Gifted Education in the Commonwealth of Virginia: A Qualitative Exploratory Study of How Gifted Education Coordinators Make Sense of and Implement Gifted Education Policy

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. Thank you for being my role models. Your unwavering support, love, and guidance helped me achieve my goals. I appreciate you teaching me the importance of being educated, working hard, and having dreams. It was a very long journey to get to this point, but you were there every step of the way.

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Abstract of Dissertation

Gifted Education in the Commonwealth of Virginia:
A Qualitative Exploratory Study of How Gifted Education Coordinators Make Sense of and Implement Gifted Education Policy

This study examined both the influence of leadership and policy development on gifted education in the Commonwealth of Virginia and how leaders of gifted education programs make sense of gifted education policy to promote effective change. Considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. The adoption and interpretation of the *Virginia 2012 Regulations Governing Educational Services of Gifted Students* provided the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialists' sensemaking. The conceptual process of sensemaking provided the conceptual framework for the study.

The design is a qualitative exploratory approach using a semi-structured interview protocol with a sample of personnel responsible for gifted education programs within rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing different regions of Virginia. Individual interviews informed how coordinators of gifted education in local school districts made sense of and implemented gifted education policy in Virginia. Analysis of data using the sensemaking conceptual framework allowed the researcher to describe how gifted education specialists interpreted and implemented gifted education policies.

The results of the study indicated district coordinators of gifted education used technical and social resources of their professional network as part of their sensemaking process when interpreting education policy. The role of stakeholders was valued by all participants. Funding played a role in the sensemaking process, while the role of local and state politics varied among the participants.

Keywords: gifted education policy, gifted program coordinators, qualitative exploratory, sensemaking

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List of Abbreviations

American Association of Gifted Children (AAGC)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

English Language Learner (ELL)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individual Education Program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)

National Education Defense Act (NEDA)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM)

Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY)

Virginia Advisory Committee for the Education of the Gifted (VACEG)

Virginia Association for the Gifted (VAG)

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

The forces of change influencing educators strongly impact gifted education. "[R]estructuring, school improvement, learning styles, thinking skills, at-risk students, cooperative learning, and other issues being discussed throughout education contribute to strengthening and improving gifted education" (Treffinger, 1991, p. 6). With the development of national curriculum standards, school districts find themselves responding to the demand for higher achievement. A need for clarification of the goals, identification practices, types of services, program delivery models, and purposes of gifted education programming for gifted learners will awaken. State directors of gifted education indicated that "[c]urriculum, instruction, staff and professional development, and identification were the areas of gifted program development that they considered most important" (Chandler, 2004, p. 149). Chandler asserted, "[i]t would seem that these areas would be starting points for considering the direction for program and service policy development" (Chandler, 2004, p. 149). Additional research must be conducted on the importance of gifted education policies on gifted education programming, program initiatives, curriculum, program models, and assessment.

According to Gallagher, "[w]ithout research on the effects of policy initiatives, the field has little substantive guidance on the relative methods for advocating for policy at the local, state, or national level" (Gallagher, 2008, p. 520). Gifted educators should serve as the voice that reminds all educators of the need to nurture and challenge all learners to meet the maximum competencies. "[G]ifted education, can, and should, also bring important issues and lessons to all educators, and make many 'school reform' and

school improvement efforts more powerful" (Gallagher, 2008, p. 520). Research initiatives and advocacy research is needed to guide proponents of gifted education as they seek to address gifted education policy and education reform. Gallagher suggested, "[i]dentification of . . . major changes in state legislation for gifted students, and subsequent tracking of the various individual and organized advocacy efforts, can serve as the basis of analysis of advocacy effectiveness" (Gallagher, p. 520).

As a result of the passage of *The No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2001) legislation, states created policies that impacted curriculum, assessment, funding, and professional development. Historically, school reform efforts have frequently emerged in response to a specific educational need and reflect the thinking and educational practices in portions of the society (Spillane, 1998). State reform efforts are shaped by individual state characteristics, including demographics, wealth distribution, and patterns of state versus local control. Additional research is needed to examine the impact of school reform policies on gifted education programming and how gifted education coordinators make sense of gifted education policy as programs for gifted students are interwoven in school districts' decisions and program initiatives surrounding instruction, curriculum, program models, and assessment.

Statement of the Problem

Without a federal mandate for gifted education programs, each state has been left to create educational policies for gifted education. Across the Commonwealth of Virginia, school district gifted programs are diverse. This diversity includes the definition of giftedness, assessment methods used in identification of gifted learners, and approaches to program models. While all Virginia school districts use the 2012

Regulations Governing Education Services of Gifted Students as a framework guideline for creating and maintaining the gifted programs, there is a lack of consistency across the state and even across regions for gifted education programs. Each gifted coordinator and locality is left to interpret the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* and implement the gifted programs in their school district within the parameters of staffing, funding, politics, and resources.

Across the Commonwealth of Virginia, gifted education coordinators have a mixed level of gifted educational backgrounds. Some coordinators have an endorsement or a degree in gifted education, while others have little-to-no experience in the field. The lack of experience or questions stemming from educational policy can result in a level of uncertainty and ambiguity among gifted coordinators charged with interpreting and implementing the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. This ambiguity can be either a benefit or a detriment when making sense of and interpreting education policy. Benefits may include opportunities for networking with colleagues, soliciting input from stakeholders, and increasing research regarding the policy resulting in varied approaches to gifted education. Contrastingly, multiple interpretations across the Commonwealth can lead to a lack of consistency from school district-to-district. Multiple interpretations of the policy across the Commonwealth can cause disruptions of service for transitioning students, as program components may differ by location. Leaving the 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* open for interpretation by gifted coordinators with a range of gifted experience, opens the door for many different gifted definitions, identification measures, and program models across the state.

Statement of the Purpose and Research Questions

This study used a qualitative exploratory design to understand how district level coordinators of gifted education made sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school systems. I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews using a protocol with a researcher-selected, high-contrast sample of personnel who were responsible for gifted education programs within a school district. The individual interviews sought to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of and interpret gifted education policy. Additional interview questions sought to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shape the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. The adoption and interpretation of the *Virginia 2012 Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* provide the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialist's sensemaking. The conceptual framework for the study was based upon the conceptual process of sensemaking.

Understanding how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy was the purpose of this study. Additional research questions sought to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and the input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. The adoption and interpretation of the *Virginia 2012 Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* provided the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialist's sensemaking.

This central research question guided the study: How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of current and evolving gifted education policy?

The following sub-questions also guided the study:

- How do the coordinators of gifted education make sense of gifted education policy through the technical and social resources of their professional network?
- How do you surface, understand, and apply stakeholder views in your leadership of gifted education?
- How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of the evolving politics of gifted education?
- As a district coordinator of gifted education, what role does funding (local and state) play in your sensemaking process?

Statement of Potential Significance

This study was significant in several ways. The qualitative research offered an understanding of the sensemaking process local gifted education supervisors used as they made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy within gifted education programs. Additional research questions sought to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and the input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. This study adds to the body of knowledge by presenting a statewide perspective on the way gifted education coordinators in school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Information gathered in this study provides a basis of understanding of the sensemaking process at a local level and adds to the broader research of gifted education and sensemaking. A study of this nature had not been conducted in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the body of research regarding statewide evaluations of gifted programming and the sensemaking

process was limited at best. This research fills a gap in the current literature and the educational knowledge base for gifted education policy makers.

Conceptual Framework

Educational reform affects all levels of the educational system, and the relationships of the educational organizations are complex and diverse (Evans, Harris, Adeigbola, Houston, & Argott, 1993). Analysts viewed organizations as social structures created by individuals to collaboratively work toward specific goals (Scott, 2002). With the complex nature of educational organizations in mind, the sensemaking conceptual framework provided the foundation to research a statewide perspective on the way gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of gifted education policies and the roles of politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process.

Sensemaking Concept

Historically, education policymakers in the United States have had a mix of decision-making formats, both believing in local authority and local solutions, but also supporting state and federal efforts (Tanner, Linscott, & Galis, 1996; Spillane, 2004). Policy analysis sought to comprehend the formation, development, and implementation of policies created to address recognized problems (Weick, 2001). Creation of education policies occurred outside of the influence of school administrators by government policy-makers. Educational policies have operated from a top down format where policy is directed from state to school district and then school district to individual schools to control.

The sensemaking concept involved the process of how meaning was made in processing policy information when ambiguity was present. Policies that were unclear led to confusion surrounding interpretations that can, in turn, lead to less effective program implementations. Sensemaking studied decision-making as a multi-level, complex process that involved studying how all participants interpreted an activity (Spillane et al., 2002). Spillane (2000) suggested people used their prior knowledge and experiences to construct new understandings. Sensemaking was influenced by the social, cultural, and physical contexts of the sense maker (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Spillane, 2000).

As policy disseminates through the chain from the top (legislatures), to the bottom (local school administrators), problems arise (Honig, 2004). For policy interpretation to be correct, decision-makers at each level must seek to understand the various complexities of a policy. Information, funding, resources, and commitment of the teachers, principals, parents, and community stakeholders impact interpretation of policy. School administrators interpret, question, and re-interpret as they move toward implementation of the educational policies in the day-to-day operation of the schools (Spillane, 2004).

Educational policies designed by state officials (legislatures and departments of education) are given to principals and school district administrators to implement as the supervisors of policy for the school district. The sensemaking process questions the role of sensemaking (interpretation) in the process of policy implementation. The sensemaking concept examines the aspects of policy interpretation by individuals involved in overseeing implementation of policy in education, the principals and district

administrators. According to Spillane, sensemaking utilizes the tools of observation, narration, and documentation to examine the perceptions, judgments, and lenses that decision-makers use when interpreting policy (Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, 2004). Information that individuals receive may not be original policy content. Rather, organizational information may be gained through meetings, electronic, written, or visual information from state departments of education.

School Administrators Making Sense of Policy

School administrators at the local school level serve as the immediate decision-makers regarding the meaning, effect, and implementation of higher-level educational policies for their schools. Principals, instructional supervisors, and curriculum personnel work collaboratively to define, interpret, and oversee implementation of the policy across the school districts and in individual schools. This group also works to balance the school district's resources, strategic missions, personnel, and input from stakeholders within the requirements of state laws, mandates, and recommendations. Historically, the local school level was the next to the last tier in a decision-making ladder traveling from the nation to the state, state to the school district, and then the school district to the individual school.

School districts have major effects on the perceived credibility of educational policies, through both their action and inaction. Spillane studied how state and federal level efforts sought to achieve educational accountability through curriculum reform. Spillane observed that educational administrators initiated their own teaching and learning role definitions when they evaluated educational mandates (Spillane, 2004).

> To understand how state policy featured in district policy-making, we need to investigate how district policy-makers made sense of the state policy in the context of district policy-making. School district officials make sense of the policy and pass their understandings on to school leaders (principals and curriculum coordinators). Private consultants, professional development providers, professional associations, and others outside the formal school system [who may serve as extra resources] develop their own understandings of the policy. (Spillane, 2004, p. 4, 12)

School district administrators and supervisors also utilize personal experiences to filter information through lenses. School district officials who fear a diminished decision-making role might begin efforts to regain credibility by reinforcing their role as an information provider by conducting meetings, conferences, training sessions (Spillane, 2004).

Policy implementation involves interpretation as implementers must deduce what the policy means to determine whether to ignore, adapt, or adopt the policymakers' recommendations (Spillane, 2000). In conventional views, policy has been identified as a stimulus. In response to policy, choices facing the implementers of policy concerned whether to ignore the policy, implement it, adapt it, sabotage the policy, or circumvent the policy (Spillane, 2000). A diversity of factors influenced policy implementation. Ambiguous or inconsistent policies led to poor or failed implementation efforts, while local school districts' factors such as strategic plans, educational agendas, resources, community attitudes, and time were all influential in the implementation process (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane, 2000).

This study sought to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of and interpret gifted education policy. Additional areas of focus sought to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shape the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. Analyzing each of the research questions using the sensemaking conceptual framework provided insight into how coordinators of gifted education made sense of gifted education policy.

Summary of the Methodology

One of the most effective and informative methods of gaining information was interviewing because the process provided researchers a detailed and descriptive narrative of the experiences of the participants in the study (Dezin & Lincoln, 2005). Interviews were similar to directed conversations (Warren, 2002). Interviews explored what could not be observed and engaged participants in a conversation regarding sensemaking in gifted education. To develop this narrative and explore what could not be observed, a qualitative study using a semi-structured open-ended interview protocol was selected for the study design.

This study used a qualitative exploratory design to understand how district level coordinators of gifted education made sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school systems. A semi-structured open-ended interview protocol was administered to a researcher selected sample of personnel responsible for gifted education programs within a school district. The individual interviews sought to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Additional interview questions sought to understand how

considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. The adoption and interpretation of the Virginia 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* provided the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialists' sensemaking. The conceptual framework for the study drew upon the conceptual process of sensemaking.

The study participants were individuals responsible for gifted education programs within his or her school district. Eight district coordinators of gifted education were purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of the state. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. A review of the literature did not yield any studies of this nature in the Commonwealth of Virginia; therefore, a study of this type of sample or in the setting of a mid-Atlantic state is unexplored and fills an identified gap in educational research knowledge. The following table lists participants for the study:

Table 1

List of School Districts to Consider for the Study

Urban District	**Suburban District**	**Rural District**
Urban 1	Suburban 1	Rural 1
Urban 2	Suburban 2	Rural 2
Urban 3	Suburban 3	

Participants were asked to discuss how they interpreted and implemented gifted education policy and the roles of networking, funding, and politics in the sensemaking

process of gifted education coordinators. The one-on-one interview session allowed participants to respond to an area of interest in a non-threatening environment. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could refuse to respond to any question, and they could stop participation at any time without penalty. Participants were referred to by pseudonyms throughout the interview protocol, coding, and analysis to protect confidentiality.

Limitations

Since a study seeking to understand how gifted education coordinators made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy in Virginia has never been undertaken, several limitations influenced the applicability of the results to other areas of research or states. As not all states have state-mandated gifted education programs, this study may not be generalizable to other states. The interviews conducted in this study were with individuals designated in school districts as being responsible for gifted education programs. The level of knowledge about gifted education varied among the participants and could impact the understanding of the gifted education components of the interview protocol.

One limiting factor related to the study's design would be in relying exclusively on interview data. The results may have suffered the biases inherent in self-reporting or responding to questions through the lens of a socially desirable answer. Another potential limitation would be the purposely selected participant pool of eight district coordinators of gifted education. A statewide participant pool of all 133 district coordinators of gifted education would have made the study more applicable to other

states or research areas. An additional limitation may be that the researcher worked in the field of study during the time of the research.

Delimitations

The study participants were individuals responsible for gifted education programs within his or her school district. Eight district coordinators of gifted education were purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of Virginia. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Assumptions

Assumptions also played a key role in this study. A key assumption and bias during this research process pertained to my service as a former educator of gifted students for five years and a supervisor of gifted education for a school district for ten years. With previous professional experience, objectivity regarding the subject matter was difficult, and I made certain assumptions regarding the impact of the regulations on local school districts' programming for gifted learners. Furthermore, I recognize my own preconceived assumptions concerning the effectiveness of gifted education and the need for quality programming in the rural, suburban, and urban areas of Virginia.

Merriam (1998) noted that acknowledging assumptions or bias of the researcher towards the process of interest in qualitative research from the beginning often mitigates their effect on the study. Subjectivity is defined as the collection of perceptions, experiences, understanding, beliefs, and expectations specific to an individual. A person's subjectivity refers to a researcher's prior knowledge and assumptions. This knowledge can influence and inform a person's judgment. In qualitative research, the

subjectivity of the researcher guides the choice of topic, formation of the research questions and hypotheses, methodology, and data analysis. While conducting qualitative research, there is a need for "[r]ecognizing that subjectivity is always a part of research and can be monitored for more trustworthy research and understanding of how subjectivity can contribute to research" (Glesne, 1997, p. 105).

In this study, I sought to discover what district coordinators of gifted education think and engage in gifted education programming with attention to the networking resources, local considerations of funding and politics, and the policies advanced by the 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* that may guide their decision making.

I have experience with K-12 students in elementary, middle, and high school. I taught middle school for seven years in collaborative, general education, and gifted education classes. I worked in a full-time, homogeneous gifted education class setting for seven years. For the past ten years, I served as the Supervisor of Gifted Education in a suburban Virginia school district. In this position, I currently work with gifted and high-ability students K-12 in a district with pull-out classes, homogeneous full-time gifted education classes, and heterogeneous classes within a gifted education cluster model.

As I work in the field that I am researching, I kept a reflection journal throughout the study to account for bias. My position as a gifted education coordinator provides professional interactions with other gifted education supervisors and programs in Virginia. This interaction on a professional level can be a source of strength in terms of my knowledge of the field of gifted education, as well as bias in seeking honest

conversations during the study as an inside researcher. As part of the reflection journal, I reflected on my personal beliefs regarding the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*. I also reflected on how I approached my sensemaking process and implementation of the gifted program in my school district. Additional reflections included how I formally and informally network with other coordinators of gifted education, including the role of funding and politics in my sensemaking and implementation process. To eliminate any subjectivity in the face-to-face interviews, I used a semi-structured interview protocol that eliminated any questions that may be viewed as bias. With this bias in mind, I believe that the protocols, methodology, and ongoing reflection journal allowed for openness to all data, themes, and conclusions within the study.

Definition of Key Terms

Ability Grouping- Ability grouping refers to the practice of grouping students for an assignment or a class based on observed behavior or performance (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Best Practices- The National Association for Gifted Children (2008) defines best practices for meeting the learning needs of gifted students as services that are family-centered, environments that are least restrictive, service delivery models that are collaborative, practices that are both developmental and individually appropriate, and practices that are both empirical and value-driven (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008). The National Association for Gifted Children supports these best practices through the Pre-K- Grade 12 Gifted Program Standards (Landrum & Shaklee, 1998).

Cluster Grouping- Cluster grouping refers to the practice of grouping gifted students within a regular heterogeneous classroom. In general, five or six gifted education students are "clustered" in the same classroom, enabling the teacher to efficiently differentiate assignments and projects for the advanced learners (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Curriculum- Curriculum includes planned student goals, outcomes, activities, strategies, resources, and assessment mechanisms (VanTassel-Baska, 2002). Curriculum is "[t]hat reconstruction of knowledge and experience, systematically developed under the auspices of the school, to enable the learner to increase his or her control of knowledge and experience" (Borland, 1989).

Differentiation- The practice of modifying curriculum and instruction through content, pacing, delivery, and/or product to meet the academic needs of the gifted education students in the classroom (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Educational Change- Educational change emerges from a planned effort to change or adapt schools to correct perceived educational problems. Such change does not always prove synonymous with progress. Educational change requires a shift of the mind as educators must embrace, view themselves, and be viewed as experts in change and reform (Fullan, 1993).

Flexible Grouping- Flexible Grouping is an instructional strategy that groups students together to receive appropriately challenging curriculum and instruction. True flexible grouping allows students the ability to move into or out of a group depending on the course content. Grouping can be determined by ability, interest, and/or size (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Giftedness- In the 2010 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students,* the Virginia Board of Education defined giftedness as students "[w]hose abilities and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special educational programs to meet their educational needs" (Virginia Board of Education, 2010, p. 2). Gifted learners "[d]emonstrate high levels of accomplishment or who show the potential for higher levels of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment" (Virginia Board of Education, 2010, p. 2). Gifted students possess abilities and talents in areas such as intellect, creative ability, artistic expression, or specific academic fields that differ from those of their peers. Teachers must provide gifted education students with services that differ from regular classroom educational programs. (P.L. 103-102 Title XIV as cited in Johnsen, 2004, p. 3).

Heterogeneous Grouping- Within a heterogeneous classroom, a teacher will have students at a variety of levels and abilities. In a heterogeneous classroom, the teacher will be expected to teach the various levels and meet a broad range of student needs and ability levels (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Homogeneous Grouping- Homogeneous Grouping involves grouping students by ability, interest, readiness level, or need. Even within a homogeneous grouping, students will exhibit a variety of interests and abilities. The intent of homogenous grouping is to restrict the range of student ability levels and readiness needs that the teacher must address within one classroom (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Intelligence- Intelligence is the ability to reason, learn, and problem solve. Researchers debate whether intelligence is an innate quality or if intelligence can be

developed because of interacting with the environment. Current research suggests that intelligence is a combination of both (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Learning Style- A learning style is the preferred way(s) for individuals to learn new concepts, process new information, or interact with information across the three areas of learning identified in the taxonomy of educational objectives: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Pull-out Program- A pull-out program is one program delivery model used in gifted education. In a pull-out program, a student or a group of students is taken out of the regular education classroom during the day for special programming (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Sensemaking Concept- The sensemaking concept involved the process of how meaning is made in processing policy information. Sensemaking studies decision-making as a multi-level, complex process that involves how all participants interpret an activity (Spillane et al., 2002).

Twice Exceptional- Twice Exceptional is the term used to describe a student that has been identified as needing both special education and gifted education services (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Summary of Chapter and Organization of the Study

This chapter provided an overview of the study and identified a gap in the literature on the sensemaking process of gifted education policy within gifted education programs. The next section outlined the purpose of the study, to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of and interpret gifted education policy. The statement of potential significance detailed the importance of the study and

how a study of this nature seeking to understand the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators would add to the field of education. Then, the sensemaking conceptual framework provided the foundation for the study on a statewide perspective on the way gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of gifted education policies and the roles of politics, funding, network, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process. A summary of the methodology provided the format of the qualitative exploratory approach, the semi-structured interview process, and the participants in the study. The next section provided limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature regarding gifted education, sensemaking, and educational policies for gifted learners. Despite the literature on educational reform, policy implementation, and sensemaking; there has been a lack of focus on the impact of leadership and policy development on gifted education or on the sensemaking process in gifted education. There was also a gap in the literature on the roles of networking using social and technical resources, funding, politics, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. The gap in the literature provides the foundation for this study focusing on how gifted coordinators made sense of ambiguous gifted education policy and implemented gifted education programs.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, design of the study, and the constructionist view of the study as a paradigm of inquiry. This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual process of sensemaking that serves as the conceptual framework for the study. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the qualitative research

design, the details of the study setting, participants, the semi-structured open-ended interview protocol, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study. According to Creswell (2007), words are important as data in a qualitative study since knowledge or perceptions about an issue are conveyed through a participant's words. Exact quotes by the participants are used to support the findings in the research. This chapter provides a voice for the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators as they make sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school divisions.

Chapter 5 presents conclusions of the study including key findings, themes, and interpretations regarding the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators when interpreting and implementing gifted education policy. This chapter addresses key findings on how gifted education coordinators using technical and social resources of their professional network during the sensemaking process. This chapter also addresses findings on the role of stakeholders, funding, and politics in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators.

Overall the results of this study suggest the sensemaking process is a beneficial tool in the interpretation of gifted education policy. The use of social and technical resources available through professional networks assist the coordinators of gifted education in the interpretation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and in writing the Local Plan for the Gifted. The role of stakeholders, funding, and politics are also considerations during the sensemaking process. While each school district was unique, this research provides a framework for adaptability of other educational policies.

This chapter details how this study adds to the body of knowledge by presenting a statewide perspective on the way gifted education coordinators in school districts make sense of and interpret gifted education policy. Finally, this chapter provides suggestions for future research on the sensemaking process in similar studies in the areas of special education and English Language Learners.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Educators in the United States vacillated in their beliefs regarding the importance of recognizing the need for gifted education and the equity of education for all. Depending on the perceived defense or economic threat to the United States, the focus shifted between equity for all in America and superiority over other nations.

Without a federal mandate for gifted education, each state has been left to govern and develop policies for gifted education. Thus, there has not been a cohesive educational policy for gifted education in the United States (Brown, Avery, VanTassel-Baska, Worley, & Stambaugh, 2006). In the absence of a federal mandate for gifted education in the United States, the structure that holds gifted programs together emerged from the policies of individual states (Brown et al., 2006). According to researchers from *The Center for Gifted Education* at The College of William and Mary, "[g]ifted education policy is tied to the rules, statutes, codes, and regulations adopted by state legislatures, interpreted by state school boards of education and state departments of education, and implemented by local school districts" (Brown et al., 2006, p. 11).

With the revised 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* (Virginia Board of Education, 2012) changing gifted education programs, it is a good time to study the influence of leadership and policy development on gifted education in the Commonwealth of Virginia and how leaders of gifted programs make sense of gifted education policy to promote effective change.

This study sought to understand how legislative and policy trends have affected local gifted education programs in Virginia. The specific focus of this study was to understand the way gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and

interpreted gifted education policy. A secondary focus included the roles of funding, politics, networking, and input from stakeholders on the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators.

Leaders and studies within the field of gifted education and studies presented in this review were found using a combination of search identifiers including: gifted education, gifted education history, gifted education programming, and gifted education legislation, and gifted education policy. Additional research on sensemaking concept and policy implementation was also included.

Historical Perspective on Gifted Education

The history of gifted education often fluctuated depending on the decade, the political climate, and the overall interest in education. This historical perspective provided an overview of gifted education from 1925 through 2004. In 1925, Terman contributed to the field of education by laying the framework for gifted testing and identification of gifted students. This spike in interest soon waned with the onset of the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the 1930's Great Depression, where survival and equity in education became the focus. The 1940's political and social climates ushered in World War II and math and science instruction became a focus as the United States sought to prepare future leaders. With the 1957 launch of Sputnik by the Russians, gifted education came again to the forefront. Politicians led the charge to improve education with a focus on math and science so students could serve their country in intellectual capacities as part of patriotic duty. The passage of the 1958 *National Education Defense Act* (NEDA) was in response to the launch of Sputnik to ensure that highly trained individuals would be prepared to compete in the technical and scientific fields with the

Soviet Union (United States Department of Education, 2012). The goals of *NEDA* promoted the advancement of mathematics, science, technical fields, and modern foreign language. *NEDA* also provided support for education reform at the elementary, secondary, and collegiate level. In the 1970's, the *Marland Report* cited the need for programs for gifted students leading to new program delivery models of acceleration, enrichment, and curriculum modification.

In the 1980's, support for gifted education flourished as the number of states providing gifted programming increased. During the 1990's state and federal initiatives resulted in budgetary restraints and led to apathy regarding the field. The passage of *The No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001) influenced the field as federal legislation enacted standards-based educational reform. In 2015, *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was signed and reauthorized the 50-year old *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). The *Every Student Succeeds Act* included provisions to help ensure success for students and schools by advancing equity for America's disadvantaged and high-need students. The legislation required all students be taught to high academic standards to prepare them to succeed in college and careers; and required states to outline how they will use training funds for teachers as they identify high-potential learners and meet the academic needs of gifted students. The *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* ensures that high-ability and gifted students from underserved populations receive challenging instruction to achieve their potential.

Gifted education fluctuated as state and federal initiatives directly influenced policy development in gifted education and thus program implementation. Throughout history, gifted education coordinators have been responsible for interpreting and making

sense of gifted education policy as they sought to implement programs for gifted children in their school divisions.

The Beginning of the Gifted Education Movement

The gifted education movement has a long history. As an agrarian nation during the mid-1800s, little interest in gifted education prevailed. The neglect of educational advancement of the past continues today in many areas where a reverence for the average prevails as teachers continue to teach to the middle in hopes of closing achievement gaps and enabling all students to achieve. High-ability and gifted youngsters have been left to fend for themselves without opportunities for them to reach their true potential, while public education has focused on average and lower-performing students (Gardner, 1983; Torrance & Sisk, 1997). Paradoxically, societies held a long fascination with youngsters possessing unique abilities or talents. Early societies attempted to identify ability in skills valued within their cultures and sought to provide early training such as apprenticeships in the hope of crafting skills.

Colangelo and Davis noted "[G]alton was the grandfather of the gifted-child movement, Binet the midwife, Terman the father, and Columbia University's Leta Hollingsworth, the nurturant mother" (2003, p. 7). In their 2003 *Handbook of Gifted Education*, Colangelo and Davis credited Sir Francis Galton with the earliest known intelligence testing involving visual, auditory, tactile, and reaction testing. Galton published his work, *Hereditary Genius*, in 1969. His book proposed that an individual's natural abilities were derived by inheritance under the same limitations as the form and physical features of the whole organic world (Galton, 1989). In his quantitative study, Galton discussed the classification of men by reputation and through a study of

biographical dictionaries and obituaries for certain years taken at wide intervals; he arrived at the conclusion that not more than 250 men in a million, or 1 in 4,000 can be termed eminent (Galton, 1989). Galton's work focused on the study of creative, productive individuals, and began the debate in gifted education of nature versus nurture (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Tannenbaum, 1983).

Colangelo and Davis recognized Terman as the father of gifted education for his contributions in the areas of testing and identification of gifted learners. In 1925, Terman published his longitudinal study of 1,528 students in his work Genetic Studies of Genius (Terman, 1925). This group of test subjects made up of 856 male and 672 female California public school students born between 1900 and 1925. They were selected through achievement testing using the Stanford-Binet, National Intelligence Tests, and the Army Alpha Tests and became some of the most studied individuals in history (Terman, 1925). Terman's goal was to disprove the current belief that gifted children were sickly, not well-rounded, and socially inept (Terman, 1954). Terman concluded that gifted children were superior physically and emotionally to their peers. Terman characterized the gifted children by various traits, but overwhelmingly these students performed differently and academically better in school. Students displayed superior achievement in academic subjects and displayed emotional stability and greater success when their family emphasized education and family values. Terman reported that his longitudinal study revealed that intelligence testing measured a student's ability to achieve in the present and future (Terman, 1954). As subsequent field studies conducted in 1927, 1939, and 1950 studied the gifted students as adults, and the sample often used as no other group of people have been followed and studied for so long. Terman's study

has been criticized for not having a generalized sample and a limited pool of subjects of diversity including gender, race, and socio-economic status. Another variable of weakness was the type of assessment the study used to determine intelligence. Despite the criticism for Terman's study, intelligence testing is still used as part of the gifted identification process in many districts.

During the "[d]ecades of crisis" of World War I and the Great Depression, the education of gifted children was not an area of focus (Hildenbrand, 1981, p. 20). In the late 1920's and early 1930's, interest in gifted education decreased as the need for equity in education moved to the forefront and individuals struggled to survive during the Great Depression. A leader in gifted education, Hollingworth founded a special experimental public school for the study of gifted and mentally deficient students. She conducted longitudinal research on intellectually gifted students. According to Genshaft, Bireley, and Hollinger (1995), Hollingsworth focused on the social and emotional needs of gifted learners as she recognized "[t]he need to cultivate the potential of gifted students in order to guide the people safely in a world where, without vision, more people will perish" (1995, p. 4). Hollingworth was the first gifted education educator in the United States, who developed, implemented, and evaluated enrichment as a curriculum model for her gifted education students (Tannenbaum, 1983). The temporary interest in gifted children remained short-lived and by the second half of the twentieth century, the gifted were virtually ignored except for nations competing for world power.

