‘When we were very young’: Experiences of young gifted children transitioning to a formal learning environment

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Abstract

This thesis presents the findings of a study that investigated the cognitive, social and emotional experiences of seven young gifted children as they adjusted to a formal educational environment. The participants were drawn from one preschool in Melbourne, Australia and the study followed the children’s transition from preschool into their first year at school. The research aim was to identify the influences that shaped the learning experiences of young gifted children as they transitioned from their home learning environment to preschool, followed by their adjustment to the first grade of school.

The transition from home to preschool and then to school are major steps in a child’s life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and early learning experiences in a formal educational environment are acknowledged as formative, influencing later success at school (Corsaro, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Lam & Pollard, 2006; Yeboah, 2002). Yet, research within the gifted education field has paid scant attention to young gifted children (Harrison, 2005a; Koshy & Robinson, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004), and their different learning needs receive little, if any, acknowledgement in the early childhood literature. As a consequence there is little about differentiating the curricula and pedagogy for these children to guide teachers.

The research was designed within qualitative case-study methodology (Stake, 2005; Yin. 2003). Data was generated from observations in the preschool and school setting across the length of the school year; through field notes that documented other sources of information, and semi-structured interviews with the gifted children, their parents and teachers. In addition, a parent questionnaire was expressly developed to ascertain social, emotional, and cognitive characteristics of the children’s learning in their home environment up to the time of the research study. Analysis of the data indicated patterns in the interaction between behaviours characteristic of gifted children and teacher responses to them.

The findings from this study revealed that preschool and school practices which enabled continuity of the children’s characteristically gifted intellectual, social and emotional learning were significant in the children’s experiences of transitioning from home to preschool, as well as from preschool to school. Discontinuity was also identified as a significant factor that impacted on the children’s ability to engage with
learning in a formal learning environment. In particular, the data revealed a need for greater support of cognitive continuity for these children at the preschool level. The study did find some teacher responses to these children that positively supported the adjustment of these gifted children to a formal learning environment. However, these practices were found to be more often happenstance rather than the outcome of identification and informed planning.

The results of this study indicate the need for increased awareness by early childhood educators of the special and holistic learning needs of young gifted children. This thesis recommends the inclusion in teacher education of knowledge about the developmental characteristics and learning needs of young gifted children. In addition it recommends explicit acknowledgement at the policy level within the early childhood field of the necessity for identification and response to the holistic learning needs of young gifted children.
Declaration:

This is to certify that this thesis — ‘When we were very young’: Experiences of young gifted children transitioning to a formal learning environment — comprises only my original work towards the PhD. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all material used. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, references, and appendices.

Signed: A.C.Grant.

Date: 28/4/2011
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The process of doctoral research has been a major undertaking for me and I would like to express my most sincere thanks to a number of people.

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Especial thanks must go to my husband Ian Grant who in many different ways made this undertaking feasible. I offer my love and deepest gratitude for his support and forbearance through this long process of research and writing.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this research to the community of families with gifted children who at the beginning of their school career bring a love of learning and hopes for fulfilment — may your spirits soar.
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Chapter One

An introduction to the study

Of all the children with special needs, younger gifted children are the group most frequently ignored throughout the world. (Koshy & Robinson, 2006, p. 114)

Transition into a formal educational program is, for most young children, a major change in their educational lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The gifted education literature stresses the importance of early recognition of the learning needs of young gifted children in educational programs (Gross, 1999a; Harrison, 2005a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004, 2007; Whitton, 2005). Yet little attention is being paid in current research to the educational experiences of these children. This study investigates the experiences of seven young gifted children as they transitioned from the same preschool to three different primary schools in suburban Melbourne, Australia.

Early learning in educational environments is acknowledged as formative (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and the learning characteristics of gifted children are described as different and requiring special educational provision (Silverman, 1995). There is, however, only a very small body of evidence-based information about young gifted children and thus it is difficult to ascertain their learning needs as well as the influences that contribute to a positive learning environment for them. Therefore, adults who teach young gifted children are without adequate information on which to base their curriculum and pedagogical decision-making.

Developed within the framework of a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003), the first aim of this study was to identify the characteristic behaviours that influence young gifted children’s engagement with learning at preschool and the first year of primary school. Through a focus on those behaviours that are accepted as characteristic of giftedness and the curriculum and pedagogical responses of their teachers to the children’s learning needs, this study aims to provide insights into the influences on the children’s experience of transition and the resulting impact on their engagement with learning in a formal educational environment. A single case study is focussed on one gifted child at preschool — Michael. This is followed by a multiple case study of the learning experiences
of Michael and six other young gifted children — Cathy, Lily, Susan, Peter, Justin and Stephen — during their first year at primary school.

1.1 The prologue: A personal journey into gifted education

As a teacher, my earliest awareness of young gifted children was formed by a brief description of their characteristics in child development lectures during my pre-service teacher training. In hindsight the initial perception I developed now appears to be strikingly parallel to Terman’s main findings about gifted children — he reported that children of high IQ were healthier, better adjusted and higher achievers in school subjects than children who were of more average development (Robinson, A., & Clinkenbeard, 2008). However, many years of teaching preschool and primary school children, and my subsequent involvement with the families of young gifted children, generated a change in my understanding of their behaviours.

The experiences of these children indicated a difficulty integrating into formal educational programs at both preschool and the early primary level as a result of accelerated cognitive development. Some children were already learning well in advance of the standard curriculum and their teachers were finding it challenging to offer these children an alternative curriculum that was cognitively satisfying. In other instances, the children’s emotional behaviours seemed immature to their teachers who were consequently uncertain about the designation of these children as gifted. Relationships with their age-peers were not always satisfactory and on occasions led to the children becoming socially isolated and unhappy. Although parents were understandably anxious, they were often unsure about how to approach teachers about their child’s needs. The parents of these children were generally aware that their child was cognitively advanced to some extent and were seeking to establish what educational provision would be made and how teachers and parents could work together to support their child’s development.

Prompted by the concern of the parents about appropriate provision for their cognitively advanced children, I searched for relevant educational literature and turned to my professional colleagues. While there was an extensive body of theory and research evidence in the gifted education literature, this reported predominantly on research with older children. In the generalist early childhood literature, gifted children were largely invisible. My early childhood colleagues were sceptical about my developing interest in young gifted learners. They typically argued that although they had been a teacher for many years they had never
had a gifted child in their class. Occasionally, a teacher would comment on a child they recalled as behaving ‘very differently’ and would wonder if that child had been gifted. More often reference would be made to pushy parents who claimed they had a gifted child. They counselled that there was no need as a teacher to be focussed on giftedness, as advanced development was extremely rare and more often exaggerated by parents. Nonetheless, my awareness of the tensions experienced by both parents and young gifted children encouraged me to explore the early childhood and gifted education literature in more depth.

**Why be concerned about young gifted children in educational settings?**

In early childhood education a child’s experiences of preschool and the first years of primary school are viewed as significant in establishing the knowledge, skills and dispositions that provide the basis for future learning (Bowman et al., 2001). Views in the literature suggest that children’s later success or lack of success within the school environment is related to their early school experiences (Brooker, 2002; Dockett, Perry, Howard, Whitton, & Cusack 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1996; Lam & Pollard, 2006; Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006; Yeboah, 2002). However, in the early childhood literature little attention is given to the need for teachers to be cognisant of gifted children and their early educational needs.

Clark (2002) suggests minimal consideration is given to the early learning needs of gifted learners as giftedness is viewed by teachers as an advantage, with only positive aspects of it being acknowledged. Harrison (2003) and Porter (2005) note that the general early childhood literature provides no detail of the developmental difficulties that can accompany advanced development. For this reason, they propose there is little, if any, discussion of the need for appropriate educational programming to support positive development of young gifted children. Early childhood literature also often expresses concern about formal assessments of learning as leading to inappropriate labelling of young children or to a focus on their learning deficits (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer, 2008; NAEYC, 2008). As a consequence there is reluctance within the early childhood field to label children.

Over the past twenty years, the issue of equity in educational provision (Dau, 2001) has attracted increasing emphasis in the early childhood literature. A principal concern has been the need to address the diversity in children’s development across the spectrum of sociocultural backgrounds and developmental differences. Specifically, this acknowledgement of individual differences has required curriculum and pedagogical
modifications in response to the need for gender equity, the inclusiveness of children with developmental delay, and for responsiveness to religious, cultural and linguistic diversity (see for instance, MacNaughton, 2004; Mallory & New, 1994). Professional acceptance in Australia of this philosophical perspective is illustrated in recent policy and professional guidance to the early childhood field (Early Childhood Australia ‘Code of Ethics’, ECA 2006; ‘Quality Practices Guide’, NCAC, 2006). However, discussions of equity do not include opportunities and learning experiences for gifted young children — no reference being made to advanced development when citing examples of diversity.

As argued by Silverman (1993), there is not an inverse correlation between a child’s high level of ability and their need for support in learning. Rather, it is the degree of difference from the mean level of ability that indicates the level of a child’s need. Hence, children two or more standard deviations below the mean level of ability require special educational provision and those who are at a similar distance above the mean also require different educational content and teaching strategies. From this perspective, gifted children have ‘special learning needs’. If we accept that early experiences in the formal learning environment of preschool and school have an effect on longer term learning and achievement at school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Harper & Huie, 1987; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004), then there is reason to expect that the response at preschool and school to the special learning needs of young gifted children will also be formative.

For nearly a century the gifted education field has explored the understanding of giftedness, and has built a significant body of knowledge about the developmental characteristics and educational needs of gifted children (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). As research attention to identifying the educational needs of young gifted children is only recent (see for example, Koshy, Mitchell & Williams, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004, 2007), this must be considered a significant factor in the dearth of empirical evidence available to teachers and parents on appropriate educational provision for these children. While the body of reliable information is modest in size, what is known indicates that attention to their learning needs is important. Young children demonstrating advanced cognitive abilities and skills at the beginning of school are now recognised as being cognitively, socially and emotionally vulnerable (Gross, 1999a; Harrison, 2005b; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Koshy & Robinson, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Roedell, 1986; Whitton, 2005). Consequently, inadequate responses to early learning needs in gifted children are likely to prompt
behaviours that begin a pattern of underachievement in formal education (Koshy & Robinson, 2006; Morelock & Morrison, 1996; Whitmore, 1986).

Central to an understanding of behaviours in young children is the view found in the early childhood literature that they learn and develop in a holistic way (Bowman, et al., 2001). This concept indicates that children’s development encompasses the major areas of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical learning and is understood to advance simultaneously with a complementary effect on other areas of learning. While the characteristic behaviours and developmental trajectory of gifted children are recognised as different from those of age-typical children (Harrison, 2005a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Silverman, 1993), it is reported that the complementary or interactional influence remains important in their development (Porter, 2005). There are, however, only a few studies from which details of this influence can be gathered (see Harrison, 2005a; Morelock, 2000) and there remains some uncertainty about the extent to which advanced cognitive development and behaviours in other developmental domains influence each other (see Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). It is the intent of this study to contribute to this discussion by expanding the information base about such behaviours. Expressly, the aim is to investigate if, and how, characteristically advanced behaviours demonstrated by the children influence their social, emotional and cognitive interactions in the formal learning environment.

The perspective expressed by my colleagues, that giftedness was rare in children, emerged in the literature as a commonly held view in Australian schools (Gross, 1993, 1999b; Harrison, 2003, 2005a). This indicated that it was not the rareness of gifted children that made them marginal in the experience of teachers — in reality, gifted children constitute about five per cent of the student population (Wilson, 1996) — instead, it was a lack of educational preparation and professional awareness of giftedness that limited teachers’ ability to identify and provide for the educational needs of young gifted children (Gross, 1999a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 1999; Diezmann & Watters, 2000). The most recent Federal Government review of the education of gifted and talented children in Australian schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001) confirmed that provision for their learning needs was unsatisfactory. The subsequent report included special recommendations that early childhood education pay attention to the needs of this sector of the student population.

Reflecting on the gap between my early conceptions of giftedness and the educational ‘reality’ for those gifted children that I had come to understand, I recognised a need to expand my knowledge of appropriate educational programming for these children. Further
deliberations, on the provision of formal education for young gifted children, eventually
resolved into two focussed questions. Did characteristic behaviours of giftedness impact on
the teacher’s pedagogy and curriculum? And, conversely, how did the constituents of a
formal learning environment affect a child whose levels of learning are different from most
other children in the class?

In summary, the combination of my experiences of the frustration and concern of
families with gifted children and a conviction about the importance of early educational
experiences and equity provided the motivation for this study. The focus on the interactions
between the characteristics of giftedness and the teachers’ responses was the outcome of a
number of years of reading, reflection and further experience through the establishment of
specialised educational programs for young gifted children. It is this deepening interest that is
reflected in the framing of my study.

1.2 Research question

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study is to identify the characteristic behaviours
that influence young gifted children’s engagement with learning as they transition into
preschool and into the first year of primary school. Given the uncertainty in the literature
about how characteristic behaviours of young gifted children influence their learning in a
formal educational environment, the following question was posed.

What influences a gifted child’s learning experiences when transitioning into a formal
educational environment?

The key research question is supported by two subsidiary questions that focus the
investigation.

- How do the characteristic behaviours of gifted children impact their engagement in
  the formal learning environment?

- How do the teachers’ pedagogy and curriculum responses impact the children’s
  engagement in the formal learning environment?

These research questions reflect the two seminal beliefs that underpin this study: the
importance for all young children to experience high quality education; and the need to
increase the knowledge base that underpins high quality education for young gifted children.
It is accepted in this thesis that gifted children have different developmental learning needs
from those who are learning in a more age-typical way.
A qualitative case study approach and the associated methods of observations, semi-structured interviews and field notes were undertaken to generate data that would provide responses to the questions. This approach was compatible with advocacy of an ‘insider’ perspective and the intent to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges and opportunities that are present for both the children and their teachers. Justification for the choice of methodology and the selection of data collection methods are discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

1.3 Establishing key terms used in this study

In framing the research it was apparent that there were definitions and concepts that needed to be considered. The most pertinent concerned:

- the concept of early childhood education or similar descriptors;
- the concept of giftedness; and,
- conceptualisation of the process of transition.

**Early childhood education**

Educational provision in the early childhood sector is defined in Australia as concerned with children between birth and age eight (DEECD, 2009a; ECA – website). The children in this study ranged in ages over the duration of the study from approximately four years to six and a half years. There are two levels of educational settings, both within the early childhood framework but demarcated in this study by the descriptors, Preschool and Prep class:

- preschool is a prior-to-school setting, usually providing for three to five year old children; and
- prep class is the first class or year of primary school in Victoria. Children attend primary school for seven years in Victoria, starting from around the age of five.

Where ‘early childhood’ is used as a descriptor, particularly in relation to educational theory, it is intended to cover children in both preschool and prep classes. If it is pertinent to distinguish between settings then the explicit terms referred to above are used.

In early childhood education, the terms ‘developmental domains’ and ‘learning areas’ currently appear to be used interchangeably to indicate those major areas of a child’s growth — cognitive, social, emotional and physical (see DEECD, 2009a). This word usage is
maintained in this study. The developmental domains that are relevant to this study are the three primary ones of social, emotional and cognitive development. In this thesis a separation has been maintained between the meaning of ‘cognitive’ and ‘intellectual’ learning. The term cognitive is used to indicate overall learning within that developmental domain and includes abstract skills, for instance, metacognitive skills. Use of the term ‘intellectual’ indicates more specific learning: for example, learning to read. This division is represented in ‘Characteristics of giftedness’ in Appendix A and throughout the text.

**Giftedness**

A study of young gifted children inevitably leads to the debates within the field about the characteristics and definitions of the concept of giftedness. Traditionally theories of giftedness have focussed on heightened intellectual functioning, readily demonstrated through the mental faculties of memory, association, reasoning and evaluation (Gallagher, J.A., 1997). High intelligence, seen as synonymous with giftedness, was identifiable when an individual demonstrated these abilities through IQ testing. However, the establishment of giftedness through IQ testing had particular implications for the identification of young gifted children.

Psychometric identification of advanced levels of ability in young children has been accepted as problematical (Hodge & Kemp, 2000; Robinson & Robinson, 1992). Assessment at a young age was considered more likely to produce a false result leading to an underestimation of the child’s intellectual potential. In addition, high intelligence was conventionally identified through excellence or high academic achievement in areas of learning at school (Gallagher, J.A., 1997), but demonstrations of such learning are less likely in very young children. Even gifted children when young will have had variable environmental opportunities to gain academic or formal learning in particular subject areas. Thus, identification of high intelligence for young children cannot depend solely on assessing the skills or knowledge measured in formal testing nor can it depend on conceptualisations of high achievement in academic learning and skills. Nonetheless, awareness of these limitations in identifying giftedness in young children has persisted, resulting in limited confidence in the reliability of early identification (Porter, 2005).

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1 Several authors cited in this thesis have the same surname, same first initial and in one case the same surname and same publication date. As advised by APA guide to referencing style, the identifying initial/s is included in the citation to facilitate reader identification of appropriate author in the reference list.
Recent theoretical discussion within the gifted education field has provided broader conceptualisations of the understanding of giftedness. For instance, the core correlation that high intelligence is always identified by IQ testing has been questioned (see for example Gagné, 2000; 1997; Gardner, 1997; Morelock, 1997; Sternberg, 1997). Discussions in the gifted education literature also present a view that the nature and measurable extent of giftedness inevitably grows, changes, and will vary depending on the interactions invited or demanded by a specific environment (Dai, 2001; Morelock 1996). Relevant to this study in the reconceptualisations of giftedness, is the theoretical acceptance of qualitative differences from age-typical children, in the characteristic social, emotional and cognitive development of gifted children (Piechowski, 1997; Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1993).

The benefits of such changes in thinking lie in the possibilities for different interpretations of the meaning of giftedness and concomitant different methods of identification. Harrison’s (2003) definition, which accommodates these additional perspectives on giftedness and is inclusive of the younger gifted child, has been adopted for the purposes of this study. It runs:

A gifted child is one who performs or who has the potential to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context. (p. 8)

A more comprehensive discussion of conceptualisations of giftedness and an overview of definitions is presented in Chapter Two.

The process of transition and ‘reciprocal-socialisation’

Discussion in the education literature on children’s experience of adjusting to a new learning environment occurs under the heading of ‘transition’. In the past this term has been employed, along with the phrase ‘school readiness’, to encapsulate the notion that children have attained the required developmental level to start school. Included in the understanding of transition as a process has been discussion of activities designed to introduce school and thus assist young children to interact smoothly and successfully with the existing and immutable learning environment of school (Petriwskyj, Thorpe & Tayler, 2005).

Some change in this usage was found in the literature. Recent views signalled a growing awareness that early experiences of adjusting to a new learning environment involve both the child and the influence of the school environment (Lam & Pollard, 2006; Dockett &
Perry, 2001) and covers more than the early process of adjustment (Petriwskyj, 2005). However, in the literature, representation of transition indicated continued variation in the degree of focus on the child or inclusion of the influence of the environment. Consideration of the length of time involved in the transition process was also variable and as a consequence I considered it necessary to look further for clarity about the process that was central to this study.

Bandura’s (2001) description of the process of learning provides the theoretical construct that substantiates the recent shift in understanding of the process of transition. His social cognitive theory explains the development of behaviours as an interaction between personal characteristics, behaviour and environmental factors. Corsaro’s (2005), reconceptualisation of learning in an early childhood education setting also presents this view of the learning process. He argues the need for a fresh view of a child’s experience in becoming a member of a new educational environment and proposes ‘socialisation’ as an apt descriptor of a process. Corsaro (2005) defines socialisation in a formal educational environment as “an interactive experience where children negotiate, share and create culture with adults and with each other” (p. 18).

Traditionally, socialisation is a sociological term describing the process where the individual learns the rules, or internalises skills and knowledge that are appropriate to a social or cultural situation (Corsaro, 2005). Preschool or school are good examples of a particular situation where there are specific behaviours that are deemed appropriate, usually learnt by the individual through both explicit instruction and implicit imitation of ‘the way things are done’. This process enables the individual to participate smoothly and positively in the culture of that group (Corsaro, 2005). However, this usage is limited as it focuses on changes that occur in the individual with an acceptance that in the case of starting preschool or school it is the child alone who adjusts to the new culture.

Bandura’s (2001, 2002) modelling of human learning and Corsaro’s (2005) description of how children and teachers adaptively interact to construct a new culture in a formal learning environment have been influential in this study. Both conceptualisations provided a theoretical basis for my early observations that the challenges faced by the gifted children I had come to know, were the outcome of an interaction between the child’s characteristically gifted behaviours and the social structure of the formal learning environment. Accordingly, the process that was of interest in this study was the reciprocal influences exerted by the gifted child, their classmates and the teacher’s practice, and the way
in which these affected the eventual adjustments made by the gifted child. While Corsaro’s
(2005) concept of socialisation continued to be relevant to this study I felt there was a need,
in view of variation in the meanings associated with both transition and socialisation, to
emphasise the interactive nature of the process that was being studied. To assist clarity in
discussing this concept I employed the term ‘reciprocal-socialisation’\(^2\) as a descriptor of the
process. It is intended to convey the dynamic interplay between the gifted child and the
teacher in a formal learning environment.

1.4 The significance of the study

This study responds to calls from within the field for an increase in research attention
to the experiences of young gifted children adjusting to a formal learning environment so that
a better understanding of the components of a satisfactory educational program for young
gifted children can be gained (Gross, 1999b; Harrison, 2005b; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Koshy
& Robinson, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Whitton, 2005). An exploration of the
‘reciprocal-socialisation’ process has not to date been undertaken when considering the
transitioning of gifted children to the formal learning environment.

It is intended that this study will contribute to the body of knowledge about the
children’s characteristically advanced behaviours in a formal learning environment and their
teachers’ responses. At present, empirical information available in the gifted education
literature on the experiences of young gifted children details the difficulties faced by them
and their teachers rather than focussing on effective educational environments. In particular,
findings from some studies indicate that the characteristic socioemotional behaviours of
gifted children adversely influence teachers’ responses (Geake & Gross, 2008), but this area
requires a greater evidence base for there to be certainty about applicability of these details to
young gifted children.

While such reports are informative they do not provide a basis for positive
educational responses. Sankar-DeLeeuw’s case study (2004, 2007) is one of the few
exceptions to this situation where description of developmental characteristics and
educational provision offer information as a basis from which teachers and parents can plan
appropriately. The message from available research emphasises the importance of teacher
identification of advanced ability in young gifted children, as an appropriate curriculum

\(^2\) Reciprocal socialisation has been used in some discussions of early interactions between infants and their
parents to describe a synchronisation of social responses to each other - see Santrock, 2007. I have not found it
used by other authors in the context of a formal learning environment.
response has a positive outcome for them (Gross, 1999b; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2007).

Gifted education has a history of research from a scientific-deductive perspective but there is now interest from scholars of gifted education in qualitative research methods, as they can offer more nuanced understandings about the behaviours and the educational experiences of these children (Borland, 1990; Coleman, et al., 2007; Schultz, 2002). Approaching this research study from a qualitative case study perspective indicated value in investigating both the behaviours of the child and the reciprocal influence of the teachers’ curriculum and pedagogy. Close observations in the preschool and primary school settings can provide insights into the influences that are effective in promoting positive experiences within a new learning environment. The merit in this is described by Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) as allowing the capture of the individual features of the interactions as well as the environmental influences, and providing detail that retrospective studies of individuals, or those conducted outside the educational setting cannot identify. This focus offers opportunities to understand the meaning of experiences for individuals; it provides an ‘insider’ perspective that Coleman, et al., (2007) identify as essential in gaining new information about the educational experiences of gifted children.

No other study I have found has focussed on these elements of transition for young gifted children, thus this research potentially offers pertinent information to inform and guide teacher and parent understanding of such influences. While the research participants constitute only a small cohort of gifted children, it is hoped that the findings will resonate with teachers and parents in similar educational settings.

1.5 Organisation of the study

Chapters One and Two provide background information and a review of the relevant literature. Chapter One presents the significance of this investigation of the experience of young gifted children and the reciprocal-socialisation process into preschool and school. It provides the aims and context for the study as well as indicating that this is a case study within qualitative methodology.

Chapter Two reviews the literature on how young gifted children may experience a new learning environment of preschool and school. It positions the study within a contemporary perspective of the concept of giftedness and indicates how the evolution of definitions has enabled earlier identification of giftedness in young children. A review of the
early childhood education literature indicates that there are some philosophical hurdles in responding to the needs of young gifted children. As well, an absence in the literature of adequate theoretical or practical discussion in relation to them appears to have resulted in this sector of students being more-or-less invisible to the early childhood educator. Reviewing the gifted education literature and the literature on transition indicates that while there is a theoretical foundation for consideration of the needs of young gifted children in a formal educational environment there is little evidence-based information in the literature about appropriate curricula and pedagogy for young gifted children.

Chapter Three provides a rationale for the choice of a qualitative case study approach to frame the investigation. It details the case study design, the research methods used to generate data, and explains how the data were analysed. The children and teacher participants in the study are introduced and the means of identifying the children as gifted is described. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the criteria employed to ensure the ‘trustworthiness’ (Flick, 2004) of the reporting and the attention paid to ethical issues.

Chapters Four and Five present the findings of the two case studies. The first case study, presented in Chapter Four, concerns Michael’s experience of the reciprocal-socialisation process at preschool. Documentation of Michael’s behaviours within the preschool program is presented in three sections: the first from the perspective of his cognitive learning; the second from the perspective of his emotional learning; and third from the perspective of his social learning. A discussion of insights from the emergent issues concludes each section. Chapter Five presents a case study of the reciprocal-socialisation process at school for Cathy, Lily, Susan, Peter, Justin, Stephen and Michael. It follows a similar pattern to Chapter Four with a discussion of the findings at the conclusion of each section.

Chapter Six provides a synthesis of the findings from both case studies in response to the key research question. The first sections discuss the themes that emerged from each case study and how they contribute to insights about the experience of reciprocal-socialisation for these young gifted children. The following sections describe the contributions made to the field by this study, outline key recommendations, and suggest directions for future research. Chapter Six concludes with a reflection on the research journey.
Chapter Two

‘Finding’ young gifted children in the literature

2.1 Introduction

The early childhood field has a long tradition of research on child development (Bloch, 1991), with recent brain research confirming the formative impact of early experiences on brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). However, the small number of studies on early learning and development in young gifted children has provoked concern for scholars within the gifted education field and their discussion suggests the learning needs of young gifted children in formal educational environments are on the whole poorly served (Gross, 1993, 1999a; Harrison, 2005b; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Morelock, 1996; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 1999; Walsh, Hodge, Bowes & Kemp, 2010). As outlined in Chapter One there appears, in Australian preschools and schools, to be limited awareness of the importance of the early educational experiences for young gifted children.

This chapter reviews in more detail the research and theoretical literature on gifted children and their learning needs. It examines how changing conceptions of giftedness have provided broader theoretical definitions of characteristic behaviours as well as the contribution changing conceptualisations make to the identification of giftedness in young children. Key studies and discussions within both the early childhood education and the gifted education literature are considered with regard to establishing appropriate learning environments for the developmental learning of young gifted children. As well, studies of the behavioural characteristics of the gifted child are reviewed for the understanding they offer on how these characteristics may influence the child’s experiences of reciprocal-socialisation as outlined in Chapter One. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the literature on transition into school for young children and how it may inform understanding of the reciprocal-socialisation experiences of young gifted children.

2.2 Context of gifted education

An interest in giftedness, as an aspect of individual development, has spanned “centuries and [many] cultures”, with the modern history of gifted education identified as starting in the early decades of the twentieth century (Robinson, & Clinkenbeard, 2008, p.
13). In recent times debates about giftedness amongst scholars and educators have involved efforts to clarify and define understandings of giftedness. Early research in this field was largely positioned within a positivist paradigm and as a consequence the central conceptualisations of giftedness were regarded as global, stable, and static (Cohen, 2006; Coleman, 1995; Cross, T.L. 2003). Consequent research demonstrated giftedness as distributed in a normal curve across the population, as susceptible to measurement, and as an entity that was either present, or not present in an individual.

Over recent decades conceptualisations of giftedness have become more dynamic in nature. It has become widely accepted that in addition to high cognitive ability, social and cultural factors in a child’s environment influence the expression of gifted ability. Insight into such influences on giftedness has been provided by an increasing number of qualitative investigations (for example, Coleman, et al., 2007; Harrison, 2005). The dynamic perspective introduced by changing conceptualisations has produced a necessary re-orientation of concepts about research and giftedness as illustrated in Dai’s (2001) conceptualisation of giftedness. He describes advanced cognitive ability as a cultural construct rather than the sole outcome of an individual mind — thus it is not global, stable or static.

