor or event that may threaten, or be perceived to threaten an individual's health, or, adversely affect the individual's normal functioning. Although positive aspects of stress are known, such as when an individual considers a

stressful situation as challenge rather than a threat, stress is more often associated with negative situations and responses (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Responses to stressors may vary.

### *6.1.4   Responses to stressors*

There are a range of responses to stressors which include disease, injury and worry, as well as internal mental conflicts and emotive events in life (Marcovitch, 2009). It has been established that stress can increase the body's hormone output of adrenaline and cortisol, which can change blood pressure, metabolism and the heart rate. Moreover, stress can affect the body's ability to cope, with constant or recurrent exposure to stress generating symptoms that include headaches, diarrhoea, anxiety, depression, and palpitations and general malaise (Marcovitch).

It has also been advised by the American Psychological Association (2009) that stress can add to psychological and physiological disorders and diseases and can therefore affect mental and physical health. Changes in mental and physical health may also affect the quality of one's life (American Psychological Association). This is because physical stress may be attributed to stressors that strain the body (Crow & Colabianchi, 2008). When stressors are thought to be socially determined, social stress theory is considered to be helpful in examining human stress processes (Aneshensel, 1992). Likewise, social stress has also been found to be harmful to health (Crow & Colabianchi).

### *6.1.5   Social stress*

Social stress research explores the relationship of stressors in the life stress process (Ensel & Lin, 1996). Some sources of social stress are social isolation, anxiety from a major change in an individual's life, partnership or marriage difficulties, socioeconomic disadvantage, and race, age or sex discrimination (Crow & Colabianchi, 2008). In addition the notion of parental stress has been recognised (Deater-Deckard, 1998).

### 6.1.6    *Parental stress*

Research conducted by Deater-Deckard (1998) contended that parental stress is not considered to be a 'parent' form of adult neuroticism, or depression, rather, it is a complex and distinct stress reaction to the demands called upon by parenthood. Deater-Deckard suggested that although the parenting-related characteristics of stress can be differentiated, the stress reactions may, or may not, be distinct from the stress reactions that are related to other areas of life. It was also proposed that parenting stress affects all parents to some degree, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances or support networks. However, although parenting stress may be considered to be a normal experience of parenting, there are number of individual differences of stress amongst parents, with some parents experiencing much higher degrees of stress (Deater-Deckard).

Commonly, when the sources of stress are very threatening and not perceived to be within an individual's control, a strategy of disengaging with the stressor is commonly undertaken. In contrast, when the stressor is perceived to be within an individual's control, engagement with coping strategies is more likely to occur. It is generally considered that there are greater psychological benefits when using more active engaged coping methods, rather than inactive or disengaging coping methods (Crow & Colabianchi). Active coping methods refer to strategies such as information seeking and social support, whereas disengaging or inactive coping methods refer to avoidance strategies and denial (Crow & Colabianchi; Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, & Primeau, 2001).

Depending on the circumstances, the treatment for stress syndromes can be prolonged and difficult, and may require medication or therapeutic interventions, including support interventions (Horowitz, 2003). Nevertheless, the developments in stress theory have shown that social support can be an important coping mechanism in moderating or buffering the effects of stress on mental and physical health (Jex et al., 2001; Thoits,

1995). Types of effective strategies and therapeutic interventions that do not involve medication and deal with stress, include social support and social support groups (Hernández-Plaza, Alonso-Morillejo, & Pozo-Muñoz, 2006). Social support will be discussed next.

6.2    *Social support*

Social support is important sociologically, psychologically and medically, because of its extensive and significant influence on health throughout the course of life (Quan-Haase & McTavish, 2011). Not only is the influence of social support wide-ranging, it is an essential element in people's lives (Pearlin, 1989; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). Furthermore, individuals' positive perceptions of social support are consistently associated with better health (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007).

It has been suggested that social support is intuitively understood (Cooke, Rossmann, Hamilton, & Patterson, 1988). But there has been some debate about the definition of social support. This is because of the different types of measurements used, and the different constructs used to measure stress (Quan-Haase & McTavish, 2011). Social support was earlier described by Vaux (1988) as a 'metaconstruct' where no single or simple definition exists. Be that as it may, most definitions of social support definitions possess some common characteristics (Hupcey, 1998). Many definitions state, or imply, some positive interactions or helpful behaviour which is provided to an individual in need of support (Hupcey, 1998; Rook & Dooley, 1985). When social support is considered in the broad psychological context, it often refers to the provision of individuals with comfort, recognition, approval and encouragement. These factors foster an individual's well-being, and thus promote good health (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Sjolander & Ahlstrom, 2012).

Scholars have continued to expand or refine the meaning of social support and contend that social support refers to the quality and function of social relationships such as the perceived availability of support, or support that is actually received (Cohen, Towbes, & Flocco, 1988; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Haber et al., 2007; Heller & Swindle, 1983; Norris & Kaniasty, 1996; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991; Tak & McCubbin, 2002; Thoits, 1995; Wethington & Kessler, 1986; Wills & Shinar, 2000; Ystgaard, 1997).

Social support has been described as including a diversity of material, as well as tangible, emotional, informational and appraisal support a person accepts from others. (Bliese & Britt, 2001; Brannon & Feist, 2004; House & Kahn, 1985; Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991). Although network or companionship support has been also been described as a separate social support factor, Cohen expressed social support as, "A social network's provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress" (2004, p. 676). Therefore, taken as a whole, social support refers to the assistance and encouragement that people receive from others, as they live through daily hassles, strains, problems, events, and tragedies that occur throughout the lifespan (Reevy, 2010; Wheaton, 1994).

Furthermore, Sarason, Levine, Sarason and Basham (1983) suggested social support occurs when positive psychosocial interactions took place with individuals with whom there is mutual trust and concern. Social support has also been described as that which is provided by individuals or groups ,which may assist a person to cope with life's matters (Cobb, 1976; Sarafino, 2002). The individuals or groups may be family members, work associates, friends, neighbours, community members or from health providers or

others (Gottlieb, Underwood, & Cohen, 2000). Furthermore, particular factors are often associated with the effectiveness of social support.

Keith and John (2006) proposed the characteristics associated with effective forms of social support which feature four key elements. The first element is the reduction of isolation through contact and meeting and others. The second factor is opportunities for conversations and confiding in others. The third aspect refers to discussions that may lead to a more positive mode of thought. And the fourth component is the opportunity to learn coping skills from the experiences of others (Keith & John). In addition to the key elements of social support are the positive aspects of social support.

The positive relationship between social support and health has been recognised for many years (Stewart, 1993). A significant positive benefit for individuals associated with social support is an improvement in health and well-being (Macik-Frey, Quick, Quick, & Cooper, 2005). This is because the aid provided by social support helps individuals to cope with stressors, and the negative effects the stressors can produce (Bliese & Britt, 2001).

When examining the ecology of stress, Hobfall (1988, 1998) maintained that a social system could provide love, caring or a sense of connectedness to individuals within a social group or dyad. Similarly, it was contended that because social support is a coping resource; it is comparable to an account from which an individual may draw from when handling stressors (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Thoits, 1995). Other evidence has suggested that a network of supportive people contribute to an individual's better health and adjustment (Ryan & Solky, 1996). Moreover, it has been contended that the social support process has the capacity to improve relationships for both the provider and the recipient (Heaney & Israel, 2008). Noted for its connection with positive psychological health outcomes, physiological benefits may also be provided by social support.

The physiological benefits of social support may include a reduction in an individual's blood pressure, a decrease in cholesterol levels, and lower levels of stress hormones (Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008). At the same time, social support in the form of affection and encouragement from others, can also boost an individual's immune functions (Seeman, Singer, Ryff, Dienberg Love, & Levy-Storms, 2002; Uchino, 2004).

It is clear that social support is a valuable tool in many peoples' lives. The interactive process of social support can be related to altruism, a sense of obligation, and perception of reciprocity (Schwarzer & Knoll; Schwarzer & Leppin). The numerous positive aspects that social support process has, indicates significant benefits for the individuals concerned (Reevy). Be that as it may, the meaning and significance of social support can change, with different kinds of social support required at different times throughout one's life (Bruhn & Phillips, 1984; Cohen & Syme, 1985). In essence, social support can enhance quality of life (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981). Two influential theories of social support will be discussed next.

### 6.2.1 Theories of social support

The literature has clearly established a strong positive relationship between social support and mental health (Andersen, Shelby, & Golden-Kreutz, 2007; Aneshensel, 1982; Billings & Moos, 1982; Carpenter, Fowler, Maxwell, & Andersen, 2010; Henderson, Byrne, & Duncan-Jones, 1981; Holahan & Moos, 1981; Turner, 1981; Williams, Ware, & Donald, 1981). Numerous studies have repeatedly documented the positive association between social support and mental health (Aneshensel, 1982; Billings & Moos, 1982; Henderson et al., 1981; Holahan & Moos, 1981; Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Strine, Chapman, Balluz, & Mokdad, 2008; Turner, 1981; Williams et al., 1981). The main effect hypothesis model and the buffering effect model of social support are two major theories that are considered to positively influence health (Carpenter et al.; Cohen &

Wills, 1985; Heller & Swindle, 1983). The direct effect hypothesis will be now be explored, followed by the stress-buffering hypothesis.

### 6.2.2    *Direct effect hypothesis*

It has been recognised that the main effect model of social support provides direct benefits to individuals dealing with stress (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). The direct effect hypothesis contends that social support enhances well-being and health (Cohen & Wills; Lakey & Cohen, 2000), regardless of the levels of stress (Cohen & Syme). Direct effects usually occur when the support measure assesses the degree to which an individual is integrated within a social network (Cohen & Syme; Cohen & Wills). That is, social support is helpful for mental and physical health during stressful and nonstressful times (Taylor, 2011). A positive effect of social support can occur as large social networks provide individuals with regular beneficial experiences (Cohen & Wills).

A direct benefit may occur to an individual who received assistance provided by others in the event of a stressful experience, or as a result of being included in the membership of a social network (Cohen & Syme, 1985). Hence, supportive functions are available if needed (Wills & Shinar, 2000). That others may be willing to help, could result in an elevated sense of self-esteem, stability and control over the environment (Cohen & Syme; Thoits, 1995). Integration in a social network may also assist an individual to avoid negative experiences (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Furthermore, these positive psychological states may reduce susceptibility to physical ill-health (Jemmot & Locke, 1984; Wills & Shinar), lower psychological distress (Cohen, 2004; Wills & Shinar) and promote well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The stress buffering hypothesis (Cohen et al., 2004; Cohen & Wills) is also important when examining theories of social support.

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### 6.2.3    *Stress buffering hypothesis*

Contrasting with the direct effect hypothesis is the stress buffering hypothesis (Cohen et al., 2004; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Studies have shown that social support can have a mediating or buffering effect between psychological distress and life events (Cohen, 2004; Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000; Thoits, 1995; Wilcox, 1981; Ystgaard, 1997). The stress buffering hypothesis predicts that social support is more beneficial when stressful experiences occur, in contrast to the direct effect hypothesis, when social support is beneficial during stressful and nonstressful times (Taylor, 2011). The buffering effects of social support may act to blunt or prevent against psychological distress (Cohen & Wills; Taylor, 2011).

Stress buffering effects may occur when support intervenes between the stressful event or expected stressful event, and a stress reaction by reducing or preventing a stress appraisal response (Cohen & Syme, 1985). The perception that others will supply the resources necessary may change the potential harm presented by a situation, and may increase the individual's ability to cope with demands. The buffer of resources may therefore prevent a situation from being regarded as highly stressful by the individual concerned (Cohen & Syme).

The stress buffering effect produced from social support has been linked with positive physical and mental health outcomes (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Gore, Dohrenwend, & Dohrenwend, 1981; Taylor, 2011) (Kawashi & Berkman, 2001; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994; Wheaton, 1985). Three main factors are involved with the stress buffering hypothesis. The stress buffering hypothesis theorises that social support may intervene between the stressful event (and anticipation of that event), and the stress experience, by reducing or preventing a stress response and the onset of pathological outcomes (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985). In addition,

resources provided by others may reduce the potential harm presented by a situation and may strengthen an individual's ability to cope with the increased demands, which may therefore prevent the situation being perceived as stressful (Cohen & Syme, 1985). Finally, the stress buffering effects of social support seem have a biological effect (Bovard, 1959; Cassel, 1976). Physiologically, the stress buffering effects tend to reduce the perception of a stressful situation by calming the neuroendocrine system, so that an individual is less inclined to perceive stress (Bovard, 1959; Cassel, 1976).

Consequently, the stress buffering hypothesis proposes that people, who experience significant stress along with strong social support, will be protected from developing the symptomatology and disease producing effects of stress (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Gore et al., 1981; Heller & Swindle, 1983; House, 1981). The stress buffering effects of social support may include: lower levels of depressive symptoms, a milder temperament, reduced stress, a more positive self-image, and decreased loneliness (Cohen et al., 1986; Lepore, 1992; Pierce, Sarason, & Saranson, 1991; Reis & Franks, 1994; Windle, 1992). Additionally, the positive effects of social support may also assist with the promotion of healthy behaviours, such as proper nutrition, exercise, good hygiene and sufficient rest (Cohen & Syme, 1985). Therefore, it can be concluded that both the main effect model and the buffering effect model of social support may provide substantial benefits that can assist with individuals health and well-being (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Be that as it may, when exploring the concept of social support it is important to advise that social support involves a range of key functions.

### 6.2.4 Social support functions

There are a range of functions of social support. The major functions of social support include emotional support, instrumental support, informational support (House & Kahn, 1985; Thoits, 1995; Wills & Shinar, 2000), appraisal support (Cooke et al., 1988;

House & Kahn, 1985; Langford et al., 1997; Lewis et al., 2001), and network, or

companionship support (Sarafino, 2002; Wills & Shinar). Other studies have posited

different constructs of social support, with 19 functions of social support within five

dimensions, as described in the Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) by Shelbourne and

Stewart (1991). Although some differences exist amongst studies the major categories of

social support have remained. These categories are; emotional, instrumental,

informational, appraisal, and network support, and will be discussed next.

### 6.2.4.1 *Emotional support*

Emotional support is the expression of various types of caring towards a person

(Reevy, 2010). It involves empathy and concern towards the individual and gives a feeling

of solace and reassurance. In addition, it can also be shown as love of the person,

particularly expressed in times of stress being experienced by the individual (Sarafino,

2002; Wills & Shinar, 2000). Emotional support allows for the discussion of feelings, the

expressions of worries or concerns and may involve sympathy, caring, approval and

acceptance of a person. This in turn may lead to enhanced self-esteem, a reduction in

anxiety and or depression, and helps an individual to cope (Wills & Shinar). House (1981)

considered emotional support to be the most important form of social support.

### 6.2.4.2 *Instrumental support*

Distinct from emotional support, instrumental support is more concrete; providing

monetary aid or tangible goods (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & McKay, 1984), or performing

tasks (Cooke et al., 1988; Langford et al., 1997). Tasks or services include attending to

household chores, running errands, looking after children (Wills & Shinar, 2000) or

assisting with a problem (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). Sarafino (2002) argued that

instrumental support decreased the demands placed on the person in need and relieved

some individuals of their day to day burdens and responsibilities. In effect, instrumental

support aids with solving practical problems and may allow more time for an individual to rest or relax in order to better cope (Wills & Shinar). Another form of support is informational support.

### 6.2.4.3            *Informational support*

Informational support is the provision of advice, guidance, suggestions, directions and information. Informational support has been found to help individuals cope with personal and environmental problems (Cooke et al., 1988; Wills & Shinar, 2000) and stress (House, 1981). For example, an ill person may obtain information from a doctor on how to treat their illness. Ideas from associates or co-workers on how to deal with a difficult issue is another form of informational support (Sarafino, 2002). Informational support can increase the amount of useful information available to individuals (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). It may also assist with accessing services which may lead to more effective coping (Wills & Shinar). Additionally, it may also help with problem-solving processes (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Tilden & Weinert, 1987). In addition to informational support, is appraisal support.

### 6.2.4.4            *Appraisal support*

Appraisal support has been described by House (1981) as individuals providing affirmation, feedback, self-evaluation and social comparison with other individuals. Lewis et al. (2001) further contended that appraisal support could also be the disclosure of feelings and thoughts to significant others, and argued appraisal social support mediated the negative impact of intrusive thoughts on quality of life measures (Lewis et al., 2001). Network support is another aspect of social support and will be explored next.

### 6.2.4.5            *Network support*

Network support may also be referred to as social network or companionship support (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). Although not always present in the more established

categories of social support, it is important because this type of support fosters a feeling of being part of a group amongst a body of people who share similar concerns and interests and promotes the feeling of membership (Sarafino, 2002). Network support can also refer to the provision of a companion with which to attend social events (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Network support may be accessible to an individual through social connectedness to other individuals or groups and the broader community (Lin, Ensel, Simeone, & Kuo, 1979). This type of social support may lead to positive affect by providing a release from demands, and provides a helpful distraction from rumination over one's problems (Wills & Shinar). A network of supportive individuals may importantly provide validation by verbal assurances of the recipients' competencies to deal with their matters of concern. This may help to increase self-efficacy and thus decrease negative affect (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). Validation of an individual's experience is an important component of social support.

### 6.2.5   *Consensual validation*

Validation from a support network of individuals decreases perceived deviancy, allows an acceptance of feelings whilst also providing favourable comparisons with some others (Wills & Shinar). This is also referred to as consensual validation (Byrne, 1962; Duck, 1973; Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2013; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Charvis (1986) state, "Consensual validation assumes people have an inherent need to know that what they see, feel and understand are experienced in the same way by others" (p. 11). Furthermore, consensual validation has been demonstrated to be transactional, coming from the group, as well as the person. In this way, a group operates to consensually validate its members and also develop group norms, or group beliefs (Fusco et al.; McMillan & Chavis).

Each type of social support may be helpful and protective for the individual who perceives or receives support (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). This may foster the exchange of

reciprocal support for the individuals concerned and may assist in achieving outcomes of positive health and well-being (Langford et al., 1997). Be that as it may, an individual must understand, or perceive that support is available, in order to receive it (Barrera, 1986; Gurung, 2010; Wills & Shinar, 2000).

### 6.2.6    *Perceived and received support*

Perceived support has been described as the belief that helping behaviours will be provided when necessary (Barrera, 1986). Received support has been described as helping behaviours that are actually provided. That is, received support is a helpful behaviour that has happened in the past, and perceived support is a helping behaviour that might happen in the future (Barrera). Although this may be so, it has been argued that an individual's perceptions may not be accurate when investigating the perception of potentially available support, in contrast with the actual available support (Hupcey, 1998; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990).

The support available during a stressful experience may be greater than, or less than, the support expected (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). In addition, the support may have originally been sufficient, and then may have decreased over time (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennet). Yet, Coyne and Delongis (1986) argued that previous supportive transactions encourage psychological well-being through the perception of support, as much as by the resolution of the difficulties experienced. It is clear the intention of those providing social support intend the support to be a positive, rather than a negative, experience (Boutin-Foster, 2005). Nevertheless, social support may not always be helpful, or positive, for an individual.

### 6.2.7    *Negative effects of social support*

Although the existing evidence has been overwhelmingly weighted towards the positive effects of social support, social support has not been found to be free of negative

effects (Antonucci, Sarason, & Saranson, 1985; Cohen & Syme, 1985; Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990; Harris, 1992; Hupcey, 1998; Jung, 1988; Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Rook, 1984; Thoits, 1995; Wortman & Conway, 1985). It has been contended that social relationships may be of more importance than the support itself (Rook, 1984). Furthermore, any negative effects of social support could affect well-being more than the positive effects of support (Rook). Social networks at times may cause stress and may be more demanding than of assistance (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). Moreover, support may have been available to the recipient as expected, however the support may not have been helpful, or may have even been harmful (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett; Thoits, 1995).

Negative or harmful effects of social support have been reported where an individual perceives the supportive interaction as unnecessary or unwanted (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). Other studies have shown that social support can be considered to be negative . This may occur when claims made by the support providers advise that they understand the recipients experience, when the support providers do not have any experiential basis to make the claim for such an understanding (Harris, 1992; Lehman et al., 1986; Thoits, 1995; Wortman & Conway, 1985).

Insensitivity by support providers may distress recipients of social support (Jung, 1988). It has further been found that the support provider may be well-intentioned, but the support provider could be misunderstood as being insensitive and patronising (Berkman, 1984; Cohen & Syme, 1985; Jung, 1988).

Antonucci, Sarason and Sarason (1985) argued support intended by the provider to be positive may be negative, because the outcome of the support may be negative, or the recipient of the support perceived the support in a negative manner. This could be because the intended recipient of the support may not be receptive of such support. An example is when a support provider encourages healthy behaviours such as the cessation of smoking,

or to stop drinking alcohol, but the support recipient may not regard this type of support as positive or helpful (Antonucci et al.).

Conversely, a particular individual's social support network may encourage the individual to engage in health-damaging behaviours that may include drinking alcohol or smoking (Antonucci et al., 1985). The outcome may be negative or harmful when the action was intended by the recipient to be a positive interaction (Antonucci et al.).

The study by Coyne and Delongis (1986) further described some of the possible negative effects of social support. They maintained emotional overinvolvement may occur in social relationships. This is when family members become overprotective, worrisome, intrusive indulgent and self-sacrificing. This burdens an individual and discourages personal responsibility and autonomy. Wishnie, Hackett and Cassem (1971), and Boutin-Foster (2005) found that overprotectiveness and intrusiveness from family members can become major stressors for those experiencing serious physiological health matters. Supportive family members, such as wives of ill husbands, may also experience distress, because the negative effects of the husband's illness may become stressors for the wife (Mayou, Foster, & Williamson, 1978). Although the support provider may not intend for the support to be perceived as negative by the support recipient, it is nonetheless an outcome that may occur (Antonucci et al., 1985; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986).

Accordingly, the literature has shown that social support has both positive and negative effects, depending on individuals' perceptions. However, overall, the evidence strongly indicates the numerous benefits of social support far outweigh the possible negative effects. Social support is the umbrella term which covers a range of social support styles and practices. In order to properly examine support in terms of the current research, it is necessary to investigate the range of social support strategies and their effectiveness with an emphasis on the gifted population, and in particular, parents of gifted children.

6.3     *Support for parents of gifted children*

Parents of children with special needs have shown evidence of considerable stress, which has implications for the community in terms of family support (Fitzgerald, 1990). Participants in the Fitzgerald study were parents of children with particular emotional, behavioural and communication difficulties. The parents tended to lack confidence and also felt more isolated and more depressed than other parents (Fitzgerald, Butler, & Kinsella, 1990). Similarly, It has been suggested that support and assistance are necessary for the successful parenting of gifted children with their particular differences and characteristics (Moon et al., 1997). Assistance in the form of counselling for individuals, couples and families is often used to mediate stress (Walsh, 2003).

Families with gifted children may seek counselling due to a child's giftedness (Anderson, 2001). This is because the child may experience social problems and problems with siblings and peers. Furthermore, parents often consider themselves as poorly equipped to deal with their gifted children and their associated issues (Anderson, 2001). Counselling support has been suggested as warranted and beneficial for parents of gifted children (Alsop, 1997). Although counselling may seem to be the initial choice to help with reducing levels of stress, it is not always the best fit for families with gifted children (Shore et al., 1991; Webb, 1993). Specialised counselling for families with gifted children has traditionally been a scarce and expensive resource (Moon et al., 1997). Bourdeau and Thomas (2002) argued that for gifted families, that is, families that have one or more gifted members, an experiential approach would be more beneficial. "Experiential knowledge is information and wisdom which has been obtained from the lived experience" (Schubert & Borkman, 1994, p. 228). Bourdeau and Thomas (2002) argued that families with gifted members tended to be more verbal, cognitive and communicative. Because of this, it was

suggested that experiential approaches were more suitable approaches for families with gifted members, in order to obtain solutions to their problems (Bourdeau & Thomas).

Furthermore, Silverman (1998) suggested that families which have children with illness or disabilities, have similarities with families of gifted children. Silverman contended that the types of support that are beneficial for the families with ill or disabled children would also be equally beneficial for parents of gifted children. The study by, Schubert and Borkman's (1994) was a uncommon examination of parents of gifted children with learning disabilities, who attended a self-help/mutual aid support group. The researchers concluded that the experiential knowledge gained empowered the parent group members. Moreover, the group members' knowledge was valued just as highly as professional knowledge specialists (Schubert & Borkman). Other findings from smaller scale research have also supported these studies findings.

In 2006 preliminary research (Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006) was undertaken, which was specifically focussed on parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne. This preliminary research gauged parents' of gifted children's need for support. Findings indicated parents of gifted children had a considerable need for support which was not met within their environment (Fisher et al.; Free). Although the benefits of social support has been established by various scholars, and despite the known possible benefits of social support (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Ayers et al., 2007; Crabtree, Haslam, Postmes, & Haslam, 2010; Rausa, 2008), there were almost no available social support structures that existed in the western region of Melbourne for parents of gifted children (Fisher et al.; Free).

When social support is lacking, negative consequences in terms of mental health, physical health and general well-being can occur (Nichols, 2006). Social support is needed to provide consensual validation and positive functioning (Johnson & Lane, 1993;

McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As discussed earlier, consensual validation refers to the collective agreement that the things people feel, see and understand, are experienced in a similar way by other individuals (McMillan & Chavis). Positive functioning broadly refers to a state of happiness and well-being (Joseph & Wood, 2010). From a psychological standpoint, positive functioning refers to self-acceptance and personal growth and from a social dimension of social participation and social contribution (Preedy & Watson, 2010). When people experience traumas or difficulties they cannot cope with on their own, support groups can provide a sympathetic audience and an opportunity to exchange social support from other people's lived experiences, as a way to deal with life's difficulties (Forsyth, 2009). In examining social support groups, it is appropriate to investigate the theories that underpin these groups, to aid with the understanding of both their mechanics and their effects.

6.4    *Theories of social support groups*

The development and promotion of social support systems has been an established pathway towards primary prevention (Gottlieb, 1983; Gullotta, 2005). Primary prevention refers to the prevention of illness and the promotion of health and psychosocial wellness (Bloom & Gullotta, 2003; Gullotta, 2005). Better health and psychosocial wellness occurs through actions which improve coping, adaptation and resiliency from social capital (Gullotta, 2005). Social capital has been defined as "human networks with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (Helliwell, Huang, & Putnam, 2009, p. 87). Social capital helps people to deal with collective problems, provides mutual support, information and helps individuals to cope with traumas and illnesses (Putnam, 2000). When a group of people come together for mutual support, it is known as a social support group (Kurtz, 1997). Social support groups have the ability to increase an individual's social networks. If the support group is aimed at

promoting child and family wellness, the support group can lead to families becoming better integrated within the community (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2000). Within a self-help/mutual aid support group, members share a common problem, illness, or addiction, and the mutual goal of the members is to help each other to deal with the problem, illness or addiction by providing mutual aid (Ahmadi, 2007). The factor and effects of mutual aid, which may be found in support groups, will be now be discussed**.**

6.5     ***Support groups***

A number of definitions of support exist, but in the context of social support, support broadly refers to the provision to others with comfort, recognition, information encouragement and approval (Reber & Reber, 2001). A group can be defined as an entity made up of people who come together for a common purpose (Haynes, 2012). Therefore a support group is a number of people who get together to provide comfort, recognition, information, encouragement and approval. Characteristics of a group include behaviours in the group which are guided by a set of shared values and norms (Haynes). More precisely, a 'common purpose' can be defined as group members engaging in group activities to achieve similar goals (Haynes). Group members are motivated to participate in the group by shared desired outcomes (Haynes). 'Shared values' are the collective core beliefs about the structure and spirit of the group which maintain the group's integrity (Haynes). Furthermore, the group norms direct or influence how the group members interact with, and behave with each other within the group (Haynes). Norms are "social standards that describe and prescribe behaviour" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 608). Broadly, norms refer to customary rules of behaviour (Lewis, 1969). When examining the coming together of people with shared views, such as a group or a support group, two other factors are also important.