World War II and the Rise of Gifted Education in the United States after Sputnik

In the early 1940's, the United States was recovering from the Great Depression and individuals were encouraged to band together as a society (Hildenbrand, 1981). In

the 1940's, America faced the prospect of World War II and an interest in gifted education ignited. The nation increased its support of gifted education and made special efforts to accelerate students so they could serve their country and provide future leaders for the United States and the international world. Schools used intelligence tests for identification of individuals with special intellectual abilities in math and science. The military and private sectors tapped students with high intelligence test scores to serve their country in areas of math, science, and technology. The United States of America emerged from World War II as a world leader. Following the end of World War II, interest in education remained high, especially in the areas of science, math, and technology, yet interest in the field of gifted education decreased. After the war ended in 1945, gifted education programs saw a decline as complacency returned with victory in the war and a thriving economy. Less than one percent of school divisions grouped students by ability levels (Genshaft et al., 1995).

Despite political and widespread interest in gifted education waning, advocates of gifted learners sought to provide increase public awareness of gifted education. In 1946, Strang and Williamson founded the American Association for Gifted Children. It was the first non-profit organization in the United States devoted to the "[n]eeds of gifted, talented, and creative children" (Kronborg, 2014, p. 244). In 1954, Ann Isaacs founded the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) with the goal of increasing public awareness of gifted education through advocacy. Another of NAGC's goals encouraged parents and education teachers and administrators to focus on the issues of gifted children (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008, p. 7).

The Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, on October 4, 1957, that led the United States to reexamine the quality of schooling in America; especially in the areas of math and science, as many Americans viewed the launch as a scientific defeat for the United States as a world power. With the launch of Sputnik, the space race began and there was an increased effort on math and science advancement; this brought about a major historical event in gifted education.

Post Sputnik, there was a "[t]otal talent mobilization in the United States" as interest renewed in identifying and educating gifted learners (Tannenbaum, 1979, p. 12). In 1958, Congress authorized the National Defense Education Act, Pub. L. No. 85-864 (NDEA) that provided funding for four-years to improve instruction and change curriculum, specifically in the areas of math, science, and foreign languages as part of the nation's defense program (Genshaft et al., 1995). With increased support from stakeholders, gifted students benefited from the focus as teachers were encouraged to teach the students to their highest ability level. The aftermath of Sputnik created "[a] total talent mobilization. Academic coursework was telescoped (condensed) for bright students; college courses were offered in high school; and foreign languages were taught in elementary classes" (Colangelo & Davis, 2003, p. 7). Schools used ability and accelerated grouping to teach identified gifted and talented minorities. Divisions rewrote math and science curricula. Post Sputnik, the effort to identify gifted children and educate them to their potential challenged Terman's definition of gifted children (the top one percent measured by intelligence testing) as it was limiting (Tannenbaum, 1983). Paul Witty suggested expanding Terman's definition of giftedness to include creativity, productivity, and remarkable actions as he introduced subjectivity into identification of

gifted individuals (Witty, 1958). Schools used grant funding for identification of gifted students who would profit from education in math, science, and technology.

The Marland Report

The development of the field of specialized education accelerated just prior to the 1970's with the public acceptance of the concept that every child had a civil right to a free and appropriate educational program. In 1969, lawmakers sought federal involvement and support of gifted education. Senator Jacob Javits of New York served as a leader in advocacy of gifted education. In January 1969, congressional representatives introduced bills that proposed development of a federal definition of the gifted, and inclusion of the gifted and talented as a population in need of specialized educational services. The Gifted and Talented Education Act (1969) served as the first federal legislation to address the population of gifted youngsters. Although the act did not mandate that states provide gifted education services for children, technical assistance and limited funding were made accessible to states wishing to develop programs for gifted learners. In 1970, Congress added Section 806, Provisions Related to the Gifted and Talented Children, to the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, that enabled federal funds to be used on gifted education and mandated a study by the United States Commissioner of Education (Marland, 1972).

In 1969, the United States Commissioner of Education, Marland, conducted a national assessment to determine the extent that special education programs were necessary to address the needs of gifted learners, reviewed current federal programs for gifted learners and their effectiveness, and recommended programs to meet the needs of gifted students (Feldhusen & Hoover, 1984). The findings published in 1972 in the

document, *Education of the Gifted and Talented,* became known as the *Marland Report* (Marland, 1972). Commissioner Marland presented his report to the Congress of the United States, including salient points on the need for specialized programs for gifted students and the current state of programming for gifted learners. The *Marland Report* indicated,

> School programs for the gifted were hampered in part by apathy and even hostility among administrators. Our most valuable natural resource was being neglected; gifted children were in fact, deprived, and could suffer ill effects of their abilities to function well, which was equal to, or greater than, similar deprivation suffered by any other population with special needs . . . Existing services to gifted and talented children and youth did not reach large and significant subpopulations and served only a very small percentage of the gifted and talented elementary and secondary population generally. Currently federal, state, and most local levels of government and education perceived differentiated education as a low priority for the gifted and talented. There was an enormous individual and social cost when talent among the nation's children and youth goes undiscovered and underdeveloped . . . States (and local communities) looked to the federal government for leadership in this area of education, with or without massive funding. The federal role in the delivery of services to the gifted and talented was currently all but nonexistent. (Marland, 1972, pp. 24, 114)

In addition, the *Marland Report* established the first formal definition of gifted education:

> Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons, who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance.

> These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas: (a) general intellectual ability, (b) specific academic aptitude, (c) creative or productive thinking, (d) leadership ability, (e) visual and performing arts, (f) psychomotor ability. (Marland, 1972)

The *Marland Report* determined the need for federal involvement and leadership in gifted education. Recommendations included the development of a national plan for increasing gifted education services, improvement of state educational support agencies, research and program development for minority populations, organization of national conferences for teacher training and gifted education leadership, and establishment of a federal gifted education office (Marland, 1972).

The 1970's brought growth in the development and implementation of gifted education programs in the United States. Commissioner of Education Marland's support was instrumental in advocacy of gifted education programs as the Office of Gifted and Talented produced advances in the field of gifted education. Throughout the United States, conferences focused on leadership training, teacher training, and gifted education.

Spurred by increased stakeholder interest in gifted education, advocacy by Congressional legislators continued for gifted education advancements beyond that of the *Marland Report*. In 1974, Congress passed legislation in the form of *The Education of All Handicapped Children* legislation, Pub. L. No. 94-142, that addressed education of exceptional children, including mentally gifted children. In 1978, Congress passed *The*

Gifted and Talented Children's Education legislation under Title IX-A of the *Educational Amendments of 1978*, P. L. No. 95-561. This act allocated funding for gifted program development, teacher and administration training, and a gifted and talented clearinghouse (DeLeon & VandenBos, 1985). Between the years 1978-1981, Congress allotted approximately $18 million for gifted education (Harrington et al., 1991). Yet interest in gifted education continued to fluctuate influenced by the social and political values of the time. Most states had no mandates or laws that regulated gifted education programming. Only a small number of advocates were beginning to call for laws that held states responsible for ensuring that all students' needs were being met (Irvine, 1991).

Gifted Education Programming in the 1970's

The 1970's ushered in a focus on programs for gifted learners. Program delivery models of acceleration, enrichment, and curriculum modification developed under the leadership of three gifted educators. Stanley, a proponent of acceleration, became known for his *Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth* (SMPY). Renzulli led the enrichment program movement, developed the *Enrichment Triad Model*, and expanded the definition of giftedness. Gallagher focused on curriculum modification for gifted learners.

Stanley began the SMPY program in 1971. He conducted talent searches to determine seventh and eighth grade students with exceptional mathematical reasoning ability and provided the students access to accelerated courses to meet their gifted needs (Stanley & Benbow, 1986, pp. 361-382). In the 1971 study, 450 students(n=450) from the greater Baltimore, Maryland area were sought to identify pupils who scored exceptionally high on grade-level tests of academic ability and were tested utilizing a more difficult instrument, usually the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT). Students who

scored in the top 3% on the mathematics section of the SAT qualified as Talent Search participants as part of the SMPY study. The objective of SMPY was to identify ability rather than presumed potential. In contrast to the gifted identification process used by Terman, Stanley rejected the use of general intelligence tests, as they would not reflect a specific aptitude or special ability. Students scoring better mathematically than 99% of their age peers received advanced mathematics classes, grade skipping, duel enrollment in college and high school, and early graduation as options. Stanley's SMPY focus on mathematics narrowed the options for identifying gifted learners as identified in *The Marland Report*.

According to Phenix (1964), Renzulli believed gifted children would become active inquirers through hands-on learning and real-world problem solving if they emulated professionals who researched and solved problems in particular disciplines. Seeking to provide differentiated learning experiences for gifted learners, Renzulli developed the *Enrichment Triad Model*, a framework for gifted education programs and lessons (1977). Renzulli believed that students should become inquirers given the opportunity to participate in special interests. Renzulli defined the *Enrichment Triad Model* as "[e]xperiences or activities that are above and beyond the regular curriculum" (Renzulli, 1977, p. 13). The framework consisted of Type I enrichment lessons and activities designed to explore a variety of topics in which the gifted learner may develop further interest. Type II enrichment consisted of methodological skills and processes that taught students critical and creative thinking, problem solving, and inquiry-based learning skills. During Type III enrichment lessons, gifted learners investigated real problems using inquiry methods like those of a professional in a specific discipline. As the learner

assumed the role of a professional researcher, the students actively engaged in the problem-solving process from beginning to end (Renzulli, 1977). According to Renzulli, the Enrichment Triad Model provided a well-defined set of three interlocking traits that enabled gifted learners to participate effectively in the investigative process (Renzulli, 1978). Renzulli's *Enrichment Triad Model* later became a foundational aspect of gifted education programming in the United States.

Renzulli (1978) proposed that the three-ring conception of giftedness consists of above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity. No one single cluster identified giftedness. Renzulli summarized giftedness as

> 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. Children who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs. (Renzulli, 1978, p. 261)

Renzulli's definition of giftedness based on research of characteristics of gifted learners held significance in that it provided direction in the development of gifted identification and programming practices for gifted education students.

Gallagher recognized the need for teacher training in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy of gifted education. Gallagher wrote the first gifted education teacher preparation textbook entitled, *Teaching the Gifted Child*. The text and subsequent

editions also focused on content area themes with an emphasis on abstract concepts, independent inquiry, and meeting the needs of underachievers, culturally diverse, and special populations of gifted learners (Gallagher, 1964).

The *Gifted and Talented Children's Education Act* of 1978 included projects designed to promote advocacy and leadership at the local and state levels for gifted education. The National/State Leadership Training Institute for the Gifted and Talented aided states as they developed plans for gifted education. Gallagher, Kaplan, Renzulli, and other members of the institute's curriculum council developed Principles of a Differentiated Curriculum for the Gifted/Talented. Since 1979, the principles have been fundamental in the development of curriculum for gifted learners. The principles included the need for teachers to present content related to broad-based themes or problems integrated into multiple disciplines, providing in-depth learning and independent study of self-selected topics, encouraging the development of productive, complex, abstract, higher-level thinking and research skills, and evaluation of student outcomes using appropriate and specific criteria (Gallagher et al., 1979).

Gifted Child Movement in the 1980's, A Nation at Risk, and National Excellence

During the 1980's, support for gifted education flourished as the number of states providing gifted programming increased. At a meeting on April 26, 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report (Bell, 1993). The release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* moved education to the front of the nation's agenda. The report enumerated thirteen educational dimensions of risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). About gifted education, the report noted (a) over half of the gifted and talented population have uneven testing ability

when compared to achievement in school and (b) many 17-year-old students do not have the higher-order thinking skills that are expected of that age (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, pp. 8-9). The National Research Center on Gifted and Talented, founded in 1990 and created through federal funding under *The Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act* of 1988 (Jacob K Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988), that provided states with research-based model programs and projects.

Education of gifted children did not remain consistent as state and federal initiatives directly influenced policy development in gifted education, particularly regarding funding initiatives. During the 1990's budgetary restraints led to apathy regarding the field. Studies conducted revealed that many gifted students were not being served (Purcell, 1993). The United States Department of Education's report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (United States Department of Education, 1993) informed the nation of a quiet crisis occurring in schools and highlighted the consistent ambivalence toward the education and intellect of the most gifted and talented students. The government report noted:

> The United States is squandering one of its most precious resources: the gifts, the talents and high interests of many students . . . In a broad range of intellectual and artistic endeavors, these [gifted] youngsters are not being challenged to do their best work. The problem is especially severe among economically disadvantaged and minority students, who have access to fewer advanced educational opportunities and whose talents go unnoticed. (United States Department of Education, 1993, p. 1)

With the publication of this report, the academic needs of gifted learners once again made headlines in the educational arena as more interest emerged in meeting the needs of all learners, including gifted and talented learners. The debate concerning how best to meet the educational needs of the students continued as policymakers, education advocates, and administrators recognized the potential of applying the strategies, concepts, and practical applications of gifted education to the general education programs in the hope of benefiting more students (Irvine, 1991). Recommendations suggested in the government report included broadening the definition of giftedness, increasing learning opportunities for minority and disadvantaged students, and designing more challenging curriculum (United States Department of Education, 1993).

The National Research Center on Gifted and Talented continued to provide differentiated services for gifted and talented students as the emphasis on higher standards picked up momentum. The desire to increase diversity in the gifted programs and funding limitations focused the work of educators in seeking new avenues to ensure that the learning of all students was being met and that students representative of the public school population were referred for the gifted program. In 1999, The National Association for Gifted Children developed a set of gifted program standards to guide state and local gifted educators in the curricular differentiation and program development for gifted and talented students published as *Aiming for Excellence: Gifted Program Standards: Annotations to the NAGC pre-K-grade 12 Gifted Program Standards* (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 1999). On July 15, 1999, a longtime gifted advocate and the President of the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC), Dr. Reis, appeared before a Congressional Committee considering gifted education legislation.

Dr. Reis appealed for the passage of The Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1999 (The Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1999). The bill failed to pass the Senate before the end of 2000. This act would have provided grant money to states to strengthen gifted education programs and delivery of educational services for gifted learners.

In 2001, *The No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) passed as the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). The federal legislation enacted the theories of standards-based educational reform based on the belief that setting high standards and measurable goals would improve individual student outcomes in education. For states to receive federal funding for schools, the act required states to set standards, to develop assessments in basic skills administered to all students in specific grades (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). The Javits program, included in the NCLB Act expanded to offer competitive statewide grants. In 2002, the definition of gifted and talented was modified again to state,

> Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008b, p. 5)

In 2004, the John Templeton foundation sponsored a report entitled *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students* (Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration, n.d.), highlighting the disparity between research on acceleration and the educational beliefs and practices in public schools contrary to

research. This document illustrated America's inability to properly meet the academic needs of gifted and talented students despite the abundance of research supporting acceleration and resulted in a national conversation about acceleration and gifted students (Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration, n.d.)

Ever-changing, the field of education, and thus gifted education, adapted to the shifting winds of national interest, social, and political values of the time. Identification, testing procedures, and program models have developed and improved since Terman in 1925. The rise of Sputnik and the space race propelled gifted education to the top of the political agenda as individuals sought to provide academic acceleration, enrichment, and opportunities in the fields of math and science. Marland's support and advocacy in the field of education provided opportunities for leadership training, teacher training, and funding for gifted education. Program development flourished in the 1970's under the tutelage of Stanley, Renzulli, and Gallagher. With the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, support of gifted education flourished as the number of states providing gifted programming increased. Since 2001 when federal legislation enacted standards-based education reform, states have revamped educational legislation and policies to improve individual student outcomes in education. Gifted education has fluctuated as state and federal initiatives directly influenced policy development in gifted education. These initiatives, funding, and the resulting policy influenced gifted education program implementation. Despite the increases in funding for gifted education and education policies that support the needs of gifted learners, there has not been a federal mandate for gifted education. As states were tasked in creating their own gifted education policies, the implementation of such state policies were the duties of the school district's gifted

coordinator. Throughout history, gifted education coordinators have had the responsibility of interpreting and making sense of gifted education policy as they sought to implement programs for gifted children.

Gifted Education Legislation and Policy

Renzulli and Reis stated that, "[t]he reform movement in education appears to focus on the ways in which schools are organized and managed rather than on the interaction that takes place among teachers, students, and the material to be learned" (Renzulli & Reis, 1991, p. 26). The authors called for a review of the impact of reform movements on gifted education programming to determine how the practices and programs might influence the educational reform movement.

In the United States, two goals of education led to the reform movement, but have also been in direct conflict with one another and often at the expense of the other. The first goal, "[t]o provide the best possible education to our most promising students so that we can reassert America's prominence in the intellectual, artistic, and moral leadership of the world" evolved in the post-industrial age when the United States realized that the students were falling behind other countries in terms of math, science, industry, commerce, innovation, and leadership (Renzulli & Reis, pp. 26-27). The second goal was to improve the education of at-risk students not passing the minimum assessments. These goals were in conflict as they focused on two groups at opposite ends of the educational spectrum, those that exceeded assessments, and those that could not pass the minimum competencies.

One of the leaders in gifted education policy, Gallagher, wrote, "[f]or us to utilize policy studies and direct our advocacy, we need to focus on the traditional engines of

change: legislation, court decisions, administrative rule making, professional initiatives, and see how they apply to gifted students" (2008, p. 514). Through these avenues of change, gifted education has found not only a platform, but also voice that continues to advocate for the gifted and talented learners. Only through continued research that addresses both policy and advocacy will the gifted education initiatives be explored (Gallagher, 2008).

Legislation on the education of gifted learners can be found at the state level. Gallagher wrote, "[c]urrently 22 states have legislation relating to the establishment of programs--often as part of "exceptional children" legislation, a fact that has been financially favorable to those programs" (2008, p. 514). When compared with the education of students with disabilities, where federal legislation has shaped American education with such laws as PL 94-142 (the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*), now *IDEA* (the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 1990), the only identifiable federal legislation for gifted children was the *Javits Act* (2002) (Gallagher, 2008). *The Javits Act* is a program with limited funding for model projects to support the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (Gallagher).

Only a limited number of court cases have had major impact on the field of gifted education when compared to the high number of decisions impacting the education of students with disabilities. One memorable court action was the work of the Office of Civil Rights that identified a lack of minority students in gifted education programs as a possible breach of civil rights (Karnes & Marquardt, 2000). Thus, school systems began to reevaluate gifted education referral and identification procedures, especially in the areas of underrepresented populations such as minority, low socio-economic, English as a

second language, and twice-exceptional students (Ford & Harris, 1999). Gallagher (2008) wrote, "[w]hen legislation and court actions are translated into practical rules for school systems, these administrative rules written to implement policy become extremely important influences on practice" (p. 515).

According to Gallagher, "[r]esearch initiatives can influence policy by purposefully designing studies that will yield information to impact educational policy (Gallagher, 2008, p. 515). Gifted education studies used data gathering devices such as document analysis, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and case studies on gifted education focus areas such as educational acceleration, identification of underrepresented populations, program development, gifted program evaluation, curriculum studies, and ability grouping (Gallagher, 2008). Research and program development was another policy and advocacy initiative noted by Gallagher. He referenced Stanley's SMPY study of precocious youth that led to the development of summer programs for gifted learners (Gallagher, 2008). Gallagher (2008) noted, "[b]ecause policy relies heavily on perception and attitudes of key players in policy development or maintenance, such perceptions are often the target of these studies and qualitative analysis is used to generate results" (2008, p. 515).

Advocacy initiatives by leaders in gifted education advanced the priorities for gifted learners. Gallagher noted that, "[s]ome of the attempts to change the priorities for gifted students have been the publication of major reports from scholarly panels or from international test results" (Gallagher, p. 517). The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* declared that by ignoring the education of the gifted students, the United States committed educational disarmament (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The

following decade, the *National Excellence* report stated that "[m]ost regular classrooms make few, if any, provisions for gifted and talented students. These youngsters spend most of their time working on grade level assignments" (United States Department of Education, 1993, p. 2). Tomlinson and Callahan (1992) attempted to influence policy in general education by outlining the benefits for all students that came from educating gifted children with an emphasis on advanced thinking process, problem-solving strategies, and creativity, components later adopted as best practices for general education students (Tomlinson & Callahan, 1992). Another avenue that influenced gifted education public policy included the development of standards by professional gifted education groups. In 2000, the Association for the Gifted (TAG), a division of the Council for Exceptional Children issued a position statement entitled *Knowledge and Skills* (Council for Exceptional Children, 2000). The statement was created to guide the education of teachers of the gifted. The National Association for Gifted Children developed a set of gifted program standards to guide state and local gifted educators in the curricular differentiation and program development for gifted and talented students published as *Aiming for Excellence: Gifted Program Standards: Annotations to the NAGC pre-K-grade 12 Gifted Program Standards* (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 1999). These standards provided a guide for opening discussions with general educators, policymakers, parents, and community member stakeholders when advocating for the academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted learners.

While gifted education advocacy has grown, research that addressed policy with a focus on legislation, initiatives, administrative rule making, and sensemaking has been limited. Continued research in these areas was needed to enact change and improve

gifted programming. When compared to legislation for the education of students with disabilities, legislation on the education of gifted learners was limited at best. Despite some federal legislation such as the *Javits Act* (2002) and *Goals 2000* that focus on advanced academics there has been a limited amount of federal legislation for gifted children. Leaders in gifted education advanced the priorities for gifted learners by advocating for additional studies and research. While the National Association for Gifted Children developed a set of gifted program standards to guide state and local education in the curricular differentiation and program development for students, no additional federal legislation has been comprised. With standards as a guide, some states began to create plans for the gifted, such as the Virginia Mandate of 1978. Even with these state plans in place, local stakeholders were responsible for interpreting the standards, policies, and guidelines as they implemented gifted education programs.

Gifted Educational Reform

America 2000 and Goals 2000: The Educate America Act

In 1990, The National Governor's Association and President George H. W. Bush provided support for educational reform by agreeing on six national goals to be achieved by the year 2000. The United States Department of Education designed a series of strategies to implement the national goals, entitled *America 2000* that proposed the creation of national standards and assessments in English, math, history, science, and geography. *America 2000* also provided funding grants for model schools, required school district report cards, and a plan for private school vouchers (States' Impact on Federal Education Policy, New York State Archives, n.d.). Despite early support for *America 2000*, concerns with national testing and private school vouchers led to

discussions within Congress and revisions to the bill. By 1992, no substantial educational legislation had been enacted (Department of Education, 1991).

In 1993, President Clinton proposed legislation entitled *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act.* This program supported state development of standards, assessments, and implementation of standards-based reform in school districts. States that supported standards-based reform and had a process to support systemic reform could apply for funding under *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act.* Rather than targeting a specific subgroup of students or subject areas for reform, *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act* emphasized the development of state standards and assessment to measure progress. *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act* established a framework to identify high academic standards, measure student progress, and provide the support for students to meet the academic standards. The educational goals concerned school readiness, student academic achievement, school completion, leadership in math and science, adult literacy, and safe and drug-free schools (US Department of Education, n.d.). While *Goals 2000* called for the United States' students to excel in math and science, numerous attempts for acceleration of gifted students in math and science have been prevented (US Department of Education, n.d.).

Tannenbaum (1983) noted, "[t]he cyclical nature of interest in the gifted is probably unique in American education. No other special group of children has been alternately embraced and repelled with so much vigor by educators and laypersons alike" (Tannenbaum, 1983, p. 16). Providing a differentiated educational program for gifted learners in terms of access and equity determines that gifted children should have their educational needs met, even if that requires an accelerated program of study.

The lack of research on policy implementation and the effect on gifted programming has been more of a reflection of the cultural and political values than the lack of effort to implement quality changes in gifted education. According to James Gallagher, "[w]ithout research on the effects of policy initiatives, the field has little substantive guidance on the relative methods for advocating for policy at the local, state, or national levels" (Gallagher, 2008, p. 521).

Evidence suggested that gifted learners benefit from a differentiated, accelerated, and enriched curriculum designated in a setting for gifted learners (Davis, 2006). Slavin suggested "[g]ifted and special education programs may be conceived of as one form of ability grouping, but they also involve many other changes in curriculum, class size, resources, and goals that make them fundamentally different from comprehensive ability grouping plans" (Slavin, 1984, p. 25). Special programming, ability grouping, and differentiation benefited student achievement in gifted populations. Research proposed "[a]cceleration helps gifted students academically without short-changing them socially or emotionally" (Davis, p. 98).

No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act, and the Impact on Gifted Education

The 2001 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation has created possible unintended ramifications for the field of gifted education and resulting impact for future generations of gifted learners. In a 2006 Presidential Address at the National Association of Gifted Learners Conference, Dr. VanTassel-Baska remarked that,

> It is the worst of times for gifted education in many respects. The overall landscape of education is not propitious for the work that we do with the best

> learners in this country. . .. The standards movement of the 1990's, which looked so promising as a mechanism to increase the quality of curriculum, has been overshadowed by lower level and narrower state assessments that serve to drive instruction to a reductionist level. (VanTassel-Baska, 2006, p. 5)

She continued that NCLB focused educators on those students who are on the edge of passing the test rather than those above the mean of performance. VanTassel-Baska proposed a 10-step program for program administrators and classroom teachers designed to produce improved classroom instruction and concise programming options for gifted learners. This policy recommended:

1. Teachers need to know how gifted learners learn.
2. Educators of the gifted need training and should conduct research on best practices in gifted education programming.
3. Teachers need training in differentiation practices and utilizing strategies to meet the needs of gifted learners.
4. Educators need training and should conduct research on needs of the diverse gifted education populations such as minorities, students from poverty, gifted girls, and underachievers. Educators need to tailor curriculum that will respond to the needs of the special populations.
5. Teachers should utilize higher-level questioning techniques and teach inquiry based thinking skills.
6. Educators need to focus on the arts as partners with academics in developing well-rounded gifted learners.

7. Educators need to prepare gifted learners for a global society and multicultural world.
8. Teachers need training to work with gifted learners in order to meet the academic, social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of the students.
9. Educators of the gifted need to create institutionalized systems of identification, serving, and supporting gifted learners. This eliminates the need for new gifted programming yearly. It is vital for divisions to have support systems in place for gifted learners.
10. Gifted education requires collaboration within the field of gifted education and general education. For success, educators need to include stakeholders in the process of developing effective gifted programs (VanTassel-Baska, 2007).

In a time of assessment-based learning, the quality of education for gifted children has been overshadowed by a focus on uniform assessments. Educational reform has reflected the ideals of access and equity to quality education, closing the achievement gaps, and preparing students for the 21st Century. VanTassel-Baska (2000) viewed the standards movements as "[a]n opportunity to upgrade what we do as well and go through the standards to do it, not around them" (p. 2). The standards reform movement led to consensus in the field of education concerning what children should be learning in America. While Dr. VanTassel-Baska's 10-step program for administrators and classroom teachers provided a framework for improved classroom instruction and program options, it is the responsibility of gifted coordinators to work within the parameters of funding, staffing, policy, politics, and standards-based curriculum to interpret and implement gifted education programs.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* was signed into law on December 10, 2015 and reauthorized the 50-year old *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* and replaces the 2001 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* maintained a focus on accountability with an emphasis on local and state systems of academic improvement. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* provided more local and state control and was viewed as less prescriptive than its predecessor, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The legislation also included provisions to help ensure success for students and schools by advancing equity for America's disadvantaged and high-need students, requiring all students be taught to high academic standards in preparation for college and careers and ensured information was provided to educators, families, and communities through annual statewide assessments designed to measure student progress. While the 2001 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation neither included nor excluded gifted learners, there were specific provisions in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* pertaining to gifted students. When applying for Title II professional development funds, states must include an overview of how they plan to improve the skills of teachers and school personnel to enable them to identify gifted learners. According to National Association for Gifted Children Executive Director, M. Rene Islas,

> *ESEA* requires states to say how they will use valuable training dollars to equip teachers in how to identify high-potential learners and to meet the academic needs of such high-performers, and it requires school districts that receive such funds to address the unique needs of gifted students. *Every Student Succeeds Act* ensured that high-ability and gifted students from underserved populations receive challenging instruction to achieve their potential. (Healy, 2015, p. 1)

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) permitted districts to use Title II professional development funds for training on gifted education strategies such as enrichment, acceleration, curriculum compacting, and instructional practices (Clarenbach, 2016). The legislation ensured that high-ability and gifted learners from underserved populations and low-income families received the challenging curriculum and instruction to meet their academic needs (Healy, 2015). The Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program, which was part of the prior *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), was retained in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and encouraged the establishment of equal educational opportunities for all students to reduce achievement gaps (Clarenbach, 2016). The Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program focused on funding for identifying and serving students from traditionally underrepresented populations such as English language learners, minorities, economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) also required states to include student achievement data on the state report card by student subgroup (Clarenbach, 2016). Another provision permitted school districts for the first time to use Title I funding to identify and serve gifted students. States were also allowed to use computer adaptive assessments as an approved state format for assessments used for accountability and authorized grant funding for states to develop computer adaptive assessments (Clarenbach, 2016).

States will be required to be in full compliance with *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA)by the 2017-2018 school year. Applications for Title I and other grants are available in July 2016 while other federal grant programs will begin in October 2016. The state accountability plans will be implemented in the 2017-2018 school year. While

the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) specifically provided provisions for gifted learners in the areas of accountability, professional development in gifted education topics, and opportunities for funding for identification of students from underserved populations, the impact on gifted education has yet to be determined. While the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) legislation provided a framework for the inclusion of gifted learners, much was left up to the local and state gifted education coordinators for implementation of the policy initiatives.

State Policies for Gifted Education

State Laws for Gifted Education

Zirkel (2005), provided a concise overview of the state laws, statutes, and gifted education regulations for students K-12. The professional literature lacked current coverage of the statutes and regulations for gifted education. Zirkel's state-by-state review of statutes and regulations for gifted education conducted in 2005 revealed a diverse pattern ranging from no gifted education laws to individualized educational plans for gifted learners (2005).

A few states have either no laws or minimal regulations for gifted education programming as of 2005. New Hampshire was the only state not to mention its legislation or regulations of gifted education. South Dakota recently repealed the legislation requiring the state board to issue regulations for gifted education identification and programming and Minnesota mentions gifted children as an aspect of staff development for teachers. Hawaii has minimal provisions defining gifted and talented students and permitted a statewide, flexible gifted program determined by the availability of financial and physical resources (Zirkel, 2005).

Of the states reviewed, Zirkel (2005) found that the models for gifted education legislation and regulations fell into two categories: individual-oriented or group-oriented. The individual-oriented model included individualized program requirements, similar to individual education plans (IEP) required through special education. The group-oriented model conducted on a permissive or mandatory basis was favored by most states. In this model, specific state and local educational responsibilities differed throughout states and across the United States.

Alabama, Kansas, Louisiana, Florida, New Mexico, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania have adopted gifted education regulations like those for special education students. In these states, the regulations established school district obligations at the individual student's level, such as an individualized special education program for gifted education. Zirkel (2005) noted, "[t]hese requirements provide individually enforceable legal rights for gifted education, serving as the springboard for published case law that clarifies the ambiguities and fills in the gaps" (Zirkel, 2005, p. 228).