Efforts in the field to clarify, expand and integrate understandings of giftedness have produced changes in definitions. Concepts about giftedness have moved from an early focus on the single criterion of high intelligence, to multidimensional definitions. The changes that have occurred in the understanding of giftedness have involved significant theoretical reconceptualisation. Such transformations are important in the broad theoretical foundation of gifted education and a representative overview of the changing perspectives and central elements in definitions of giftedness is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Conceptualisations of Giftedness: 1900 to Present Day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time frame</th>
<th>Theoretical developments</th>
<th>Representative theorist and description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early decades of twentieth century</td>
<td>Understanding of intelligence was ‘scientific’.</td>
<td>Spearman conceptualised an individual’s level of ability as derived from an underlying general intelligence. He designated this mental substructure as ‘g’ and theorised that intelligence tests measured ‘g’. Despite changes in definitions the concept of ‘g’ has continued to be present in the debate on the nature of giftedness. (Colangelo &amp; Davis, 1997; Winner, 1996)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td>Theoretical developments</td>
<td>Representative theorist and description</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920s onward</td>
<td>Early definitions emerged as emphasising a single criterion – a unidimensional construct.</td>
<td>Terman devised the Stanford-Binet measurement of IQ, and regarded the top 1% of scores as indicating giftedness (Colangelo &amp; Davis, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Marland Report in the US provided a statutory definition of giftedness for educational provision. It formally introduced a definition that was broader than the single dimension of 'g' measured psychometrically.</td>
<td>Marland laid the groundwork for a move away from a primary focus on the concept of ‘g’ and established that giftedness could be a domain-specific ability. Giftedness was defined as both psychometric identification and potential for high performance. Areas of potential high performance — ranging from cognitive aptitude to creativity and physical skill — were named. Consequently the need for differentiated provision within educational programs was recognised. Work of Stanley through the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth contributed to understanding of possibilities of exceptional learning when domain specificity was supported educationally (Mathews &amp; Foster, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s-1980s</td>
<td>In Australia there has been increasing recognition from late 1970s of need for special educational provision for gifted children. National focus has expanded since late 1980s but there is still no national acceptance of a definition of giftedness.</td>
<td>From the 1930s some schools had provided educational programs for gifted children but such recognition was isolated. Formal recognition of gifted children occurred in Commonwealth School’s Commission Act, 1973, Section 13, but no discernable increase in interest and focus until the 1988 Senate Report into education of gifted and talented children in Australia. The Marland Report influenced subsequent Australian provision, as almost identical definitions were adopted at each state level (Wilson, 1996). Nonetheless, provision for gifted students has remained under state jurisdiction and there continue to be differences between states in definitions of giftedness, the subsequent identification and educational provision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983 - 1990s</td>
<td>Multidimensional view of intelligence — conceptualised as specific and potentially separate domains.</td>
<td>Gardner critiqued the concept of ‘g’ and its assessment through IQ tests. He argued for the presence of multiple intelligences, originally proposing 7 forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1997). Such intelligences may be relatively autonomous or be combined in adaptive ways. Although not a new concept (see Marland definition) it became a very popular view of intelligence. In turn, Gardner’s theorising was critiqued as being based on very Westernised and mainstream conceptions of intelligence potentially failing to identify gifted students from minority cultures (see Kincheloe, 2004).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td>Theoretical developments</td>
<td>Representative theorist and description</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Multidimensional view of giftedness — conceptualised as a dynamic combination of intellectual strengths.</td>
<td>Critical of an academic narrowness in definitions of giftedness, Sternberg proposed a ‘triarchic theory’ of intelligence. His definitions propose multiple loci of intellectual ability with high levels of cognitive ability being influenced by environmental catalysts and inhibitors (Sternberg, 1997). The resulting complex concepts of expression of giftedness are unlikely to be identified readily in young children i.e. analytic giftedness — I suggest this is less applicable to understanding advanced ability in young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978 – 2000s</td>
<td>Multidimensional view of giftedness — conceptualised as a dynamic combination of intellectual and non-intellectual strengths.</td>
<td>Renzulli proposed in 1978 a Three-Ring conception of giftedness. Factors in addition to inherited ability contribute to giftedness — ‘non-intellective’ and internal traits of creativity and task commitment plus external factors such as chance and environmental support. Thus identification and extent of giftedness can vary according to environment (Renzulli, 2005).</td>
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<td>1990s</td>
<td>Holistic view of giftedness — giftedness conceptualised as resulting from a combination of factors.</td>
<td>Giftedness arises from a combination of intellectual strengths – general plus special ability — as well as other factors including emotional traits (motivation, self-concept) and environmental opportunities. (Tannenbaum, 1992, 1997)</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Holistic — an alternative conceptualisation returned view of giftedness to an emphasis on an individual’s inner characteristics.</td>
<td>Giftedness is defined as asynchronous development, which was conceptualised as a combination of inner developmental characteristics. Advanced cognitive ability as well as heightened intensity combines to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. The development of gifted children is considered particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in teaching and parenting in order to develop optimally. This is the Columbus Group Definition and is a perspective found in the theory of Silverman (1993), Morelock (1993), and Piechowski (1997).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td>Theoretical developments</td>
<td>Representative theorist and description</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Giftedness definitions that are inclusive of young children.</td>
<td>Harrison’s definition was the first found that was specifically concerned with the young gifted child. Its relevance is its potential to identify the young gifted child. “A gifted child is one who performs or who has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context.” (2003, p. 8) Conceptual orientation is same as the Columbus Group. (see Silverman, 1993, pp. 3 &amp; 4.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 - 2003</td>
<td>Giftedness and Talent as separate concepts</td>
<td>Giftedness and talent are distinguishable. Giftedness is innate potential and talent is the transformation of high aptitude into well trained skills in a particular field. This view includes other factors in development of giftedness such as motivation and environmental influences. Identification of raw natural abilities through Gagné’s ‘Differentiated Model of Gifted and Talented’ could assist in recognition of young children. (Gagné, 1985, 2000, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertainty continues about nature of ‘talent’ in very young gifted children — it is difficult to agree on meaning and/or to identify it. Project Spectrum noted it could not identify talent development in very young children. (Smutny, Walker, &amp; Meckstroth 1997).</td>
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</table>

This brief overview illustrates the theoretical evolution that is occurring in the field of gifted education.

**Current context**

In addition to changes in understanding of the nature of giftedness — from the early twentieth century — it is also apparent that its conceptualisation has become more complex and multifaceted. Subsequently there is no clear agreement to be found in the field on a single philosophy, concept or definition of giftedness. Acknowledgement of this situation is made
by a number of scholars who suggest the best that can be achieved is an acceptance of a
diversity of views (Cohen, 2006; Cramond 2004). Gallagher (J. J., 1996) in critiquing
theories of giftedness, concluded that definitions cannot be ‘proved’ and thus their
application will depend on them ‘being more or less useful’ — for instance, in providing a
framework for particular educational provision. Hence, a definition will be appropriate
according to the educational goals and programs being implemented in a particular context.
Coleman (2004) expresses this perspective in his assessment of the plethora of definitions
within the gifted education literature. He concludes that discrepancies seem inevitable
because varying modes of inquiry produce different perceptions of the nature of giftedness
and therefore of the way educational provision should respond. The definitions referred to in
Table 1 illustrate this diversity.

In seeking to generate information from a research study there is a need to accept a
specific viewpoint or definition even if it is necessarily accompanied by Gallagher’s (J. J.,
1996) qualification that it is ‘the most useful’ for the situation. Accordingly this study has
been guided by the perceptions about identifying giftedness in young gifted children inherent
in Harrison’s (2003) definition. It provided a conceptualisation of giftedness that
acknowledged behaviours that were advanced on those accepted as typical for the age, as
distinct from other definitions which require demonstration of well-developed cognitive traits
such as analytical ability, or observable talent. Of key significance are those perspectives on
giftedness that have ‘uncoupled’ identification of high ability from a sole reliance on
psychometric testing or demonstration of excellent academic achievement. This is evident
particularly in the work of Renzulli, Gagné, and Tannenbaum (as indicated in Table 1). Also
relevant to this study is recognition of a link between domains of development, such that
advanced cognitive ability is associated with a different trajectory of social and emotional
growth. This has emerged particularly from the theorising of Piechowski and the Columbus
Group, as well as being evident in the work of Tannenbaum (see for example Piechowski,
1997; Silverman, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1997). In summary Harrison’s (2003) definition of
giftedness encompasses the holistic development of the very young gifted child, as well as
the role of the social context in supporting gifted development.
2.3 Early childhood education

Discussion of key goals in early childhood and gifted education literature indicate shared educational perspectives. Both include reference to fostering children’s learning dispositions as well as the need for children to gain basic concepts and skills as a foundation for future learning (see for example Bowman, et al., 2001; DEECD, 2009b; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Cornu 2006; Porter, 2005). In such recommendations it is stated that education should be holistic and enable children to have a positive experience of school, as well as being prepared for their future life. However, in reviewing recent theoretical developments in the early childhood literature it appears that behind an apparent compatibility in educational perspectives there are conceptual barriers to providing for the learning needs of gifted children.

Ways of understanding children’s learning and development in early childhood education in Australia have become dominated in recent decades by developmental theory (Fleer, 2005). This has presented cognitive development as occurring within identifiable stages, suggesting as a consequence that normative development or learning is observable at particular ages in young children — an age-stage concept of developmental learning.3 Despite a shift in educational philosophies away from developmental theories towards a sociocultural perspective (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2004), recent discussion in early childhood education in Australia indicates that the perception of normative development continues to prevail as a conceptual mindset in the field (Agbenyaga, 2009; Edwards, Blaise & Hammer, 2009). However, evidence of the early development of gifted children reveals their development as qualitatively different (Harrison, 2005a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004) to age-typical or ‘normal development’.

A further hurdle appears to be present in the invisibility of young gifted children in the early childhood literature that provides professional information and guidance on curriculum and teacher practice. While there is a current theoretical focus on diversity in curricula and pedagogical practice, (for instance - AJEC, Vol. 31(1) 2010; Connor, 2007; DEECD, 2009a), as mentioned in Chapter One little reference is made to the diversity represented by children who are developmentally advanced. To understand the nature of the hurdles that appear to be present in the Australian early childhood classrooms in regard to

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3 See original NAEYC publication - Bredekamp, 1987 and follow-up responses to comments from the field on DAP in Bredekamp, 1997 and Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1993.
educational provision for young gifted children requires close examination of the prevailing philosophy of educational provision — Developmentally Appropriate Practice.

Developmentally appropriate practice and learning

In 1987 the National Association for the Education of Young Children in the United States of America (NAEYC) published *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8* (Bredekamp, 1987). The goal of this publication was to define the NAEYC position in relation to debates in the US at that time on the learning styles and learning needs of preschoolers (Williams, 1999). Fuelled by political initiatives that had resulted in the establishment of the Head Start Programs (Williams, 1999) to overcome educational disadvantage, one side of the debate saw value in the early introduction of children to academic type learning. The other side, represented by the NAEYC, advocated educational values based on the mainstream ‘child development theory’. Knowledge derived from this theory provided the conceptual basis for the initial NAEYC statement of ‘best practice’ in early childhood education, describing ‘appropriate’ pedagogy and curriculum (Bredekamp, 1987). Following publication it became an educational model identified as Developmentally Appropriate Practice, or simply DAP.

Advocacy of early introduction of academic learning to young children, views which were antithetical to the NAEYC, included provision of school subjects and skills as soon as possible to young children, based on a perception that they learn in much the same way as older children. The role of the teacher was to direct the child’s learning and provide as much of this type of learning activity as possible, with an expectation that future proficiency in learning would be enhanced (Williams, 1999).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice viewed the young child differently. Their view was that a child needed to follow their own inherent path of development although this was understood as proceeding through a sequence of cognitive stages — based on Piagetian theory of child development (Piaget, 1951). Subsequent interpretation of a child’s learning was that learning prompted development that was appropriate for that individual child. The most supportive educational approach was to enable children to follow their own developmental needs and interests in learning. This view of learning and development within DAP was described as ‘age-appropriate learning’, which was best supported through the strategy of play. As a consequence of this viewpoint, the NAEYC maintained pedagogical practice that pushed-down early academic learning onto very young children ran counter to
the evidence, and well-established theories of child development. Accordingly the NAEYC condemned the early introduction of academic content and the associated teaching practice.

This overview briefly describes NAEYC perspectives central to their original position statement as well as subsequent discussions in response to critiques of the concept of DAP. However, the NAEYC has recently provided a revised position paper substantially shifting the early DAP focus from ‘age-appropriate’ learning to one inclusive of sociocultural influences on children’s’ learning (NAEYC, 2009). Nonetheless, incorporation of the early DAP positions into early childhood education in Australia is apparent both in teacher training texts at that time (for example, Arthur, et al., 1996) and in continuing criticism of the prevailing national acceptance (Agbenyaga, 2009; Fleer, 1995, 2005). It is the earlier views which were found to be dominant in the preschool program in this study and so discussion here is now focussed on their potential influence.

**Can the learning needs of gifted children be accommodated within DAP?**

To be responsive to the learning needs of any individual child, a teacher planning an educational program within a DAP model needed to incorporate into her practice twin maxims — to provide ‘individually-appropriate’ and at the same time ‘age-appropriate learning’. ‘Age-appropriate’ refers to the body of knowledge held by the teacher about the sequence of typical cognitive development for the child’s age. It provides the benchmark against which the teacher assesses current learning needs, followed by planned learning experiences to support age-appropriate development for an individual child. ‘Individually appropriate learning’ requires the teacher to make allowance, within the planned age-appropriate content and activity, for differences apparent in an individual’s temperament, family environment, and/or developmental pattern in reaching the (Piagetian) cognitive milestones. Developmental disability is the example usually given. The DAP framework proposes good teaching practice will include such variations on age-stage expectations in planning content and teaching approaches. While the maxim of ‘individually appropriate learning’ appears to offer the opportunity for teachers to identify the actual learning needs of a gifted child, descriptions of age-appropriate planning received more attention in the early versions (for example, Bredekamp, 1987,1997), and thus appeared to be the ‘dominant twin’.

Doubts amongst early childhood scholars of the efficacy of DAP as an educational model were raised in debates that followed its publication (see Fleer, 1995; Mallory & New

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4 All teachers participating in this study were female hence the use of the personal pronoun ‘her’. 
1994). Principally it was argued that to implement DAP required a particular view of development (Mallory & New, 1994) one that held that normal child development was universal and followed a predictable sequence of growth and change. The critics argued that child development was demonstrably diverse (for example, Rogoff, 2003). Evidence in the gifted education literature identifies development in young gifted children as following a different trajectory (Harrison, 2005a; Morrissey, 2007; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004), which substantiates the perspective in this study that these children illustrate diverse characteristics in their development.

**View of the child**

Different behaviours in gifted children are identified as developmental characteristics, encompassing the cognitive, and especially language learning, as well as emotional and social domains (Dalzell, 1998; Harrison, 2005a; Morrissey, 2007; Winner, 1996). A list of characteristic behaviours ascribed to young gifted children is presented in Appendix A. Some scholars in the gifted education field argue that the developmental journey is qualitatively different for gifted children as advanced cognition influences the emotional dimension of development producing a lack of developmental-synchronicity (Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1993). Consequently gifted children experience internal tension between learning domains. For instance, they may conceive an advanced cognitive goal for a drawing yet possess only age-typical physical skills to accomplish the outcome they envision. A lack of developmental-synchronicity can also subject gifted children to external tension between accepted behaviours within, for instance, their family (their ‘real’ self), and perceptions of age-appropriate behaviours within their community. This is viewed as particularly influential on their formation of a sense-of-self (Gross, 1998; Terrassier, 1985). The descriptor ‘asynchrony’ has been applied to this experience (Silverman, 1993) and is considered significant in understanding behaviours of gifted children (Morelock, 2000; Silverman, 1996).

Immediately, this different view of developmental behaviour raises doubt about how a teacher might interpret advanced developmental behaviours with DAP. Unless teachers are knowledgeable about characteristically different behaviours in young gifted children, I believe the age-stage conceptualisation of children’s learning effectively puts a ceiling on how teachers may understand behaviours. If behaviours are to be evaluated against a normative perception of cognitive, social, emotional and even physical development, then how are teachers to interpret those that do not conform? Logically, if behaviours do not
match expectations of age-typical ones they may as a consequence be interpreted as less than age-typical and identified as immature behaviours. Morelock and Morrison (1996) argue this point theoretically, stating that different development in young gifted children and the behaviours that express that difference expose the notion of age appropriate as begging the question about what is really meant by developmentally appropriate: “developmentally appropriate for which children?” (p. 109). Therefore, the necessity within DAP of applying the maxims of individually appropriate and age appropriate appears to present teachers with a logical inconsistency when considering the learning needs of young gifted children. It introduces the possibility that they will respond by choosing one or the other.

Some behaviour is clearly identifiable as advanced for the age, such as accelerated levels of reading or mathematics. How is this to be understood within the DAP model? In applying the DAP model, teacher interpretation of behaviour is that ‘development unfolds’ in an age-typical way unless the environment or the child’s temperament alters the nature of this process (see Bredekamp. 1987). If for instance, cognitive development for a certain age is understood by the teacher as not typically including symbolic learning — as evident in learning to read — development of such clearly advanced skills or knowledge in a very young child can be logically explained (when a teacher is unaware of the nature of advanced cognitive development) as either the outcome of temperamental or environmental differences. Where the explanation of temperament is not relevant and an ‘immature’ interpretation not logical, as in this example, then the explanation most compatible to the DAP philosophy is to understand cognitive differences as attributable to ‘environmental’ influences. This would provide one explanation for the ready belief amongst teachers that it is parents who create advanced behaviours by ‘hot-housing’ their child (Gross, 1999a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 1999). However, inherent within this interpretation there continues to be a tension between understandings of what is age- and individually-appropriate learning. I believe that this tension raises the following question for the teacher: Is age appropriate learning being minimised by or affected in other ways by individual learning?

View of the educational environment

If a view of the gifted child is masked by the DAP perspective on development, how might the curriculum and pedagogical approach advocated in the DAP model influence gifted children’s experiences of learning? Play was advocated by the NAEYC as the fundamental instrument of learning, enabling children to gain knowledge and skills at a level that matched their developmental stage and therefore learning needs. Hence, play was promoted within
DAP as the most relevant strategy to promote young children’s cognitive, physical, social and emotional development throughout the early childhood years. The DAP philosophy stated specifically that children need years of play before they are ready for abstract and complex learning (Bredekamp, 1987). Understanding and approaching children’s learning from this perspective was perceived as allowing development to proceed in a natural and holistic way.

As a consequence of this view, teacher best practice was understood as supporting children’s learning at their own pace within an ‘appropriate environment’ — as described by Piaget and Inhelder (1969). Implicit in this pedagogical guidance was the view that it was ‘judicious’ for teachers to restrain from intervening in children’s play (Arthur et al., 2008) as there was need to allow children to progress at their own pace. Hence, directed learning plus content derived by the teacher from an ‘external curriculum’ was interpreted within DAP as likely to run counter to the child’s developmental inclination and therefore to be developmentally damaging. Consequently play, as a pedagogical strategy, has become firmly entrenched in educational practice and while the earlier categorical advocacy has been ameliorated it continues to be prominent in recommended teacher practice in the early childhood sector (DEECD, 2009a; NAEYC, 2009).

However, this conception of learning and teaching practice presents difficulties for teachers in responding to the learning needs of young gifted children. Empirical evidence suggests that even at a young age they respond eagerly to:

- acquiring new knowledge and skills;
- learning provided at a rapid pace; and
- delight in complex and abstract cognitive concepts (Porter, 2005).

Appropriate teaching practices to support the learning needs of gifted children require a differentiated approach, involving modifications to standard content, learning approaches, learning outcomes and the learning environment (Maker & Neilson, 1995). Therefore, the learning needs of gifted children require teacher strategies that partner the child in the learning process rather than those that steer away from direct involvement as promoted by DAP. This would be particularly necessary for those young gifted children who are in the very early stages of formal academic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics but I believe it is also relevant where play is the chosen pedagogical strategy.
Morelock and Morrison (1996) state that one consequence of introducing the DAP approach has been that preschool teachers, in particular, became reluctant to contemplate the provision of learning activities that had any similarity to the directed learning typical of school. Falls (2006) found that because giftedness was seen as synonymous with accelerated learning and academic content — as in reading and mathematics — teachers were confused about how to reconcile satisfactory learning activities for young gifted children with the teachers current approach of planning for learning needs in terms of their knowledge of age-typical learning.

The prominent advocacy of play within the DAP philosophy and its rejection of teaching approaches that accompany ‘early academics’ presents a pedagogy that appears to dichotomise play or directive teaching. In doing so I believe, it creates difficulties for an early childhood teacher in planning for the learning interests of a gifted child. Where a child has advanced learning interests, which can include the development of academic skills such as reading and mathematics, it becomes a challenge to teachers (see the following section on ‘Curriculum responses to gifted children’) to frame cognitively satisfying learning within a play approach focussed on normal development. A small body of evidence and discussion about the nature of play in which young gifted children engage, indicates it has a place in their learning but involves different interests and advanced levels of complexity to that described as age-typical or normal for the age (Grant, 2004, Harrison, 2003; Harrison & Tegel, 1999; Morrissey, 2007; Moss, 1992; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004).

Broadly, the early DAP model presents a view of the child and of the educational environment that does not readily encompass what is already known about the learning characteristics and needs of the young gifted child. The description of best teaching practice indicates minimal teacher intervention in, or direction of learning and a curriculum based on and evaluated against developmental norms. Morelock and Morrison (1996) propose that as a consequence of the DAP position on learning, — to be age and individually appropriate — a teacher interpreting the different learning needs of a young gifted child will incline towards a deficit perspective and concentrate on the age-typical behaviour which appears to be absent.

Curriculum responses to gifted children

While the characteristics of the DAP model present significant difficulties to educational provision for young gifted children, there are two additional factors which appear to compound potential complexity for early childhood teachers in understanding the learning
needs of this group of children. The first is a weakness in subject knowledge, found to be prevalent in early childhood teachers. Teachers of young children in the United States are reported to have not only personal low-levels of learning in core subject areas such as science and mathematics (NAEYC, 2009), but these have often not been addressed in their pre-service teacher training. Such an omission in professional education has been found to potentially create feelings of inadequacy for teachers about including such content in their educational planning (New, 1998).

Similar investigations of early childhood teachers in Australia were not found but it is probable that preschool teachers in particular would be similarly positioned as early childhood courses in Australia have been influenced by early childhood teacher preparation in the USA (Fleer, 2005). Advocacy of the inclusion of core subject knowledge, such as literacy and mathematics, is now present in early childhood curriculum documents (DEECD, 2009a). However, in a study of mathematics in the early childhood curriculum it was found that early childhood teachers were not well prepared or felt confident about planning for inclusion of this topic (Doig, McCrae, & Rowe, 2002). Thus, there is reason for concern about how well early childhood teachers may be able to respond to a very young child who expressed an eagerness to pursue specific and accelerated content knowledge such as mathematics, as is the case with Michael, a child participant in this study. A teacher’s own lack of education and subsequent feelings of inadequacy may compound the DAP censure of early academic learning.

A second factor is the particular focus on holistic learning. The importance of children’s learning in all developmental domains is acknowledged (Ayoub & Fischer 2006) and holistic learning was an important focus in the early DAP statements. Extensive detail of normal development within each developmental domain was provided in the early DAP framework (Bredekamp, 1987). An acceptance of the importance of satisfactory learning in all developmental domains is also present in recent statements about teaching practice (Bowman, et al., 2001; DEECD, 2009a; VCAA, 2007; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). While the intent has been to encourage educational planning for children’s holistic development the outcome has been somewhat different. Early childhood teachers in Australia, widely influenced by the DAP philosophy, are reported to separate understandings of learning and thus educational planning into the four, key developmental domains (Arthur, et al., 2008), which effectively compartmentalises both their assessments of learning and their teaching strategies.
Such a focus on learning within the developmental domains poses potential difficulties for gifted children. Gifted children may not display ‘age-appropriate behaviours’ (see next section: ‘Where are young gifted children in the gifted education literature?’) so descriptions of expected behaviours and learning within developmental domains could not be expected to explain their behaviours. In addition, the theory supporting the definition of giftedness that guides this study indicates an interconnection between advanced cognitive ability and socioemotional development. Therefore, compartmentalisation of behaviours would not enable teachers to understand how, for instance, advanced cognitive behaviour influences social and emotional behaviours (Morelock, 2000).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) had been intended by the NAEYC to describe ‘current best practice’ in early childhood programs, but far from settling the debate about the desirability of early academic learning activities or the importance of developmentally appropriate learning, it provoked critiques and further debate. These have contributed to a reconceptualisation of early childhood education over the last two decades (Williams, 1999).

**Early childhood education in Australia**

Theory and practice do not always align and this is the case in the early childhood field in Australia. Despite ongoing theoretical discussion of alternative conceptualisations of early childhood education (for example, Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) and debate about its conceptual limitations, Fleer (1995) acknowledged that eight years after the DAP perspective was first published, it “now underpin[ned] early childhood education across Australia” (p.2). Fleer commented again ten years later on the entrenchment of the concept of DAP, which was reflected in responses from the profession to the National Agenda for Early Childhood (Fleer, 2005). Subsequently the National Childcare Accreditation Council had published benchmarks for Australian early childhood practice (NCAC, 2006). Four years later concern was expressed again about the persistence of a concept of normative development in teachers’ understanding of children’s learning (Edwards, et al., 2009) and in the (new) Australian Early Development Index (Agbenyega, 2009). Sociocultural perspectives on learning now dominate the theory underpinning early childhood education in Australia, but the DAP philosophy and framework continues to be found in everyday practice (Arthur, et al., 2008). In view of this situation it is pertinent to this study to ask: Does the theory around sociocultural practice reduce some of the challenges in understanding and providing for the young gifted child in early childhood education?
Sociocultural perspectives on children’s learning

Over the last two decades different perspectives on early childhood education have contributed to changing views about the child as learner and the most efficacious educational environment for young children. Critical discourse analysis, postmodernism, feminism, and post-structuralism have, from different theoretical orientations, all sought to ‘trouble’ the accepted views of the child and the educational environment (Williams, 1999). In doing so the implication of the DAP model — child development follows a universal pattern — was profoundly rejected. The resulting reconceptualisation viewed children’s development as following different patterns that originate in the social and cultural context of the individual. A sociocultural perspective on learning has now become the preferred theoretical orientation for current early childhood education in Australia (Arthur, et al., 2008; DEECD, 2009a; Fleer, 2005; Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2007) and the individual, their learning and context of learning are viewed as part of a whole:

Individual development must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its social and cultural–historical context … the efforts of individuals are not separate from the kinds of activities in which they engage and the kinds of institutions of which they are a part. (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50)

Further conceptualisation of this stance is provided in Hedegaard’s (2004) view of the individual. She calls for a reorientation of the concept of development in early childhood education to include an acceptance that development does not just exist within the child but occurs as children interact with their community. Hedegaard argues that if a child does not develop in a healthy and positive way it is not the fault of the child but of the relationship between the community and the child. The potential relevance of this perspective to the interaction between a young gifted child and the formal learning environment is confirmed in discussion of underachievement in school by gifted children. Here it is argued that in seeking insights into why underachievement occurs for these children there is a need to focus on the interactions between the gifted child and the school environment rather than seeking reasons that relate only to the child or family learning environment (Delisle, 1994; Kolb and Jussim, 1994; Seeley, 1993; Whitmore, 1986). I propose that these perspectives on the context of child development support the relationships suggested in Harrison’s definition of giftedness (Table 1, p. 18). However, there is a need for more investigation into the interaction between the characteristics of young gifted children and the social context of learning (home,
preschool and school), as only sparse evidence-based information is presented in the literature on this topic.

Sociocultural theory appears to offer a theoretical framework for understanding and providing for the learning needs of a gifted child without the logical inconsistencies and other conceptual problems I have described as inherent in DAP. Of particular relevance is that the sociocultural framework provides a contrasting view of the role of play as a pedagogical strategy to the one proposed by DAP. Harrison and Tegal (1999) offer a number of recommendations about play and the gifted child, which recognise the importance of a view of the gifted child as developmentally different to their age peers and the influence of the social context. Their discussion suggests play opportunities for the young gifted child must include guidance from the teacher in a form that is responsive to the ability level of the child. Only through teacher participation is it possible for play to incorporate the features that are necessary for gifted children to sustain their own level of learning and a positive disposition to learning in a formal learning environment. Specifically, such play must include opportunities to engage with complex ideas, creativity, possibilities for critical and flexible thinking, and connection with like-minded peers.