The two factors that play an important role in groups are first, the exchange of information and second, the cultural context (Yukl, 2002). Information within a support group is often exchanged by talking. Talking to others about similar experiences can be described as cultural. This is because culture can be described as an organisational system of shared values beliefs (Yukl). Culture also provides a sense of commonality, which helps individuals to identify with others (Trenholm & Jensen, 2000). Identifying with others is a key aspect of people becoming involved with support groups (Kurtz, 1997).

Various forms of support groups and self-help/mutual aid support groups exist. Support groups can be conceptualised on a continuum with self self-help/mutual aid groups at one end, support groups in the middle, and treatment groups at the other end (Schopler & Galinsky, 1993; Schubert & Borkman, 1991). The major differences between support groups and self-help/mutual aid support groups are the number of members, the central focus of the group, the degree of group autonomy, the group's program and the group's philosophy (Schopler & Galinsky, 1993; Schubert & Borkman, 1991). Another key difference of social support groups is whether professionals are involved in leading or facilitating the group (Kurtz, 1997).

Support groups are often facilitated by professionals such as a psychotherapist, and can be linked to a social agency or a larger formal organisation (Kurtz, 1997). Most often, support groups are formed to assist individuals dealing with emotional stresses or stressors due to illness, hospitalisation, situational crises or maladaptive behaviour (Clark, 2003). Support groups meet for the purpose of effecting change, by giving emotional support, comfort and information to individuals with common problems (Kurtz). Support groups most often have leaders within the group. Support group leaders do not engage in assessments or psychological interpretation. Furthermore, support groups have a closed membership (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Kurtz, 1997). That is, membership is not open to

new members and new members cannot join the group after the group meetings have begun (Tourigny & Hébert, 2007).

It should be made clear that support groups should not be considered as group psychotherapy (Clark, 2003). This is because the emphasis is on educating members to manage the stress associated with their situational crisis (Clark, 2003). Most often, support group meetings take place for a fixed duration, and do not engage in any type of advocacy activities. There are a range of similarities and differences between support groups and self-support/mutual aid support groups. Important in both support groups and self-help/mutual aid support groups are the constructs of consensual validation and mutual support (Duck, 1973; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

### 6.6     *Mutual support and consensual validation*

The constructs of mutual support and consensual validation are especially salient with support groups and self-help/mutual support groups. In a group setting, mutual support refers to group members offering and receiving help from each other that is related to their common experiences and problems (Gitterman, 2006). As previously advised, consensual validation refers to the need of individuals to know the things they perceive and experience, are perceived and experienced similarly by others (American Psychological Association, 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Further, consensual validation is the process of achieving a collective opinion or agreement among others (Westmoreland, Wesorick, Hanson, & Wyngarden, 2000). Moreover, Yalom (2005) considered consensual validation to be a "particularly important concept in group therapy" (p. 22). Consensual validation is important because it assists individuals to validate and confirm their notion of reality, when compared with the perceptions and concerns of others (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It can also assist with reducing individuals levels of distress (Baum, Fisher, & Solomon, 1981). The lack of social validation and consensual validation

can be detrimental (Westmoreland et al., 2000). This is because it can change an individual's perception of reality and other people in a negative way (Westmoreland et al.).

After experiencing consensual validation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) in an existing support group, new support group members can be provided with more insight and opportunities regarding their issues and concerns (Fusco et al., 2013). Therefore, the behaviours a group engages in, where a group consensually validates its members, also assists with the creation of the groups norms (McMillan & Chavis). Should individuals freely choose to conform to the norms, their need for consensual validation will act to strengthen community norms (McMillan & Chavis). Some people receive consensual validation from their involvement with a range of support groups and programs; these support groups include twelve step support programs (Galanter, Castaneda, & Franco, 1998). As twelve step programs are a type of support group, an investigation of twelve step programs will be undertaken next.

### 6.6.1 Twelve step support programs

Twelve step programs are said to be well accepted for individuals dealing with illnesses and diseases. Indeed, twelve step programs are social interventions that can be applied to diseases, including drug addictions and alcoholism (Kurtz & Fisher, 2003). A range of twelve step programs exist which are focussed on various other illnesses, situations and circumstances(The Sponsors Aide, 2012). In addition to diseases, twelve step programs have also been developed for those who have experienced trauma, abuse, anorexia, problem gambling behaviours and people with cancer (The Sponsors Aide). Twelve step programs aim to change behaviours and encourage the empowerment of the individuals who attend (Ajri & Sabran, 2011). People seek structured social assistance for dealing with a range of difficulties and conditions (Messeri, Silverstein, & Litwak, 1993). Yet giftedness is a state of possessing a great amount of natural alibility, potential or

intelligence (American Psychological Association, 2009). Such attributes would not usually be considered a in need of treatment or an applicable twelve step program. Nevertheless, a ten step program exists for parents of gifted children. The Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted (SENG) program is a topic based program that is conducted by professional facilitators and will be investigated in the following section.

### 6.6.2    The SENG program

The SENG parent group program is aimed at highlighting the social and emotional needs of gifted children by assisting parents to develop and manage their gifted children (Blackett & Webb, 2011; Webb & DeVries, 1998, 2007). The SENG program typically holds group facilitated meetings once a week over a fixed ten week period (Webb & DeVries). A set of different topics involving giftedness is covered each week. In a class style environment, the trained facilitators model desired behaviours and strategies for parents to trial and adapt while they raise their gifted children (Blackett & Webb). The SENG program's stance is that challenges can be overcome; and barriers can be reduced, or removed, by empowering parents with the knowledge gained from the program (Blackett & Webb). Although the SENG program has some advantages, some disadvantages can also be discerned.

As part of her doctoral study, Adler (2006) established a formally structured support group for parents of gifted children. This support group followed the Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) model, devised by Webb and DeVries (1998, 2007). The findings indicated that the SENG support group did not have a significant effect on parents' knowledge of giftedness, their gifted child's special needs, parents' relationship with their children, or confidence in parenting their gifted children (Adler).

In addition, the SENG support group, as a formal support group has a closed membership. A closed membership can be beneficial for a specific program to run, but can

lack flexibility for members to come and go as they wish (Kurtz, 1997). Also, the fixed duration of 10 weeks does not allow parents to attend if the time frame does not fit the parents' schedule. However, not all forms of social group assistance are so formally structured. Social group assistance can have various formats and also be less structured (Kurtz).

Parents of gifted children seek assistance dealing with the difficulties and experiences associated with raising their gifted children (Alsop, 1997; Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006, 2009). Mutual support and consensual validation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) are important factors in helping individuals to cope with difficulties and can be found in self-help/mutual aid support groups (Fusco et al., 2013).

6.7    *Self-help/mutual aid support groups*

Where people's existing support systems are inadequate or need to be strengthened, social support groups are valuable and helpful resources (Johnson & Lane, 1993). Both social support groups and self-help/mutual aid support groups acts as a temporary, personal community that supplement or compensate for deficiencies in the participant's natural social network, such as family and friends (Healy & Darlington, 1999; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Seebohm et al., 2013; Streeter & Franklin, 1992). (p. 4). Because people need to know that the things they feel, see, and understand, are experienced similarly by others; this helps to validate their experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Self-help/mutual aid support groups make a strong contribution to the group members' validation and well-being by enhancing a sense of control, which can increase resilience (Seebohm et al., 2013). Consequently, a definition of self-help/mutual aid groups may assist with the exploration of this matter.

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### 6.7.1 Self-help/mutual aid group definition

The criterion which helps to define self-help/mutual aid support groups is the factor of experiential knowledge which refers to lived experience knowledge (Schubert & Borkman, 1994; Seebohm et al., 2013). Although not all self-help support groups are alike, but Kurtz (1997) asserts that most fit a particular definition. Kurtz defined a self-help support group as, " a supportive, educational, usually change-oriented, mutual aid group that addresses a single life problem or condition shared by all members". An overview of self-help/mutual groups will follow, in order to properly explore common facets of self-help/mutual aid groups.

### 6.7.2 Self-help/mutual aid group overview

Self-help/mutual aid support groups are conducted and managed by the people within the group. Self-help/mutual aid support groups are also referred to as mutual support, mutual aid groups (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006), peer support groups (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000), or commonly, self-help/mutual aid support groups (Seebohm et al., 2013). Self-help/mutual aid, or peer support groups are focussed on the assembly of support processes at the social network level (Hernández-Plaza et al.). That is, self-help/mutual aid support groups create a peer culture that is based on mutual aid, disclosure, and a sense of belonging that comes from mutual identification (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Seebohm et al.). In addition, self-help/mutual aid support groups can be described as member-governed, voluntary associations of people, who share a common problem, who rely on experiential knowledge to cope with, or mutually solve their concerns (Borkman, 1990; Wituk & Meissen, 2008).

Self-help/mutual aid support groups are often appropriate approaches to overcome individuals' difficulties because they encourage people to share experiences and express feelings (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Seebohm et al., 2013). The expression of feelings

can lead to validation and provide opportunities for mutual assistance. Expressions of feelings also help to connect people in the group. Connection with people in the group can foster a sense of belonging. When a person has a sense of belonging, they are more likely to perceive and receive emotional support. Information gained from others in the group may also help an individual to cope more effectively with their problem. Consequently, the information obtained from others within the group can also help to normalise an individual's experiences. Normalisation of the experience can lead to an increase self-esteem (Helgeson & Gottlieb; Seebohm et al., 2013).

Kurtz also contended the self-help support group's purpose may be for personal, societal change, or both can be achieved through the use of the group's ideologies, should the groups have an ideological basis. Further, a self-help support group's leadership, if any, originates from the group's membership. Moreover, group members' participation and contributions are voluntary, so no fees are not usually charged. In addition, professionals do not often have a role in a self-help support group, unless participating as group members. Additionally, boundaries of the self-help support group include all who qualify for membership by experiencing the problem or condition (Kurtz). Moreover, self-help support group meetings are often unstructured, (Kurtz). This is because most self-help support groups are not professionally facilitated, as the meetings are conducted by the group members who are often peers (Kurtz, 1997).

Peers share a feature or function within a social group (American Psychological Association, 2009). Peers in a self-help support group are likely to share similar experiences (Kurtz, 1997). Self-help/mutual aid support groups allow natural care giving to occur, and for new behaviours and competencies to be developed and shared by those within the group (Gullotta, 2005). Similar to professionally led support groups, self-help/mutual aid support groups meet to effect change, and offer membership to individuals

who have problems in common with other group members (Seebohm et al., 2013). Different criteria apply for different self-help support groups. (Kurtz). To be a member of the parent self-help/mutual aid support group that will be discussed in the current research, has only one criteria, and that is that the attendees is a parent of a gifted child.

In contrast with structured support groups with limited time frames, self-help/mutual aid support groups often run for an indefinite period and may involve advocacy (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Seebohm et al., 2013). Moreover, individuals can join the self-help/mutual aid group at any time, and the group members can attend as desired throughout the life of self-help/mutual aid groups (Tourigny & Hébert, 2007). A principal characteristics which may shared with structured support groups and self-help/mutual aid support groups, is the 'helper therapy principal' as contended by Reissman (1965).

The 'helper therapy principle' by Reissman (1965) suggested the more group members help others, the more they help themselves. Further, Hansen (2001) asserted that shared experience is the basis, or rationale, for group membership. With the sharing of experiences, individuals tend to feel understood and not psychologically alone. Feeling understood and not psychologically reduces an individual's defensiveness and also encourages self-revelation. Helpers feel increased self-confidence, receive social approval, reinforce desirable role behaviour, and also gain a greater level of objectivity about their problem, within the support network (Hansen). Moreover, Hansen suggests that the support network is where the self-help support group members receive positive reinforcement, by way of praise or compliments at the meetings, which can be extended beyond the meetings with other group members. In addition, Hansen also suggests that information sharing in a support group setting, refers to the positive benefits that come from receiving information and advice about the problems the group members are dealing

with (Hansen). Another factor concerned with self-help support groups is finding models. Finding models refers to the self-help support group members learning coping strategies from other (model) group members (Hansen). Also, gaining feedback is a factor. This is where in the openness and honesty that characterises self-help support groups, the group member's behaviour is likely to be observed and commented on. Because the feedback occurs in a supportive group environment, it has the effect of helping people to find their way to their solutions (Hansen). The seventh factor particular to self-help support groups is learning special methods. With some self-help support groups learning special methods can involve learning special procedures or techniques which provide a structure for coping which can be helpful for the support group members (Hansen).Last, other cognitive factors that may have helpful effects include increasing self-understanding, gaining an improved self-image, expanding possible alternative choices, and redefining accepted norms (Hansen).

It can also be said that most support groups can improve interpersonal exchanges of informal resources and develop abilities to solve shared problems which aides with the development of community empowerment (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006).

Empowerment refers to the process through which individuals and groups obtain greater control over actions and decisions which affect their well-being (Kirch, 2008). Empowerment is a process through which individuals express their concerns, present their needs, and devise strategies for decision-making. In the context of support groups, individual empowerment refers to the individual's ability to make decisions and control their personal life, whereas community empowerment refers to individuals acting collectively to gain greater influence and control, over health and quality of life within their community (Kirch).

Thus, it has been shown that self-help/mutual aid support groups have many positive effects and benefits for the group members (Forsyth, 2009; Gray et al., 1998; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Seebohm et al., 2013; Wituk & Meissen, 2008). In addition, they are often run by volunteers, rather than professionals (Forsyth; Wituk & Meissen, 2008). Moreover, support group members help each other to effectively cope with difficult experiences and stressors in the environment (Bliese & Britt, 2001). A self-help/mutual aid support group may assist with lowering an individual's levels of stress, and reduce the need for more formal psychotherapeutic support (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Munn-Giddings & McVicar, 2006; Seebohm et al., 2013). If the self-help/mutual aid group has leaders or facilitators, they are unlike therapy groups leaders, because the self-help/mutual aid support group does not make diagnostic assessments or engage in any clinical practices (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). Yet facilitation is a key factor with self-help/mutual aid support groups, and will be outlined in the next section.

### 6.7.3    *Self-help/mutual aid support group facilitation*

One of the most important qualities of a group leader or group facilitator is an authentic and sincere interest in the well-being of others (Corey, 2012). The group's leader or leaders has considerable influence on the group processes and dynamics (Corey). Leaders bring with them their personal qualities, values, and life experiences, together with their biases and assumptions (Corey). According to Corey, the key to the success of a group leader is a commitment of the leader to go on a journey of becoming a more effective human being. The effectiveness of the support group can be assisted from the leader by being sincere, authentic, and enthusiastic whilst sharing and listening to stories and interacting with others in the group (Corey).

Because, self-help/mutual aid support groups are usually run by the members of the group, rather than experts or mental health professionals, and at a minimal cost (Forsyth;

Munn-Giddings & McVicar, 2006), they have been likened to small communities where members can gain friendships and a sense of connectedness with others (Humphreys). Families of children with illness and or disabilities have found this approach of great benefit (Johnson & Lane, 1993). The self-help/mutual aid group type of approach can be applied to any number of human experiences (Maddox, 2008). Further, some individuals may not wish to share their problems with those close to them, and prefer to unburden themselves with others who are knowledgeable in the problematic area, and less likely to make harsh judgements of the individual concerned (Forsyth). This is because support groups are based on the a natural tendency of individuals to seek reassurance and assistance through group membership (Forsyth).

In addition, because many self-help/mutual aid support groups have individuals who have experience and knowledge with the problem, and ways of dealing with it, these individuals may facilitate or lead the group and become role models for other group members (Forsyth, 2009). As most self-help/mutual aid support groups are autonomous, they create their own standards and practices and often operate outside of, and even in opposition to, traditional health care systems (Forsyth, 2009). Therefore, support group members become qualified as experts, not by training, but from common experience. Because no compensation is received for being involved with the support group, they can be trusted to openly share information (Forsyth). But there can also be limitations associated with self-help/mutual aid support groups.

### 6.7.4   Self-help/mutual aid support groups negative aspects

Some negative aspects can be found with support groups (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), because in some instances, the groups may increase some group member's stress levels, raising conflicts, increasing responsibilities in some cases, and exposing members to criticisms and misinformation (Chien, Norman, & Thompson, 2006; Coates & Winston,

1983; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). Overall, however, support groups are considered to be more therapeutic than harmful, and individuals who participate in such groups generally report substantial gains from the support group involvement (Forsyth, 2009; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Semmer et al., 2008). The gains include increases in self-efficacy, an increase in self-worth and improved practices and knowledge (Forsyth, 2009). These gains could be of value for many parents of gifted children; and may be helpful in dealing with the unique circumstances and experiences parents of gifted children have.

It has been argued that parents of gifted children deal with more stressors and social isolation than other parents (Alsop, 1997; Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006; Hayes & Levitt, 1982; Irving, 2004). It stands to reason that parents of gifted children are also a population who have been shown to need social support assistance (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al.; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2009; Irving; Wessling, 2012).

Therefore it follows that the difficulties parents experience in raising gifted children could be assisted with a self-help/mutual aid support group. This is because a self-help/mutual aid support group could help parents cope with their problems by normalising their experiences. In doing so, it could also possibly reduce the stressful experiences of parents' of gifted children (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). Together with stress are the associated factors of the lack of support from family, friends, schools and the community in the western region of Melbourne; a community in which giftedness is not readily accepted (Free, 2006, 2009). These factors can negatively impact mental health, if appropriate strategies are not appropriately implemented (Fisher et al.; Free). Social support groups are favoured interventions because of the mutual help provided by members of the group to more effectively deal with the problem at hand (Ahmadi, 2007). For example, for parents of gifted children, new behaviours may include more effective

ways to deal with school staff or government departments. Moreover, members of a self-help/mutual aid support group may be further assisted by the empowering effects gained from the support group (Humphreys, 1997; Johnson & Lane, 1993; Maddox, 2008; Schubert & Borkman, 1994).

Accordingly, self-help support groups are more likely to have the collaborative, empowering and cost effective qualities needed for parents in the western region of Melbourne (Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006). Parents have a strong desire to relate with other parents of gifted children, in an environment where they can share their issues and experiences about their gifted children (Adler, 2006; Fisher et al.; Free). The desire for parents of gifted children to meet with other parents of gifted children is a desire that largely goes unmet, particularly in the western region of Melbourne (Adler; Fisher et al.; Free, 2009). The experience of learning that individuals have something to offer and receive from others is profound and can assist with improved mental health and increased levels of coping (Humphreys, 1997). The distinct advantages and minimal financial costs involved with self-help/mutual aid support groups are clear. Self-help/mutual aid support groups have been shown to be powerful and effective low cost approaches, which can benefit many individuals within the community, including parents of gifted children.

# CHAPTER 7

## 7. Methodology

The goal of this research was to explore the phenomenon of parenting gifted children in the western region of Melbourne. It will attempt to discover the distinctions concerned with raising a gifted child. This study will explore what kinds of challenges exist for parents of gifted children, and why this is significant for them. From the data obtained an attempt was made to discover what mediates the difficulties parents of gifted children, in an effort to determine what assistance is most beneficial for them.

In order to better understand phenomena and achieve new perspectives, qualitative methods of inquiry foster an in-depth examination of data that would otherwise be difficult to obtain with quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Rather than search for casual determination, prediction and generalisability of findings by testing hypotheses, qualitative research seeks to illuminate, understand and extrapolate to comparable situations. This is done in order to better comprehend the phenomena involved in everyday lived experiences of people (Hoepfl, 1997; McLeod, 2001).

It would therefore be inappropriate to select a positivist paradigm with a quantitative, objective and deductive approach, which is often utilised to test hypotheses (Taylor & Medina, 2013). In the current research, an appropriate research paradigm is one that is qualitative, subjective and inductive, which interprets and analyses phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Subjective, qualitative phenomena are context rich and attempt to understand what is happening in the totality of the situation (Godfrey & Hill, 1995). As the experience of parenting involves a range of context rich and complex everyday phenomena, it is necessary to adopt an appropriate qualitative framework for the phenomenological investigation.

7.1     *Qualitative research*

Qualitative research is primarily concerned with the understanding of individuals' experiences (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) contended, "The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured, (or measured at all), in terms of  quantity, amount, intensity or frequency" (p. 14). Marshal and Rossman (2011) asserted that "Qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive and is grounded in the lived experience of people" (p. 3). Rossman and Rallis (2003) maintain there are five general hallmarks of qualitative research. These hallmarks are that: (a) qualitative research is typically enacted in naturalistic settings, (b) uses multiple methods that are respectful of the humanity in the study, (c) focuses on content, (d) evolves from emergent findings, and (e) is at its centre, fundamentally interpretive. Qualitative researchers tend to view social worlds as complex and holistic, they engage in systematic reflection when conducting the research, they also remain sensitive and reflexive to themselves, and rely on complex reasoning abilities (Rossman & Rallis).

Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) advise "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality" and the "intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied" together with the "situational constraints that shape inquiry" (p. 14). This is where the researcher's emphasis is on the value-laden nature of the inquiries and answers to questions are sought that stress how social experience is formed and meanings are made (Denzin & Lincoln).

In addition, Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) contend the key features of a qualitative method of inquiry involve five factors. The first is an understanding by the researcher of the events and processes by which events and actions take place. The second is to develop a contextual understanding. The third is facilitating an interactive process between the

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researcher and the participants. The fourth is to adopt an interpretive stance, and the fifth is to preserve design flexibility (Bloomberg & Volpe). A qualitative researcher is central, as the researcher acts as a "quilt-maker", who assembles a montage of experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Phenomenology is a qualitative method of inquiry which is focussed on individuals life experiences (Barnacle, 2001). Phenomenology is integral aspect of this research, and will be discussed in the following section.

### 7.1.1    *Phenomenology*

Transcendental phenomenology is concerned with the world as it presents itself to human beings (Willig, 2008). Phenomenology is a movement which originated from modern European philosophy and was initiated by German philosopher Edmund Husserl (American Psychological Association, 2009). Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology in the early twentieth century (Husserl, 1960, 2001).

Transcendental phenomenology concerns itself with the phenomena that emerge in our consciousness as we engage with the world around us (Willig). The phenomenological method allows the researcher to gain a fresh perception of the phenomena and extracts the essence, which provides meaning of the event. The knowledge gained from the phenomenological approach would not involve notions of common sense scientific explanations or abstractions in attempts to explain an individual's world. Instead, the phenomenological approach encourages an understanding of the world as it appears to individuals as they connect with it (Husserl, 1960, 2001).

The aim of transcendental phenomenology was to return to things themselves, as they appear to our perception, and to set aside, or bracket, what we consider we know about them. In his work Husserl often referred to the terms of transcendental and phenomenology interchangeably (van Man, 2011). More often, transcendental

phenomenology is simply referred to as phenomenology when dealing with the investigation of intentionality of the intellectual process of the self (Barua, 2007).

According to the phenomenological approach, no sense can be made of the world of and subjects and objects, separate from our experience of them. Because subjects and objects show themselves as something, the manifestation of the subjects and objects represents their reality at a particular time (Willig, 2008). The perception of the subject or object is dependent on the individual's mental orientation of desires, judgments, emotions and purposes, which is known as intentionality. With internality, objects appear as phenomena, so the individual and the world cannot be separated from its meaning. So, perception is always purposeful and enacts the experience (Willig, 2008). Individual's perceptions are of key importance in social science research.

Willig (2008) provides an example of phenomenology and how individuals perceive and experience the environment in different ways. She suggests a pile of dissertations on an office floor represents a hazard and a potential source of falls or back injuries to a health and safety officer. The same pile of dissertations to a lecturer constitutes hours of work reading and marking them. For students the dissertations include their thoughts and feelings and are a manifestation of their knowledge and potential source of failure or success. Therefore, in a phenomenological sense, the pile of dissertations has no meaning, until the dissertations are perceived by others with intentionality (Willig). In addition, phenomenology can be considered as both a philosophical approach and also human science methodology (Orbe, 2009).

Alfred Schutz connected Husserl's phenomenological approach to the social sciences by recognising the gap from Max Weber's concrete methical approach to research. Husserl's phenomenological approach facilitated "understanding the subjective meaning a social action has for the actor" (Schutz, 2011, p. 1). Schutz proposed to accept

the world as experiences, rather than mental representations, and different images (Schutz & Wagner, 1982). Shutz's development of what is known as social phenomenology emanated from documenting the process by which social reality is constructed, managed and maintained (Schutz, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1970). Schutz's stance, where the natural attitude of the world is 'out there', is distinct of from acts of interpretation or perception.

The phenomenological method of extracting the essence of the phenomena gained from understanding involves three phases of contemplation(Spinelli, 2005). These are the epoché, phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. Epoché is the suspension of presuppositions and assumptions, judgments and interpretations to allow ourselves to become properly aware of what is before us. With phenomenological reduction, the phenomena is described as it presents itself in its totality, which includes physical features such as shape and size and experiential features such as the thoughts and feelings in one's consciousness(Willig, 2008). That is, one becomes aware of what makes the experience what it is. Imaginative variation aims to identify the conditions associated with the phenomenon, which could involve time, space and or social relationships. Following the three stages of contemplation, the textural and structural descriptions come together to achieve an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon (Willig). Despite its valuable contribution, criticisms have been made of phenomenology.

Criticisms of phenomenology include its subjective, first-person approach and its emphasis on the essentialist conceptualisation of phenomena, which may hold assumptions that could limit human research (Orbe, 2009). Nonetheless, the criticisms made of phenomenology are also its strengths. Through phenomenology, the conscious experience is given meaning through the individual's own interpretation. Phenomenology does not specify before what it intends to find out, and approaches scholarly inquiry through an unconstricted and open manner, giving it its value. Because the qualitative approach is

subjective, interpretive and context rich when examining reality and experience (Guba &
Lincoln, 1989; Orbe, 2009) it has the capacity to discover what may not be found through
other methods of investigation (Sofaer, 2002).

An approach to qualitative experimental research that is has its foundations in
psychology and recognises the central role of the analyst in understanding participants
experiences is Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Pringle, Drummond,
McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008). A discussion of Interpretive
Phenomenology is necessary to aid with an understanding of the analytic stance taken in
this research.

### 7.1.2     *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

IPA "is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how
people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2008, p. 1).
IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploration of experiences in its own
terms. Researchers in IPA are especially interested in what occurs when the everyday flow
of lived experiences becomes more significant to individuals; which usually happens when
something important has happened in an individual's life (Smith et al., 2008). Further, IPA
is a qualitative phenomenological approach which is grounded in psychology and is
concerned with lived experiences, and how individuals make sense of those experiences
(Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Theoretically, IPA is underpinned by phenomenology and hermeneutics with an
idiographic focus (Smith, 2007). That is, the investigations are focussed on the
examination of individuals or events. The range of phenomena investigated with IPA
centres on experiences of personal significance or significant relationships (Smith). The
phenomenon in the current research relates to the experiences of parents of gifted children.

Understanding experiences offers insight to learn from the experts, who are the participants themselves (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

IPA also allows the investigator the opportunity to connect with the research question at an idiographic level. This is because it offers insight in a subjective and reflective process of interpretation regarding how an individual makes sense of a phenomenon (Smith, 2007). The idiographic level focuses on the specific, rather than the universal, and shifts the focus from causal laws, where events occur in predictable ways and one event leads to another, to understanding the meaning in an individual life (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

The focus of the IPA researcher is to understand how individuals feel and think about a phenomenon through their cognitive, emotional, written and verbal responses (Willig, 2001). Yet, the exploration of the phenomenon must involve the researcher's own worldviews, which includes the interactions between the researcher and the participant (Willig, 2008). This is important because there are two basic phenomenological assumptions embedded within IPA. One is that individual's perceptions provide evidence of the world as a person lives it, and not as it is thought to be. Two, individuals are conscious of their existence in the world as they experience it, consequently any meaning attributed to their perceptions and behaviour is within a specific context which involves people, relationships, events, situations and things (Richards & Morse, 2012).

Moreover, IPA does not test hypotheses, in order to avoid prior assumptions (Reid et al., 2005), nor are generalisations part of an IPA investigation (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Instead IPA gathers rich data using qualitative techniques, such as personally salient accounts found in interviews (Smith, 2007). That is, IPA emphasises the unearthing of meanings is a mutual process which results from the interaction of researchers and participants in a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997; Smith, Jarman, &

Osborne, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2004). Participants are recruited purposively as this method offers a meaningful perspective and multiple perspectives on a shared familial experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Researchers examine subject matter often obtained through open-ended interviews (Chapman & Smith, 2002). The interviews are conducted in a environment that is curious and facilitative, rather than challenging and interrogative, and requires in-depth and rich accounts of salient experiences that the researchers can investigate from verbatim transcripts (Smith et al., 1999). Within the IPA framework, analysis of the data should reflect the person's experience and perceptions of the phenomena that is being investigated (Smith et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2004).