Most states fall in the middle of the range in specifying state-level and/or district and school responsibilities for gifted education identification and programming premised on group-orientation. These responsibilities support and advocate for the gifted education programs. "[A]lthough the specification of state and local responsibilities also characterize the laws in the IDEA-type category, those in the group-oriented model lack the hallmarks of individualized education program (IEP)-type documents and the impartial adjudicatory dispute resolution" (Zirkel, 2005, p. 229). The vast majority of state statutes and regulations for gifted education fit in the category of group orientation with varying degrees of specificity.

Almost all the states had specific state responsibility provisions in terms of program standards or funding. State-level standards included legislation that either permitted or mandated gifted education and that delegated to the state department of education the specific procedures or criteria via regulations for gifted education programming. When reviewed, Zirkel found that Mississippi's legislation instructed the state agency to maximize parental involvement and local flexibility while Colorado has permissive legislation that gave the state agency responsibility of issuing regulations that specify criteria and procedures for program admissions, teaching, and delivery of services (Zirkel, 2005). State-level funding provisions were flexible and varied by state. Zirkel (1995) wrote, "[a] minority of states established a formula that would appear to guarantee a minimum funding base or increase at the state level, typically pending local contribution" (Zirkel, 1995, p. 229). The final area of the legislatively specified state responsibilities was that of technical assistance. Some states such as Iowa, Illinois, and Arkansas require the state department of education to have a specialized contact person that served as a state coordinator for gifted education. Other states such as Ohio provided technical assistance only for noncompliant school districts (Zirkel, 2005).

The states in the IDEA-type category and the intermediate or group-oriented category have one or more specific provisions under the local level area of responsibility. The most frequent provision addressed the procedures and criteria for identification of gifted education students. Of the state laws, Zirkel (2005) reported that Florida, Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maine, Arkansas, and Virginia have specific provisions for nondiscrimination because of linguistic, racial, and other grounds. The second most frequent area of local responsibility was gifted education programming characterized by a

flexibility and variety of approaches across the states that included curriculum modifications, multiple service delivery models, administrative accommodations, collaborative teaching, independent study, full-time programs, part-time programs, advanced courses, and grade-skipping (Zirkel, 2005). Other local area responsibilities included teacher training, data collection, staff development, and program evaluations.

There has not been a uniform policy issued for gifted program implementation. Thus, gifted education programs were varied across localities and states. A state-by-state review of statutes and regulations for gifted education conducted in 2005 revealed a diverse pattern ranging from no gifted education laws to individualized educational plans for gifted learners. While some states such as Virginia had gifted regulations in place, others had no unifying document or regulation for program implementation. Even with a regulation document in place for the state, gifted education coordinators were tasked with interpreting and implementing aspects of the program in terms of referral and identification policies, assessment practices, staffing, funding for programs, and curriculum components. Such interpretations were varied depending on the locality.

Gifted Education Policy Analysis

Given that each state governs the development of policies in gifted education, the state policies have never been comprehensive or cohesive. With no federal mandate for gifted education in the United States, the structure that holds gifted programs together was found in the policies of individual states (Brown, Avery, VanTassel-Baska, Worley, II, & Stambaugh, 2006). According to researchers from The Center for Gifted Education at The College of William and Mary, "[g]ifted education policy is tied to the rules, statutes, codes, and regulations adopted by state legislatures, interpreted by state school

boards of education and state departments of education, and implemented by local school districts" (Brown et al., p. 11). A comprehensive state policy in gifted education evidenced a vital need as it affects the daily educational practices of gifted students as influenced by policymakers across the commonwealth.

States are responsible for the education of children but many states delegate authority and decision-making processes to local school divisions. According to Cohen and Spillane (1993), "[t]his delegation of power and authority leads to fragmentation in decision-making, implementation, and practice" (p. 35). This authority system allowed for autonomy, interpretation of policy, funding powers, and implementation procedures but differed among school districts, regions, and states; thus making gifted education policies less cohesive as policy initiatives may or may not implement policies as intended by policy makers. Commitment to reform efforts and policy implementation, understanding of policy, leadership consistency, and at least five years of sustained implementation, contributed to school reform, student growth, and policy implementation (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). Policy development in gifted education focused on identification and programming features.

Passow and Rudnitski (1993) analyzed components of state gifted education policies including identification procedures, program delivery models, programming elements, and gifted education philosophy. A pattern of diverse variability was revealed in a state-by-state review of 49 state regulations and statutes for gifted education. While all 50 states cite legislation for gifted and talented learners, a diverse range of policies among the individual states existed (National Association for Gifted Children, 2003b). With the emphasis in public school education on high-stakes testing and the current

economic situation, many states without strong gifted-education policies have suffered a reduction in gifted-education services or an elimination of gifted programming within school districts. The variance of policies made national reform in gifted education difficult, less cohesive, and less comprehensive (Landrum, Katsiyannis, & DeWard, 1998).

NCLB neither includes nor excludes gifted learners as it encourages states to compromise services for gifted students to focus on closing the achievement gap (National Association for Gifted Children, 2003a). Specific policy initiatives, policy implementation, policy evaluation, and funding requirements left to gifted education advocates and stakeholders within local and state governments demonstrated variability. This led to an inequity and diversity of services and funding within regions and states.

Transforming Gifted Education Policy

In *Transforming Policy to Enhance Educational Services for the Gifted*, Passow and Rudnitski (1994) argued that education for gifted learners has improved since the pre-Marland days. Passow and Rudnitski (1994) noted, "[t]he fact that all 50 states have formulated policies in the form of legislation, regulations, rules, or guidelines that support education for the gifted . . . represents a very significant achievement, of . . . persistent efforts on the part of many advocates" (p. 271). The article compares the 1972 *Marland Report* (Marland, 1972) and the Department of Education report entitled *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (United States Department of Education, 1993). *National Excellence* (1993) described concern of the education for top students. "[Y]oungsters with gifts and talents that ranged from mathematical to musical are still not challenged to work to their full potential" (United

States Department of Education, p. iii) and attributed the crisis to problems such as anti-intellectualism in America, a lack of high standards, and aiming for adequacy, not academic excellence (Passow & Rudnitski, p. 271). Passow and Rudnitski (1994) noted that,

> Because education is essentially a function of the states, it can be argued that one of, if not the most important, outcomes of the *Marland Report* was its influence and impact on the states and local school systems. The report stimulated state and local activities on an unprecedented level with policy formulations that resulted in statutory descriptions or definitions of the gifted, regulations regarding identification of such children; appointment of personnel to state education departments with briefs to initiate, coordinate, and support educational programs and services for the gifted; appropriations of state generated funds for such programs and services; and provisions for both pre-and in-service education of teachers for the gifted. (Passow & Rudnitski, 1994, p. 271-272)

Passow and Rudnitski noted that the *National Excellence* report shifted education of the gifted learner from isolated programs and provisions to developing every students' potential including gifted learners by enhancing education for the gifted by placing it in the context of education for all students (Passow & Rudnitski, 1994).

A review of the authors' findings revealed specific areas considered vital in gifted education policy, included a clear philosophy and rationale for gifted education, mandated gifted education services, clear definitions of gifted, identification procedures that provide both flexibility and guidance, set standards that guide gifted program implementation, and procedures for ensuring differentiated curriculum for gifted learners.

These authors noted that states should have a clear philosophy and rationale for gifted education that establishes the framework for the state's policy and provides reasons why a gifted education policy was necessary. One of the most important elements of policy determines whether programs and provisions for gifted learners were mandated or discretionary. Mandated programs established required services and may be tied to funding while discretionary services may be recommended but not required. When discussing mandates for gifted education, Passow and Rudnitski remarked,

> We believe that state policies must affirm or reaffirm a mandate requiring that appropriate and adequate services be provided by the local districts for all children and making clear that this cannot be attained by identical services for all. Differentiated experiences and services are especially necessary in the context of educating all children with their similarities and differences and the state must mandate that local districts give special attention to the gifted and talented who may be lost otherwise. State mandates must remind school districts that appropriate and adequate education for all includes the gifted and talented and that programs that ignore or eliminate that charge will fail to meet the state's and local district's goals and responsibilities. (Passow & Rudnitski, 1994, p. 273)

The authors found that in the 49 states' statement of definition of giftedness or that of a gifted learner reviewed that the definitions differed from the state to the definition utilized by local plans, which had broader or narrower definitions. State policies devoted substantial attention to gifted education identification procedures as this was an area of accountability for local districts and the state. The authors determined that, "[p]olicies regarding identification ranged from detailed, required standards to be

flexible guidelines or suggestions to the specification of instruments that local districts may use in identifying gifted and talented students as defined by the state legislation or regulation" (Passow & Rudnitski, 1994, p. 272). The authors suggested that the policy regarding identification should provide both guidance and flexibility for the broad spectrum of identification instruments and flexibility of the local districts to choose identification procedures that fit the district's population, especially when identifying underrepresented populations such as minorities, ELL, lower socio-economic, or twice-exceptional students. States vary in the gifted education programs offered in local districts including a range of pull-out classes, full-time classes, magnet schools, cluster grouping, resource rooms, Advanced Placement classes, International Baccalaureate, independent study, and gifted centers. Passow and Rudnitski wrote that "[s]tate policies should affirm the need for flexible grouping procedures that would facilitate teaching and learning. An affirmation in state policies would encourage school districts to explore appropriate grouping and organizational procedures rather than install heterogeneous grouping for all" (Passow & Rudnitski, p. 273).

Programs for the gifted needed to provide adequate curriculum and instruction for gifted learners. A survey of 49 states revealed that, "[d]espite the fact that many state policies refer to, advocate, or even mandate that local school districts provide differentiated curriculum or appropriate curriculum for the gifted, there is little indication of what is meant or required" (Passow & Rudnitski, p. 274). The authors contended that this was an area of need for most state policies as the areas of curriculum and instruction tended to be the most problematic for states and local districts to implement (Passow & Rudnitski).

In summary, Passow and Rudnitski called for the establishment of clear state policies for gifted learners focusing on affirming or reaffirming a philosophy of gifted education, providing clear definitions of giftedness, identification, program delivery models, and appropriately differentiated curriculum. The establishment of challenging curriculum standards for all core subjects, opportunities for higher-level learning, and flexible grouping of gifted learners would pave the way for the transformation of state policies for gifted education. As advocates for gifted education, policymakers, gifted coordinators, administrators, educators, and parent stakeholders must support the local school districts as they develop teachers of the gifted, develop curricular and instructional standards appropriate for gifted students, set standards for evaluation and assessment, and recognize that the schools require adequate funding and support for gifted programs. Both the *Marland Report* (Marland, 1972) and the *National Excellence Report* (United States Department of Education, 1993) challenged gifted education advocates and educators to "[e]xercise their leadership responsibilities in creating the kinds of policies that will move local school districts to provide appropriate and adequate curriculum and learning opportunities that motivate all children" (Passow & Rudnitski, 1994, p. 275)

Purcell (1995) examined the status of local gifted programs for students using descriptive ex post facto research. Purcell sampled 3,000 gifted education coordinators in 19 states and conducted follow-up interviews with gifted education key personnel about three research areas. Questions focused on the status of gifted programs: intact, expanded, reduced, eliminated, threatened with reduction, or elimination by causes that attributed to the current gifted program status. Gifted education personnel offered

perceptions regarding factors leading to the retention or elimination of gifted education programming.

The study revealed that states with gifted education programming mandates credited the retention, stability, or expansion of gifted programming to stable economic funding and the existence of a state mandate for gifted programming within school districts. Of those surveyed, 46% of the respondents cited a decline in funding or the lack of a state mandate for gifted programming to their jeopardized, declining, or eliminated program status. As part of phase two, Purcell noted the "[p]olicy decisions resulting from reform issues, did not feature prominently in the data when viewed across the categories of states" (Purcell, 1995, p. 62). One recommendation for future studies included annual research conducted at the state level to monitor changes in gifted programs. Purcell (1995) wrote, "[w]ithout data related to the status of programs, policymakers have little information, or reason, to redesign educational initiatives for high-ability students" (Purcell, p. 65). This study provided needed information concerning the program status of gifted programming in 19 states and recommended future study options.

Five-State Analysis of Gifted Education Policies

In 2006, gifted education researchers from The Center for Gifted Education at The College of William and Mary conducted an analysis of state gifted education policies and their impact on gifted education program design across five states. In a 2006 study, the researchers conducted a policy review study across five states to determine the nature, extent and success of policies governing gifted education programs. The study included in-depth review, interpretation, and comparative analysis of state policies and their impact on gifted education programming in the five states.

Researchers conducted interviews with state officials and focus group sessions with state advisory boards. The research team used the National Association for Gifted Children standards analysis, focus group and interview data, and document review to determine key themes through a triangulation of the data sources (Brown et al., 2006). Research questions centered on: (a) the nature, extent, and intent of policies in gifted education, (b) the effectiveness of the policies in moving gifted education forward within the state, (c) how the gifted education policy interacted with other state policies and the impact on gifted learners, (d) the extent to which the policies aligned with the National Association for Gifted Children standards, and (e) the strengths and weaknesses of the gifted education policies (Brown et al.). The researchers selected Indiana, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina based on the willingness of the states to participate, existence of a full-time state director, state gifted education legislation, and funding thresholds above five million dollars. The selection of participants was limited to mid-Atlantic regions with specific criteria of state gifted education legislation, and a specific funding threshold of five million dollars. The limited sample may impact generalizability of the findings to other state gifted programs.

The cross-state analyses revealed conceptual and regulatory frameworks of the states in terms of definitions and identification of gifted learners, curriculum and instruction, professional development, program monitoring and evaluation, and supplemental policies. The states studied reflected the various models of power distribution between local and state governances. Four of the five states required that districts both identify and serve gifted students but differed in the definition of gifted

students, the parameters for identification, and the programming approaches (Brown et al., 2006).

Two states employed cutoff score control on specific evaluation instruments while others provided loose guidelines for identification. The emphasis on appropriate services and programs for gifted services showed less prominence, as no clear parameters guiding program services or delivery model policies emerged. Specific components determined as necessary for a comprehensive program included flexible grouping, contact time, differentiated, content-based instructional provisions, and specialized programming for highly gifted and at-risk learners (Brown et al., 2006). None of the five states had all components. Professional development parameters were outlined in all five state policy documents but were determined to be underdeveloped and lacked enforcement of regulations in the areas of gifted education training and endorsement. Brown et al. (2006) noted, "[t]he technical assistance and monitoring role of the state in gifted education was not defined in the five states analyzed . . . there still needs to be increased accountability for program quality through the mechanism of annual local plan review internally by a local education agency advisory committee" (p. 24).

Within the five-state analysis, researchers noted that "[a]lthough the regulations identify four categories of giftedness, school divisions are only required to identify and serve in either general intellectual or specific academic aptitude" (Brown et al., 2006, p. 12). Study participants noted that as there was no state cut-off for identification, each school division established uniform gifted screening criteria and procedures. Some focus group members viewed local discretion of services as a positive situation while others saw it as having a negative impact on the cohesiveness of services across regions and the

state. Findings of the cross-state analysis determined that different states reflected different models for the definition of gifted students, parameters for gifted identification, and the nature of the program delivery model (Brown et al., 2006).

This study revealed the unevenness in defining gifted education policy among the five states studied that emphasized identification procedures over professional development training, program development, and service delivery. This five-state policy analysis provided a framework of literature and a comprehensive look at how gifted education coordinators made sense of gifted education policy as it affected their policy implementation.

A review of gifted education policy studies revealed a common thread that while states are responsible for the education of children, authority, and decision-making falls with the local school districts. This has never been more evident than in gifted education policy where local school districts personnel were tasked with interpreting state regulations and policies while navigating local and state funding and politics. A positive outcome of the *Marland Report* was its influence on local and state school districts that results in increased regulations, funding, staffing, and gifted programming options for gifted learners. A review of the literature revealed specific areas considered vital in gifted education policy. This included a clear philosophy and rationale for gifted education, mandated gifted education services, and a clear definition of gifted education. Clear identification procedures that provide both flexibility and guidance, set standards that guide gifted program implementation, and procedures for ensuring differentiated curriculum for gifted learners were also considered important aspects of gifted education policy (Brown et al., 2006). Another salient point was whether programs and provisions

for gifted learners were mandated or discretionary. Mandated programs established required services and may be tied to funding, while discretionary services may be recommended but not required. Analysis of five states' gifted education programs, including Virginia, provided a diverse view of gifted education programs that differed in definition of gifted education, identification procedures, curriculum models, and programming services. The differences in defining and interpreting gifted education policy among the states provided the need for a comprehensive look at how gifted education coordinators made sense of gifted education policy and thus how the policy was implemented in terms of program features and components.

Gifted Education in the Commonwealth of Virginia

The Virginia Mandate

The 1970's saw a commitment to gifted education from the Commonwealth of Virginia. In 1973 Governor Holton established the first Virginia Summer Residential Governor's Schools to provide extended academic opportunities for over 400 high school students in Virginia. In 1974, local school divisions received the first allocations of state funding and an endorsement of gifted education programming by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction (Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 1994).

Within the Commonwealth of Virginia regional networks and organizations of gifted education educators developed. Educators of the gifted met to discuss common concerns and goals in gifted education, curriculum for gifted learners, and issues relating to state and federal legislation applicable to gifted education. Many regional consortiums of gifted educators organized and provided professional development opportunities

through presenters and workshops for teachers and administrators. In 1977, Virginia established the first statewide organization, the Virginia Association for the Education of the Gifted, later renamed Virginia Association of the Gifted, as a communication network and advocacy group for educators, parents, and community members (Virginia Association of the Gifted, 2008). The mission statement of the association states:

> The Virginia Association for the Gifted supports research in gifted education and advocates specialized preparation for educators of the gifted. The association disseminates information, maintains a statewide network of communication, and cooperates with organizations and agencies to improve the quality of education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. (Virginia Association of the Gifted, 2008, p. 1)

Like the mission statements of other state organizations of the gifted and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) in advocating for high-potential learners, the Virginia Association for the Gifted mission focused on training for teachers of the gifted, providing a network of communication, and working with other gifted education organizations to improve education for gifted learners in Virginia.

The Standards of Quality and Objectives for Public Schools in Virginia adopted in 1971 briefly mentioned the education of gifted and talented in the 1974-1976 Standards of Quality (Virginia Board of Education, 1974). The United States Congress passed the *Gifted and Talented Children's Education Act of 1978* that amended the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* to authorize grant programs for the education of gifted and talented children. It also established guidelines for allocation of the grant funds (GovTrack.US, n.d.). The *Gifted and Talented Children's Education* legislation provided funding to districts in Virginia for gifted education programs. Standard 5 enacted by the

Virginia General Assembly stated "[e]ach school division shall conduct a program acceptable to the Board of Education for the early identification of gifted and talented students" (Virginia Board of Education, 1978). The Virginia Constitution delineated responsibility for education of gifted learners to the General Assembly that mandated gifted education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The General Assembly further required that "[e]ach school division shall offer differentiated instructional opportunities in accordance with the guidelines of the Board of Education for identified gifted and talented students" (Virginia Board of Education). The Virginia Department of Education developed procedures for creating a differentiated program of study for gifted students and in the Virginia Plan for the Gifted approved by the Virginia Board of Education in 1980 established guidelines.

The Virginia Plan for the Gifted, Giftedness, and Identification of Students

The Virginia Plan for the Gifted, first approved in 1980, provided a framework of assistance for local school districts in designing and implementing gifted education programs in Virginia. The plan required each school district to designate a gifted education coordinator by September, 1980. A per-pupil formula determined funding for local divisions. Each coordinator assisted in developing local gifted advisory committees and each locality developed a written local plan that outlined procedures for identifying and providing gifted education services for gifted students.

Giftedness was defined as students "[w]hose abilities and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special educational programs to meet their educational needs" (Virginia Board of Education, 1996, p. 3). The Virginia Department of Education Gifted Education website (2008) stated that, "[V]irginia law

allows school divisions to establish gifted education policies and procedures according to the needs and interests of the local division" (p. 2). Per the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* (2005) multiple criteria and no single identification instrument determined the degree and type of giftedness of the student. The process encouraged gifted education screeners to utilize a combination of at least four of the following criteria to develop a student profile: (a) record of classroom observations, (b) achievement test, (c) aptitude test, (d) individual interview, (e) appropriate rating scale, checklist, and/or questionnaire, (f) record of previous accomplishments such as grades or awards, (g) additional valid measures or procedures (Virginia Board of Education, 1996). Each local school district was required to establish a committee comprised of teachers, assessment specialists, and gifted program staff that received referrals, reviewed findings, and determined the eligibility of the student to receive gifted education services.

> Once deemed eligible for gifted services, the level of programming options also varied from locality to locality. Programming options based on the assessed potential of the student included grade level and/or content, enrichment pull-out or seminar sessions, honors or advanced-level courses, mentorship, independent study, access to secondary level specialized programs, differentiation within the regular classroom, student team competitions, or full-time gifted classes within centers (Virginia Board of Education, 1996, p. 10).

Renzulli and Ward's 1969 text, *Diagnostic and Evaluative Scales for Differentiated Education of the Gifted* served as a guide for school districts to link state policy and regulations to local division practice as they developed categories for program

design and evaluation. In 1983, Virgil Ward, Professor of Education at the University of Virginia and a scholar in the field of gifted education, presented for consideration a program planning model and evaluation instrument. Included in Ward's text were the following components: (a) philosophy of gifted education and program objectives, (b) identification of gifted students and program placement, (c) appropriate differentiated curriculum for gifted learners, (d) teacher staff development and selection of teachers of the gifted, and (e) gifted program design and management (Renzulli & Ward, 1969). Each school district submitted its annual plan to the Virginia Department of Education (Virginia Board of Education, 1980).

State funding in 1979 provided the first gifted coordinator at the state level. The Virginia Plan for the Gifted required establishing state personnel that would provide leadership and assistance to local school divisions and the formation of the state advisory committee (Virginia Board of Education, 1980). The State Advisory Committee for Gifted Education began in 1982.

For five consecutive years, the Virginia State Department of Education reviewed and revised the Virginia Plan for the Gifted. By 1985, the Board of Education and State Advisory Committee developed plans for progressive growth in the field of gifted education in Virginia (Virginia Board of Education, 1980). There were significant increases in the number of students identified for gifted programs, staff development opportunities, an increase in parental support and gifted education advocacy.

2012 Virginia Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students

Nearly 20 years ago, a cross-section of gifted leaders in Virginia engaged in a conversation to identify elements that characterize best practices of identification and

program services for gifted learners in the Commonwealth of Virginia. These ideas comprised the original *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* in Virginia developed in the 1970's under the Virginia Mandate. When discussing the original regulations, Dr. Tomlinson, a leader in gifted education wrote,

> In retrospect, the Virginia regulations governing programs for gifted learners that stemmed from those conversations comprised a remarkable document. It set a high bar for districts' philosophies of gifted education, identification of students as gifted, quality of curriculum, professional development for teachers, role of local advisory committees, and peer review of local plans for gifted education. (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 2)

In 2009, leaders in gifted education and members of the Virginia Advisory Committee for the Education of the Gifted (VACEG) gathered to draft revisions to the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students.* The proposed revisions addressed six recommended changes.

The first change involved the identification and screening procedures of students. School districts were required to form a gifted education screening committee who determined the eligibility of students for gifted education services and determined which of the school district's service options were appropriate for meeting the academic needs of the student. The regulations charged the committee to ensure that no single criterion determined a child's eligibility and required that divisions use at least three measures to determine eligibility. Appropriate identification measures included, classroom observations, individual interviews, norm-referenced aptitude and/or achievement tests, record of previous accomplishments, appropriate rating scale from teachers and/or

parents, and assessment of products or performance, or portfolios. In the past, school districts could use no less than four criteria to determine eligibility of students.

Secondly, school systems were limited to 90 days from the receipt of the parent/guardian's consent for assessment to determine the eligibility status for each referred student. This reduced the time for decision-making from the previous 120 days. In larger school districts that screen hundreds or thousands of students, this shortened timeline could potentially alter the identification procedures to ensure school district compliance with the proposed regulations.

Changes also occurred in terms of the language of the regulations. Specific words in the regulation language changed to further define terms and requirements such as "identification," "referral," "screening," "differentiation," and "program services." While most language changes were positive because they clarified definitions and expectations of districts; some wording changes narrowed the authority of the school districts with a simple change of the word "or" to "and", which affected identification and programming options for students (Virginia Department of Education, 2009). The inclusion of the phrase "[e]vidence that gifted education service options from kindergarten through twelfth grade are offered continuously and sequentially" impacted the program delivery models utilized in school districts across the Commonwealth (Virginia Department of Education, p. 15). Pull-out programs for gifted learners one day a week were no longer appropriate if the requirement called for continuous and sequential services daily. With the current economic trend and the reduction of staff or the inability to hire additional staff to comply with this daily program regulation, school district gifted coordinators and staff must look for other ways to provide the necessary program

services through gifted centers, homogenous classes, heterogeneous classes, or cluster-grouping models.

The regulation revisions also proposed to alter the role and function of the local gifted advisory committee so that the committee reflected the ethnic and geographical composition of the school district. This promising change ensured equal representation for all. The committee annually reviewed the local plan for the gifted and determined the extent to which the school district implemented the plan. This proposed change in the committee's purpose included the authority to review the effectiveness of the school division plan as evidenced by student outcomes and academic growth based on multiple criteria (Virginia Department of Education, 2009). This change altered the evaluation process for school districts and held gifted education coordinators responsible for the implementation of the program by providing oversight by the local school board and gifted advisory committee stakeholders. A positive aspect occurred with this change as it promotes the need for continuous evaluation of not only students individually, but the gifted program as a whole. The new regulations also called for further definition of criteria for the evaluation process in terms of student growth and outcomes. This will require reliance on quantitative data rather than only qualitative evaluations.

A major change that garnered hundreds of feedback responses from concerned stakeholders on the Town Hall site related to the revised role of the Virginia Department of Education and the local school boards in the local gifted education plan approval process. Since the inception of the gifted education regulations, the gifted education district coordinator with input from stakeholders including the local advisory committee, parents, teachers, and administrators prepared the local plan for the gifted. Once written,

the district coordinator presented the local plan to the local school board for approval. Once approved by the school board, the district coordinator submitted the local plan for the gifted to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) for peer review by other gifted education coordinators and approval. The peer review process promoted collaboration among gifted programs across the Commonwealth and provided an opportunity for discussions of current research, strategies, and programming options among the school districts. Once approved by the VDOE, the local plan remained in effect for five years.

Changes to the proposed regulations required that local plans be approved on a timeline set by the local school board, with the suggestion of reviewing plans annually. Local boards of education were charged with approving local plans rather than the VDOE. This change eliminated the five-year window for approving local plans, the peer review process, and diminished the authority of the VDOE over local gifted plans. The revised regulations proposed that once approved by the local school board, the local plan would be submitted to the VDOE for technical approval to insure components are addressed properly and offer any suggestions for improvement. Numerous district gifted education coordinators voiced concern over the shift from a five-year approval window to one year, the elimination of the peer review, and the approval authority of the local school boards, many of whom have very little knowledge of the needs of gifted students and the regulations governing the education of gifted learners.

Liz Nelson, executive director of the Virginia Association for the Gifted, addressed the Virginia Board of Education regarding the proposed changes. Nelson commented that the state peer review approval process for local plans played a role in

ensuring that the services and funding occurred per the requirements of the regulations. Through the peer review process, district gifted coordinators would submit school board approved local plans for the gifted to the Virginia Department of Education on a five-year basis. The peer review process would ensure that all local plans complied with the state gifted education regulations and provided a process for collaboration, feedback, and growth of gifted programs (L. Nelson, personal communication, March 26, 2009).

The final major change to the regulations dealt with funding. Previously, the state earmarked funds administered by the VDOE for the education of gifted students solely for the support of the activities identified in the local plan as approved by the Board of Education. The 2009 proposed regulations stated that the school district in accordance with the provisions in the Appropriation Act shall use funds designated by the Virginia General Assembly for the education of gifted students (Virginia Department of Education, 2009). This change no longer earmarks specific funds for gifted education allowing local divisions to distribute funds to meet their strategic plan needs.

In the Superintendent's Memo issued on January 9, 2009, Dr. Wright, Superintendent of Public Instruction estimated that the administrative impact to the Virginia Department of Education would be minimal as the proposed revisions would lessen the Department of Education's administration requirements in placing local approval under local school board authority. Wright conceded that the proposed regulations would impact local school districts depending on the division's current practices. Some districts would have additional administrative requirements related to a) the yearly review of the local plan, b) shorter time for identification of students, c) additional action of identification result appeals, d) reduction in identification criteria

from four measures to three, e) requirement for identification and service options to include history, social science, and English, f) requirement of continuous and sequential provision of services for all identified students, and g) professional development of all teachers of the gifted based on the requirements of the gifted education add-on endorsement (Wright, 2009). Wright noted that existing school division budgets should be sufficient, yet agreed that for some local school districts, there was a potential for an increase in cost with the implementation of the 2009 proposed revisions (Wright, 2009).

All localities and school districts in the Commonwealth were affected by the proposal. Addressing the Virginia Board of Education on behalf of the Virginia Association for the Gifted, President Liz Nelson remarked,

> In these times when schools are under major pressure to raise test scores, gifted educational services are often ignored. In smaller districts, which sometimes struggle to keep gifted services strong and vital, this change could lead to decisions, which would reduce or eliminate gifted programs due to competing priorities (Nelson, L., personal communication, March 26, 2009).

On March 26, 2009, the Virginia Board of Education adopted the revised *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* as proposed. Even after the 2009 adoption, the revised regulations were opened again for public comment. Finally, on May 27, 2010, the Virginia Board of Education adopted revised *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* (8VAC 20-40-10 et. seq.) that strengthened the regulations and brought them into conformity with best practices in gifted educations. In the July 30, 2010 Superintendent's Memo 178-10, the regulations "[w]ill become effective for school divisions beginning in the 2010-2011 school year . . . Divisions not

currently in compliance with the revised regulations are expected to have changes to their local plan in place for the 2012-2013 school year" (Wright, 2010, p. 1). These regulations were revised again in August 2012 to align with changes in the Code of Virginia (Virginia Board of Education, 2012).