**Where are young gifted children in early childhood education literature?**

Calls for a reconceptualisation of early childhood education appear to have increased since the NAEYC position statement on DAP, but they are not all based on the same theoretical framework. While the demands for change have represented an advocacy for diversity, the theoretical frameworks themselves are diverse and have ranged from an interest in the impact of power relationships within the social context, to calls for the pluralisation of concepts of child development and subsequent early childhood practice (for example, Cross, T. 1995; Dahlberg, et al., 1999; Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1994; MacNaughton, 2004; Mallory & New, 1994). Despite the promotion of recognition of diversity in student learning, through for instance, recognition of gender differences, developmental differences, and cultural differences, the developmental diversity represented by gifted children remains barely visible in the literature.

Where ‘developmental differences’ are described, these have been only in terms of developmental disorder or disability (see Atwater, Carta, Schwartz & McConnell, 1994; Mallory & New, 1994, MacNaughton, 1995). Developmentally advanced levels of ability are not discussed in the early childhood literature, and, as a result, there is little or no reference to
the characteristic behaviours of young gifted children that could support teachers in understanding their specific needs. The original and subsequent publications by NAEYC on DAP, in addition to the philosophical hurdles in regard to providing for young gifted children, contained no information on teaching strategies or the establishment of environments that might provide for this group of children (Bredekamp, 1987, 1997; Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1993). Current guidelines for early childhood education in Australia specify that different levels of ability need to be recognised by teachers (DEECD, 2009a; NCAC, 2006; VCAA, 2007; Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2007). But these lack detail and only hint at the possibility without promoting any confidence that this acknowledgement would include advanced levels of ability.

Information necessary to support young gifted children includes identification of behavioural and developmental characteristics plus recommendations about suitable educational programming. Statistically these children represent around five per cent of the population (Wilson, 1996), and this is a reasonable basis on which to claim that information on their needs must be available. The rationale for this is strengthened by the information that these children experience advanced cognitive, social and emotional development and display qualitative differences in behaviours (Harrison, 2005a).

Discussions of the need to respond to the diversity represented by advanced development were found predominantly within the gifted education field. For example, Silverman (1997) argues for it on the basis of symmetry in educational provision for this sector of children. She reasons that children who show differences of two or more standard deviations below the mean level of ability of the population have special educational provision made for them while those children who show the same degree of difference above the mean, and for whom the need for educational differentiation has been demonstrated, seem to go unrecognised. The reality of this situation in Australia was signalled in the aforementioned Commonwealth Government report on the education of gifted children in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). Describing the lack of provision for gifted children in schools as an issue of equity, the report made particular references to the need for the early childhood field to address provision for these children. This need is still to be addressed.
Where are young gifted children in the gifted education literature?

There is a similar lack of visibility of young gifted children in the gifted education literature and this has been the subject of comment within the field over recent decades (Fatouros, 1986; Gross, 1999a; Koshy & Robinson, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). To some degree the absence of information can be attributed to an accepted notion that formal testing for an IQ score with children under the age of six years is difficult and unreliable (Robinson & Robinson, 1992). However, recent research has provided evidence that advanced development can be evident at 18 months and earlier in some children (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, & Guerin, 1994; Harrison, 2005; Morrissey, 2007). Reliable identification of such advanced development, through assessing the qualitative and quantitative ways that gifted preschoolers express their abilities, is now accepted as possible (Harrison, 2003; Louis & Lewis, 1992; Morelock & Morrison, 1996; Robinson & Robinson, 1992). Notwithstanding recognition of such findings, uncertainty about identifying actual levels of ability in very young gifted children has resulted in a minimal evidence base from which to argue for the necessity of planning at the early childhood level.

Qualitative and quantitative characteristics of young gifted children

Extensive lists of characteristic behaviours of gifted children are readily sourced (see end of Table 2). These have been published mainly in specialist gifted education texts and journals and they provide educators, as well as parents, with information about the types of behaviours that indicate advanced ability. A comprehensive list is included in Appendix A, and those characteristic behaviours most frequently listed as applying to young gifted children are listed below in Table 2.
Table 2: Characteristics of Giftedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exceptional memory</td>
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<td>Development is ahead of peers</td>
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<td>Learns rapidly</td>
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<td>Intense interest in books and stories</td>
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<td>Acceleration in language and mathematical ability-mastery of symbolic concepts</td>
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<td>Early language, especially extensive vocabulary</td>
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<td>Long attention span</td>
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<td>Enjoyment of complexity, including abstract concepts</td>
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<td>Meta-learning skills: planning, prioritising, analysis, synthesis, reasoning</td>
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<td>Good problem solving ability</td>
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<td>Vivid imagination &amp; creativity</td>
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<td>Early ability to play games with rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social and emotional</td>
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<td>Enjoys company of older children and adults, mature sense of friendship and advanced play interests</td>
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<td>Early sense of social justice</td>
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<td>Highly developed empathy</td>
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<td>Perfectionist</td>
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<td>Heightened sensitivity and intensity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early development of self-concept and awareness of being different to peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>General attributes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asynchrony</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intense and persistent curiosity</td>
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<td>High levels of intrinsic motivation</td>
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<td>Home environment cognitively enriched</td>
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<td>Advanced sense of humour</td>
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<td>Physical skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age-typical level of fine and gross motor skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>High levels of physical activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need less sleep than age peers</td>
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</table>

Reservations about lists of characteristics

While lists of characteristics provide potentially useful indicators of gifted behaviours to assist in identification of young gifted children I consider that these qualitative descriptions of behaviours need to be appropriated with some caution. As a contribution to improved professional identification of the needs of gifted children, especially at the early childhood level, the efficacy of such lists can be limited. They are not always enlightening in terms of quantitative measures as they neither adequately identify variations between the levels of ability of an individual, nor acknowledge that gifted children are not all alike. Likewise there is no indication about what level of behaviour or skill constitutes advanced development.

Each gifted child’s profile of development would be expected to show both qualitative and quantitative differences to those of another gifted child (Porter, 2005). In addition, it is accepted in the literature that young gifted children usually show asymmetrical or asynchronous development even within their own profile (see Sankar-DeLeeuw’s description of characteristics, 2004). This is not simply the variation in day-to-day competency that is common to all children rather, it refers to very noticeable variations in development: a four year old child may have a similar cognitive ability to an eight year old, the social skills of a six year old and the physical skills of her ‘age peer group’. Reports of such unevenness of development are commonly found in studies of gifted children (Gross, 1998; Harrison, 2005a; Hollingworth, 1942; Morelock, 2000; Roedell, 1986; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Silverman, 1995; Whitmore, 1986).

Caution about applying the information is also required. As noted by Sankar-DeLeeuw (1999), there is an inconsistency in the use of the descriptor ‘young gifted children’; the ages of the children to whom this is applied range from babies to twelve year olds. Concern about the reliable identification of giftedness is expressed in the gifted education literature in regard to a history of variation in sample selection. For instance, Terman’s original study of giftedness was based on informal teacher selection of the youngest, brightest children in a mixed ability class (Robinson, & Clinkenbeard, 2008). Further, it is noted in the literature that evidence about social and emotional difficulties in gifted children was frequently derived from counsellors or psychologists who, by definition, were observing children experiencing problems (Porter, 2005; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008).
I share Porter’s view that these lists of characteristics are a mixed blessing. While they do provide a quick overview of potential behaviours they also frequently lack the specificity needed for a distinguishing characteristic; such as:

- has a strong curiosity; and
- has a high degree of energy (Silverman & Maxwell 1996)

Nonetheless, these lists remain a presence in the literature, most probably because they offer a quickly accessible means of identification for parents and teachers. As such, they are unlikely to be discarded and will remain as part of the general information about young gifted children and how they learn.

2.4 Establishing a learning culture

The patterns of learning experienced by a child form a schema for learning and achievement within a learning environment (Bernstein, 1996). The gifted education literature reports that learning accomplished at home by gifted children is characteristically different from that experienced by age-typical children (Gottfried, et al., 1994). This raises the question: How might the home learning schema of gifted children shape their experience of a formal learning environment?

Home learning culture

Research evidence identifies home life for gifted children as enriched by high, but also appropriate, levels of intellectual stimulation, provided by parents or older siblings who support the child’s intellectual development, especially demands for complex information (Gottfried et al., 1994; Gross, 1993; Harrison, 2005a; Mooij, 1999; Morrissey, 2007; Moss, 1992; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). Such learning frequently includes responses to a child’s particular mode of learning, encompassing an intense focus on topics of interest.

Development of learning and interests in gifted children are reported as usually mediated by the family’s educational level, the characteristics of other children in the family as well as parents’ ability to provide resources to meet their child’s intellectual demands (Gottfried, et al., 1994). The family may have clearly defined times when, for instance, conversations around complex topics are possible, or there may be ‘no real boundaries’ on when parents are available to their children (Gottfried, et al., 1994). Such characteristics in the learning mode become a pedagogic discourse, characterising learning for that child (Bernstein, 1996). Bernstein identifies the pedagogic discourse that is familiar to the child as
framing their particular knowledge or skill, motivation, self-concept, confidence, learning styles and expectation of success. For instance, a child who has an early interest in learning mathematics may become familiar with a pedagogic discourse at home that is characterised by ‘rule learning’ or alternatively ‘learning for meaning’ within mathematics (Gaye Williams — personal communication).

Research on learning for gifted children indicates that the pedagogic discourse at home may be strongly developed but also considerably different to the one in the preschool and school environment (Gottfried, et al., 1994; Gross, 1993; Harrison, 2005b). This has the potential to heighten differences for the child between home and the educational expectations and practices present at preschool and/or school. Young children with advanced development can display idiosyncratic social and emotional characteristics, but the home culture accommodates this as normal for that child (Gottfried, et al., 1994). For example, gifted children may develop high levels of initiative in satisfying their curiosity leading to a strong sense of independence including the desire to set their own learning goals. They may also relate readily to adults and have little interest in children of their own age, or alternatively they may think divergently and critically about how adults respond to situations (Whitmore, 1986).

Teachers are reported as having their own learning schema, which is suitable to their formal learning environment, and are often unmindful that their educational perceptions and practices might contradict those already learnt by the child, or advocated by parents (Brooker, 2002). A consequence of such differences between learning schemas, compounded by the atypical behaviour of young gifted children, suggests the potential for interaction within the formal learning environment to be difficult for them.

**Formal educational culture**

Leta Hollingworth is widely regarded as initiating the contemporary field of gifted education. In the 1930s, her ideas were informed by case studies of children with IQs above 180 on the Stanford Binet Scale for whom she devised markedly different educational approaches from standard teaching practices. Hollingworth’s differentiated educational programs proved successful with this sector of students and she publicly advocated for this educational approach to meet the distinctive cognitive, social and psychological needs of children with high IQs (Hollingworth, 1942). Although such children constitute a tiny group in relation to the majority of children assessed as gifted, and they arguably have very
different needs to those with a moderate level of giftedness, the principle methods Hollingworth advocated continue to be recognised as central to the education of all gifted children (Gross, 2004; Maker & Nielson, 1995; Van Tassel-Baska, 2003).

While the principles of differentiation are not questioned in the gifted education field, the implementation of them provokes much discussion, with a wide range of curriculum and pedagogical approaches being advocated. These encompass radical acceleration at one extreme — a student finishes school three or more years earlier than the usual age (Gross & van Vliet, 2003) — and at the other the suggestion that the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘gifted programs’ should be discarded (Borland, 2003; Feldhusen, 2003). Van Tassel-Baska (2005) argues from a more ‘mid-field position’ that a range of educational structures can be efficacious and despite the volume of literature on the topic these are not the real issues in educational provision. The real learning needs of gifted students, Van Tassell-Baska considers, can be addressed by maintaining a core of important practices that she terms, ‘nonnegotiables’.

‘Nonnegotiables’ are those core elements that must be part of an appropriately differentiated curriculum so that there is an optimal match between the learner and the content. Traditionally this has been described as qualitatively changing the content, product, process and outcome of the curriculum delivery (Maker & Nielson, 1995). Even for children at the beginning school level (and I would include preschool level), it is argued the core elements can be addressed by ensuring the curriculum incorporates more abstract concepts, conceptual complexity, core discipline knowledge and awareness of modes of inquiry particular to each discipline (Van Tassell-Baska, 2005). Teaching approaches should incorporate the use by children of higher order thinking skills, and provide a faster pace of learning with open ended opportunities for the individual pursuit of topics. Difficulties in reconciling these ‘nonnegotiables’ with the DAP model of early childhood education are quite clear.

**Policy and provision for young gifted children in Victoria**

The presence of young gifted children and educational programs for these children in Victoria (Australia) are rarely mentioned in either the scholarly literature or more general professional information. Hence, it is difficult to know what differentiation occurs at the beginning of school or at the preschool level in this state. While some parents have commented anecdotally to me that provision for gifted children does occur at a classroom
level within individual schools, others have said they experienced little awareness by teachers, or that they encountered opposition to giving special attention to the learning needs of young gifted children.

Formally, educational policy describes the standard and the parameters of educational provision. National policy to guide provision of appropriate educational opportunities for gifted children in Australian schools has progressed slowly and has been characterised by ambivalence about the necessity of such provision (Wilson, 1996). This aspect has been most apparent in the intermittent provision of funding at a national level for the education of gifted and talented children. Attitudes have ranged from a view that separate educational programs are required to allow gifted children to fully develop their potential, to the belief that no special services are required (Wilson, 1996). Advocacy for recognition in schools of different learning needs in gifted children has increased from the 1980s, culminating in the first national report into the education of gifted and talented children in Australia in 1988 (Senate Select Committee). This report included strongly worded statements on the necessity of implementing special educational strategies in schools across Australia to allow gifted children to reach their full potential. However, recommendations were not adopted (Wilson, 1996). While some education policy has been devised and funding provided, at a national level, each state has its own education department, responsible for educational provision within the state, so consistency is difficult to achieve.

The state of Victoria has had differing forms of educational provision for education at the primary and secondary level of gifted and talented children from early in the 1980s, although as Wilson (1996) notes this has included both formal and informal responses to perceived needs. An official policy, called Bright Futures, was introduced by the Victorian Government in May 1995 and included a commitment to meet the needs of gifted and talented students in all government schools (DSE, 1995). At that time, preschools were administered by a different government department and the Bright Futures policy did not mention provision for gifted and talented students in that sector of education. No comparable separate policy was devised to guide provision for gifted children below school age. Although initial financial assistance was provided to implement a range of Bright Futures initiatives and programs in schools, ten years later this had largely ceased. At the outset there was a fulltime team of five officers in the Victorian Education Department to support teachers across the state; by 2005 this had been reduced to one officer, part time (DEECD 2009, personal communication). Although many schools in Victoria now have their own
Gifted Education Policy, there is little evidence of continuing co-ordination of program provision at the level of state education in Victoria.

At the national level there is no policy identifying the importance of specific educational provision for gifted children in the preschool sector (see for instance, Quality Improvement and Accreditation System documents: NCAC, 2006). There also continues to be no policy at the Victorian state level (see DEECD website) regarding identification of young gifted children or describing guidelines for provision of a satisfactory educational program for them. The inevitable conclusion is that the lack of visibility of young gifted children in the literature is mirrored at the level of policy to guide implementation of programs.

To respond adequately to this situation in the Australian context there has been a call at the national level by the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented (AAEGT, 2006) for changes in teacher awareness of gifted children. Representing the ‘voices’ of the affiliated state organisations, the request is not solely for specific programs or pedagogies to be implemented in schools, but for changes in the preservice education and professional development of teachers. In their submission to the Commonwealth Government (2006), the AAEGT stated that the education of teachers should provide them with the professional skills to be able to respond appropriately to the learning needs and learning styles of gifted students. Recognition of early year’s education as formative indicates that this is also important for teachers in the early childhood sector. The waxing and waning of educational provision for gifted children in Victorian schools in line with the publication or absence of public policy on the subject illustrates clearly the nexus between policy and provision. The current absence of any overt policy about educational provision for very young gifted children is consequently a concern.

2.5 Reciprocal-socialisation

When reflecting on how the young gifted child might adjust to a new educational environment an early influence was the current view of the child in early childhood education. The young child as learner is now acknowledged as competent and as an active initiator of learning within the social and cultural aspects of their lives (DEECD, 2009a; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1994). In contrast to the view of the teacher’s role developed within the DAP model, and also to that of the proponents of early teacher directed learning (opposed by the NAEYC), it is now recommended that teacher best practice responds to
children’s agency in learning. Hence, through facilitation, encouragement and engagement teachers are advised to become active partners in children’s learning interests (Arthur, et al., 2008; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2006; Rogoff, 2003).

In the gifted education literature satisfactory learning for young gifted children is described in terms that readily align with these perceptions. Gifted children are recognised as active learners (Gottfried, et al., 1994). Observations of young gifted children in learning situations indicate that they influence the cognitive, social, or emotional environment through use of their advanced verbal and socioemotional development to augment the learning possibilities (Dalzell, 1998; Moss 1992). It is recognised that in this way they achieve a level of stimulus or support that they need (Harrison, 2005a). Parents as their first teachers are identified as assuming a guided participatory role (Gottfried, et al., 1994) and teachers of gifted children are recommended to be flexible in curriculum delivery through practices that incorporate student choice about the learning process, content and product (Van Tassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005).

These views of optimal provision for children’s learning illustrate the mechanisms in Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory and in particular the influence of personal agency in the interaction between the individual and the sociostructure in which they function. Relevant to this study is the perspective within this theory on ‘agency’ as not simply an individual reaction to the social environment derived from personal factors such as temperament, cognitive ability (or the age-stage understanding of the Piagetian concept of development) or past experiences. Rather, Bandura’s (2001) concept of agentic behaviour indicates an active cognitive response to a situation or experience that interacts with and is also influenced by personal factors, as well as the social and physical environment. The social and physical environment, described as the sociostructure, is recognised within social cognitive theory as influencing how, and to what extent individuals are able to express their agency (Bandura, 2002). A dynamic interplay occurs between individual agency (indicated by individual learning goals, sense of efficacy, and beliefs about learning progress) and factors within the sociostructure (teacher guidance, pedagogy and forms of feedback) to influence learning outcomes. Bandura (2001) describes this dynamic mutual influence as a process of triadic reciprocal causation (p.14).

Corsaro’s (2005) conceptualisation of the process of adjustment for children in a formal learning environment reflects Bandura’s (2001) views of the dynamic interplay of influence between the child as learner and the teacher’s presentation of the sociostructure
within the classroom environment. The essence of Corsaro’s perspective, that “children negotiate, share and create [the learning] culture with adults and with each other” (p.18), describes the active interaction in the context of the classroom. The gifted education field in Australia has identified the lack of knowledge in teachers of satisfactory learning programs for gifted children (AAEGT, 2006) as a serious concern. A state of affairs that suggests teachers are not well equipped with the professional skills to enable interaction with gifted children in a way that would support positive learning and development. In response to this potential ‘blind spot’ in the sociostructure the literature on transition was explored for insights it may provide into the subsequent influences on young gifted children in early educational settings.

**Transition**

Transition as a process is reported as having long term implications for a child’s school life (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Harper & Huie, 1987). Such studies have shown that follow-up investigation of children’s academic competency at school, both three and five years after starting, indicate strong and positive correlations between early experiences in the transition period and academic achievement. Because many children in Australia now experience some form of peer group involvement before starting school it is probable that adjustment to a preschool environment would share some similarities with the transition experience. In light of the concern within the gifted education field about underachievement by gifted children (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Schultz, 2002) it is reasonable to wonder whether there is a connection between their early experiences of transition and this later outcome.

Scholarly understanding of the experience of transition into school has steadily changed over recent decades (Brooker, 2008). An earlier and implicit assumption was that school was an immutable environment to which children needed to adjust, (Petriwskyj, 2005). From this viewpoint a belief evolved that children needed to attain or mature towards a level of developmental readiness for school. Recent discussion on children starting school reports a change in this view to include expectations of both children and the school (Dockett & Perry, 2009). In addition to accepting there will be a range of learning levels in young children, current views are that transition should also include consideration, by the school, of how it may adjust to the child (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Lam & Pollard 2006; Vogler, et al., 2008). Hence, adjustment is now viewed as a reciprocal process, not simply one required of
the child. Within this perspective there is a greater potential for acceptance of, and response to, the developmental differences of gifted children including the social-emotional differences referred to in Harrison’s (2003) definition of giftedness.

Literature on school transition provided a rich source of information about the expectations, influences and issues, which surround what is regarded as a key turning point in a child’s life — the movement from preschool to primary school. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of influences on children’s lives, this movement is described as the first, and a major transition in children’s educational lives. While there is a substantial body of literature on transition only a few studies were found that directly referred to the early experiences of very young gifted children (Sankar-DeLeeuw 2004, 2007; Whitton 2005). Nonetheless, the literature on transition was informative about the influences accepted as important in children’s experiences of the change in their educational environment and thus provided a basis from which to evaluate the experiences of the gifted children in this study.

**Influences on reciprocal-socialisation**

Early childhood educators have long believed that the quality of experiences for children in their very early years is formative. The recent Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project has confirmed that children’s early learning, cognitively, socially and emotionally in the years at home, as well as in peer group learning environments, influences later success at school (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004).

*Cognitive development*

It is reported in the literature that quality experiences for young gifted children need to provide sufficient opportunities for cognitive development (Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Harrison, 2005b; Porter, 2005; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2007). Therefore, it would be expected that programs providing satisfactory intellectual learning in a preschool and prep class contribute significantly to a positive experience for young gifted children of the reciprocal-socialisation process.

An additional characteristic usually discussed in tandem with cognitive learning is the nature of motivation in young gifted children — although Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) includes it as indicative of their affective development. Bernstein (1996) identified the expression of motivation as influenced by the home learning schema and therefore liable to be both established and potentially different from that of the formal learning environment. Bandura
(2002) describes self-efficacy as the well-spring of motivation and as influential in cognitive, social and emotional learning. Whitmore (1986) described tensions between the gifted children’s established motivational responses to learning and the school provision of learning as influential on young gifted children’s adjustment to school, as did Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004). Gottfried and Gottfried (2004) report that they found higher levels of motivational behaviour in young gifted children, from as early as age two (approximately), than was apparent in age-typical children. Their findings indicate that behaviours expressing motivation to learn were most apparent in the gifted children’s interest in the mastery of intellectual-type learning. When considering young gifted children’s adjustment to a formal learning environment, distinctive expressions of motivational behaviours are potentially influential on how they respond to the learning program.

One Australian study of young gifted children and their parents, prior to the children starting school, identified this interest in intellectual learning as their most important priority in the new environment of a prep class (Whitton, 2005). In contrast when parents, teachers and children in the broader community ranked the importance of issues concerned with starting school their results indicated social and emotional adjustment, including a feeling that they belonged in the school environment, were valued ahead of new learning of knowledge. This indicates a marked difference in the ranking of important issues and suggests the potential for expectations of gifted children and their parents to be significantly out-of-step with the general goals of the prep class. If the same survey with both groupings was conducted at preschool, I believe that the findings would be similar.

A number of reports on the experiences of young gifted children adjusting to a new learning environment at the early childhood level have frequently described unsatisfactory provision for them at the prep class level. For instance, teachers’ practice appeared to be either unable or unwilling to respond to the real learning needs of these children (Gross, 1999a; Hall, 2001; Harrison, 2005b; Hodge, & Kemp, 2006). In addition, as these children have learning needs that can vary markedly from those of age-typical children there is also evidence that it is challenging for teachers to identify and plan appropriately for them within a prep class (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004, 2007) and within a preschool program (Hodge & Kemp, 2002). Although the current body of evidence of the provision of cognitive learning for young gifted children is small, awareness of reasons for less than satisfying learning for them, in a preschool or school class, strengthens the argument that there is a need to know
more about the influence of cognitive provision on their adjustment to the formal learning environment.

Social development

For all children an important element of social experiences connected with transition is reported to be the connection with peers (Brooker, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Harrison, 2005a). Positive adjustment has been identified as more likely in children who had sufficient experience of peer relationships and started school with existing friendships. These children showed less problem behaviour at school as well as higher levels of social skills and greater academic competence (Margetts, 1999). Some studies refer generally to the importance of friendships (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Margetts 2000), while others identify the contribution it makes to the child’s sense of identity as the most important factor in friendship (Corsaro, Molinaro, Hadley & Sugioka, 2003; Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1996).

The literature identifies that gifted children more commonly develop social connections with older children — a mental peer rather than a chronological one (Gross, 2000). Further, it is reported that gifted children have difficulties in developing and maintaining friendships amongst chronological-age peers at school; with problems ranging from simply not having a friend with whom to share interests to being teased about differences (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 2005b). Recommendations are that gifted children require the friendship of children who are similarly cognitively advanced — the need for ‘like minds’ — to enable satisfactory social skill development (Gross, 1996; Morelock & Morrison, 1996).

Evidence derived from some small studies with young gifted children (Harrison, 2005b; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004) found wide variation in the development of social and emotional skills amongst young gifted children. But there is little evidence-based information about the nature of support for young gifted children in early social development of social skills with peers and in addition how, or if, they are supported by existing friendship as they transition into a new learning environment. Therefore questions remain as to whether the presence of an established friendship is important for young gifted children as they transition, or is the affirmation of a sense-of-self more significant? Whitton’s (2005) study indicated that social connection for young gifted children was a lower priority than provision of new learning although that does not negate its potential influence on their experiences.
Nonetheless Whitton’s (2005) finding does underline the need for further information about the influence of friendships for young gifted children. Relevant to this study are questions about the influences of peer interactions when the majority of peers will be at age-typical level of cognitive and socioemotional development. This is the situation in preschools where the age range of children is narrow and therefore peers of a similar mental age are less likely to be available. In light of the recommendation found throughout the gifted literature of the importance for gifted children to experience education with ‘like minds’ (Coleman, 1995; Gross, 1996; Harrison, 2005b; Porter, 2005; Winner, 2000) does the standard mixed ability grouping of children in Australian schools make it difficult for young gifted children to learn social skills? Pertinent to these considerations is the acceptance that the development of adequate peer relationships is indicative of the strength of adjustment to the new learning environment (Harper & Huie, 1987; Yeboah, 2002). This finding might have particular implications for understanding the progress of reciprocal-socialisation for young gifted children.

Establishment of a relationship between a child and their teacher is accepted as important for all children as they each adjust to a new class (Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2006). It provides a secure emotional basis from which the child can begin to adjust to the new learning environment (Brooker, 2008; Whitton et al., 2004). Rolfe (2004) emphasises the importance of this connection and states that for young children this needs to be at the level of a feeling of attachment. Specifically, a quality relationship with a teacher affords the child a feeling of care and affirmation of their perception of events as well as their own sense-of-self, and thus offers the emotional security needed to engage with the cognitive challenge presented by a new learning environment.

Reports of how this might occur for the young gifted child focus on the importance of teacher identification of, or understanding of, advanced cognitive ability (Gross, 1993, 1999b; Harrison, 2005b). Description of this aspect of teacher practice identifies the young gifted child as particularly dependent on teacher provision of a satisfactory level of cognitive programming. Evidence from Gross (1999a) and Harrison (2005b) illustrates the subsequent problems for the relationships between teachers and gifted children when the cognitive program is not satisfactory. Sankar-DeLeeuw (2007) reports more positive relationships, but did find that the relationship between teacher and young gifted child required willingness by the teacher to assume a variety of roles in response to their particular needs.
Brooker (2002) nominates the maintenance by a child of their sense-of-self as one of the important challenges presented by the experience of transition. Other studies of children’s adjustment to school (Pollard & Filer, 1999) suggest the reorientation of self-identity is the major task faced by all children in their early experiences of school. Reports in the gifted education literature, however, nominate this as a greater difficulty for the gifted child (Gross, 1998; Harrison, 2005a). Advanced cognitive ability results in behaviours that are not age-typical or that may occur for different reasons, or from different motivations, than behaviours of other children of the same age. Awareness of their difference, Gross (1998) argues, results in gifted children masking their true self or choosing to reject social acceptance in order to retain their ‘true identity’. The extent to which this choice may be forced on young gifted children is uncertain as Gross’s study focussed on adolescents, although Harrison (2005b) has reported this occurring for some gifted children early in their school lives.

*Emotional development*

Expectations of children’s emotional development as they transition into a formal learning environment vary depending on age; that is, the level of emotional competency expected from a preschool child varies from that expected of a child beginning school (Rolfe, 2004). Generally, children who develop in a regular way at this age are expected to assume more responsibility for themselves as individuals, in particular managing some emotional independence from parents and appropriate emotional self-regulation (Sroufe, 1995). As children adjust to preschool or beginning school it is accepted that their emotional wellbeing is central to a positive experience of the process (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian, 2000).