Although the usual number of participants involved in an IPA method of enquiry is around 15, 23 individuals participated in the current study. This is because IPA has been shown to be effective when the numbers of participants can be up to 42 (Reid et al., 2005). As outlined, the IPA mode of investigation is the most appropriate and suitable method of uncovering phenomena when examining a particular important occurrence in individuals lives, such as the experiences of parenting gifted children. Nevertheless, one single approach is not always the best possible process, because of methodological or conceptual deficits. Other complementary approaches may be utilised to further enrich the meanings of the study. Ethnography is a fitting additional approach that is beneficial to this research.

### 7.1.3    *Ethnography*

Ethnography is also known as the science of contextualisation (Greenhouse, 2010). Context is interpreted through personal relationships, connected with self-knowledge, expectation, and commitment, together with language, memory, and imagination to registers and relativities of experience, beyond the present of the here and now (Greenhouse). As ethnography is a purely human endeavour, the researcher is the primary

tool for collecting data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The ethnographer's principal data base is built during the process of human interactions that include direct observations, face-to-face interviews and elicitation, and the recording of networks, places and times the human interactions take place (LeCompte & Schensul). Primarily, ethnography is about telling a rigorous, authentic and credible story (Fetterman, 2010). This is because ethnography gives a voice to individuals in their own local context and often relies on verbatim quotations and thick descriptions of events (Fetterman).

An ethnographer enters with an open mind, yet also with pre-conceived ideas and biases about how individuals think and behave, as all researchers do (Fetterman, 2010). When controlled, the biases can act to focus the research. To moderate the possible negative effects of bias, the investigator conducting the research will advise specific biases. Quality controls of contextualisation, triangulation, and the adoption of a non-judgemental orientation acts to check the negative effects of biases (2010). The ethnographer concentrates on predictable regular patterns of human thought and behaviour (2010). Consequently, ethnography acts as a product of written text obtained from a research method. Accordingly, Ethnography is an appropriate additional methodology to contextualise the self-help/mutual aid support group experiences in this research

Consequently, a multidimensional approach has been employed in the current research. The approaches of phenomenology (Willig, 2008), IPA (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2008), and ethnography (Fetterman, 2010; Gertz, 1973; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), are utilised to further develop the multifaceted meanings of the study. Accordingly, these frameworks are the most suitable for unearthing rich and thick meanings in the qualitative, phenomenological data obtained in the current research. Context and location are also important factors in this research. As the current research is located in the western region of Melbourne, it is appropriate to undertake an investigation of his region.

## CHAPTER 8

### 8.    Method

8.1    *Location and history of the western region of Melbourne*

The western region of Melbourne, Australia is the place and cultural context of the current study. Hence it is appropriate that the western region of Melbourne's history, and environment be properly outlined in order to convey the context in which this research is grounded.

Located to the west of the city of Melbourne and extending towards the urban fringe, the western region of Melbourne consists of the municipalities of Brimbank, Hobson's Bay, Maribyrnong, Moonee Valley, Melton and Wyndham and covers 1,333 square kilometres (LeadWest, 2008).

Historically, contact with Aboriginal people from the western Plains was made from 1835-1940 (Walker, 1986). The survey, exploration and establishment of towns and ports of the area took place 1835-1920. Expansion of industrial estates and housing occurred 1880-1980. Further industries were developed from the 1840s until the 1980s that included meat processing, metal, textiles, chemicals, synthetics and munitions. Following this period, the change in technologies prompted some job losses and changes in number of workplaces and types of employment available (Walker). Currently, the manufacturing and construction sectors provide the most employment, with retail, health and community services, which are followed by transport, warehousing, and the postal industry sectors (Regional Development Victoria, 2012). It is also prudent to also investigate the demographics and context of this region to provide a representation of the area.

#### 8.1.1    *Demographics and context of the western region of Melbourne*

The western region of Melbourne is comprised of 97 suburbs and 20 rural localities (Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2009). The

population of the western region of Melbourne is just over 819,000, which is around 20% of the population of metropolitan Melbourne (Regional Development Victoria, 2012). Although the majority of the population in the western region of Melbourne are of Anglo Saxon descent, the region includes a sizeable culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) population. Over 36% of people from the region were born overseas (Regional Development Victoria). English is the first language for majority of the population, but approximately 43% of the population speak two or more languages other than English, with Vietnamese as the most common language after English at 6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The pockets of diversity found throughout the western region include 90 nationalities of people that have migrated from other countries. Most of the residents who migrated were from Vietnam, Italy and Malta, and later, from Africa and Burma (LeadWest, 2008).

The western region of Melbourne is a less affluent region when compared with other regions of Melbourne (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Many residents in the western region are employed in the heavy industries that are located within the western region of Melbourne (Regional Development Australia, 2012). Furthermore, incomes in the western region of Melbourne are less than other metropolitan regions of Melbourne. On average, the residents of the western region of Melbourne receive a per capita disposable income of $29,800.00. In addition, the western region of Melbourne has the highest amount of income received from government benefits, when compared with other regions of metropolitan Melbourne (Regional Development Victoria). Income is also associated with internet usage: those with higher income levels (primarily located outside the western region of Melbourne) have higher levels of internet usage, and those with lower income levels have lower internet usage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010-2011). Lower income levels are also linked with unemployment.

Unemployment in 2012 was 3% higher in the western region than the Melbourne metropolitan average (Regional Development Australia, 2012). However, the western region of Melbourne region was also reported as having the fastest growing workforce of all the Melbourne metropolitan regions, with an average growth of 3.6% over five years (Regional Development Victoria). A key influence in employment levels are education levels (Gutierrez, Orecchio, Paci, & Serneels, 2007).

Formal education in the western Melbourne region is comprised of 274 schools and one university, which is Victoria University (LeadWest, 2008). Victoria University manages vocational education within the Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Victoria University also caters for further education and higher education needs, across 11 campuses throughout the western region of Melbourne and one recently established campus in Sydney, New South Wales (Victoria University, 2013).

Education levels were generally lower in the western region and higher in the Eastern region of metropolitan Melbourne (Regional Development Australia, 2011; Regional Development Victoria, 2012). In terms of educational outcomes, in the western region of Melbourne, 59% of working age people achieved a year 12 level of education compared with 65% of working age individuals in the Eastern region of Melbourne. The Melbourne metropolitan average of working age people who obtained a year 12 level of education was 61% (Regional Development Australia, 2011, 2012). In addition, the lower than average education levels found in the western region of Melbourne tended to result in a relatively less skilled workforce, particurlaly when compared with the rest of metropolitan Melbourne (Regional Development Australia, 2011, 2012).

Furthermore, within the western region of Melbourne, the municipality of Brimbank recorded the lowest levels of education, and the municipality of Hobson's Bay recorded the highest levels of education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). A Victoria

University study of the Statistical Local Area (SLA) in 2010, further reported the growth of residents who hold a bachelor degree or higher. The majority of the growth of tertiary educated residents can be found within the Inner West, in areas which include Hobson's Bay, Moonee Ponds and Maribyrnong. Furthermore, the increase in degree holders, and the increase of people with occupations such as managers or other professions, has resulted in a growing level of gentrification of the Inner West (Centre for Stategic Economic Studies Victoria University, 2010). More recently it was reported that 21.3% of the overall population of the western region of Melbourne now hold bachelor degrees or higher qualifications (Regional Development Victoria, 2012). Be that as it may, the outer western areas of Brimbank and Melton continue to fall behind the rest of Melbourne economically and educationally (Centre for Stategic Economic Studies Victoria University). It is in the aforementioned demographic and characteristic context that this research was set in. The next section will discuss the design of the study.

## 8.2    *Design*

The current research explored the experience of parenting gifted children in the western region of Victoria. Therefore, an IPA study design was developed that collected qualitative data from a purposive sample of participants. A purposive sample was chosen, in keeping with IPA requirements to have a relatively small sample. Data for the current research was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews which was audio-recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and were subsequently analysed within the IPA framework (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Participant selection for this study will be discussed nex.

## 8.3    *Participants*

The inclusion criteria for recruiting participants were that they were parents of gifted children. Parents self-selected that they were parents of gifted children. Parents are

adept at identifying giftedness and potential in their children (Alamer, 2010; Chan, 2000; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Silverman, 2009). An additional requirement was that they also should reside in the western region of Melbourne, Victoria, (although not all fathers resided in the Western region of Melbourne. An explanation of this decision is made below Table 3).

Twenty three parents of gifted children participated in the current research. Sixteen participants were mothers of gifted children, and seven participants were fathers of gifted children (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Participants demographic data*

|  |  | Number | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sex |  |  |  |
|  | Male | 7 | 30.4 |
|  | Female | 16 | 69.6 |
| Marital Status |  |  |  |
|  | De facto | 2 | 8.70 |
|  | Married | 21 | 91.3 |
| Education |  |  |  |
|  | Some secondary | 2 | 8.70 |
|  | Some tertiary | 5 | 21.7 |
|  | Bachelor degree | 10 | 43.5 |
|  | Postgraduate | 6 | 26.1 |
| Residence |  |  |  |
|  | Regional Victoria | 1 | 4.35 |
|  | Interstate | 1 | 4.35 |
|  | Eastern region | 1 | 4.35 |
|  | Western region | 20 | 86.9 |
| Ethnicity |  |  |  |
|  | CALD | 5 | 21.7 |
|  | Non CALD | 18 | 78.3 |

*Note.* All categories of data equate to 100%.

Twenty participants lived in the western region of metropolitan Melbourne in the state of Victoria, Australia. As the demographics of the western region of Melbourne indicated, the sample was skewed to participants of Anglo Saxon descent. Because the difficulty of recruiting fathers, and how the investigation of fathers developed in some different directions to the overall study, some latitude was extended in regard to the

location of three of the fathers. One father was located in the Eastern region of Victoria, one father was located in a remote region of Victoria, and one father was located outside the state of Victoria, in an Australian territory.

Compared with the relative success of recruiting mother participants, fathers of gifted children were extremely reluctant to participate in the study. Despite what should have been a generous pool of resources from the parent support group that was formed alongside the progression of this research, and word-of-mouth advertising, I conducted only three face-to-face interviews with fathers. Of the other four fathers, one interview was conducted via the telephone with a father living in a geographically remote Victorian location, and three other fathers responded in writing, which was sent by email. One of these three fathers appeared to have had social engagement difficulties, and two fathers preferred to email their responses, rather than respond in a face-to-face interview or by telephone. In my attempts to recruit fathers for this research, I was advised by some fathers' partners that the fathers had agreed to participate. Whereas when I made contact, the fathers advised various reasons for not participating. Reasons included that they were busy, would be away, would get back to me, and other similar responses.

Although no restrictions were placed on the participant's age, the minimum age of 18 years was required to meet legal requirements and Victoria University ethical guidelines. The participants had varied levels of educational achievement. Most (43.5%) participants held a bachelor degree, with 26.1% of participants who had achieved post graduate qualifications. Almost 22% of participants had received some tertiary education (incomplete degree or diploma), and 8.7% of participants had received some secondary or high school education. A very high percentage of participants were married (91.3%),and the remaining participants were in de facto relationships (8.7%). With regard to ethnicity,

21.7% were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and the majority of participants at 78.3%, were from an Anglo-Saxon background.

Whilst the gifted children were not interviewed, their demographic data was obtained in order to obtain a clearer picture of the parent and child dyad. It should be noted that although 23 participants were interviewed, eight of the participants were in a married or de facto relationship, so that eight participants were members of four couples. Accordingly, the 23 who participated in the study were parents of 19 children.

In keeping with the literature most of the gifted children in the current research were firstborn (Gross, 2004; Johnson, 1994; Parker, 1998; Webb, Gore, Amend, & De Vries, 2007). Firstborn children who were gifted comprised 94.7 per cent of the data gathered, and non firstborn children who were gifted comprised the remaining 5.3% of the data. Gifted male children comprised 57.9% of the data set, while 42.1% were female. There was a cross-section of various ages of children, with ages ranging from three to 15 years. Previous research (Alsop, 1997) has shown that it is within this child age range that parents have to deal with many complex and distressing matters that are integral for preparing their gifted children for their future years. In order to properly conduct the research, suitable materials were required and subsequently developed.

## 8.4    *Materials*

This research was designed to ascertain what experiences parents of gifted children have in the western region of Melbourne, and what challenges are presented to these parents. No existing instrument was found to exactly fit the current research's research design, although a similar interview schedule had been administered in a previous smaller scale study (Irving, 2004). In order to elicit information, and also allow for maximum flexibility and reflexivity for the participants and researcher, a more comprehensive interview schedule was refined and further developed. This is in keeping with the

qualitative method of inquiry to uncover the phenomenon of individuals' lived experiences. There were three iterations of the interview schedule . The interview schedule was based on the research and the theory that underpins this research.

The first version of the interview schedule was developed in 2004 (Irving) for the purpose of researching an honours thesis on the parenting of children with high intellectual potential (Irving). The second version of the interview schedule was amended and used by this researcher in 2006, also for the purpose of researching an honours thesis, investigating the psychosocial needs of parenting gifted and talented children (Free, 2006). A third, more comprehensive revised version of the interview schedule was subsequently developed in consultation with the researcher's principal supervisor. The final version of the interview schedule comprised 40 questions (see Appendix A). Consistent with the qualitative IPA process, questions flowed from more summary level questions to more focussed open-ended questions, in order to obtain specific experiences and associated thoughts and feelings (Smith et al., 2009). With the exception of the background or demographic questions, 31 of the questions were open-ended questions. Open-ended questions encouraged the participants to be open and expansive with their responses, to talk at length, with minimal verbal input from the interviewer (Smith et al.).

The interview schedule was divided into seven sections. The first section of the interview schedule consisted of nine background information questions. The questions included the residential post code, marital status, educational level, ethnic background, the gifted child's age, birth order, sex and visual spatial orientation.

The second part of the interview schedule surveyed information about schools. Five questions centred upon the choice of schools. Questions focussed on the supportive or unsupportive nature of the school, and how the nature of support was manifested. In

addition questions surveyed the nature of the relationship between the parent and the school, and any emotional difficulties that were involved in this relationship.

The third section of the interview schedule consisted of two questions about access to programs and services for the children, their degree of assistance, and/or the availability of programs or services that the parents or child wanted to be involved with. The fourth section of the interview schedule was specifically related to the western region of Melbourne. Four questions and two sub-questions were related to the experience of parenting gifted children in the western region. These questions probed access to programs and services. They also explored how the parents needs were catered for, in the western region of Melbourne.

The fifth section of the interview schedule investigated parents relationships with family and friends. Eight of these questions related to family and friends responses to the child's giftedness, advice from family, friends, or school, the seeking of further information regarding giftedness, and when, where the information was sought and the type of information sought. The sixth part of the interview schedule centred on parents of gifted children's needs and support. Six questions and three sub-questions encompassed various aspects of support; support needs, supplementary assistance support groups and counselling.

The seventh section of the interview schedule surveyed the structure of support groups using five questions that queried different models of support groups, such as a support group with a professional at the centre, a play group model, a counselling model, or a casual chat group. Other questions concerned the financial cost, and the possible negatives or drawbacks a support group for parents of gifted children may have. In order for the participants to advise any matter that was not covered throughout the interview, the interview was concluded with this open question, "Is there anything you would like to add,

or that we did not cover throughout the interview?" Procedural and ethical matters will be elaborated in the net section.

## 8.5 *Procedure*

### 8.5.1 *Ethical issues*

The Victoria University Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development Research Ethics Committee originally granted approval for this research in 2007. All research was carried out with Victoria University approval and conducted within the university guidelines. Participation by those recruited was on a non-remunerated, voluntary basis, and participants could withdraw their participation at any time throughout the course of the research. No participants exercised this option.

Following the approval from Victoria University Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development Research Ethics Committee, participant recruitment began. An information evening for parents with speakers presenting topics on giftedness was held at Victoria University on 25 July 2007. This event was advertised in a gifted information organisation newsletter[1] and also by word of mouth communication. At the conclusion of the event, 15 parents elected to leave their personal contact details for the researcher to contact them regarding the possibility of forming a support group for parents of gifted children, and expressed interest in possible future research. In December 2007, a parent support group was founded by a parent of a gifted child, who attended the information evening. The researcher joined with the parent to assist with the establishment and running the support group. Upon establishment of the support group, the details of the group and meeting information were advertised in the gifted information organisation's newsletter in January 2008 (see Appendix B), and subsequently every month after the group's inception.

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[1]The gifted information newsletter has not been identified to protect the privacy of the organisation

Participants were recruited through contact with the self-help/mutual aid support group. Participants were also recruited after reading the gifted information organisation's newsletter, or by direct contact with this organisation. The researcher's email and telephone contact information was listed on the gifted information organisation's website and newsletter. Potential participants then contacted the researcher.

All potential participants were given a Victoria University plain language 'Information for Participants in Research' letter (see Appendix C). This letter contained a brief description of the study and what participation in the study entailed. Potential participants were advised the research was to take the form of an interview and at the participant's time and place of convenience. It also advised that participation was voluntary and that the interview could be terminated at any time and also that the participant could withdraw from the study at any time. Although Victoria University ethical guidelines were followed, and psychological risks were minimised, the information letter also offered the option of free psychological counselling assistance if needed by any participant. If needed, the counselling would be provided by a registered psychologist, employed by Victoria University. No participants requested this option. Contact details that included telephone numbers and email addresses of the researcher, the principal investigator and supervisor, and the psychologist, were also clearly indicated within the information letter. It was advised that interviews would take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete.

Potential participants were also given an informed consent form (see Appendix D). If potential participants agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to return the consent form to the student researcher. The consent form included the title of the research, and included a certification by the participants that they were aged 18 years or more. The consent form also stated that the research would be conducted by me, and that the

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participants would engage with the researcher in a semi-structured interview that would be recorded. Twenty consent forms were completed on the days the interviews were conducted. Three participants were sent the Victoria University Consent Form, which was subsequently completed and returned by mail. No interviews were conducted without a signed and completed consent form. A discussion of the data gathering process will be discussed next.

### 8.5.2    *Data gathering*

Twenty interviews were completed in face-to-face meetings by the researcher and the participant. The meetings were conducted at times and places that were most suitable and comfortable for the participant. Fourteen interviews were conducted at the participants' residences. Three interviews were conducted at three different cafés that were convenient for the participants. Participants were advised that confidentiality could not be completely assured in public venues such as cafés, but the participants elected to conduct the interviews in these venues, regardless of these considerations. Two interviews were conducted at two different public libraries, in private rooms that had been booked for the purpose of the interviews. One interview was conducted at an indoor public swimming pool, whilst the participant's child was taking her regular swimming lesson; where again, confidentiality issues were raised with the participant, who elected to have the interview take place in the public venue. Three interview schedules were completed by email.

Data pertaining to the self-help/mutual aid support group was gathered through participant observation (Willig, 2008). The methodology of participant observation requires that the researcher to not only observe what is going on, but to feel what it is like to be involved in a specific social group (Marsh, Rosser, & Harré, 1978). Willig advised that " the observer may be incognito (covert), or, known as a researcher (overt)" (p. 27).

In this instance, I was the researcher, and my data gathering was overt. Although I was a parent and member of the self-help/mutual aid support group, as a researcher, I was also considered to be a participant observer. I advised the group members and new group attendees at each group meeting that I was a researcher from Victoria University and was exploring the experiences of parents of gifted children.

In addition, Willig (2008) further explains the process of participant observation involves engaging in a range of activities, which include participation, informal documentation or note taking, interviews and reflection. I most often completed documentation by note taking immediately after a self-help/mutual aid support group meeting had taken place, thereby freshly capturing the details of the events or activities soon after they occurred. The documentation and note taking procedure that followed the meetings aided with the process of reflection necessary to attempt to understand the data. This process promoted the goal of the researcher to be involved enough to understand what occurs, but detached enough to reflect on the phenomena that is being investigated (Willig).

In keeping with the guidelines stated by Willig (2008), most of what was recorded was concerned with actual observations that were made. These notes described settings, events and people, including summaries and quotes of what people said at the meetings. This type of information is referred to as substantive notes. Other notes that were taken, were about the observation process itself. These notes reflected on the researcher's role in the research and the relationship with other group members. The notes also recorded any problems and/or positive experiences that occurred. These notes are known as methodological notes. The notes were also used to record emerging connections, patterns and themes. These notes assisted with analysis of the data and theory-building. These notes

are referred to as analytical notes (Willig). In addition to note taking, the researcher also attended to the recording and transcription of the data.

### 8.5.3    Data transcription

Eight interviews were tape recorded by the researcher. The other thirteen interviews were digitally recorded using an Olympus digital recorder model DS-30. The researcher elected to personally transcribe the interviews. This decision was made in order to ensure accuracy and stay close to the data, in an effort to obtain a rich and full context of the participants' experience. This was achieved by listening carefully for pauses, nuances, voice pitches and making appropriate notes throughout the interview transcription process. Pseudonyms were used in place of all the participants' names and the participant's children. This was done to provide protection of the identities of the participants and the identities of the children. All quotes that were recorded were copied from the raw transcribed data. Clarification words have been entered at times, and these insertions have been marked within square brackets [ ]. Overt emotional expressions, such as laughter or distress have been marked within parentheses ( ). The Olympus digital recorder software DSS Player version 7 aided the researcher with the transcription process of the data. Following from the process of data transcription, is the process of data analysis.

### 8.5.4    Data analysis

IPA was the selected as the methodological framework for this study. Thematic analysis was the method employed for the data analysis. This technique facilitated the identification and analysis of the patterns and themes in the qualitative data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is considered to be both a practical and robust method for dealing with qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Roberts & Taylor, 2002). In order to become familiar with the phenomena investigated, and construct theories from the transcripts, a thorough examination of the data was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Initially, the transcripts of the interviews were printed, read and re-read by the researcher several times in order to become more familiar and closer to the data, as stated by Roberts and Taylor.

As suggested by Strauss and Cobin (1990) , open coding and axial coding then took place. Open coding refers to the labelling of words, sentences or phrases. This was followed by axial coding, whereby the data was then highlighted, thematically colour coded and tagged (Strauss & Corbin). In keeping with Strauss and Corbin, this is where patterns and themes of the data began to emerge. At this stage of the data analysis notes on the transcribed data pages were also made. Following the initial readings, open coding, axial coding and tagging process, the QSR NVivo version 8, (a computer software program for qualitative data ) was utilised. The NVivo program further assisted with more in-depth analysis and delineation of metathemes, themes and subthemes within the data. Themes were then re-examined and reviewed and in order to ensure they were correctly assigned and categorised correctly (Jennifer, 2001). Throughout the data analysis processes, Victoria University ethical principles were observed. In addition to the observation of ethical principles, is the factor of validity. Validity of the data obtained is an important aspect of conducting research.

### 8.5.5    *Validity*

In order to demonstrate credibility, validation of the data is necessary (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Validation refers to whether the findings of a study are true and certain (Patton, 2002).The aim of validity therefore, is not to produce one truth, but to present the creditability of the themes created from the data gathered (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Validation of the findings helps to improve the accuracy and transferability of the findings (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). In addition to validity, the triangulation of data is necessary when two or more perspectives of qualitative data are analysed (Lindlof &

Taylor). The validation process consequently occurs through triangulation by using multiple methods of enquiry (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001). Triangulation will now be discussed in more detail.

### 8.5.5.1 *Triangulation*

Triangulation is important to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Triangulation involves the comparison of two or more types of evidence which are connected to the research. Should data from two or more methods indicate the same conclusion, then validation is improved and confidence is strengthened in the research findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Multiple methods of data collection in the current study were achieved by conducting open-ended semi-structured interviews with individuals who were purposively selected. In addition, validity of the study was also enhanced by member checking and participant observation (Willig, 2008).

In order to achieve triangulation, member checking is regarded as an important step in validating research findings (Carlson, 2010). The establishment of a self-help/mutual aid support group for parents of gifted children and the recruitment of participants from the self-help/mutual aid support group created multi-dimensional methods of enquiry. In order to check the viability of the interpretation of the findings, the topics findings were member checked with other parents of gifted children who attended the self-help/mutual aid support group. As recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1989), specific data was cross checked to verify insights, results and conclusions with members of the support group.

Thematic data was member checked in the following manner. The researcher would raise topics that had emerged from the data. The researcher would then ask the self-help/mutual aid support group members to comment, in order to gauge informational feedback, and check the findings in an attempt to validate the data. No confidential or personally identifiable information was member checked with the self-help/mutual aid

support group. It is also important to state that as the researcher, I am also a parent of a gifted child, which may have influenced the nature of this research.

## 8.6    *Researcher's statement*

It was my hope to understand if the experience of meeting with parents of gifted children in a supportive group environment would be of value and effective for parents of gifted children. I wanted to know the topics parents of gifted children were most concerned with, because I understand that it can be difficult to share experiences and  raising gifted children with other parents and other people in an individual's family and amongst their community.

Parenting gifted children has special meaning to me because I am a parent of a gifted child. I experienced many difficulties raising my son, especially when he attended kindergarten and primary school. My child's difficulties were primarily due to his troublesome behaviour, which was disruptive in the classroom and often anti-social in nature. Over four years my son was referred to a range of professionals including mental health professionals and an occupational therapist. This was a very stressful time for me; I did not know what to do to help my son. Because I considered the school environment more negative than positive, I arranged for my son to change schools when he began his second year of formal education. My son was subsequently identified by teachers who fortunately had some training in gifted education. This could be regarded as lucky, because many teachers in the state of Victoria have not been trained in gifted education (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012). The school staff, and two teachers in particular, recognised and strongly supported his learning style and abilities. They referred him for an assessment with a psychologist who specialised in gifted children. They also helped by arranging for the psychologist to come to the school. My son was

assessed as visually spatially gifted, when he was in year three at school, during the year 2000.

I had very little knowledge of giftedness at that time. From 1996 until 2000 I experienced four years of huge difficulties dealing with my son's behavioural problems, that were particularly pronounced within an educational setting. A comprehensive individual learning program was developed and implemented for him. My son worked alone in a separate room which was located off the classroom with a variety of materials including a computer. Although he was a regarded as an oddity, because he was the kid with his own office, my son's behaviour improved. The frustrated little boy, who often acted out, became calmer, more focused and happier than he had ever been. This meant less stressful meetings with the teachers at the school as well as with other student's parents which resulted in a more relaxed and happier time for me.

I have related my experience with my son to others as being like night (before my child was identified) and day (after he was identified and an appropriate program was put in place). I felt relief that his differences were recognised. Although my son had been assessed by a range of professionals, it became apparent that he did not need treatment; he just needed an appropriate educational program to suit his learning style. Appropriate support during this difficult time would have been beneficial for my son and me. Unfortunately, as far as I could ascertain at the time, there were not any support services available. In fact, there were no support groups or other supportive parents that I knew of that could have assisted me.

I did not receive any guidance or support during the very difficult four year process leading up to his identification. When I better understood my son's special needs, I did not know of any specialised groups or support services, apart from a small number of educators and one psychologist. It was difficult to talk to other parents about this. After

experiencing negative responses from some parents, I learned to be careful about how I talked about having a gifted child, although I did not specifically hide it. So, giftedness was discussed with some helpful teachers and a psychologist who specialised in giftedness and gifted children. The internet was available, but it was a very new and underdeveloped as a reference source. It was difficult to know how I could best support my son and how I could be supported to assist him. Talking to teachers and the psychologist was a validating experience for me and it relieved some of the stress that I felt. This experience taught me that being with others who knew about giftedness may be helpful for other parents of gifted children. This experience also spurred my interest in psychology.

One of the reasons I began studying psychology was because of the behaviour and special characteristics of my son. I also thought studying psychology may help me to understand my son better, by improving my understanding of human behaviour. Therefore, this research examines more closely and deeply the experiences of parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne; what their needs are now, and how they can best be supported.

