

**What are the Most Evident Characteristics of Giftedness that Students With  
Disabilities Portray to Their Classroom Teachers?**

by

**Jonathan Thomas Goosey**

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## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Review of Literature .....	3
Chapter Three: Methods .....	9
Subjects .....	9
Instruments .....	9
Procedures .....	10
Chapter Three: Results .....	11
Descriptive Statistics .....	11
Inferential Statistics .....	11
Chapter Four: Conclusions .....	13
References .....	16
Table 1: Characteristics Checklist .....	18
Table 2: Mean, Percentages, and Standard Deviations for Characteristics .....	19
Table 3: Paired Samples T-Test Results for Characteristics .....	20
Vita .....	21

## Tables

Table 1: Characteristics Checklist.....	18
Table 2: Mean, Percentages, and Standard Deviations for Characteristics.....	19
Table 3: Paired Samples T-Test Results for Characteristics.....	20

## Abstract

This study explores the most evident characteristics of giftedness that students with disabilities display to their classroom teachers. This is based on the hypothesis that the perceptions that teachers have of students with disabilities is predominately negative and causes teachers to overlook strengths and possible giftedness in those students. Participants in this study are all Caucasian, female, elementary school teachers that currently educate students with disabilities in upstate New York. For each student that they were responsible for educating, participants completed a checklist containing both positively and negatively worded characteristics. These checklists were collected and analyzed.

Results from the data collected indicate that educators do have significant negative perceptions of students with disabilities. This causes them to overlook strengths and potential giftedness in these students. These findings lay the foundation for future research to be completed in order to further explore the effect that issues such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status have on the perceptions that teachers have of students with disabilities and students who are of a minority.

## Introduction

Sternberg's (1985) Triarchic Theory of Intelligence proposes that intelligence reveals itself in at least three ways; componentially, experientially, and contextually. Componential learners are analytical thinkers that do very well on standardized tests and school in general. Experiential learners are creative thinkers that enjoy novelty and unique situational learning. To them, rules are constant inconveniences and are meant to be broken. Contextual learners are highly adaptive thinkers that do well in a wide variety of environments. These thinkers are street-smart survivors, socially competent, and practical. They also often do poorly in school. Due to the fact that adaptability is not a skill that is measured on IQ tests, contextual learners, therefore, tend to be underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. Teachers tend to interpret these differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages which leads to labeling such students "at risk" (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002). As a result of these labels, student potential is often lost due to the negative focus of teachers on "at risk" students. Research shows that as late as 1992, the "at risk" population was still primarily composed of students who are of a minority and consistently underrepresented in gifted and talented programs in 34 of the 50 states (Brown, 1997).

During our studies in class, we have discussed a statistical overrepresentation of students that are placed in special education programs. After these investigations and discussions, I wanted to research one of the issues of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students. The U.S. Department of Education (1993) reported

that students who are of a minority, with the exception to Asian Americans, remain significantly absent from gifted and talented programs. Following this trend, in my personal experience as a fifth grade teacher, I noticed that my peers would make special education referrals for students who were of a minority at a higher rate than students of Caucasian background. In contrast, I also saw the lack of gifted and accelerated referrals for students who were of a minority by these same peers.

Experts have been pushing for reform in area of gifted education for years. In 1997, The National Association for Gifted Children stressed the need for equity in the identification and assessment instruments, policies, and procedures by making a statement recommending that teachers use more than one test to make educational and placement decisions in regards to gifted students (Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman, 2002). The Jevits Act of 1998 soon followed, passing legislation to promote interests of gifted and talented students (Ford, 1998). It heavily supported the efforts to identify and serve students coming from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Therefore, I will further investigate reasons for differing perceptions of students with disabilities and the characteristics of gifted and talented potential. I feel that this is something that every educator needs to be aware of when developing gifted and talented programs, as well as, when choosing all students to participate in such programs. More specifically, I will be examining the main obstacles that keep students with disabilities out of gifted and talented programs in hopes for positive change.