There are contrasting views in the literature about the extent to which emotional development in gifted children of all ages is influenced by their advanced cognitive development (Freeman, 1997; Neihart, et al., 2002). Studies on emotional development of gifted children, at both preschool and beginning school age, report characteristics of heightened intensity or sensitivity as significant in these children (Harrison, 2005a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). As a result, these children can find it difficult to manage their own responses to learning or the behavioural expectations made of them in the formal learning environment. For instance, perfectionism (a common characteristic of gifted children) may make it difficult for them to satisfactorily complete tasks. Also young gifted children may display behaviours towards others, such as being highly competitive, which make relationships difficult (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). While the body of evidence on young gifted children is small there does appear to be agreement about heightened intensity or sensitivity
as important influences on their experience of adjusting to a new learning environment (Harrison, 2005b; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004).

Resilience is emphasised as an important influence on children’s feelings of wellbeing in a new learning environment as a well-developed ability to cope with the new demands of a new environment is a protective factor in transition (Lam & Pollard, 2006; Niesel & Griebel, 2005). Coping strategies illustrate levels of resilience and occur in response to stress in the child’s social and emotional environment (Rolfe, 2004). While some levels of stress are productive in helping children to learn how to overcome the inevitable demands of reality it is accepted that there are potentially different stressors present for gifted children (Morelock, 2000; Silverman, 1995). Differences in their developmental trajectory create different internal responses to situations and can also result in external stress because responses to their behaviours are out of step with the child’s development (Silverman, 1993). This suggests that if a teacher’s response to a young child whose behaviour is not age-typical — because of advanced cognitive ability — conveys expectations that are too low or too high it can create additional stress for the child. There is little evidence to be found about this with young gifted children, although Hodge and Kemp’s (2006) findings indicate that a stress response depended on the individual. It is also accepted that stress may be more apparent because of the accepted characteristic in gifted children of heightened intensity (Piechowski, 1997).

However, Porter (2005) reports ambivalence in the literature about the extent to which gifted children are supported by their advanced ability to be more resourceful in responding to stress, or more prone to stress because of it. The evidence suggests that those factors which are supportive for all children — positive family environments, supportive relationships especially outside the family, and guidance in solving problems including conflicts with others — are also important for young gifted children (Clark, 2002). In contrast, there is also evidence that young gifted children are especially vulnerable to stress because of a greater than usual difference between conceptual awareness and emotional resources or social skills to cope with the resulting situation (Morelock, 2000). Roedell (1986) reported a particular vulnerability in young gifted children as the result of both internal and external stressors. Despite its age, Roedell’s study continues to resonate in the literature, as it reveals the potential impact of early school experiences on the emotional development of young gifted children.
Communication

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory states that good communication between families and educators is especially important. The maintenance of links between the microsystems of home, preschool and school are reported as a protective factor in transition, contributing to children’s successful adjustment (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Yeboah, 2002). Early childhood education in Australia promotes the importance of strong links based on good communication with families — as illustrated in the educational goals in the recent curriculum documents in Victoria for this sector (DEECD, 2009a; VCCA, 2007). However, I found little description of the establishment of such links to specifically support young gifted children.

It may well be that when links are positive they appear unremarkable, but when not established successfully they are more notable because of ensuing difficulties. Hodge and Kemp (2006) found parents of young gifted children, after a year or more of their child’s attendance at school, expressed a declining confidence in the teacher’s and the school’s ability to provide an appropriate curriculum. A reciprocal lack of confidence in communication by teachers with parents of gifted children was reported by Plunkett (2000). She found that Australian teachers doubted parents’ abilities to accurately judge their child’s ability. In these studies identification of giftedness appeared to introduce a problematic element into the relationship between teachers and parents.

This evidence about teacher-parent relationships suggests there are good reasons for concern about the strength and trust within the relationships that are established as gifted children transition into a peer group learning environment. There are calls for teachers to be receptive to the knowledge and insight that parents have about their own child, especially as they begin school (Bernstein, 1996; Brooker, 2002), as well as recommendations that parents are included in the educational program as a resource to provide for the additional learning needs of gifted children (Harrison, 2005b; Mooij, 1999; Whitton, 2005). Such counsel appears especially necessary for young gifted children.

Links between other figures important in the transition process — preschool and school teachers — have been found to be poorly developed, despite advocacy for its importance (Hopps, 2004; Timperley, 2003). A fundamental problem has been that teachers in either sector are not aware of the educational goals or pedagogical practices of the other and hence do not effectively communicate or facilitate links to support children and families through the transition process (Brostrom, 2002). Concern about the impact of this was instrumental in prompting the implementation in Victoria of formal communication between
preschool and school — the Transition Learning and Development Statement (DEECD, 2009b). This involved asking the preschool teacher to complete a series of set statements assessing each child’s level of skills and learning, in each developmental domain.

No reports were found in the literature on how such links or communication between teachers in the different sectors may specifically impact on young gifted children. However, variation in teacher responses to giftedness, between inability or unwillingness to respond to it (Gross, 1999a; Hall, 2001; Harrison, 2005b) and the more receptive relationship illustrated in Sankar-DeLeeuw’s (2007) report, suggests that the establishment of communication may depend on the individual teacher and their knowledge of giftedness. This is an insecure basis for supporting the adjustment of these children in a formal learning environment.

*Continuity*

Characteristic to each of these influences, on children’s experiences of adjusting to a new formal learning environment, is that they are facilitated when there is continuity between environments. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stressed the importance of continuity in children’s movement between the influential micro-system of home into the relatively unknown one of school and I would propose that this is also applicable to preschool. Studies of influences on children in a new educational environment consistently present as an essential element in successful transitions: continuity of opportunity to learn, continuity of relationships and continuity in the support systems available (Brooker, 2008; Brostrom, 2005; Margetts, 2000; Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006; Vogler, et al., 2008; Yeboah, 2002). Its influence is also apparent in the reports of transition difficulties resulting from discontinuity. While some discontinuity on an individual level is to be expected, the findings of particular relevance to this study are any that identified the impact of discontinuity in the experiences of young gifted children.

As discussed earlier, continuity in learning environments involves more for the young gifted child than continuation of satisfactory intellectual learning between home and a formal learning environment. Whitmore’s (1986) descriptions of early social and emotional adjustment to school by young gifted children reveal the negative impacts on them when continuity was minimal or not present at all. Sankar-DeLeeuw’s (2004) study on characteristic behaviours of young gifted children in the first year of school illustrated the need for teachers to respond to a wide variety of behaviours in these children. These findings add emphasis to the need for continuity through strong links between the micro-environments.
of the young gifted child. Only through such links can the teacher be enabled to be aware of prior learning and development.

There is a tone of pessimism in the gifted education literature about the quality of learning experiences and support for social and emotional development for young gifted children in formal educational environments in Australia (Gross, 1993, 1999a; Harrison, 2005b; Hodge & Kemp, 2006). There were indications in these reports that poor quality educational response to gifted children was not the experience of all, yet there was only minimal description of positive aspects of learning experiences for young gifted children in formal educational environments. A principal motivation for this study was to gain some insight into positive influences that may affect the engagement with learning in a formal learning environment by young gifted children. If teachers are to satisfactorily support these children within a reciprocal-socialisation process then it is imperative that there is sufficient information about the children’s experience of this process.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed key literature pertinent to how young gifted children adjust to the new learning environment of preschool and school. A brief overview of the relevant theory and definitions of giftedness has illustrated changes that have occurred in understanding the nature of giftedness. Through the inclusion of behaviours separate from those measured psychometrically this movement has facilitated the earlier identification of gifted children.

Both early childhood and gifted education literature were reviewed to identify how responsive these could be to the more readily identified young gifted child. Initially there appeared to be compatibility in the values held about curricula and pedagogical approaches to learning. This suggested that while evidence indicates young gifted children experience difficulties in formal educational programs there are no philosophical barriers in early childhood programs to educational provision for these children. However, in considering the implementation of these principles it became apparent that the principles espoused within the framework of Developmentally Appropriate Practice introduced challenges to provision for young gifted children. In contrast, sociocultural theory provided greater theoretical flexibility, which allowed for inclusion into teacher practice of two factors that support the learning characteristics of young gifted children. Namely the importance of guided participation in
learning and the influence of the learning context, which is usually distinctive for gifted children.

The literature in relation to children’s transition into a formal educational environment provided information about important elements involved in this process. The most pertinent influence discussed in the literature on transition is the maintenance of continuity and the potential difficulties for children where there is discontinuity. Continuity as a factor in transition is regarded as particularly important in children’s experiences of modes of learning as well as in relationships with their peers. However, information illustrating how continuity influenced the experiences of gifted children and the process of reciprocal-socialisation was minimal, emphasising the scarce research attention that has been paid to them.

Drawing on evidence in the literature, of the influence of cognitive, social and emotional behaviours within children’s adjustment, the approach of the study was conceived as an exploration of this process, rather than testing a hypothesis. This approach orientated the study towards qualitative methodology. The view voiced in the gifted education literature that there is a need to build a foundation of qualitative studies to extend understanding of the lives of gifted children (Borland, 1990; Schultz, 2002) consolidated this choice of methodology. The outcome of these beliefs for the research design and methods are now detailed in Chapter Three.
Chapter Three

The research process

The need for more case studies is apparent. The insider perspective, the meanings of people who are gifted and talented as well as those who teach, counsel, and parent the gifted and talented is urgently needed. In addition, the interaction of curriculum, student, teacher and program from varying perspectives is an untouched area of inquiry. (Coleman, et al., 2007. p. 61)

3.1 Introduction

Calls for an increase in qualitative inquiry have been made from within the field of gifted education on the basis of a need to diversify research perspectives and methods (Borland, 1990; Coleman, et al., 2007; Schultz, 2002). Such diversification has value in its potential for new insights into issues in gifted education. Qualitative methodology, employed in the form of two case studies, was chosen for the opportunities it offered to gain enhanced understanding of young gifted children’s experience of transition into a formal learning environment. A search of data bases indicated a paucity of research studies with young gifted children and no other studies were located that explored the process of reciprocal-socialisation as conceptualised in this study.

This chapter justifies the study’s adoption of a qualitative methodology and the methods which supported this approach. The research question is presented in Chapter One and revisited here to provide a link to the discussion about the methods. The key question that framed the study was:

*What influences a gifted child’s learning experiences when transitioning into formal educational environments?*

Subsidiary questions which expanded on the intent of the primary question were:

- *How did the teacher’s pedagogy and curriculum impact on the gifted child’s engagement in the formal learning environment?*

- *How did characteristic behaviours of gifted children impact their engagement in the formal learning environment?*
3.2 Methodology

With a long-established history of debate between quantitative and qualitative methods in educational research (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990), it could be expected that diverse approaches to research would be well established. Yet, overviews of research in gifted education report that a ‘scientific’ approach with its logical-deductive characteristics have continued to prevail in the field (Schultz, 2002) and only within the last two decades has qualitative research gained some “currency in our [gifted education] journals” (Coleman, et al., 2007, p. 51). Grant and Piechowski (1999) have called for “rich, well developed accounts of how gifted children think, feel and experience” (p. 11) from the perspective of the child, as this approach is required to help understand their development. Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) describes the contribution to an understanding of the experiences of young gifted children that can be made through a study of their experiences in ‘present time’. This approach has an especial value through offering detailed information about children’s development, and about the educational environment which influences their learning. These views emphasise the importance of exploring the richness and complexity of the experience of young gifted children and thus substantiated the value of a qualitative approach in this study of their transition into a formal educational environment.

The paradigm for this research study

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) state that all research is essentially interpretive as the researcher’s beliefs and feelings about the world guide any investigation. Nonetheless, present day qualitative research has at its core a particular understanding of the notion of ‘interpretive’. It proposes that world views differ between individuals so there are inevitably ‘multiple realities’. This perspective of many realities is not confined to any one method of qualitative inquiry but is present in the variety of approaches that all exist under the umbrella of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). From the varying interpretive paradigms within qualitative research the constructivist paradigm appeared the most pertinent to this study. It provided a conceptual foundation for including the realities of the perceptions of different sets of participants — the children, the teachers, the researcher, and to some extent the parents.
**Constructivist paradigm**

A constructivist paradigm provides views and guidelines about research that supported the goal of this study, specifically the concept that individuals construct the meaning of their experiences. This directs the researcher to a ‘view of the individual’ that positions the participants and their construction of the meaning of experiences at the centre of the study. Both the participants and the researcher are encompassed by this view (Patton, 2002); hence, understanding the reciprocal-socialisation experience of the key participants is the primary concern in this research study.

In recent discussions of methodology in early childhood education research there is unease about viewing children as players in a fixed reality as well as research methods which sustain that view of reality (Christensen, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2007b). This concern has played a role in the development of alternative methodological viewpoints which are evident in the early childhood field (Aubrey, David, Godfrey & Thompson, 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2007b). The resultant re-conceptualisation of an individual’s behaviour and reality has incorporated an appreciation of the attributed meaning and emerging perspectives of the participants, as well as indicating that:

> [W]hat observers see and hear depends upon their prior interpretive frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context, their relationships with research participants, concrete field experiences and modes of generating and recording empirical materials. (Charmaz, 2005, p 509)

This methodological orientation directed the design of the study towards particular questions.

- What do the participant children, teachers or parents hold as real about their experience of preschool or school?
- How is the children’s engagement with learning in a new peer group environment influenced by their social or cultural (interpreted as the mode of learning particular to the home experience of gifted children) context?
- In what particular situations — cognitive, social and emotional — do the meanings of the children’s learning experiences become apparent?

An imperative in this study was to explore the reciprocal-socialisation process for insights into influences that shaped the interactions between the participants and the influence of meaning attached to experiences by them. Hence, the design and methods were required to be
inclusive of multiple individual views of the social world. This approach facilitates the understanding of particular situations as part of a particular context, and the influences within that context (Patton, 2002).

Within a constructivist paradigm there are four key characteristics to the methods advisedly adopted by the researcher. The first is concerned with steps that the researcher takes to seek out and understand the participants’ perspectives: — the children’s; the teachers; and, where relevant, the parents. These perspectives are accepted as potentially different to, or separate from, those of the researchers. Diverse methods such as observations and interviews are used to generate data which are acknowledged as constructed by the individual participant as well as being co-created understandings of both participants and researcher. The relevant background, beliefs and values of the researcher are overt and recognised as an integral part of the construction. However, they are not considered as the body of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

The second characteristic is that the researcher goes to the ‘field’ to gather data (Merriam, 1998). While it is acknowledged that the data and its meanings are mediated through the researcher, the methods do not involve attempts to manipulate or control the unit or process of interest. Instead, methods embody a stance towards the generation of data where events are allowed to unfold naturally, with no set expectations of the course they will take, or of the eventual outcome (Aubrey, David, Godfrey, & Thompson, 2000; Burns, 2000; Patton, 2002). The characteristics of the field setting in this study supported this approach to research in the following ways:

- it allowed me to be responsive to the whole context of the preschool or school environment;
- it made it possible to adapt data collecting techniques when circumstances changed in any particular setting;
- it enabled data collection of non-verbal aspects of the context; and
- it allowed the use of research approaches that supported the need at times for further clarification of information or meaning, and the need to explore anomalous responses.

These principles became an integral part of this study with the methods employed being guided by an overall emphasis on gaining an understanding of the meaning given to experiences by the participants.
The third characteristic is that analysis of data is inductive in contrast to the deductive approach of quantitative research. This involves the researcher building from the field work, and then proceeding “inductively to explore the natural context, social processes and constructions of meaning, [and] suspending personal value systems so far as possible to gain access to others viewpoints” (Aubrey et al., 2000, p 33). As a research process this necessitated coding all data, followed by identifying and interpreting the subjectivities of the participants, including my own. This occurred as a continual process in this study from which patterns in the children’s and teachers’ interactions were established, forming propositions against which, both the early childhood and gifted education theory was compared.

The fourth characteristic is that the product or outcome of the analysis is expected to lead eventually “to the emergence of a clear conceptual story” (Aubrey et al., 2000, p. 40). This is described as a rich and thick description (Merriam, 1998) where words, rather than statistical findings, are used to convey what has been found. In this study words convey the context of the preschool and the primary school classes. They describe the children involved as well as their teachers, and, where relevant, information from the parents about their child’s early behaviours and learning. The participants’ words as well as my voice as the researcher are included. Together they provide the basis for a narrative, presented in the form of two case studies. The ‘story’ describes the influences on the holistic learning of seven young, gifted children as they transition into a new formal learning environment. The first case is a study of one child’s experience of the reciprocal-socialisation process in a preschool learning environment and the second case is a study of seven young gifted children’s experience (including the first case study’s preschool child when he entered school a year later than the first six children) of the reciprocal-socialisation process in their first year of primary school (prep class).

3.3 A qualitative case study

Commonly, a case study has been regarded as one mode of inquiry, one set of methods, among others. Discussions of case study theory did suggest, however, some difference of opinion as to where it is positioned methodologically. Yin (2003) describes it as most suitable for quantitative research, although he does refer to its use within qualitative research. Whereas, Merriam and Associates (2002) define it as a type of qualitative research, standing apart from others. Nonetheless, while definitions vary, there is agreement in the literature that case study research is not defined by the mode or methods used but is
distinguished by the opportunity it offers to design, implement, and report on research projects that are singular for a particular reason. Theoretically, the particular opportunities or characteristics are:

- the phenomena under study is especially suitable to illustrate ‘a case’;
- the study encompasses a whole situation surrounding the phenomena — it is not simply focussing on isolated factors within it;
- there is a natural limit on the sources of data that pertain to this phenomena or ‘case’; and
- it provides an experiential perspective on the case that shapes the type of description or report offered.


These characteristics convey a generally accepted condition of a case study, which is that there is an intrinsic boundary around the case, it is ‘bounded’ (Stake, 2005). ‘Boundedness’ provided an apt description of the situation that was of interest in this study. The parameters of the single preschool class and three prep classes, the timeframe of the academic year, the children and teachers as primary participants in the learning environment, all formed a discrete situation or case. These particular characteristics contributed to the design decision that case study methodology would provide an appropriate framework. The particular methods utilised in this research project will be outlined in the following discussion on the design, implementation, and reporting of this study of young gifted children and their experience of reciprocal-socialisation in new formal learning environments.

**Designing a case study**

Two case studies are presented in this thesis. Together they concern a group of seven young children who were identified as gifted and studied over the course of their experience of transition into a formal educational environment. Stake (2005) emphasises that in designing a project there needs to be a careful distinction made between the case and the factors that impact it, while they may be intertwined the focus must be essentially on the case rather than on the process. Yin (2003) takes this thinking a step further, defining the methodological approach of a case study in the following way:
A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (p. 13)

The case in this research study conforms to this description. It involved the ‘present time’ experiences and perspectives of the children as well as those of the teachers and parents integral to the context of the preschool and school setting. A boundary between children’s behaviours, teacher practices, and subsequent responses by both children and teachers was considered not to be clearly distinguishable. Hence, all aspects of the interaction that form the reciprocal-socialisation process were considered as potentially pertinent to the research.

**Implementing a case study**

Implementation of the design was initiated through recruitment to the study of parents and children from one preschool. Parents were informed that this research study aimed to investigate the experiences of young children transitioning into a new formal educational environment. My anticipation was that an invitation to the parents of all children who would be transitioning to school the following year would yield sufficient acceptances to form a group of approximately 10 children. It was intended that initial details would be gathered through a questionnaire to parents (see Appendix B). Parents were informed that to identify levels of learning and development, which could influence transition, a developmental assessment would be carried out by the researcher. Following the return of signed consent forms to participate an initial study group was formed. This was followed by an invitation to the teachers of these children to join the study (see examples of documentation in Appendix C).

The intent was to collect data during the last months of the children’s preschool year and for approximately six months of the following year when the children had started in the beginner’s grade at school. It was intended that data collected from the field would continue at a frequency and duration acceptable to the individual teachers of the children. In addition, I expected that data collection on the children’s learning experiences in a new formal educational environment would reach a point after a six month period when new data were no longer useful to the study. However, the study evolved in a different direction, which required flexibility in the overall design.
Case study flexibility

In detailing the execution of a case study Yin (2003) cautions that modifications to design are to be expected and that any changes require extra attention from the researcher to ensure that they stay within the original theoretical concerns and objectives. Changes did occur during this study. A decision was made to include the year-long preschool experience of a child who had already been identified as cognitively advanced and the period of preschool observations were as a result extended from the original, brief period at the end of the year. A much larger than expected body of field notes eventuated which put pressure on the transcription and subsequent reflexive processing of data. To maintain the original objectives there was a reduction in the number of participants and a re-orientation from an initial group with a range of abilities towards a sample group of children with a mental age from twelve months in advance of the norm for their age. Guiding the final modifications was an expectation that the depth of data could potentially replace the range of data expected from a greater number of participants. The resulting redesign and reorganisation was scrutinised to ensure that data collection was not deflected away from the original goal of exploring the reciprocal-socialisation process.

A further and significant modification to the original design was implemented when the preschool teacher approached me, prior to the start of the year, with some concern. She had accepted the request of the M-EEC Director to integrate Michael into her class the following year. Michael had been identified as demonstrating extreme levels of academic ability in several areas and his prospective teacher felt unsure about her skill in providing for him. Subsequently we arranged to hold a case study meeting approximately every three weeks, during the course of the teaching year. As I had a background in the education of young gifted children the preschool teacher asked if we could use such meetings to discuss Michael’s progress and for me to provide some programming support. This was agreed on the understanding that Michael’s teacher would lead this interaction and that my role would be to support her.

I anticipated that the introduction of these meetings would contribute to the generation of data as it offered additional opportunities to enrich ‘the insider perspective’ in the study. Equally these meetings had the potential to contribute to the developing relationship between the teacher and me, as they allowed for some reciprocity from me, thus ameliorating the implicit power differential between me as the researcher and the teacher as participant.
My new role in the preschool class was as observer plus ‘participant’, a modification that involved a combination of two styles of data collection noted by Merriam (1998) as “participant as observer and observer as participant” (p. 101).

**Setting**

There are two categories of setting for these case studies — the preschool class and the beginner’s class in a primary school. These exemplify Yin’s (2003) description of the characteristic focus of a case study as a ‘naturally occurring phenomena’. There was only one preschool involved in the project, an early childhood centre in suburban Melbourne, Victoria. This preschool was chosen because of the large enrolment of children at this centre, offering a greater opportunity to recruit a sample group. As well, I was already known to the staff, and the director of the centre had previously expressed interest in this research project. In this study it has been given the pseudonym of ‘Melbourne - Early Education Centre’ (M-EEC).

Children at this centre were organised into a number of separate classes according to age: at the beginning of the year there were classes for three to four year olds and other classes for four to five year olds. The class involved in the Preschool Case Study was composed of children, aged four to five and a half years of age with approximately 26 children attending on any one day. Parents who enrolled their children at the M-EEC were in professional occupations, working at a middle-management level in business, or running their own business. The seven sets of parents who participated in this study were typical of this range of occupations.

Each preschool class had a permanent lead teacher and teacher-assistant, with other staff rostered to work with the children at lunch times and other break times. The most continual influence on all the children involved in the study came from the lead teacher who had the most contact with them. Thus, it was the lead teacher who was recruited and who contributed the majority of the data relevant to teacher curriculum and pedagogy.

The primary school settings were initially chosen as they were those schools in which the participant children were enrolled for the year following their preschool experience, rather than for particular characteristics of the school itself. When selecting the final sample group there was consideration of the efficacy of collecting data from a number of schools, but ultimately the children selected to participate were chosen on the basis of theoretical recommendations about this type of case study — that they were worthwhile examples of the case being studied (Stake, 2005). One aspect that could have influenced the schools chosen
was the willingness of the staff to participate. However, when the school principals and individual class teachers were approached they were all willing to allow me to collect data about the sample group children’s experience of reciprocal-socialisation into the prep classroom at their school. Examples of these letters and information statements are in Appendix C.

Three primary schools, also located in Melbourne were eventually involved; two were in the inner city while the third was a suburban school. Each prep class numbered over twenty children with one class teacher and occasional contact with other adults within their class. Additional support for teachers was provided through a standard practice of parent involvement in each class. Usually this commences half-way through the first term with parents involved in activities such as listening to the children’s reading. This experience of the classroom contributed to parental understanding of their child’s learning at school and enabled the parents who participated in this study to offer first-hand information about this additional aspect of their child’s interactions in the reciprocal-socialisation process. The differing preschool and school settings, as well as the inclusion of the perspective of the different participants, children and adults, illustrate the presence of the naturally occurring multiple realities that Yin (2003) describes as characteristic of case study design.

**Sampling**

In case studies the ‘case’ is chosen so that understanding of the phenomena is progressed. Hence, purposeful sampling instead of random sampling is used to support this research approach. In addition, where the number of potential ‘cases’ is small, as it is in the ‘gifted children’ sector of the student population, there cannot be random selection. Although they comprise approximately five per cent of the population (Wilson, 1996) within any class such as a preschool or prep grade of a primary school there will be only a small group of gifted children to draw on for a sample. Where the aim is to achieve the greatest understanding of a critical phenomenon the value of the outcome depends on choosing the case well. For these reasons the group of children who were chosen for these case studies were a ‘purposive sample’ where, as Stake (2005) advises, variety and opportunities for intensive study are built into the design.
Other considerations

The changes in the size of the sample group occurred during the initial stages of the study, demonstrating the necessity for flexibility in case study design as identified by Yin (2003). Some months prior to recruiting the initial sample I had been contacted by the father of one child, Michael, seeking information about identification of giftedness and suitable educational placement. His parents wished him to attend preschool the following year and they chose to enrol Michael at the preschool where I had recruited the sample group. They subsequently agreed to his participation in the study. Michael would be attending preschool in the year when the other recruited children would be at school. The opportunity to gather data on the transition of a gifted child into preschool, at the same time as the other children were entering school, offered a comparison of transition into the two different settings of preschool and prep class. This additional perspective was judged to be a worthwhile contribution to the general aim of the study. Subsequently the original focus on ten children with advanced cognitive development, transitioning from preschool into the first year of school (prep class), was changed to include only seven children but with the addition of an in-depth study of transition at the preschool level.

Developmental assessment to ascertain a level of ability was an important element in determining the composition of the final group, and assessments were carried out soon after the recruitment process was completed. With the exception of Michael and Stephen, each child was administered two forms of reliable ability testing: the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT - Dunn & Dunn, 1997) and the Raven’s Coloured Progressive Matrices (RCPM - Ravens, 1956). These were carried out on two different occasions as it was too tiring for such young children to do both tests in one sitting. The reliability of these tests in assessing general intellectual functioning is well accepted. Ladd and Price (1987) recognize the PPVT as correlating well with other measures of verbal ability and mental age. The RCPM is also accepted as providing a reliable measure, with young gifted children, of non-verbal or abstract reasoning and general ability to perceive and think clearly (Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth, 1997). Michael and Stephen had been formally tested independently of this study and found to have an IQ in the gifted range. The information obtained about the cognitive ability of the children was subsequently part of the criteria used in choosing the final sample (details of assessment are in Table 3, p. 66).
The principal criterion was those children whose cognitive assessment (Stanford Binet 5; or PPVT and RCM) indicated they had a mental age greater than 12 months in advance of their chronological age. As there was no hypothesis about which characteristics might be most influential in the reciprocal-socialisation process the decision on the sample group also included the variables of having close to equal numbers of boys and girls, as well as including a different classroom structure. Thus, determination of the final group of seven children was based on multiple criteria as well as being guided by Stake’s principle “that potential to learn from cases can be a different and superior criterion for representation of cases in a sample” (2005, p. 451).

3.4 Case study participants

The principal participants in this study are the young gifted children and their teachers. However, parents are also central to young children’s lives and they have provided this study with essential background information. The narrative of each case study is focussed on the children and their teachers but the parents enter where they could contribute to the emerging picture about influences on the children’s experiences.

When children were recruited to the study their parents were provided with a letter of introduction to the study and a plain language statement outlining it. This was similar to that provided to other participants (see Appendix C) being altered only to be appropriate to the recipient. Parents were asked to formally consent for their children to take part in the study and to be willing themselves to informally provide background information on their child’s experiences. A more informal approach was used with the children — see 3.6. ‘Ethical considerations’ and 3.7. ‘Consent’.

Brief profiles of the children participants

Two of the children are introduced individually as details of their background were particular to their involvement in this study. The other children are introduced together as the relevant details of their inclusion in the study were closely related.