I undoubtedly have an existing bias, which may have influenced the study. There is a risk the data and its findings may have been misinterpreted by me. However, I anticipate the personal experiences that I have brought to the interpretations of the data have enriched the quality of the evaluations, rather than detracted from its value. I will be in the valuable position to assess the literature and the obtained data through the lens of a parent of a gifted child. Although I have tried to consciously set aside any expectations of the current research, my interpretations are, as a human being, subjective.

The literature has shown that the needs of parents of gifted children have been largely ignored, particularly in the resource poor western region of Melbourne. The current research's exploration of the parents of gifted children will help to clarify what types of

supports are needed by these parents through a greater understanding gained from the in-depth interviews conducted. Unquestionably, there is a need to come closer to address the gap of knowledge that exists, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

Outcomes of the current research may assist professionals and parents of gifted children to seek the much-needed relevant support in a manner they find most suitable. By seeking and finding appropriate support, parents of gifted children may gain help with parental practices. They may also find assistance with advocating for the needs of their gifted children, particularly in the educational arena. It hoped the current research, which is located in the western region of Melbourne, will help parents and others deal effectively with the joys and difficulties of raising a gifted child, in a community that is less receptive and more resistant to the concept of giftedness. The next section will be an exploration and investigation of the findings and discussion of the research that was conducted.

# CHAPTER 9

## 9.    Findings and Discussion

This chapter will be present findings exploring the experiences of parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne. Although all parents experience stress, the findings indicated that parents of gifted children are challenged with unique stressors. They were regularly faced with a variety of particular challenges, particularly with schools and the education of their children. Different forms of social support were needed to help parents of gifted children. The lack of perceived social support indicated an increased risk of social isolation and a range of associated difficulties.

Two metathemes of stress and social support emerge from the data analysis. The metathemes have several further layers of themes and subthemes as presented in Table 4. The themes were interconnected and complex in nature (see Table 4).

The complex nature of the themes meant they were not neat categorical constructs. This is because the broader societal perceptions of giftedness are culturally shaped. Society determines which abilities are recognised, valued and nurtured (von Károlyi, 2006). Giftedness was considered a concept that was often opposed by Australian schools and teachers (Watters & Diezmann, 2001). The prevailing societal perceptions led to reduced social support for parents of gifted children, which in turn contributed towards parents experiences of social isolation. It became clear the overarching factors of stress and social support profoundly affect the parental experience of raising gifted children on multiple levels.

Table 4

*Themes and subthemes which emerged from interviews with parents of gifted children*

| Metathemes | Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|---|
| Stress | | |
| | Identification and Education | |
| | | Schools |
| | | Early entry |
| | | Bullying |
| | Social isolation | |
| | | Giftedness as a 'disease' |
| | | Tall-poppy syndrome |
| | | 'Pushy' parent |
| | | Stigma and labelling |
| Social Support | | |
| | Parent support | |
| | | Family and friends |
| | | Organisations |
| | | Counselling |
| | | Information |
| | Fathers support | |
| | Support groups | |
| | | Consensual validation |

## 9.1 *Stress*

The findings in this study indicate that having a child who is gifted can affect the way parents interact with family, friends, schools, the government education department, and other organisations. Raising a gifted child influences many parents' decisions. Parents of gifted children experience stressors that are often not mediated by social support. The socio-environmental demands placed on individuals (Aneshensel, 1992), and in this case, parents of gifted children, may overburden them. Coupled with the reduced amount of support they perceive is available to them, parents may have an increased risk of illness and associated negative effects (Haber et al., 2007).

The findings show that varying degrees of stress were experienced by parents of gifted children in response to the stressors and the difficulties associated with raising gifted children. The stressors and difficulties were contextually woven throughout the themes and subthemes. Furthermore, the findings indicate that simply having a gifted child activated stressors for parents. Because the level of stress experienced by parents was influenced by societal views of giftedness, this influenced the meaning giftedness has for the parents of gifted children. Often giftedness was perceived by the parents of gifted children as a special set of circumstances requiring intervention and particular attention, rather than something positive, as a 'gift' is often otherwise perceived.

Peter proposed his family's stress levels were higher because of his daughter's giftedness, which was difficult for his family to manage because of the problems that giftedness has presented:

> *I'm well aware of the stress levels and I suspect the family stress levels are higher because of who Anna is and what she is, but yeah, it's really up to us to find a way of dealing with it, day by day, I guess. It's very hard...*

Doris explains that her stress experiences are related to her sense of injustice because her child's needs are not catered for by the school. A sense of helplessness can be ascertained from experiences with the school:

> *Because...my most stress is that... I've got this child who's extremely good and you know I feel like there's no justice for him by just sending him to school and... he's clever, but nothing's done to further that [by the school].*

Jack recalled a particularly stressful encounter with his daughter's school teacher, demonstrating a mismatch between the expectation that the teacher would be receptive and the stress experienced when there was a hostile response from the teacher.

*Early on we were having a conversation with her prep[2] teacher and it seemed that it was becoming a bit stressful, and I wondered if the communication was working, and then the teacher sort of jumped and said, "Well for goodness sakes, she's only five".*

After receiving negative and hostile responses from neighbours or at the day care centre, Mary described the stress she experienced, and dealt with it by hiding her child's giftedness from others. Mary's multilayered response appears to be focussed on the educational issue, but it appears the stress she feels may be from being from being judged as a boastful parent.

*Whereas, you know neighbours or people at crèche or at school or whatever are much more inclined to say, "That's a terrible idea" [early school entry for her child] (laughs), like what? Okay… "Do you think we haven't thought about it all? Or agonised, or okay, no, just a terrible idea, well, that's good to know"… Now we just mostly try and hope nobody notices,… but we still try very hard not to make it, like we are just so cautious about making anyone else feel bad, because that whole competition thing you get in, like, that you're proud or boastful about your child, that their children aren't as good as your child, for whatever reason, we try so hard not to set up any of those feelings for people… but you do see that sometimes, I think, I think that's where the hostility comes from.*

The stress experienced by parents was often associated with issues of their child's identification as gifted. Identification and educational issues were problematic for some parents and had considerable impact.

### 9.1.1   Identification and Education

Identification of giftedness in children and their education go hand in hand with each other (Renzulli, 1998).This is because identification is often required in order for children to access any suitable educational programs that may be available, which may assist with their learning (Hodge, 2013). Identification of giftedness can be a difficult and

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[2] In the state of Victoria, primary school begins from a preparatory year, known as 'prep', and advances a further six years (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010).

multifaceted process which may involve the gifted individual, family, friends, schools, and professionals within the community (Silverman, 2009). Although parents are often the first informal identifiers of giftedness in their children (Silverman), parents who advise their child's early literacy and numeracy skills to school staff are regularly disregarded or actively disbelieved (Gross, 1999). The identification of a child as gifted can lead to problematic relations within the immediate environment of family and friends, and the wider environment of schools, professionals and organisations (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

Identification and educational matters are linked and are therefore interconnected (Geake & Gross, 2008). The link between education and schools is clear; students attend pre schools, schools, colleges and universities (Wood, 2012). Ultimately, education is related to the concept of learning, whether that takes place in formal or informal environments (Wood, 2012). In the current study, the majority of the parents' gifted children attended schools in the western region of Melbourne.

Identification can also be a difficult issue to deal with for parents who have themselves been identified as gifted, particularly if the identification has taken place as a mature adult. Katie's personal journey of the identification of her own giftedness came later in life and was a particularly emotional and painful process. The pain stemmed from the neglect of her educational and intellectual needs throughout her childhood at western region schools. Because Katie's needs were chronically ignored and she was grossly under stimulated, her self-worth and self-esteem greatly suffered. The pain Katie felt from these experiences prompted her to advocate for her child's intellectual needs, in order to protect her child from the pain she experienced:

*I found out that I am gifted as well, very low on the scale, but I mean in the same group and when I found out I was shocked, completely shocked [participant becomes visibly distressed and the researcher stops recording. Recording resumes after the participant resumed her composure a few minutes later]...*

*It's all right, it's all right [to the researcher]... it took me a long time to accept it... I used to think I was stupid, had no confidence, not capable of further education, I was bored in school, bored to tears... It's a truly painful realisation because my motivation behind all of this is I don't want Sam to end up like me...being sent through the rafters like I have... not being recognised... [and for Sam]not being able to fulfil himself and to go to university when they are [he is] 45.*

In respect of identification and educational matters, frustration from the lack of support that was expected, or received, was commonly expressed by participants. Varying levels of frustrations, in terms of dissatisfaction that comes from unresolved problems or unfulfilled needs (Eriksson & Svedlund, 2007), were expressed by 18 of the 23 participants in the study. Parents' responses were unique in their experiences of worries and concerns which were conveyed with a range of emotions that manifested in anger, sadness, distress, disgust and anticipation.

A frequent response from participants was that frustration was experienced from the lack of recognition of their child's giftedness, and the problems that stemmed from what parents regarded as a most important issue. Doris expressed her anger, frustrations and difficulties born from an expectation that her gifted child's needs will be recognised and catered for, and then dealing with the reality of trying to cope when they are not:

*I also feel very angry and frustrated, I'm thinking, yes, they [society] recognise to the point that there are conferences especially for gifted children but the teachers are not aware of that, how can that be, you know? I'm thinking, this is a child who is reading medical books and understanding and asking me questions, and I'm sending him to the Year 2 (laughs) is that sort of justice for him? And is that enough for him? Am I catering for his needs? So that aspect and the other aspect of trying to cope with the level of information and knowledge that he needs at home.*

Lucy's frustrations emanated from the teacher's lack of knowledge when her child was identified as gifted. Parents put faith in those trained in education, such as teachers, and believe they will be able to develop and implement a plan for their child's potential and abilities:

> *I think I found it very frustrating that um, particularly when Anna was first identified, but um, the teacher who she had at the time was, really wanted to help Anna, but didn't know how.*

Following the identification of her child as gifted, Mary conveyed the sense of burden and isolation she experienced. Mary compared the identification of her child as gifted with a special needs diagnosis, which marginalised both her and her child:

> *At the identification stage it's quite isolating in a way, because you can't really talk about it with other parents because they think you are showing off or something, when in fact it's like in an odd sort of a way, is like a special needs diagnosis, that maybe finding that your child is somewhere on the spectrum that maybe the mainstream won't deal with as well as you'd like, um, so that, I thought that was, you know, there was that sort of, that sense of responsibility that I was going to have to have for her upbringing doing as well as we could for her and that it might be a little tougher because of this.*

Marg expressed her vision of what should occur when a child is identified as gifted, as she lamented the lack of support following her child's identification:

> *I think what would be fantastic is if your child gets identified, as a gifted kid, that then you as a parent have your own little private counselling with the psychologist to say this is what it is, this is what it means, and these are some links to some useful websites because there's a lot out there, useful ones [websites] that are actually good, ... because you are not told any of that.*

Identification, and education are closely linked (Wood, 2012). Schools form an integral part of the educational process (Wood). Many parents conveyed a wide range a problems and difficulties from their interactions with schools.

Interactions with staff at western region of Melbourne schools were stressors for many parents of gifted children. This could be because schools tend to mirror their communities and reflect many of the social mechanisms, behavioural patterns and cultural values which occur in the world at large (Muschert & Peguero, 2008). Most parents lived in the western region of Melbourne and their children attended schools in this area. The lack of support for gifted students and their families from the western region schools was a common experience for parents in the current research. The attitudes from the school staff were often unsupportive or intolerant of giftedness. Differences were perceived by parents living in the western region of Melbourne in comparison with other regions of Melbourne. Marg conveyed her frustrations living in the western region of Melbourne as a fight and to 'beg' for her children to obtain program assistance through the school. Marg perceived the differences in the schools located in the western region of Melbourne as unfavourable, when compared with schools elsewhere

Jenny points out teachers' ignorance of giftedness, which tends to highlight the problems that teachers experience. The teachers' lack of knowledge, training, and the lack of appropriate teaching strategies exacerbates the problems that parents encounter when they deal with teaching staff:

> *That teacher actually said, that was the teacher that we actually had a tough year with, and she said to me, 'I get no support, I've got my training, I've got no idea what to do'... this is the teacher that said she had no help and no support and no knowledge.*

Similarly, Katie further pointed out the lack of knowledge from the kindergarten about giftedness acknowledging that only a minority of teachers are trained in gifted education.

*Maybe they did get in the end but they didn't, certainly didn't make any adjustments or acknowledgement or anything. Maybe they don't know what to do either.*

Katie experienced conflict between her belief the kindergarten would help her, and her shock reaction when no assistance was provided:

*I found it devastating. I really thought that they [the kindergarten staff] would give me some kind of assistance.*

Jan's description as accessing the services her child needed was described in strong terms as a metaphorical 'fight' with her child's education. She discusses how burdensome her child's difficulties were for her, which were contrasted with 'heavy', 'light' feelings when her child's gifted issues were properly addressed:

*I was having to fight against everything and when everything wasn't going my way it just seemed like, you know everything, just every little day to day task was so big, and it seemed everything, I just felt like a real heaviness, it was just, everything was just um, a chore, and I just, like nothing would ever go right, and then when it finally did start going right, and now it's just so much different, it's just a light feeling about everything.*

Similar to Jan, Marg's frustrating experience referred to 'fighting' to access a gifted program for her child, which contrasted with her sisters' experiences, who lived in other areas of Melbourne:

*I think it has limited us more, [living in the western region of Melbourne] both of my sisters have kids who are all gifted as well, and all of their kids have just hooked straight into programs, without any glitches. You know, they just, it was such a smooth process. They didn't have to fight. They didn't have to go to meetings for it to happen. They didn't have to beg. And that's very, very frustrating.*

Lucy was advised the problems associated with getting her child's IQ properly assessed by a psychologist were due to the lack of funding in the western region, and was a very low priority. As remedial assistance is more often recognised for children in the western region, so are the priorities and funding:

> *Yeah, and they had three appointments set up with the school psychologist but because of the shortage of resources um, in the western area for child psychologists, and also because this school had a heavy population of kids who require funding, at the, Anna was sort of a very low priority basically, and didn't get seen. And we were told that, we were told, "We made that appointment, but it was funding, time to work out the funding, so we had other children that needed to be seen". So yeah.*

Marg's sacrifice of paid employment may not be considered unusual. Although this aspect of parenting gifted children is lacking in the literature, similar sentiments have been expressed elsewhere. The Asynchronous Scholars Fund (2011) blog stated, *"We're talking sacrifice on the order of giving up half your family income… Giving up one or both careers to be able to home school a child that cannot be served by the school system"*. Silverman and Kearney (1989) previously discussed the financial strains parents of gifted children must bear, whilst Bloom (1985) similarly reported the financial sacrifices made by the parents of gifted children.

The dismissive attitude conveyed by the school was keenly felt by Rita as belittling her, and her child's needs:

> *I also felt as if they [the school staff] didn't really give it [child's giftedness] the credence that it deserved, the topic deserved, and that our needs clearly required.*

Further frustrations were experienced by Marg because she provided informational assistance to the school which was rejected. When the school did not attend to her gifted child's needs, Marg found it exasperating. It is a prime example of the conflict between the

parents' expectations of the school and the unmet needs of their gifted children; a common

scenario amongst parents with gifted children:

> *So they [the school staff] are actually required to do that [teach her gifted child] and I shouldn't be the one telling them constantly how to do it and I find that incredibly frustrating that I am expected to be giving them all the tips and the pointers how to do it.*

Rex's comments resonated with Marg's that focussed on role reversal of parents

and schools in the provision of information:

> *Recently we've been challenging some of the teachers to modify what they are doing. It tends to be more a case of us feeding them, rather than getting information back from them, though.*

In addition, patronising attitudes by educational and school staff were reported by a

number of participants. That is, the participants were treated in a condescending manner or

with an attitude of superiority (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005). Patronisation

has the negative effect of devaluing an individual's opinions and their sense of self; it can

also generate an anger or defensive response in the recipient of the patronisation (Vescio et

al., 2005).

Alice conveyed the patronising attitude expressed to her by the Education

Department's regional gifted coordinator. Alice advised she accepted such negative

treatment in order to help her gifted child and would not accept such treatment under any

other circumstances. Alice's comments exemplifies what harsh conduct some parents of

gifted children allow themselves to be subjected to by others in the hope of obtaining

assistance for their gifted children:

*Go to the local state school, dear. Do stop worrying; you're just going to make life hard for your daughter"... I got the mass patronisation, the mass brush off, um, just in a way that in other context I would not put up with...I wouldn't have had a bar of it for a moment,... but for my child, I can't make waves, I can't, I had to pursue everything to make sure I've not missed out on some option, some thread that somebody might toss over the fence to me, so you have to stay much calmer, much friendlier and put up with a lot worse treatment than I ever would in my life, on my own account.*

More succinctly, Alice advised the perceived victimisation she experienced through the patronisation, humiliation, threats and abuse made by the Education Department staff, and school principals. She was clearly offended by such treatment:

*I have never been so demeaned, put down, accused, abused, threatened, sworn at, oh, um, you name it*

Mary also relayed a patronising experience made by a school principal who advised Mary should provide enrichment for her gifted child by taking the child to museums and galleries:

*[Response from a school principal to Emily's giftedness]: "You'll just have to take her to the gallery and the museum quite a lot next year". You know, like, I've got this kid who wants so much attention, enrichment and I'm already taking her to the gallery and the museum and this and that and the other, now, you know, I just can't do this for another year without anything else so…*

An important factor associated with schools is the process of early entry. Although gifted children are said to benefit from early entry to schools, they are often denied this educational pathway.

### 9.1.1.2 *Early entry*

The Department of Education and Early Childhood (DEECD) in Victoria consider a child who is aged less than five years and is admitted to school as 'early entry'. Although Gagné (2007) suggested that early entry is considered to be an effective 'cornerstone' with

numerous benefits for gifted children, early entry is rare in Victoria. Each early entry

application is considered separately, because the Victorian DEECD, unlike other states

such as Tasmania, has no set criteria to guide early entry decisions (Department of

Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012).

Mary submitted three applications to the Department and was frustrated by the lack

of a framework to facilitate a child's early entry into school. These issues were stressors

for her:

> *"You haven't shown any evidence, of educational disadvantage; therefore she can't go to school early" [response from DEECD for the participant's second application early school entry]... This is what I really found frustrating... I'm a lawyer and so is my husband, the legislation is fucking [indistinguishable], that they have to allow early entry if it would be to the long term educational disadvantage for the child not to allow it.*

The processes involved in obtaining early entry for Mary's child elicited profound

distress which was fuelled by the associated frustrations of this experience:

> *It really frustrated me that it took up so much of that year... Last year with her [Emily] before she went off to school and so much of it was spent you know, visiting schools and researching and trying to find options and [heavy sigh] I just wish it hadn't happened, do you know what I mean? and, we, we had an uncertainty for a very long time and, and that was very unfortunate I think [Participant becomes visibly distressed. Recording stopped].*

Alice recalled her difficult dealings with a school principal and the schools within

the Education Department, whilst attempting to obtain early entry for her child:

> *The thing that it's not a focus for the schools, it's not a focus for the council, um, if you want to try and start school a year early you have to get approval of the Regional Director and he's never in the history given approval for such a thing, in spite of the abundance of research that in some cases it's a very good idea.*

In addition to the problems associated with early entry to school, parents also experience a number of problems in relation to bullying. It has been reported that school students bully gifted children on a regular basis (McGee, 2011). Some parents who had previously experienced bullying were mindful of the implications bullying may have.

### 9.1.1.3 *Bullying*

The existing literature indicates many gifted children are bullied (Cross, 2001; Davis, 2012; Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2012; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Roddick, 2011). It was therefore expected that bullying would have been a matter raised by many parents in respect of their gifted children. However, of the 26 parents interviewed, the issue of the bullying of their gifted children was raised by only three. Due to the close and child-oriented nature of the parental relationship with their gifted children (Bloom, 1985), it is possible the smaller than expected amount of bullying reported could have been because the parents did not know their gifted children were victims of bullying. This may be because the gifted children may have been suffering the effects of bullying in silence, as suggested by McGee, (2011) and Peterson and Ray (2006b). An alternative explanation could be attributed to research by Parker, Peters and Bain (2011) which reported little differences between the levels of bullying of gifted children and other children. Or, that because parents of gifted children may have been bullied themselves in childhood, they may have developed strategies to reduce, or prevent the bullying of their children. Nevertheless, the effects of bullying can be long term and far reaching (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009).

Jan regarded the matter of her child's bullying experience was due to the communication differences between her child and her child's peers:

*The kids at his school find him different, because he tries to speak to them on an intellectual level and sometimes they find him just kind of... he doesn't communicate with them very well, and it leads to bullying and such as other issues.*

Millie reports that one of her children was the victim of systematic physical attacks by her child's school peers:

*They [child's school peers] were even like organising bullying against him, ah, through phys-ed. So like, they'd be doing football this week so they'd get in the scrum and they'd say, "Everybody punch John"... bullying has been a problem for him. Phillip [participant's second child], on the other hand, has never been bullied.*

The bullying of Jim's child was the most worrying aspect of his children's education, in terms of the impact bullying has had on his children's learning:

*We are determined to avoid school from creating an environment that prevents our children from learning; this has happened for example in relation to incidents of bullying.... incidents of bullying would be the worst sort of problem we have faced.*

In contrast, the parents' experience of bullying that occurred in their childhood was a matter of concern for three other parents. Bullying was also a concern for two of the three parents' partners. Because more parents than children experienced bullying in their childhood, this emerged as an area requiring investigation.

The impact of childhood bullying for Florence and her partner was so immense and so far reaching that the difficulties and bullying they experienced at school were determining factors in their choice to home school their eldest gifted child:

*I grew up in the western region... went to school there, primary school ... I was bullied there, because I was teacher's pet, top of the class... a lot of people weren't ready to see that children could be very advanced.*

Florence further expanded on her husband's damaging experiences of extended bullying throughout his school years:

> *My husband's 35 years of age I should say, so primary school and high school for him were basically hell, because he was bullied relentlessly for being smart, um, hence the reason we want to home school I guess... and like I said with my husband it turned into bullying throughout high school, myself, I was bullied in primary school.*

Physical abuse and verbals abuse characterised Jim's experience of bullying at during his school years:

> *I was generally top of the class, certainly in primary and lower high school. I was to a greater or lesser extent depending on which year and which season it was... physically beaten up... because of jealousy, well not jealousy, ridicule, but picked on.*

Jim's experience of childhood bullying has heightened his awareness of negative attitudes towards giftedness in the community:

> *I see it around me all the time, and to be really, really clever at school doesn't win a lot of popular support, even til you get to uni....*

Mary acknowledged that she and her partner both had difficulties with others at school, stemming from own acceleration at school, and conceded that despite the problems experienced, acceleration was a preferred option for the educational benefits of increased intellectual stimulation :

> *My experience was also starting mine [formal education] early and my husband started ordinary times and he was put up a year so we've both went through one year under our age peers and I mean not so say it didn't have its troubles, but compared to the other option, which is being with your age peers and not being sort of stimulated, it was a better option.*

Parents experiences of bullying were important, because these experiences tended to increase their awareness of bullying and affected how they raised their children in terms of what kinds of educational choices they made. Furthermore, parents reports of social isolation was a particular problem that affected their lives.

### 9.1.2   *Social isolation*

People are considerably affected by experienced or perceived social isolation (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). If an individual perceives social isolation, it is a risk factor that may decrease cognitive performance, increase cognitive decline, reduce executive functioning, increase negative and depressive thoughts, and amplify sensitivity to perceived social threats (Cacioppo & Hawkley). Social isolation can affect decision making, emotions, behaviours, and interpersonal contacts. It has been found previously that parents with gifted children often experience social isolation and are in need of social support (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006).

Parents in the current research were frank about their experiences they often considered to be difficult and stigmatising, in a community that is perceived to be resistant to giftedness. This perceived resistance to giftedness from the community influenced parents becoming isolated from others, which can lead to the lack of social validation and consensual validation. This is important because social relationships have the protective power to shield people from adversity and stress-induced anguish (Ayers et al., 2007).

Rex reported that the lack of knowledge in the community led to a lack of acceptance of giftedness. Rejection of giftedness by others increases the isolation parents of gifted children experience. The words 'proud parents' emote negatively, because of the context of the widespread lack of acceptance of giftedness.

*Because understanding of giftedness is so limited within the community, most
people don't accept it; just think you are being proud parents.*

Jenny was also philosophical when she discussed her frustrations and her
experiences of isolation, which she described as 'a very private thing'. Jenny identified the
difficulties of having a gifted child which are exacerbated by the lack of recognition and
support of giftedness by others:

*I think it would be really good if giftedness got more attention. Because I think at
the moment it is this very private thing that people have and it's not without its, ...
it's not a straight run to an easy life, far from it. I think the frustration of the child
who's under challenged is, yeah, it's hard and if you have a child who is really
struggling you can kind of make a lot of noise and get a lot of help, but when you
have a child up the other end we tend not to make too much noise about it. It would
be really good if it [giftedness] was a), celebrated and b), supported. Yeah.*

Because her child was gifted a strategy that some parents of gifted children employ
is hiding the child's giftedness. This hiding from others was firmly rejected by Rita. She
expressed a pragmatic approach when considering negative responses to her child's
giftedness:

*I don't find it easy to hide. So you know if somebody's going to react badly then
they're going to act badly and I'll just have to deal with it.*

Jenny expressed her isolating experience as feeling constrained to share her
parenting concerns with friends. A sense of loss of sharing information with others was
lost for Jenny,  because of the restrictions parents of gifted children feel are imposed by
others:

*I mean friends will say to me, 'Oh, I'm so worried because my child is behind on
this or can't do that at all', you know, but I, I can't say, 'I'm so worried because
my child's ahead.'*

The experience of social isolation was described in an unusual way by some parents. The metaphor of giftedness as a 'disease' emerged which seemed to encapsulate parents experience of isolation in a negative manner.

### 9.1.2.1 *Giftedness as a 'disease'*

The term 'gifted disease' is unusual and perhaps odd. The theme of social isolation includes giftedness as a disease because giftedness can be experienced by some parents negatively, in terms of a disease. The word 'gifted' has been assigned with negative connotations such as elitism, and is regarded as an 'emotionally charged' expression (Webb et al., 2007, p. xx). Giftedness was experienced in such powerfully negative terms that it was described as a 'disease' by some parents in the current research. The word 'disease' was used as a metaphor to describe the hardships parents experienced. It also encompassed the lack of empathy parents, disregard and even ridicule, perceived to be received from others, in relation to raising a gifted child.

Parents are affected by the negative experiences that they and their gifted child are subjected to. Rex recalled a conversation he had with a friend, which referred to the lack of understanding of giftedness in the community. The lack of understanding was expressed by way of an analogy between disease and giftedness. Rex's preference for an 'obscure disease', instead of the word giftedness. Rex evoked a grim picture of the lack of understanding giftedness has in the community:

> *A friend's comment was made that having a gifted kid is actually a bit like having somebody with an obscure disease in the family. And my comment back to Mariah [participant's friend] was that you'd probably get more sympathy and understanding with the obscure disease, because people understand that, where the cultural understanding of giftedness is just not there.*

Pairing the words gifted and disease suggests that giftedness is an illness that should be cured. Similarly Webb (2005) suggests substantial assistance is required for

those with the disorder of ADHD and those who are gifted. Marg also referred to giftedness as a disease. Marg's comments encapsulate the similarities that a disease and giftedness have for her, in terms of a social barrier and negatively affecting communication with others:

*It's[giftedness] almost like you are talking about a disease that no one wants to talk about... it sort of becomes this awkward silence and then the topic's changed...*

A disease is likened to a sickness, because 'sick' is defined as being afflicted with an illness or disease (Moore, 1997). Sick is also a word which is often used colloquially in Australia to convey disgust (Moore). Tammy experienced responses to her child's giftedness as making them 'sick'. Here Tammy contrasted her positive encounters at the self-help/mutual aid support group with other negative encounters:

*When I go there, [the support group] you can walk in and say, "Oh, guess what he [gifted child] did? he learnt pi to the three thousand, isn't that wonderful?" and nobody will go, "Oh you make me sick".*

Additionally, Alice's use of the word sick refers to her ill feeling in relation to her child's giftedness. Although the term 'worried sick' is often used in modern society, if the worry inhibits good health and peace of mind, it may become an anxiety disorder and may require treatment. This is based on factors which include the severity and the length of time the anxiety is present, according to the National Institute of Health (2011).