Regardless of the demographics of the school district or geographic location, all gifted programs in the Commonwealth were influenced by the adoption of the 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students.* How gifted coordinators will network with other coordinators using technical and social resources to interpret and implement the regulations to provide program services has yet to be measured. Across the Commonwealth of Virginia, gifted education coordinators have a mixed level of gifted educational backgrounds. Some coordinators have an endorsement or a degree in gifted education, while other have little to no experience in the field. Additionally, some gifted coordinators are responsible solely for gifted education programs, while others oversee programs in addition to gifted education. Based on 2014-2015 data collected by the Virginia Department of Education, the following table provides information regarding the background and program responsibilities of the 133 school district gifted coordinators in Virginia:

Table 2

2014-2015 District Coordinator of Gifted Education Background Information (self-reported)

Number of district coordinators holding an endorsement in gifted education	54
Number of district coordinators of gifted education with a Master's Degree in the field of gifted education	11
Number of district coordinators of gifted education with a Doctorate degree in gifted education	3
Number of district coordinators of gifted education responsible for only programs related to gifted education	21
Number of district coordinators of gifted education responsible for programs in addition to gifted education	105

(Virginia Department of Education, 2014-2015)

As each locality was charged with interpreting the 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*, local school districts' gifted education coordinators turned to fellow colleagues to gather insight on how to make sense of the new regulations. Among coordinators of gifted education programs in Virginia, there was a sense of ambiguity regarding the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. The ambiguity was attributed to possible multiple interpretations of the regulations, vague roles/responsibilities, and how districts would fund the necessary changes to their programs. Such ambiguity provided an opportunity for sensemaking. It is with the adoption of the regulations, that sensemaking in the field of gifted education in Virginia evolved. The roles of funding and politics in implementation of the local gifted programs have yet to be studied.

From the early 1980's, when Virginia first approved a plan for the gifted, that provided a framework of assistance for local school districts in designing and implementing gifted education programs, the state has been committed to the education

of gifted learners. With a collection of advocates in the state including VanTassel-Baska of The Center for Gifted Education at The College of William and Mary, Tomlinson of the University of Virginia, and the State Advisory Committee for Gifted Education, the growth of gifted education programs in Virginia expanded. In a form of sensemaking, continued conversations among gifted education advocates and coordinators occurred as they identified elements of best practices for identification, quality curriculum components, and program services for gifted learners. These conversations became the draft of policies for gifted education programs.

Since the development of the Virginia Plan, the *Regulations Governing Gifted Educational Services for Gifted Students* has undergone multiple revisions to best meet the needs of gifted learners. The adoption of the latest revisions in 2012 affected all localities in Virginia. Each school district was charged with interpreting the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. To eliminate ambiguity surrounding the regulations, local school district gifted education coordinators conversed with colleagues to gather insight on how to make sense of the new regulations and implement the policies in gifted education programs. Not only were the gifted coordinators charged with revising a division-level local plan for the gifted, each coordinator would present the local plan to the school board for approval. Regardless of the gifted coordinator's background in gifted education, these conversations were constructive for the coordinators given such parameters as funding and local politics that factored into writing not only the local plan for the gifted, but also in the implementation process. School board political agendas, division-level initiatives, stakeholder input, and funding constraints provided challenges for gifted coordinators that were required to

construct a local plan for the gifted that would best meet the needs of the gifted learners in a high-stakes testing environment. It is with the adoption of the 2012 regulations, that sensemaking in the field of gifted education in Virginia evolved.

Sensemaking

Ambiguity and Sensemaking

Weick (1995) proposed that "[d]escriptions of conditions for sensemaking in organizations refer just as often to uncertainty as to ambiguity" (p. 95). Such uncertainty and ambiguity among coordinators of gifted education programs in Virginia provided an opportunity for sensemaking of the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* (2012). Ambiguity often led to the sensemaking process as it occurred when there was an ongoing influx of supporting information for multiple interpretations, a lack of clarity, or consistency. Weick (1995) suggested, "[p]eople engage in sensemaking because they are confused by too many interpretations" when confronted with ambiguity (p. 91). Similarly, Coleville et al (2012) noted, "[l]essening ambiguity implies that through action you can learn to discount what might have been going on and reach an answer to the question as to what is going on (i.e. 'what is the story?)". As each school district was responsible for determining the evaluation methods for identifying gifted learners and creating a program model to serve students, most gifted programs were different because districts interpreted the regulations differently. District personnel brought diverse perspectives, experience, and used different clues when interpreting the regulations and implemented the policy in a way that made sense to them and their organization. Weick (1995), agreed with Milliken (1987) and proposed that sensemaking occurs when "[p]eople lack understanding of how components of the environment are

changing (state uncertainty), or of the impact of environmental changes on the organization (effect uncertainty), or of the response options that are open to them (response uncertainty)" (Milliken, 1987; Weick, 1995, p. 95). Ambiguity occurred when there were multiple interpretations, unclear goals, unclear responsibilities, lack of success measures, questions regarding the information, language, or problems, and different funding, political or value orientations to the situation (Weick, 1995, p. 93). District coordinators of gifted education used networking as a tool in the sensemaking process when they discussed the multiple interpretations of the policy, how the policy influences the organization, or how the coordinators would respond and adapt their gifted programs to meet the gifted education regulations.

Sensemaking Concept

Educational leaders experienced the challenging demands of managing and leading educational programs and schools during a period of varying stakeholder interests, budget reductions, high-stakes accountability, decreased resources, increased diversity of student needs, and changing policies. This was never more evident than in the field of gifted education. To wade through the choppy educational waters, schools have demanded leaders who must engage in sensemaking to understand the complexity of educational agendas as they lead change. Weick (2001) defined sensemaking, as the attempt to understand complex circumstances or events (Weick, 2001, Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Weick (1995) further suggested that sensemaking involves organizing stimuli into frameworks, patterns, or theories to provide meaning (Argyis & Schon, 1978; Seligman, 2006; Weick, 1995). Dervin (1983) suggested sensemaking focuses on the use of observations and patterns to construct reality (Dervin 1983). Such

observations provided cues for interpretation and sensemaking. As part of sensemaking concept, Weick (1995) explained that individuals used cues to interpret and solve problems in their environment. Cues were found in familiar circumstances or structures from which an individual could develop a larger sense of what was occurring (Weick, 1995). The framework and context of the extracted cue can influence how the cue is interpreted. Starbuck and Milliken (1988) noted that the process of noticing, which is how cues are extracted for sensemaking, refers to the activities of filtering, classifying, and comparing cues in one's interactions and surroundings. These cues can be behavioral, environmental, or stimuli related. Starbuck and Milliken (1998) further share that

> Sensemaking focuses on subtleties and interdependencies, whereas noticing picks up major events and gross trends. Noticing determines whether people even consider responding to environmental events. If events are noticed, people make sense of them; and if events are not noticed, they are not available for sensemaking (Weick, 1995, p. 52).

Seligman (2006), affirms that sensemaking is not a constant recognition of cues or making judgments to sort information, events or action, but is a "[c]yclical process of taking action, extracting information from stimuli resulting from that action, and incorporating information and stimuli from that action into the mental frameworks that guide further action" (p. 109). Further, Halverson, Kelley, and Kimball (2004), assert that sensemaking is an aspect of a constructivist approach in which prior experiences shape learning and experiences produce mental frameworks to anticipate patterns (Halverson, Kelley, & Kimball, 2004). Similarly, Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) argue that

"[t]he social context is crucial for sensemaking because it binds people to actions that they then must justify, if affects the saliency of information, and it provides norms and expectations that constrain explanation" (Weick, 1995, p. 53). In education, cues are used as reference points in the sensemaking process as an individual cognitively groups together cues to create sense out of the ambiguity of education policy.

Stein's (2001) discussed the ways policy mechanisms can shape school language and culture. Using interpretive policy analysis as an analytical lens, Stein investigated how practitioners made sense of policies. Drawing from Bourdieu's work, Stein (2001) argued that reality was constructed through individual's interactions with the world. Stein (2001) thought that human interactions and socialization led to interpretation and making sense of institutions, roles, and traditions. As policies directed for schools were accompanied by guidelines and regulations, practitioners must interpret the policies. Stein (2001) further noted that acts of legislation added to the daily sensemaking in the routines and language of schools. According to Stein (2001),

> Through interpretations of policy purposes . . . educational practitioners construct interpretive meanings . . . interpretations of policy language are multiple theories of cause and effect . . . practitioners interpret policies and these interpretations shape their overall conceptions. (p. 137-138)

Recently, the field of policy studies introduced interpretive policy analysis, a lens for implementation inquiry, which examined narrative elements of a policy through artifacts, symbols, and language from legislation to local implementation (Stein, 2001). Per Yanow (1993; 1996), interpretive policy analysis intended to uncover meaning of policies through communication as the policy could have various meanings within the policy

context. Yanow (1996) believed that policy interpretation depended on the perception of the participant and interpretive analysis contributed to the understanding of policies. "[N]arrative study of policies places analytical focus on the multiple meanings that policies engender, through the myriad interpretations of policy-makers, implementers, intended beneficiaries, and analysts" (Stein, 2001, p. 139). Depending on the individual, policies could have various meanings depending on the context. Policy meanings and thus sensemaking depended on the context, perception, and interpretation of the individual.

Sensemaking operates at both the individual and collective levels (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a form of social cognition. Howard and Renfrow (2006) proposed social cognition was the "[s]tructure of knowledge, the interpersonal processes of knowledge creation and dissemination, the actual content of this knowledge, and the shaping of each of these aspects of cognition by social forces" (Howard & Renfrow, 2006, p. 260). During the sensemaking process of continuously comprehending, items were placed into frameworks, where individuals constructed meaning and interacted in a pursuit of understanding (Weick, 1995, 2001). Moving beyond interpretation, sensemaking viewed how something was constructed, how something was read by individuals, how people generated or shared what they interpreted, and how sensemaking influenced and changed organizational structures (Harris, 1994). Individuals used a variety of verbal and sensory frames to represent knowledge and build frameworks. Social cognition used organized verbal knowledge representations as a basis for cognitive structure. Individuals sorted information into categories otherwise known as cognitive structures (Howard & Renfrow, 2006). Weick proposed two different strategies for how people make sense in

organizational environments. The first scenario involved four points: ecological change, enactment, selection, and retention (Weick, 1979). Ecological changes produced new cues in the environment that individuals interpreted as they made sense of the environment. Individuals participate in selection by connecting new experiences to existing cognitive frameworks. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) proposed that "[s]sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right. Instead, it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism" (p. 415). Weick's (2001) understanding of sensemaking as the verbalization of an individual's story involved a storytelling aspect, either as a monologue or as a narrative shared with others. Weick (2001) proposed that sensemaking could occur in the context of a group or because of an individual experience. In this example, the individual telling or refraining from telling the story and the specific context where the story was heard or shared likely contributed to the sense individuals and groups made or shared with others. Gioia and Chittipeddi termed this example as sensegiving, "[a]ttempting to influence the sense making and making construction of others toward a preferred redefinition" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 443). Weick (1996) presented the hazards of groups or individuals not sharing or comprehending each other's stories. According to Helms, Mills, and Weatherbee (2006), and Weick and Roberts (1993), a convergence of sensemaking within and across organizations and individual stakeholders was necessary for shared meaning and interrelating results.

Multiple phases existed in the sensemaking process. The first phase involved the initial interpretations of decision-makers by filtering information through reference or though points called lenses (Spillane, 2004). According to Spillane (2004)

> Sensemaking involves noticing and categorizing signals or cues from the environment. Inundated by signals from their environment, people notice some and ignore most others as they use the lenses they have developed through experience to filter their awareness . . . sensemakers generate or author the signals that they interpret. If local officials respond to higher-level policy, they respond to ideas about local behavior that they construct from policy. This sensemaking process is fraught with opportunities for understandings to develop that do not reflect those intended by policymakers (p. 7, 61).

The process of sensemaking involved a person filtering incoming information through lenses, or reference points, and categorizing it. The filtering of information into common categories of thought across several decision-makers' reports indicated the importance of the filtered information (Spillane, 2004). Some questions that may guide the filtering of policy information include how educational administrators viewed the policy, their concerns regarding school district policy implementation, and how the administrator has been taught to view the policy and any related issues/concerns.

The second phase of the sensemaking process involved widening the experience base. Local decision-makers may attempt verification of information they filtered in the first stage by gauging their perceptions against those of peers, subordinates, and superiors. This type of information exchange provided a foundation in determining how a policy is defined and guides the decision-makers' interpretation of the policy. Most

social information exchange networks such as the one previously described included those with peripheral and close relationships to a decision-maker with information to share. Information about what is interpreted from a policy was considered less important than how the policy was interpreted (Spillane, 2004). Organizational information, personal experiences, and the experiences of others were considered factors in the information exchange (Spillane, 2004). Information that led to positive interpretations most likely promoted positive implementations, while they can also be biased by personal interpretations. The issue of personal bias can lead to different interpretations than those that the higher-level policymakers had originally intended (Spillane et al., 2002).

The third phase of sensemaking involved a status check of the resources local decision-makers have available to implement the policy. This check of resources included funds, building supplies, available staff, training needs, staff experience, and time available for implementation of the policy (Honig, 2004). Decision-makers utilized this information to make sense of the policy (Spillane et al., 2002; Honig, 2004). Within this phase occurred the formulation of requests for other resources, personnel, and implementation needs in the administrative hierarchy of a decision-making process from the bottom toward the top (Honig, 2004). Outside community attitudes and interest also weighed into local policy interpretation and application (Tanner et al., 1996). Such information available to local decision-makers had strong bearings on how policy is interpreted and implemented.

School Administrators Making Sense of Policy

School administrators at the local school level served as the immediate decision-makers about the meaning, effect, and implementation of higher-level educational

policies for their schools. Principals, instructional supervisors, and curriculum personnel worked collaboratively to define, interpret, and oversee implementation of the policy across the school district and in individual schools. This group also worked to balance the school district's resources, strategic missions, stakeholder interests, and personnel with the requirements of state laws, mandates, and recommendations. Historically, the local school level was the next to the last tier in a decision-making ladder traveling from the nation to the state, state to the school district, and then the school district to the individual school.

School districts have major effects on the perceived credibility of educational policies through either their action or inaction. Spillane studied how state and federal level efforts sought to achieve educational accountability through curriculum reform. Spillane observed that educational administrators initiated their own teaching and learning role definitions when they evaluated educational mandates (2004). Spillane noted

> To understand how state policy featured in district policy-making, we need to investigate how district policy-makers made sense of the state policy in the context of district policy-making . . . School district officials make sense of the policy and pass their understandings on to school leaders (principals and curriculum coordinators) . . . Private consultants, professional development providers, professional associations, and others outside the formal school system [who may serve as extra resources] develop their own understandings of the policy. (Spillane, 2004, p. 4, 12)

School district supervisors also utilized personal experiences to filter information through lenses. School district officials who feared a diminished decision-making role might begin efforts to regain credibility by reinforcing their role as an information provider by conducting meetings, conferences, training sessions (Spillane, 2004).

Knowledge, Information, and Interpretation

Knowledge was considered a major factor in interpretation of education policy that was a factor in implementation of education policy. According to Spillane (2004), school administrators often wished that they had better information on the policy and prior knowledge of a policy before it was mandated. The quantity and the quality of information received by interpreters had a foundational role in policy interpretation (Spillane et al., 2002). Spillane's work illustrated that educational administrators did wish to comply with educational policies, but had concerns regarding the availability of resources for implementation and the different levels of information about the policies. This point illustrated the connectivity and networking needed among local level decision-makers and implementers and the region or state-level administrators to make sense of the policy and thus interpreting and implementing as it was originally intended. Interpretation of policy can also be hampered by policy-content critiques in that local school districts are opposed to an invasive external policy, which replaces an internal division policy that was deemed effective. Another concern in interpretation involved the availability of resources, personnel, buildings, training, and parent/community stakeholder support needed to implement educational policy.

Policy Implementation

Policy implementation involved interpretation as implementers must deduce what the policy means to determine whether to ignore, adapt, or adopt the policymakers' recommendations (Spillane, 2000). In conventional views, policy had been identified as a stimulus and the choices facing the implementers of policy concern whether to ignore the policy, implement it, adapt it, sabotage the policy, or circumvent it (Spillane, 2000). Spillane (2000) further wrote, "[f]rom a cognitive perspective, a key dimension of the implementation process concerns whether, and in what ways, implementers change their minds in response to a policy" (p. 145). Tabak (2006) reflected that policy design facilitated educational policy interpretation and implementation of the policy depended on a variety of factors including resources, motivation, capacity, culture, and organization structure. Interpretive policy analysis focused on how implementers employed a diversity of resources and perspectives to interpret policy and thus policy implementation (Yanow, 1996). Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), argued that standard-based reform policy interpretation can be viewed by either deep and surface features, where deep features had a literal pedagogical intent and surface features referred to policy like that in current existence. They further discussed that implementation agents, when given a new policy, focused on surface features that triggered existing pedagogical knowledge and thus the policy was viewed as an extension of current practice. Some surface features were attributed to the interaction between the structure of the policy document and the policy language (Tabak, 2006). In such cases, implementation of the policy may not have reflected the policy's true intent due to the openness of the policy to multiple

interpretations based on the readers' knowledge and background of the policy content. Tabak (2006) noted

> When people are presented with new information, they employ their current knowledge and understanding to make sense of the new information. If the new information is similar to their existing knowledge, then they are likely to ignore differences and regard the new information as consistent with their existing knowledge. (p. 25-26)

Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002), argued that enhancing the effectiveness of information processing could facilitate equivalence between interpretations of the implementing agents and the policymakers' intent. Weber and Glynn (2006) suggested that institutional-level processes perhaps caused sensemaking decisions made by organizations. A diversity of factors influenced policy implementation. Ambiguous or inconsistent policies led to poor or failed implementation efforts, while local school districts factors such as strategic plans, educational agendas, resources, community attitudes, and time were all influential in the implementation process (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane, 2000). Depending on the policymakers' intent, any variation in implementation could be considered a failure or breakdown of the process (Spillane, 2000).

Sensemaking Studies

Weick noted that sensemaking was a social process (Weick, 2001). In turn, policy implementation was also a social process formulated through learning, interpreting, and interaction within and among communities of practice. Karreman and Alvesson (2001) conducted an in-depth ethnographic study of a meeting of newspaper professionals in Sweden. The researchers participating observed the workplace for 2-3

days a week for nine months while conducting 15 formal interviews and ongoing informal conversations. While it was a regular meeting of professionals, Karreman and Alvesson proposed it was an "[e]laborate sequence of reality construction shaping and confirming a shared cultural Universe" (p. 60). While the participants appeared to discuss their work in the meeting, they were also constructing and making sense of their social, professional, and organizational identities. Further, Karreman and Alvesson asserted that the study explored the construction of organizational realities and work identities during a meeting, which served as a sensemaking device. Zibler (2007) explored the role of sensemaking in maintaining and/or disrupting the ongoing process of organizing.

> The most significant outcome of this meeting is neither the information shared, nor the decisions made . . . but the various ways in which certain aspects of reality, notably identities and identity materials, have been constructed and enacted by participants (Zibler, 2007, p. 60).

The purpose of their study was to show how shared meanings and joint identification were accomplished given the setting of a meeting. A second purpose attempted to show how "[s]ome situations in the organization may be seen as the "[o]rganization in miniature" as individuals can learn about organizational processed through the study of specific events (Karreman & Alvesson, p. 61). The researchers concluded organizations were comprised of a variety of situations and multiple realities. Zibler (2007) provided an analysis of how instructional entrepreneurship was achieved through the narration of sensemaking stories. In the study, two groups of individuals attending a high-tech conference in Israel created a shared story and then counter-stories, which blamed the

other individuals for a crisis. The creation of the story and counter-stories provided an avenue for the groups to reproduce and disrupt the institutional order. Coburn suggested that one of the ways implementation can be studied was by reviewing the interpretation of the meanings associated with a proposed policy (Coburn, 2005). Yanow (1990) further expanded this thought by suggesting that policy implementation could be studied by viewing implementation from "[d]ifferent aspects of a larger picture, which can supplement and balance each other rather than contradict and refute" (p. 221).

Sensemaking, Networks, and Policy Implementation

How the implementers interpreted a policy guided their actions toward implementing a policy. Coburn and Stein (2006) cited a community of practice framework as they investigated how participation in teacher communities such as mutual engagement, shared practices, and joint enterprise shaped how teachers understood and implemented instructional policy. Coburn described that school leaders actively constructed understanding of educational policy by "[i]nterpreting them through the lens of their preexisting beliefs and practices" (Coburn, 2006, p. 344). Inherent in Coburn's research was the idea that social networks allowed educators to access understandings and beliefs outside of their own that could lead to constructing new meaning (Coburn, 2005, Coburn & Stein, 2006).

Smylie and Evan (2006) argued that social capital in organizations was desirable as "[i]t can promote certain behaviors within social structures and it can be accumulated and drawn on to achieve otherwise hard to obtain objectives" (p. 189). These networks of social structures used as professional learning communities worked to develop knowledge in school districts. This knowledge was imbedded in social contexts and the

networks of interaction that affected sensemaking and the action of policy implementation. Policymakers and policy implementers referred to social networks and social contexts as an avenue for understanding new or ambiguous policy. These social interactions were vital as individuals learned from colleagues and fountains of ideas were generated among the network of educational actors and policymakers. Sensemaking does not occur by chance, rather the school environment provided a critical framework or network of sensemaking opportunities (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

Sensemaking and Leadership

Leaders played a fundamental role in guiding the sensemaking of individuals in an educational setting (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Educators made sense of policies through indirect and direct interaction with the network of colleagues, while school leaders often shaped the nature of the interactions and influenced the teachers' responses to policy (Coburn, 2005; Coburn & Stein, 2006). Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) expounded that individuals serving as local implementing agents, or individual sensemakers, needed to comprehend the context in which the policy was being implemented while also understanding the external representations of the policy. Institutional sensemaking has been affected by the leaders' influence, understanding, and network of interactions with colleagues and subordinates. These factors influenced how leaders made sense of and implemented policy.

For example, administrators had influence over how teachers made sense of school policies by shaping access to policy ideas, types of training presented, participating in the social process of meaning making, and creating opportunities for

teacher learning (Coburn, 2006). For a policy to be successfully implemented, district administrators must have reached agreement on a policy. According to Yanow (1996) and Spillane (1998), while administrators were not the only educational stakeholders engaged in policy interpretation and sensemaking, how administrators understood and made sense of a policy influenced how the policy was implemented. Spillane (1998) further asserted that implementation involved interpretation, individuals needing to call upon prior knowledge to make sense of new policies. He further argued that local implementers tended to focus on parts of policy reform that were familiar to them rather than delving into new areas that were ambiguous. Spillane (2000) suggested implementers were required to figure out what a policy meant to decide "[w]hether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt policymakers' recommendations in their practices" (p. 145). Spillane (2000) also acknowledged that recognizing the importance of local stakeholders assisted policymakers in their development of effective programs and reforms.

Sensemaking and Politics

Political dynamics played an essential part when considering education policies and sensemaking as some local interpreters understood and interpreted policy in certain ways based on political considerations (Bachrach & Baratz, 1987). Furthermore, school district officials had to consider and address a variety of issues from stakeholders and at times competing stakeholders when making decisions and interpreting policy. Also, individual self-interest may have played a role in sensemaking in education. Wirt and Kirst (2001), expressed that "[d]ifferent politics exist for the different stakeholders involved; dominant patterns of interaction among actors; strategies and styles that each

actor employs; and policy outcomes" (p. 184). While interpreting a policy, educational leaders might not have interpreted a policy with respect to its content and purpose, especially if they opposed the policy and refused to implement it for a variety of political reasons. In addition, the district, state, or federal role in policy may have had local implementers opposed to a policy as they opposed the role of the stakeholder in the policy process.

The past decade in education ushered in a time of change and challenge as educational leaders faced the demands of managing and leading educational programs during a time of budget reductions, high-stakes testing, decreased resources, changing policies, and increased student needs. The concept of sensemaking was considered useful for understanding the implementation of education policy. Educational leaders needed to engage in sensemaking as they interpreted educational agendas and implemented programs. As part of the sensemaking process, individuals used cues, conversations, networking, context, reflection, and filtering information through lenses to interpret policies. Prior practices, knowledge, and beliefs among local school district sensemakers and implementers at times have posed challenges to successful implementation of policy. According to Spillane et al., (2002) during the sensemaking and implementation process, local implementers, administrators, and stakeholders may have been unwilling to adopt the language of the policy. Spillane et al., (2002) suggested local implementers and stakeholders may have been wary of a

> [c]hange in the direction of the policy, but also because their extant understandings may interfere with their ability to interpret and implement the reform in ways consistent with the designers' intent. It is not simply that

> implementing agents choose to respond to policy but also what they understand themselves to be responding to. (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 393)

As the education policy implementers, such as school district administrators, school boards, principals, teachers, parents, and superintendents viewed and made sense of policy and regulations; the policy may have been interpreted differently. The policy as intended by policy makers may have evolved into a different version through the sensemaking and policy implementation process as stakeholders and policy implementers view policy through a variety of lenses.

A review of the literature described policy interpretation as dependent upon the context, perception of the participant, and the interpretive analysis by the individual. Daily sensemaking in the language of schools, routines, and regulations shaped the overall policy interpretation and thus implementation of programs. According to Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obsteld (2005), sensemaking was fluid and adapted as a continuously emerging story based in the context of a group or in an individual experience. As the 2012 *Regulations Governing Gifted Educational Services for Gifted Students* were reviewed, gifted coordinators had a shared experience as they met both in small regional and statewide sessions to discuss the aspects of the document and propose changes to individual district programs.

As school administrators in localities worked to collaboratively define, interpret, and oversee implementation of educational policy, their interpretive lenses factored into the implementation process, often leading to a variety of different policy definitions or implementation models. Starbuck, Milliken, and Weick agree that different organizations will have different interpretations. Weick (1995) noted "[p]eople in organizations are in

different locations and are familiar with different domains, which means that they have different interpretations of common events (p. 53). The various implementations may have been attributed to the resources local decision-makers have available to implement the policy. Such resources included funding, politics, educational agendas, staff availability, staff experience and knowledge, space availability, and time for implementation.

Summary

Despite the literature on educational reform, policy implementation, and sensemaking, there has been a lack of focus on the impact of leadership and policy development on gifted education or on the sensemaking process in gifted education. The gap in the literature showed that a study focusing on how gifted coordinators made sense of ambiguous gifted education policy and implemented gifted education programs was needed. There was also a gap in the literature on the roles of networking using social and technical resources, funding, politics, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. A study of this nature has not been conducted in Virginia. As gifted coordinators continue to process the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* and implement gifted programs in Virginia within the parameters of staffing, funding, politics, and resources, it was the right time for a study of this nature to be conducted.

Chapter Three: Methods

In this study, I used a qualitative exploratory design to understand how district level coordinators of gifted education make sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school systems. I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews using a protocol with a researcher-selected sample of personnel responsible for gifted education programs within a school district. I utilized the individual interviews to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Also, I asked additional interview questions to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. The adoption and interpretation of the Virginia 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* provided the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialists' sensemaking. The conceptual framework for the study draws upon the conceptual process of sensemaking.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the way gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Additional research questions uncovered how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of coordinators of gifted education. Exploring the research questions using the sensemaking conceptual framework allowed me to describe the specific ways gifted education specialists interpreted and implemented gifted education policies.

The following central research question guided this study: How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of current and evolving gifted education policy?

The following sub-questions guided this study:

- How do the coordinators of gifted education make sense of gifted education policy through the technical and social resources of their professional network?
- How do you surface, understand, and apply stakeholder views in your leadership of gifted education?
- How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of the evolving politics of gifted education?
- As a district coordinator of gifted education, what role does funding (local and state) play in your sensemaking process?

Epistemology

Through this study, I sought to understand the way district coordinators of gifted education made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Additional questions aided understanding of how local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. Exploring each of the political, funding, and networking areas as well as input from stakeholders using the sensemaking conceptual framework allowed me to describe the specific ways gifted education specialists interpreted and implemented gifted education policies.

This study takes a constructionist view, recognizing that gifted coordinators' meaning is not discovered, but rather it is constructed during their everyday work lives through interaction. Crotty (1998) expounded that "[c]onstructivism claims that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (p. 43). Central to constructivism is the conception of learning. This study adopted the view that administrators in the field of gifted education are continuously learning and growing through research on best practices for gifted learners, process for gifted identification, and gifted program experience, all of which are blended together to create meaning, a foundation of constructivism. The theories of constructivism are not unlike those theories of gifted education in which educators lay a framework for problem solving and critical thinking while facilitating the students' real world, process-oriented exploration of subjects through learning that emphasizes the process and the product. This study recognized the individuals in educational organizations are in different locations and therefore are familiar with different domains that can lead to a variety of interpretations. Using constructionism as a paradigm of inquiry, this study sought to determine the ways gifted education coordinators made sense of and implemented gifted education policy.

Additional focus areas of inquiry included how considerations of local politics, funding, social and technical networking resources, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. The process of sensemaking is ongoing as all Virginia gifted coordinators continue to process the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* as they plan, design, and implement *g*ifted programs in their respective districts.

Sensemaking of Gifted Education Administrators

Despite the shifts in education reform, government decision-makers have played a role in the importance of education policy by bringing it to the forefront and seeking change for schools. Historically, in education, there has been a tension between decision-making formats, with a desire for local authority control and local solutions, but also the support of supporting state and federal efforts including funding (Tanner, Linscott, & Galis, 1996; Spillane, 2004). This tension and a sense of ambiguity have led to questions when interpreting policies. The process of interpretation led to questions on how policies are funded, written, and introduced (McNeil, 2000). This questioning and ambiguity regarding policy provided an opportunity for sensemaking to occur.

Weick (1995) defined sensemaking as "[t]he making of sense," or the process of how meaning was made, noting that "[s]ensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery" (Weick, 1995, p. 8). Sensemaking is about invention and finding meaning where there is ambiguity. As an iterative process, sensemaking is derived from experiences, which can affect and be affected by new perceptions and experiences.

As coordinators of gifted education, individuals in school districts bring a diversity of experiences and perceptions to their role thus decision making. These experiences can be influenced by a coordinator's educational level, background, prior job positions, interactions within the school district, and individual stakeholder interests. According to Weick (1995) "[a] crucial property of sensemaking is that human situations are progressively clarified" (p. 11). Thus, individuals make sense of experiences as new

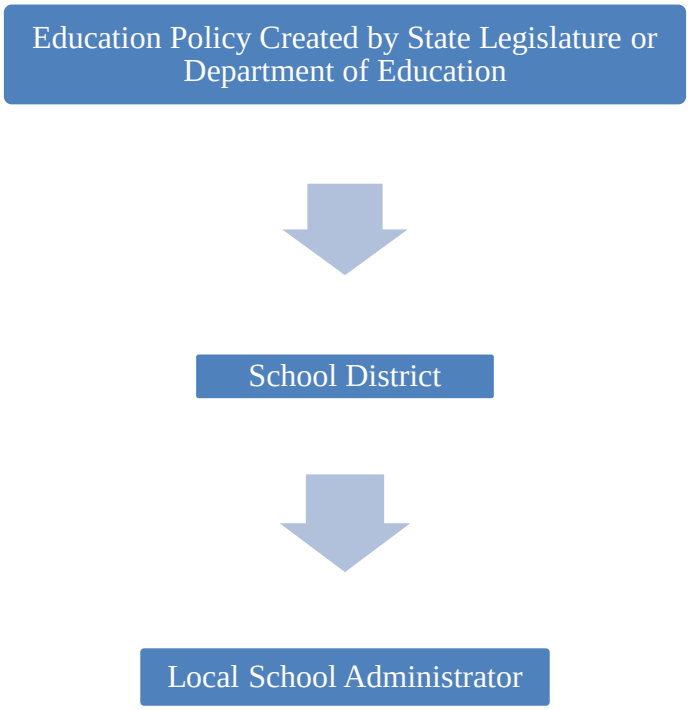
practices are understood within the framework of existing patterns and meaning is adjusted to fit the given context and situation. Seligman (2006) explained that much of what is noticed or reacted to in a situation or environment is shaped by the patterns an individual anticipates. Similarly, Turner (1987) and Weick (1995) agreed that engaging in sensemaking is the process of constructing, filtering, and framing to create meaning. How an individual structures the unknown into the frameworks, or sensemaking, is a process of creating interpretations of experiences, which are different from the anticipated assumptions (Seligman, 2006).