Michael joined the study late in 2004 when he was about 4 years 3 months. I first met him several months later when he came to the preschool for two orientation days in the December. He was an only child whose parents had migrated to Australia from an East Asian country when he was 13 months old. First contact with Michael’s parents had occurred when they rang me seeking help with identifying whether he was developmentally advanced. We
had discussed the characteristics and learning needs of young gifted children and they had subsequently taken him for an IQ test. He was tested on a Stanford Binet 5, gaining a Full Score IQ of 130. However, awareness that IQ scores are regarded as less reliable when children are below the age of 6 years turned my attention to the results of the subtests which are accepted as more indicative of developing ability (Silverman, 1993). Michael’s individual scores on his subtests were:

- Fluid Reasoning - 121 (92nd percentile);
- Knowledge - 120 (91st percentile);
- Quantitative Reasoning - 147 (99.9th percentile);
- Visual-Spatial Processing - 114 (82nd percentile); and
- Working Memory - 126 (96th percentile).

Michael’s father was the main informant about Michael’s development. He provided detailed information about Michael during a visit to Michael’s home early in the full preschool year (I was invited to accompany Michael’s teacher on this visit). I also had the opportunity to talk regularly with Michael’s father through phone conversations. Early in 2006, when Michael had started school, his parents emailed written responses to the standard interview questions used with all the parents of the participant children.

Stephen joined the study in August 2004 when he was 4 years 2 months. In his first year at preschool his parents became aware he was rapidly developing skills in reading, writing and number. Stephen’s birthday was in late June resulting in him being ineligible, because of age, to start school in Victoria the following year — children need to be five years of age by the beginning of May in the year they start school. But in view of Stephen’s rapidly emerging academic knowledge and skills his parents decided to apply for early entry to school for the following year. An IQ test was required by the Department of Education before this would be granted and Stephen was assessed on a Stanford Binet 5. He gained an IQ score of 131, with individual subtest scores of:

- Fluid Reasoning - 150 (99.9th percentile);
- Knowledge – 103 (58th percentile);
- Quantitative Reasoning, 133 (99th percentile);
- Visual-Spatial Processing, 120 (91st percentile); and
- Working Memory, 129 (97th percentile).

The Department of Education was satisfied with this outcome and granted early entry. Stephen’s mother contributed to information about him through a questionnaire on his learning behaviour during his preschool year and through a number of conversations with me. Both Stephen’s parents contributed to a long interview about his experience of school towards the end of his first year.

Peter, Cathy, Lily, Justin and Susan were recruited at the same time in September 2004 through a letter inviting all parents of children who would be starting school in the following year to participate in the study (See Appendix C). The process following consent was the same for each child, therefore, to avoid repetition the detail is presented just the once. Data generation on the children’s experience of preschool, including observations and cognitive assessments, occurred over the last three months of the academic year. Parents were asked before the end of the preschool year to complete a questionnaire about their child’s learning behaviours at home. Towards the end of the first year at school one parent of each child, and sometimes both, participated in an interview about their child’s experiences of school. This detail is indicated where relevant. Detailed background for these five children, equivalent to that available about Stephen and Michael, was not available at the beginning of Combined details of identified ability levels of all the children in the final sample are in Table 3.
Identification of ability levels of participants.

Table 3: Results of assessment undertaken by the children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>PPVT</th>
<th>RCM</th>
<th>Age equivalent based on PPVT norms. (Dunn &amp; Dunn, 1997)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael - 4.0 years # SB5. Full scale IQ 130</td>
<td>Not assessed</td>
<td>Equivalent SB5 subscale of visual/spatial was 114 - 82nd percentile</td>
<td>SB5 equivalent (approx.) – 5 years 9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen - 3 years 11 months * SB5. Full scale IQ 131</td>
<td>Not assessed</td>
<td>On 90th percentile</td>
<td>SB5 equivalent (approx.) – 6 years 11 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter - 4 years 10 months</td>
<td>91st percentile</td>
<td>Above 95th percentile</td>
<td>6 years 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy - 5 years 1 month</td>
<td>93rd percentile</td>
<td>Above 95th percentile</td>
<td>6 years 2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily - 5 years 2 months</td>
<td>96th percentile</td>
<td>Above 75th percentile</td>
<td>7 years 8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan -5 years 4 months</td>
<td>96th percentile</td>
<td>Above 95th percentile</td>
<td>7 years 11 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin - 5 years 4 months</td>
<td>99th percentile</td>
<td>On 90th percentile</td>
<td>8 years 10 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes on Table 3 support the reading of the results of the individual children.

Primary assessment of cognitive development for most of the sample group was through use of the Ravens Coloured Progressive Matrices - RCPM (Raven, 1956), and a Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, PPVT (Dunn & Dunn, 1997).

# Michael’s parents were in the process of joining the study at the time these assessment were carried out. He had been assessed 4 months earlier with a Stanford Binet 5 so further identification was not needed. As stated in the table, his IQ score was 130. (Just on the borderline of accepted psychometric classification of gifted - Porter, 1999, p. 304)

* Stephen appeared extremely shy during his preschool year and although I visited his home-room frequently before testing was carried out he would not talk to me. However, he appeared willing and happy to come with me to a separate, quiet area of the preschool to do an assessment. A RCM score was obtained because he could point to an answer but with the PPVT
a verbal reply was needed and he seemed unable to give one. As he had been assessed with a Stanford Binet 5 by this stage I considered no further assessment was needed.

**Teacher Participants**

Following initial formal introduction of the study to the director of the preschool and principal of each school, permission was given to approach the prospective teachers. They were given a similar letter of introduction to the study as well as a plain language statement (Appendix C). The documentation included advice that consent to participate did not remove their freedom to withdraw at any time. Teachers were asked to formally consent to take part in the study and all were willing to participate. Collection of data on the child’s participation in their class then commenced. Altogether six teachers formally participated (one preschool and five primary school teachers) — Michael’s preschool teacher, Michael’s school teacher, Justin’s teacher, Susan’s teacher, Cathy and Stephen’s (together in same prep class) teacher, as well as Lily and Peter’s (also together in same class) teacher. The preschool teachers of Lily, Cathy, Susan, Peter, Stephen and Justin were not asked to formally consent as no observations were being made of their interactions with the participant child. Nonetheless, they each gave informal consent, following permission from the Director of the M-EEC, for me to observe the child in their class and to record any conversational comments they made about the participating individual children.

**Brief profiles of the teachers**

Michael’s preschool teacher was in her third year of teaching experience with a tertiary degree in early childhood education. The size of her class on a daily basis varied because of a flexible grouping configuration common to the long day model of early childhood programs in Victoria. Michael’s group attended Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On any particular day there would be approximately 26 children in the class. These children were between four and five years of age at the beginning of the year. In the narrative of Preschool Case Study, the teacher is referred to as Michael’s preschool teacher or Michael’s teacher. A tertiary qualified teaching assistant worked with Michael’s teacher each day and is named as the TA.

Michael’s school teacher was an experienced teacher who had worked at different grade levels for over ten years and held a tertiary degree in education. She had a larger class than usual in Michael’s year of attendance: 30 children in her prep class who were aged from nearly five years to approximately five and half years at the beginning of the year. There was
additional teaching support for her in response to the greater than usual numbers of students in her prep class. Several teachers assisted her, although only one joined her at any one time. Within ‘Chapter Five: School Case Study’, references to the teacher are to the regular teacher who is referred to as Michael’s school teacher.

Lily and Peter’s teacher had been a prep teacher for many years. She held a teaching diploma, completing her training as a teacher when the required qualification was a certificate or diploma of teaching. There were approximately 26 children in this prep class, ranging from close to five years of age to over six years of age at the beginning of the year. This teacher is designated as either Peter’s or Lily’s teacher as relevant.

Stephen and Cathy’s teacher held a tertiary degree in education and had six years’ of teaching experience. Three of these were as a prep teacher. There were approximately 25 children in this prep class ranging from nearly five years to just over six years of age at the beginning of the year. This teacher is designated as either Stephen or Cathy’s teacher as relevant.

Justin’s teacher gained her tertiary degree in education as a mature age student and had been teaching for seven years. Her experience had been predominantly with prep-age children. There appeared to be a close relationship with Justin because his sister had been in this teacher’s class in the year Justin was born. His teacher recalled him as a baby and had encouraged Justin’s mother to request Justin be placed in her prep class. There were approximately 27 children in this prep class ranging in age from close to five years to nearly six years of age at the beginning of the year.

Susan’s teacher held a tertiary degree in education, had eight years of teaching experience and had been at this particular school for four years. A multi-age organisation of classes characterised this school with Susan’s teacher working with preps, grade one and grade two children in her class. In the year of the study she had approximately 22 children in the class of which eight were preps. The preps ranged from nearly five years to approximately five and half years at the beginning of the year.

The following Table 4 provides an overview of information about the sample group of children, their teachers and the observations schedule.
Table 4: Summary of relevant background information on participants in school case study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>CA * at start of schl</th>
<th>CA/MA* at assmt – age in years (yrs)</th>
<th># Prior preschool (P/sch) exp —days x mths/ year</th>
<th>Teacher exp. x years( yr)</th>
<th>School-class org.</th>
<th>No. of obs. / duration of year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>5. 6.</td>
<td>4.0 / 5.9 yrs</td>
<td>P/sch A-5 x 6 mths. P/sch B-3 x 3 mths. M-EEC 3 days x 1 yr</td>
<td>10 yrs</td>
<td>One-age level</td>
<td>7 obs / over aca yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.11/ 6.11 yrs</td>
<td>2 days x 1 yr</td>
<td>6 yrs</td>
<td>One-age level</td>
<td>5 obs /over aca yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.1 / 6.2 yrs</td>
<td>3 days x 2 yrs</td>
<td>6 yrs</td>
<td>One-age level</td>
<td>5 obs /over aca yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.4 / 8.10 yrs</td>
<td>5 days x 2 yrs</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>One-age level</td>
<td>6 obs /over aca yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.2 / 7.8 yrs</td>
<td>3 days x 2 yrs</td>
<td>30 yrs +</td>
<td>One-age level</td>
<td>5 obs /over aca yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.10 / 6.7 yrs</td>
<td>2 days x 2 yrs</td>
<td>30 yrs +</td>
<td>One-age level</td>
<td>5 obs /over aca yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.4 / 7.11 yrs</td>
<td>5 days x 2 yrs</td>
<td>8 yrs</td>
<td>Multi-age level</td>
<td>4 obs /over aca yr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes on Table 4

Abbreviations: assmt. = assessment; obs = my observation visits; aca yr. = academic year; schl. = school; exp = experience.

*CA - Children’s chronological ages (CA) are taken to the closest month of age at beginning of school year (In Victoria this is late January).

*MA - Children’s mental age (MA) is derived either from the ratio formula for calculating IQ scores (see Porter, 1999 p. 305) or the ‘age equivalent’ calculation in the norm-referenced tables, as indicated in the PPVT or RCM.

# All children in sample group attended long-day-model preschools except for Michael’s experience at Preschool B.

NB – an estimate of mental age (MA) is included in this table to indicate potential learning needs related to mental age rather than the learning needs commonly attributed to chronological age: e.g. Children are ready to learn to read at the age they start school.
Myself as researcher

Inherent in the constructivist paradigm employed in this case study is that there is no attempt to separate the researcher from the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is from this perspective that my presence in the research process is explicit and I have made my voice conspicuous from the first chapter. My background of many years teaching in early childhood education, combined with a developing interest in young gifted children, led to experiences in providing gifted education programs for preschool age children. Where this experience has overtly influenced the study it has been described (see in particular in Chapter Four). My professional experience occasioned the initial contact with both Stephen’s and Michael’s families, which subsequently became a more extended relationship than occurred with the other families. This, I believe, enriched the study. While in the preschool setting my participation was as a participant-observer, my role in the school setting was as a non-participant observer.

3.5 Case study methods

Merriam (1998), in describing the process of collecting data for a case study, emphasises that while ‘data collection’ is the common term, it is accepted within a constructivist paradigm that in reality it is ‘data selection’ of specific information pertinent to the study. This process is influenced by the techniques derived from the researcher’s theoretical orientation, the nature of the research topic, the composition of the sample and, as in this study, by the orientation of a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). These influences were discussed in the opening sections of this chapter and are referred to again merely to confirm the link between the theory and the description of the methods used. Accordingly while data collecting or data generating are utilized as a standard phrase in this study, there is awareness that the ‘data selection’ was subject to influences that will be discussed in sections 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7.

Case study data-collecting methods can be varied in type and duration (Stake, 2005), occurring within the mode of research in a way that is particular to the case. This was exemplified in this study where variable opportunities to observe the children because of different timetables in classes and differing levels of contact with teachers, generated different forms and quantification of data. Merriam (1998) acknowledges and affirms this variability in opportunities and thus methods employed in case studies stating, “Any and all
methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study” (p. 28). The following sections describe the particular methods that were employed in this study.

Guidance for the generation of data was provided by the review of the literature, as outlined in Chapter Two. This informed the research questions asked and indicated potential data topics (Richards, 2005). For instance, the pertinent learning behaviours in a formal educational setting such as the distinctive expressions of motivation in young gifted children (see section 2.5, ‘Influences on reciprocal-socialisation’). These considerations shaped the focus of the data collection and its subsequent analysis. (See Appendix D for list of analysis questions).

**Interviews**

Interviews are described as a special kind of data gathering, providing access to information not readily gathered in other ways. For instance, data that researchers are unable to see for themselves, or thoughts, feelings and intentions represented in other peoples’ perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Merriam, 1998). However, interpretation in this study of such data has, through comparison of information between those involved, endeavoured to remain aware that in an interview both the interviewer and respondent are participants who “construct versions of reality rather than merely purvey data” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p 14).

An additional consideration, in this form of data collecting, is that the relationship between the researcher and the respondent occurs in an ‘asymmetrical encounter’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). The influence of the researcher who uses this technique is present in the setting, the construction of the interview, and usually the direction it takes (Briggs, 2001). Further, the researcher is counselled to be aware that frequently analysis removes many of the ‘contextual signposts’, potentially hiding other meanings that may have had currency for the interviewee. This influence was recognised as I planned and reflected on the interviews, and I took into account the potential influence of the power relationship that is present, particularly so when an adult interviews a child. For instance, while I prepared topics and/or questions pertinent to the study before each interview or conversation the manner of the interview was informal and conversational in tone, aiming as far as possible for a relaxed discussion.

In the past children’s perspectives — their thoughts, feelings and intentions — were viewed as severely limited in their usefulness as research data. A growing recognition that children were able to clearly articulate their feelings and thoughts has led to the current view
that children have a right to be heard in research projects (Brooker, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2007b). However, it is also accepted that there are limitations when collecting children’s views. For instance, children are more likely to be relaxed and participate in meaningful conversation when they are talking with a familiar adult (Brooker, 2001), and the most useful information is produced when the ‘research space’, including any activity within, is negotiated with each child (Dockett & Perry 2007b). These guidelines shaped my approach to the children’s interviews.

I was able to have only relatively brief, individual interactions with most of the children in this study and I recognise that as a result, the level of familiarity between us was not high. In aiming for exchanges that would be as authentic as possible I approached these interactions in a particular way. The interviews/conversations with children occurred in a situation that was familiar to the child and they were relaxed in style with an invitation to each child to talk about a particular event that I had observed. When I visited them at home to carry out a longer interview, the child was invited to nominate the ‘best place’ to talk and offered the choice of telling me what they liked most about school or drawing a picture of what was important about school if they preferred (see Chapter Five, Figures 2, 3, & 4). Overall, this approach resulted in a number of individual conversations between me and each child, including informal unstructured conversations as well as the semi-structured interviews (Table 5, p. 77). A rich source of information about the meaning of experiences for them was provided through these conversations, although they elicited only a small volume of data for my purposes. Nonetheless, insights were gained, such as Justin’s thoughts on the ‘too simple content of school learning’ (see Figure 5, p. 206).

Interviews with each teacher and with the parents were arranged at a time and place that was convenient for them. In addition to an interview, some impromptu conversations with the teachers provided additional information about each child. There were fewer opportunities for informal conversations with the parents. Michael’s parents were the exception to this and informal contact with them, through telephone calls, contributed to the rich data available about Michael’s experience of reciprocal-socialisation (see 3.5. ‘Anecdotal information’).

The semi-structured interviews with the teachers, parents and the children were conducted towards the end of the data collection period. This timetable allowed for the groundwork of observations and analysis to be established and for the emergence of
particular themes or areas of interest. Such information enabled more focussed interviews as well as the opportunity to clarify those points in the data that were not clear. It also allowed the reciprocal-socialisation process to be well established, anticipating that this would afford the participants a reasonable level of confidence to describe and discuss the learning culture of their classroom. It also provided the opportunity for me to become more familiar to the children.

The transcription of each semi-structured interview was entered into the data base and became part of the raw data (Appendix E — Interview topic/question guide). A copy of the transcribed interview was sent via email to each of the teachers for verification that it was an accurate record of our conversation. These were verified with the exception of two of the teachers who each asked that a comment attributed to them be altered. Once this was done they were offered the amended transcript but they declined this and both said they were satisfied to know that it had been altered. Transcriptions of the children’s interviews were not returned, but an alternative approach was used as explained in section 3.7. A typed copy of the interview with parents was sent to all, with the exception of Michael’s parents. In this case it was unnecessary as his parents had been too busy to meet with me and had responded to the interview questions by email. Four of the remaining six parents replied that they regarded it as an accurate record and the remaining two did not reply.

**Case study meetings**

Meetings were incorporated into the case study design, following the request of Michael’s preschool teacher for support with educational planning for a gifted child. These meetings can be considered as the same type of data gathering as interviews. They offered access to the observations of Michael’s preschool teacher and illustrated her perspective of his involvement in the preschool program, and occasionally included reflective comments from the director of the preschool.

Meetings were planned to take place approximately every three weeks depending on the availability of the participants. At times, intervals varied according to the wishes of his preschool teacher. The participants were his teacher, myself, and on several occasions the director of the preschool. Thirteen case study meetings were held over the course of the time Michael was at preschool with the frequency declining as the year progressed because the teacher was unable to find time for a meeting. Whenever I visited, she continued to initiate discussions with me about Michael’s involvement at preschool, but other forms of contact
also evolved — for instance, in place of more regular meetings about Michael’s behaviour and planning for his individual needs, contact via email increased. I transcribed these meetings (except for the brief exchanges during my observation visits) and sent copies to all participants for verification. They verified the transcripts and they made no requests for corrections.

**Questionnaires**

A questionnaire was also used as a data-gathering-variation on an interview (Appendix B) and provided initial data on each participant as an early contribution to establishing the data bank. The questionnaires sought the parents’ perspective on the children’s learning behaviours and cognitive experiences at home, in particular those behaviours that are acknowledged as precursors to the forms of learning that dominate the early school curriculum. These included reading and writing, as well as social skills and emotional maturity.

**Observations**

Observations are distinct from interview-type data gathering as they are a research tool used in the natural field setting of the phenomena or ‘case’. Reading on the topic of children’s adjustment to school had identified four areas of behaviours that were recognised as influencing children’s engagement with learning in peer group learning environments. These areas provided a framework for observations of behaviours that reflected motivation, cognitive ability, social, and emotional characteristics. Further reading enabled more detail to be included in these areas providing a list of questions that framed and linked the observations to the original research questions and theory (Appendix D). These questions guided the subsequent collection of data.

The consent form for Stephen had been returned very promptly in the August of 2004 and this enabled observations of him at preschool to start immediately. Observations of Justin, Lily, Cathy Susan and Peter began from the November of that year, and of Michael from the December. Observations of all the children continued throughout 2005 and for Michael alone into 2006, as he began his first year at school. (Details are in Table 5)

Edwards (A., 2001) cautions that the researcher employing the technique of observation in data collecting needs to be aware that their presence inevitably changes the environment that is being studied. An awareness of this was an important consideration in
arranging and conducting the observations. In the weeks prior to starting preschool observations, with the teacher’s permission, I endeavoured to become a familiar adult in the classroom by making a number of short unobtrusive visits to each relevant classroom, interacting informally, where appropriate, with the children. When data collection started, the same routine was maintained. During Michael’s year at preschool this role varied because his preschool teacher requested my participation at times in Michael’s activity. Where this is relevant to Michael’s responses to preschool my interaction is described - in Chapter Four.

A similar routine of sitting unobtrusively in the room or talking to children if they approached me was adopted for the school classroom visits. When the children started at school, I was able to visit each of them in their first days at school with a second visit a week later and then subsequent visits were made throughout the year. Visits to Michael followed a different timetable as his parents had requested I not visit too early in case Michael developed ‘an exaggerated idea of his importance’. Following contact with his school teacher in week five of the new school year, she invited me to visit and observational visits were able to start from that time (see Timeline, Table 5, p. 78).

Anecdotal information

This method of gathering data is to some extent a hybrid one as it has characteristics of both interview-type data and observations. Anecdotal information is accepted as providing information about behaviours that are particular to the case that occur naturally in the field. Yet, it is information that is filtered through some else’s perspective (Burns, 2000). Therefore, when I added these anecdotes as raw data I also recorded ‘whose reality’ appeared to be represented.

The design of the study included an expectation that data generation would include informal anecdotes, which would contribute to the richness of the information, although common-sense indicates it would not be possible to formally plan collection of this type of data. As a source of information this requires the establishment of positive and trusting relationships between researcher and participants. Thus, relaxed and friendly interactions with all teachers were integral to the overall process and I believe that the rapport established with Michael’s preschool teacher was enabled by my preparedness to be a resource for her.

The resulting positive relationship between us meant that over the lengthy period of data collecting Michael’s preschool teacher openly shared a large volume of anecdotal information. This contributed information that I would not otherwise have had access to,
thereby providing significant understanding of Michael’s experience of the reciprocal-socialisation process.

Michael’s parents were also willing to share anecdotal information about Michael’s engagement with learning and social interactions, and this contributed to the richness of the data. His father initiated contact with me by phone from time to time and these conversations provided many anecdotes about Michael, including his responses to the preschool program. When analysis of data was well developed, a record of the anecdotes from these conversations was sent to Michael’s father for verification and he confirmed them as accurate. It was central to the relationship with Michael’s preschool teacher that I disclose the phone calls from Michael’s father, although it usually transpired that she already knew, as he had also informed her.

Anecdotes offered about Michael’s responses to events at preschool were recorded in the database with notes identifying the source. This included occasional observations or comments from other staff members at the centre. Some anecdotes were offered about the other children in the cohort but these were fewer in number. In comparison to observation visits to Michael at preschool there were fewer possibilities for observation visits to the children at school and as a consequence fewer informal conversations with each teacher.

**Case study timeline**

The timeline needed to show flexibility, as did other aspects of the study, but retain the characteristics of a case study. As Yin (2003) notes while the design can be flexible the case remains defined by the whole situation concerned with the case. This was the situation in regard to gathering data where the addition of Michael to the sample group had resulted in the need to change observation timetables and the numbers of children participating. As a result, the timeline was considerably extended from the original plan to generate data between August 2004 and June/July 2005, to a new completion date of December 2006. Details of the data collection timeline are in Table 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase for data collection</th>
<th>Research technique</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>August to October 2004</strong></td>
<td>Formal recruitment of participants</td>
<td>Teachers, parents and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observations of Stephen commence</td>
<td>Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>October 2004</strong></td>
<td>Assessment of ability levels</td>
<td>Lily, Cathy, Susan, Justin, Peter, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>November to December 2004</strong></td>
<td>Observations at preschool</td>
<td>Michael, Lily, Cathy, Susan, Justin, Peter, Stephen &amp; Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal interviews with children</td>
<td>As above (excluding Michael)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questionnaires completed by parents</td>
<td>Children’s parents (excluding Michael’s parents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>January to December 2005</strong></td>
<td>Observations at school</td>
<td>Lily, Cathy, Susan, Justin, Peter, Stephen and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation weekly (approx.), at preschool</td>
<td>Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case study meetings: 3 weekly intervals (approx.)</td>
<td>Michael’s preschool teacher and myself. Occasional attendance of Preschool Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal conversations with Michael at preschool</td>
<td>Michael and myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal conversations about Michael’s responses to preschool with his preschool teacher and at less regular intervals with Michael’s parents</td>
<td>Preschool teacher, his parents &amp; myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>August to December 2005</strong></td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant within each group</td>
<td>Group 1: School teachers &amp; Michael’s preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2: Lily, Cathy, Susan, Justin, Peter, Stephen, Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3: Children’s parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>January to May 2006</strong></td>
<td>Observations at school</td>
<td>Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plus interview x 2</td>
<td>Michael’s school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>January to December 2006</strong></td>
<td>Informal school progress reports</td>
<td>Provided by Michael’s parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6 Case study analysis and reporting

Analysis and reporting are discussed together in this section as they are part of an interactive process leading towards the goal of constructing an explanation or narrative about particular cases (Yin, 2003). Data collection focussed on observable behaviours and the environmental context of those behaviours. From the initial analyses, of apparent connections between reciprocal-socialisation experiences and engagement with learning in a formal educational, themes appeared. These themes were compared to the relevant theory, leading in turn, to further analysis and comparison. The final narrative was the result of repeating this process many times so that analysis and reporting became inextricably part of the same journey.

Research analysis questions (Appendix D) were assigned a code and became a framework to guide observations and support the analysis process. Three sets of questions were devised to provide a view of the children’s behaviours and teacher responses to them from three different perspectives — a form of triangulation. Thus behaviours were reviewed from the child’s, the teacher’s, and the parents’ perspective. For example, three analysis questions were devised to provide different perspectives on behaviours indicating the child’s ability level:

**Children’s variables**: Section 2, Ability (A), question 6 (code A.vi) - Does this child seem confident of their own ability? (Data source was my observations or other reports on the child).

**Home variables** (H) (no sections), question 2, (code Hb) - What understanding or expectation do the parents have of the child’s level of functioning or level of ability, displayed at home or at school? (Data source was parent questionnaire and parental interview/conversations).

**Teachers’ variables** (T) (no sections), question 8 (code Th) - Does the teacher expect this child to be a successful learner? (Data source was my observations and teacher interview/conversations).

Once all the data had been entered and coded, random sections of the preschool data were checked for rating reliability by the director of the preschool from which the participant sample of children had been drawn. At the end of checking she was in unanimous agreement with the codes applied.
In analysing the data collected, two levels of processing occurred in the following way. The literature on children’s learning in a formal environment (see Chapter Two, principally 2.5), preschool and school, had identified four key areas of influence:

- social experience and the development of social skills;
- the level of emotional learning achieved by a child;
- the level and type of motivation the child displayed in learning; and
- innate cognitive ability, as well as the level of learning offered in the environment.

These key areas were used, with the associated questions, to guide initial coding of the observations, the interviews and the informal discussions with teachers, parents and child (See Appendix D). Richards (2005) description of this as ‘topic coding’ was found to be a useful concept in this part of analysis when the volume of data and possible interpretations appeared daunting. As analysis progressed, themes or patterns emerged from these topic categories, allowing a synthesis of the meanings of children’s behaviours, teacher practices and responses by both within the class environment. It was found that critical incidents or insights from particular behaviours initiated a focus on particular development and then more substantiation was sought in the data to indicate if these behaviours were a theme. This is suggested by Morse (2006) as a particular strength of qualitative research and was exemplified in a comment by Michael on his first day at preschool (see quote at beginning of Chapter Four). Eventually, as the result of continual interaction between the data and the developing themes, the influential elements of the reciprocal-socialisation process for these gifted children become apparent. These influences form the narrative of each case study.

While a case study mode of inquiry shares many of the methods and approaches of other qualitative approaches, perhaps its particular utility is that it provides an extension of experience for the reader in the description of the individual case (Stake, 2005). In these case studies of transitioning to a formal learning environment the reporting has included many descriptions from the field notes, interviews and other informal communications with the participants.

To clarify, the narrative, the findings and the discussion are presented together in Chapters Four and Five. Behaviours that were important in the reciprocal-socialisation experience are discussed in the light of the available theory, not to prove or disprove theories but for the explanatory power that the theory could offer on the influences on each child.
Grant and Piechowski (1999) endorse this approach for research with gifted children claiming its value lies in the child, rather than the theory, being placed at the centre of the research process. It also puts into practice the aim, which was signalled at the beginning of this chapter, to contribute new understanding of young gifted children to the early childhood and gifted education literature through the use of qualitative approaches to research. The ‘report’ is concluded in Chapter Six where, in the first section of the chapter, a discussion of the overall findings suggests four main influences on the children’s experience of transition. These in turn provide a basis for recommendations for changes in teacher practice and directions for future research.

**Trustworthiness**

Flick (2004) states that in addressing the issue of legitimation of a particular study it is the transparency of the link between the researcher’s constructions and those of the participants that is essential. He considers this is ensured by making the steps in the research process as a whole clear to the reader. While debate still swirls around the descriptor ‘trustworthy’ (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Edwards, A., 2001; Flick, Kardoff & Steinke 2004; Janesick; 2003; Morse, 2006; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003), the implication of ‘trustworthiness’ in an inquiry is the need to demonstrate to the reader that this is ‘quality research’.