## Review of Literature

A synthesis of research literature on this topic identifies two leading obstacles that keep students out of gifted and talented programs. First, educator's stereotypically low expectations for students who are of a minority cause many talented students to be overlooked for the initial referral (Howells, 1998). Second, tests and evaluations used in the referral process are biased and discriminatory to students who are of a minority, and students are denied based on the results of these tests (Frasier, 1995).

There is a serious underrepresentation of culturally different students in gifted and talented programs (Maker, 1996). The reason for such low enrollment is partially due to the fact that teachers and administrators are not expecting to find academically gifted students in their classrooms (Howells, 1998). Teachers often have stereotypically low expectations for students who are of a minority and, therefore, overlook them for gifted and talented programs. One hypothesis for these low expectations is that teachers do not perceive gifted and talented characteristics in all students. Some researchers feel that these low expectations are established in preservice educational experiences, practicum placements, and instruction. Research by Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) indicates that teachers graduate with a narrow social perspective and are not prepared to work with culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students.

Boykin (1994) explored the cultural differences among students in an educational setting noting such characteristics such as verbal, mobility, oral tradition,

communalism, spirituality, and affect. These six characteristics were often perceived by teachers as hyperactivity, immaturity, irrationality, low cognitive ability, and social dependency (Boykin, 1994). Furthermore, teachers that are trained in the prior fashion often determine that giftedness is based on achievement or demonstrated performance (Ford; Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002). This being said, it is highly conceivable that many gifted students that fail to openly demonstrate such high achievements are overlooked for gifted and talented programs.

Additional research needs to be performed because several key issues are unclear dealing with educator's expectations of all students. One such issue is the impact that the race/ethnicity of the referral educator has on the number of students who are of a minority that are referred for gifted and talented programs. Coinciding with this, a second issue that needs further exploration would be the impact that the race/ethnicity of the test administrator has on the student's test performance. A third issue that needs exploration is the level of importance of rapport between the student and the test administrator. Findings from additional research may provide further insight about how the perceptions of teachers effects student selection for gifted and talented programs.

If students who are of a minority *are* initially referred for gifted and talented programs, they face a second obstacle in that the tests and evaluations used in the referral process are biased and discriminatory to students who are of a minority. The assessments that generally determine the eligibility for gifted and talented programs is based on the assumption that students have requisite skills that are representative of

the normative population. Mills and Tissot (1995) state that the fact that many students who are of a minority and children from low-income families may not have these requisite skills to perform at a non-biased level. This reflects their untrained abilities rather than their academic potential. The tests used to determine eligibility for gifted and talented programs are typically ones that measure familiarity of the American culture and English proficiency, not intelligence (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002). What makes this an obstacle for students who are of a minority is that 90% of school districts use these test scores exclusively in their referral process for determining which students are selected for gifted and talented programs (Maker, 1996).

Other studies have established more justification that the current practice of basing entry to gifted and talented programs solely on one test may not be the best method for identifying all students with characteristics of giftedness. Doing so results in qualified students being overlooked. Brown (1997) found that these students typically have a different (a) culture or background, (b) talent area, (c) gifts other than intellectual, or (d) have been exposed to a limited amount of knowledge and/or experiences due to living conditions or location. With this in mind, it appears obvious that tests that are norm-referenced on Caucasian, middle-class, intellectually gifted students will be a poor indicator of giftedness for students who are of a minority. One study illustrating this found that when using the Naglieri Non-Verbal Abilities Test (1996) and Raven's Progressive Matrices (1998) for additional gifted and talented screening, 50% of the non-white children who failed to qualify for gifted

and talented programs based solely on the WISC-R qualified for the same programs with the Raven (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002).

Being that giftedness often presents itself in ways that traditional IQ assessments cannot evaluate effectively, further exploration of effective and appropriate assessments is needed. These assessments should be ones that accurately measure levels of giftedness other than intelligence. In addition to looking at the tests themselves, further studies would need to be performed to examine the effect that a student's familiarity with the test format has on the student's performance. Parallel to this, the test-taking ability of students in general also would need to be taken into consideration. Some students simply do not test well. Also, since formal assessments are the main tool for determining entry into gifted and talented programs, questions arise as to the role that rapport between the student and test administrator plays in the performance of the student. Hypothetically, a student who has a positive relationship with the test administrator could have an advantage over a student that has a negative or non-existent relationship with the test administrator.