Policy analysis seeks to comprehend the formation, development, and implementation of policies created to address recognized problems (Weick, 2001). Educational policies such as the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* operate from a top down format where policy is directed from state to school districts to individual schools to control. During this process, additional policy may be created by division-level personnel in response to the state level policy. Sensemaking is further influenced by the social, cultural, and physical contexts of the sense maker (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Spillane, 2000). Cognitive theory suggests that people use their prior knowledge and experiences to construct new understandings (Spillane, 2000). The sensemaking process will differ from division to division as each individual responsible for gifted education programs in a school division draw on a variety of experiences, cues, and social contexts. Figure 1 illustrates the channels of policy dissemination from the top (legislatures), to the bottom (local school administrators). Education policies that are unclear lead to confusion or ambiguity

surrounding interpretations, which can in turn lead to less effective program implementations.

Figure 1

Education Policy Dissemination



For policy interpretation to be correct, decision-makers at each level must seek to understand the various complexities of a policy and eliminate ambiguity. Information, funding, resources, and the commitment of stakeholders (including the teachers, principals, parents, and community) may impact interpretation of policy. School administrators interpret, question, and re-interpret as they move toward implementation of the educational policies in the day-to-day operation of the schools (Spillane, 2004).

As the supervisors of policy for the school district, principals and school district administrators are tasked with implementing educational policies designed by state officials (legislatures and departments of education). As part of the sensemaking process, individuals examine the aspects of policy to alleviate ambiguity. According to Spillane, individual sense-makers utilize tools of observation, narration, and documentation to examine the perceptions, judgments, and lenses that decision-makers use when interpreting policy (Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, 2004). These tools assist sense-makers with alleviating ambiguity and understanding educational policy. The information that individuals receive may not align with the original content of the policy. Rather, organizational information may be gained through meetings, electronic or written, or visual information from state departments.

The research literature on policy implementation also notes how conditions influence how local actors interpret new policy mandates or guidance (Spillane, 2004). When confronted with new gifted education policy, individuals responsible for the gifted programs must work to understand its intention by considering the policy formation, policy content, and the position of stakeholders such as state educational officials, school district officials, principals, school boards, parents, and advisory committees toward the policy. Sensemaking is a process in which coordinators of gifted education use cues, language, networking, and conversations to interpret policy. This study is informed by the literature on sensemaking and educational policy. Using the sensemaking process as the conceptual framework, I sought to determine the way gifted education specialists in local school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. I also sought to determine the roles of politics, funding,

networking, and the role of input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process. This conceptual framework served as a tool for inquiry and analysis of the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators.

Qualitative Research Design

I employed a qualitative research design to understand participant views and experiences regarding the implementation of gifted education policy in their respective districts. Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol that included a combination of open-ended and semi-structured questions. Study participants reflected a purposeful sample of individuals responsible for gifted education programs within eight school districts across Virginia.

This study recognizes the individuals in education organizations are in different locations and therefore are familiar with different domains, which can lead to a variety in interpretations. The individual interviews document how district coordinators of gifted education made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. The interviews also documented how local considerations of funding and politics, the nature of the professional network, and input from stakeholders shaped their sensemaking process. Through the interview process, I desired to understand how and why the coordinators of gifted programs implemented the gifted education policy in the way they did in their school district. A qualitative study was appropriate since the purpose of the study is to understand how gifted education coordinators made sense of gifted education policy, with attention to how local considerations of funding and politics, input from stakeholders, and the nature of the professional network shaped their sensemaking process.

Study Setting and the Participants

The setting of the study is the Commonwealth of Virginia, a mid-Atlantic state on the Eastern seaboard. Virginia covers 42,769 square miles and is the thirty-fifth largest state in the United States. Virginia is the twelfth most populous state in the United States with a population of 8,260,405. The state has rural, urban, and suburban areas across the state encompassing towns, counties, and cities. According to the 2009 Virginia School Divisions Locale Descriptions, the 133 school divisions are classified as rural, city, town, and suburb. Table 3 presents the overall classifications.

Table 3

Virginia School Divisions Locale Descriptions

Locale Classification	**Number of School Districts in Virginia classified by locale**
Rural	78 school districts
Town	21 school districts
Suburban	18 school districts
City	16 school districts

(Virginia Department of Education, 2009)

Virginia was one of the earliest states to develop programming and service requirements for gifted learners. Virginia has three nationally known colleges and universities with gifted education programs for teacher and curriculum development: The College of William and Mary, The University of Virginia, and James Madison University. Faculty members from each of these universities have served on local, state, and national gifted program committees and organizations such as Virginia Association

for the Gifted (VAG) and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). Virginia was also unique in that all three universities have published curriculum units and textbooks designed for use in gifted education program in schools and teacher preparation programs. Members of the faculty also participated in crafting Pre-K through grade 12 gifted program standards endorsed by NAGC. Like other states, Virginia has a diverse cross-section including rural, suburban, and urban populations with both farming and business influences. Virginia is a microcosm of the nation and has similar geographic characteristics with other states.

From the early 1980's, when the first *Virginia Plan for the Gifted* was developed, the state has been committed to the education of gifted learners. The Virginia Plan provides a framework of assistance for local school districts in designing and implementing gifted education programs. It also requires each division to designate a gifted coordinator responsible for implementing and maintaining the program. In a form of sensemaking and networking, gifted education advocates and coordinators gather periodically in both formal meetings and informal conversation groups. These conversations take place in local areas, in school district clusters, and at the state level. During these periodic formal meetings and informal conversations, gifted education advocates and gifted education coordinators identify elements of best practices for identification, quality curriculum components, and program services for gifted learners. These conversations ultimately were developed in the draft of state level policies for gifted education programs. Since the development of the first Virginia Plan, the *Regulations Governing Gifted Educational Services for Gifted Students* has undergone multiple revisions with the goal of meeting the needs of gifted learners.

Most recently, gifted coordinators have been actively exploring and interpreting changes in the state gifted regulations, with an eye towards implications for their respective districts. The 2012 revisions of the *Regulations Governing Gifted Educational Services for Gifted Students* influenced all the 133 school districts' gifted programs in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Virginia's gifted education programs are diverse. Each district has the responsibility to determine which methods will be used for identification, the area of giftedness in which learners will be served, and which program model will be used. For example, while all school districts must use an aptitude test as an identification measure, some school districts use a second aptitude test, while others use an achievement test. Some school districts use a portfolio method for reviewing student work and assessments, while others use assessment data, student essays, interviews, parent checklists of gifted characteristics, and/or teacher checklists of gifted characteristics. Districts can identify students by the following areas of giftedness: general intellectual aptitude, specific academic aptitude, visual and performing arts, and/or career and technical aptitude. Table 4 lists the 2014-2015 numbers of students participating in areas of giftedness in Virginia.

Table 4

2014-2015 Numbers of Students Participating in Areas of Giftedness in Virginia

Total number of students identified as gifted in Virginia	169,310
Number of students served as general intellectual aptitude (GIA)	112,879
Number of students served as specific academic aptitude	45,236
Number of students served as visual and performing arts	11,114

Number of students served as career and technical aptitude 51

(Virginia Department of Education, 2014-2015)

Gifted program models in Virginia include pull-out programs, homogenous classes, heterogeneous classes, full-time gifted classes, and gifted schools. Unlike some states, Virginia does not require an individualized educational plan for gifted learners. While Virginia is similar to other states in their identification procedures and program models, there is not a consistent gifted education program model across the United States. School districts are left to interpret the gifted education policies. According to the National Association for Gifted Children in 2012-2013, 44 states reported having gifted education programs (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013). Of those 44 states reporting, most states reported learners served in the following areas of giftedness: intellectually gifted, academically gifted, creatively gifted, specific academic aptitude, and performing/visual. With a wide diversity in gifted education program definitions, services, and models, there can be a sense of ambiguity when interpreting gifted education policy. Ambiguity provides an opportunity for coordinators of gifted programs to use the sensemaking process to interpret gifted education policy and implement gifted programs.

In Virginia, each school district's gifted education coordinator is expected to interpret the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* and, in turn, ensure that the program is in compliance. In a form of sensemaking, some local school district gifted education coordinators began convening colleagues to gather insight as to how to interpret the newer regulations and implement the policies in their respective

district programs. Regardless of the gifted coordinator's background in gifted education, these conversations proved beneficial for individuals when discussing such parameters as funding and local politics factoring into the writing of the local plan for the gifted. Some individual political agendas such as a dedicated gifted school, offering additional advanced courses for students or eliminating a pull-out program for the gifted surfaced as challenges for gifted coordinators. Funding constraints in some districts surfaced as challenges for gifted coordinators that were required to construct a local plan for the gifted that would best meet the needs of the gifted learners in a high-stakes testing environment. It is with the adoption of the 2012 regulations, that sensemaking in the field of gifted education in Virginia evolved both individually and as a collective unit among coordinators across the state. How Virginia gifted coordinators networked with other coordinators, drawing on technical and social resources to interpret and implement the regulations to enhance program services has yet to be understood as a process. The roles of funding, politics, and input from stakeholders in implementation of the local gifted programs in Virginia, while discussed informally, have not yet been examined through empirical research.

I identified a high diversity sample of district-based gifted education coordinators across the state. All study participants were individuals responsible for supervising gifted education programs within his or her school district. A purposeful high contrast sample of eight district coordinators of gifted education was selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of Virginia. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. A review of the literature revealed a gap in the current

educational literature for any studies of this nature in the Commonwealth of Virginia; therefore, a study of this type of sample or in the setting of a mid-Atlantic state is unexplored. Table 5 presents the sampling frame guiding the selection of gifted education coordinators for participation in the study.

Table 5

Sample Frame Guiding the Selection of Gifted Education Coordinators for Participation in the Study

Urban District	**Suburban District**	**Rural District**
Urban 1	Suburban 1	Rural 1
Urban 2	Suburban 2	Rural 2
Urban 3	Suburban 3	Rural 3Rural 4
Urban 4	Suburban 4	

Interviews were the primary method of data collection. Participants were asked to describe and explain how they are interpreting and implementing gifted education policy in their respective districts, with attention to the roles of networking, funding, and politics in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. One-on-one interview sessions facilitated confidentiality so that participants were comfortable sharing their views and experiences. Participants were fully informed that their participation was voluntary, that they may decline responding to any question, and that they could stop participation at any time without penalty. Participants were referred to by pseudonym throughout the interview protocol, coding, and analysis to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

This study used a qualitative exploratory approach using a semi-structured open-ended interview protocol administered to a purposeful high contrast sample of personnel responsible for gifted education programs within their respective school districts. I conducted 60-90 minute interviews with gifted education coordinators across the state. Follow-up interviews were requested, as needed. The individual interviews were for learning how individual gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Open-ended interview-questions and probes solicited participant viewpoints on how information flowed through networking, politics, and funding influence in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. The interview protocol was piloted with 1-2 individuals with a group of gifted education coordinators (full-time and retired). I reflected on the interview data (transcripts) and assessed what I learned. Specifically, I examined how well each question, and my probes, facilitated opportunities for the participant to fully describe and explain their sensemaking regarding the adaptation of gifted education policy to their unique district context. The protocol was updated based on this analysis.

Interviews Protocol and Procedures

One of the most effective and informative methods of gaining information is interviewing because the process provides researchers a detailed and descriptive narrative of the experiences of the participants in the study (Dezin & Lincoln, 2005). Interviews are similar to directed conversations (Warren, 2002). Interviews explored what could not be observed and engaged participants in a conversation regarding sensemaking in gifted education. To develop this narrative and explore what could not be observed, I chose to

conduct a qualitative study using a semi-structured open-ended interview protocol. Patton advances that "[i]nterviewing allows the evaluator to enter another person's world, to understand that person's perspective" (1987, p. 109). According to Seidman (1997), listening is an important skill in interviewing. An interviewer must listen to what the participant is saying, listen for the inner voice, and listen while being aware of the interview process. Building rapport with the subject before and during the interview process is an important aspect of qualitative research. Asking open-ended questions that provide an opportunity for constructing a narrative or experience, listening, and exhibiting appropriate body language are essential steps to building rapport with a participant. Building a relationship between the researcher and the participant allows the researcher to gain the information needed to answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2005). It is important to develop trust when conducting the study. Glesne (1997) suggests, "[i]n qualitative research, rapport is a distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism that primarily serves the interest of the researcher" (p. 96). As confidentiality is important to building rapport with study participants, they were each assured that their responses and participation was confidential. Ensuring the interviewee benefits from the interview assisted in building or strengthening rapport (Glense,1997). As I am employed in a similar position as the gifted education specialists I interviewed, a level of rapport or relationship was already established since we attended the same state level meetings and conferences. Self-disclosure by the interviewer was one way rapport was developed during the interview process. To strengthen rapport, I disclosed that I intend to share the findings with the participants after the study. Rapport is not a single variable, rather the importance lies in the kind of rapport as well as the amount of rapport

generated with a study participant (Maxwell, 2005). As the researcher is effectively the human instrument of the research, the relationship between the researcher and the participant developed and changed throughout the process as rapport was strengthened (Maxwell, 2005).

In this study, the interviews with individuals responsible for gifted education programs were recorded and later transcribed. An interview protocol consisting of a semi-structured open-ended interview questions was developed with the research questions in mind (see Appendix G). It was used with each individual who were all asked the same questions, but I used a flexible format with follow-up questions to obtain deeper understanding and meaning. This semi-structured open-ended interview format allowed the interview to pursue a specific topic, but still provided for openness to allow the participant to introduce new topics or aspects of gifted education that reflected their unique experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Following each interview, I developed field notes, which served as my documentation of participant interview. My field notes contained my observations of the interview, key words from the interview, potential codes, emerging themes, and interpretations of the interview (Saldaña, 2013, Schwandt, 2007).

My approach in designing the semi-structured and open-ended questions was to illicit how the gifted coordinators made sense of gifted education policy, what social and technical resources were used as part of the networking process, and the roles of funding and politics on the sensemaking and implementation process of the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services of Gifted Students.* The interview protocol was organized into six sections and questions asked the individual to draw on their own

personal resources (social, cognitive, political, networking, and stakeholders) to making sense of and implementing gifted education policy. The six sections of the protocol included gifted coordinator position, networking resources, the sensemaking process, funding, politics, and stakeholder input. To explore the gifted coordinator position, questions sought to understand the role of the gifted coordinator, the programs he/she supervised, and perception of gifted education in the school district. The networking resources portion inquired about the social and technical resources of the gifted coordinator and interactions with colleagues in the gifted education field. I asked the gifted coordinator to describe an important event or issue in which he/she is engaged in problem solving or interpreting an ambitious course of action, with attention to the resource used to address a given problem. I asked the individual to reflect on their thoughts and beliefs when reviewing the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* With the funding questions, the gifted coordinator was asked whether and to what extend funding played a role in the efforts to interpret and act on gifted education policy. The political questions inquired about whether political agendas were considered when they were interpreting the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* For the stakeholder input questions, the gifted coordinator was asked to describe the types of stakeholders in his/her division, how stakeholder input was received, and the areas where input was provided.

Participant Recruitment

Individual participants were contacted by phone and email to ask for their interest in participating in the study. Participants were also recruited at local or state meetings. Potential participants were informed of the goals of the study, data collection procedures

to be used, and the time commitment to the study. Participants were not aware of other gifted education coordinators participation in the study. Permission for the interview was obtained using the informed consent process. Informed consent included information regarding the role of the researcher in the interview process, the purpose of the research, rights as a participant in the study, and the steps taken to maintain confidentiality (Warren, 2002). Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a private location such as an office or library or via Skype. The interviews were conducted in an optimal environment with regard to acoustics, as each interview was recorded using a digital recorder, "[w]hich frees the interviewer to concentrate on the topic and the dynamics of the interview" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 179). This allowed me to replay the interviews during the transcription. I hired a professional transcriber to transcribe the interviews verbatim for data analysis and interpretation. To ensure confidentiality, the professional transcriber and I were the only individuals with access to the interview data. The interview recordings were locked in a secure cabinet prior to transcription. The professional transcriber was instructed to confirm receipt of the interview recordings. As Poland noted (2002), "[w]e can usefully focus our attention on the trustworthiness of transcripts as research data by examining how faithfully they reproduce the oral (tape) record…to portray the full flavor of the interview" (p. 636). After the transcriptions were completed, I reviewed the transcriptions to ensure accuracy of the interviews by playing the recording and comparing it to the transcription. After reviewing the transcriptions, I destroyed the tapes to protect the voice identities of the study participants. I also verified that the professional transcriber deleted all recordings

related to the study. At the completion of the study, I shred the transcriptions at a secure shredding facility.

Data collection storage procedures

Research study documentation was collected in digital forms including researcher logs, reflection journals, interview transcriptions, and any artifacts that embody the sensemaking process. To minimize the risk of breach of confidentiality, all data was secured on a password protected folder on my hard drive and backed up on a password protected external hard drive stored in two separate locked cabinets in my home accessed by a key in the researcher's possession only. I backed up the external hard drive weekly. Personal/demographic data including the participant's name, employer name and the participant's contact information has been collected and has been redacted for the study. The personal/demographic data points were identified indirectly using a unique pseudonym linked to the information, which was stored in a locked cabinet. The pseudonyms and the personal/demographic information were stored separately in two separate locked cabinets. Data items including transcripts and researcher field notes were coded using attribute coding that identified each notation with the relevant date, time, location, and source. The attribute codes were added to the researcher field notes prior to the interview. Pseudonym codes were added to the audio files prior to transcription. The transcription file was also assigned an alphanumeric code upon receiving it from the professional transcriber. All digital information was permanently deleted from file and external hard drive and all hard copies of data shredded.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis served to process the qualitative data from the interviews to gather meaning. Through organization and synthesis of the data, I developed patterns, emerging themes, relationships, and interpretations (Hatch, 2002). The data analysis phase began immediately after the first interview. The first step of my analysis was reading the interview transcripts and interview notes. I listened to the interview tapes prior to transcription and used this as an opportunity for analysis as I jotted notes such as key words, repeated words, potential codes, and emerging themes. I completed this same analysis for each interview transcript and set of interview notes. Reading and thinking about the interview transcriptions in relationship to the research questions provided the opportunity for me to develop coding categories, note potential relationships, and pull out themes relating to the research questions (Maxwell, 2005). The use of memos, coding, and categorizing strategies aided me in the data analysis process. I wrote memos to capture and facilitate my thinking as I developed themes and organized the interview responses by research question (Maxwell, 2005).

As I read the interview transcriptions, I organized the material into chunks or groups of text in an effort to bring meaning to the information (Rossman and Rallis 1998). When developing codes, I selected a short word or phrase that captured the essence of the participant's statement (Saldaña 2009). I selected codes such as funding, politics, training, ambiguity, networking, stakeholder, resources, and meetings for their frequency in the interview transcriptions. I selected other codes such as background, children, locality, urban, rural, suburban, and endorsement as they provided a way to see similarities and differences in the participants' responses (Rossman and Rallis, 1998).

The constant comparing of the participants' responses assisted me in disaggregating the coded data and prompted additional questions as I began to develop themes.

In this study, transcriptions of the interviews were coded and analyzed using the following procedures. I kept a researcher's journal that included communications, interpretations, and analysis of the interview data and the ongoing study. I kept a qualitative codebook, containing a list of predetermined codes, coding schemes, and definitions of codes used in the analysis process. Predetermined codes included: ambiguity, cues, collaboration, funding, politics, networking, stakeholder, and other forms of sensemaking were aligned to the research questions. I pulled together similar data pieces into a chart based on the codes to determine potential themes (Glesne, 2011). The analysis of the data was completed in two stages: First cycle coding and second cycle coding, as suggested by Saldaña (2009).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1988), "[d]uring open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (p. 102). Once the interviews with the gifted coordinators were transcribed, I conducted open coding using the method of circling, highlighting, underlining, and bolding key quotes or passages in the data (Saldaña 2009). Data that were similar in nature, events, or actions were grouped as categories that included: background in gifted education, roles, ambiguity, funding, technical resources, social resources, stakeholders, politics, and networking. The interview data was examined and categorized for themes and patterns to better answer the research questions and to determine how gifted education coordinators make sense of gifted education policy. Specifically, I looked for themes and patterns to determine how the coordinators made sense of gifted education

policy using technical and social resources of their professional network. I also categorized the transcripts to determine the roles of stakeholders, politics, and funding in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. The process of coding the interview transcripts surfaced several subcategories for funding, politics, networking resources, and stakeholder input. To gain better understanding of the data gathered from the interviews, I conducted a microanalysis of the transcripts and the codes. As part of the microanalysis, I reviewed each of the participants' responses to determine the meaning of key words to better understand how the gifted coordinators made sense of gifted education policy (Strauss and Corbin, 1988). During the microanalysis, I asked guiding questions to help analyze the data. I was able to make theoretical comparisons, and develop additional insights.

Another level of coding, axial coding, occurs when the researcher seeks to identify conditions that may influence a study or phenomenon within the data. Axial coding is the process of building categories from the data and "[l]ooking at action/interaction and noting movement, sequence, and change" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 167). Some axial codes developed refer to different types of environment (rural, urban, suburban) or types of gifted program model (pull-out, full-time heterogeneous, homogeneous). Other axial codes- such as formal or informal conversations, opportunities to use social or technical resources, and questioning of colleagues captured how gifted education coordinators made sense of gifted education policy.

Specifically, I highlighted interview data relating to the nature of networking for district gifted coordinators, and the roles of local politics and district funding in how they interpreted and acted in adjusting or sustaining current gifted education policies and

programs. The transcripts were then coded for additional themes. Some pre-determined abstract themes included: local plan for the gifted, gifted regulations, current district program model, gifted coordinator social resources, technical resources, and the division's gifted identification procedure.

As part of the structural coding process, I highlighted excerpts from the interview data that related to each research question and sub-question (Saldaña, 2009; 2013). Next, I grouped similarly-coded segments together for more detailed coding and analysis.

Analytical Memos

I wrote analytical memos as a tool for data analysis, analytic thinking about data, and reflection (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). Saldaña (2009) suggested that analytical memos can be effective tools for sorting research questions, code choices, emerging patterns and themes, future directions or areas of study. The first analytical memo focused on how gifted coordinators made sense of gifted education policy through technical and social resources of their professional network. The interview transcriptions, coding, and field notes were reviewed to seek evolving theories, emergent patterns, or themes related to the networking practice. A second analytical memo explored themes and theories about the role local and state politics played in the sensemaking process of the district coordinator of gifted education. A third analytical memo reflected on the role local and state funding played in the gifted coordinator's sensemaking process. An additional memo focused on the how the division geography and size factored into the sensemaking process when interpreting and implementing gifted education policy. These analytic memos assisted me in analyzing data and organizing it into useful information and thoughts (Glesne, 2011).

Subjectivity Statement

By acknowledging bias or assumptions, a researcher can mitigate their effect on the study (Merriam, 1998). Subjectivity is defined as the collection of perceptions, experiences, understanding, beliefs, and expectations specific to an individual. Subjectivity refers to a researcher's prior knowledge and assumptions about the phenomenon they are studying. As a coordinator of gifted education programs, my subjectivity provided me with the perspectives into my research topic, but could also have influenced my judgment throughout the research process (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). In qualitative research, the subjectivity of the researcher guides the choice of topic, formation of the research questions and hypotheses, methodology, and data analysis. While conducting this qualitative study, it was important for me to recognize that subjectivity is part of research and can contribute to research (Glesne, 1997). When using the subjective lenses, emotions may factor into the research process and assist in identifying when a researcher's subjectivity is being engaged. I believe emotions did factor into my research process because I am an advocate for gifted education and have worked a majority of my career in the field. My perspective on gifted education guided my reflective inquiry process as I sought to understand the sense-making process of gifted education coordinators (Glesne, 1997). By monitoring and acknowledging my own subjectivity, I used the insights to shape the research process through the development of research questions, formation of hypotheses, creation of interview discussions, and drawing inferences as part of the data analysis process.

In this study, I wanted to discover what district coordinators of gifted education think and engage in gifted education programming with attention to the networking

resources, local considerations of funding and politics, input from stakeholders, and the policies advanced by the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* that may have guided their decision making. Continued investigation of the data and the literature review process allowed for a direct dialogue with the individuals responsible for gifted education programs in their school districts. All attempts were taken to manage potential bias or negative impacts of bias on this study by creating an interview protocol with neutral questions, reviewing the question order of the protocol to ask general questions before specific questions, and recognizing my own subjectivity. Since I worked in the field that I researched, I answered my own interview questions and probes as an analysis of the interview protocol to manage my bias. When answering the interview protocol, I had to acknowledge my own views on networking with other gifted coordinators in my region and across the state. I also had to explore how I viewed my own sensemaking process, how I addressed ambiguity, and how I interpreted gifted education policies within my school district. As a gifted coordinator, I keep annual journals which serve as a collection of my thoughts, questions, experiences, interactions, and overall year in review. As part of this study, I reviewed my own annual journals from 2012 to revisit my questions and thoughts regarding the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*. In my annual journal, I listed questions, comments, and thoughts regarding the ambiguity in the language of the education policy, how the policy would be implemented in my school district and how funding and politics might impact my implementation process. My position as a gifted education coordinator was an asset when conducting the interviews and analyzing the transcripts because I was familiar with the processes, terminology, and acronyms used by

the respondents. I realized my own bias of the sensemaking process and how I interpreted gifted education policy, could be a liability when interviewing the participants and analyzing their responses since I could seek themes and discussions that aligned to my own thinking. This reflective process assisted me in exploring how my bias may impact the study, because I bring knowledge, opinions, and views that may serve as either an asset or liability when soliciting others views and experiences.

My Subjectivity Statement

I am the daughter of an educator and believe the experiences of witnessing my mother's role as principal, director, and executive director drew me to the field of education. I have experience with K-12 students in elementary, middle, and high school. I taught middle school for seven years in collaborative, general education, and gifted education classes. I worked in a full-time homogeneous gifted education class setting for five years. As a gifted education teacher, I became an advocate for the high-ability and gifted learner. I attended professional development sessions, read literature on best practices, and sought to pursue my endorsement in gifted education so I could have a voice in the field and eventually move into gifted education administration.

For the past ten years, I served as the Supervisor of Gifted Education in a suburban Virginia school district. In this position, I currently work with gifted and high-ability students K-12 in a district with pull-out classes, homogeneous full-time gifted education classes, and heterogeneous classes within a gifted education cluster model. I have worked with a variety of gifted program models such as a pull-out program, homogenous grouping, heterogeneous grouping, and cluster grouping. I personally preferred teaching the full-time, homogeneous gifted class but recognize with budgetary

constraints, policy initiatives, and programming K-12, all four types of program models benefit gifted education students.

As a coordinator of gifted education programs in my school district, I was interested in understanding the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. I was intrigued by the fact that as gifted education coordinators, we could all read the same gifted education policies and regulations, yet interpret them differently. There was not a uniform definition of giftedness, nor standard identification process used by all school districts. The diversity of program models across the state and reflected the various interpretations of the gifted education policies. I wanted to determine how other coordinators make sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Thus, I planned to conduct this study.

Like the participants in this study, as a district coordinator of gifted education, I am tasked with reviewing gifted education policy and implementing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* in the school district. Prior to and upon the release of the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, I embarked on a sensemaking process to understand the education policy, eliminate my own questions and ambiguity, interpret the regulations, and ultimately implement them in my school district. I researched the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)'s pre-K through grade 12 standards, read other districts' local gifted plans, and studied best practices for gifted identification, program planning, and curriculum modifications. During my sensemaking process, I consulted with my social network of other gifted education coordinators to discuss ambiguous terms or brainstorm programmatic solutions to implement the regulations. Many conversations

centered on funding constraints, stakeholder input, and school district politics. I reached out to my district stakeholders composed of parents, teachers, administrators, students, district-level instructional supervisors, and school board members to obtain feedback on the proposed regulations, probe interest in program components, district initiatives, and possible funding avenues to explore. It was this journey that provided the basis for this study as I wanted to understand the sensemaking process of other gifted education coordinators.

As a district coordinator of gifted education, I am responsible for creating a budget and allocating funds for gifted program components. For the past six years, funding of the gifted education department has decreased due to dwindling state and local funding allocations. This has guided funding allocations and gifted education program components. Conversations regarding funding options, concessions due to budget constraints, and program models were discussed with other coordinators of gifted education program to eliminate ambiguity when reading the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* Local social networks were tapped to provide insight into how other districts were making sense of the policy. Funding constraints were considered during the sensemaking process when determining how to implement the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* while decreasing the overall gifted education budget. At times, funding or the lack of funding drove the program components within my school district. Personnel within the school division led professional development sessions in the area of gifted education versus attending outside workshops to provide funding for program components. Grants and outside assistance

from local universities have been tapped to subsidize funding and provide additional resources to district teachers.

Local and state politics also influenced my sensemaking process when reading and implementing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* State and local politics guided the amount of funding available for local school divisions and in turn the gifted education program. As a coordinator of gifted education, I recognized the role of local and state politics in my sensemaking process and through this study, I wanted to see if there were similarities in other districts. Additionally, individual stakeholder input and local school board initiatives also shaped the sensemaking process as their goals were considered when planning program components. One such example is the open access for students to Advanced Placement courses and the desire for an equity balance in gifted programs.