In acknowledgement of the need to demonstrate trustworthiness I have endeavoured to maintain transparency in the recording and reporting of this study. Where relevant in the narrative of each case study I have illustrated how interpretations were made of the children’s behaviours and the teachers’ responses. In response to the breadth and depth of the data collection in this study, four specific procedures were adopted in the research process to ensure trustworthiness.

1. **Triangulation**

As recommended by Stake (2005) data was generated from a variety of sources — children, parents, teachers and field notes — consequently, the information collected represents different realities in the study. This method supported the verification of interpretation of behaviours and events. For instance, meaning attached by Justin’s teacher to some of his comments about the lack of challenge in the work at school was checked through
informal conversations with Justin’s mother: Justin himself also provided further insight into these specific behaviours.

Stake (2005) reminds the researcher, that establishing trustworthiness requires explanations or interpretations of the data to be ‘challenged’. With this in mind, as analysis proceeded, alternative reasons for behaviours or responses were ‘held up against the data’ and explored for their explanatory power. Where pertinent to the narrative these aspects of analysis are included in Chapters Four and Five.

2. Length of data collection

Morse (2006) advises that in qualitative research, data or evidence are collected until the new information starts to become redundant. She argues that when observation occurs over the long term, the existence or occurrence of particular phenomena can be substantiated through repeated observation. But she also directs the researcher to be aware of an additional reason for lengthy observation. While data gathering should be rich and extensive, Morse notes that this approach offers an increased possibility of observing the single instance or the ‘exemplar story’ that allows an insight into the meaning of the situation. As analysis of data from this study proceeded, the veracity of this advice was apparent. The extensive time spent in the field provided detailed profiles of behaviour that could be verified by repeated similar behaviours, and which also offered those single incidents that allowed the researcher the ‘aha’ insight.

3. Describing assumptions and theories

Assumptions that may have influenced this research as well as the theories that have informed it have been explained as well as made explicit from the beginning. For instance, the background to the study and my emerging interest in young gifted children were detailed in Chapter One.

4. Providing an audit trail

An audit trail is an accepted method within qualitative research to provide assurance that acceptable standards have been maintained and findings are consistent (Aubrey et al., 2000). In this study verification of interpretation is offered through the inclusion of raw data from field notes in the form of examples, and through the provision of specific references to the origins of the information in the raw data.
In qualitative study transferability as a measure of the value of the research is not applied in the same way as the concepts of validity or reliability are to quantitative research studies. The outcomes of a qualitative research study are regarded as ‘strong enough’ through the insights they provide for the reader into other similar situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Patton, 2002). The trustworthiness of this study, I believe, is made apparent through the informed judgements and rational discussion, which provide insights and information about transition experiences of young gifted children.

3.7 Ethical considerations within qualitative research

Ethical issues are fundamental to any piece of research and in this study they were especially important as children were at the centre of the research. Where research goals are to study the personal experiences of people, particularly children, it is important that individual rights are protected. During the collection of data, and in the reporting, awareness of individual rights was considered to be effected through remaining sensitive and responsive to needs and views emerging from interactions between participants and the researcher. In interactions with young children it can be difficult to fully inform them about the aims or implications of the research and to know how they perceive the relationship between the adult researcher and themselves. Hence, ethical considerations needed to be taken into account at all stages of the research: in the design; in the field work; in the analyses of results; and in the reporting the findings.

Ethics approval was given for this research by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Melbourne (HREC Project, 040446). Informed consent was sought from the Department of Education and Training (Victorian Education Department) to conduct a research study in Victorian Government schools and written permission was granted (Appendix C). Informed consent was given by the Director of the preschool involved, the Principals of the three schools attended by the participant children, as well as the five teachers and seven sets of parents of the children. Other ethical considerations within this study have been described, where relevant, throughout this chapter.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality were important issues in the design of this research. Inherent in a case study is extensive rich and detailed information about participants, so ensuring anonymity is essential. This has been implemented by changing names and
removing other details that may identify people or locations. The children have been given an alternative name and the adults involved have been identified only by their relationship with the child participant. This contributed to the protection of the identity of all participants.

All adult participants were informed at the beginning that no information would be shared with other participants in the study. Where sensitive information has been relevant to the discussion in this study its importance to the case study narrative has been considered in depth and reported in a way that does not contribute to identification. The preschools and schools who consented to participate have been identified only by general location: for example, a suburban school. All data were kept on my private computer and identifying information was locked in a filing cabinet, including tapes, assessment results and lists of names and addresses, as required by Human Ethics Research Committee at The University of Melbourne.

**Consent**

All participants were fully informed of proposed methods to collect data and adult participants were asked to give written permission for this to occur in their individual case (Appendix C). Parents gave written permission for their child. Where informal interactions occurred at preschool or school I would explain the purpose of our conversation to each child and ask permission to follow through. To check accuracy with the children about both the conversations and the tape recorded interviews, at the end I would routinely summarise my recall of the conversation. This provided an opportunity for children to agree with or correct my version, which they did. The children were asked to give a verbal agreement at the start of each taping episode and the request was presented in a way that endeavoured to convey they had a real choice. All children appeared pleased to be asked to describe their ideas or understandings about a situation or school in general.

**Ethical approach to power in relationships**

An ethical approach within any piece of qualitative research will be expected to produce dilemmas about the impact of research decisions on the participants and the outcome of the research (Aubrey, et al., 2000). This can occur in everyday situations within the privacy of interviewing, in observation of behaviours and in the reporting, requiring the researcher to be responsive to participants needs as well as sensitive about the power inherent in the relationship (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005).
Consequently, interactions between me, as the researcher, and participants were always conducted in a way that indicated contributions were valued, individual’s rights would be protected and any concerns would be addressed. The issue of the power inherent in a relationship between researcher and the teacher as a participant required me to establish a rapport, as well as maintaining sensitivity towards the primacy of the role of each teacher and of impartiality about the information they provided. In the relationship with Michael’s preschool teacher this awareness was especially important as the levels of contact were much higher than with the school teachers. Overall, where these considerations influenced the research process interactions, this has been reported.

Developing relationships with the parents also required sensitivity as there were fewer opportunities for contact and thus for establishment of a trusting relationship. Contact was maintained in a way that offered confidence that their contribution was worthwhile and would be approached ethically. Confidentiality and anonymity were integral elements in this process as previously described.

Of particular relevance in this study was the issue of power in relationships with children as there is a greater potential for imbalance in these situations (Christenson, 2004). An awareness of this differential between myself, as the adult, and each child was maintained in this study, guiding the manner in which the interviews and conversations with each child were constructed and carried out. (Further detail on this is presented in section 3.5 in the discussion of ‘Interviews’) These elements are reported in each case study where they are relevant to the narrative.

**Ethical reporting**

The process of analysis and eventual dissemination of findings or theory necessitates ethical responsibility by the researcher. Principally this is that the narrative, supported by evidence and description of methods used, should be clearly trustworthy. Thus data needs to be interpreted as honestly and accurately as possible with alternative interpretations being considered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). Methods that have adhered to this principle, contributing to the ‘trustworthy’ quality of this case study, have been outlined in this chapter as well as being overt throughout the two case studies reported.
3.8. Conclusion

Views presented in the literature of how a qualitative study is structured, and the associated research methods indicate there is no strict or single form in this research approach. However, the description in this chapter and throughout the thesis of the case study methods developed within this study, has aimed to demonstrate the concept employed by Creswell (2007) that the study exhibits methodological congruence. This outcome is apparent when “the purposes, questions, and methods of research are all interconnected and interrelated so that the study appears as a cohesive whole rather than fragmented, isolated parts” (Creswell, 2007. p. 42).

Expressly, this chapter has described how a study of the transition experiences of seven very young gifted children is positioned within a constructivist paradigm. In doing so, this chapter has provided details of how this research project was designed and undertaken as well as describing the attention paid to the particular responsibilities of the case study researcher. The next two chapters present the two case studies: the Preschool Case Study is the focus of Chapter Four and the School Case Study is the focus of Chapter Five.
Chapter Four

Preschool Case Study: Michael

*I don’t play with toys. I’m not a child.* Michael on his first day at preschool

(Preschool field notes: Jan. 05. p.4.)

4.1 Introduction

This first case study explores in-depth, the reciprocal-socialisation experiences for one gifted preschool child, Michael, within the peer group learning environment of a suburban preschool in Melbourne. The focus of the study is Michael’s responses, as a gifted child, to his experiences of the preschool program. As the essence of the reciprocal-socialisation process is the interaction between the child and others in the educational setting their responses are an integral part of the case study. Michael’s preschool teacher was central in these interactions and thus in each major section of the chapter her perspective on Michael’s responses are presented.

The chapter begins with a profile of Michael, drawing primarily on information from his formal IQ assessment and examples of early significant behaviours provided by his parents. Conventionally within the gifted education literature, cognitive, emotional and social behaviours are discussed within their respective domains and this separation has been maintained in the analysis and reporting of the case study results. Documentation of Michael’s behaviours within the preschool program is presented in three sections, the first from the perspective of his cognitive learning and the second and third from the perspective of his emotional and social learning respectively. In some instances of Michael’s behaviour a chronological sequence has been used to highlight the way in which his behaviours emerged and changed in response to the preschool program. Each section concludes with a discussion of the influences on Michael’s engagement with learning in the formal learning environment of his preschool and the key findings are revisited at the close of the chapter.

Examples from the data, included to illustrate the influences which impacted on Michael’s experience, are presented in several forms. Short quotes from participants are italicised within the text. Those examples which are between one and ten lines have been indented and presented in a smaller font while any that are longer have been placed in an anecdote box. The identity of the individual is indicated alongside the quote or included in
the data source that follows each excerpt. The Melbourne Early Education Centre (M-EEC)\(^5\) was the third preschool that Michael attended and is the centre which is referred to in this case study. Michael’s experiences at two preschools prior to his enrolment at the M-EEC were also influential so, where relevant, available information about these experiences is included. These preschools and teachers have been identified respectively as Preschool A and Teacher A, Preschool B and Teacher B. This nomenclature designates the sequence of his preschool attendance before he entered the M-EEC program.

4.2 Profiling Michael

Michael was just over four and a half years at the beginning of his preschool year at the M-EEC. He was an only child, whose parents had migrated to Australia from Asia when he was 13 months old. Both parents are tertiary educated. Although Michael spoke his parents’ first language at home, it was evident that he had had exposure to English from an early age, for instance from children’s story books. His continual use of English appears to be from the age three and a half years when he started at his first preschool-centre (Preschool A). While English was Michael’s second language, his spoken English when I met him appeared age-typical (FN-12/04. p.1).\(^6\)

Information from Michael’s parents

Descriptions by Michael’s parents of the home learning environment appear to resemble the type of parenting practice identified by The Fullerton Longitudinal Study as common with parents of gifted children (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, & Guerin, 1994). Most frequent in the accounts given by Michael’s parents were opportunities for Michael to experience high levels of intellectual stimulation, in particular an intense focus on mathematics. He clearly enjoyed this learning and continually requested more complex knowledge on mathematics as well as other topics.

On the advice of a friend, Michael’s parents had read to him and shown him picture books while he was still a baby. His parents considered both his language and numeracy

\(^5\)M-EEC – pseudonym

\(^6\)FN – Field Notes; 12/04 – month/year; p. – Page number.
development had been stimulated by this experience (FN-02/05. p.12). Michael’s parents commented that he subsequently became interested in learning to read from about the age of three and a half, and, prompted by his interest, they had explained the mechanics of reading to support his rapidly emerging skill. Michael’s interest and skill in mathematics also started early. At about eighteen months old he demonstrated a fascination with the numbers on an electronic display at home and an indication of his ability was evidenced very early, as Michael’s father reported:

When Michael was between the ages of 2 and 3 years we were walking along the street one day and he was saying out loud the house numbers visible on the front fences [he could count to 55 at that time]. He suddenly said to me, sounding worried, that there were numbers missing — he had noticed that the houses were numbered 20, 22, 24, etc. So, I explained the convention of numbering houses on one side of the road with even numbers and the opposite side with odd numbers. Michael was really interested in this concept of odd and even numbers and wanted to know exactly what this meant. Then he ‘played’ with this idea for several weeks. One game he played was when he was riding in the car with us he would read the numbers on the number plates of other cars and say that’s an ‘odd car or an even car’ depending on whether the number ended with an odd or even number. A little later from one of his picture books — Mr Brown’s Apple Tree, where each night one apple goes missing from the tree — he began to learn to count backwards (FN- 09/05 p. 118).

Home activities reported by Michael’s parents, in the year before Michael attended the M-EEC (between age four to four and a half years approx.) included being able to read preschool story books to himself, and read three digit numbers. For example, he could interpret 625 as six hundred and twenty five. As a consequence of this demonstration of Michael’s interest and ability his father decided it was time to explain and teach him about numerical place value. Michael was enthusiastic about this new learning and persistent in seeking further knowledge and skills. Accordingly, Michael’s father started doing some addition and subtraction algorithms with him and reported (somewhat resignedly) that Michael would then wait eagerly at the front door for him to come home from work, asking
that they immediately do some more mathematics (FN-09/05 p. 118). Learning experiences provided for Michael by his parents at this time were not focussed exclusively on academic skills; they thought it also important to foster other interests and skills. Consequently Michael attended piano and chess lessons, participated in music concerts and chess tournaments, and went at varying times to swimming and cricket lessons. His parents commented that he enjoyed all these activities. During the 12 months prior to his attendance at the M-EEC Michael’s parents believed his numeracy knowledge developed rapidly. By the beginning of the following year, when I started regular observations of Michael, he was reckoned by his parents to have progressed mathematically to the level of second to third year of learning at school.

Information about early preschool experiences

The data suggested that Michael’s first experiences of a peer group learning environment impacted later developments at the M-EEC. He started attending Preschool A at three and half years old — a long day care program — in a class for three year olds. Michael attended five days a week, as both his parents were working and they reported that Michael settled in happily. His proficiency at home in learning to read grew rapidly during this time and Michael’s parents approached the early childhood teacher anticipating she would advise them how to support his developing skill. To their surprise she told them that it was unlikely Michael was really reading that he was just looking at the pictures or else he was just remembering the words (FN-09/05. p. 119).

Following several discussions between Michael’s parents and his teacher about his level of reading ability, the teacher at preschool A eventually accepted that he was learning to read. She responded by moving him to an older class, but towards the middle of the year Michael became increasingly unhappy about attending this centre. At home at this time his parents observed a rapid acceleration in Michael’s reading, writing, mathematical, verbal and reasoning ability. Michael’s parents concluded that despite the move to a different class there had been no real adaptation in the preschool curriculum and therefore learning opportunities were minimal for him at Preschool A. As a consequence they moved him to another centre, Preschool B, for the last term of the year.

Preschool B provided a sessional program (half day sessions) which Michael attended three times a week. Reports from Michael’s parents suggested that this placement was also not satisfactory for Michael as he continued to be reluctant to attend preschool (FN-02/05.p.
12). Following Michael’s enrolment at the M-EEC his prospective preschool teacher visited Preschool B and her observations of him, amplified through a conversation with Teacher B (shared later with me by Michael’s M-EEC teacher), developed the view that Michael was not engaged in this second program, socially or intellectually (TN-12/04. pp.1-3).

The background knowledge of Michael gained by Michael’s M-EEC teacher from her visit was that Michael’s development at this time (prior to starting at the M-EEC) was markedly unbalanced. Teacher B evaluated him as notably immature emotionally and socially as he was unable to interact with the other children. She even suggested that he may be cognitively immature because he did not appear to know how to engage with typical preschool activities. Teacher B was aware that Michael’s parents offered him accelerated experiences in mathematics and considered that as a consequence he was deprived of other ‘common-sense’ activities for four year olds — such as sand play, creative activities or outdoor play. Her comments indicated a belief that Michael’s difficulties in adjusting to preschool were exacerbated by his parents’ encouragement of advanced and academic type learning activities and that these had contributed to his general developmental immaturity (TN-12/04 to 01/05 pp.1-3). Michael’s M-EEC teacher’s description of the program at Preschool B indicated a mainstream early childhood ‘developmentally appropriate approach’ (see Bredekamp, 1987) where children chose and pursued activities with minimal adult input. Michael’s M-EEC teacher’s description of the program at Preschool B suggested a mainstream early childhood ‘developmentally appropriate approach’ (Bredekamp, 1987) where children chose and pursued activities with minimal adult input.

While Michael’s involvement with a preschool mode of learning at Preschool A and Preschool B do not appear as positive experiences, he seemed happy and ready to engage with activities and other children when he attended two orientation visits to the M-EEC in December 2004, prior to his commencement in January 2005. He arrived on time with his mother and while she sat outside in the garden Michael appeared willing to be inside with his prospective teacher and the other children. From my observations of Michael on both visits, and those of his preschool teacher, it was clear that Michael was interested in the preschool setting as he readily participated in the class routine and interacted with the other children. For instance, during the free play period his teacher gave him a clip board with paper and pencil with the suggestion that he ask some of the other children their names and then write

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7 TN- Teacher Notes: month/year 12/04. pp. 1-3; pages 1-3.
them on his board. Michael did this for about an hour, being able to spell most of the names without asking for adult help. He decided out of interest to then count and record the numbers of letters in each name. Michael came over to me eventually and showed me whose name had more or less letters than his, and he looked pleased in pointing out that Susannah had the most letters (FN-12/04 p. 2).

**Michael’s formal assessment**

When Michael’s placement at Preschool A was becoming increasingly unhappy his parents, on the advice of friends that Michael appeared accelerated in his learning, decided to contact a psychologist and seek a formal assessment. Subsequently Michael was tested close to his fourth birthday on a Stanford Binet 5, gaining a Full Score IQ of 130 — his most significant sub-score being Quantitative Reasoning-147 (99.9th percentile). Silverman (1992) advises that the results of subtests can be more indicative of developing ability, particularly when devising educational programs. The psychologist’s report discussed the potential influence on Michael’s subtest scores of his bilingualism and of cultural differences between his first language and English which may have made it difficult for him to understand some of the responses requested in the assessment. Despite noting this factor as possibly affecting Michael’s full score, the report did not include his relatively new grasp of English as a major factor in his overall score. Michael’s parents believed that Michael was at this time, articulate and competent in both languages. The psychologist recommended that the most appropriate placement for Michael would be early entry to school for the following year. Notwithstanding this recommendation, his parents felt that social skills with his peer group were very important for Michael and preschool offered the best opportunity for their development, so they chose to enrol him for a full year at the M-EEC.

Observations of Michael’s abilities during the course of his year at the M-EEC indicated a level of ability much greater than just on the borderline of giftedness (as in Porter’s categorisation of levels of giftedness: 1999, p.95). This corroborates acceptance in the gifted education literature that psychometric testing below the age of six years can be unreliable (Koshy & Robinson, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). Michael’s parents had given a copy of the psychologist’s IQ report to his preschool teacher and given her permission to share it with me. The report provided detailed information about Michael’s advanced learning in areas of quantitative reasoning as well as in reading and writing skills. In other areas of learning, such as knowledge and ability to reason, although still in the highest 20% of his age
group, the assessment indicated that Michael was less likely to be markedly advanced over his age peers — these scores suggested an uneven developmental profile that has been reported elsewhere as not unusual in gifted children (Silverman, 1993).

**Beginning at the M-EEC**

The Preschool Case Study was carried out within one class at the M-EEC. This centre provided an early childhood program with a number of classes for children who were aged between three and five years at the beginning of the year. ‘Class’ has been used to designate the grouping of children in an educational setting for the duration of the academic year, although preschools in Victoria usually denote this as ‘a group’. Michael attended this preschool three days a week for a full day from January to December 2005. His class comprised approximately 26 children.

At the M-EEC, Michael’s preschool teacher had no preservice education in gifted education, but appeared in our preliminary conversations to be confident that the case study meetings would provide her with sufficient information about giftedness. In the first case study meeting, her goals for Michael’s cognitive development were for him to be an independent learner in the preschool environment (CS1-01/05. p. 6). Her comments, when we discussed a learning program for Michael, conveyed an expectation that his intellectual interests and learning needs would emerge early and conspicuously, providing a focus for her planning (CSN1. 01/05. pp. 4-6).[^8]

The preschool learning program implemented by Michael’s teacher was philosophically positioned within the DAP framework. The style of the program was an emergent curriculum, which is constructed from the teacher’s assessment of the children’s holistic developmental needs and interests, and implemented through a pedagogy characterised by ‘free play’ (Arthur, et al., 2008). Thus, the children in Michael’s class were expected to choose their own learning from activities the teacher provided according to her assessment of their holistic learning needs. The children’s engagement may have a self-directed goal such as completing a drawing, or just be free flowing play as in sociodramatic play in the home corner area, or playing outside in the sandpit. This occupied about two-thirds of children’s day with remaining time concerned with regular activities or routines — e.g. listening to a story, or lunch. The pedagogical approach was minimal teacher direction of

[^8]: CSM1 – Case Study Meeting One: 01/05 - month/year. pp. 4-6 – pages 4-6: p. 2 – page 2)
children’s learning, although from the beginning of the second term there were opportunities for the children to participate in regular weekly or fortnightly activities planned and provided by a specialist teacher. These experiences offered teacher directed learning in: art, music, or Italian language.

Michael’s advanced academic skills were at the forefront of his teacher’s consideration as the new preschool year commenced. A perception of him as different in many ways from other age-typical children had been established from her enquiries about his background, but her early view of Michael was reinforced on his very first day. Initial greetings were exchanged happily as his teacher bobbed down to be at Michael’s height, said Hello and How are you? and asked if he had had a good summer holiday. When his father attempted to say goodbye and leave, Michael then became upset and began to cry very loudly. Several of the centre staff responded to this situation, they tried to calm Michael and distract him from his distress. Michael did stop crying when asked about his interests and he talked with the adults about his current interest in playing the piano and the lives of classical composers. But Michael’s distress returned as his father started again to leave, and in another attempt to reassure Michael the Director of the M-EEC said, this is a nice place to be, there are other children to play with and lots of interesting toys; to which Michael replied, through his tears, I don’t play with toys, I’m not a child (FN-01/05. p. 4).

Eventually the Director took control of the situation, nodded to Michael’s father to go, and suggested Michael’s teacher pick Michael up and take him into his new classroom. Michael’s description of his sense-of-self had been very unsettling for both the Director and his teacher. In hindsight it was predictive of the challenges that lay ahead in integrating Michael into a peer group learning environment.

4.3 Characteristics of Michael’s cognitive learning at preschool

The results presented in this section provide documentation of Michael’s cognitive responses to the preschool program. The focus is on those cognitive behaviours accepted as characteristically gifted (see Appendix A), which were apparent in Michael’s behaviour, and how they appear to have influenced his teacher’s curriculum and pedagogical responses to his behaviour. While this section is primarily focussed on the cognitive aspects of Michael’s experience there is no intention to suggest they are separate from learning in the other learning domains discussed in this study. As demonstrated in this case study, Michael’s learning experiences were interactive across cognitive, social and emotional learning areas.
Michael’s teacher had an initial focus on his intellectual learning, however her early planning for him became dominated by an intense emotional response by Michael to attending preschool. This is described in greater detail in section 4.4, but some reference to it is needed here to explain the nature of Michael’s cognitive involvement at preschool, particularly in the early weeks.

Prior to Michael’s start at the M-EEC his teacher’s consideration of his integration into her preschool class had focussed on questions of how to respond to his advanced learning in reading and mathematics. Michael’s teacher was well aware of his emotional and social difficulties at Preschool B but despite Michael’s distress at separation from his father on his first day she was confident at the end of the day he would settle in quickly — *all children are shy and a bit emotional at the beginning of the year* (FN-01/05. p. 4).

It became routine that as Michael and his parent arrived at preschool each day he would begin to cry. Michael also, repeatedly, became upset throughout the day with tearful queries to the teachers about the routine of his day at preschool. This anxiety would interrupt any play activity that his teacher may have commenced with him. In particular Michael would become increasingly preoccupied and stressed towards the end of the preschool day about the time his father or mother would arrive (TN-01/05. p. 11). Thus Michael’s interactions with his teacher over the first weeks became dominated by his distress and her attempts to stop his tears, to discuss why he was upset, and her hopeful encouragement of play with the toys or available activities (FN– 02/05. pp. 7-10 & 15-18. TN - 02/05. pp. 7-20).

On the basis of her early planning for Michael, his teacher had set several ‘Independent Learning Goals (ILGs)’ for him. While Michael’s teacher was aware of the learning approaches typical of Michael’s experience at home, she considered professionally that these involved too much adult direction of, and involvement in, his learning. Consequently she concluded Michael needed to develop more initiative and self-directed learning (CSN1 – 01/05. p. 4). Her early goals as a result emphasised those aspects of cognitive learning that appeared to her as under-developed, reflecting her professional opinion that the preschool approach to learning through children’s self-chosen or self-directed play was more valuable for Michael than activities similar to those he engaged in at home. His teacher’s goals were intended to include Michael’s current level of intellectual learning but they also illustrate an aspect of his teacher’s practice that was to emerge as influential on his responses
to the preschool program — an expectation that each child leads their own learning process and therefore the ‘best learning’ occurs when children engage independently in most learning activities within the daily program. Teacher intervention or direction should be minimal.

The two ILGs for Michael were:

- To show curiosity about happenings in the world around him; and
- To develop the ability to set goals for himself. (FN-02/05. p.9)

For weeks the observations made by his teacher and me, indicated that Michael did not choose any activities, show any curiosity, or set any personal goals, and his distress appeared as the most overt behavioural response to the program. Whenever Michael’s teacher invited him to look at, or participate in an activity he would readily comply, but his involvement would last only as long as there was one-to-one interaction with her. As soon as his teacher’s attention moved to assist another child, or deal with classroom management matters, Michael’s attention would also move and he would become tearful and upset again. After several weeks, this pattern of tears and anxiety each day started to erode his teacher’s intention to provide for his advanced learning.

After approximately six weeks Michael’s teacher decided that despite her anticipation of the need to provide advanced intellectual activity for Michael, his emotional responses to preschool indicated that this was not appropriate. Further, she concluded that accelerated learning opportunities would be a potential stressor for Michael as they required teacher-guided learning and introduced high, adult, expectations of him. Michael’s teacher stated — structured intellectual learning is not important for him at preschool: he has enough structured expectation in his life, we shouldn’t add to it (FN-03/05. p. 16). From this viewpoint his teacher made a decision that Michael needed to experience the same learning activities and learning strategies as all the children in the class. Her evaluation of Michael’s learning needs during first term, in combination with her curricula and pedagogical decisions began a permanent reorientation of her learning goals for him. The educational focus for Michael moved away from any inclusion of intellectual learning to a primary concern with his social and emotional development.

**How did Michael engage with learning opportunities at preschool?**

Observations indicate that although it took a long time (relative to the other children), Michael did gradually become involved with activities at preschool. While his teacher viewed
This as ‘catching up’ with his age peers in play and independent learning, my observation of Michael indicated that he was simply not playing as his age peers did and the very nature of his involvement with activities was different.

Prior to any participation in a new activity Michael first watched, and then imitated precisely what the other children did. Whether the activity involved a drawing, making a collage, or using construction materials, Michael’s end product would look like a replica of the other children’s work. As teacher direction of play/learning activities was minimal as an outcome of ‘her DAP perspective on teacher practice’, this form of engagement in an activity became an enduring characteristic of Michael’s involvement for the remainder of the year. While his teacher viewed this response by Michael as him now learning the skills, ideas and things, four and five year olds should know (TN-05. pp. 7-21: teacher emphasis) my observations indicated an increasingly skilful level of imitation. Reviewing observations of Michael’s level of skill in these activities, or the end product, did not indicate any progress from a beginning level to a more developed or complex one. Nor did he show any interest in producing creative work representative of his cognitive ability, nonetheless Michael’s ‘work’ received approval from the staff.

Michael’s participation from the beginning of second term (approximately) appeared generally to be at an ‘age-typical level’ in those activities he chose to join, but the library corner was always available and here he could be frequently observed occupied in a way that represented his advanced ability — engrossed in silent reading. Michael would occasionally ask children who joined him there if they would like him to read to them. Sometimes they did accept his offer and at other times they laughed at this suggestion, appearing to disbelieve that Michael could read. He did not appear upset by such reactions. One day Natasha (a class mate) was there at the same time as Michael and offered to read to him. He politely thanked her and sat patiently listening while Natasha provided a good imitation of reading a story. Michael could also see the pages as Natasha ‘read’ and he looked as if he knew that she was not literally reading the story, nonetheless he said to her at the end: Nice reading Natasha (FN-03/05. p. 16).