### *Conclusion*

Based on a review of research data, I have determined that the underrepresentation of all students in gifted and talented programs has been and still is a significant problem in education today. Two obstacles commonly facilitate this underrepresentation. First, teachers often have stereotypically low expectations for students who are of a minority and overlook them for gifted and talented programs signifying that they do not acknowledge that those students may possess gifted and

talented characteristics. Experts on this issue stress the need to examine the training that new teachers are getting, and the perceptions and expectations they are exiting these training programs with. Misconceptions that are developed in preservice training programs tend to influence teachers to misinterpret alternate abilities that are not traditionally measurable on standard assessments as deficits and disabilities. Further research needs to be done to (a) determine the impact that the race/ethnicity of the referral educator has on the number of students who are of a minority that are referred for gifted and talented programs, (b) the impact that the race/ethnicity of the test administrator has on the student's performance, (c) the impact that rapport between the student and the test administrator has on test performance, and (d) the impact that teacher perceptions has on their ability to recognize characteristics of giftedness in all students.

The second obstacle that keeps all students who are of a minority out of gifted and talented programs are the test and evaluations used in the referral process. Research has shown that these assessments are biased and discriminatory to students who are of a minority. Data indicates the increased importance of using multiple forms of assessment when determining whether or not students who are of a minority are eligible for gifted and talented programs. Tests such as the Naglieri Non-Verbal Abilities Test (1996) and Raven's Progressive Matrices (1998) might prove to be appropriate in assessing such students because they have the ability to measure levels of giftedness other than intelligence. Additional research in this area needs to be done to determine (a) the effect that a student's familiarity with the test format has on

the student's performance, (b) the effect of test-taking ability of students in general, (c) the role that rapport between the student and the test administrator plays in the performance of the student. This is essential because if teachers do not correct the problem of underrepresentation of students who are of a minority in gifted and talented programs, they are doing a disservice to those students who are mislabeled or go unrecognized in the classroom.

Prior to researching the obstacles that exclude students who are of a minority from gifted and talented programs, a preliminary exploratory study needs to be conducted to determine the extent in which students with disabilities exhibit characteristics of giftedness as perceived by their teachers. Determining this relationship will allow for future research to be conducted on these important issues of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of all students in gifted and talented programs.

## Methods

The research question I am planning to study is: What are the most evident characteristics of giftedness that students with disabilities display to their classroom teachers? I am looking to see if teachers perceive students with disabilities negatively within their classroom and overlook strengths and possibly giftedness in the process.

### *Subjects*

In this study, 100% of the subjects are Caucasian, female teachers currently employed at a rural elementary school in upstate New York where they teach kindergarten through fourth grade. One hundred percent of the subjects in this study hold degrees in elementary education, special education, or both. One hundred percent of the subjects in this study currently educate students with disabilities.

### *Instruments*

The instrument used in this study is an unpublished instrument that was developed by the researcher from a combination of sources. These sources included the Portland Public Schools (2003) webpage for intellectually gifted children, the New York State Education Department's (2004) webpage for giftedness, and a previously unpublished checklist developed by Moira Fallon (1980). For editing purposes of this study, the researcher modified and reworded the characteristic descriptions in order to more accurately convey their meaning. Ten of the items on the checklist are positively worded and reflective of characteristics typically associated with students who are academically gifted. The remaining ten items are negatively worded versions of the gifted characteristics and often associated with

students with disabilities (see Table 1). Reliability and validity information will be taken during the study.

### *Procedures*

The instrument will be distributed simultaneously to all subjects by placing them in their school mailboxes on March 26, 2004. The instrument will be in an envelope along with a letter of explanation, a sample instrument, and an additional envelope for returning the completed instrument. Subjects will return completed instruments to the main office and place them within the box marked, "Data Collection" by March 30, 2004. No identifying information will be associated with the collection of the instrument. Instruments will then be collected by the researcher and analyzed. Planned statistical analyses will include descriptive statistics as well as a paired samples T-Test. During this study, reliability will be determined by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 12.0 (SPSS v12.0). The validity of the instrument will be established based on the characteristics of gifted and talented students as set forth by the New York State Education Department. These are the subjects, instruments, and procedures that the researcher will use to conduct this study. All results will be presented in the results section with any changes in data collection or analysis being noted.