As part of my position, I participated in networking opportunities, both formal and informal, with other gifted education coordinators in the region and across the state. These networking opportunities occurred in small groups as well as state level meetings and gifted education conferences. This provided me with some knowledge of various gifted education programs in Virginia. My familiarity with the gifted coordinators and their programs served as a resource as I developed the interview protocol and conducted the interviews because I had personal experience of the sensemaking process and interpreting gifted education policy. My familiarity also served as a potential bias since my own experiences with networking, stakeholders, funding constraints, and policymakers could have swayed how I coded the interview transcripts and interpreted the results. When reviewing gifted education policy, I turned to the social and formal

networks of other coordinators of gifted education. We discussed gifted education policy, highlighted ambiguities in the policy, and worked to brainstorm possible solutions or programmatic implications. This network provided beneficial feedback on program implications, solutions to funding or political initiatives, and an opportunity to alleviate ambiguity in the education policy. I collaborated with other gifted education teachers and coordinators to present workshops and professional development opportunities in the region and at the state level. I participated and chaired the local gifted education coordinator group for the region where networking discussions regarding programming, funding, gifted education policy, politics, and resources took place. I attended an annual meeting of gifted education coordinators where gifted programming, funding, resources, policy interpretation, and the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* were the topics of discussion. Information gained in these informal and formal networking opportunities assisted me in making sense of education policy and to inform the decision-making process as the gifted program was implemented in my school district. As a longtime advocate for gifted education, I believe that gifted programming is vitally important for gifted students in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

I am the sole investigator of this study. I monitored my subjectivity using a journal, analytical memos, and relied on my experiences in the field of education and in gifted education to enhance my data analysis. It is important as a qualitative researcher to follow the necessary steps to ensure the credibility of the study. This included clarifying the role of the researcher while assuming the various roles as observer, interviewer, and data analyzer (Unluer, 2012). As a coordinator of gifted education, I was studying a group to which I belong, therefore making me an inside researcher.

Jenkins (2000) noted an inside researcher was a member of a group with access and one who shares experiences with the research participants. There are benefits to being an inside researcher. First, I have the knowledge of the culture I am studying. Second, the flow of the social interactions remains uninterrupted, and finally, the existence of the collegial relationship can promote honesty from the participants (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). I was concerned about the possible effect of bias on the data and the findings.

My position as a gifted education coordinator provided professional interactions with other gifted education supervisors and insider knowledge of gifted education programs in Virginia. This interaction on a professional level proved to be a source of strength in terms of my inside knowledge of the field of gifted education, as well as bias in seeking open and honest dialogue during the study. As an inside researcher, I understood my participants' professional activities, their roles and responsibilities, and the network of resources available to them.

As I worked in the field that I researched, I answered my interview questions and probes as an analysis of the interview protocol. This process assisted me in exploring how my bias may impact the study, as I not only bring knowledge, opinions, and views that may serve as either an asset or liability when soliciting others views and experiences. Prior to conducting interviews, I employed a system of bracketing where I intentionally set aside my personal experiences or preconceived notions to best understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). In this bracketing process, I reviewed my answers to the interview questions, reflected on my personal beliefs regarding the 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*, how I approached my own sensemaking process and implementation of the gifted program in my school

district, and how I formally and informally networked with other coordinators of gifted education programs. As part of the bracketing process, I reviewed my own annual journals from 2012 to revisit my questions and thoughts regarding the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*. In my annual journal, I listed questions, comments, and thoughts regarding the ambiguity in the language of the education policy, how the policy would be implemented in my school district and how funding and politics might impact my implementation process. After the bracketing process, I wrote a reflection journal on how the areas of funding, politics, networking and the role of stakeholders impacted my sensemaking process as I interpreted and implemented gifted education policy. This strategy also strengthened the trustworthiness of the study. To manage my subjectivity in the face-to-face interviews, I developed a semi-structured interview protocol that did not reveal my personal views about how gifted education policy should be interpreted and acted upon in local districts. While the potential for bias was present, I believe that the protocols, methodology, and ongoing reflection journal allowed for openness to all data, themes, and conclusions within the study.

Trustworthiness

Areas for building trustworthiness in a qualitative study include credibility, applicability, consistency, neutrality, and truth value (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Verification steps are used to insure trustworthiness and credibility. For a study to be valid and credible, the researcher documents how confident he/she is in the findings in terms of research design, context, and participants. I kept a journal where I documented the research design, context, and participant notes. The time spent building sound

relationships with the participants and the time spent conducting the interview contributed to trustworthy data (Glesne, 2011). To ensure trustworthiness of the data and analysis of the study, it was important to acknowledge any potential threats to the validity of the conclusions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As I was a studying a group to which I belonged and therefore an inside researcher, the foundation for the relationship building with the participants occurred at annual gifted coordinator meetings, regional meetings, and professional development opportunities. For this study, I provided ample time for the interview process (60 to 90 minutes) to build rapport and receive a clear picture from the gifted coordinators regarding how they made sense of gifted education policy and the roles of funding, politics, and the networking resources used during their sensemaking process. Alertness to your own subjectivity and bias also assisted in producing trustworthy interpretations (Glesne, 2001). As I conducted the interviews, read the transcripts, analyzed, and coded the participant responses, it was important for me to be forthcoming with my thought processes as I interpreted the data. I used analytical memos and reflection journals to consider my own subjectivity and work within the field of gifted education within the context of the trustworthiness of the data and findings. I reflected on my own responses to the interview questions and acknowledged how working in the field I was studying could be a potential bias.

The researcher must also establish confidence in the truth of the findings for the study to have truth value (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conducted member checking during each interview to verify that the data collected depicted the understanding and sentiment of the participant's answers. Member checking was an important quality control process and involved clarifying what was understood from the participant's responses (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985) and thus achieved credibility. For this study, I conducted member checks at the end of each interview. This assisted me with recognizing if I was hearing what the participants expressed or if I was hearing what I wanted to hear because of my own subjectivity and experiences as a gifted education coordinator.

Throughout a study, the researcher must be consciously aware of how his or her background impacts the study. According to Creswell (2007) reflexivity "[m]eans that the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study" (p. 243). One potential threat to the validity of my study was that I am a gifted coordinator in the field that I am studying and participants may be wary of providing interview data to a colleague. I was concerned whether the participants would be honest in sharing their opinions with a colleague. My aim was to acknowledge my subjectivity rather than attempting to control it (Ortlipp, 2008). One method for acknowledging subjectivity, assumptions, and goals is for the researcher to maintain a self-reflective journal. As qualitative researchers, we interpret the data, draw on our own experiences, theoretical dispositions, and knowledge as we collect data and find meaning in other's words (Glesne, 1992). In qualitative studies, the researcher has influence that may shape interpretations or potential outcomes. Thus, the study must be designed to control for such influence, values, and bias. It is important for the researcher to be aware of how he or she has influenced the participant and ultimately how this influence shaped the validity of the study. As an inside researcher, it was important for me to recognize that an individual's background and personal experiences could influence how I make sense of the data garnered from this study (Krefting, 1991).

I also used field journals to document the interview process and analytic memos to engage in reflexivity. The reflexive memos acknowledged my own biases, my thoughts regarding the interview protocol, and how I answered the interview questions. Once again, I reviewed my annual journal from 2012 to reflect on how my own sensemaking process. I noted how I made sense of gifted education policy, how funding and politics played a role in my interpretation and sensemaking process. I also completed a journal on how I used the technical and social resources of my network to make sense of gifted education policy. I also reflected on how I thought the participants would respond to specific questions regarding the roles of politics and funding in the sensemaking process. These memos and journals provided opportunities to ponder connections, discuss biases, make inferences, and analyze themes within the data. I used these memos and journals as a basis for developing themes on the importance of networking, the role of stakeholders, funding, and politics in the implementation process of gifted education policy. These connections and themes were then used when analyzing the interview data and presenting the results.

Applicability and Transferability

The applicability of a study is rooted in how the findings or lessons learned can be applied to other settings or found useful by others. For the study to have applicability or transferability, the findings must fit into context outside of the study's parameters (Krefting, 1991). Transferability is assessed by a few factors. First, the descriptions included in the study must provide a realistic picture to the reader. Secondly, the amount of information provided by the researcher assists in building a shared experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This study is set in the Commonwealth of Virginia and

focuses on the how coordinators of gifted education in local school districts made sense of and implemented gifted education policy in the Commonwealth. Analysis of data using the sensemaking conceptual framework allowed the researcher to describe how gifted education specialists interpreted and implemented gifted education policies. Virginia is like other states in size and diversity of rural, suburban, and urban school divisions. Eight district coordinators of gifted education were purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of the state. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. When compared to other states, Virginia is similar in size and diversity of rural, suburban, and urban school divisions so a similar sampling design could be employed. In the 43 other states that have gifted education programs, a study of this nature could have applicability or transferability as others seek to understand the sensemaking process. Should a researcher wish to conduct a similar study, the process could be applicable to other states or even other educational departments who seek to understand the process of sensemaking.

Consistency and Dependability

According to Krefting (1991) "[q]ualitative research emphasized the uniqueness of the human situation, so that variation in experience rather than identical repetition is sought" (p. 216). With the small participant pool of eight district coordinators of gifted education, the study findings may be exploratory, limited to individual perceptions, and may not be reflective of the entire state. With variation in mind, qualitative studies could be generalized across many subject areas while maintaining consistency and dependability.

One threat to the study would include that I am an inside researcher in the field that I am studying and participants may be wary of providing interview data to a colleague, despite pseudonyms being used. Freedom from bias in research procedures is considered another criterion of trustworthiness, known as neutrality (Krefting, 1991). Objectivity is a key to neutrality and achieved by rigor of methodology and emphasis on the data remaining free from bias. In this study, I strengthened the credibility and neutrality of the study using analytic memos and journaling to support researcher reflexivity as I acknowledged by potential bias.

Human Participants and Ethics Precautions

The risk of participating in this study was minimal and all individuals were aware of the voluntary nature of contributing. During all phases of this study, I adhered to the guidelines stipulated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of The George Washington University. To ensure that ethical safeguards were upheld, I informed participants that their participation was voluntary, important, anonymous, and desirable (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Information was held in confidence and participant identities protected so that information collected would not cause harm in any way to the participants. The participants were informed about the steps I took to guarantee the confidentiality of the data such as using pseudonyms of districts and participants to maintain confidentiality. For the individual interview sessions, informed consents were utilized to offer guidance to the participants regarding how I safeguarded their information, explained the scope of the study and how the findings would be used.

Chapter Four: Results

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how district level coordinators of gifted education made sense of gifted education policy for their respective school systems. The conceptual framework for the study drew upon the process of sensemaking to understand how gifted educators interpret and apply existing policy or recent changes at the time of this research. A semi-structured open-ended interview protocol was administered to a researcher selected sample of personnel responsible for gifted education programs within a school district. Using constructivism as a paradigm of inquiry, the individual interviews sought to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Additional interview questions sought to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education.

As coordinators of gifted education, individuals in school districts brought a diversity of perceptions and experiences to their role and the decision-making process. These experiences may be influenced by a coordinator's background, educational level, prior job positions, interactions within the school district, and individual stakeholder interests, among other factors/considerations. The adoption of the Virginia 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* provided the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialist's sensemaking as all Virginia gifted coordinators must continue to plan, design, and implement gifted programs in their respective districts.

The central research question guiding this study: How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of current and evolving gifted education policy?

The following sub-questions guided this study:

- How do the coordinators of gifted education make sense of gifted education policy through the technical and social resources of their professional network?
- How do you surface, understand, and apply stakeholder views in your leadership of gifted education?
- How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of the evolving politics of gifted education?
- As a district coordinator of gifted education, what role does funding (local and state) play in your sensemaking process?

Participants

The study participants were a high diversity sample of district-based individuals responsible for supervising gifted education programs within their school district. A high contrast sample of eight district coordinators of gifted education were purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of the state. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Table 6 provides an overview of the types of school districts and job responsibilities for each of the eight participants. Some coordinators worked only in gifted education while others had job duties for a variety of different programs.

Table 6

Type of School District and Job Responsibility for Study Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Type of School District	Job Responsibilities
Brooke	Urban	solely gifted education
Leslie	Urban	gifted education and making sure the district has programs to support students in need of tutoring or remediation
Renee	Suburban	gifted education, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Governor's School Programs
Tonya	Rural	gifted education, Title I, Title III, PALS assessments, Math and Reading Curriculum
Melissa	Suburban	gifted education, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Governor's School Programs
Carly	Suburban	solely gifted education
Jackson	Urban	gifted education, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Governor's School Programs, high school special programs
Blair	Rural	gifted education, Governor's School, Curriculum and Instruction for various content areas, curriculum based assessments

One common theme of how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy was rooted in their background in education. Their educational backgrounds informed the sensemaking process as the specialists drew on personal experiences with their own gifted children or their own teachers, years of teaching students, and at times, their lack of knowledge of gifted education. The backgrounds of the eight gifted coordinators were as diverse as the

school districts they represent. Their background in gifted education ranged from being new to gifted education, being a parent of a gifted child, having taught gifted education, having completed gifted endorsement classes, and having a Master's Degree or Doctorate in gifted education. Some had children who were identified as gifted. Others sought post-secondary endorsements or degrees in gifted education after teaching gifted students in the classroom. One common teaching experience shared by all participating gifted coordinators related to supporting gifted students in their classrooms. For Brooke, Leslie, and Renee, personal experiences of their own children being identified as gifted sparked an interest in the field of gifted education. Brooke spoke of drawing from personal experience to create a professional goal to meet the academic and social needs of the gifted children she believed were often ignored by teachers and even education policy. Brooke remarked that,

> Once I had children . . . both were identified gifted. That really solidified a fact that this was a group of students that had some unique needs that were often ignored and I did not want . . . all the talent that was sitting in that classroom to be wasted.

Leslie was a classroom teacher who recognized a diversity of abilities in her class. To further understand her students and to provide appropriate curriculum differentiation, Leslie sought out professional development opportunities on gifted education. Then, she embarked on earning an endorsement in gifted education after her two children were identified as gifted. Her two children were her catalyst for learning about gifted education so she could not only understand her children, but to help other gifted children succeed. As an advocate for gifted learners, Melissa felt gifted education was an

intriguing field because the importance of gifted education to the public had varied throughout history. At times, gifted education was not given the same attention as other fields in education. Melissa felt the needs of the gifted learner should be in the forefront, even if most of the educational leaders were focused on children passing the Virginia Standards of Learning tests and "being able to master some of the minimum competencies that we're expected to have as a society." This feeling shaped how Melissa approached the differentiated curriculum not only in her classroom, but also at a district level.

It was Jackson's own personal experiences as a child that led him to the field of gifted education. He explained, "I had really good teachers growing up and I wanted to have a similar impact upon kids." Jackson felt strongly about preparing gifted learners to lead in the future. When asked about teaching gifted students, Jackson noted, ". . . it's an opportunity to see [gifted] kids really get it and really understand and know that these are the students who are most likely to go on and be the movers and changers of the next generation." Jackson was motivated by helping to prepare his students as his teachers had done for him and this guided his approach to understanding gifted education policy. An opening in a course schedule for Introduction to Gifted Education while pursuing an undergraduate degree led Blair to a career and a post-secondary degree in gifted education. After being in the classroom for a few years, she decided to further her knowledge of the field. Blair decided to "go back and get my masters . . . and became a gifted resource specialist/teacher at the same time." She has since worked with other, newer gifted coordinators to share some lessons learned and to assist newcomers who may not have experience in the field of gifted education.

Not all participants sought out a job in gifted education nor did they have a background in gifted education and this caused the gifted coordinators to take a different approach to sensemaking by relying heavily on their network of other gifted coordinators. Almost all the eight gifted coordinators held a specialist endorsement in gifted education or a graduate degree in gifted education. Tonya's journey into gifted education came with her new position in the Central Office. She remarked, "when I moved from a Principalship to Central Office, [gifted education] was one of the roles of the position I took. It's just part of my job description." Tonya did not have any graduate level training in gifted education, which influenced her work. Due to the lack of specialized knowledge that would come with training or endorsement in gifted education, she encountered a steep "learning curve." To grow her professional knowledge, she relied on networking with other gifted coordinators in the state or utilizing documents created by her predecessor in this role.

When asked to share how the current work in gifted education compared to past positions or experiences, the responses ranged from daily interactions with students and additional staff development duties to overseeing multiple programs. Most of the responses reflected if the gifted coordinator was solely responsible for gifted education programs. Brooke and Carly identified gifted education as their sole responsibility. Leslie, Renee, Tonya, Melissa, Jackson, and Blair's responses reflected their program duties beyond gifted education. These included, for example, Advanced Placement, Governor's School, and International Baccalaureate Programs that tend to have gifted learners as the program participants. Other program responsibilities such as Curriculum Support, Response to Intervention Programs, Title I, Preschool, Title III, PALs

Assessments, and Special programs are outside of the gifted education focus. Blair noted that her job duties included programs other than gifted education and that at times, her focus was split as she managed the day-to-day work. Many gifted educators also mentioned moving from a classroom or school-based level directly into the central office where they were responsible for gifted education programs kindergarten through grade twelve. This move required Jackson, Blair, Renee, and Brooke to seek out additional guidance from other administrators as they learned to navigate their district responsibilities. In a form of interpersonal sensemaking, the gifted coordinators used the interpersonal dynamics and guidance from others to create a context for sensemaking about their role as gifted education coordinators (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

The background experiences of the gifted coordinators impacted how they approached their job responsibilities for gifted education and how they approached the sensemaking process when interpreting gifted education policy. The coordinators with gifted education experience or specialized endorsements in gifted education had better knowledge of gifted education than participants without classroom or graduate level course work. Brooke worked in a larger urban school district with responsibilities solely in gifted education. The move from the middle school classroom to the K-12 Central Office provided a learning curve and an opportunity for networking for Brooke. Having middle school teaching experience, she noted, "We work K-12 and so it's been very different for me to work with lower elementary students." This led Brooke to network and lean on her colleagues who had more experience with the lower elementary students.

When asked to compare her current work in gifted education with past positions, Brooke admitted the biggest difference was a shift from working with students in the classroom to being a district coordinator. She was still an educator, but now as a coordinator, her work was more focused on adults through staff development sessions than working with children in the classroom. Brooke noted, "I think it's a difference with whom I'm working (adults) rather than maybe the things that I'm doing . . . I do like the idea that I can train teachers. I've always liked working with adults, so that's a change."

Another difference in her work as a gifted coordinator was her work on the Local Plan for the Gifted and corresponding documents. Brooke described that she had been on a committee for the five-year [Local Plan for the Gifted] in the past, but I had not, of course, worked on the actual creating and physical writing and putting that plan together." This work moved her from the macro level to the micro level where she was now interpreting and implementing gifted education policy while using the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom.

For Renee, the journey to her current position as a gifted education coordinator started with volunteering in high school. She began teaching gifted education students after college graduation and then became a coordinator in a smaller school district. Renee recalled, moving from a coordinator in a small rural school district to "work at the state level and now I'm an administrator here" in a suburban school district. Renee's job responsibilities are all related to gifted education as "the gifted piece is by far the biggest piece of what I do, but I also work with the International Baccalaureate Program, the Governor's School Programs, and AP." As part of her sensemaking process, Renee drew on her experiences in multiple school districts, rural and suburban, as she interpreted the

gifted regulations and led program models for the International Baccalaureate Program and Advanced Placement. Having worked at the state level in gifted education provided a different insight for Renee as part of her state department duties included reading Local Plans for the Gifted. She noted that her prior job experiences provided a wealth of knowledge and she had less ambiguity when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.*

Jackson's move into gifted education administration followed a path like Renee's journey. Leading gifted programming in a large urban school district, Jackson noted, "If it's anything that a gifted student might be involved in I am probably involved in it in some way, shape, or form." His responsibilities spanned K-12 and included: coordinating kindergarten through grade twelve programs for gifted students; Advanced Placement; Governor's School; and special programs for high school students centered around math and science or World Languages. When comparing the current job responsibilities to those in the past, Jackson remarked, the move from the school level to district level was difficult because now he has many programs under his purview. Jackson noted, "it's an ongoing juggling act of making sure . . . you're keeping everything running as smoothly as possible, and unfortunately, you have way too many things that you're trying to juggle at one time." To make sense of gifted education policy, Jackson drew on his teaching experiences, but also reached out to other gifted coordinators for guidance, including his predecessor when he had ambiguity regarding language in the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*.

Carly and Blair echoed Jackson's path and drew on their classroom experiences to guide their work in her position and their interpretation of gifted education policy. Blair

explained, "I'm sort of more responsible on the macro level, but I also have a more in-depth understanding of how schools work so that I see things more complexly than, I guess, I did when I first started." This in-depth understanding assisted Blair when revising her school district's Local Plan for the Gifted. Melissa drew on her counseling background when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* to ensure her district's Local Plan for the Gifted included a strong support system for the social and emotional needs of the gifted learners.

The study participants were a high diversity sample of district-based individuals responsible for gifted education programs within his or her school district. A high contrast sample of eight district coordinators of gifted education were purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of the state. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The eight gifted coordinator participants had very diverse backgrounds. Their history in gifted education ranged from being new to gifted education, being a parent of a gifted child, having taught gifted education, having completed gifted endorsement classes, and having a Master's Degree or Doctorate in gifted education. The sensemaking process of the coordinators of gifted education began with their backgrounds knowledge, work assignments, and personal experiences. In a form of interpersonal sensemaking, the gifted coordinators used cues from others to create meaning in their work and understanding of the gifted education policy (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). The interpersonal dynamics that unfolded in the interactions among the gifted coordinators created a context for sensemaking about their job duties.

A common thread throughout the conversations centered on the gifted coordinators drawing on their personal experiences of having children in the gifted program or their own interactions in school when interpreting gifted education policy. For the coordinators who held a specialized endorsement in gifted education, there was less ambiguity because they had the graduate level knowledge of gifted education learners, curriculum components, and social and emotional needs of the gifted students. The coordinators without graduate level coursework in gifted education sought guidance and support from other gifted education coordinators to alleviate ambiguity and to make sense of gifted education policy.

Overwhelmingly, when asked about how their prior work compared to being the gifted coordinator, they noted the difference in moving from the school classroom or principal level to the district level. For some coordinators, the move from a rural to suburban or urban setting also added to their sensemaking process, as they could reflect on their roles in their former districts when interpreting gifted education policy in their current job. Those with experience in gifted classrooms drew on their experiences as part of the sensemaking process. However, the gifted coordinators without classroom gifted experience had a learning curve when accepting their current position. Most of the coordinators commented on the challenges of working with a K-12 program versus a specific level such as elementary, middle, or high school. For all of the gifted coordinators the sensemaking process was personal because they used their experiences from their personal life and previous teaching experiences to make sense of and interpret gifted education policy.

Research Question 1

How do the coordinators of gifted education make sense of gifted education policy through the technical and social resources of their professional network?

With the eight coordinators of gifted education responsible for a variety of programs within the respective school districts, I wanted to know how they learned what to do in the gifted coordinator position and what technical and social resources they were drawing upon or valued as part of their professional network. This professional network included other gifted coordinators, predecessors, and other instructional supervisors in their school district. Knowledge gained from completing graduate coursework in gifted education also provided a basis for the sensemaking process to occur as they reflected on their own studies and research. The gifted coordinators also cited alleviating ambiguity by reviewing documents such as Local Plans for the Gifted, parent resources, teacher resources and research as part of their sensemaking process. A common theme for the gifted coordinators was that learning was a daily process as they made sense and interpreted gifted education policy.

The eight gifted coordinators remarked they learned the duties of a gifted coordinator by reaching out and talking to other gifted coordinators. Melissa, Jackson, and Blair described that they had their predecessor as a mentor. As part of the sensemaking process, Melissa, Jackson, and Blair looked to the documents, program models, and Local Plan for the Gifted when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* Jackson and Blair expressed that when they had ambiguity or questions regarding gifted education policy, they turned to their predecessors for assistance and guidance.

Leslie and Blair listed their gifted endorsement coursework as a resource for helping them build a foundation for their position as well as prior experiences and continued education. Part of the coursework requirements included reviewing other school districts' Local Plan for the Gifted. Blair recalled, "reviewing the documents and plans of other school districts assisted me in getting a clear picture of how gifted programs were organized across the state." Further, Blair's graduate coursework at The Center for Gifted at The College of William and Mary provided her the opportunity to "pick the brains and soak up all I could" from leaders in gifted education such as Joyce VanTassel-Baska. Blair noted a graduate school internship in gifted education assisted in learning what to do in the current position, as ". . . I was fortunate having that internship before stepping into the role." Brooke also drew on her graduate coursework and personal experiences as a gifted education teacher and parent of gifted children to assist with her on-the-job training when she moved from the classroom level to the district level. Despite her specialized endorsement in gifted education and her teaching experience, Brooke noted,

> I'm still learning. I've had wonderful mentors . . . so I kind of watched what happened and that helped me understand what the role would be. . . . I could see the kinds of questions that she asked and I could see the kinds of forms that she used and how she had the conversation with the teacher, and how she determined that the conversation should go this direction . . . so she essentially trained me in the nuts and bolts of it.

Brooke noted the size of her district assisted in her training and learning because she was not the only gifted coordinator in the urban district. She noted that being in a larger

school district allowed for her to interact and network with other individuals in similar positions. This networking assisted in her sensemaking process.

Resources from other gifted coordinators throughout the state and nationally such as documents, letters, pamphlets, and emails assisted Leslie and Renee in their knowledge gaining process. When thinking back on how they approached interpreting gifted education policy, Renee remarked that when "going into any position, it's a matter of looking at the documents and the materials that are there, comparing that to the state regulations, and then talking to colleagues." Renee previously worked at the state level in gifted education. So, she was familiar with reviewing gifted documents across the state including Local Plan for the Gifted, identification packets, teacher resources, and parent resources. Renee relied on her background from working at the state level and participating in multiple technical review sessions to clear up any ambiguity she encountered with state level documents. Renee relied on information from contacts to assist other gifted coordinators. She explained that she, ". . . was answering a lot of questions for a lot of other people. I think it is really important for those networks to be in place whether you're on the receiving end or on the giving end of it." Tonya used a predecessor's work as a starting point while remarking, "I was able to pick up . . . where she left off, and she'd also done a lot of research from around the state and pulled samples of things." Reviewing documents left by her predecessor was the first step in the sensemaking process for Tonya. Renee, Carly, Jackson, and Melissa described their learning process as "trial and error" as they gleaned information from their gifted coordinator communities such as regional coordinator meetings and statewide gifted conferences. A theme expressed by the gifted coordinators was learning something new

was a daily occurrence and they relied on the network of their colleagues to make sense of gifted education policy.

The gifted coordinators were asked to identify or define the network of resources (social and technical) both inside and outside of the district that assisted them or helped them learn what to do in their positions. Responses included interactions with other gifted education coordinators at regional and state gifted education meetings as a networking tool while technical resources included documents, state guidelines, pamphlets, and websites such as the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), Virginia Association for the Gifted (VAG), and National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). Leslie acknowledged the benefits of a gifted coordinator network when she explained ". . . if I don't know how to do it or need extra resources from research to other gifted coordinators . . . I pick up the phone and ask what they're doing in this situation." Reaching out to regional gifted educators for guidance or to share ideas was also cited as a networking tool.

Upon reading the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, a common theme was the ambiguity and questions they had relating to the document and how they would implement the changes in their respective school districts. For Blair, ambiguity developed around interpreting state guidance to fit the unique features of the district. Blair explained: ". . . there's the literal interpretation of what is written, but then there's also trying to make sense of the wording and trying then to make sense for the context of the divisions." Similarly, Jackson, Carly, and Melissa recalled the document was somewhat difficult to understand in terms of the language, particularly around regulations. While the regulations caused ambiguity for the coordinators, Jackson

explained that he thought ". . . the Regulations in some areas are . . . appropriately vague, in that, they really leave things up to the division to make some decisions." Jackson felt that vague language allowed the divisions to meet the education policy while tailoring the Local Plan for the Gifted to the individual school divisions.

Leslie highlighted the importance of professional connections. She explained, "I have great support of my superintendent and the other department supervisors or coordinators and then we have state conferences and national conferences that we attend as appropriate." Renee also turned to the network of gifted coordinators for guidance in interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* to "clarify some of those pieces of ambiguity" related to teacher certification and the technical review process.

All of the gifted coordinators were members of regional gifted education committees that met multiple times during the year. The regional meetings were similar to professional learning communities in that they provided opportunities for the gifted coordinators to discuss topics relating to gifted education. Such topics included gifted education programming, state guidelines, professional development, book studies, and educational policy. The regional gifted education meeting provided a venue for the gifted coordinators to discuss any ambiguity they had when interpreting the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*. The regional meetings provided a platform to share ideas, review Local Plans for the Gifted, discuss how to measure student growth, review gifted identification measures, explore teacher certification and gifted endorsement options, discuss gifted programming policy, collaborate on staff

development opportunities such as Regional Professional Development Days, and to ask questions of their colleagues.

The regional and state gifted education coordinator meetings provided an avenue for resource sensemaking (Wright, Manning, Farment, & Gilbreath, 2000). Resource sensemaking was the ability to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others and to use the understanding to create meaning and sense of situations. Resource sensemaking relied on the sharing of ideas, posing of questions, and seeking out answers. Renee met with other gifted coordinators during regional meetings where they discussed teacher certification and how each district planned to approach the regulation. Similarly, the technical review process was new to the coordinators so Renee explained that her regional group conducted a mock technical review so all could be aware of the process and have an opportunity to discuss questions.

Jackson remarked that he relied on colleagues outside of the district in similar positions as they ". . . meet on a regular basis so I get an opportunity to bounce a lot of ideas off of those folks." Blair echoed Jackson in sharing examples of networking included serving on regional advisory group committees comprised of regional coordinators for gifted education. Blair noted the regional advisory groups provided a network of individuals who ". . . fulfill the technical and social in terms of having formed relationships with people that can call me . . . or that I can call and ask for background information." Networking can be a support, but also bring uncertainty. Brooke described a sense of "comfort" and "challenge" of learning experiences while networking. She further asserted, "the more you learn, the more you find out that you need to learn. And I think networking and talking to folks who are in the same boat

provides a comfort to you, but can also challenge you." Similarly, Melissa noted that while hearing and seeing a range of perspectives was beneficial, her process was then to eliminate ambiguity in how she interpreted the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*. She also shared her interpretations with other gifted coordinators. Melissa explained:

> Networking in itself allows you to see and hear other people's perspectives. Sometimes you can think you have an understanding of something and then you hear it…asked and answered somewhere else or by someone else and, you go, 'I was completely on the wrong part' . . . for me it allows me to kind of just run ideas by -- or be that sounding board for someone else. That doesn't happen if you haven't created a network.

Leslie recalled interactions with other gifted coordinators at the regional meetings, also included planning discussions about ". . . creating those local plans in each of our divisions and reviewing other people's plans." Topics discussed focused on the identification process in each school division, the latest best practices and research, and how gifted coordinators approached professional development.

Carly noted collaboration with other gifted coordinators at the Gifted Coordinators Virginia Consortium and regional gifted meetings were technical and social resources that "play into the resources she used" during the sensemaking process. Brooke characterized the network within the gifted community as providing support and assistance in interpreting education policy,

> I think the calls we get [from one another] are sometimes just for some advice or just for some discussing, they're not looking for us to tell them exactly what to

do. [Other gifted coordinators are] looking to be able to talk through a problem and get some suggestions and then work on it and then come back and talk about it a little more . . . And that's for them as much as it is for us to -- to support each other. It makes a really solid social community of the entire gifted community.