Notwithstanding Michael’s evident enjoyment of reading, and the absence of tears during this occupation, his teacher was concerned about Michael’s inclination to sit and read for half an hour or more. She believed that it isolated Michael from the other children and so she would limit this activity, instructing him to find ‘something else to do’. Michael readily obeyed her direction but early in the year this would often result in him resuming a habit,
developed early, of pacing around the room, in and out of the little tables and chairs, not stopping or appearing to be interested in any activity, hands behind his back, head down and tears rolling down his face.

Confirmation of a link between Michael’s emotional demeanour and his involvement with stimulating cognitive activity appeared relatively early in the year through an unexpected response to Michael’s expressed interest in classical composers.

The M-EEC Administration Assistant hoped to help alleviate the stress that was evident every morning for Michael’s teacher, Michael, and his parents. Remembering, the conversation with Michael on his first day about his current music interests she downloaded information about Bach from the Internet. The Administration Assistant handed this to Michael one morning after his father had left, explaining the content of the printout. Michael instantly stopped crying and asked if he could read them. The class TA (teacher assistant) helped Michael create a folder to store this information and he subsequently spent much of the day absorbed in reading and calculating numerical facts about the composer — such as how long Bach lived. Later in a conversation with the TA Michael shared his newly acquired knowledge about the composer and told her how much he had enjoyed this activity. When Michael asked his teacher at the end of the day to take the information home to show his parents, she said, *Well the folder needs to stay here but I’ll make a deal with you. If you can come in next time, without crying when Dad goes, you can work on the folder again.* At the beginning of his next session she reported that Michael arrived smiling, said a prompt goodbye to his father (behaviour not seen in the preceding weeks ) and immediately settled down to read more about composers. His teacher reported that there were no tears that day (TN-02/05. p.13).

Such opportunities for Michael were not subsequently continued or planned and for the remainder of the first term one his frequent tears in response to stressful situations continued (FN-02/05. p.15).

Some teacher-directed learning activities became available from second term as specialist-teacher activities commenced. These classes were usually offered in blocks of a term and Michael participated, over the remainder of the year, in Italian language classes as well as art, drama and music. Michael always approached any new situation or unfamiliar
adults with some anxiety, but after several sessions he became enthusiastic about them and was a most engaged participant in a way not observable in the usual daily program. The following observation illustrates his level of participation and style of response.

Ms S. (specialist teacher for Italian) began today’s session by introducing the vocabulary they were to learn — words associated with ‘la famiglia’. Michael put his hand up and commented on the similarity in the sound between this word and *il figlio* (one of last week’s words). Ms S praised him for his memory and awareness of word sounds. He was the only child to make this sort of observation. At the end of this session when the children took it in turns to practise the greeting *come stai* (*how are you*), instead of the standard response *bene* (*good*) Michael grinned cheekily and said *male* (*bad*). Ms S pretended to be upset, he laughed and then she laughed, then Michael responded as if to placate her, *not really*, he said. (FN-08/05 p. 93)

However, a teacher-directed approach to learning in the everyday class activity, at a level intellectually stimulating for Michael, was not readily available. There were occasional, happenstance opportunities when the TA would engage with Michael at a more complex intellectual level. One day she invited Michael to estimate the number of knots needed to convert several strands of wool into a strong guy rope for the class project to create a castle. There were also occasional conversations between the TA and Michael about his current interests. Late in the year Michael had become fascinated at home with the Melbourne street directory and initiated several conversations with the TA about his current interest. One conversation included the following comments:

**MICHAEL**

Do you know that Kingsway [a main road leading into Melbourne] changes its name once it is over the Yarra [river]? It then becomes King Street.

**TA.**

Really! Do other roads do that?

**MICHAEL:**

Yes. There is Blackburn Road; it changes from Blackburn Road into Surrey Road, then into Chapel Street and then it becomes Blackburn Road again. (FN-11/05. p. 142)
Michael’s teacher did provide some directed learning for the class through story-time groups, or class discussions on a topic but these were at an age-typical intellectual level. Michael always readily conformed to the behavioural expectations in these group times as he did with any teacher request. From the beginning of term two he would sit quietly for the duration, generally looking detached and gazing elsewhere in the room, but he rarely responded to the teacher’s questions, which were always of a lower-order cognitive type (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Nonetheless, there were instances where Michael’s participation did appear to be at a genuinely age-typical level, for example his ability to complete puzzles and his levels of gross motor skills. There were also areas of activity where Michael appeared to his teacher to be less competent than his age-typical peers. Efforts by Michael’s teacher to understand these variations in Michael’s skill levels were always framed within the DAP perspective of a child’s level of competence in relation to expectations of age-typical behaviour. Therefore, Michael’s teacher became concerned when she observed behaviours that appeared to her to be even less well developed than those of his peers. In response, her focus on Michael’s developmental immaturities increased. One aspect of Michael’s involvement in the preschool program which greatly occupied her focus was the absence of any indication that Michael played in an imaginative way at preschool.

No sociodramatic play

Sociodramatic play is recognised as a vehicle for supporting learning across all developmental domains (Bergen & Mauer, 2007; Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Nourot & VanHoorn, 1991) and as such is central to an early childhood program. However, Michael’s teacher could not identify any of Michael’s early activity at preschool as demonstrating imaginary play. This element of Michael’s experience of the preschool program is described in detail as it afforded insights into his general cognitive response to learning at preschool.

Four months into the academic year and following the decrease in Michael’s emotional distress at attending preschool, his teacher became aware that Michael was not involved in any symbolic play at preschool, either as a solitary player or with other children. Michael’s teacher expected that as Michael was now less stressed about preschool he would begin to interact socially with the other children. Sociodramatic play was considered by her

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9 The words sociodramatic or imaginative play refers to the concept of symbolic play. In such activity children either in solitary play or in cooperation with others (sociodramatic play) engage in imaginary play.
as an important type of play as it would facilitate opportunities for Michael to connect with his peers. She recollected that Preschool Teacher B had commented on the absence of any sociodramatic play by Michael and this information in combination with her observations caused her concern. Michael’s teacher was aware of Michael’s advanced ability to engage with the complex symbolic thinking required in reading and mathematics yet it appeared to her that he was unable to engage in the symbolic representations of reality involved in sociodramatic play. The non-appearance of sociodramatic play therefore suggested to Michael’s teacher further inconsistency in Michael’s development — normal development of this cognitive ability had not yet emerged — and this was an additional reason to be concerned about the imbalance in Michael’s learning (CSN5-04/05. p. 26)

The account provided by Michael’s parents of his early experiences and activities at home suggests that imaginative or sociodramatic play was not one of Michael’s interests and had not been cultivated in the home learning environment. Such early play at home was focussed on ‘concrete or specific tasks’ in which one of Michael’s parents would either be available for some guidance of his activity or would participate with him, for instance working on a jigsaw, reading, or engaging in mathematical activities. Nonetheless, imaginative thinking was not totally absent — his parents reported he enjoyed imaginative stories, for example, The giant jam sandwich (Lord & Burroway, 1972) and would afterwards discuss himself within the scenario of the story (FN-02/05. p. 12).

An alternative perspective to the one provided by the DAP framework is the possibility that, like other gifted children, Michael’s progress through early developmental stages had been earlier and quicker than age-typical children (Harrison, 2005a; Porter, 2005). If so, he may have developed his imaginative play or imagination to a more complex level or in a specific form such as reading fiction. Consequently the preschool program did not offer opportunities to participate at this level, nor did the DAP perspective on appropriate curricula for this age group identify enjoyment of reading as a form of imaginative engagement with learning.

However, early in second term, Michael became interested in playing with Amy, a girl of similar age in his class. Michael’s teacher enthusiastically reported, on my next observation visit, that Michael had developed a sudden interest in joining Amy in her favourite activity — imaginative play of ‘mothers and fathers’ in the home corner. The
following anecdote is my first observation of Michael engaging with sociodramatic play and his interaction with Amy.

Observations of the home corner play on this day have Amy lying on the floor pretending to wail like a baby. Kim, her usual play partner, was bustling around the table with a saucepan and spoon. Michael was there with them but not playing a role as they were. He bobbed down besides Amy, stroked her arm and asked solicitously: How are you feeling Amy — what do you want? Amy continued to wail like a baby and Kim made (what was to become her typical response to Michael) an attempt to exclude him. Looking determined, Kim grabbed his top to pull him away, and said: You’re not playing this game with us (Kim’s emphasis). Her statement referred to Michael’s behaviour, questions and comments which differed from Amy and Kim’s standard ‘mother and baby narrative’ in the home corner.

Amy made no response to Kim’s attempts to remove Michael and he did not protest about Kim’s rough handling of him. I decided to intercede as there were no teachers nearby and on the basis of recent discussions with Michael’s teacher about the absence of sociodramatic play I felt it was important to support Michael’s efforts. This appeared to be a teachable moment so I said to Kim, Tell Michael who he can play (my emphasis). In a very authoritarian voice she said, I’m the mother and Amy’s the baby, but then stopped and just stood there looking defiant. Enquiringly I pointed to Michael, and Kim said in the same tone of voice, He’s the father. I tried, unsuccessfully, to prompt Michael for some more detail to provide guidance for his ‘father role’.

Michael then left briefly to go to the library corner but very quickly returned with a book and made his own attempt to follow the appropriate narrative. He asked directly of Kim, Who am I? A dad, she said firmly. Michael next asked her, What do I do with the baby (Amy)? There was no response and he answered himself, I think I give baby a hug. He gave her a light hug and then turned to me and asked, What happens here now? I said, I’m not sure, as I didn’t want to be drawn any further into the play. Michael turned back to the others and tried to ‘comfort the baby’; this included asking, Would you like a story? But Amy just continued to wail. Michael then came up to me and said in an exasperated voice, I can’t
understand her. Without waiting for a reply from me he returned to Amy who had stood up and was now putting on dress-up clothes. He scanned the clothes she had pulled out and asked her, What’s happening here? But again there was no reply. Amy returned to being the baby and Michael lay down on the floor next to her, stroked her arm and asked very solicitously, What’s going on here baby? Amy did not answer but increased her baby wails. Michael got up, and with a somewhat resigned expression made no further attempt to join in the play but went back to the library corner and started to read a book (FN-05/05. pp. 37-38).

At the next case study meeting Michael’s teacher commented that she heard him spontaneously offer to be the father during play the following day, and how amazed she was by this development in his engagement with other children. I explained my observation from my previous visit and my role in the conversation (FN-05/05. p. 41).

From this point to the end of the year I observed Michael regularly joining in sociodramatic play but only with Amy and Kim; never with others nor in imaginary play by himself. The play of all three children followed their regular, simple scenario around mothers and babies. Michael continued to be accepting of the age-typical level of their play, and usually did not try to lead the play or introduce ideas that were more intellectually complex. Michael was observed on one occasion only, to try and reason with them for a fairer organisation of the play. In response Amy and Kim simply excluded him (see later boxed play episode in 4.5). Kim continued to try to reject Michael but he appeared to be tolerant of her and it did not deter his persistence in attempting to join her and Amy. Michael’s behaviour towards her was always polite and generally friendly — he appeared patient, as an older person might be of irritating behaviours in younger children. Reports from his parents indicated that throughout this developing connection between Michael, Kim and Amy there were discussions at home about his social interactions including guidance from his parents about polite and correct behaviour (e.g. FN-05/05. p. 34).

Reflection on Michael’s participation on sociodramatic play

Sociodramatic play within Piagetian (1951) theory requires development of cognitive ability for representational thought and representations of reality. Therefore, participation by a child indicates an achieved level of cognitive ability, and involvement in such play is expected to increase their skill, thus prompting further development of representational thought (Berk, 1994). The DAP perspective on sociodramatic play (Bredekamp, 1987) was
consistent with Piaget’s theory, and emphasised the role of such play in prompting learning in all developmental domains.

Michael’s new interest and involvement in sociodramatic play indicated to his teacher the emergence of such maturity — she described it as some positive development at last. While Michael’s teacher welcomed his increasing social connection with other children through involvement in sociodramatic play, in contrast to the approach to learning at home for Michael, she maintained her maturational perspective on his new engagement in learning activities. This also directed her pedagogical approach which was that Michael’s continued development in this area was dependent on his initiative; her direct involvement was not required (FN-05/05. p.41).

The evaluation of Michael’s new behaviours as emerging maturity did not, however, provide Michael’s teacher with answers to a number of aspects of his play. At case study meetings she questioned the reality of his advanced development, asking why, when Michael was so advanced in some areas of learning, he persisted in joining the Amy and Kim duo in imaginary play when the nature of their play was so simple and repetitive? Why did he not choose other children when Kim continued to be so unwelcoming? His teacher had noted that two other girls interested in playing with Michael, Natasha and Molly, were both involved in more sophisticated play and were possibly closer in ability level to Michael. They individually initiated contact with him but while he was pleasant and co-operative he did not approach them or sustain episodes of play with either girl.

In contrast to his teacher’s interpretation of Michael’s behaviours, the evidence in this study suggested Michael’s participation in sociodramatic play did not illustrate increasing age-typical maturity in cognitive ability. Documentation of Michael’s behaviours reveals an established capability to comprehend complex representations of reality, as in examples of his sense of humour.

On Friday March 18th (at the end of first term), Michael arrived with a big smile on his face. He signed himself in (the attendance book) and said jokingly to the TA that he was going to write that it is Thursday today and he was also going to write the wrong arrival time. He laughed and laughed at how this would trick his teacher. (TN-03/05 p. 18)

Neither can his behaviour be interpreted as suggesting he had developed to a cognitive level where he was now able to socially interact in an appropriate way for his age (Bredekamp,
His parents had reported that Michael already had satisfactory levels of social skills and enjoyed interacting with other children, albeit with those older than him.

Drawing on theoretical models of learning it is possible to gain some insight into Michael’s behaviours associated with sociodramatic play, as well as other behaviours at preschool that puzzled his teacher. Vygotsky (1978) identified sociodramatic play as contributing to development through enhancing a diverse array of cognitive and social skills. Relevant to the characteristics of Michael’s imaginary play with other children at preschool is the requirement of a social relationship with an adult who provides instruction or modelling for a young child of this type of play. A child can subsequently draw on the learnt forms and language associated with imaginary play to facilitate play with peers which in turn supports the development of successful peer relationships (Berk, 1994).

From a sociocultural perspective Michael’s limited capacity to play in this way can be explained, not by maturation but by his prior cognitive and social experiences, the children with whom he chose to play and the pedagogy of his teacher. Background information suggested Michael had little experience of sociodramatic play. Therefore, it can be presumed that Michael did not know the language and behaviours that would have fostered his capacity to play in this way with his peers and nor had he experienced the adult guided participation necessary for learning this form of activity (Berk, 1994; Rogoff, 2003).

The social context of Michael’s preschool class indicates that only minimal guidance about participation in such activity was available as Amy and Kim were the only source of guidance. The evidence illustrated that as Michael’s play with them increased his behaviour and language became more and more like Amy and Kim’s, so his guided participation was from the source suggested as possible by Rogoff, (1996) — a peer as a ‘knowledgeable other’. However, their play was limited in complexity as it had a standard story line with only minor variations in behaviour or verbal responses.

As described in Chapter Two, sociodramatic play is seen as developmentally valuable for gifted children as it presents opportunities to use advanced skills in meaningful contexts or to develop an inner awareness of their sense-of-self (Harrison & Tegal, 1999). While Michael’s play with Amy and Kim can be viewed as offering him the opportunity to learn how his age-typical peers engaged in imaginary play, there was no evidence that it prompted personal growth in the manner suggested by Harrison and Tegal (1999). Michael potentially had more knowledgeable peers in his class with whom he could have employed his more
advanced skills in a more complex and intellectually satisfying experience of sociodramatic play but observations of his involvement with learning activities did not suggest that he found such play an avenue for expressing his more advanced cognitive development. Instead it appears from the evidence that he was maintaining his goal of becoming a friend with Amy (see section 4.5. ‘Peer relationships’) and in the absence of any guidance to the contrary he persisted in his social interactions with Amy and Kim.

Vygotskian thought also attributes dramatic play to the development of imagination and creativity, which in turn stimulates flexible and inventive thinking (Wertsch, 1991). There was, however, no sign that play with Amy and Kim, or increasing involvement in other preschool activities resulted in an increasing richness or complexity in Michael’s engagement with learning activities at preschool. Michael’s level of involvement, observable in the products that required creativity or innovation such as in the visual arts, continued to illustrate work that was more like that of classmates rather than an expression of his cognitive ability.

An explanation of this direction in Michael’s development is offered by Vygotsky’s (Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991) emphasis on the importance of language and social context as the essential tools for learning and development. As with sociodramatic play there was no evidence that pedagogical strategies were used in the preschool program to provide mediation for Michael between his present level of (unpractised) skill, in for example drawing, and a more developed or complex level. Subsequently, the outcome of his participation in such activities remained, as it did with sociodramatic play, at a level that he could most readily observe — age-typical behaviour. His age-peers were the available ‘knowledgeable others’ who provided guidance in how to engage with an activity.

In contrast, where learning goals and the learning process were supported by a familiar language and social context, Michael’s learning was rapid and complex. The Italian language lesson illustrates a mode of learning that was like Michael’s home schema (Bernstein, 1996; Gottfried, et al., 1994) and included ‘a more knowledgeable other’ (Rogoff, 2003) who provided guidance in the learning process towards more complexity. The result for Michael was that he appeared to be enthusiastically engaged with learning as well looking happy and relaxed.

While Michael’s preschool teacher was surprised that his art products always appeared age-typical she evaluated this as another indication of his unbalanced development
of skills and knowledge and planned for him to develop at his own pace. She encouraged him to draw but did not consider it necessary to intervene or place any high expectations of the end result on him. Michael’s experience at school, in the following year, suggests however that he was cognitively capable of visual art products more indicative of his advanced level of ability. Michael’s school teacher did not accept age typical drawings from him and several times in the early weeks of school she sent him back to his table to rework them, explaining in detail what she expected to view in his work. His drawings changed quickly into more careful and complex creations that were still individually creative (FN-03/06. p. 192). Michael subsequently maintained in his approach to drawing, a level of care and attention to detail which transferred into a personal enjoyment of this activity (FN-07/06. p 225).

Bandura’s model supports an explanation for the behaviours found by Michael’s preschool teacher to be difficult to interpret. I believe Michael’s responses within sociodramatic play and in his level of work in visual art activities illustrate a logical cognitive response to the learning sociostructure of preschool. Michael, in the absence of continuity between home and preschool, in the level of intellectual learning and the approach to learning, used his cognitive ability to maintain a long term goal of adjusting to the preschool mode of learning. Where there was no guided participation to bridge the discontinuity he experienced, he devised his own approach to achieving this goal through imitating the play of the other children. This outcome illustrates how Bandura’s model of bidirectional-influences (2001) may manifest in the interaction between a gifted child responding to the sociostructure of a classroom focussed on normative expectations of learning and appropriate pedagogy.

**Perspective on the preschool teacher's teaching response to Michael**

Some observations of interactions between Michael and his teacher have already been presented but this section focuses on teaching practices that influenced Michael’s opportunities for intellectual learning at preschool. The teaching response Michael’s teacher made to his interest in intellectual learning illustrates a sequence in her understanding of Michael’s learning needs as a gifted child, although not one that eventually achieved a form of differentiated program in an early childhood setting. Porter (2005) summarises the appropriate cognitive features of an early childhood program for gifted children as including intellectual challenge through differentiation of the curriculum accompanied by teacher support. She includes in the recommendation for differentiation the need for gifted children to
have opportunities to develop competencies relevant to their own level of learning, as well as maintaining positive dispositions towards learning and themselves as learners.

Knowing his academic skills were advanced, Michael’s teacher had been diligent in informing herself about Michael. Before he started she had talked to his parents, read the psychologist’s report on his IQ assessment and visited his previous preschool. Therefore she was aware that Michael:

- was already an established reader;
- enjoyed intense learning sessions with his father which involved amongst other topics, complex mathematics for his age;
- had shown immature exploratory behaviours at his previous preschools, for example, putting sand in his hair;
- did not interact with other children in sociodramatic play; and
- showed a marked lack of interest or engagement in the typical preschool activities.

Michael’s teacher reported at our first case study meeting that she aimed to provide a holistic educational approach that was responsive to the social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs of all the children (CSM1-01/05). The background information had prepared her for considerable disparity in levels of Michael’s development, nonetheless her educational goal was to meet all his developmental needs. Following Michael’s difficulty at separating from his parents in the first days of the preschool year his teacher arranged to make a visit to Michael at home. The visit confirmed a view she had already expressed. Michael’s learning at home, supported by his parents, was too focussed on highly intellectual activity and lacking in the range of age-typical activity. Activities his teacher considered ought to be provided for a preschool child for balanced development were not observable — she was concerned about the apparent absence of opportunities for outside play, independent play with construction toys, imaginative play with soft toys such as teddies. This was to influence her decisions about the curriculum she provided to Michael at preschool (TN-02/05. pp. 22-24).

**Early months of Michael’s year at preschool**

Michael’s teacher admitted that although she felt prepared for Michael’s integration into her class she was nervous about how she should, or could, respond to a student she knew
was intellectually accelerated — especially in his mathematical learning. After some reflection, prior to Michael’s commencement, his teacher decided that skills for independent learning would best support Michael’s learning in her program. She anticipated development of such skills would allow him to continue to learn at an intellectual level that was satisfying to him, and eventually decided the High Scope approach to learning of ‘plan, do, review’ (Weikart, 2000) would promote the development of independent learning skills.

Despite his teacher’s early consideration of appropriate teaching practice for Michael’s intellectual learning, his emotional response to attending the M-EEC (see section 4.4) became for her the dominating characteristic of his attendance. This behaviour, which lasted for most of first term and re-emerged at later periods, was viewed by his teacher as illustrating emotional immaturity. So while she had an early focus on providing an appropriate curriculum response to Michael’s advanced intellectual ability this quickly became sidelined and any discussion of Michael’s cognitive needs or interests — for instance, independent learning skills — became unimportant. This was illustrated in his teacher’s overview of Michael’s first term:

We have stopped trying on a one-to-one basis to interact so sympathetically or help Michael learn, as this is making him more dependent on us rather than him learning independently. (CSM3: 03/05. p. 16)

Michael’s teacher, in a conversation at the end of the year, confirmed her early decision that his emotional development was more important than providing any form of intellectual differentiation of the preschool program for Michael. She commented:

It was quite obvious which area needed developing: we switched from the intellectual side quite quickly to the social and emotional. (TI-12/05. p154)

However, although an educational program that would ‘invite’ Michael (see Hodge & Kemp, 2002, on invitational curricula) to engage at a cognitively advanced level was absent, Michael did share his intellectual interests with his teachers. In early June Michael’s teacher reported a recent example of ‘Michael’s unbalanced activity at home’.
One Monday morning, when chatting with the TA about their respective weekend activity Michael had said: *Over the weekend Dad and I have been doing ‘times tables’ I like the 13 times table. Do you know it?* When the TA acknowledged she did not, he asked politely if she would like him to write it out for her. She cheerfully accepted his offer and Michael spent 40 minutes of the session writing and calculating the answers (Figure 1). The TA commented that she watched and listened to him and realised that he had not just memorised it, he could actually work out each product: Michael’s calculation of 2 x13 was to multiply 2 x 10, then 2 x 3 and add them together (FN-06/05. p. 51).

As a result, the TA commented she had a better understanding of the nature of Michael’s ability and although this appeared to strengthen their social relationship it did not result in any change in the intellectual component of the preschool curriculum.

![Figure 1: Do you know the 13 x table?](image)

As in his prior experience of preschool, Figure one illustrates Michael’s learning was proceeding at home and at preschool on two very different levels.
Mid-year

By mid-year Michael’s strategy of imitating his classmates’ approach to activities was a consistent feature of his participation in the preschool program. Amy’s skills, different from his own, were of especial interest to Michael. One particular skill was to swing across the high, horizontal bars of the climbing frame and this became a focus for Michael. Michael's teacher reported that one day towards the middle of the year, Michael asked her for help in learning to swing, as Amy did, across the outdoor climbing frame. In response she had collected some other children who could do this and took them over to the frame with Michael. She said:

I thought it was perhaps not strength but technique that was making this skill difficult for Michael to manage. So I organised the children who could do it, to demonstrate. I said, Let’s watch the others and Look how they swing their legs so they get close enough to grab the next bar with their hands. Michael didn’t try it that day, but on the next day he came and told me he could do it and indeed he was swinging across the monkey bars.

His teacher’s subsequent comments indicated some insight into Michael’s learning, stating she thought the more age-typical children probably did not or could not learn in this way. She attributed this to their not remembering or reflecting to the same degree that Michael was able to do, noting Michael probably remembered the detailed information given about the skill, thought about it overnight and then applied it (FN-06/05. p. 65).

However, there were no further examples of teaching to Michael’s point of need with appropriate scaffolding. Although this insight by Michael’s teacher, into his approach to learning, was volunteered in a conversation with me after this incident, his teacher appeared to maintain her teaching strategies within the DAP framework. Her focus continued to be on Michael's deficit emotional and social learning and she provided overt approval for his efforts to participate in activities in a way similar to the other preschoolers. When Michael had been at preschool for over six months the following example of his participation was typical of many observations I made of him.
On this day Michael is sitting at the collage table, pasting pre-cut coloured paper onto a piece of backing card. He glances around the table at the other children and appears be doing exactly the same as they are. He, too, applies paste liberally all over the backing card, and places pieces of paper randomly onto this. Julia, a part-time TA, asks Michael, ‘What is it? Jeremy sitting opposite Michael offers, Mine is a bed: Michael glances at him, considers for a moment and says emphatically, Mine is a chair. There is no particular form to this work but Julia says Good work. When Michael stands up to leave, Julia intervenes and tells him, as he has put paste all over the backing board, he should cover the whole piece with coloured paper. Michael obligingly sits down and proceeds to fill in all the space and when he announces he is finished there is still no recognisable form. Michael's teacher passes the activity at that point and commends his concentration. (FN-07/05. pp. 68 & 70)

Later, his teacher comments to me how much Michael is improving in his play, to the point where he is now managing to play like the others. A marked contrast between the complexity of Michael’s learning activities at preschool and those at home did not appear contradictory to his teacher. Her continued interpretation of these differences from a perspective of developmental maturity, DAP, appeared to mask the influence of the social and cultural context of his learning (Rogoff, 1996).

Last two terms of the preschool year

The teacher's perception of how Michael differed from her expectations of preschoolers was highlighted when his tearfulness returned at the beginning of third term (mid-July). Michael’s teacher approached his parents about the return of his distress where they explained their understanding of its origin. In the school holidays Michael had participated in a chess competition with older children, and had become upset by disparaging comments they made about his age (described in 4.4, ‘The baby-chairs incident’). His parents believed this experience had prompted Michael to not want to return to preschool. Michael's teacher reviewed what she considered his regression to immature emotional behaviour with the Director of the M-ECC who suggested a possible link between Michael’s level of intellectual satisfaction at preschool and emotional distress. Consequently, his teacher requested that I become more involved in Michael’s activity at preschool.
We agreed my contribution would be to provide some complex intellectual activity for the remainder of term three, each week when I visited. Michael and I subsequently discussed his current interests and together decided that I would teach him backgammon, he would teach me chess and we would do some science experiments. His teacher and I also devised an ILG and learning strategies to guide Michael towards intellectually stimulating learning that required independent learning skills. The goal devised was for Michael to become ‘a research learner’ at preschool. From the beginning of term four, Michael would be expected to choose a topic to research and, with some teacher support, to investigate and write up the information found (Appendix F). Strategies to support this learning experience for Michael were broadly based on Van Tassel-Baska’s (2003, 2005) recommendations for curriculum development with gifted children.

Following implementation of these more complex activities accompanied by some adult guidance of learning Michael’s anxiety about attending preschool subsided, corroborating the interaction between his cognitive satisfaction and emotional equilibrium. Michael responded to the new goals and activities with enthusiasm. His teacher wished him to adhere to the same curriculum topic as the other children, so Michael chose his first topic from the current class theme of musical instruments. He decided to investigate stringed instruments and despite the expected conformity this approach did support him in choosing specific learning goals of his own. One investigation he pursued was to test the relationship between the length of the string on one of the preschool instruments and the sound it made when plucked. Michael measured the length of the strings then recorded on a piece of paper, the length and the variation in sound (Figure 2). In due course he presented all this information in book form to the other children, before, with much pride, taking his book home (FN-10/05, pp.129-130).
Michael's teacher commented a month later that Michael was now starting to show an interest in learning at preschool, a development that was significant to her.