## Results

The research question that was explored was: What are the most evident characteristics of giftedness that students with disabilities display to their classroom teachers? The planned analysis was completed using SPSS v12.0 in order to obtain descriptive statistics (including mean, percentages, and standard deviation).

Inferential statistics will also be obtained using paired samples T-Test in order to see if teachers perceive students with disabilities negatively within their classroom and overlook strengths and possibly giftedness in the process. Sixty-one records of seven teachers were obtained during this study. Analyses went as planned.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics were obtained using SPSS v12.0. The mean, percentages, and standard deviation results are shown in Table 2.

### *Inferential Statistics*

Inferential statistics were calculated using SPSS v12 to establish the reliability of the instrument ( $\alpha = .826$ ) as well as to perform a paired samples T-Test using the sixty-one records comparing the positively-worded characteristics associated with giftedness and the negatively-worded counterparts. No significant differences were found between the means for the two sets of characteristics ( $t = -1.591, p = .117$ ).

After a review of the raw data, an additional post hoc analysis was completed. Each positively-worded characteristic associated with giftedness was paired with its corresponding negatively-worded characteristic. A paired samples T-Test was then

computed on the ten pairs of characteristics. An adjusted significance level was used to adjust for the multiple T-Tests ( $p = .005$ ). Results are shown in Table 3.

## Conclusions

Students who are of a minority are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. These same students are also overrepresented in special education programs. Teacher perceptions are highly influential when referring students who are of a minority as well as those who are not, to either program. I have only investigated the perceptions that teachers have of students receiving special education services.

Limitations of this research exist due to the small sample size and the use of volunteers. The small sample size yielded varying results due to the differences in teacher perceptions while completing the checklist. These perceptions, either positive or negative, could have affected the results more significantly than would have been the case in an identical study of a larger sample size.

A change in the research focus was due to a change in internship placement. This resulted in a lack of an appropriate minority sample population, as well as an established gifted and talented program. Therefore, the initial research focus was shifted to an exploratory study investigating the most evident characteristics of giftedness that all students with disabilities display to their classroom teachers.

The research overwhelmingly indicated that teachers do perceive students with disabilities negatively within their classroom and overlook strengths and possible giftedness. This is directly shown when comparing the ten pairs of characteristics. When describing the students they work with, teachers allotted 37% of the total possible points for positively worded characteristics typical of giftedness while simultaneously allotting 50% of the total possible points for the negatively worded

counterparts. Therefore, it is evident that the negative perceptions of students with disabilities by their teachers accounted for the 13% increase in negative points that were allotted. When comparing the pairs of characteristics in Table 3, three pairs showed significant differences between the positive and negative characteristics in how teachers perceive students with disabilities. These differences are especially noteworthy in relation to the relatively small sample size. Initial results indicate that future research with a larger sample size has the potential to yield increasingly higher instances of negative perceptions by teachers towards students with disabilities.

#### *Positively Worded Characteristics*

According to the completed checklists, 90.2% of the students currently receiving special education services exhibited characteristics typically associated with giftedness. The checklists also indicated that 34% of the students exhibited at least 50% of the characteristics typically associated with giftedness, and 18% of the students exhibited at least 70% of the characteristics typically associated with giftedness. Teachers also indicated that 39% of the students receiving special education services exhibit as many or more characteristics typical of giftedness than characteristics typically associated with disabilities.

#### *Negatively Worded Characteristics*

According to the completed checklists, 8% of the students currently receiving special education services displayed *none* of the characteristics typically associated with students with disabilities. The checklists also indicated that 54% of the students exhibited at least 50% of the characteristics typically associated with students with

disabilities, and 34% of the students exhibited at least 70% of the characteristics typically associated with students with disabilities. Teachers also indicated that 39% of the students receiving special education services exhibit less than 1/3 of the typical characteristics associated with students with disabilities.