*It's [child's giftedness] worried me for years.*

Embedded in the concept of sickness and disease is pathology. Pathology refers to the scientific study of structural changes involved with mental and physical disorders or diseases. More broadly, pathology refers to a difference from what is considered adaptive

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or healthy (American Psychological Association, 2009). Webb et al. (2005) referred to the misdiagnoses of gifted children by uniformed professionals. Misdiagnoses included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). The misdiagnoses stem from the social and emotional characteristics in gifted children, which can be mistaken to be signs of pathology (Webb et al.).

Tolan (1997) also described that some parents have pathologised giftedness. Tolan suggested that giftedness was pathologised because gifted children with overexcitabilities, as described by Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977), tended to be misdiagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). When misdiagnosed, gifted children may be inappropriately medicated (Tolan). Pathologising giftedness was a matter that was raised by parents in the current research. As Mary previously stated, the meaning of her child's gifted identification to her was a 'diagnosis' which pathologised her child into a category of 'special needs':

*In fact, it's like in an odd sort of a way, is like a special needs diagnosis...*

Jack compared children with disabilities in a school setting to gifted children. His comments compare the pathology of disability with giftedness:

*You can find children that are seriously, disabled in one way or another and there's an enormous amount of money and time and effort put into integrating them into the standard school as much as possible, which is a wholly admirable undertaking um.... if your child can think faster than anyone else they say, "That's fabulous, they can do it already? Great, do some more of these sheets, while we concentrate on all of these people that can't do it well enough"*

The effect of social isolation that may come from having a gifted child is not limited to encounters with others, rather it appears to also be embedded within the societal context of what is known as the tall-poppy syndrome (Peeters, 2004).

*9.1.2.2*                              ***Tall-poppy syndrome***

That giftedness may be viewed as a 'disease' may be influenced by the effect that

the tall-poppy syndrome and the effect it has within the community. Spathopoulos

described the tall-poppy syndrome as the "...cropping of excellence" (2009, p. 38). The

celebration of academic achievement in Europe is not uncommon, where a name for such a

celebration exists. It is known as a 'Festschrift'and is of German origin (Jensen, 2009). In

keeping with the downplaying of intellectual success, Australia does not have a word for

celebrating academic achievement, but rather it has a term for cutting down success; the

tall-poppy syndrome.

Tammy poignantly expressed her frustrations related to the negative effects of the

tall-poppy syndrome. Here the parent experiences of pain and frustration concerning her

son's experience of being gifted in the community, which is resistant to the concept of

giftedness:

> *When you've got issues like the tall poppy stuff and you can see your child as so*
> *upset and hurt, you know, part of you as a parent says, "Oh, for god's sake, get*
> *over it, deal with it", but then the other part of you just hurts.*

Lucy assigned reasonability for the loss of sharing her child's achievements with

reference to the tall-poppy syndrome, which is embedded in the Australian culture:

> *I couldn't write back and say the same thing about my children because I would*
> *just feel that it's just not, it's not the normal Australian culture um...to be valued*
> *for academic achievement or, or intellectual yeah*

Additionally, in Australia, a culture exists where successes are valued more highly

when they benefit the team, not the individual, and where an individual finds it helpful to

minimise their achievements and downplay their successes (2009; Peeters, 2004). The tall-

poppy syndrome can often be identified in terms of athletic comparisons. The broad

celebration of sporting successes in the Australian culture, has been argued, is at the expense of intellectual achievement (Southwick, 2012). Marg expressed her disappointment at the school's recognition of athletic achievement, contrasted with the ignorance of academic and intellectual achievement:

> *It's not like you are talking about how sporty they are, and everyone can go, 'Wow!' and it's interesting because Roger won in district aths [athletics] last week in a relay, and everyone was all over him. ... [the school staff], they're very into celebrating the sportsman, the artisan, everything else, and we never, ever, would celebrate the sensitive, the academia, anything like that.*

Rex pointed out the emphasis that is placed on athletic achievement in comparison with the element of chance involved in academically gifted individuals receiving appropriate support:

> *It is remarkably sad that intellectual achievement is totally ignored... Whereas if you are a top sporting [person]... they even import top sporting athletes, you know... so, academic achievement is rewarded by playing Russian roulette.*

Together with the tall-poppy syndrome is the notion of the 'pushy parent'. This is because both the tall-poppy syndrome and the negative label of a 'pushy parent' are often assigned to parents of gifted children, and was a matter raised by many parents.

### 9.1.2.3 *'Pushy' parent*

There may also be an element of chance at play in having a gifted child, based on genetic and environmental factors (Yewchuck, 1999). Parents of gifted children are often said to be 'pushy' parents (Alsop, 1997). 'Pushy parents' are defined by Silverman (1999), as parents who advocate for their child in opposition to the school's agenda for the child to comply with the school system.

Yet, 'pushy parents' have been described as modern disease (Paul, 2010), which parallels the earlier negative contention of giftedness as a 'disease'. The concept of

giftedness tends to evoke strong pathological descriptions (Tolan, 1997). Because many

parents of gifted children lack the support they need, particularly from the education

system, they may be referred to as 'pushy parents' by school staff and others when they

attempt to advocate for their gifted child's needs.

However, it has been argued that parents are 'pushed' by their gifted child's thirst

for knowledge, rather than parents pressuring their gifted children to achieve (Fisher,

Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005). Parents who

attempt to nurture and develop their children's potential often find themselves in an

adversary role with the school (Cole & Della Vecchia, 1993). This is largely due to the

school's requirement for the child to fit in with the school system, not the school to cater

for the child's needs. Mary acknowledged she was negatively viewed as a 'pushy parent'

because she had chosen to advocate for her child's needs:

> *I really don't have a vision of myself as 'pushy' at all. I actually tried very hard not*
> *to stand out on a lot of things, and the last thing I wanted to do was be 'pushy' in*
> *any way. But we sort of worked out at some point that if we didn't advocate,*
> *nobody would.*

Distress was clearly evident when Katie painfully conveyed her experience of the

pre-school treating her as a 'pushy parent'. Katie believed the school treated her in a

condescending manner, after she advised the pre-school of her child's giftedness. The

shock that parents experience when the school staff react in this negative manner is

extremely difficult for parents to deal with and can be emotionally damaging:

> *So I went back to the pre-school again saying I think he is gifted and they thought I*
> *was some loony, pushy, overbearing parent and treated me terribly. Yeah.*
> *(Participant becomes visibly distressed) [Recording stopped].*

Rita described the negative perception that others may have of her pressure parenting her child to highly achieve:

> *Yeah, you sort of get the feeling that people think that you're hot housing the child and have them in the basement doing their times tables.*

Because Rita perceives that others think she pressure parents her child, Rita considered that she would be viewed negatively by the school staff :

> *I'm a bit concerned of pushing too hard to get the response I need [from the school].*

Mary believed she was viewed as is a stereotypical 'pushy parent' because of her child's giftedness. There is a common view in Australia that gifted children are forced to learn by their parents. Therefore, simply being a parent of a gifted child was viewed negatively by others, as stated by Mary:

> *I mean, that's from the stereotypes you get with it, that you know, kids are doing well in something and you must have pushed them too hard.*

Tammy provides an apt example of a family member labelling her as a 'pushy parent'. This may be an attempt by the grandparent to protect the child, but it also infers that giftedness may be negative and possibly harmful and for the child:

> *I think his grandfather is very much, he's very protective and says, "Don't you push that boy, he's going to get beaten up at school because he's so bright, and that'll be the worst thing you can do".*

A 'pushy parent' may be considered a negative label but being a parent of a gifted child may also be associated with a stigma in the community. Stigma and labelling was problem that many parents of gifted children felt deeply.

### 9.1.2.4 *Stigma and labelling*

When a person's social identity has been devalued in a social context due to a characteristic or attribute, stigmatisation occurs. Stigmatised individuals may be discriminated against (Crocker et al., 1998). Stigmatised individuals are also associated with more poor physical and mental health issues than others (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Because parents of gifted children are different to other parents, they are susceptible to the stigma which parenting gifted children has (Alsop, 1997). The differentness can unfavourably effect parenting of gifted children (Coleman, 1985), which can result in parents of gifted children becoming isolated from others (Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006; Irving, 2004).

Florence related her stigmatising experiences as negative physical reactions from others. Florence advised the experiences occurred after informing others her child was intelligent or advanced. She considered the stigmatising experiences occurred because she lived in the western region of Melbourne:

> *I also think that oh, um, there's that stigma where, of course if you let anyone know in any way that your child is intelligent or advanced, people will roll their eyes behind your back and all that sort of stuff. I think there's always a stigma for kids of that area [the western region]*

Similarly, Jan advised the perceived stigma she experienced from a professional because she lived in the western region of Melbourne:

> *I go to someone [a professional] who won't look at me because I'm from the western area or whatever, I don't, just, so I don't know...*

Alice had experienced the stigma of being stereotyped by a dismissive staff member at the Education Department:

*The gifted services coordinator... put me onto this woman and it was a disaster. I, it was not, there was no point even trying to answer, she had me pegged, pigeon-holed...*

Alice subsequently developed a strategy to avoid being labelled:

*... don't upset the boats, don't get yourself labelled as a problem parent.*

Jenny was wary of using the term giftedness, and she had developed a sensitivity based on her experiences:

*... it's just a label [giftedness] I'm really wary of using.*

Social support was the other major theme discovered in this research, and will now be discussed.

## 9.2    *Social Support*

Social support was the second metatheme that emerged from the current research. Social support was lacking for many parents of gifted children. Social support is vitally important because it has been found to have consistent, positive effects on well-being, and has also been found to be helpful for those suffering from a disease (de Ridder & Schreurs, 1996). This is because social support refers to the provision of assistance or comfort to others to assist them to cope with a range of stressors (American Psychological Association, 2009). When people are separated from other people they do not experience social support. The condition of being separated from others is known as social isolation (American Psychological Association, 2009; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003). Social support has been established as an effective buffer or mediator of the negative effects of stress (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen et al., 2004; Cohen & Syme, 1985).Parent support has

been contended as a specific type of support required by parents, particularly for parents of gifted children.

### 9.2.1    Parent support

Successfully parenting a child requires support in many forms (Deater-Deckard, 2004). It has been argued that more support is required to parent a gifted child (Alsop, 1997; Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Keirouz, 1990). Many parents considered that support for parents of gifted children as support for their children, and not themselves. The researcher often tried to rephrase questions in an attempt to determine what the parents support needs were. This was challenging at times, because many parents did not separate their needs from their children's needs. Marie verbalised her anxiety regarding her child's advanced development:

> *I feel really anxious, like, is she burning out? I look at Melody and she's reading and she goes to ballet and swimming and has all the play equipment and all the toys she wants and there's no one telling her to read, she just loves it...*

She also denied her need for emotional support, yet this was contrasted with her desire for a formal pool of resources, involving evidence-based guidance, which tends to indicate psychological services:

> *Yeah, not emotional support but a context of where you can get like a pool where you can access resources, or you say, someone can say, "Look if they're doing this in grade prep this is the amount of time that's healthy for them to be spending reading". Just some guidance; a formal thing of guidance would be good, with some research behind it, that would be the ideal.*

Doris considered her unmet needs as a parent of a gifted child who was "struggling", were directly related to her needs:

*...there's not enough done for the kids and that's why the parents are struggling.*

Although there is a greater need for support for parents of gifted children, most parents did not receive the support they needed, despite searching out possible avenues of support. Jan had met with many different individuals and professionals in an attempt to gain recognition and assistance for her and her child. She verbalised the need for a supportive person, in this case an advocate, which would assist with others acceptance and positive regard from others:

> *... An advocate, whether it be in a separate office or whether it be in the schools or whether it be travelling from different schools, but just someone that can just say, "Okay, I'm on your side".*

Individuals may also see social support from family and friends.

### 9.2.1.1 *Family and friends*

Family support refers to the unit of kinship that provides that which is needed or lacking which assists with well-being or improvements (Reber & Reber, 2001). Parents are required to adapt to a lack of support from the usual support network of family and friends, also the community (Alsop, 1997). Support was more often articulated by participants as notions of acceptance, or tolerance, rather than more active behavioural processes of support.

Julie's reactions from her family were more related to tolerance, than support. This reaction from family members was not unusual within the cohort of parents of gifted children in the current research:

> *Um, gee I don't know that I'd call it supportive. I wouldn't say it was, I wouldn't say it was dismissive but I wouldn't say it was supportive either.*

Mary indicated she expected a negative reaction to her child's giftedness, despite her describing it as 'good'. Mary's expectation was likely to be borne from experiences within the community who do not often reflect on giftedness in a positive or supportive manner:

> *On the whole they [family members] were all very supportive of the early school entry, the advice, yeah they thought it all sounded good and um, they're, they're, on, the whole I thought they I thought they might have a negative reaction, but on the whole they were all saying, that sounded good.*

Florence hesitated and haltingly described her family's acknowledgment of her child's giftedness, rather than any support she received from her family.

> *Um, my parents, positive, um, when I say positive, um, you know, mum sort of said you know oh, you could just tell that he's just ahead, whereas, the way, the way, the way he is, I suppose. My in-laws the same... so my in-laws were again receptive towards it... lastly there's just my sister again really, really positive.*

Tammy likened her family's support as acceptance of her child's giftedness:

> *My side of the family, he's [Adam] only got a grandmother there, and my mother is very much like, "Oh, it seems to run in all the family, all the grandchildren seem to be very bright" and um, I think she just kind of accepts that's the way it is and um always says, "It's terrific that he's able to do some of those things and aren't you so lucky you don't have to worry about him having learning problems".*

Millie acknowledged the comfortable casual nature of the social support assistance she received from a work associate, which was a positive experience for her:

> *I have a good old gasbag to Nick [participant's work associate] about Harry [Participant's work associate's child]. That's helpful.*

Difficulties associated with friends' reactions and their lack of support was a common thread throughout the participants' responses. Parents' lack of support was a

factor that increased their sense of isolation. Lucy succinctly conveys her anxiety and the restriction of her friendships, by hiding her child's giftedness which increased her sense of isolation.

> *Um, so family's fine, um, friends is a little bit harder, um, probably depends on the friends, um, I tend not to talk about it, things like Anna going to Sydney [to attend a GERRIC program], or whatever with friends, most particularly friends with children of the same age, because I think people find it uncomfortable... and I feel uncomfortable talking about it... because it, it's like boasting...*

Tony's sentiments appear to be grounded in the need for acceptance by others. He seems to acknowledge the difficulties that giftedness of his child has, by indicating that little would be gained from such an acknowledgment. This is because Tony perceives he will be categorised by his friends as a boastful pushy parent, which may lead to negative responses by others:

> *I guess there's always that belief that friends have that they think you're exaggerating or um, "He's not really that bright" or whatever, so, it's always just a bit difficult and we obviously don't press the point, because there's not really a lot to be gained by sort of saying how great Adam is, or how bright we think he is... well, it's like showing off. But we don't like to think that we're showing Adam off or pushing him.*

Although some of the participants advised their friends were supportive, more often they were not. Rex expressed the supportive nature of friends who also had a gifted child:

> *Um, we have one set of friends, [names omitted] who have a gifted child themselves, so they're very sympathetic, and we whinge about schools with each other on the rare occasions we catch up. Because of understanding of giftedness is so limited within the community most people don't accept it. Just think you are being proud parents.*

Together with family and friends, organisations can be helpful in providing support to parents of gifted children. Nevertheless, there can also be problems associated with organisations due to a numbers of factors.

### 9.2.1.2 Organisations

Not many parents reported receiving support from organisations. Of those who did, GERRIC (Gifted Education Research Resource and Information Centre), located in the university of NSW, or G.A.T.E.ways, were the most often mentioned organisations of support. CHIP (Children of High Intellectual Potential) was also reported. The Able Learners' Enrichment program administered by La Trobe University was also raised by a parent, although again, not conveniently located, in a regional city location.

GERRIC was an organisation that was advised by some parents as helpful, although difficult to access because of the it was located interstate. Tony considered GERRIC to be of value, but impracticable because it is located interstate. Sydney is located 963 kilometres north of Melbourne. G.A.T.E.ways was also reported by Tony as positive, but inconveniently located in the Eastern region of Melbourne, which may take 20 minutes to one hour or more of driving time, depending on the location within the Eastern region and traffic conditions:

> *The GERRIC program in Sydney. But it's just a bit difficult to get up to Sydney for the school holiday... There's also one [program] I've heard of recently, which was actually a science one, which was run in Perth... I guess the other thing we've made use of is the G.A.T.E.ways program, which happens to be mainly in the Eastern suburbs and that's now been happening for a few years.*

Peter highlights the problem of the location of the organisational assistance for his gifted child, located in Glen Waverley which is located 26.7 kilometres from Melbourne (Maps.google, 2012):

*We'll be sort of dropping Anna off and going to Sydney for this, the GERRIC program and um, G.A.T.E.ways was the program I was thinking about before... which is funded by the parents, funded by us, yet um, we had to go out to Glen Waverly [South Eastern suburb] of Melbourne for when it was offered.*

Julie was recommended to the CHIP organisation by others. However she did not receive the support she was looking for. Julie was disappointed when CHIP did not advise an appropriate school in the western region:

*We did go to CHIP at one stage and ah, looking at an option of another school because several people had recommended that they would find a school for Andrew and their simple answer to us was, "No, there's nothing in the western suburbs, you'd need to move, or travel great distances. So, there's an organisation that supposedly got its finger on the pulse and they say, "There's nothing in the western suburbs for Andrew." So, that was difficult.*

Rita expressed her concerns regarding her desperation to access the programs run by G.A.T.E.ways and CHIP. Rita inferred that her child needed more enrichment programs than those available during the school holiday period:

*I'm desperately seeking stuff like that. G.A.T.E.ways and CHIP, they're nice but CHIP seems to only operate in the holidays*

Rita further states her desire for her child to be involved in a G.A.T.E.ways program, which is hindered because her gifted child attends a preparatory class at school:

*G.A.T.E.ways program is something that I would really like Cassandra to be involved in but because she's a prep she's not automatically because they start from grade one.*

Tammy advised that she had attended the 'Able Learners' program through La Trobe University located in Bendigo. Bendigo is located 147 kilometres from Melbourne,

with an associated travelling time by motor vehicle of approximately 90 minutes (Bendigo Tourism):

> *I think we've attended the 'Able Learners' enrichment program up at um, Bendigo University.*

Organisations that ran gifted programs were considered to beneficial but also problematic due to their availability, cost, distance and the travelling required. Counselling was another factor that was explored with parents. There were a range of issues associated counselling as a method of support for parents, with some difficulties reported.

### 9.2.1.3          *Counselling*

Counselling is a term that covers several processes, including interviewing, testing, guiding, and advising, designed to help an individual solve problems and plan for the future (Reber & Reber, 2001). Alsop (1997) suggested that parents of gifted children would benefit from counselling. The parents who had experience with counselling related it to the assessments and identification of giftedness in their children, which was completed by a psychologist. Parents who discussed the assessment and identification experience with psychologists reported the subsequent counselling as useful or somewhat useful.

One parent advised that counselling was useful. Seven parents reported counselling as somewhat useful. Two parents advised counselling was not useful. Thirteen parents did not consider counselling at all. One parent found the psychological counselling sessions very helpful for her. Katie's experience with counselling was valuable, but also distressful and painful for her, as she was coming to terms with her own giftedness at the time:

*So, she's [counselling psychologist] been invaluable, she's helped me considerably, not just behavioural issues with Sam, but for myself as well. She's um, counselled me, um … (Participant becomes visibly distressed). [Recording stopped]*

Katie later reiterates her positive experience with the counselling psychologist, but highlights the problematic nature of the distance and inconvenient location of the psychologist, who was located 13 kilometres from the Melbourne central business district (Distancesfromto.org, 2012).

*I want to reiterate that the counselling that I've received I've had to get from Malvern, from a psychologist in Malvern which is obviously on the other side of town, not in the western area. You know, she's helped me considerably, not only with my child, the behaviour issues, and the interest areas for him, trying to give him information, um, but for myself, um...but my point is, I had to go to Malvern to get that assistance, I think because there isn't a psychologist specialising in the gifted area on this side of town.*

Doris's experience with an educational psychologist and counselling was limited and unhelpful, and disagreed with psychological advice, so she did not regard psychological services well:

*So, but that lady [the educational psychologist], the next year we found that she left and was really not useful... she didn't look at his academic side, it was more his social side and um, and she was recommending him to go to some groups where other sort of autistic, kids with autism, Asperger's, and we didn't think that would help him at all. You know, his social skills were not, we felt that it was not his social skills.*

Jim framed counselling support in terms of his child's education and rejected any need for counselling or other support:

*No. We haven't been faced with educational problems that have required us to seek support.*

Jim completed his responses via email. The following question was: "What types of support would you feel comfortable seeking?" The question was then rejected by the Jim, indicating a denial of support needs thus:

*NA*

Rita conceded that she possibly had a need for counselling with her current stressful situation, and the problems of travelling, but then mocked her need for counselling, rejecting its value:

> *I might need counselling, when I suppose it's a matter of dealing with ah, the current situation. At the moment we are doing it pretty hard, because we are travelling backwards and forwards so that might be one of the [indistinguishable] might benefit from counselling one of these days (laughs).*

However, Mary related her childhood experiences of differentness and her child's recent gifted assessment and dismissed counselling as an option. Mary's experience illustrated that consideration of counselling had taken place both for herself and her child, but rejected counselling as a probable harm reduction strategy:

> *We need more sort of social support...When that first identification [her child's gifted assessment] went through, we decided we didn't need it [counselling]... it got me thinking of my own childhood, and the things that I found sad about being a bit different than other kids and realising that was sort of happening again... I might have considered getting counselling, but I decided I didn't need it.*

Although counselling was a less favoured form of support, many parents discussed their need for informational support to help them deal with the issues they face.

### 9.2.1.4 *Information*

That parents need quality information to assist with raising gifted children (Weber & Stanley, 2012) was echoed in the current research. Information that parents considered

helpful related to their child's giftedness. Information about giftedness was found from books and from family, friends or professionals. Other sources of informational included the internet. The lack of information was a factor raised by the Victorian Parliament in the recent inquiry in to the education of gifted children (2012). It was also a problem expressed by some participants. Difficulty in accessing information was a consideration for parents of gifted children. Rex regarded his need for information support highly, a need that was more pronounced by his remote location:

> So it would be good to have access to some more information, um, but given where we are, there are just so few opportunities to access it that it's almost, well virtually non-existent.

Cathy advised the difficulties involved in trying to access support from other parents in a support group located in the South East region of Melbourne, which was 11 kilometres from Melbourne and 18 kilometres from the participant. In addition to the location, Cathy had additional problems that would involve travelling with her infant on a 36 kilometre round trip:

> They're like a mothers group [gifted support group], mothers that get together, and I just couldn't justify it, with Peyton [participant's second child] a baby then, and I just couldn't justify driving all the way down to Brighton to spend one hour, you know...

Typical of many parents, Alice detailed her exhaustive efforts made to obtain information to understand giftedness and to help her child. Efforts included purchasing books, talking to another parent and receiving advice from a former colleague:

*I've bought numbers of books just after she [Susan] was identified, um, I've borrowed numbers, Jack's [participant's husband] borrowed from the uni library, um, I've talked to a woman at Uni, but basically that was a 'No-Go', a bit synthetic, I'm not sure. Um, Karen [previous work associate of the participant, who is a professional in the field of giftedness] in moments of crisis and I said I keep that as small as I possibly can because she's got to earn a living too. Um, yeah, mostly that.*

Julie regarded advice from a professional as helpful. She obtained a great deal of information regarding giftedness via a website, based on a psychologist's recommendation. Obtaining this information had a snowball effect, which led Julie to other sources of gifted information, which included talks and information sessions about giftedness.

*Ah, well, we contacted um, an educational psychologist, ah and she, her first comment to us was, "Have you looked at the [gifted information organisation] website?" and we said, "What's that?" and um, so, yes, I think that's where we've probably gained most of our information. And go to talks and information sessions and all of those sorts of things that are offered through there.*

Julie also advised that in conjunction with obtaining information from a particular website, she considered other parents would provide a valuable source of information:

*Oh, I constantly check the [gifted information organisation] website, yes and ah, go to talks and hear speakers and just talk with other parents because that's, I think that's what's probably very useful...*

Alice's experience of isolation manifested in her unsuccessful attempts to gain support from other parents through the internet:

*I don't have other parents to talk to. I've looked into a couple of the chat room options, um, a lot of them go stale one of them has been infiltrated by a pornographer.*

Doris relayed the advice she received from a self-help/mutual aid support group as constructive and positive. The advice given by the group members led to Doris obtaining a particular book favoured by other parents of gifted children about giftedness:

*Ah, you know when I attended our parent group I got to know that book was really good, so I thought I would buy that.*

Information was considered an important resources and form of support for many parents. They also preferred to obtain the information from other parents. Some fathers, however, viewed sources of support and support experiences differently than mothers did.

### 9.2.2 *Fathers' support*

Although father's roles have been developed in past decades to encompass a larger share of the caring responsibilities for children, fathers often view the term of support as financial support. Many fathers still embody the traditional views of fathers and the role of fathering (Biddulph, 1997; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Lee, 2010).

The recruitment of father participants was much more difficult than the recruitment of mother participants. Fathers' approaches to support and their responses were much more guarded than the mothers' responses, and more difficult to obtain.

Perhaps the considerably lower participation by fathers is not unusual when researching children's giftedness. Similar to Lisa Wolk-White (2009) researching her PhD, this researcher encountered difficulties recruiting father participants. The Wolk-White participation rates of 81.3%  mothers and 18.7% fathers was more highly skewed towards mothers, in comparison to the current research. This study's participants was comprised of 69.6% mothers and 30.4% fathers. Nonetheless, the participation rates exemplify the marked imbalance of mother and father participants when studying parents of gifted children. This suggests substantial resistance by fathers of gifted children to participate in

research of this kind, although it may also be due to other factors, such as a possible reluctance to participate in research.

Most fathers relegated dealing with their child's giftedness to their partners. There were only three fathers who appeared to be enthusiastic participants, who were genuinely keen to discuss the issues of parenting a gifted child. One of the three fathers was a primary home and child carer. One father welcomed the opportunity for to discuss parenting and rearranged his work day to complete the interview. Another father who lived in a remote country area, was willing to engage with the researcher in a lengthy telephone interview, and then graciously agreed to one further interview, after it had been discovered by the researcher that the telephone recording equipment had malfunctioned during the first interview.

Only one father openly acknowledged his emotional need for support as a parent of a gifted child. The fathers' notion of support was different in comparison with mothers' ideas of support. Many fathers acknowledged there was a need for support for parents of gifted children, but denied their own need for support, or that support was necessary for them. Mothers were more open about their need for support. In many instances, the fathers' opinion of support was solely about support for their gifted children, which they did not consider to be related to their support needs.

Despite the difficulties experienced in recruiting father participants for the current research, it seemed the fathers who agreed to be interviewed, or the fathers I received responses from, were the more engaged fathers. These father participants were at a minimum, willing to discuss the matters of parenting their gifted children, and as such, perhaps a minority of fathers of gifted children in the population.