Blair echoed the importance of leaning and learning from other gifted coordinators when she recalled feeling as though she knew all 132 gifted coordinators in the state because she had worked with them at regional gifted coordinator meetings or at the state Consortium for Gifted Coordinators. Blair recalled that one of the benefits of the gifted coordinator network was to speak with and share ideas with ". . . people who often wear multiple hats like me." The use of subgroups of gifted coordinators was beneficial when individuals met as regional groups or when a coordinator wanted to discuss programming options with another similar rural school division.

Another form of networking was at the state and national gifted conferences. Each of the eight gifted coordinators maintained a membership and active participation in state and/or national gifted organizations such as The Virginia Association for the Gifted, Virginia Consortium of Gifted Coordinators, and National Association for Gifted Children. Blair cited the "Virginia Association for the Gifted" as a technical resource for articles in addition to professional journals and research on gifted education. Many of the gifted coordinators chose to attend the Virginia Association for the Gifted (VAG) conferences and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) conferences. Brooke recalled gaining insight and suggestions from leaders in gifted education such as Jack Naglieri, Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Donna Ford, Sally Reis, and Joseph Renzulli. Renee agreed and welcomed the opportunity to learn about the latest advancements in

gifted education outside of the state of Virginia such as identification procedures for students from poverty, English language learners, and twice-exceptional students.

For all participants, the networking process expanded beyond formal and informal interactions among gifted personnel. Participants mentioned using similar technical resources such as professional journals, available research, parent resources, and identification tools. They all also utilized a set of state guidelines, including planning documents for revising the individual Local Plan for the Gifted Education, handouts relating to the gifted education teacher competencies, and the 2012 *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* According to Renee, one of the most important programming discussions concerns the Local Plan for the Gifted, specifically its peer feedback as a form of professional support. Renee explained: ". . . the technical review gives administrators the chance to really evaluate each other's local plans in an environment that's conducive to providing support rather than solely criticism." Renee recalled that part of the sensemaking process for her was conducting a mock technical review in regional meetings because it reduced the ambiguity she had regarding the process. The gifted coordinators went step-by-step through the technical review process, gained feedback on their Local Plan for the Gifted from other district coordinators, and could gain insight into plan components. This was extremely beneficial to the sensemaking process when regions of similar size or type such as rural, urban, or suburban could see components such as the program model and identification tools found in the Local Plan for the Gifted in districts of comparison.

Another example of technical resources used in the sensemaking process were the documents provided by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) such as the

understanding the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, guidelines for writing the Local Plan for the Gifted, supporting identification of twice-exceptional students, the technical review template, and opportunities for middle and high school students. As part of the sensemaking process, the gifted coordinators sought technical resources such as guidance documents and explanations of the regulations to assist them in answering unknown questions interpreting gifted education policy. Renee remarked that at the VDOE, ". . . the gifted department puts out a lot of guidance documents that can actually be very helpful." She found the technical resources helpful when designing program components for the middle and high school students and when writing her district's Local Plan for the Gifted. Melissa used the technical resources provided by the gifted department of the VDOE, but also turned to the National Association for Gifted Children's website. Melissa explained that she used the resources available on gifted websites at the local, state, and national level for technical support and her sensemaking process when interpreting the gifted regulations. Blair recalled her process for tapping prior knowledge and experience to understand current or new gifted policy:

> I've read a wide range of program models, curriculum models, instructional strategies, and philosophies in terms of implementation. I do have a couple of key resources that I typically turn to . . . of how I would plan to implement the policy, the Regulations, and the local plan.

These resources were used during Blair's sensemaking process as she sought understand and implement the gifted education policy. For Jackson, state law was an "anchor" for the work, explaining: "we go back to our local plan quite frequently because that is . . .

our anchor document . . . it's in alignment with . . . state regulations . . . " When faced with ambiguity and questions, the gifted resources sought technical resources for answers, guidance, and suggestions. These technical resources assisted the gifted coordinators with their sensemaking process as the documents provided a path for understanding and meaning making. For this narrowing and focusing of sensemaking, Jackson cultivated his professional gifted coordinator network to challenge his own assumptions and gather different views from others.

The sensemaking process occurs when ambiguity is present. When asked to discuss the ambiguity raised by the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, participant Leslie remarked, "Did I have questions? Absolutely, we all have questions, but it was all discussed through the networking and [in] collaboration with other coordinators." Tonya, Carly, and Jackson elaborated on the benefit of discussing ambiguous questions and sharing aspects of their Local Plan for the Gifted with a coordinator in a similar size division. According to Jackson, the act of ". . . brainstorming and thinking out loud with my peers and my colleagues helps me in my decision-making process." Blair described networking as a positive tool for making sense of gifted policy ". . . both within gifted education networking and then also within the (district) networking." Specifically, she used it with others to examine the interaction of policies, especially "how the [gifted education] policy relates to other policy that are implemented or being considered." Blair further remarked that a benefit of networking was discussing the Local Plan for the Gifted with coordinators from other rural regions or districts of similar size. The rich discussions with members of the gifted coordinator

networked sparked the sensemaking process as the individuals attempted to eliminate ambiguity and interpret the gifted education policy.

When asked to reflect on their steps of interpreting educational policy and specifically the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, networking was a word shared most often as was drawing from personal experiences. Similarly, participant Tonya used knowledge from her prior experience with a structured process used in in the special education field to interpret the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* Her sensemaking example focuses on power differentials. She explains: Drawing from her experience with special education, Tonya explained, "the power process is very similar to what you would see in the special education world in going through the steps, looking at diverse pieces of evidence, and having all the stakeholders at the table when we have those discussions." Both Melissa and Renee recalled using their current plan as a starting point for revising their Local Plan for the Gifted documents rather than starting over with a new document. As part of her sensemaking process, Renee ". . . looked at the previous local plan that was here because I don't think divisions usually start from scratch, I think divisions usually or almost always build on what they previously had, so all those pieces put together." Renee focused on determining what could be kept from the previous local plan, what questions she had about the new regulations, and the specific areas where she needed to interpret the new language in the education policy.

For the eight gifted coordinators, networking plays a role in the sensemaking process as they made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. When faced with ambiguity regarding the regulations, the gifted coordinators turned to their networks of

regional and state gifted coordinators. Through resource sensemaking, the gifted education coordinators understood and appreciated the perspectives of others as they sought to create meaning and make sense of the gifted education policy (Wright, Manning, Farment, & Gilbreath, 2000). Conversations at the regional and state meetings focused on identification of gifted learners, various program components available throughout the state, and aligning the district's Local Plan for the Gifted to the state regulations. A benefit of networking was being able to call and discuss aspects of gifted education with other rural, suburban, or urban school district leaders. The opportunity to run ideas past one another or to get insight into how one school district answered an ambiguous question was key in the resource sensemaking process of the gifted coordinators. Tapping prior knowledge of instructional strategies, program models, and gifted education philosophies gained through endorsement or graduate programs in gifted education also assisted in the interpretation process. They also relied on the technical and social resources available to those responsible for gifted education programs in the school districts.

Research Question 2

How do you surface, understand, and apply stakeholder views in your leadership of gifted education?

All eight gifted education coordinators viewed stakeholders as a vital role in their school districts and in their sensemaking process. When asked to define the types of stakeholders in their school districts, all identified students, parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, community members, and the Gifted Advisory Boards for each school district. Brooke noted that she considered stakeholders "pretty

much the entire population [of the school division] . . . we think the students are like the ultimate stakeholder anyway . . . that's who we're trying to reach." The gifted coordinators sought feedback from parents, teachers, administrators, and the Gifted Advisory Boards when reviewing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for of Gifted Students* and when writing their Local Plan for the Gifted. For Leslie, the Gifted Advisory Committee for the district has stakeholders, including coordinators of departments, teachers, parents, community members, and representatives from the Governor's School. Her Gifted Advisory Committee ". . . had input of initially writing [the local district plan] and then as we revise it every year." Depending on the district, the gifted coordinators gathered stakeholder feedback informally through conversations and emails or formally through surveys, meetings, or reports. Renee and Tonya's districts sought input from stakeholders through annual surveys and provided periodic reports to their school boards regarding updates in the gifted education department. Melissa presented the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* to ". . . principals, the school board . . . gifted resource teachers, all three levels."

While the gifted coordinator was ultimately responsible for writing the Local Plan for the Gifted, Melissa chose to approach writing the plan as a committee with members working on individual sections of the plan such as the vision of the program, the program model, professional development, identification, and academic growth. Her committee of stakeholders including principals, parents, teachers, and school board members assisted in drafting the Local Plan for the Gifted so it aligned to the new regulations. Melissa described that after drafts of the Local Plan for the Gifted were written, it was then "touched, and stroked, and everybody [on the committee] had a chance to ask every

question they could possible ask." The process of asking and answering questions assisted in the sensemaking process of Melissa as it alleviated ambiguity. All the participants indicated they obtained feedback from stakeholders regarding programs and initiatives in an effort to ensure they were meeting the needs of the students, school, and community. As part of the interpretation process, the participants described initiatives and/or programs stakeholders felt were important in their district.

When asked to share examples of the programs or initiative of interest to the stakeholders in her division, Brooke explained that the stakeholders in her division (parents, teachers, school board members, and administrators) appreciated the idea of a separate ". . . school where students will get differentiated instruction and early language courses as well as . . . accelerated math . . . and those specialized arts programs." Therefore, Brooke's sensemaking process included research on program models to meet the interests of the stakeholders in her district. Similarly, Renee's district stakeholders supported a school for gifted students and "that parents want more time in gifted instruction for their kids . . . in the gifted resource program . . . more than an hour a week." Additionally, Renee suggested that the stakeholders were concerned about initiatives other than gifted education including "STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), accreditation, graduation rates, AP course, all those pieces on the report cards that the state is looking for [school districts]." As part of her sensemaking process, Renee networked with other school district coordinators to determine how they offered the gifted resource program so she could build a similar program within her district. Melissa's stakeholders wanted to include in the Local Plan for the Gifted "any type of opportunity for rigorous content engagement, specifically in programs that allow

students opportunities to have college access . . . AP, IB, dual enrollment opportunities, anything . . . STEM." Initiatives of importance to Carly's school district also included STEM, college readiness, and opportunities for leadership. Leslie consulted the stakeholders through conversations and surveys to determine their initiatives. Leslie described that the self-contained elementary gifted program and the Governor's School as being vital components to the division's program model." A common theme throughout the stakeholder initiatives included programs for gifted learners, opportunities for advancement, college readiness, and rigorous content engagement. A few of the stakeholders cited program models such as individual schools for gifted learners, the gifted resource program, Advanced Placement (AP), Governor's School, and International Baccalaureate (IB).

The gifted coordinators drew guidance from the initiatives important to stakeholders when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and making sense of education policy. As part of the sensemaking process, all eight gifted coordinators relied on feedback from the stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and Gifted Advisory Groups. When faced with ambiguity such as how to incorporate a specific initiative like increased time for the gifted resource program, the gifted coordinators turned to their gifted network for suggestions and ideas for program models. When stakeholders were interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), Carly looked to other similarly sized districts to see how they incorporated STEM strategies in their local plan. Each of the gifted coordinators noted the role of stakeholders in their sensemaking process of education policy because the initiatives of importance assisted in driving the

interpretation process of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.*

Research Question 3

How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of the evolving politics of gifted education?

The role of politics (local and state) in the sensemaking process of gifted coordinators varied among the participants. While all participants viewed the local and state politicians as a stakeholder group, only some of the gifted coordinators indicated political agendas or initiatives came into consideration when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* Leslie and Tonya noted political agendas could play a role in the sensemaking process of gifted education policy at the state level in terms of funding, but both indicated it did not factor into their current interpretation process. When asked to share initiatives of importance to local and state politicians, the responses were like those of the other stakeholder groups including parents, teachers, administrators, students, and Gifted Advisory Groups. The initiatives of interest included class size, Advanced Placement, Governor's School, Standards of Learning scores, accreditation, STEM, rigor, and advancement. Political decisions do influence the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. Blair explained her sense of legislator sensemaking and how she prioritized programs and wrote the district's Local Plan for the Gifted.

> . . . at the state level . . . our [gifted]regulations are set by the (VA) General Assembly, a political body. But then again, a lot of legislators rely on personal experience when talking about education in general much less gifted. I know this

> by my couple of years of advocacy through the Virginia Association for the Gifted. . . . I think personal experience weighs more than anything as well as personal mindsets about education, amount of regulation, or lack thereof.

Blair made sense of gifted policy through the idiosyncratic, personal mindsets, and experiences that legislators used/drew upon when assessing the merit or allocation of resources to education program.

Based on Jackson's experience, the role of politics in his sensemaking process started with listening to the initiatives and then aligning the Local Plan for the Gifted with the political goals. He explains:

> It would be naïve for me to say that [politics] don't [play a part]. Yes. I mean, we move in certain directions based upon, you know, where the division is going, and what they [school board and local elected officials] are interested in . . . We're very, very fortunate that the interest of the division's politics is very much in line with what gifted education wants to do.

Jackson described the division's politics as STEM, college readiness, and opportunities for rigorous learning that were then used as a guide for him as he interpreted the gifted regulations.

Melissa's sensemaking process included determining how to include the programs of interest to the elected officials in her plan. Melissa acknowledges that ". . . no elected official wants to have a school in their area that doesn't have all the possible services afforded to their students [such as gifted education] . . . so, in the plan, I include all of the different ways we could service the students." This required Melissa to review similar size districts' Local Plan for the Gifted for ideas on how to implement gifted

programs in all the schools. Further, Melissa felt the inclusion of different service models [pull-out resource, full-time gifted classes, and push-in programs] "did help during all that budget time for [the budget committee] not to cut any positions."

Budget management was a theme during interviews with the gifted coordinators regarding the role of local and state politics. Political decisions also influenced the implementation of the gifted program in the area of budget. Renee noted, when there are "budget cuts and it goes after staffing, and after programs, we understand . . . that if the cuts are across the board it'll impact us too and . . . we hope that it doesn't impact us anymore significantly than it impacts any other department." Renee, who has been in her position for 10 years explained that her sensemaking process was to construct a Local Plan for the Gifted that could sustain budget cuts but also aligned with the gifted regulations and the interests of the stakeholders in her district such as the teachers, parents, students, school board, and Gifted Advisory Group. This idea was echoed by Carly who explained, ". . . because if we don't have the funds to continue programs or to initiate programs and politicians aren't leaning toward gifted, then it . . . puts more constraints on us."

Carly, who has been in the position for 11 years, also noted another possible scenario: ". . . if we do have people in higher positions who are very supportive, then our programs continue to grow and flourish." Carly sought the knowledge of gifted coordinators in suburban school districts to make sense of what program model could work in her district. Having a gifted program aligned to the stakeholder interests, including school board members and local politicians, was key to the interpretation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and in revising the

Local Plan for the Gifted. Gifted coordinators reviewed the regulations and as part of their sensemaking process, they had to determine what was possible, feasible within a given budget, and what aligned to stakeholder and political interests. Jackson explained, ". . . you have to be looking at things through the lens of what you're actually going to be able to pull off . . . if the local politics run counter to what you're trying to do, you're not going to meet with success." According to Brooke, ensuring gifted programs are successful and acceptable to stakeholders did play a role in the sensemaking process. She explained: "If what you're doing is currently acceptable to the vast majority of the governing body, in our case the school board, and city council because they eventually have to approve our budget . . . then it's kind of [staying the course]." For Jackson, his sensemaking process was rooted in developing a gifted program acceptable to the school board, city council, and the school district personnel. Tonya noted how professional development offerings are often guided by political interest. She remarked ". . . some of the professional developments that I steer them [teachers to . . . matches some of the political interests in the area" such as infusing STEM strategies in lessons and career training.

Overall, gifted coordinators acknowledged the role of local and state politics as a factor in the sensemaking process of gifted coordinators. They viewed local and state politicians as a stakeholder group and did take their initiatives and agendas into consideration when writing their Local Plans for the Gifted. All participants agreed local and state politics could impact the funding received not only at the district level, but also for the gifted education department. When faced with the ambiguity of how to include political interests in the gifted program, the gifted coordinators sought possibilities for

program models in their network of gifted coordinators. As part of the sensemaking process, they reached out to similarly sized districts to seek possibilities for programming options, suggestions, and feedback from their colleagues. The gifted coordinators operated in the realm of possibility and used their network of colleagues as a resource when interpreting and implementing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.*

Research Question 4

As a district coordinator of gifted education, what role does funding (local and state) play in your sensemaking process?

When asked to share factors the gifted coordinator considered when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and then writing or revising the Local Plan for the Gifted, funding was a theme throughout the interviews. The responses of the urban gifted coordinators differed from those of their suburban and rural counterparts where funding was not as much an issue. Funding and staffing were also considerations in how the interpretation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*.

Funding in the suburban districts played a role in the sensemaking process of the gifted coordinators as they researched possible program components, avenues for staff development, and the staff needed to support the implementation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*. Suburban based Renee explained that her sensemaking process was driven by funding but also by best practices and experience. In a form of resource sensemaking, Renee relied on the sharing of ideas, posing of questions, and seeking of answers to determine how to interpret the gifted

education policy considering the funding constraints (Wright, Manning, Farment, & Gilbreath, 2000). Renee looked at the program models that worked in her district, but also in districts of similar size for ideas. Then, she ". . . looked at what our budget was, specifically in terms of staffing. There's a lot of things we'd like to do, but just don't have the staffing to do it." One example Renee recalled focused on completing the gifted eligibility process within the 90 day timelines without the staff to manage the volume of gifted referrals. Another example of the funding impact was in the visual arts programs and the necessary staff to offer specific course electives. As part of her sensemaking process, Renee listed the initiatives of importance to stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, students, school board, and the Gifted Advisory Committee.) She then narrowed her interpretations of the gifted regulations to what was feasible within the budget, staffing, and program model.

Similarly, Carly and Melissa cited funding as a factor when providing additional staff to serve the students and in providing program resources for the students. When looking at the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, Carly further explained that she "had to look at the economy. There are things that I know we would be doing in a perfect world where we had all the funds . . . I have to take . . . what is reasonable based on if the economy gets worse, if the economy stays the same, or if it improves." When writing the Local Plan for the Gifted, Carly had to make concessions regarding purchasing additional Governor's School slots, providing gifted resource teachers at the high school, but recognized that as a gifted program, they could provide many opportunities that rural districts did not offer such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and gifted programs at the elementary level. Leslie remarked

that as long as she had justification, funding, ". . . is not a huge barrier." Leslie noted her district supported the gifted program and understood the funding requests associated with providing a differentiated curriculum for learners K-12. In the suburban school districts, funding impacted staffing, purchasing differentiated curriculum materials, and some program courses. However, funding was not as much of a barrier to the implementation process as it was for rural school districts.

When interpreting and implementing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, funding allocations had a direct tie to the types of programs that could be offered in school districts. In the rural school district, Tonya reflected, ". . . one of the budget reductions a few years ago, was to go to half-time gifted teachers at each elementary school, and that's where we get the most feedback as far as what we need to change to improve." The reduction in staff limited the amount of time the gifted resource teachers worked with the students. As part of her sensemaking process Tonya spoke with other rural gifted education coordinators to discuss how they were planning to implement the regulations. These conversations guided her decision-making process. Blair from a rural school district noted the district spends more than is allotted from the state plus the local share for gifted education. Commenting on trying to expand the gifted education program, Blair noted, expansion ". . . would require local funds and we are having a problem with the division getting local funds for things that are direly needed in the division for general education . . . so, expanding gifted programs would be very challenging." Funding concerns by the participants included staffing, purchasing testing materials, completing evaluations in the 90-day timeline, providing staff development for all teachers who teach an identified gifted child, and the types of programs available.

The gifted coordinators shared a common theme of feasibility and possibility when interpreting and writing a Local Plan for the Gifted, which would work within the specific school district. For Blair, the goal was to write a Local Plan for the Gifted that was feasible and able to be implemented, but also included initiatives of interest to stakeholders. Blair explained, "I want to . . . build a plan that is implementable, feasible, but also forward thinking in terms of next steps." Blair reviewed other rural districts program models and drew on her gifted education background when interpreting the gifted regulations.

For urban districts, funding was not a barrier because they had a larger local composite index with funding from local and state sources. However, funding did play a role when Brooke was trying to decide how to approach professional development for her teachers. With such a large school district and with the number of gifted education teachers, it was difficult to provide a staff development plan to meet their professional development needs. Brooke remarked, "I think the funding with regard to the training of people is probably the trickiest part of the Regulations." When interpreting the gifted policy, Brooke and her district focused on providing professional development webinars, videos, and training documents available for teachers at any time. This was an idea that she had heard at the National Association for Gifted Children conference and she believed it provided a way to implement the professional development regulations within the funding provided. Jackson, another gifted coordinator in an urban school district recognized that he could not negotiate the amount of funding provided by the state, but could advocate for funding for the gifted program within his school district. His sensemaking process was ". . . a matter of thinking logically and strategically" about the

gifted regulations, the types of program models available, the number of staff needed for the programs, and how best to implement the education policy. While he had requested additional staff over the past three years to expand the program, the funding for additional teachers was not provided. Still, Jackson noted that the gifted program in his school division was generously funded and could provide a differentiated curriculum K-12 for the gifted learners in his district. The generous funding made his job easier when creating the Local Plan for the Gifted and implementing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.*

Overall, funding did play a role in the interpretation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and then writing or revising the Local Plan for the Gifted for the gifted coordinators interviewed. After at least three years of flat or limited funding increases, the gifted education coordinators were limited by the programs they could offer and the staffing available for the students. While the urban school districts fared better than the suburban and rural districts in terms of budgeting and funding constraints, none of the school districts were immune to funding impacts. Funding seemed to weigh heavily into the sensemaking process for the rural and suburban districts as their gifted coordinators were tasked with revising their Local Plan for the Gifted without any funding increase from the state. As part of the resource sensemaking process, the gifted coordinators reviewed other districts' Local Plan for the Gifted, held discussions with colleagues, and explored the possibilities for programs within their school district (Wright, Manning, Farment, & Gilbreath, 2000).

Conclusion

The study participants were a highly diverse sample of district-based individuals responsible for supervising gifted education programs within a school district. A high contrast sample of eight district coordinators of gifted education were purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of the state. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Their background in gifted education ranged from being new to gifted education, being a parent of a gifted child, having taught gifted education, having completed gifted endorsement classes, to having a Master's degree or Doctorate in gifted education. A qualitative research design was employed to understand participant views and experiences regarding the implementation of gifted education policy in their respective districts. The interview protocol included a combination of open-ended and semi-structured questions. Participants were asked to describe and explain how they interpreted and implemented gifted education policy in their respective districts, with attention to the roles of stakeholders, networking, funding, and politics in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators.

The sensemaking process of the eight gifted education coordinators was as personal and unique as the school districts they represented. The process varied from relying on personal experiences, reviewing another district's Local Plan for the Gifted, seeking formal and informal stakeholder input, allowing the funding to drive the program, networking with others, or seeking to appease the political stakeholders. In a form of interpersonal sensemaking, the gifted coordinators used cues from others to create meaning in their work and understanding of the gifted education policy

(Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). The interpersonal dynamics that unfolded in the interactions among the gifted coordinators created a context for sensemaking about their job duties.

A common theme across the interviews was a supportive network of social and technical resources available for district coordinators of gifted education. All eight participants were members of the Virginia Association for the Gifted, attended the Virginia Consortium of Gifted Educators, and participated in regional gifted coordinator groups. The regional and state gifted education coordinator meetings provided an avenue for resource sensemaking as the individuals shared ideas, posed questions, and sought out answers (Wright, Manning, Farment, & Gilbreath, 2000). All the participants listed the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Association for the Gifted, and the National Association for Gifted Children as websites they visited frequently for technical resources to guide them in their sensemaking process. The interpretation and sensemaking process of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* relied on learning from other gifted coordinators, asking questions, reviewing other districts' Local Plan for the Gifted, and seeking closure to ambiguity found in the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* The common stakeholder groups of students, parents, administrators, teachers, school board members, community members, and politicians were included as a consideration during the sensemaking process. Seeking input from stakeholders and creating a gifted program that addressed the initiatives important to the stakeholders proved to be a key to a successful gifted program. Overall, the gifted coordinators viewed local and state politicians as a stakeholder group and did take their initiatives and agendas into consideration as part of

the sensemaking process. The gifted coordinators agreed local and state politics could influence the funding received not only at the district level, but also for the gifted education department. Funding also influenced the sensemaking process when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* The flat or limited increase in school district budgets over the past few years guided the amount of program expansion, change, or staffing available. The gifted education coordinators had to consider funding constraints when creating the Local Plan for the Gifted for their school district. Jackson's views sum up the sensemaking process of the gifted education coordinators,

> I don't think you [gifted coordinators] can do it [the job] alone. You have to have that network of support, and you have to have peers that you can go to and bounce ideas off. I think more than anything else, you have to be open-minded and always thinking about how this does impact kids.

The sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators was a personal experience as well. Every gifted coordinator explained they did his or her best to interpret the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* considering their school district needs, stakeholder interests, funding, and politics of the community. They set a goal of aligning what they hoped to do for gifted students and to make sure their Local Plan for the Gifted adhered to the state regulations. What worked for one school district may not work for another, but with the support of a network, the gifted coordinators realized they were never truly alone.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

According to Gallagher, "[w]ithout research on the effects of policy initiatives, the field has little substantive guidance on the relative methods for advocating for policy at the local, state, or national level" (Gallagher, 2008, p. 520). Gifted educators should continue to serve as the voice that reminds all educators of the need to nurture and challenge all learners to meet the maximum competencies. Research initiatives and advocacy research were needed to guide proponents of gifted education as they sought to address gifted education policy, reform, and advocacy. "[I]dentification of . . . major changes in state legislation for gifted students, and subsequent tracking of the various individual and organized advocacy efforts, can serve as the basis of analysis of advocacy effectiveness" (Gallagher, p. 520).

Without a federal mandate for gifted education programs, each state has been left to create educational policies for gifted education. Across the Commonwealth of Virginia, school district gifted programs are diverse. This diversity included the definition of giftedness, assessment methods used in identification of gifted learners, and approaches to program models. While all Virginia school districts used the 2012 *Regulations Governing Education Services of Gifted Students* as a framework guideline for creating and maintaining the gifted programs, there was a lack of consistency across the state and even across regions for gifted education programs. Each gifted coordinator and locality was left to interpret the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* and implement the gifted programs in their school district within the parameters of staffing, funding, politics, and resources. Across the Commonwealth of

Virginia, gifted education coordinators had a diverse level of backgrounds in gifted education. Some coordinators held an endorsement or a degree in gifted education, while others had little to no experience in the field. The lack of experience or questions stemming from educational policy resulted in a level of uncertainty and ambiguity among gifted coordinators charged with interpreting and implementing the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. This ambiguity was determined to be either a benefit or a detriment when making sense of and interpreting education policy. Benefits included opportunities for networking with colleagues, soliciting input from stakeholders, and increased research regarding the policy resulted in varied approaches to gifted education. Leaving the 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* open for interpretation by gifted coordinators with a range of experience led to many different gifted definitions, identification measures, and program models across the state.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how district level coordinators of gifted education made sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school systems. I used a qualitative exploratory research design to understand how district level coordinators of gifted education made sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school systems. I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews to a researcher selected high-contrast sample of personnel responsible for supervising gifted education programs within a school district. The individual interviews provided understanding about how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Additional interview questions provided understanding about how considerations of local politics, funding,

networking, and input from stake-holders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. As coordinators of gifted education, individuals in school districts brought a diversity of perceptions and experiences to their role and their decision-making process. These experiences could have been influenced by a coordinator's background, educational level, prior job positions, interactions within the school district, and individual stakeholder interests. The adoption and interpretation of the Virginia 2012 *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* provided the stimulus for exploring gifted education specialist's sensemaking. The conceptual process of sensemaking provided the framework for the study.

Looking Back: The Journey of Sensemaking

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study and identified a gap in the literature on the sensemaking process of gifted education policy within gifted education programs. The next section outlined the purpose of the study, which was to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of and interpret gifted education policy. The statement of potential significance detailed the importance of the study and how a study of this nature, seeking to understand the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators, would add to the field of education. Then, the sensemaking conceptual framework provided the foundation for the study on a statewide perspective for the way gifted education specialists in local school districts make sense of gifted education policies considering the roles of politics, funding, network, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process. A summary of the methodology outlined the format of the qualitative exploratory research design, the semi-structured interview

process, and the cross-section of participants in the study. Limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study were addressed.

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature regarding gifted education, sensemaking, and educational policies for gifted learners. Despite the literature on educational reform, policy implementation, and sensemaking, there has been a lack of focus on the impact of leadership and policy development on gifted education or on the sensemaking process in gifted education. There was also a gap in the literature on the roles of networking using social and technical resources, funding, politics, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. This gap in the research literature provided the foundation for this study focusing on how gifted coordinators made sense of ambiguous gifted education policy and implemented gifted education programs across the state of Virginia.

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology, design of the study, and the constructivist view of the study as a paradigm of inquiry. This chapter provided an overview of the conceptual process of sensemaking, which serves as the conceptual framework for the study. Chapter 3 provided an overview of the qualitative research design, the details of the study setting, cross-section of participants, and the interview protocol. The semi-structured open-ended interview protocol was organized into six sections and asked the individual to draw upon their own personal resources (social, cognitive, political, networking, and stakeholders) to make sense of and implement gifted education policy. The six sections of the protocol included gifted coordinator position, networking resources, the sensemaking process, funding, politics, and stakeholder input. Chapter 3 provided the overview of the data collection and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 presented the results of the study. According to Creswell (2007), words are important as data in a qualitative study since knowledge or perceptions about an issue are conveyed through a participant's words. Exact quotes by the eight gifted coordinators were used to support the findings in the research. This chapter provided a voice for the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators as they made sense of evolving gifted education policy for their respective school divisions. Data collected through the open-ended interview protocol assisted in answering the central research question: How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of current and evolving gifted education policy?

The following sub-questions guided this study:

- How do the coordinators of gifted education make sense of gifted education policy through the technical and social resources of their professional network?
- How do you surface, understand, and apply stakeholder views in your leadership of gifted education?
- How do district coordinators of gifted education make sense of the evolving politics of gifted education?
- As a district coordinator of gifted education, what role does funding (local and state) play in your sensemaking process?

In this study, transcriptions of the interviews were coded and analyzed. I created a qualitative codebook, containing a list of predetermined codes, coding schemes, and definitions of codes used in the analysis process. Predetermined codes such as ambiguity, cues, collaboration, funding, politics, networking, stakeholder, and other

forms of sensemaking were aligned to the research questions. I coded the data by pulling together similar data pieces into an organizational coding framework (Glesne, 2011).