### *Summary*

These results are significant for teachers working with students with disabilities because it supports fact that, to varying degrees, most students in special education programs exhibit characteristics of giftedness. These results also indicate that teachers' perceptions regarding students with disabilities are highly influenced by their perception of the ability level of those students. Teachers tend to ignore strengths and positive characteristics in students with disabilities and focus on the negative characteristics they exhibit. While not significant, this is clearly shown by the 13% increase in negative characteristics being observed by teachers during this study.

Future research should examine the volunteer teacher's background more extensively. Factors such as the teacher's age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, certification area, and years of teaching experience would all be valuable in looking for trends in perceptions regarding students with disabilities. In addition, factors such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and record of special education services that have been provided would also be valuable when looking for trends in student behavior regarding the exhibition of characteristics of giftedness.

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**Table 1**

**Survey: Characteristics of Learners**

Learner: \_\_\_\_\_

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys the company of adults                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Daydreams and seems lost in another world   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Struggles to stay focused on a single task              | <input type="checkbox"/> Asks inquisitive questions/contributions to class discussions                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Appears fidgety and lacks attention                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoys talking and discussions  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Displays an abundant intellectual and physical appetite | <input type="checkbox"/> Has poor social skills when dealing with other students                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Is curious about many activities and places             | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefers self-selection of activities or tasks                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dislikes writing tasks                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Constantly ponders new situations and ideas                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finds alternative ways of doing things                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Usually enjoys group activities with other students                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seems uninterested in tasks/directions given by teacher | <input type="checkbox"/> Is a keen and alert observer  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asks or says things inappropriate times during class    | <input type="checkbox"/> Lacks focus to task.<br>(Wants to always do something else or go somewhere else.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot function independently for most tasks            | <input type="checkbox"/> Does not follow the given directions  |

Table 2

Mean, Percentage, and Standard Deviation of  
Positively and Negatively Worded Characteristics of Giftedness

Description Of Characteristic	Mean	Percentage	Standard Deviation
Finds alternative ways of doing things	.2951	29.5%	.45986
Is curious about many activities and places	.4918	49.2%	.50408
Prefers self-selection of activities or tasks	.1967	19.7%	.40082
Usually enjoys group activities with other students	.5902	59.0%	.49588
Is a keen and alert observer	.2623	26.2%	.44353
Displays abundant intellectual and physical appetite	.2623	26.2%	.44353
Asks inquisitive questions/contributions to class discussions	.2951	29.5%	.45986
Enjoys the company of adults	.6721	67.2%	.47333
Enjoys talking and discussions	.5082	50.8%	.50408
Constantly ponders new situations and ideas	.1148	11.5%	.32137
Does not follow the given directions	.4754	47.5%	.50354
Lacks focus to task (Wants to always do something else or go somewhere else)	.4262	42.6%	.49863
Seems uninterested in tasks/directions given by teacher	.4590	45.9%	.50245
Cannot function independently for most tasks	.4426	44.3%	.50082
Struggles to stay focused on a single task	.5574	55.7%	.50082
Appears fidgety and lacks attention	.5738	57.4%	.49863
Asks or says things at inappropriate times during class	.2951	29.5%	.45986
Has poor social skills when dealing with other students	.4262	42.6%	.49863
Dislikes writing tasks	.7377	73.8%	.44353
Daydreams and seems lost in another world	.4426	44.3%	.50082