Rob was the only father who unusually verbalised a formal need for support, describing a support group as "good" and preferring not to go to a "mother's group":

*Support groups would be good... My wife has attended a support group, it's not possible for both of us to be involved in that, and it's essentially a mothers' group so it doesn't involve me. A fathers' group would be good.*

Jack voiced a need for family support, but also denied his need for support that was related to his child's giftedness. It is likely that the need for grandparents support is more socially acceptable to Jack, than the less socially acceptable need that comes with having gifted child:

*And now look, this, this is the fact... I don't really like the 'gifted' thing...And whatever is special or different about your child, you need some support, you know? And we don't have the grandparents living next door, which can be a good thing. So, we've struggled with a lot of things...The time may come when I'll be looking for it [support for child's giftedness], but as yet I'm not feeling the need.*

Peter was one of the more approachable fathers who agreed to participate, and was comfortable openly participating in the interview in a public cafe near his workplace, at his suggestion. This was unusual because the small number of fathers, who were willing to engage with the researcher, were in most cases, resistant to the idea of participating in a face-to-face interview. In response to the question by the researcher, 'Do you think support is needed for parents of gifted children?' Peter responded positively to the support need, but paradoxically rejected his need for support, although did not complete his statement. He paused and turned the emphasis away from his needs and on to a deficiency with schools:

*Um, probably, yeah, people to talk to. Um, but I, I, I don't think I need a ... [long pause] and you would think the schools would actually be able to provide a better starting point...*

Peter also disclosed his reluctance to seek support in a group environment. This may stem from a fear of not being accepted by others, possibly because he is a father, and

not a mother. More mothers than fathers attended the self-help/mutual aid support group. Peter admitted his reluctance to attend a father's support group, and then attempted to displace his introspective comments by his laughter:

> *I probably would feel uncomfortable, now that's interesting, I would probably feel uncomfortable in the coffee group [support group] that you have... I can't imagine sitting around with strangers, um, and starting that conversation. Um, like if there was a father's version of it I don't think I'd go. Um, coz I, yeah, I'm trying to pre-empt your question, why wouldn't I go? I don't know why, but I just don't think I would (laughs).*

Despite the general lack of interest in support and support groups by fathers, it was an area of investigation that mothers were especially interested in.

### 9.2.3  Support groups

Preliminary research strongly suggested that a support group for the parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne was needed by many parents of gifted children. In particular, parents of gifted children indicated that a type of self-help/mutual aid support model where parents meet with each other and chat in a casual environment, such as a cafe (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). The researcher had joined with a parent of a gifted child to establish an informal self-help/mutual aid support group. Some participants of this research had attended the support group, and others had not.

Marg crystallises the positive aspects of a support group and what support she needs to assist her raising her gifted child:

*I like the support group where you can sit around and talk about it, because I often think in that situation, you know, there are other people who often are having similar issues and it's great to just brainstorm that together and brainstorm ideas, but also with someone who you know, has, is perhaps an expert or has, um, someone who is knowledgeable um, which is why I love the support group... I love the informal. I guess what's helping me from calling Raelene [gifted education consultant], I keep thinking oh well, we aren't that bad, oh, we are alright, I reckon we can plunder though, we'll make it... I'll keep bashing heads with Stephanie [Roger's school principal] a bit longer, wait another week and see if they actually do anything.*

Rex drew some parallels with another type of program he had previously attended. He discussed this program and advised that it was a positive model, based on the sharing of information. He suggested how the model could work as a support group for parents of gifted children:

*It was a brilliant format... we actually sat outside, in somebody's garden, for the session.... And that's what I was getting at with parenting. The venue is less important but that process of sharing, what's worked and what hasn't worked and even seeing other people's kids and drawing your conclusions about what's worked and what hasn't worked, because my idea of what's been successful can sometimes be different to what other parents think.*

Rita emphasised why she thought support groups were where she could gain some knowledge that could be beneficial for her. She highly rated the experience of other parents of gifted children. She also rejected the notion of counselling:

*I think parent groups are very important, I think hearing people talk on giftedness would help me, being the type of person that likes to collect information, um, being informed on it in some manner, so yeah, um, I don't know, films or speakers or um, or talking with people who have the experiences, any of the above... I don't think a playgroup situation is suitable. I think parents' getting together is good. I think an occasional professional there is good. I don't think it needs to be all the time. And I think um, the counselling can be in a separate environment. I don't think you need counselling in that situation.... I don't want it to be a situation where somebody is running it at a profit, I don't think that's suitable, but I think somebody who starts something like that isn't necessarily after that.*

Rob rationalised that a parent support group was the best support arrangement, following a less successful attendance at a play group type that did not meet his (and his partner's) needs properly:

> *We went to a play group meeting, but my son didn't interact well with one of the other boys so we had to stop attending. Probably parents meetings are best.*

Katie had a passive-aggressive response from attending a parents of gifted children support group in another region of Melbourne. Katie's experience was not unusual. Other parents interviewed had also expressed their dissatisfaction with this group and the group's primary interest in the IQ scores of the children:

> *I did go to one on the other side of town, but they um, they judge you on what level of giftedness your child is. It made me sick... Yeah, and that whole group, they judge you and because I didn't have technical, he hasn't been formally tested, yeah... so when I found out about your group I thought, oh yes, a group on my side of town it would be fantastic...*

Tammy's story resonated as typical of a family with a gifted child. The usual supports that were previously obtained through the community, such as mother's groups, neighbours and parents at the school, were lost to many parents of gifted children.

> *For long time our friends were our mothers groups and the neighbours, but we are very distanced from all of them now. We don't go to the same schools, our child's not in the same year level any more, we don't have a second sibling, and so, there were lots of things that made us kind of separate, and we laughed about it and said, "God, maybe we just need to find a social network through all these gifted parents (laughs) coz we might have something. more in common", and at least we say oh, by the way, Adam read War and Peace this weekend (laughs) and nobody would even bat an eyelid at it.*

Lucy shared her experience of parenting without the usual support of friends and acknowledged her need for some social support in the form of a support group. She

considered the practical advice that could be obtained from a support group as refreshing useful:

> *I don't feel like I can talk to friends, particularly about my kids, in that area anyway, um, so having a support group, you can actually feel that you can say whatever and, and not be looked on in a particular way, is just so refreshing... and also to hear of other people's experiences and learn from what's worked and what hasn't worked, I just find that, first and foremost I find that the most useful; meeting other parents that have had similar issues.*

A concern in regard to a support group was of an individual dominating or 'hijacking' the group. Jenny and two other participants raised their concerns about the possible dominance a support group member could play:

> *Sometimes people have a particular agenda, or a need to impose, or sometimes people want, they want their decisions validated, by kind of pushing them on to other people's; "So well I've made, I'm doing this with my child, so you should do that with your child"... I haven't particularly noticed that in that group, but just generally that's the kind of thing that can happen.*

Rita was also concerned about the possibility of a dominant person taking over and being overly involved in a support group s concerns:

> *...drawbacks there can be people who take over, who want to talk all the time...*

Lucy also expressed a possible negative or drawback of a support group as a dominant person in the group. She seems to have had previous experience of this taking place, so it was perceived as a concern for her:

> *If one person dominates the support group too much, which is what happens sometimes in informal gatherings.*

Mary highlights location and the problems and inconvenience associated with attending a support group that is not located in the western region:

> *The problem with ones [support groups] that we know is that they are not very convenient, as I say we sometimes join the one that meets down in Cheltenham, [located 19 kilometres South East of Melbourne] but otherwise it's very inconvenient.*

Support groups were favoured methods of support. This is due to a number of factors that will be discussed, including the effect of consensual validation that may be received in a support group environment.

### 9.2.3.1 *Consensual validation*

Validation can be achieved from the mutual support of other parents of gifted children; this type of experience is referred to as consensual validation. Consensual validation occurs when individuals compare perceptions or experiences with others who have similar perceptions or experiences (American Psychological Association, 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Westmoreland et al., 2000). The current research indicates that parents of gifted children require consensual validation to reduce the stressors associated with their social isolating experiences. Consensual validation would also be helpful as a mechanism to assist with the frustrations that arise from the difficulties encountered by parents of gifted children.

Florence's need for normalising the experience of her child's giftedness as being validation from others, in this way:

> *You want to tell people what your child is doing coz you need some kind of validation, that, your child is advanced or whatever, or that's normal, that, your child's not weird or a misfit in any way...*

Florence experienced validation from a professional who recognised her child's giftedness. The experience of validation also provided relief from the anxiety Florence had about her child's giftedness:

> *I finally got this validation from a professional, from an expert that the guy I think is um, one of Australia's leading experts in um, you know, behavioural paediatrics... it was really helpful to have a medical professional spend whatever it is, 45 minutes with your child and realise, there's something [giftedness] there. That was good, that was good.*

Lucy was familiar with feeling uncomfortable about giftedness, the unhelpful reactions to giftedness, and the negative experiences from teachers. Here, Lucy expressed the pleasure she received from her validating experience from an educator [the school principal] who accelerated her child's education:

> *...it was just fantastic to actually have an educator make some sort of a stand on acceleration, other than the negative.*

Various forms of support were required for parents. This may have been more pronounced because of the lack of services and support available, particularly in the western region of Melbourne. The following section will summarise the findings and discussion.

## 9.3 *Summary of the findings and discussion*

The findings have illustrated that the western region of Melbourne environment can be a difficult region in which to raise gifted children. Parents of gifted children were faced with a myriad of challenges, which began very early in their children's lives. In light of the previous research and the current study's findings, it became possible to identify the compound effects of how minimal, or no levels of support for parents of gifted children deeply and negatively affected them.

The common threads of stress and of social support were woven throughout many parents' experiences. From the time a child is identified as gifted (and often before such identification), stressors for the parents begin to manifest. Stressors may be generated from many areas, including education policies, schools, family, friends, professionals and organisations.

That giftedness was viewed negatively, for example, as a stigmatising condition, or as an illness, was indicative of the detrimental effects giftedness can have on parents who are raising gifted children. Parents of gifted children generally require more support and specialised attention to alleviate their difficulties within an environment that is by and large unsupportive of giftedness. In addition, the stressful experiences tended to be influenced by the difficulties parents of gifted children encountered.

The factors of stress, repression and social support, which can influence physical illness and disease tend to be somewhat consistent with the findings of this study (Cohen & Herbert, 1996). The current research has shown that many parents of gifted children have had their interactions and relationships with others affected. This was apparent with many parents' experiences of patronisation, frustrations and being regarded as 'pushy parents' who 'hothouse' their children, by teachers, families, friends and others in the community. In addition, social isolation often had the effect of parents censoring themselves by not discussing their child's giftedness and hiding it from others.

The tall-poppy syndrome, where high achieving individuals are encouraged to minimise and downplay their success to fit in with the majority (Gross, 1999; Peeters, 2004; Spathopoulos, 2009), was a prevalent theme which underpinned the negative context that giftedness was held in. Within the Australian culture, athletic achievement is held in high regard and holds more value, which is at the expense of giftedness or intellectual achievement (Southwick, 2012). Similar sentiments were echoed by parents as their gifted

children's needs were dismissed, in favour of the sporting abilities of other children which were promoted and celebrated.

Parents were faced with numerous tangible, as well as social and emotional difficulties, particularly when dealing with the Education Department and schools. Despite the accepted recommendations that differentiated learning (Kronborg et al., 2008; Peterson & Morris, 2010) and early entry should be made available to gifted children (Gagné, 2007), educational and school matters were constant sources of stress for parents. The problems encountered with the Education Department, predominantly with regard to early school entry, was a particular source of distress for some parents. Within the realm of education, the issue of bullying was also a matter of concern.

Bullying has often been referred to in the context of the bullying of gifted children (Davis, 2012; Peterson & Ray, 2006). Nevertheless, parents of gifted children associated bullying more often with their own experiences of childhood bullying. The parent's childhood bullying experiences appeared to shape the management of their gifted children's matters, which included a preference for home schooling, rather than institutionalised education and its possible risk of bullying.

In addition, support from family and friends who are natural forms of support, were missing for many parents of gifted children. In order to restore the balance, and avoid the negative consequences of a lack of support (Darling & Steinberg, 1993), alternative forms of support are essential. Support that helps parents to manage matters of giftedness and assist their gifted children develop their potential, are important and necessary (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Free, 2006, 2009). Support groups are known and established mechanisms of support. Support groups can provide parents of gifted children suitable forums to share similar issues and concerns. By sharing similar issues and

concerns parents of gifted children can obtain validation (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al.; Fisher et al.; Free), and make progress towards normalising their experiences.

Parents in the current research recognised that organisations for gifted children help to provide the enrichment gifted children need that may be lacking in schools (Clark & Callow, 2013). Organisations that fostered the development of gifted children were considered helpful by parents of gifted children, but access to the organisations and programs was a barrier. The distant location of GERRIC (Gross, 2013) was a barrier because it is located in another city and another state of Australia. CHIP was another organisation for the gifted, but was not considered as helpful and was also not conveniently located. The G.A.T.E.ways organisation (G.A.T.E.ways, 2008) was considered beneficial by some parents, although the restricted access (children are required to attend school, or be six years of age), together with the cost and inconvenient locations of the programs, was prohibitive for some parents. The Able Learners program aimed at gifted children and their parents was considered useful, but was also situated in a distant location 90 minutes drive from Melbourne, in Bendigo. Although considered to be of value, the overriding concerns with gifted organisations were their problematic locations.

Counselling was also a matter considered by parents of gifted children. Contrary to Alsop's (1997) contention that counselling would be beneficial for parents of gifted children, counselling was not an avenue of assistance favoured by the majority of parents in the current research. The parents who did receive counselling had mixed responses regarding its effectiveness. Only one parent advised counselling as beneficial process. Another parent derided her stated need for counselling. Most parents rejected counselling as the type of support suitable for them. The low rate of counselling could be due to the perceived public stigma that counselling holds (Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007). What

became quite clear from the parents responses, was their need to interact with other parents of gifted children, rather than seek formal avenues of advice or support and information.

Information is an important factor regarding giftedness. Information about giftedness can be sourced in a multitude of ways; from the internet, professionals, schools, government departments and the community. Information in all its forms provides parents with a basis on which to make important decisions regarding their gifted children. Because there is so much information about giftedness available, the quality and reliability of information for parents of gifted children is important (Weber & Stanley, 2012). Participants advised that information sourced from other parents of gifted children was the most desired and valued source of information.

Fathers were in favour of support for parents of gifted children, but paradoxically, were opposed to seeking support for themselves. In particular, fathers were opposed to seeking assistance in a support group environment, with only one father in favour. Nonetheless, this father also advised he would not involve himself in the support group for parents of gifted children that his wife attended, even though the support group was for both mothers and fathers. This inconsistency and the denial of the need for support may be influenced by the traditional views of fathering roles (Biddulph, 1997; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Lee, 2010), where there is less involvement with their children (Lee, 2010), and which appear to be still embedded in society, even in the 21$^{st}$ century.

Support groups were advised as being the overall preferred method of support delivery by the participants. Although some different types of support groups such as play group support groups were suggested, the self-help/mutual aid support group models were the most favoured type of support groups for parents of gifted children parents. Preliminary research indicated a preference for a self-help/mutual aid support group for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne (Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher,

Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009). Similar findings in the current research further supported the contention that a support group was necessary to address the sizeable imbalance between the support needed, and the available support, for parents of gifted children.

Several parents expressed the desire to talk to others about their gifted children and the need for their experiences to be validated. Embedded with the self-help/mutual aid support group structure is the notion of consensual validation (Fusco et al., 2013; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Westmoreland et al., 2000). Consensual validation is an integral construct for a self-help/mutual aid support group. Consensual validation can be achieved through the group members offering mutual support that is based in similar experiences or perceptions of other group members (Fusco et al.). Validation of the participants' experiences of parenting gifted children is considered helpful, as a way of providing relief for anxiety and assisting with the normalisation of parents' experiences.

A strategy aimed at mediating some of the stress and negative effects that parents of gifted children endured was clearly required. The following chapter will be an ethnographic examination of the self-help/mutual aid support group strategy established for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne, Victoria. The strategy provided a forum for parents of gifted children to meet and discuss issues involved with challenges raising gifted children in an environment resistant to the concept of giftedness. The support group was established by, and for parents of gifted children. It was hoped the support group forum would provide the necessary mutual support and consensual validation needed by parents of gifted children.

# CHAPTER 10

## 10.    Social support group strategy

### 10.1    *Self-help/mutual aid support group development*

Previous research (Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006) indicated that many parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne had a strong desire to discuss parenting matters with other parents of gifted children. Parents reported that they preferred to meet other parents in an informal setting, such as a coffee shop.

Together with this study's findings, and in keeping with previous findings, the self-help/mutual aid support group model appeared to be the most suitable approach to assist with some of the difficulties that parents of gifted children experience (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004).

In light of the previous research, and as a prelude to the current research, an information evening was held at the Victoria University Footscray Park campus. This evening was hosted by a gifted information organisation for parents of gifted children in July 2007. The information evening was entitled 'Social Support for Parents of Academically Gifted Children' and was advertised in the gifted information organisation newsletter in July 2007, and also by word of mouth. Speakers with expertise in the area of giftedness presented information on various aspects of giftedness. At the conclusion of the meeting, 15 parents completed a short questionnaire and elected to have their personal details recorded for future contact. Fourteen of the 15 parents who left their contact details advised that they were interested in a support group for parents of gifted children. No support group for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne was in existence at that time.

A parent who had previously been in contact with the university met with the student researcher in August 2007. We discussed the founding of an informal support group. This parent had previously lodged a notice in the gifted information organisation newsletter February 2006 about organising a support group for parents of gifted children. The parent was subsequently, overwhelmed with responses from other parents. Unfortunately the work load of forming the group without assistance, together with the parent's existing commitments, made it unrealistic for the parent to establish a support group at that time. This was remedied with this researcher's assistance in the later months of 2007. Although the new support group was to be the first of its kind in the western region of Melbourne, it should be noted that a previous support group had existed for a short term..

10.2 *Previous support group*

The western region of Melbourne has not had an established history of supporting parents of gifted children, although it is known that one support group was previously founded. The previously established support group was known as the Western Information Network for Gifted Students (W.I.N.G.S.) was understood to be short lived. Little evidence of the group exists, although it is known the group was founded by two professional educators in 2001. This was evidenced by their submission from the Victorian Affiliated Network of Gifted Support Groups (VANGSG) in February 2001, to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee, Parliament House, regarding the Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Children in 2001 (Commonwealth of Australia. Parliament, 2001).

Additionally, participants from previous research (Irving, 2004) advised they had knowledge of a disbanded group that held formal meetings in the evenings with presentations made by speakers in the field of giftedness. A participant who had attended

one of the W.I.N.G.S. meetings conveyed dissatisfaction with the formal structure of the

meetings. It was reported the most satisfying aspect of the meeting was the post-meeting

interactions. Following the meeting, refreshments were served and parents had an

opportunity to talk informally with each other (Irving). The preference by parents for a

relaxed forum for discussion can be contrasted with a formally structured model of support

group for parents of gifted children, known as Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted

(SENG), which was previously discussed in chapter six.

## 10.3  *Formal support group model*

SENG has been acknowledged as an effective intervention for some parents of

gifted children in the USA (Webb & DeVries, 1998, 2007; Weber & Stanley, 2012).

Previous research on parents of gifted children in western region of Melbourne indicated

that the formally structured ten week SENG program was not a strongly supported format

of support (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005;

Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). The parents involved in the preceding studies expressly

verbalised their desire to meet other parents of gifted children in an informal environment,

and casually discuss gifted matters and other issues, rather than engage with a highly

structured support group (Fisher et al.; Fisher, Morda, et al.; Free; Irving).

## 10.4  *Existing support groups in Melbourne*

Four support groups for parents of gifted children existed in Melbourne at the time

this research was conducted. Two support groups were located in the Eastern region of

Melbourne, at various distances from the central business district of Melbourne (CBD).

Two other support groups were located in South East region of Melbourne. One of these

support groups had the largest membership of all four of the support groups in Melbourne[3].

Additionally, this support group was situated in a more affluent socio-economic region of

Melbourne. This support group was established in 1997 and was an incorporated

association. The support group was structured with four elected committee members and

ordinary members. Furthermore, this support group had a list of scheduled speakers,

presentations and other arranged activities. In order to join this support group, the payment

of membership fees was required. Group members most often meet in each other's homes,

with coffee evenings held in a café at times.

In addition, this support group had a website which advised that there were no

other groups like this support group in Melbourne. This suggests that this group is a unique

group. The support group's website also advised that their members had entered 62

submissions into the Victorian Government Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and

Talented Students published in 2012, indicating it may also be a political and influential

group in gifted matters. Although the support group's events and activities were primarily

located in an Eastern region of Melbourne, the support group welcomed others from

further afield to attend their events.

It could be suggested that because the support group had a formal hierarchical

structure, entered submissions to government inquiries, and was a unique organisation, that

it might be the best choice of support group for parents of gifted children. Thus,

individuals seeking guidance or support in gifted issues may be particularly drawn to this

support group. Although some parents may find this formal and politically active model of

support group useful, research has indicated that a casual, informal and low cost support

group model was the preferred support group model for parents of gifted children in the

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[3] The support group and their website have not been identified in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

western region of Melbourne (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). This model of support group is referred to as a self-help/mutual aid support group (Munn-Giddings & Borkman, 2005; Munn-Giddings & McVicar, 2006; Seebohm et al., 2013).

10.5    *Self- help/mutual aid support group strategy*

The new support group located in the western region of Melbourne was structured to avoid the perceived negatives of a formal hierarchical closed support group and to be a positive and non-threatening experience for parents. A self-help/mutual aid support group was the model that most parents had requested (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006; Irving, 2004). Parents who had provided their contact information at the Victoria University evening were approached. They were contacted in December 2007 by email and by letters, regarding the formation of a new support group. The parents were invited to attend the new self-help/mutual aid support group. The self-help/mutual aid support group was established by a parent of a gifted child, with my assistance. The self-help/mutual aid support group was founded on the philosophy of parents assisting other parents of gifted children. This philosophy was based on mutual support (Gitterman, 2006) and consensual validation (Fusco et al., 2013; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In addition, for those who share a common experience, such as parenting a gifted child (Alsop, 1997), the self-help/mutual aid support group is recognised as an effective means of providing a shared identity and sense of community in a non judgmental environment (Borman, 1992).

The founding parent and I concluded that a café would be the most favourable type of venue, because it would be in a central location, and be in a comfortable and casual environment. It would also need to be close to public transport and have car parking facilities. The café location would also eliminate the need for the support group to obtain

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public liability insurance. There would be no attendance fee. The only financial cost involved would be for any refreshments purchased by the support group members. Because of the support group would not have any membership fees, or any other associated financial expenditure, financial records and taxation records were not required. It would therefore not be necessary for the group to become an incorporated body. The lack of such formal requirements enhanced the relaxed nature of the group, which promoted open group membership, where members could attend whenever they wished, in keeping with the self-help support group guidelines discussed by Tourigny and Hébert (2007). Data in the form of observational notes by the researcher/participant observer were collected from December 2007 until August 2013.

The first support group meeting was held in December 2007 with four participants. The existence of the support group was advised in a gifted information newsletter from January 2008, up until the present time. The newsletter was widely available and also free of charge via subscription, or directly from their website.[4] Gradually, the number of parents who attended the group increased. Over a three year period, an average number of nine parents attended the group meetings. The largest meeting was held in 2009 when 24 people attended. A gifted education specialist spoke at this meeting.

As the group developed, the venues the group attended changed to adapt to the group's requirements. One of the more noticeable changes was that more parents began bringing pre-school aged children with them. Another venue was located which was more suitable for young children. The first meeting was held there in March 2010, and is still the current venue location.

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[4] The gifted website has not been identified in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Meetings were held on the first Monday of the month, during school term times, but not on public holidays. This was because parents may have had increased commitments during non school terms. Parents would meet at 9.30am or later. This time was selected because it was considered to be most suitable for parents who would drop their children off at school, and call into the café afterwards for the support group's meeting. Over time, the self-help/mutual aid support group norms developed.

10.6    *Self-help/mutual aid support group norms*

The development of group norms is usual when individuals come together in a group environment (Tuckman, 1965). As the self-help/mutual aid support group became established it began to develop norms over time. "Group norms are the informal rules that groups adopt to regulate and regularise group members' behavior" (Feldman, 1984, p. 47). That is, group norms are beliefs and habits shared in common with other group members. They include group members shared perceptions. The group norms also include spoken and unspoken rules of conduct which are expected to be followed by all group members (Seat & Sundstrom, 2003). Four group norms became established within the self-help/mutual aid support group.

One group norm which emerged within a few months of the support group's operation, was that individual group member's political points of view regarding gifted education were not encouraged or discussed. The shared view was that the self-help/mutual aid support group was aimed at socially supporting parents of gifted children, within a group of other parents of gifted children, rather than deal with political matters.

Another group norm that developed was that the self-help/mutual aid support group would provide a range of information to other parents of gifted children. Some information was shared regarding services, or some commercial products, but the self-help/mutual aid support group would not endorse or sell any service or product.

An additional group norm which developed was that group was non-judgemental. The self-help/mutual aid support group was an open and receptive forum where group members provided encouragement and support, but without judgement or criticism. The group was not a place for negativity, but rather a place to relax and talk freely.

The last group norm which developed was that parents of gifted children refrained from discussing their child's IQ score. This norm developed even though it was never specifically discussed. Parents of gifted children may have wanted to avoid potential conflicts with other parents and maintain the self-help/mutual aid support group's status quo. The norm simply became part of the supportive culture embedded with the self-help/mutual aid support group.

10.7  *Matters discussed at the self-help/mutual aid support group*

The most popular topic at the meetings, one which was discussed at every single meeting, was education; more specifically, schools and teachers. Most aspects of the children's education were discussed. Parents regularly discussed the difficulties their child was having in relation to the education. Often this was about their children being bored and not appropriately challenged at school. Challenges considered to be appropriate by the parents included more complex school work, not merely extra work, and acceleration into higher grades or higher level subjects.

Children's difficult behaviours were also a popular topic. Some parents reported that their children would be disruptive in the classroom or would just stare into the distance. Parents also reported that they believed that these behaviours emanated from the children's boredom with the classroom activities. The choice of schools was also regularly discussed, with parents providing feedback to other parents about their child's school, or other schools they had visited or attended. The differences between public and private schools were also a matter that was raised by the parents, particularly in regard to future

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choices of secondary schools. Parents were generally in favour of private schools, which were primarily located in other regions of Melbourne. However, the substantial cost, the limited choice of schools, particularly in the western region, and the lack of specific programs for the gifted were perceived negatives of private schools. Often, dissatisfaction with schools led to parents changing the school their gifted child attended.

Many parents of gifted children changed their children's schools after becoming frustrated with school staff attitudes towards their child's education. Parents who were new to the group wanted to talk to others about several key areas which were often: school options, assessments and identification, how to deal with their child's behaviour and gifted specialists such as education consultants or psychologists. A group of parents who regularly attended established relationships with other parents, in and outside of the group. Other parents attended once or twice to obtain information or guidance. The self-help/mutual aid support group was adaptable, because it appeared to cater to the needs of parents as they required. **In addition, facilitators may aid in the adaptation process of the self-help/mutual aid support group.**

10.8   *Self-help/mutual aid support group facilitation*

Support group representatives are the primary contact individuals from the support group. The support group representatives group often facilitate, or may lead the group (Wituk, Shepherd, Warren, & Meissen, 2002). As parents of gifted children, the founder and I had a sincere interest in the well-being of other parents of gifted children. We were the support group representatives in the gifted information organisation newsletter, which advised both of our email addresses and telephone numbers. In this self-help/mutual aid support group, the shared experience of parenting gifted children and respect for each other were vital factors in the success of the support group.

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The founder and I did not have, nor did we receive, any professional training as leaders or facilitators. It has been contended that professional training is not necessarily a determinant of successful group leadership (Yalom, 1975; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). But it has also been argued that the unpredictable dynamics of groups which have open membership need skilled facilitators with experience and training (Keats & Sabharwal, 2008).

The founder and I could be referred to as 'peer facilitators' (Hoey, Sutherland, Williams, & White, 2011). This was first, because we were peers, and second, because we facilitated the self-help/mutual aid support group's discussion. The founder and I, and the group members all shared the experience of parenting a gifted child.

In my case, I could be referred to as a 'peer facilitator' and researcher, because I was undertaking more than one role, which requires extra attention to actions and emotions (Herbert, 2010). In addition, I could also be referred to as a 'participant-observer', because I observed while I participated in a qualitative research study (Sullivan, 2009). This is when a participant-observer will become part of social group or phenomenon that is being studied in order to gain a full understanding of what is being studied (Sullivan). As a participant-observer who also represented and facilitated the self-help/mutual aid support group, I had a direct involvement in the group which permitted a unique avenue of insight and a depth of involvement that would otherwise not be possible. Although there were many positive attributes of the self-help/mutual aid support group, it was not impenetrable to threats made to its existence.