Key Findings and Discussion

Sensemaking Process of District Coordinators of Gifted Education

The sensemaking concept involved the process of how meaning was made in processing policy information when ambiguity was present. Policies that were unclear lead to confusion surrounding interpretation, which in turn lead to less effective program implementation. Sensemaking studied decision-making as a multi-level, complex process that involved studying how all participants interpreted an activity (Spillane et al., 2002). Spillane (2000) suggested that people used their prior knowledge and experiences to construct new understandings. Sensemaking was influenced by the social, cultural, and physical contexts of the sensemaker (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Spillane, 2000). In a form of interpersonal sensemaking, the eight gifted coordinators used cues from others in order to create meaning in their work and understanding of the gifted education policy (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). The interpersonal dynamics that unfolded in the interactions among the gifted coordinators created a context for sensemaking about their job duties.

District coordinators of gifted education used a variety of methods during the sensemaking process and interpretation of current and evolving gifted education policy. In examining the sensemaking process of the gifted coordinators, similar processes surfaced. Consistently, the district gifted education coordinators drew upon their personal experiences and prior experiences of teaching gifted students when making decisions and interpreting gifted policy. Jackson drew upon “personal experience as a

gifted resource teacher and what I have heard from the previous supervisor over the years. Certainly, it gives me a frame of reference or lens that I would look through when I read those regulations." Others looked to their personal experiences of having children who were identified gifted to guide them into the gifted profession as they embarked on graduate level courses in gifted education. The seven gifted coordinators who held an endorsement or a graduate level degree in gifted education turned to their knowledge of gifted philosophy, pedagogy, instructional strategies, and programming models when interpreting the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. Blair stated, "I've read a wide range of program models, curriculum models, instructional strategies, and philosophies in terms of implementation." The background knowledge in gifted education helped to eliminate ambiguity found upon reading the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. The results supported Spillane's (2000) theory of sensemaking that suggested people use their prior knowledge and experiences to construct new meaning as all the gifted coordinators relied on their prior experiences when making decisions and interpreting gifted education regulations.

Sensemaking Process of District Coordinators of Gifted Education Using Technical and Social Resources of Their Professional Network

The gifted coordinators looked to their professional network of social and technical resources as they made sense of gifted education policy. The social resources included a network of colleagues who were other gifted coordinators. The gifted coordinators met frequently as a regional group to discuss education policy, staff development options, program models, and gifted identification options. The regional groups also dissected the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted*

Students as they bounced ideas off one another, raised questions regarding the wording of the document, and discussed individual interpretations of the gifted policy. Reflective of the literature, the use of networking supported Stein's (2001) research on how policy mechanisms can shape school language and culture. Using interpretive policy analysis as an analytical lens, Stein (2001) investigated how practitioners made sense of policies. Drawing from Bourdieu's work, Stein (2001) argued that reality was constructed through individual's interactions with the world. Stein (2001) thought human interactions and socialization led to interpretation and making sense of institutions, roles, and traditions. As policies written for schools are accompanied by guidelines and regulations, practitioners must interpret the policies. Stein (2001) further noted that acts of legislation added to the daily sensemaking in the routines and language of schools. According to Stein (2001),

> Through interpretations of policy purposes . . . educational practitioners construct interpretive meanings . . . interpretations of policy language are multiple theories of cause and effect . . . practitioners interpret policies and these interpretations shape their overall conceptions (p. 137-138).

Uncertainty and ambiguity among coordinators of gifted education programs in Virginia provided an opportunity for networking with colleagues and sensemaking when discussing the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*. Ambiguity often led to the sensemaking process as it occurred when there was an ongoing influx of supporting information for multiple interpretations, a lack of clarity, or consistency. According to Weick (1995), when confronted with ambiguity, "[p]eople engage in sense-making because they are confused by too many interpretations" (p. 91).

Since each school district was responsible for determining the evaluation methods for identifying gifted learners and creating a program model to serve students, the majority of gifted programs were different because districts interpreted the regulations differently. District personnel brought diverse perspectives and experiences, and used different clues when interpreting the regulations and implemented the policy in a way that made sense to their organization. As part of the networking process, many gifted education coordinators participated in local or regional mock Technical Review of the Local Plan for the Gifted to view the various interpretations of policy by their colleagues. The regional and state gifted education coordinator meetings provided an avenue for resource sensemaking (Wright, Manning, Farment, & Gilbreath, 2000). Resource sensemaking was the ability to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others to create meaning and sense of situations. Resource sensemaking relied on the sharing of ideas, posing of questions, and seeking out answers. Renee shared one of the most important programming discussions concerned the Local Plan for the Gifted as ". . . the technical review gives administrators the chance to really evaluate each other's local plans in an environment that's conducive to providing support rather than solely criticism." Consistently, all the gifted coordinators cited the annual Virginia Consortium of Gifted Coordinators meeting as an opportunity for networking through breakout sessions and round-table discussions focusing on any ambiguity raised with the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students.*

The gifted coordinators explained they used technical resources during their sensemaking process. The coordinators cited the frequent use of documents and resources available at the Virginia Department of Education, National Association for

Gifted Children, and the Virginia Association for the Gifted websites. The results suggest the gifted coordinators also looked to other school district's Local Plan for the Gifted as a guide for their own plans. Melissa noted hearing and seeing other people's perspective, as well as eliminating ambiguity in how one interpreted the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* was a benefit of networking.

> Networking allows you to see and hear other people's perspectives. Sometimes you can think you have an understanding of something and then you . . . hear the question . . . asked and answered somewhere else or by someone else and you go, I was completely on the wrong part. . . . for me it allows me to kind of just run ideas by--or be that sounding board for someone else. That doesn't happen if you haven't created a network.

Results indicated the eight district coordinators of gifted education used technical and social resources of their professional network as part of their sensemaking process when interpreting education policy. The gifted coordinators drew from their professional network of social and technical resources including gifted education colleagues, websites, regional groups, and state meetings. The results supported Weick's (1995) research on ambiguity and sensemaking. As Weick (1995) suggested, ambiguity often led to the sensemaking process as it occurred when there was an ongoing influx of supporting information for multiple interpretations, a lack of clarity, or consistency. As each school district was responsible for interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students*, most gifted programs were different because districts interpreted the regulations differently. District personnel brought diverse perspectives,

experience, and used different clues when interpreting the regulations and implemented the policy in a way that made sense to them and their organization.

Role of Stakeholders in the Sensemaking Process of District Coordinators of Gifted Education

School administrators at the local school level served as the immediate decision-makers about the meaning, effect, and implementation of higher-level educational policies for their schools. Principals, instructional supervisors, and curriculum personnel worked collaboratively to define, interpret, and oversee implementation of the policy across the school district and in individual schools. This group also worked to balance the school district's resources, strategic missions, stakeholder interests, and personnel with the requirements of state laws, mandates, and recommendations. Spillane, who studied how state and federal level efforts sought to achieve educational accountability through curriculum reform, noted

> To understand how state policy featured in district policy-making, we need to investigate how district policy-makers made sense of the state policy in the context of district policy-making . . . School district officials make sense of the policy and pass their understandings on to school leaders (principals and curriculum coordinators) . . . Private consultants, professional development providers, professional associations, and others outside the formal school system [who may serve as extra resources] develop their own understandings of the policy. (Spillane, 2002, p. 4, 12)

The role of stakeholders was important to all the gifted coordinators and they valued their input as part of the sensemaking process. There was commonality when

participants were asked to list the stakeholders for their programs. The gifted coordinators listed the same stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, community members, and the Gifted Advisory Boards for each school district. The results suggest the gifted coordinators sought formal and informal feedback from the stakeholders when reviewing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and when writing their Local Plan for the Gifted. This input included conversations, emails, surveys, reports, and questions from stakeholders. According to Leslie, the Gifted Advisory Committee for the district has stakeholders "in all the different areas, from teachers, to community members, to coordinators of departments, and the Governor's School . . . and they all had input of initially writing it and then as we revise it (the local plan) every year." Renee and Tonya's districts sought input from stakeholders through surveys every year and provided reports to the school board regarding updates in the gifted education department. The gifted coordinators obtained feedback from stakeholders regarding programs and initiatives to ensure they were meeting the needs of the students, school, and community. The stakeholders in Renee and Carly's districts were interested in STEM, so both incorporated STEM strategies in their local plan. Brooke and Jackson both discussed "making sure students are appropriately challenged" and made sure rigor and challenge was included as part of their sensemaking process. The results supported the research question of the role of stakeholders in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. Results indicated the gifted coordinators relied on stakeholder input when interpreting and implementing education policy. The results suggested stakeholder input

and initiatives of importance assisted in driving the interpretation process of the *2012 Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.*

Role of Politics (Local and State) in the Sensemaking Process of District Coordinators of Gifted Education

The role of politics (local and state) in the sensemaking process of gifted coordinators varied among the gifted coordinators. Bachrach and Baratz (1987) suggested political dynamics played an essential part when considering education policies and sensemaking as some local interpreters understood and interpreted policy in certain ways based on political considerations. School district officials had to consider and address a variety of issues from sometimes competing stakeholders when making decisions and interpreting policy. The results suggested the gifted coordinators viewed the local and state politicians as a stakeholder group. However, only six of the eight indicated political agendas or initiatives came into consideration when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* Leslie and Tonya noted political agendas could play a role in the sensemaking process of gifted education policy at the state level in terms of funding, but both indicated it did not factor into their interpretation process. When asked to share initiatives of importance to local and state politicians, the responses were similar to those of the other stakeholder groups ranging from class size, Advanced Placement, Governor's School, Standards of Learning scores, accreditation, STEM, rigor, and advancement. According to Melissa, knowledge that "no elected official wants to have a school in their area that doesn't have all the possible services afforded to their students . . . so in the plan, I include all of the different ways we could service the students."

Budget was a theme during the interviews with the gifted coordinators regarding the role of local and state politics. Political decisions affected the implementation of the gifted program in the area of budget. Renee noted, when there are "budget cuts and it goes after staffing and after programs . . . we hope that it doesn't impact us anymore significantly than it impacts any other department." Contrastingly, Carly noted that "if we do have people in higher positions who are very supportive, then our programs continue to grow and flourish." The results indicated having a gifted program aligned to the stakeholder's interests, including school board members and local politicians was key to the interpretation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and in revising the Local Plan for the Gifted. Jackson described, "You have to be looking at things through the lens of what you're actually going to be able to pull off . . . if the local politics run counter to what you're trying to do, you're not going to meet with success." Ensuring the gifted programs are successful and acceptable to the stakeholders played a significant role in the sensemaking process.

The results indicated the gifted coordinators acknowledge the role of local and state politics as a factor in the sensemaking process of gifted coordinators. Based on the results, it appears the gifted coordinators viewed local and state politicians as a stakeholder group and did take their initiatives and agendas into consideration when they were interpreting education policy. However, the results indicated the extent of the role of politics on the sensemaking process varied among the gifted coordinators.

Role of Funding (Local and State) in the Sensemaking Process of District Coordinators of Gifted Education

The results indicated funding played a role in the sensemaking process of the gifted education coordinators as they interpreted the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and wrote or revised the Local Plan for the Gifted. After three years of flat or limited funding increases, the gifted education coordinators were limited by the programs they could offer and the staffing available for the students. Budget was a theme during the interviews when asked about the role of funding and politics. Political decisions affected the implementation of the gifted program in the area of budget as Renee explained, "when there are budget cuts and it goes after staffing and after programs . . . we hope that it doesn't impact us anymore significantly than it impacts any other department."

Upon reviewing the results, the impact of funding differed depending on the size of the district. For urban districts, level or flat funding over the past few years provided an opportunity to sustain the level of program services, whereas in the rural or suburban districts, reduced funding year after year influenced staffing, program models, and resources for the classrooms. While the urban school districts fared better in terms of budgeting and funding constraints, none of the school districts were immune to funding impacts. Contrastingly, funding seemed to weigh heavily into the sensemaking process for the rural and suburban districts as their gifted coordinators were tasked with revising their Local Plan for the Gifted without any funding increase from the state. Suburban based Renee described her view of funding impacts on the types of programs offered in her school district:

> I looked at what I know works. I looked at what I know doesn't work. I looked at what our budget was, specifically in terms of staffing. There's a lot of things we'd like to do, but just don't have the staffing to do it.

Blair, representing a rural school district, noted the district spends more than is allotted from the state plus the local share for gifted education. She further asserted that trying to expand the gifted education program, "would require local funds and we are having a problem with the division getting local funds for things that are direly needed in the division for general education, necessary staffing positions, so, expanding gifted programs would be very challenging." The results indicated funding concerns by the gifted coordinators included staffing, purchasing testing materials, completing evaluations in the 90-day timeline, providing staff development for all teachers who teach an identified gifted child, and the types of programs available. Regardless of the type of district, funding was a consideration for the gifted coordinators as part of the sensemaking process when interpreting gifted education policy and in creating a gifted program that followed the regulations set forth by the state.

Conceptual Framework

With the complex nature of educational organizations in mind, the sensemaking conceptual framework provided the foundation to research a statewide perspective on the way gifted education coordinators in local school districts made sense of gifted education policies and the roles of politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process. Historically, education policymakers in the United States have had a mix of decision-making formats, both believing in local authority and local solutions, but also supporting state and federal efforts (Tanner, Linscott, & Galis, 1996; Spillane,

2004). Creation of education policies occurred outside of the influence of school administrators, by government policy-makers. Educational policies have been implemented from the top down, where policy was directed from state to school district and then school district to individual school to control.

The sensemaking concept involved the process of how meaning was made in interpreting policy information when ambiguity was present. Policies, which were unclear or ambiguous, led to confusion surrounding interpretations and often led to less effective program implementations. Spillane (2000) suggested that people used their prior knowledge and experiences to construct new understandings. Sensemaking was influenced by the social, cultural, and physical contexts of the sense maker (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Spillane, 2000). For policy interpretation to be correct, decision makers at each level needed to understand the various complexities of a policy. Information, funding, resources, and commitment of the teachers, principals, parents, and community stakeholders impact interpretation of policy.

Educational policies designed by state officials (legislatures and departments of education) were given to principals and school district administrators to implement as the supervisors of policy for the school district. The sensemaking process questioned the role of sensemaking (interpretation) in the process of policy implementation. The sensemaking concept examined the aspects of policy interpretation by individuals involved in overseeing implementation of policy in education, the principals, and district administrators. According to Spillane, sensemaking utilized the tools of observation, narration, and documentation to examine the perceptions, judgments, and lenses that decision-makers used when interpreting policy (Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, 2004).

School administrators at the local school level served as the immediate decision-makers regarding the meaning, effect, and implementation of higher-level educational policies for their schools. Principals, instructional supervisors, and curriculum personnel worked collaboratively to define, interpret, and oversee implementation of the policy across the school districts and in individual schools. This group also worked to balance the school district's resources, strategic missions, personnel, and input from stakeholders with the requirements of state laws, mandates, and recommendations. School district administrators and supervisors utilized personal experiences to filter information through lenses. Policy implementation involves interpretation as implementers must deduce what the policy means to determine whether to ignore, adapt, or adopt the policymakers' recommendations (Spillane, 2000). A diversity of factors influenced policy implementation. Ambiguous or inconsistent policies led to poor or failed implementation efforts, while local school district factors such as strategic plans, educational agendas, resources, community attitudes, and time were all influential in the implementation process (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane, 2000).

I conducted this study to understand how gifted education specialists in local school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Additional areas of focus sought to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of gifted education. Analyzing each of the research questions using the sensemaking conceptual framework provided insight into how coordinators of gifted education made sense of gifted education policy.

The results indicated gifted education specialists relied on a network of resources, both social and technical when interpreting and implementing gifted education policy. Reflective of the research on sensemaking, the results showed gifted education coordinators sought to eliminate ambiguity and questions regarding gifted education policy by networking with colleagues informally and formally at regional, state, and national meetings. The process of reviewing technical resources such as websites, educational policy, and other districts' Local Plans for the Gifted when interpreting the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* assisted the sensemaking process of the gifted coordinators. The results indicated stakeholders are an important part of the sensemaking process. The main stakeholders identified were: students, parents, teachers, school board members, community members, and the Gifted Advisory Boards for each school district. The results indicated gifted education coordinators sought both formal and informal feedback from stakeholders when reviewing the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* and when writing their Local Plan for the Gifted. Funding and politics played a role in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators, but at varying degrees as evidenced by the results. The impact of funding differed depending on the size of the school district. For urban districts, the results showed level or flat funding provided an opportunity to sustain a level program of services, whereas in the rural or suburban districts, reduced funding year after year impacted staffing, program models, and resources for the classrooms. The results indicated that at times, political agenda could play a role in the sensemaking process, especially when political agendas were tied to budget items such as Advanced Placement, STEM, or identification of gifted learners.

Similarly, when asked to note the initiatives of interest to stakeholders, local, and state politicians, the responses were in common citing: STEM, accreditation, rigor, advancement, reduced class size, and Advanced Placement.

Analyzing each of the research questions using the sensemaking conceptual framework provided insight into how coordinators of gifted education made sense of gifted education policy. The sensemaking concept involved the process of how meaning was made in interpreting policy information when ambiguity was present. The results indicated the sensemaking process was personal and unique to the individual and type of school district the gifted coordinator represented. District coordinators of gifted education used a variety of methods during the sensemaking process and interpretation of current and evolving gifted education policy. In examining the sensemaking process of the gifted coordinators, similar processes surfaced. Consistently, the district gifted education coordinators drew upon their personal experiences when making decisions and interpreting gifted policy. The gifted education specialists also relied on a network of resources, both social and technical when interpreting and implementing gifted education policy. The role of stakeholders was important to all the gifted coordinators and they valued their input as part of the sensemaking process. The results suggest the gifted coordinators sought formal and informal feedback from the stakeholders when reviewing the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and when writing their Local Plan for the Gifted. While there were common themes of networking, using social and technical resources, and the role of stakeholders; the role of funding and politics in the sensemaking process differed greatly and was often tied to the type of school district.

Limitations

In an effort to address the identified gap in the literature on the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators when making sense of and interpreting gifted education policy, specifically the *2012 Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students*; this study was limited to a cross-section of Virginia. A delimitation for research was geography, as I sought a cross-section of participants representing urban, suburban, and rural school districts in Virginia. Since a study seeking to understand how gifted education coordinators made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy in Virginia has never been undertaken, several limitations would influence the generalizability of the results to other areas of research or states. As not all states have state-mandated gifted education programs, this study and the findings may not be generalizable to other states. The interviews conducted for this study were with individuals designated in school districts as being responsible for gifted education programs. The level of knowledge about gifted education varied among the gifted education coordinators and could have shaped the understanding of the gifted education components of the interview protocol.

One limiting factor related to the study's design in relying exclusively on interview data. The results may have suffered the biases inherent in self-reporting or responding to questions through the lens of a socially-desirable answer. Each school district was unique in their size, amount of funding, local politics, and gifted programming model. The interview answers were unique to the specific district coordinator of gifted education and may not be generalizable to other school districts within the Commonwealth of Virginia or across the United States. Another potential

limitation would have been the purposive participant pool of eight district coordinators of gifted education. A statewide participant pool of all 133 district coordinators of gifted education would have made the study generalizable to other states or research areas.

An additional limitation may have been that the researcher worked in the field of study. While lessons can be learned from this research and there is a framework that can be transferred to other districts, such as the sensemaking process, the use of professional networks, and the role of stakeholders, funding, and politics, findings of this study may be limited in application to other educational areas.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, these are recommendations for future research:

1. This study should be replicated and expanded to include all 133 coordinators responsible for gifted education programs in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Although Creswell (2007) expressed that generalizability is not a specific goal of qualitative research, broadening the sample size and the geographical area to include all school districts would provide a deeper understanding of the sense-making process of gifted education coordinators when interpreting and implementing gifted education policy.
2. To further examine any similarities or differences between the sensemaking process of experienced and new gifted coordinators, this study should be replicated and expanded to focus on participant groups that include both new and experienced coordinators representing a cross-section of the state of Virginia.

3. Future researchers should conduct the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators in other states.
4. A study to explore the sensemaking process of special education coordinators or English Language Learner coordinators when interpreting and implementing education policy specific to their area of concentration would be meaningful to both special interests.
5. A similar study conducted to explore the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators and special education coordinators, when interpreting and implementing education policy specific to twice-exceptional students who receive both gifted and special education services, would provide important and meaningful information to educators.

Implications for Practice

The sensemaking process provided the framework for district coordinators of gifted education to explore the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and their interpretation of the document as they wrote or revised the Local Plan for the Gifted. By relying on a network of professional, social, and technical resources, the gifted coordinators were able to analyze the education policy, discuss ambiguities in the document, and connect their prior knowledge of gifted education. Participating in regional gifted coordinator groups allowed for open and honest discussions of the educational policy surrounded by colleagues who can serve as sounding boards and mentors during the sensemaking and interpretation process. Recognizing the role of stakeholders, funding, and politics and their impact on the

sensemaking process of education policy were important to the success of the gifted programs.

This study added to the body of knowledge by presenting a statewide perspective on the way gifted education coordinators in school districts made sense of and interpreted gifted education policy. Information gathered in this study will provide a basis of understanding of the sensemaking process at a local level and will add to the broader research of gifted education and sensemaking. A study of this nature had not been conducted in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the body of research regarding statewide evaluations of gifted programming and the sensemaking process was limited at best.

While the findings of this study may not be applicable to other states or subject matters, the sensemaking process could be used in similar educational studies. There is a gap in the literature on the sensemaking process of educational leaders and their interpretation and implementation of educational policy. A similar study in the area of special education and the interpretation of special education policy would add to the body of literature. With many school districts receiving an influx of students who qualify for programs for the English Language Learner, a qualitative study on how English Language Learner coordinators make sense of and interpret educational policy would be beneficial. Similar to the gifted education program, the English Language Learner and special education programs can differ among school districts. Research questions seeking to understand how considerations of local politics, funding, networking, and input from stakeholders shaped the sensemaking process of district coordinators of

English Language Learner and special education programs would add to the body of literature on the sensemaking process.

Conclusion

In conducting this study, a narrow gap in the literature was examined. Through the interview process, the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators was explored. The study participants were a high-diversity sample of district-based individuals responsible for gifted education programs within his or her school district. A high-contrast sample of eight district coordinators of gifted education was purposefully selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts representing a cross-section of the state. The participants were selected based on the size and setting of the school district throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Their background in gifted education ranged from being new to gifted education, being a parent of a gifted child, having taught gifted education, completed gifted endorsement classes, and to having a Master's Degree or Doctorate in gifted education.

A qualitative research design was employed to understand the views and experiences of the district gifted education coordinator regarding the implementation of gifted education policy in their respective districts. The interview protocol included a combination of open-ended and semi-structured questions. The district coordinators were asked to describe and explain how they interpreted and implemented gifted education policy in their respective districts, with attention to the roles of stakeholders, networking, funding, and politics in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators.

The sensemaking process of the eight gifted education coordinators was as personal and unique as the school districts they represented. The process varied from

relying on personal experiences, reviewing another district's Local Plan for the Gifted, seeking formal and informal stakeholder input, allowing the funding to drive the program, networking with others, or seeking to appease the politician stakeholders. A common theme across the interviews was a supportive network of social and technical resources available for district coordinators of gifted education. All eight participants were members of the Virginia Association for the Gifted, attended the Virginia Consortium of Gifted Educators, and participated in regional gifted coordinator groups. All of the participants listed the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Association for the Gifted, and the National Association for Gifted Children as websites they visited frequently for technical resources to guide them in their sensemaking process. The interpretation and sensemaking process of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* relied on learning from other gifted coordinators, asking questions, reviewing other districts' Local Plan for the Gifted, and seeking closure to ambiguity found in the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students.* When asked to describe how district coordinators of gifted education made sense of gifted education policy, Brooke noted, "The first step is you try and make sense of it based on your current plan and the division's current goals. I think you start with what you know and what makes sense to you." Carly remarked, "I think we make sense of it by spending hours reviewing it, talking to people who have more experience than us, by trial and error . . . and by seeking advice from other colleagues." Advocating for using the network of resources available to gifted coordinators, Jackson explained, "I think a lot of it is by weighing the policy against best practices, weighing it upon strategic

goals of their division, by collaborating and consulting with colleagues in order to refine understanding."

The common stakeholder groups of students, parents, administrators, teachers, school board members, community members, and politicians were included as a consideration during the sensemaking process. Seeking input from stakeholders and creating a gifted program that addressed the initiatives important to the stakeholders proved to be a key to a successful gifted program. Overall, the gifted coordinators viewed local and state politicians as a stakeholder group and did take their initiatives and agendas into consideration as part of the sensemaking process.

As part of the sensemaking process, the district coordinators of gifted education networked with their regional and state colleagues and reviewed Local Plans for the gifted to determine a list of possible program components and models to use when interpreting the gifted education policy. The gifted education coordinators agreed local and state politics could influence the funding received not only at the district level, but also for the gifted education department. Funding also affected the sensemaking process when interpreting the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for of Gifted Students.* The flat or limited increase in school district budgets over the past few years guided the amount of program expansion, change, or staffing available. The gifted education coordinators had to consider funding constraints when creating the Local Plan for the Gifted for their school district. The urban school districts were limited in their ability to expand program due to staffing, but felt confident in providing programs for their gifted learners that reflected the intentions of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for of Gifted Students.* Funding constraints limited the types of

program models offered in the rural and suburban school districts. The lack of funding for additional staff members meant the gifted coordinators had to make concessions on the types of programs offered and the availability of the programs, such as at the high school level or services provided more than once a week.

Overall the results of this study suggested the sensemaking process was a beneficial tool used in the interpretation of gifted education policy. The use of social and technical resources available through professional networks assisted the coordinators of gifted education in the interpretation of the *Regulations Governing the Educational Services for Gifted Students* and in writing the Local Plan for the Gifted. The role of stakeholders, funding, and politics were also considerations during the sensemaking process. While each school district was unique, this research provided a framework for adaptability of other educational policies. Information gathered in this study provided a basis of understanding of the sensemaking process at a local level and will add to the broader research of gifted education and sensemaking.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Location:

Participant Code: Institution and Role

Interview Code: Participant Code + Date + Location

Participant's Contact Information:

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I am a doctoral student at The George Washington University. I am conducting a qualitative study to determine how gifted education coordinators in Virginia make sense of and interpret gifted education policy. Additional areas of focus include the roles of politics, funding, networking resources, and the input from stakeholders in the sensemaking process of gifted education coordinators. I am interested in your thoughts on sense-making in gifted education. For the purposes of our discussion, Weick (1995) defines sense-making as "[t]he making of sense," or the process of how meaning was made. Educators make sense of policies through indirect and direct interaction with the network of colleagues. School leaders actively construct understanding of educational policy by "[i]nterpreting them through the lens of their preexisting beliefs and practices" (Coburn, 2006, p. 344). I will be conducting interviews with individuals throughout the state that are responsible for gifted education programs. I

will analyze the data collected against my research questions. I will not use any identifying information about you or your school division in the study. A pseudonym will be used to maintain confidentiality. Everything you say will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with any specific comments or data in the study.

The format of the interview will be semi-structured with open-ended questions. The interview will last no more than one hour. I hope that it will flow similar to a conversation. I will be recording our interview for purposes of transcription. This also means that I can spend more time listening and thinking about your insights and responses, and less time note taking. Your recording will be kept confidential and will not be used in any publication or presentation. The files containing the recording will be made into a pseudonym as soon as possible. The only identifier on them will be a participant code that cannot be connected to your name by anyone but me. While we talk, feel free to stop and ask questions or seek clarification about anything we discuss. The best data for me will be gathered when we are both clear on the discussion. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Questions

Gifted Coordinator Position:

1. How did you become involved in gifted education?
2. What is your attachment to gifted education and keeps you in the field?
3. How does your current work in gifted education compare to past positions or experiences?
4. Is gifted education your only focus or do you "wear many hats?"
5. What other programs are you responsible for in the district?
6. How have you learned what to do in this position?
7. Describe what it is like to be a gifted coordinator in your district.
8. Tell me about a typical week or month in your district.
9. What is the perception of gifted education in your district?

Networking:

10. What would you define as your network of resources (social and technical) both inside and outside of the district?
11. What resources do you find most beneficial to your day to day work? How do you use these resources?
12. Do your network resources include any professional organizations? In what way do you use these resources?
13. What are your interactions if any with other gifted personnel colleagues? Are these formal or informal interactions? What are some topics discussed? How often do you meet?
14. Do you consult colleagues regarding gifted programming or policy?

15. Did you consult other gifted colleagues when writing/revising the local plan for your district?
16. Does networking have a role in the sense-making process of gifted education policy?

Sense-making Process:

17. What facilitates or presents obstacles to the gifted program in your district?
18. What was the climate like in your district when the regulations were released and when you were writing and revising the local plan for the gifted?
19. Would you change anything in the district to help better facilitate the gifted program? If so, what?
20. When you reviewed the *Regulations Governing the Education of Gifted Students*, what were your thoughts?
21. Did you have any questions or ambiguity regarding the *Regulations*?
22. How did you interpret the documents in light of your work and district?
23. What part of your background did you tap when reading the *Regulations*?
24. How did you use your knowledge of gifted education in writing/revising the local plan for your district? What factors did you consider when writing/revising the local plan?
25. Did you have any concerns regarding writing/revising the local plan or the implementation process? If so, please explain.
26. In your opinion, how do gifted education coordinators make sense of gifted education policy?

Stakeholders:

27. Who are the stakeholders in your district?
28. What input or feedback if any do you receive from stakeholders in your district?
29. How do you respond to feedback from stakeholders?
30. What initiatives or programs are important to stakeholders in your district?
31. Did you receive any feedback or input from stakeholders on the *Regulations Governing the Education of Gifted Students*?
32. Did you receive any feedback, input, or assistance from stakeholders when writing or revising the local plan for the gifted?

Funding:

33. Is funding a challenge you face in facilitating the gifted program and implementing changes in the program in your district?
34. What was the funding climate like in your district when the *Regulations Governing the Education of Gifted Students* were released?
35. What funding constraints, if any, are placed on you when constructing your annual budget? Does funding have an effect on the level of gifted programming options offered in your district?
36. Did funding (local or state) play a role in your sense-making process of understanding gifted education policy and the regulations?
37. Did funding play a role in the implementation process of the Regulations Governing Education of Gifted Students?

Politics:

38. Currently in your division, what initiatives or programs are important to the politicians? How do you know these are important to them?
39. What was the political climate in your division, city, or county when the Regulations Governing the Education of Gifted Students were released?
40. Did politics or political agendas come into consideration when you were writing the local plan for the gifted?
41. Do political decisions impact the implementation of your program in your district?
42. Does politics (local or state) play a role in the sense-making process of gifted education policy?

Wrap-up:

Thank you for your time and your willingness to speak with me. Your information will be very valuable to my research. I will be conducting an initial analysis of the data in my study. Would you be available in case I have a follow-up question? If so, would you prefer contact by email or phone? One of the tools I will be using in my study is called a member check to ensure that I understand your comments and that I am true to your answers. Would you be available to review my initial analysis and offer feedback? Thank you again for your time. Have a great day.