**Table 3**

**Paired Samples T-Test Results: Positively and Negatively Worded Characteristics**

	<b>Positively Worded Characteristics of Giftedness and Negatively Worded Characteristics of Giftedness</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>*</b>
Pair 1	(a) Finds alternative ways of doing things (b) Does not follow directions	(a) .2951 (b) .4754	(a) .45986 (b) .50354	-.472	.000 **	*
Pair 2	(c) Is curious about many activities and places (d) Lacks focus to task (Wants to always do something or go somewhere else.)	(c) .4918 (d) .4262	(c) .50408 (d) .49863	-.317	.013	
Pair 3	(e) Prefers self-selection of activities or tasks (f) Seems uninterested in tasks/directions given by teacher	(e) .1967 (f) .4590	(e) .40082 (f) .50245	.123	.343	
Pair 4	(g) Usually enjoys group activities with other students (h) Cannot function independently for most tasks	(g) .5902 (h) .4426	(g) .49588 (h) .50082	-.465	.000	*
Pair 5	(i) Is a keen and alert observer (j) Struggles to stay focused on a single task	(i) .2623 (j) .5574	(i) .44353 (j) .50082	-.294	.021	
Pair 6	(k) Displays abundant intellectual and physical appetite (l) Appears fidgety and lacks attention	(k) .2623 (l) .5738	(k) .44353 (l) .49863	-.466	.000	*
Pair 7	(m) Asks inquisitive questions/contributions to class discussions (n) Asks or says things at inappropriate times during class	(m) .2951 (n) .2951	(m) .45986 (n) .45986	-.182	.160	
Pair 8	(o) Enjoys the company of adults (q) Has poor social skills when dealing with other students	(o) .6721 (q) .4262	(o) .47333 (q) .49863	-.175	.176	
Pair 9	(r) Enjoys talking and discussions (s) Dislikes writing tasks	(r) .5082 (s) .7377	(r) .50408 (s) .44353	-.288	.024	
Pair 10	(u) Constantly ponders new situations and ideas (v) Daydreams and seems lost in another world	(u) .1148 (v) .4426	(u) .32137 (v) .50082	-.114	.383	

\*Note: Adjusted p-value for multiple paired sample T-Tests was (p = .005).

## Vita

The author Jonathan Thomas Goosey was born in Rochester, New York on . He attended the State University of New York-College at Oswego from 1997 to 1999 and received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education in 1999. From 2000-2002, he taught fifth grade in an inclusive classroom in Sodus, New York. He began work toward a Master of Science in Education at the State University of New York-College at Brockport in the Summer of 2003.

## **JONATHAN T. GOOSEY**

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**Internship Program – SUNY Brockport  
Churchville Elementary School, Churchville-Chili Central School District  
January – May 2003**

### Inclusive Blend Special Education Intern

- ❖ Designed, developed, and taught lessons and units within the inclusive setting for grades 3 and 4
- ❖ Monitored and modified instruction for 13 students within the inclusive setting based on IEP goals and objectives
- ❖ Developed and implemented individual behavior management systems for 10 students
- ❖ Developed and implemented daily independent work system for 43 students
- ❖ Regularly attended parent conferences, team meetings, Pre-CSE, and CSE meetings
- ❖ Monitored, evaluated, and updated IEP goals and objectives for 3<sup>rd</sup> marking period

**Paddy Hill Elementary School, Greece Central School District  
September – December 2003**

### Inclusive Special Education Intern

- ❖ Designed, developed, and taught lessons and units within the inclusive setting for grades 1 and 2
- ❖ Monitored and modified instruction for 12 students within the inclusive setting based on IEP goals and objectives
- ❖ Administered 4 formal assessments to selected students (WIAT-II, WJ-III, KeyMath-R, PAL-RW)
- ❖ Developed and implemented individual behavior management systems for 2 students
- ❖ Regularly attended CSE and IST meetings to determine course of action for new referrals
- ❖ Monitored, evaluated, and updated IEP goals and objectives for 1<sup>st</sup> marking period

**Sodus Elementary School, Sodus Central School District, Sodus, New York  
August 2000 to June 2002**

### Inclusion Classroom Teacher - 5<sup>th</sup> Grade

- ❖ Partnered with a Special Education teacher to meet the needs of 10 classified students.
- ❖ Taught 2 non-English speaking ESL students and actively communicated progress with families.
- ❖ Developed and implemented assessments to gauge ability level and knowledge gaps due to language barriers.

### Technology Representative

- ❖ Departmental Supervisor of grade level staff of 9
- ❖ Software Consultant  
Responsible for researching, previewing, and ordering assistive technology and educational software relevant to the New York State Standards for 5<sup>th</sup> Grade.
- ❖ Designed and implemented classroom webpage consisting of 26-30 individual profile pages.

### Academic Intervention Services Tutor

- ❖ Tutored 25-35 students in an after-school program in all subject areas.