10.9   *Threat to self-help/mutual aid support group*

The threat to the existence of the group took place following the publication of an article in the Age newspaper (Education section) in June 2008 (Hogan) (see Appendix E) . The subject of the article was on gifted children and the parenting of gifted children. The

journalist that wrote the article had previously contacted a number of people involved in gifted matters including the founder of the support group and I. The article included some comments made by founder of the western region self-help/mutual aid support group. Also included in the article were some statements I made regarding the current research which is focussed on the parenting of gifted children. When the article was published the founder of the support group and I were separately contacted by an individual expressing congratulations and support for our comments in the article.

Six emails were sent to the founder of the support group within six days of the articles publication. After receiving a number of enquiries following publication of the article it was decided that an interim meeting would be held before the next official meeting of the support group. The founder invited the author of the emails to come to the meeting if it was convenient. It later transpired that the author of the emails lived 24 kilometres away, and her associate, who was accompanying her, lived 130 kilometres away from the location of the self-help/mutual aid support group meeting place.

Throughout the chain of emails, reference was made to a future speaker event in July 2008 that the author and her associate were promoting. They also referred to working on the political side of giftedness with educators. Their aim of changing the national curriculum involved getting more people involved with making contributions of personal stories of difficulties regarding their children's giftedness to a specific organisation. The author also requested that no professionals attend the support group meeting, because the author advised, "It would not be helpful for some professionals to give their slant on what gifted is all about" (Personal communication, 21 June, 2008)[5]. Whilst acknowledging a

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[5] In order to protect the author's confidentiality, the author has not been identified.

place for political activism in the realm of giftedness, I was troubled and suspicious of their attendance at the next support group meeting. I was right to be concerned.

The meeting took place in June 2008. Despite the author of the emails advising she and her friend would 'sit quietly at the back' of the group and 'support' the founder of the group, under the founder's 'guidance and direction'; this did not happen. The visitors raised matters that appeared to alienate the new parents who attended. The new parents, who attended this meeting later advised they would not attend any further meetings, should the type of content and format be similar to this meeting. The matters raised at the meeting by the visitors included political topics concerning giftedness, refuting Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, and also advocating for a 'special needs' government ruling for those with an IQ score of 170 and more. The positions held by the visitors virtually dismissed those who were gifted with an IQ score range of 130 to less than 170, together with individuals who had not been IQ tested, or others who did not have their giftedness formally recognised. Group members were also advised of the previously mentioned giftedness speaker's event in July by the visitors, and strongly encouraged parents to attend. Free passes were quietly offered to the founder of the group, for us to both attend. The visitors espoused their political activist views throughout the meeting. They also encouraged others present to join in with the activism and contact targeted politicians. The meeting was essentially hijacked by the visiting individuals.

The founder of the group and I later discussed the inappropriate behaviour of the visitors to the group. We considered the support group was at risk of collapsing because of the visitors' actions. We agreed in order to protect the group the visitors could not attend the group in the future. If necessary, we would take action to safeguard the group by moving the venue location, to avoid their presence.

To make our displeasure clear, we did not attend the speaker's event in July to which they had provided passes. Because so much harm had been done to the group by the visiting individuals, it was necessary to further manage the damage inflicted by them. After consultation with my PhD thesis supervisor, parents who were new to the support group were contacted and advised the next meeting would revert to its usual 'coffee and chat' format. The founder and I spoke to several group members personally to allay any fears of the members may have had about attending in meetings in the future. Thankfully, our remedial actions were helpful and the support group gradually returned to its original format. Following the invasion by the interlopers to the group, and the subsequent corrective actions, the balance of the group became restored. The group remained apolitical, with its primary focus on mutual support, consensual validation and normalising parents of gifted child's experience. Numbers of parents attending the meetings began to grow steadily. Around this difficult time in the self-help/mutual aid support group's history, a sub-group emerged. The parent who established this sub-group was associated with the existing parent self-help/mutual aid support group. The sub-group was a great development which also served to strengthen and stabilise the parent self-help/mutual aid support group.

## 10.10 *Self-help/mutual aid support group sub-group and planned sub-groups*

The new sub-group was focussed on preschool and primary school aged children and their parents. Because families often experience additional stresses and strains when bringing up gifted children (Alsop, 1997; Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Keirouz, 1990), the group was structured for gifted children and their families. This group's get-togethers took place on one Sunday afternoon per month, or once during the school term depending on the number of people attending. The group's structure was similar to a playgroup but with prearranged

outings. This group's focus was to provide a stimulating experience for young gifted children with like-minded peers and their parents. The group assisted, as it gave an opportunity for families to relax for a while. Relaxing, and leisure activities can reduce levels of stress experienced (Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butcher, 2005; Kabanoff & O'Brien, 1986). It also provided gifted children the opportunity to socialise with other gifted children which is important for gifted children (Gross, 1998).

The parent who organised the sub-group was conscious of the extremely limited opportunities for gifted children to be with each other, compared with other playgroups, kindergartens or schools in the community. The outings for the sub-group took place at various locations such as a children's science centre, a museum, or a zoo. The group was conducted on casual basis, where parents and their children would attend as they wished. I would advise the sub-group meeting information in my email correspondence to the support group parents on a regular basis, and refer enquiries to the parent who organised the outings. Unfortunately, following its December 2010 meeting, the sub-group ceased to operate in 2011, due to increased commitments by its founder. The sub-group was considered successful because it continued for two and a half years and was attended by many families throughout its existence. I would regularly refer other parents' queries to the sub-group parent organiser and I often received positive feedback from parents who had attended the sub-group outings.

Interest in planning another two sub-groups was recently advised by another parent member of the support group. Two sub-groups are planned . One is planned to be a playgroup for families with preschool twice-exceptional children. Twice-exceptional refers to gifted children with learning or attention difficulties or disabilities (Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2013). The second group is planned to be a group for families with primary school aged children, within the twice exceptional cohort. The groups have

not yet been established, but the parent was garnering possible support for the planned sub-groups.

The establishment of the sub-groups may assist in dealing with the lack of assistance available for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne. It also indicates a range of different needs parents of gifted children have, and that they are not being sufficiently addressed. The success of the original self-help/mutual aid support group strategy is suggested by the subsequent establishment of the self-help/mutual aid sub-group and the two other proposed sub-groups. In addition, the successor to western region's self-help/mutual aid support group has planned to arrange a monthly Sunday afternoon sub-group meeting for gifted children and their families to play board games in a private room at a local public library. As a shared family activity amongst like-minded individuals, this sub-group may assist in filling the gap that was left when the previous western region support sub-group ceased. It is hoped this sub-group will be as successful as its predecessor. The success of self-help/mutual aid support groups may be difficult to measure, but there are some key factors and indicators that help to determine their success.

10.11 *Self-help/mutual aid support group's success*

There is overwhelming empirical evidence of the critical role of social support (Antonucci et al., 1985; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Syme, 1985; Ozbay et al., 2007; Rook & Dooley, 1985; Taylor, 1995). Support groups are a form of social support. Support groups can be regarded as successful, or high functioning, if they meet the group members' needs (Block & Llewelyn, 1987). Furthermore, successful support groups develop into a cohesive community capable of dealing with the particular needs of the group members (Block & Llewelyn). Hence, the parents of gifted children self-help/mutual aid support group could be considered successful, because the group appeared to give the parents a platform to empower themselves in order to meet their needs. The sharing of concerns and

stories in a safe and non-judgmental environment, with other parents of gifted children achieved mutual support (Gitterman, 2006; Maddox, 2008) and consensual validation (Fusco et al., 2013; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Markers of the success of the self-help/mutual aid support group was demonstrated by the growth in group membership, the long term establishment of the group, the success of a subsequent sub-group, and the three planned sub-groups. Furthermore, the self-help/mutual aid support group for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne has remained in constant operation since December 2007.

Preliminary research had previously indicated that parents wanted to meet with other parents of gifted children in a casual setting (Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004). Based on the preliminary research findings, the self-help/mutual aid support group had been established. The parent support group was structured as an informal group which avoided what the parents perceived were negatives within a formal group structure. Therefore, the group did not have any formal rules or regulations to govern the group. The support group was reflective of parents' needs, and was a self-help/mutual aid support group because it was run by and for parents of gifted children. The meetings afforded regular opportunities for parents of gifted children to talk to other parents of gifted children in a comfortable and safe environment. Parents shared knowledge and experiences about parenting gifted children. The sharing of knowledge and experiences aided with consensual validation (Fusco et al., 2013; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). By sharing knowledge and experiences consensual validation helps to make sense of the experiences and validating them as truth (Brameld, 1971). Furthermore, consensual validation assists groups to achieve direction, effectiveness, and a definitive commitment (Brameld). Parents could attend as they wish. The meeting place was convenient for private and public transport and refreshments were

available. These factors promote accessibility and flexibility for the group stakeholders, whilst encouraging networking and informational opportunities with other parents of gifted children.

The hallmarks of the support group's approach was in keeping with Levin and Hogg's (2009) description of a support group which is focused on a specific problem, encourages group members to form personal relations with other group members, and emphasises mutual helping. The overarching perspective of the parents of gifted children support group provided a context for understanding the problems faced by parents and their children.

With the exception of the hijacking of the group's meeting in June 2008, there were never any disputes or arguments. Although this may be considered unusual, it was likely attributable to the group's norms. Norms of the group refer to the customary behaviour of group members interacting with other group members (Haynes, 2012). The self-help/mutual aid support group's norms appeared to include the following: Every person who attended the group respectfully listened to each other. At times, parents provided a sounding board for other parents, or a shoulder to cry on. The discussions were lively, in-depth, funny and, sometimes, sad. It was rare for any topic not related to giftedness to be discussed. It seemed that parents finally had a chance to relax, exhale, and blurt out all the matters concerning giftedness in a safe and receptive environment. The size of the group was in accordance with optimum levels of six to 12 members for a support group (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000) with numbers of attending parents fluctuating over the months.

An indication of the social support group's success can also be drawn from Carpenter et al.'s study (2010) on the direct and buffering effects of social support in cancer survivors. Building on previous research (Hays, Turner, & Coates, 1992; Lepore,

2001), Carpenter et al. reported the mechanisms through which social support effects differ. That is, a supportive meeting with a friend or family member may directly elevate an individual's mood or reduce depressive symptoms. Additionally, a supportive network provides multiple opportunities to discuss stress-related issues. Discussing stress-related issues helps the individual to gain control over negative emotions, which then can reduce the negative symptoms of stress (Carpenter et al., 2010; Prüter & Heidenreich, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that the supportive network in the self-help/mutual aid support group may have positively influenced parents of gifted children to better manage stress.

Furthermore, the success of the self-help/mutual aid support groups is suggested in terms of improved well-being for the group members. This is in keeping with findings by Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2006) who have reported the concept of community connectedness is beneficial for personal well-being and meaningful involvement in the community. Moreover, Prilleltensky and Nelson (2000) have contended that when a support group is aimed at promoting child and family wellness, better integration in the community can occur. The improved well-being reported by the self-help/mutual aid support group members appeared to be associated with the advice and skills provided by other self-help/mutual aid support group members. The advice and skills learned by the group members include better management of stressful situations with schools, their children and other family members. Indeed, the self-help/mutual aid support group overcame adversity, as it survived and prospered, despite the threat made to its existence.

The current strength of the group bodes well for its future, although a decision was made for the founder and I to leave the self-help/mutual aid support group at the end of 2012. This decision was made because our children had completed, or had almost completed their secondary education. The value of our contributions for new parent members had become less relevant, as most parents had young primary school aged

children. Additionally, the founder and I had taken on other roles and commitments which necessarily affected the management of the group. Consequently, the founder and I developed a succession plan in order for the self-help/mutual aid support group to remain a viable and ongoing organisation.

A succession plan often refers to activities which involve the planning of transitions in leadership (Garman & Glawe, 2004). Subsequent to implementing the succession plan, a specific self-help/mutual aid support group member was offered the role of facilitating the support group, as well as another person who had previously attended the support group and offered to facilitate the group. The person who was initially offered the group facilitation role has chosen to establish another self-help/mutual aid support group for parents of gifted children, located in an outer western urban area, situated 25 kilometres from Melbourne (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). These developments indicate further markers of success of the self-help/mutual aid support group. Further, the development of additional support groups suggests there was a considerable gap in the need for support by parents of gifted children and available support prior to the self-help/mutual aid support groups' establishment. That the self-help/mutual aid support group and its subsequent chapters will continue to provide support assistance for parents of gifted children in the central west, and outer western regions of Melbourne should be beneficial to a larger population of parents of gifted children

10.12 *Summary of the self-help/mutual aid support group*

The self-help/mutual aid support group survived in the face of adversity, went on to prosper, and has remained strong. The self-help/mutual aid support group continually evolved with some core group members who attend on a regular basis, and some other parents who attended as they felt the need. Members of the support group were friendly, welcoming and engaged with each other's conversations with tact and care. The self-

help/mutual aid support group continues to be a point of engagement, information and

support in the western region of Melbourne, where little other assistance is available.

# CHAPTER 11

## 11.    Conclusion

This study addressed the following research questions: What difficulties do parents of gifted children deal with? What are the support needs of parents of gifted children? And, how can the support needs of parents with gifted children be best addressed? What is clear from the results is that parents of gifted children are stressed. Almost all of the parents in this study lacked the support necessary to help them manage the demands that raising gifted children presented to them. Fathers in particular appeared to have a different experience of parenting gifted children in comparison to mothers.

The knowledge gained from the current research may assist theoretically with the advancement of the concept of support for parents of gifted children, and particularly with support groups for these parents. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help improve understanding of the difficulties experienced by parents of gifted children. In doing so, it will contribute to the body of knowledge for strategies to better assist parents who raise gifted children. The findings demonstrated that the self-help/mutual aid support group model is an important and appropriate intervention strategy for this cohort of parents.

A discussion of the more salient aspects of the findings of this research will now be undertaken and further explored. They were the support group strategy, the lack of acceptance of giftedness in the community, encompassing the sub-theme of the tall-poppy syndrome, followed by the subtheme of giftedness as a disease. The theme of fathers of gifted children will then follow. These themes and their subthemes deserve particular attention, because of their uniqueness within the literature that is associated with parents of gifted children.

## 11.1   *Self-help/mutual aid support group intervention*

Many parents involved in the current study described stressful experiences and dissatisfaction with aspects of their role as a parent of a gifted child in the western region of Melbourne. They reported their dissatisfaction stemmed from a range of more complex difficulties, than perhaps those faced by other parents. Stressful experiences included frustrations and problematic dealings with family, friends, professionals, educators, school staff, and the Victorian Education Department. Dealing with these difficulties was problematic, because the parents often lacked adequate or effective coping mechanisms, such as support from other individuals.

Stressful experiences, which often culminated in distress, were regularly reported by the parents of gifted children involved in this research. As a result of their negative experiences dealing with matters of giftedness within the community, parents often felt isolated and expressed a clear need for support. It was therefore not only appropriate, but necessary, to develop a suitable support strategy to assist parents of gifted children. In particular, parents requested support from other parents of gifted children, to help them deal with their challenges.

In conjunction with this study, a self-help/mutual aid support group was developed. This informal type of support group was chosen for parents to share their experiences with each other. This is important, because mutual sharing can help to alleviate stress (Carpenter et al., 2010; Prüter & Heidenreich, 2009). Moreover, the difficulties individuals experience can be mediated by the consensual validation achieved through shared experiences, as proposed by Fusco, O'Riordan and Palmer (2013). As McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggested, consensual validation can help to normalise individuals' experiences. Because consensual validation helps to normalise individuals' experiences, it has been shown to have positive effects, which include reducing distress (Baum et al.,

1981). Therefore, the support group was designed to specifically address parents' social support needs.

The researcher/participant observer noted an example of the positive effects of the support group following the 20th meeting held in November 2009. The notes were taken when the support group had been established for 23 months, and the size of the support group was increasing. There was also international interest from a new attendee and a guest speaker who was present at this meeting:

> *Wow-This is the biggest meeting we have ever had for the [support group]! 22 attendees in total [including one visitor from Kuala Lumpur and one guest speaker], which shows the level of interest in this area [western region of Melbourne and giftedness].*

Although the support group is now facilitated by other individuals, it is still currently active. Clearly, there was a distinct need for a support group, particularly a self-help/aid support group for the western region of Melbourne. From the support's group's longevity, the formation of a sub-group and the proposed sub-groups, it can be concluded that the support group made considerable progress in meeting the support needs that were required for parents of gifted children in the western region of Melbourne. This is an area where little, if any, support was previously available for these parents. There was only limited recognition, and availability of services or support for giftedness in this region (Free, 2006, 2009). Indeed, it could be concluded from the present study that there is a clear lack of support for giftedness in the western region of Melbourne. Along with the lack of support there is also a lack of acceptance of giftedness in the community. The derision that some parents' face from educators and other professionals may stem from the lack of support and acceptance of giftedness in the community.

11.2    *Lack of acceptance of giftedness*

A range of problems parents experienced appeared to be associated with a lack of
acceptance of giftedness in the community. In particular, the tall-poppy syndrome seemed
to have considerable negative effects. Parents' dealings with friends, family school staff
and the community were made more complex in a community where the tall-poppy
syndrome (Peeters, 2004) is embedded; and where high achievers are 'cut down to size' to
fit in with the majority (Feather, 1989). The tall-poppy syndrome has a firmly established
prevalence in Australia (Peeters). But it is not only high achievers who are affected by the
tall-poppy syndrome, such as gifted children, it can also affect their parents. It was
reported by Gross (1999) that the tall-poppy syndrome can lead to the negative effects of
patronisation, stigmatisation and the labelling of parents of gifted children.

Some parents in this study experienced similar antagonistic attitudes and
intimidation from teachers and school staff, such as that advised by Gross (2004), which
included evidence of one teacher's statement to a parent, "It's my job to pluck the tall-
poppies" (p. 171). It is understood that the school, the family and the community all
influence a child's development (Agabrian, 2007). Accordingly, it could be said that the
tall-poppy syndrome's negative effects are so embedded within the community, that its
effects are not limited to gifted children, but extends to their parents, other professionals
and the larger community.

Furthermore, parents of gifted children are often adversely labelled by others as
'pushy parents' who 'hothouse' and 'push' their children to achieve; despite this often not
being the case (Webb et al., 2007). Such criticisms of parents of gifted children could also
be influenced by those who want to 'cut down' other individuals, as with the tall-poppy
syndrome. Most parents who participated in this study have been similarly characterised in

such terms. In addition, the tall-poppy syndrome may also be a factor at play in the finding that giftedness was described by some parents as a 'disease'.

11.3    *Giftedness as a 'disease'*

There were some interesting connections between the concept of giftedness and its association with a disease and stress as this research progressed. As this study noted earlier, a newspaper published an article that referred to the 'modern disease of pushy mothers' (Paul, 2010). Additionally, the disease producing effects of stress have been well established (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Gore et al., 1981; Heller & Swindle, 1983; House, 1981). To help to counter the negative effects for those who are afflicted with illnesses or diseases, many 12 step programs exist to support individuals concerned. Interestingly, some of the 12 step programs designed to help those with illnesses or diseases exhibited similarities to the ten week SENG program, that was developed to help parents deal with their child's giftedness (Webb & DeVries, 2007).

One of the participants, Marg, summarised her experiences of giftedness and raising a gifted child as, *"It's [giftedness] almost like talking about a disease no one wants to talk about"*. Given the negative associations with giftedness, perhaps it should be no surprise that giftedness was described in terms of a disease at all.

The finding that giftedness was described and pathologised to some extent as a disease and as an illness tends to evoke disturbing images of pain and serious consequences. The notion of pathologising giftedness has only previously been referred to in terms of ADHD (Webb et al., 2005) or the overexcitabilities of children (Tolan, 1997). It could be argued that the current research finds that the referring to giftedness as a 'disease' is unhelpful and tends to reinforce the negative stereotypes and alienation that are associated with the concept of giftedness (Mahoney, 1998). Such negativity and alienation can be exemplified by the rejection parents in this study experienced by others. The

rejection experienced is not limited to other individuals, but also by the systems in the community. Such systems include organisations, schools and governing bodies including the Education Department. Therefore, for those who are associated with giftedness, there are substantial social and emotional consequences.

It was also noted that the problematic relationship with gifted matters was not limited to mothers. In addition to the effects of the 'disease' of giftedness mentioned by some parents, and the varying degrees of discomfort and stress experienced, fathers of gifted children reported particularly distinctive experiences.

11.4  *Fathers*

Fathers of gifted children who participated in this study tended to have unique experiences which were often quite different when compared with mothers' experiences. Fathers were inclined to avoid engaging with the concept of giftedness, especially in regard to their child and themselves. Fathers were often hesitant to engage in the research, in stark contrast to the mothers, who often readily agreed to participate. One father who participated in an interview appeared to be pressured to participate by the presence of his wife who was also a participant. He exhibited signs of his discomfort by his short and sharp responses to the researcher's questions. This father proved to be an example of the unease that fathers often displayed when engaging with the matter of giftedness.

The current research also provided some insight that fathers often relegated the parenting of their gifted children to mothers, and in doing so, fathers further distanced themselves from issues related to giftedness. This could be due to a number of factors. It may be partially attributed to the traditional role of fathers' who were not as closely engaged with child rearing practices as mothers (Lamb, 2010). It may be associated with the Australian notion of fathering of children which tends to be more traditional in nature, and less involved than mothers' experiences (Craig & Mullan, 2012; Lamb, 2010; Lamb &

Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Additionally, there may be a relationship between the Australian focus that many fathers have on their children's athletic or sporting abilities (particularly boys), rather than intellectual matters, as evidenced by Bidduph (2008, 2010) and Grose (2000). There may also be an association with the tall-poppy syndrome, (Feather, 1989) and Australia's intolerance of intellectuals, where sports heroes are allowed, but intellectual heroes are disallowed (Gross, 2004; West, 1987).

Despite many differences, fathers in this study also reported similar parenting problems and support needs to mothers. Yet, fathers often refused to consider support strategies to alleviate their support needs. The reluctance to seek support by fathers was found whether the support was provided by family or friends, or by a support group. This may stem from a lack of understanding, to the ambivalence, or even hostile reactions from others towards giftedness (Webb & Kline, 1993).

Be that as it may, the fathers involved in the present study may have been those who were more engaged with raising their children. As noted earlier, there was considerable resistance exhibited by possible father participants to be involved in the research. Furthermore, for fathers, the negative effect that the stigma of giftedness holds in society (Cross & Coleman, 1993; Free, 2006; Irving, 2004) was often managed by them by avoiding, rejecting, or denying giftedness. Therefore it could be said that the fathers who did participate in this study may be regarded as acting defiantly in the face of the community's disregard of giftedness.

Only limited studies have examined fathers experiences of raising their gifted children. Whilst studies have explored the quality of the relationship between fathers and their gifted daughters (Blanchfield, 2002, 2005), or fathers and their exceptional sons (Hébert et al., 2009), or fathers influence on their children's talent development (Lee, 2010), studies are noticeably absent which focus on the support needs of fathers of gifted

children. In light of the scarcity of any existing research, this study has found that much work needs to be done to increase the understanding of fathers of gifted children and their parental experiences. Certainly there is a need to provide support that is suitably tailored for these fathers' needs. It is clear that more work needs to done to address these matters in order to better understand the support needs for all parents of gifted children.

## 11.5 *Summary*

It is recognised that parents' health and well-being is critical for themselves, their family and the community (Davis et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012). This study confirms earlier research that the nature of parenting gifted children is qualitatively different than parenting other children (Alsop, 1997; Fisher, Kapsalakis, et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher, Morda, et al., 2005; Free, 2006, 2009; Irving, 2004; Keirouz, 1990). In addition, the current research suggests the nature of parenting gifted children appears to be tied to the differences and difficulties that everyday life holds for them.

For most parents involved in the current research, raising gifted children was associated with a lack social support. The people and places that parents usually expect to receive support from, such as family members, friends, professionals, school staff and the community, were often sources of stress, rather than being providers of support. As a consequence, there was a clear need for parents to obtain social support.

The evidence provided by the parents in this study indicated parents' need to discuss parental experiences with other parents of gifted children. The findings indicated that a forum of a self-help/mutual aid support group was the most preferred choice of support. That participation in self-help/mutual aid support groups, whose members share similar experiences can provide substantial benefits, has been well reported (Kurtz, 1997; Schubert & Borkman, 1991; Seebohm et al., 2013).

Based on these findings, it may be of little wonder that the self-help/mutual aid support group that was established remains in operation. The support group has been in existence for over five years and the development of sub-groups and other proposed sub-groups further demonstrate its success. In such a group, parents can begin to deal with their stress, share their stories and normalise their experiences with others. In doing so, they can actively share their joyful and negative experiences. Consequently, validation of their experiences can be achieved. Thus, with better support and effective coping strategies, parents of gifted children may experience improved well-being, and may better manage the vital job of raising their gifted children. In doing so, parents of gifted children may enjoy an improved quality of life with their children, their family and the community. In order to achieve further advancements for families with gifted children, a range of specifically aimed future research would be beneficial.

This study was community-based and took place in the western region of Melbourne. Nonetheless, the findings extend to a number of areas. The areas include parents of gifted children in other regions outside the western region of Melbourne. It would therefore be helpful to target other regions within the state of Victoria and examine their existing levels of support, particularly those regions that do not have support strategies in place. This would allow further and more wide-ranging assessments of the existing support levels and the support requirements of parents of gifted children, throughout the State of Victoria, and further afield.

An overlooked area for future investigation is an exploration of various cultural approaches that parents may have when raising their gifted children in Australia. There is a vast range of diverse cultures in Australia, which should be supported in the most culturally appropriate manner. Further studies could foster the development of specific

strategies and programs to tackle the challenges encountered by particular populations of parents of gifted children.

In addition, there is limited literature examining fathers' parental experiences with their gifted children. The quality of the relationship between fathers and their gifted children, and the stark contrast between fathers' need for support and their reluctance to obtain support, requires more in-depth investigations. The investigations should be aimed at exploring and promoting an increased sense of well-being for fathers.

An unexpected finding was that the experience of parenting gifted children was described by some parents as a disease, and in terms of a sickness or an illness. In an interview some years ago, Stephanie Tolan (1997) discussed the matter of pathologising giftedness, but it was in terms of misdiagnosis of gifted individuals with ADD or ADHD. Pathologising giftedness tends to infer that giftedness is a serious condition that can negatively affect an individual's health and well-being. In light of these findings, and in order to promote parental well-being it would be helpful to further investigate the notion of giftedness as a 'disease'.

Because these particular matters of giftedness have received limited research and attention, it is fitting to recommend these areas for future research. Such investigations may help to discover fresh insight that may assist parents of gifted children. Accordingly, such research may lead to the development of more support strategies to achieve improved harmony for parents, their gifted children, and others in their environment. Be that as it may, it should also be advised that this research had a range of limitations.

## 11.6 *Limitations*

This study has offered an evaluative perspective on the experiences of parents of gifted children, which was conducted in the western region of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The purposive sampling technique employed provided a suitable number of

participants who were parents of gifted children. However, this methodology encountered some limitations that need to be considered.

The participants were a self-declared population of parents of gifted children. Although the participants may have been parents of children that were not gifted, it has well been recognised that parents are excellent identifiers of giftedness in their children. It is, therefore, considered unlikely, but possible, that the participants' children were not gifted.

In addition, the sample of participants was skewed to participants who were born in Australia. Therefore, the sample may not be adequately representative of the demographic profile. This is because 36% of people living in the western region of Melbourne were born overseas (Regional Development Australia, 2012). Only two participants in this study advised they were born outside of Australia. Subsequent studies would be well served to obtain a more representative sample of participants who were born overseas, as well as those with a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

11.7   *Final summary*

Unique to this study is the close-up and personal experiences of parents of gifted children. Most often omitted from the literature in giftedness, this study has given these parents a voice that is otherwise often lost. Because of the general ignorance of giftedness in the community, parents' struggles are largely unseen and unknown.

The primary focus of this study was on parents of gifted children; their pain, their joy, their perspectives. After all, it is the parents who are entrusted with the great responsibility of bringing up their bright kids. These parents have a strong need to spend time with, and talk to, other parents of gifted children. Unfortunately this rarely occurs. The parent-led support group that was developed was non-judgemental and was self-managed by implicit, rather than explicit rules. It gave parents a chance to counter their

negative experiences. They could drop in and chat about matters close to their hearts, and feel validated in the process.

Parents of gifted children are remarkable individuals and deserve our respect and our understanding. They should be welcomed and supported. They should be able to get on with the job of parenting, just like other parents do.

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**Support for Parenting Gifted and Talented Children in the Western Region of Melbourne**

With the aim of the interview being the exploration of the experiences of parents of gifted and talented children, questions are structured around these areas. Background information will be collected, followed by discussion around the child's identification as gifted and talented and education of the child and issues surrounding this.

Parents experiences will be examined along with comments on what support they receive and what support they sense they need. Due to the possible emotional aspects that could be attached to these areas the researcher will be careful to observe any discomfort by the participants and address it promptly.

**Background information**

*So, for the background information*

Q1. Who will be interviewed?

a. Mother b. Father c. Other d.Both/together

Q2. What is your marital status?

Q3. What is your ethnic background?

Q4. What is your educational level?

Q5. Could you provide the post code of your residence?

Q6. Could you tell me the age, birth order and gender of the first child identified as gifted?

Q7. Do you have any other children? What are their ages and gender?

Q8. How many of your children have been identified as gifted?

Q9. Were any of the recognised children identified as visual spatial?

**Schools**

*I will now ask you about schools*

Q10. How do you view the choice of schools available for your child?

Q11. Is the school supportive or unsupportive for your gifted child?

Q12. How is it supportive or unsupportive?

Q13. How do you regard the relationship between you and the school?

Q14. Have there been any difficulties, emotionally speaking, in regards to your child's education? For example, teachers, or other children?

Q15. Has your child changed schools? If so, why?

## Access to programs

*I would now like to ask about access to programs and services.*

Q16. Were there any programs that you have found especially helpful for you and your family or for your child?

Q17. Were there any special programs that you heard about that you would like to have been involved in or with?

## Western Region of Melbourne

*I would like to ask you about your experience as a parent of a gifted child, living in the Western region of Melbourne.*

Q18. How do you feel living in the Western region of Melbourne has affected your choices, as a parent of a gifted child?

Q19. As a parent of a gifted child, what differences do you think you experience living in the Western region?

Q20. Living in the West of Melbourne, do you think you have equal access to programs and services?

Q21. How are your needs as a parent of gifted child catered for, in the Western suburbs of Melbourne?

**Family and friends**

*I now want to move along to asking you about responses from your family and friends in relation to your child's giftedness. These are both issues of emotional responses as well as information and social support.*

Q22. How did your family respond when you informed them of your gifted child/children?

Q23. How did your friends respond when you informed them of your child/children?

Q24. Did any representative from the school, your friends or family offer any advice about your life situation?

Q25. What advice was given and was it helpful?

Q26. Upon realising your child was gifted, did you or other members of your family seek out further information?

a. Was it helpful?

Q27. Do you still seek additional information?

Q28. If you still need information, where do you try and get it?

a. Can you give me an example of the type of information you have needed?

**Parents needs and support**

*I will now ask you about support and your needs as parent of a gifted child.*

Q29. Do you think support is needed for parents of gifted children?

Q30. How do you think your needs as a parent of a gifted child could best be supported?

Q31. At any point, have you ever considered seeking additional help, such as counselling or support groups to assist you with difficulties you may have faced?

a. If so, have these support groups/counselling been useful?

b. What types of support would you feel comfortable seeking?

Q32. Has a support group ever been suggested or made available to you as a parent of a gifted child?

Q33. Have you ever been, or are you currently associated with any of these support groups?

a. Which support groups?

Q34. Is there a support group that is specifically aimed at meeting your needs as a parent of a gifted child?

**<u>Structure of support groups</u>**

*I now have some questions about support groups and their structure.*

Q35. For you, what is the best structure for a support group for the parents of gifted children?

Q36. Would it be best to have only parents getting together or similar to a play group with activities for the children? or a group with a professional at the centre; or a group that involves counselling?

Q37. Where should the support group should be located? how often and when should the support group meet?

Q38. Who should run the support group and how much should attending the support group cost?

Q39. What would be the drawbacks or negatives of the support group?

Q40. Is there anything you would like to add or that we did not cover throughout the interview?

## APPENDIX B - SUPPORT GROUP FLYER

████████████████████████

**A new group for parents of gifted children in the Western region of Melbourne**

**We meet for coffee and a chat at:**

████████████

**On the first Monday of each month at 9.30am**

**(Public and School holidays excluded)**

**Anyone interested is welcome to attend and if anyone has queries they may contact**

████████████████

**or Sally-Ann Free**
**sallyann.free@live.vu.edu.au Ph:** ████████

**We are a small group and look forward to welcoming you**

# APPENDIX C - INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY** | **A NEW SCHOOL OF THOUGHT**

**INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS
IN RESEARCH**

**Support for Parenting Gifted and Talented Children in the Western Region of Melbourne**

Dear Parents:

I would like to invite you to participate in part of a research study that I am conducting for my PhD thesis in Psychology at Victoria University, under the supervision of Associate Professor Adrian Fisher. The overall purpose of the study is to examine the impacts that social supports have on the wellbeing of parents of academically gifted children (whether formally assessed; accelerated, or performing at a higher level than age expected).

This first step is to interview parents about their support experiences and the needs that they have for more formal social support groups. Interviews will be individual. The interview will take about 45-60 minutes and will be recorded in order to ensure that I have all your comments accurately. Participation in this research is purely voluntary. You are under absolutely no obligation to participate in this research.

We know that parenting has its challenges, so some people may feel a little distress at recounting their experiences. We want to make the interview as comfortable as possible for you and will assist should you find the interview too challenging. Should a situation arise that distresses a participant, they may choose to discontinue some or all of the interview. Alternatively, contact may be made with a qualified psychologist who can provide immediate support and debriefing (Romana Morda 9919-5223). Should further intervention be required, participants will be referred to local services such as ISIS.

We know that some parents of academically gifted children hide this because of the negative responses of others. We will provide a supportive, positive environment for the interviews. In the group interviews, you will be with other parents who are meeting these challenges, but who will also be reminded to adhere to the privacy concerns of all involved.

Everything you say will be held in strict confidence by the researchers. Due to the nature of the study it may be necessary to use quotations from participants in the final thesis or in conference presentations or publications. No quotes will contain information that will jeopardize the confidentiality of participants.

If you have questions at any time about the research or the procedures, or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact either of us, Sally-Ann Free 0425-779-829; sallyann.free@live.vu.edu.au, or Associate Professor Adrian Fisher, 9919-5221, or through email Adrian.Fisher@vu.edu.au.

Sincerely yours,

Sally-Ann Free,
School of Social Sciences and Psychology
Victoria University

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher Associate Professor Adrian Fisher (9919-5221; Adrian.Fisher@vu.edu.au. If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone 9919 4710

WWW.VU.EDU.AU/RESEARCH

# APPENDIX D - CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY** | **A NEW SCHOOL OF THOUGHT**

# CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

**INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:**

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study aimed at investigating experiences unique to parents with academically gifted and talented children (whether formally assessed; accelerated, or performing at a higher level than age expected). There will be particular focus on perceived support available to parents and how you feel a support group environment is or could be of benefit to you, if at all.

We feel it is our responsibility to advise you that the questioning will be in-depth and may or may not be found to be personally distressing to you. If at any time you feel uncomfortable you may ask the interviewer to stop or not focus the questions in that particular area of sensitivity.

Your confidentiality is vitally important and will be protected by adopting pseudonyms (aliases) throughout the research project. However, should you feel unable to continue participating at any time during the study; you are free to withdraw from the study, with the knowledge that your confidentiality and privacy will be maintained.

**CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT**

I,

of

certify that I am at least **18 years old\*** and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study: **Support for Parenting Gifted and Talented Children in the Western Region of Melbourne** being conducted at Victoria University by: **Associate Professor Adrian Fisher** and PhD research student **Sally-Ann Free.**

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

**Sally-Ann Free**

and that I freely consent to participation involving the use on me of these procedures:

- **A semi-structured interview, which will be recorded.**

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

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Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher **Associate Professor Adrian Fisher. Telephone 9919 5221**
If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 4710

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WWW.VU.EDU.AU/RESEARCH

NEWS STORE

**THE AGE**

**Too clever by half**

Author: Belinda Hogan
Date: 16/06/2008
Words: 2827
Source: AGE

Publication: The Age
Section: Education
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It should be a blessing but many gifted children discover that a sharp mind can be a burden at school. **By** Belinda Hogan.

TELEVISION'S Lisa Simpson yells at the top of her voice: "Relax? I can't relax! Nor can I yield, relent, or . . . only two synonyms? Oh my God, I'm losing my perspicacity!" A big statement for an eight-year-old. Little wonder her parents, Homer and Marge, look at her with bewilderment in most episodes of The Simpsons.

Ones so young are not supposed to use words such as yield, relent or perspicacity. And synonyms? Well, they are taught a little later. Lisa Simpson is a gifted child. She has abilities beyond her years, is environmentally astute, politically aware and shows talent in the arts. She is a deep thinker, sensitive and often misunderstood. Gifted children share many of Lisa's traits.

Contrary to popular belief, they are not all piano concerto players, chess champions or immersed in developing computer programs at age five. These children are, in fact, extremely rare. The gifted are as diverse as children with learning difficulties and their needs are just as varied. They are stereotyped as children who can look after themselves and their parents as pushy. These perceptions can make life for gifted children and their parents extremely difficult.

A 2001 Senate report on the education of gifted children found there was widespread suspicion of the term "gifted", with its anti-egalitarian connotations. A lecturer in gifted and special needs education at La Trobe University, Michael Faulkner, says most people have a notion that giftedness is elitist.

"Some gifted children are seen as the products of over-ambitious middle-class families rich in social capital," Dr Faulkner says. "Yet research suggests that there are very many children of potentially high capacities from under- privileged backgrounds...Giftedness most commonly refers to superior intellectual functioning, typically evidenced in verbal abilities, logical reasoning and visual-spatial problem solving."

It can also refer to a child's capacity to undertake their own advanced learning, such as when children teach themselves to read before starting school. Dr Faulkner says the gifted may equal 2% of the population. .Often they misbehave in class when not challenged. What is typical of a gifted child, however, is a sense of social justice, a heightened sensitivity to everything around them and a fixation on topics of interest. They are perfectionists who often feel isolated from their peers. The search for "soul mates" is a lifelong challenge.

The president of the Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children, Christine Ireland, says realising your child is gifted can be a shock and cause complex problems for parents.

"If a child has an area of excellence but is also coping with learning difficulties, the problems become more acute," Ms Ireland says. "This asynchronous behaviour can lead to students' abilities not being recognised in a traditional school setting."

Australia's tall poppy syndrome heightens these issues. Sally-Ann Free is a PhD student at Victoria University whose research is centred on support services - or the lack of them - for parents of gifted children in Melbourne. She believes Australians have no problem lauding a child who has outstanding sporting abilities but it is a different story for a child of high intellect.

"Clever people are cut down to size to fit in with the majority," Ms Free says. "Parents are often silent, not willing to share their child's academic abilities or accomplishments with others for fear of being berated."

███████████████████████████ has a 10-year-old son, ██████████, who is starting high school next year. He began using and reading sophisticated language when he was two.

"He loves books and would learn things like different animal species, trains or dinosaurs and then start classifying them," ██████████ says. "With the dinosaurs, he would say if they were herbivore,

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carnivore or if they were sauropods and raptors, at age three. I do remember reading articles about kids like him, but I never thought we had one."

Contrary to another belief that parents of intellectually able children are just being boastful, research suggests that most have no clear academic notion at first of what giftedness is. Jim Watters, from the education faculty at the Queensland University of Technology, believes it is difficult for parents to find a professional who can help. "There is a sense of frustration when no one listens to them (parents)," Professor Watters says. "This is heightened when no one can give them an answer on what they can do." Professor Watters thinks the gifted are placed in the too-hard basket. "It is believed that gifted children don't need the level of support that children with learning difficulties need," he says. Dr Faulkner agrees. "Schools vary considerably in their willingness and their capacity to provide for gifted and talented learners," he says. "A commonly held view is that very able learners should learn to get on with their peers. But that begs the question, which peers - age peers?"

In her research, Ms Free has found that parents report mostly negative experiences when dealing with schools. "Many parents have felt belittled, patronised and even verbally abused **by** school staff, who in many cases did not believe what they were telling them about their gifted child's abilities," she says. ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ out of his first school after having ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ - who runs ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ a Melbourne-based educational, social and emotional support agency - advocate for him to be advanced a grade.

"They told us they would not do anything until he was in at least grade 3 because he needed to consolidate," she says. "This was just absurd to us because we could just see a bird tethered to the ground. After much discussion and feeling like we were banging our heads against a brick wall, we left the school."

Ms Free is researching how much support is given to intellectually advanced students as opposed to those who are not. "Children situated on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale at 70, being 30 points below the average of 100, receive much practical and financial support and often an aide worker in the classroom," she says. "However, children with an IQ of 130-plus are also a group requiring special kinds of support. They receive little and are not generally recognised as a special-needs group."

Another aspect of the debate is the training teachers get in dealing with exceptional students. Professor Watters says teachers are frightened of educating the gifted. "They carry a model of teaching," he says. "They fear being caught out in the classroom and being asked questions they can't answer.

"Unless you specialise in gifted education when completing a degree, there is very little taught to undergraduate teachers about the talented. There is just not enough room in university courses."

The leader of the Boroondara Gifted Network, Dinah Waldie, says research shows that a school's ability to cater for gifted students is directly related to the amount of professional development teachers have undertaken.

"I think it is such a pity that more professional development is not available for teachers," Ms Waldie says. "So often when teachers do come to a gifted network meeting, they are so happy to have had the opportunity to discuss their concerns and have some strategies to take away with them."

However, some schools like ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ son now attends, work on this premise. "It is a multi-age school so the classrooms are organised with different mixes of class," she says. "At first people asked me if it was that 'weird school', but nowhere else in your life are you organised into age groups. The school is a gem."

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ has started her own group called ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ for parents in Melbourne's western suburbs. "What has initiated is a small group which meets once a month, where tears have been shed, but we usually laugh an awful lot,"she says. "It's great to hear others have the same issues and same problems. We are a great source of support for each other."

Parents of gifted children are hoping community perceptions will change and government policies on schooling gifted children will shift with them.

"I think the general public thinks of gifted children as having a bevy of admirers in their peers, are able to design computer programs from scratch and escort little old ladies across the street," Ms Anastasas says. "It's not like that."

Link: gifted-children.com.au

'ALICE'

**Researcher:**
No, of course not.
So we'll along to the Western region, so I'll ask you, partially what you've already been talking about, about your experiences as a parent of a gifted child, living in the region that you do.
**Q14.** How do you feel living in this region of Melbourne has affects your choices, as a parent of a gifted child?

*- SHOCK*
*DISBELIEF*

**Participant:**
(Indistinguishable). It's amazing, um, there are schools that specialise in gifted children, and make a point of it and who have the reputation for doing something about it. None of those are this side. Um, with one exception, two exceptions, ****
****** (primary school) and one begins with 'S', I can't think of the name of it. ****
****** (primary school), I made enquires and basically unless my grandmother had been born with the appropriate post code we weren't going to get in. There's no way, not on this god's earth. I was going to need three forms of proof showing residence within the area for a period greater than three months, and you think I'm joking. I'm not. And that was before they would even talk to me. Let alone entrance.

*LACK OF SUITABLE SCHOOLS IN THE WEST*
*DISBELIEF*
*DEPRIVED OF SUITABLE SCHOOL OPTI...*
*EXCLUSION*
*SARCASM*

**Researcher:**
Really?

*DENIED ACCESS - LACK OF OPTIONS*
*- SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS*

**Participant:**
Yes.

**Researcher:**
They're not very welcoming

*GOOD EDUCATION RELATED TO LUCK*

**Participant:**
Um, that would be an understatement. Um, they were extremely quick to make it perfectly plain I had no chance. And it didn't matter about testing, it didn't matter about results, if I didn't live in the area, they were full up to the gunnels, "Sorry, can't help". And it was very clear. Okay, so rolling on from there (laughs).

*DIRECTLY RELATES TO SELF NOT CHILD.*
*CHILD?*
*NO CHANCE*
*NO OPTION for SUITABLE EDUCATION*
*LACK OF VALIDATION - HAS EMPIRICA... DATA AS A KEY TO ENTRANCE DENIED*
*LAUGHING - COPING MECHANISM HIDES PAIN - PARTICIPANT BECOMES VISIBLY UPSET LATER...*

**Researcher:**
That's very harsh isn't it?

*PARENT LIVES IN THE 'WRONG AREA'*

**Participant:**
Oh, no, that's soft, compared to a lot of the reaction I got.

**Researcher:**
Oh, really?

*ABUSED AND VICTIMISED BY SCHOOL STAF...*

**Participant:**
I have never been so demeaned, put down, accused, abused, threatened, um, sworn at, oh, um, you name it

*OFFENDED - HURT - BELITTLED - HARMED*
*- HUMILIATED - INVALIDATED - DISRESPECTED*

**Researcher:**
From the schools?

**Participant:**
Schools, yes. Frankly, I think there's a particular, I better not name the school now, had I? There are two who moved into the threatening area, um, one of them is located in *******. I have to say, um, the [Education Department's] gifted services coordinator told me I should go to the local school because she'd be ever so much happier having been able to have her little friends over to play. That was from the region's gifted services coordinator, she was so patronising.

*SCHOOLS*
*CONDESCENDING ATTITUDE BY EDUCATION DEPT.*
*PATRONISED*
*OSTRACISED*

**Researcher:**
Yes.

**Participant:**
She leaned over, bent down, patted me on the shoulder

*BELITTLED*
*HUMILIATED*
*PATRONISED*
*EXERTED POWER OVER PARENT*

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'TONY'

FATHER'S NEEDS

**Participant**

I'm not aware of um, any particular programs or services except that ****
(participant's partner) is a member of the um, a group, which is a help group, a
support group um, for parents of gifted children. But that's really about it.

\ Denial

CONTRARY RESPONSE-
PARTICIPANT HAS ATTENDED
GIFTED PROGRAMS AND
KNOWS OF THE SUPPORT GROUP

RESPONSE
DEFLECTED TO
PARTNER
- INFERS HE HAS
NO NEEDS

**Researcher**

Okay we'll move on to family and friends.

**Family and friends**

I now want to move along to asking you about responses from your family and friends
in relation to your child's giftedness. These are both issues of emotional responses as
well as information and social support.

**Q18.** How did your family respond when you informed them of your gifted child?

**Participant**

AWARENESS OF GIFTEDNESS

Oh, I think most of the close family have been aware of ********'s (participant's
child) abilities since he was very young. So, I guess they've grown up with him and
supported us, um, specifically ********'s (participant's child) step grandmother has
been very generous in term of buying ******** (participant's child) books and
documentary programmes that she's interested in, so there's been a lot of support
there.

FAMILY
SUPPORT
GRANDPARENT

PARTNER
INTERFERENCE

**\* Participant's partner**

And taking him to places too, you know, with his interest in plants, she'll take him to
lots of nurseries and um, things like that

**Researcher**

Yeah. Okay.

**Q19.** How did your friends respond when you informed them of your child?

**Participant**

DOWNPLAY GIFTEDNESS

HIS BELIEF-NOT OTHERS

Um, probably less interested in some cases. Um, I guess there's always that belief that
friends have that they think you're exaggerating or um, "He's not really that bright" or
whatever, so, it's always just a bit difficult and we obviously don't press the point
because there's not really a lot to be gained by sort of saying how great ********
(participant's child) is or how bright we think he is.

CONSTANT

SCARED OF
NEGATIVE RESPONSE

ACKNOWLEDGES STIGMA OF GIFTEDNESS

PROBLEMATIC
EXPERIENCES
WITH FRIENDS

DOESN'T HELP-
HARMFUL TO
FRIENDSHIPS

**Researcher**

LACK OF SUPPORT

"Not a lot to be gained", sorry, what do you mean by that?

**Participant**

BOASTING

Um, well, it's like showing off. But we don't like to think that we're showing
******** (participant's child) off or pushing/him

SENSE OF
ELITENESS
TALL-POPPY

- NEGATIVE

- PUSHY PARENT -

**Researcher**

So you feel as if you say that, you'd get a negative response?

**Participant**

Well, probably just not a positive response

SEMANTICS - AVOIDANCE RESPONSE

**Researcher**

Okay

PARTNER
INTERFERENCE
↓
CARETAKING
RESPONSE

**\* Participant's partner**

A perception, you know, it's like (participant's partner hold her hand up to her nose
and gestures wiggling her fingers) our kid's better than yours. It's not the case
(chuckles)

**Researcher**

Terrific.

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**Researcher:**

That's good. So I'll move onto family and friends and I'll ask you about your responses from your family and friends in relation to your child's giftedness. So they are both issues of emotional responses as well as information and social support. How did your family respond when you informed them of your gifted child?

**Participant:**

Um, I don't think it was telling them anything they didn't already know. But I think everybody understood from a very early age that he was very smart. Um, plus I think everybody in the family has said that I have done an awful lot with him anyway as a one-on-one experience and of course as an only child he gets that, which probably makes a difference as well. Um, I think his dad's side of the family, his grandparents the maternal grandparents (clears throat) excuse me, um I think his grandfather is very much, he's very protective and says, "Don't you push that boy, he's going to get beaten up at school because he's so bright, and that'll be the worst thing you can do". All that kinda thing. My side of the family, he's only got a grandmother there, and my mother is very much like, "Oh, it seems to run in all the family, all the grandchildren seem to be very bright" and um, I think she just kind of accepts that's the way it is and um always says, "It's terrific that he's able to do some of those things and aren't you so lucky you don't have to worry about him having learning problems". Um, she doesn't actually see that there are problems involved with having a bright kid that are actually probably equivalent to some of the problems you can have with someone with learning difficulties anyway, but that, that's really her lack of understanding about what giftedness really means and what the implications are, yeah.

**Researcher:**

Good.

**Participant:**

As far as, do you want me to respond to friends?

**Researcher:**

Ah, yes, that, that's the next question.

How did your friends respond when you informed them of your child?

**Participant:**

Every kid's smart and every kid's smarter than your kid. And um, it's very much an, um, keep it under your hat kinda thing because the reaction is always the, um, "How could he possibly read Harry Potter, all the Harry Potter books in two weeks? He would have just skimmed through it, he would never have understood it all and, "Oh well, my kid read Harry Potter in two days", but ask them anything about it and they don't know anything, um, they can't tell you anything about it. So it's their misunderstanding or their lack of knowledge about giftedness. Um, we became very isolated from our mother's group very early on, um, because I think I spoke about ***** (participant's child) in a matter-of-fact way, "Oh, he read this book this morning", "What do you mean he read the book?" and I didn't quite understand that's what other kids weren't doing, I just thought all kids were doing that and that he was at his, you know, level appropriate. So of course the more I said these things, and my lack of understanding of how bright he really was, lead them to I think, you know, do the sniggering behind the back, "Oh, she thinks her kid's a genius", Um, then I remembered one particular parent said to me, "Just watch him, he's extraordinary". This was at a party, and um, he was sitting there on the floor on a picnic rug, coz they'd up the party for kids on the floor, and he was there and he was ordering all of his jelly beans in colour order and then he was getting his serviette and he was unfolding the serviette and he placed it in a perfect square to match the perfect

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| NVivo Nodes Segments of data | Data tagged |
|---|---|
| Parental Support | <Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Transcript 08.05.03 'Julie'> - § 5 references<br><br>**Reference 3**<br>Q25. Do you think support is needed for parents of gifted children?<br>*Participant:*<br>I think everybody needs to know that they're not isolated and that you're not the first person to go through this. Other people have experienced it and found ways of dealing with it. If that, even though it may have worked for them, and it may not work for you, at least it gives you an option, a possibility, and you've got somewhere to step off from, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel all the time, by yourself.<br><br>**Reference 4**<br>Q26. Okay. How do you think your needs as a parent of a gifted child could best be supported?<br>*Participant:*<br>Oh, regular meetings with other gifted parents; parents of gifted children.<br><br><Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Transcript 08.08.12 'Susan'> - § 4 references<br><br>**Reference 2**<br>so it's probably the same thing for gifted children, um, it's just nice, it would be nice to have something out there that you can go to and ask for help, if you feel that you need it, and if you don't need it, then you don't want it then, great, you know, great, but if you do need it, and I'm one of those people. I need research, I need facts.<br><br>**Reference 4**<br>Q27 b. What sort of support would you feel comfortable seeking?<br>*Participant:*<br>Um, well I think things like the coffee club just to have someone to, more experienced people<br><br><Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Transcript 08.11.18 'Millie' doc.> - § 2 references<br><br>**Reference 1**<br>Q30. How do you think your needs as a parent of a gifted child could best be supported?<br>*Participant:*<br>Ah, just by talking to other parents of gifted children. It would be nice if that was facilitated by some sort of educational institution, but that's not necessary.<br><br>**Reference 2**<br>Q35. For you, what is the best structure for a support group for the parents of gifted children?<br>*Participant:*<br>Ah, I don't know. Social. Like an informal setting where people are free to talk<br><br><Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Transcript 09.02.09 'Doris'> - § 9 references<br><br>**Reference 3**<br>the other advantage of taking your child to such a program is that you meet other parents and that you kind of sort of get to know what's out there, and what's needed. You know, they've gone through similar difficulties, how have they coped? You know, with school problems, so it's a sort of task to meet other parents as well as you know, you take the child to some program as well, um, yeah, but I didn't feel that we got anything like that in the Western region.<br><br>**Reference 4**<br>I've started going to this um, the parent group, which has been really good…but apart from that there's nothing. |

| Western Region Issues | <Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Interview Transcript 'Rob' 14.7.09> - § 2 references |
|---|---|
| | **Reference 1**<br>I have not researched this in depth, but it seems that the best support is available in the inner eastern suburbs.<br><br>**Reference 2**<br>Q21. How are your needs as a parent of gifted child catered for, in the Western suburbs of Melbourne?<br>Not very well.<br><br><Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Interview Transcript 09.06.09 'Jenny'> - § 5 references<br><br>**Reference 1**<br><br>**Reference 2**<br>And I think for boys there's not as much choice in this end of town, um, just given the situation where what seems obvious is the local high school around the corner and that doesn't feel like the most obvious choice for us.<br><br>**Reference 3**<br>I got a very strong sense that everything was happening in the East. A friend of mine is friends with ***** ***** (gifted education consultant), and you know, sort of showed me some of the resources and things, I did get a very strong sense that everything was over the other side of town, that's come back now you've said that, I thought yeah, I remember that, um, yeah, so I think it's been pretty minimal on this side of town.<br><br>**Reference 4**<br>I think (pause) if we lived in the East we'd probably have accessed a little bit more.<br><br>**Reference 5**<br>So, living in the West of Melbourne, do you think you have equal access to programs and services?<br>*Participant*<br>My impression is that we don't. And that was my strong impression when I first started looking around.<br><br><Internals\\Interview Transcripts\\Interview Transcript 16.09.09 'Marg'> - § 2 references<br><br>**Reference 1**<br>Q18. How do you feel living in the Western region of Melbourne has affected your choices, as a parent of a gifted child?<br>*Participant*<br>I think it has limited us more, um, both of my sisters have kids who are all gifted as well, and all of their kids have just hooked straight into programs, without any glitches. You know, they just, it was such a smooth process. They didn't have to fight. They didn't have to go to meetings for it to happen.<br>They didn't have to beg.<br>And that's very, very frustrating.<br><br>**Reference 2**<br>What differences do you think you experience?<br>*Participant*<br>Um, there seems to be less around; less programs and service around. Everything from what I've looked at on the internet, everything seems to be over in the East, um, all of the programs are over in the East. The closest I've seen seems to be ***** ***** and that's only an occasional, it's not nearly as often um, and I mean there's the ***** school which um, I'm still trying to get into, but that's all I've heard about for over here.<br>And I just find it surprising because I know that there must be gifted kids over this way. You know, surely the East is not the only area with gifted kids. |