I had expected that it [interests] would have been apparent from early in the year; apart from his obsession with discussing everything in terms of numbers; [but] he seems to have taken all year to reach this point. (CSN13-11/05. p.143)

The remaining weeks of the year for Michael were occupied with pursuing a number of interests as a researcher, as well as an increasing level of confidence to interact with other children in his class. However, the most significant aspect of this time for Michael's teacher was that Michael now appeared to have achieved some emotional maturity as his tears and other signs of stress (at preschool) were notably absent.

**Discussion**

It was not possible to evaluate Michael’s response to an interpretation of a differentiated early childhood program — for example, as summarised by Porter (2005). As
described previously Michael’s teacher was diverted from her early resolve to provide for his intellectual learning needs. Nonetheless, documentation of Michael’s experience of the preschool program offers insights into his cognitive behaviours, into the difficulty experienced by his teacher in providing appropriate educational support for him and the influence of this on Michael’s response to the absence of opportunities to develop relevant learning competencies.

*Michael’s cognitive response to the preschool program*

The behaviours discussed in this section confirm the presence of advanced cognitive characteristics (Appendix A) in Michael’s response to his teachers and the preschool program. Most observable was his:

- sense of humour;
- advanced academic skills — reading, writing, and mathematical;
- memory skills;
- thinking skills;
- language skills; and
- uneven cognitive knowledge and skills.

The observation of the characteristically gifted behaviours in a preschool child contributes to Sankar-DeLeeuw’s findings (2004) of these behaviours in children approximately a year older, in the beginning grade of school. However, the focus in this section was on the influence of characteristically gifted cognitive behaviours on the reciprocal-socialisation process.

The most significant cognitive challenge in the reciprocal-socialisation process for Michael was a discontinuity between the mode of learning at home and that at preschool. Michael’s adaptation to the preschool program provides an illustration of how differences in learning schemas and hence the lack of continuity prompted particular responses in this gifted child. The effect of minimal opportunities for intellectually satisfying learning at preschool appears to have resulted in Michael adopting two distinctive approaches to his participation in the preschool program.

The first was that Michael expressed those characteristics typical of his learning at home, but only in his interactions with adults — his class teachers and specialist teachers. For
instance, he engaged in conversations around complex topics, he was most responsive to adult direction of learning (on those few occasions when it occurred) and he displayed an ability to learn, think and reason that was advanced for his age. In particular he demonstrated:

- a multi-dimensional awareness of self (Seigler, 1996) — e.g. he reflected self-awareness in a comment that he used to cry at the beginning of preschool but now he did not - in 4.5;
- mature understanding of self (Harter, 1996) — e.g. he could joke about his own expressions of anxiety (in 4.5. ‘Self-initiated strategies to cope with stress’); and
- norm referencing of his own behaviour against abilities of others (Gross, 1998) — e.g. in his compliment to Natasha on her reading even when aware she was not really reading.

Overall there were few observations of egocentric behaviour considered typical of Michael’s age (Harter, 1996).

The second distinct approach evident in Michael’s cognitive adjustment to the preschool learning environment was that interactions with preschool activities demonstrated increasing imitation of typical preschool behaviours (as discussed in ‘No sociodramatic play’ and described in 4.5 ‘Searching for a preschool sense-of-self’). As Michael’s repertoire of such responses increased so did his teacher’s confidence that he was maturing. I argue Michael’s cognitive achievement at preschool was not maturation as his teacher evaluated it within the DAP interpretation of development, but rather Michael was attempting to conform by reading the cognitive expectations of his teacher and his peers.

The maturity that these behaviours signal enabled Michael during his experience of reciprocal-socialisation to adapt to a preschool way of behaving. In achieving conformity to the preschool environment he used his cognitive ability, not simply to adjust to a new learning environment and gain more complex skills from the experience as is expected from most children, but to develop a repertoire of simpler social and intellectual modes of behaviour. This strategy both matched his behaviours to teacher expectations of him and those of the other children. Michael’s attempt to join in role play with Amy and Kim in the home corner was a clear example of the beginning of this behaviour (other examples are described in 4.5). The static nature of Michael’s drawings and collages, for instance, also
illustrates his continuing efforts to imitate the preschool way of participating rather than advancing his development of skills or ability.

Michael’s cognitive response to the preschool program confirms the agency of children (Bandura, 2001) in the reciprocal-socialisation process. Michael’s responses illustrate how a gifted child may be active and even creative in adapting to a new learning environment. However, Michael’s cognitively advanced behaviours were frequently inaccessible to his teachers and although his teacher showed some awareness of his advanced abilities, this did not prompt an appropriate programmatic response in the form recommended by Porter (2005). I argue that Michael was, as a consequence, at risk of learning that in a formal learning environment — the M-EEC combined with his experience of two previous educational settings — intellectually satisfying learning was either happenstance or that it was not provided. Therefore his learning progress within an educational program was vulnerable.

Teaching response to Michael’s cognitive behaviours

The most significant challenge for Michael’s teacher in responding to Michael’s participation in her preschool program was to understand his apparent learning needs and subsequently devise a learning program. Her difficulties in achieving this have been described and are revealing of two particular influences within the early childhood approach to education.

First, Michael’s responses to his teacher’s program illustrate the difficulty of providing for a child who is different from mainstream expectations and where the teacher is insufficiently prepared to provide for, in this case, developmental diversity. It is possible that if Michael’s teacher had more extensive knowledge of characteristically gifted behaviours included as part of the spectrum of child development Michael’s display of ‘different behaviours’ may not have been as puzzling to her. In addition, this knowledge may have contributed to an understanding of the nature of holistic learning needs in a gifted child and awareness that it was not possible to compartmentalise these needs, as she did, without a significant influence on learning responses to the preschool program.

The second, and I consider the more important influence, was the inaccessibility of alternative explanations for Michael’s behaviour within the DAP framework. This became a compounding factor in the difficulty of making a satisfactory teaching response to him. The framework’s focus on individual development based on knowledge of age-stage development
and with minimal reference to how the environment may influence learning, particularly in regard to advanced development, limited the possible interpretations of Michael’s responses to the preschool learning environment. In addition, DAP did not provide a curricula or pedagogical basis for responding to Michael’s different home learning experiences in a way that would have allowed for continuity of these learning experiences. The evidence suggests that this outcome was significant in influencing Michael’s response to the preschool program and the way in which he subsequently engaged with learning at preschool.

In early childhood theory over the last decade there have been calls for a reconceptualisation of early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Williams, 1999) based on Vygotsky’s view of children as active cultural learners. This has produced in Australia an increased commitment to early childhood educational responses to diversity (DEECD, 2009a; NCAC, 2006), with recognition of differences in children’s learning relating to gender (MacNaughton, 2004), cultural differences (Cross, T 1995) and developmental diversity (Bowman, et al., 2001, Mallory & New, 1994). However, I would argue that there continues to be an exclusionary aspect to current perceptions. Developmental diversity is elaborated only in terms of developmental delay, as noted in the literature review. Michael’s experience of the reciprocal-socialisation process at preschool, highlights the absence of consideration in early childhood education in Australia of the range of cognitive diversity in preschool aged children, even in those discussions calling for a ‘problematising’ of the concept of child development (e.g. Fleer, 2005).

Michael’s experience of the reciprocal-socialisation process strengthens the case for viewing the learning needs of a gifted child at preschool through a sociocultural lens. This would allow both the prior learning and learning approaches of a gifted child to be considered as a product of their social and cultural context (Rogoff, 2003), not solely as an outcome of inherent individual development — as occurred with Michael. A sociocultural perspective may have allowed an appreciation of the significance to Michael of his established mode of learning, and indicated the need to adapt the curriculum and pedagogy to bridge the difference, even if only temporarily.

In view of the dearth of evidence about the cognitive responses of young gifted children in formal learning environments Michael’s experience is informative. It indicates how both continuity and discontinuity may affect a gifted child’s cognitive experiences in a formal learning environment. It also reinforces awareness that intellectual learning in a gifted
child does not occur separately from other developmental learning. Consideration of the influence of Michael’s emotional development on his other areas of learning in the preschool program will be the topic of the next section in this chapter.
4.4 Characteristics of Michael’s emotional learning at preschool

The results presented in this section provide documentation of Michael’s emotional responses to the preschool program. The focus is on those emotional behaviours accepted as characteristically gifted (Appendix A) which were apparent in Michael’s behaviour, and how they appear to have influenced the teacher’s curriculum and pedagogical responses to his behaviour.

Michael’s parents had first and foremost articulated social goals for his development over the year but understandably they also wanted him to be happy at preschool. Michael’s emotional response to the beginning of each preschool day continued for most of first term and his parents found it increasingly distressing and difficult to know how to help him adjust. Michael’s father told me late in the year that he and his wife had been especially anxious about how Michael might react to starting at a new preschool after his previous responses. Michael also responded intensely to some situations at home so this behaviour was familiar to his parents but they had not thought of this as pertinent information to share with his teacher. Neither did they seek to collaborate with her on a solution to the difficulty of Michael’s heightened emotional reactions. There was a degree of formality in their relationship with teachers which precluded discussion about how the teacher managed and/or responded to Michael’s behaviours and learning patterns. For instance, they always addressed the teacher as Miss Katrina (pseudonym), as did Michael, even though it had become an accepted practice at the M-EEC for both parents and children to address teachers by their first name.

Michael’s teacher had some awareness of Michael’s previous negative response to preschool but as he had appeared relaxed during his orientation visits to the M-EEC the previous December she had not expected the intensity of his initial reaction. The extent of Michael’s difficulty with separation each morning did not fit her expectations of advanced development; it was not only unexpected, it appeared contradictory to her. She knew that Michael had initially separated happily at his first early childhood centre at age three and a half, and on the basis of Michael’s prior experience, his teacher expected his feelings of emotional independence from his parents to have matured and she expected more resilience.
Michael’s emotional responses to the preschool program

Michael’s early response to attendance at preschool quickly led to his teacher’s assessment of him as lacking age-typical emotional development. Her records from the early weeks reflect her growing preoccupation with Michael’s immature behaviours and she notes:

- tears at separation every morning;
- anxiety and tears again in the afternoon over what time his parents would return to collect him;
- frequent tears throughout the day; and
- distress bordering on panic when the class moved to a new or different setting, such as an unexpected outside-playtime (not on the timetable which Michael persists on checking frequently) (TN-01 to 04/05. pp. 7-20).

These behaviours continued throughout most of first term, with the length of time Michael was upset, as well as the degree of intensity, declining as the term drew to a close. The change at the beginning of term two, however, was striking for Michael’s teacher and she reported with understandable delight:

His separation from his dad is now fine, there are no more tears; his dad seems much happier and relieved. Michael looks much happier, more relaxed than last term; the tears and his pacing around the room or outside has stopped. (CSM5 - 04/05)

His teacher’s interpretation of this change in behaviour was that whilst Michael’s adjustment to preschool had been extraordinarily protracted it had been achieved, and his change in behaviour represented growth in his emotional independence. However, while Michael’s teacher evaluated the change in his behaviour only from the perspective of emotional maturity there was evidence that this new response to separation was more likely to have been prompted by guidance from his parents.

Michael’s teacher had commented to them, early in term two about the sudden decrease in Michael’s tearfulness, although she was aware of him making a considerable effort at times to control his feelings. Michael’s parents then told her of a conversation at home with Michael during the term holidays where they had talked openly with him about how difficult it was to part at preschool when he was so upset. They wanted him to stop crying each day (CSM5-04/05). Later his father shared with me, that at home Michael would
comment himself on his new ability to control his tears saying: *I used to cry till March 28th but I don’t cry anymore* (FN-05/05. p.34).

Interpretation of this change by Michael’s teacher was that it demonstrated an increasing ability in Michael to be independent of his parents and thus she did not anticipate such heightened stress responses to reoccur. However, they did reappear in response to other stressful situations; for instance see following section on ‘The baby-chairs incident’. I argue this recurrence demonstrated the inadequacy of the DAP framework, which suggested behaviours such as Michael’s intense emotional responses could be viewed simply as appropriately mature or immature. An alternative perspective, incorporating an awareness of characteristically gifted behaviours suggests that Michael was illustrating a characteristically gifted trait: heightened sensitivity combined with cognitive ability (Piechowski, 1997; Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1993). With this knowledge it is possible to explain Michael’s early distress at attending the M-EEC as, in part, a response to being required to attend another preschool when his prior experience had indicated preschool was intellectually unsatisfying. In addition, as the early weeks passed, the marked differences between his home learning environment and that of preschool was confirmed yet again and no-one explained to him the different learning approaches or attempted to bridge them for him. Aided by his cognitive ability, Michael attempted to adjust by managing his emotional responses and reorientating his sense-of-self in this formal learning environment. The following observations of Michael’s participation in the preschool program illustrate key points in his emotional development.

*Michael’s stress about when his parents would collect him from preschool*

Michael’s ongoing, year-long anxiety about the time at which he would be collected from preschool was behaviour his teacher viewed as unnecessary and irrational. By the third month of the year his teacher considered there had been sufficient time for him to cease such worrying — *Michael has been at preschool long enough to know his parents always collect him on time* (TN-03/05, p. 21). For his teacher, it also defied any sort of emotional logic because it only occurred on a Monday and Friday, not on a Wednesday (FN-11/05. p. 142). On an observation visit late in the year I talked with Michael about this and his explanation rather than being immature was clear and rational. He explained to me carefully and in detail that:
On a Monday and Friday my father comes for me, at 4.45 and if he is late then it is only 45 minutes to when the M-EEC closes. If he is really late then I might be left here [a thought which obviously worried him]. But on a Wednesday my mother comes — she is here at 3.30pm — even if she is late it doesn’t matter because there is still two hours before the M-EEC closes. (FN-11/05. p.p. 147/8)

This explanation appears to be an example of the ‘logicalisation of thought’ proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and found by Morelock (2000) in very young gifted children. It is a characteristic of thought that young children are not deemed capable of as it represents abstract interpretations of experience.

As in the case cited by Morelock, Michael was demonstrating that he was capable of abstract interpretations of experience, in this situation he was attaching emotional reactions to a cognitive construction of events that had not yet occurred. His teachers’ reassurances that his parents always came for him were in vain (which they found frustrating and hard to accept) because for Michael logically the situation could occur. This illustrates how this highly analytical thinking can occur early for gifted children and produce a difficulty for the child who is not ready emotionally to manage the possibilities they imagine. In addition it indicates a pedagogical difficulty for the teacher who is not aware of this characteristic of advanced cognitive development where even a preschool-age child cannot be reassured about the predictability of the people in their environment.

The baby-chairs incident

On Michael’s first day of term three his distress at separating from his parents and anxiety about when he would be collected by them at the end of the day returned in full force (FN-07/05.p. 66). His parents, in response to contact from Michael’s teacher about his behaviours, suggested that his reaction against returning to preschool at the beginning of term three was prompted by participation in a chess competition in the holidays. Michael had won the junior section against 10 and 11 year old children but the older boys who had lost to him had challenged his win because he was still at preschool. There had not been any serious response to this challenge but nonetheless it had upset Michael. His parents believed this had led to Michael’s subsequent complaints at home that he did not like preschool because he was required to sit on ‘baby chairs’. Michael had continued at home, for several days, to argue with his parents about why he had to continue attending preschool. They responded by insisting he had to return as he still had ‘things’ to learn there.
I contend that this incident illustrates the cognitive dissonance for Michael between the intellectual stimulation available through familiar activities outside the preschool and the difficulty for him in engaging intellectually with the learning opportunities at preschool. The contrast or dissonance for Michael, in continuing attendance at preschool, was re-emphasised by the stimulation of the chess matches. The dissonance was accompanied by intense feelings about the difference between home and preschool learning so he again became highly stressed about participation in a learning environment where the mode of learning was markedly different.

While Michael’s teacher interpreted his heightened emotional responses at preschool as a reversion to immature emotional behaviours, his subsequent behaviour can be seen as an attempt to resolve this dilemma. In declaring, first to his parents and later to his teacher, he would no longer sit on the ‘baby-chairs’, Michael attempted to assert his sense-of-self as not like the other preschool children who sat on ‘baby chairs’. He announced to his teacher that he would now use the teacher’s chairs\(^\text{10}\), but Michael’s decision became a point of contention between him and his teacher for several weeks (FN-07/05. pp.78/79). The tension between them was eventually resolved when his teacher asked him if he would like to make his own special chair. Michael responded immediately to this adult suggested goal by finding and decorating a piece of cardboard that was shaped in a way to fit neatly over the seat of one of the child-size chairs. This he unfailingly placed on any chair he used for the remainder of the year.

*Self-initiated strategies to cope with stress*

Michael’s emotional responses to stress at preschool were understood by his teacher as indicating low levels of emotional resilience. She also subsequently concluded that Michael was potentially a ‘school refuser’, a view shared by the Director of the M-EEC (CSM8.-06/05. p. 55). Contrary to these estimations of his development, the evidence indicated that Michael did have the ability to cope with problems and stress, but his responses were not age-typical behaviours. Observations suggested a strong sense of self-efficacy in Michael’s employment of his advanced cognitive ability to start to regulate his emotional responses and develop his relationships with both adults and other children at preschool. This response by Michael illustrates how the cognitive ability of a gifted child may shape their expression of self-efficacy as well as the influence of advanced cognitive development in the

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\(^{10}\) Teacher’s chairs – a set of stools taller than the small chairs provided for the children. It was a class rule that only teachers could use the teacher stools.
formation of a sense of self-efficacy — as modelled by Bandura (2002). But Michael’s teachers were not able to readily identify the origin of these behaviours because they were not typical of preschoolers and thus they were categorised as immature or just a further example of Michael’s difference.

Michael’s coping skills were evident in his preoccupation with wearing his watch to preschool. He was proficient in reading the time before commencing at the M-EEC and would often refer to the clock on the wall, or his watch, and appeared to find reassurance in calculating the time period until lunch, how long till his parents arrived, or the time difference between the present moment and the next change of routine. Michael looked at his watch constantly early in the year, and although the conspicuousness of this behaviour declined as the year progressed, there were a number of episodes of high levels of stress when Michael realised that he did not have his watch. On one such occasion his mother’s only recourse was to leave her watch with him before she could say good bye to him at preschool. On another occasion his teacher let him wear her watch for the day. This apparently enabled him to calm down, appearing to offer comfort in the same way that a security blanket or teddy bear from home can support a more age-typical child.

A further example of Michael’s self-initiated strategies to cope with his stress, which illustrate his development in moderating his emotional responses to preschool, occurred late one day towards the end of the year. In this incident Michael exhibited a mature understanding of his own behaviour. Having checked his watch Michael started to joke with the TA about his own anxiety about when his parents would arrive to collect him from preschool. He said to her in a cheerful voice: This is the time of the day when I start to look at my watch a lot! In an illustration of the complexity of responding to Michael’s anxiety, which his teachers had considered indicated his emotionally immaturity, the TA also adopted a jovial tone and said to Michael, Well I can soon fix that. To do so she put a strip of masking tape over his watch so the face was hidden. While these comments by Michael appear indicative of an emerging metacognitive ability he did not appear emotionally ready to cope with this response. He retreated from the conversation with the TA into the library area and took a book from the shelf — appearing close to tears. After a few minutes she called to him, I was only joking. Michael, still looking upset, continued reading his book and did not reply, although he hesitantly peeled the tape off his watch (FN-11/05. p. 147).
There is awareness in the gifted education field that characteristically a capacity to think metacognitively appears earlier in gifted children than in children with average development (Moss, 1992; Porter, 2005; Robinson, N.M. 2008). Michael’s display of metacognition in his coping skills — in his self-awareness of his own thinking with an ability to evaluate and regulate that thinking (Rodd, 1998) — illustrates his cognitive capacity at five years of age. However, the DAP framework of curriculum and pedagogy offers no insight into how a young gifted child might employ such strategies in resolving their levels of stress. For Michael’s teacher and the TA this example of Michael’s behaviours simply appeared confusing — how could he attempt to joke about his behaviour and continue to become upset about when his parents might arrive to collect him from preschool? (FN-11/05. p. 147)

**Response by Michael’s teacher to his emotional behaviour**

There are two defining characteristics to the teacher’s pedagogical responses to Michael’s emotional reaction to preschool. The first is that she clearly valued the importance of a close emotional bond with her students. While Michael’s teacher regularly felt confronted and frustrated by those behaviours of Michael’s that appeared inexplicable, she continued to be warm and sympathetic towards him, especially when he was distressed. Her persistence in maintaining this aspect of her professional role is reflected in Michael’s affectionate comments about her (see 4.5. ‘Social connection between Michael and his teacher’); a feeling also noted by his parents as their response to my question demonstrates:

**ANNE:** What was important in helping Michael settle at the M-EEC?

**MICHAEL’S PARENTS:** We think it was the care and love his teacher and the TA showed towards him. (PI, 03/06: email)

The second defining characteristic is that attempts by Michael’s teacher to help Michael learn and develop within the preschool learning environment were continually situated within the DAP conceptualisation of curriculum and pedagogy. This was illustrated in her on-going attempts to evaluate Michael’s intense emotional responses within her understanding of age-typical maturity, as her notes in first term about Michael’s difficulties with separation from his parent each morning reveal:

- This is a normal process of settling in (week 1);
- Once he is more familiar the anxiety should ease off (week 2);
• We’ve got to stop that crying, children shouldn’t still be crying at the start of the day (week 4);
• I think his father gets too anxious and Michael reacts to this (week 6); and eventually,
• We have to ignore his reactions as it is making him too dependent on us (week 8).

(TN-05. pp. 7-21)

Detachment from a child’s emotional reactions was not Michael’s teacher’s usual response and despite this decision in week eight it was not a response she maintained with Michael. However, the DAP maturational perspective on development led Michael’s teacher towards a deficit view of Michael’s learning. Morelock and Morrison (1996) had predicted that as a result of the conceptual tensions between the principles of best practice espoused within the DAP framework and the learning needs of a gifted child the most likely outcome was a deficit view.

I propose that the subsequent focus of the program on Michael’s immaturity created ‘blind spots’ that hid the salient influences on his behaviours at preschool. Specifically these influences were the discontinuity between the home and preschool modes of learning as well as the link, for Michael, between satisfying cognitive stimulation and his emotional equilibrium. An understanding by Michael’s teacher of the causative influence of minimal teacher/adult guidance for Michael, apparent in both her expectations and style of providing feedback on his characteristically gifted behaviours, may have offered her some understanding of his responses. Characterised as the sociostructure by Bandura (2001) the responses made by Michael’s teacher illustrate a disjunction between teaching practice designed for mainstream students and the learning needs of a gifted child. A sociocultural perspective on Michael’s behaviours and the corresponding teacher practice offers the potential to gain insight into the origin of those behaviours displayed by Michael that puzzled his teacher. This perspective could have suggested a curricula and pedagogical approach that included differentiation of the preschool program for Michael in the manner suggested by Porter (2005)

**Achieving emotional adjustment at preschool**

By the final term at the M-EEC Michael appeared to be more resilient. His intense emotional reactions had mostly ceased and in the last term he usually appeared happy during his time at preschool. He was positive about most situations and able to participate without
undue signs of stress in new routines and unexpected activities, although changes to routine activities because of end-of-year performance rehearsals and school orientation days saw him expressing some anxiety and seeking verbal reassurance from his teacher. But compared to his heightened emotional responses earlier in the year Michael coped reasonably well.

This was assisted by his teacher’s realisation that he needed to be given information about new events and time to prepare for them and she provided this support. For example, prior to school orientation visits she outlined aspects of school such as the greater numbers of children and the range of ages. Michael had two orientation days scheduled at his prospective new school where he was transitioning along with a group of other children he knew from preschool. His teacher considered the social continuity should support Michael in coping emotionally with the new experiences.

Michael’s father accompanied him for these visits and although Michael had said he was looking forward to going to school, his heightened emotional response to new situations returned. He did not find the transition activities interesting and when on the second visit all parents were asked to meet in the school library for a short time, leaving their child with their new teacher and class, Michael panicked. While the other parents were able to leave their child for this short time, Michael’s father could not; he had to promise Michael to stay with him. As Michael’s teacher shared this information in our last conversation, she said her concern for Michael had returned. She was not sure how well the school would attend to the social and emotional needs of a child who was as sensitive as Michael. She was worried about how he would cope with all the new situations in a school environment, especially if the teacher decided to accelerate him because he would then have more new and different groups to accommodate (TI-12/05).

**Discussion**

The gifted education field recognises the importance of awareness of all domains of development, although emotional development is not discussed at the same length as curriculum responses to cognitive development. Nor is there general agreement on the link between advanced development and particular socioemotional traits in gifted children (Freeman, 1997; Neihart 1999). The evidence from this case study supports the stance on the interconnections and influence of emotional development on cognitive development described by the Columbus Group (Silverman, 1993) and in Harrison’s (2003) definition of giftedness adopted in this study. The focus in this section on Michael’s emotional behaviours
provides evidence of how one gifted child managed the combination of heightened sensitivity in his feelings and advanced cognitive ability in a preschool learning environment and their influence on his experience of the reciprocal-socialisation process.

**Link between cognitive and emotional development**

Michael’s responses to the preschool program and their impact on his teacher’s understanding of him, illustrate how holistic development may influence the experience of a gifted child in a formal learning environment. Holistic development is understood as learning that proceeds in a way that is interrelated and where all aspects actively affect development in other domains (Sylva, et.al. 2004). The centrality of this concept in early childhood education is affirmed in the recent ‘Early Years Learning and Development Framework’ (DEECD, 2009a).

Michael’s behaviours at preschool demonstrate the link between developmental areas of learning. His advanced cognitive ability created tensions for him, resulting in intense emotional responses to situations at preschool. For instance, ‘logicalisation of thought’ created in Michael overwhelming feelings of anxiety about aspects of his experiences at preschool, resulting in stress and outbursts of tears. Sankar-DeLeeuw’s (2004, 2007) identification of characteristics in young gifted children in the first grade of school also reveal some aspects of this link, but I have not found reports of the influence of holistic development influences on a gifted child in the preschool setting, therefore Michael’s behavioural responses are an important illustration of how this may appear.

However, it was also the difficulties Michael experienced in responding to the external adjustment required of him at preschool that influenced his emotional demeanour. Michael’s teacher had declared at the beginning of the year that she was determined to maintain a holistic approach to Michael’s (and all children’s) learning at preschool, but it appeared that the combination of Michael’s heightened sensitivity and advanced cognitive ability resulted in behaviours too different to interpret within the DAP framework. As a result Michael’s teacher made decisions about his learning needs that led effectively to a compartmentalisation of the curriculum. In deciding that a focus at preschool on developing Michael’s emotional maturity would best support his future development his teacher also made a judgement that Michael’s current level of intellectual learning did not require her to devise a cognitive curriculum response for him.
Michael’s teacher did report her realisation late in the year that Michael’s emotional equilibrium and intellectual satisfaction were associated, as exemplified in the behaviours observable when Michael was given the task of being a research learner. But the view of behaviours as maturing or otherwise, implicit in the DAP interpretation of early childhood education, appeared to remained dominant, as demonstrated in his preschool teacher’s reflection on the stability of Michael’s emotional development in response to new situations during the school orientation visits.

Available reports on young gifted children in school do identify negative outcomes from unsatisfactory curriculum provision and describe the link between satisfactory intellectual learning and emotional well-being for young gifted children (Harrison, 2005a). However, as illustrated in this study, there were two significant aspects to this link that emerge from the example of interaction between cognitive and emotional development in Michael’s experience at preschool. One is a need for an emphasis on awareness by teachers of the characteristics of advanced cognitive development in both the cognitive and emotional areas. The second is that there is a need within the educational framework employed in the preschool program to understand and provide satisfactory learning in both areas for a gifted child, appreciating that the educational response to one area of learning will impact on another. These aspects do not appear to have been discussed in the literature in the necessary depth.

*Expression of cognitive development in coping strategies*

The importance of resiliency in gifted children is identified in the literature (Delcourt, Cornell & Goldberg, 2007; Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005; Gross 1999a; Harrison, 2005a; Neihart, 1999) and differences in gifted children’s coping behaviours from those of age-typical children have been identified in other studies (Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Sowa, McIntire, May & Bland, 1994). There is some reference to young gifted children masking their real self in order to conform (Harrison, 2005a), which suggests coping behaviours, as do characteristics reported by Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004). But overall in the gifted education literature it is accepted that there is little evidence based information about resiliency in young gifted children (Porter, 2005).

The evidence from this case study illustrates Michael’s employment of his cognitive ability to devise strategies to support his emotional adjustment. His most observable coping strategy was his attempt to imitate typical involvement in preschool activities and typical
preschool behaviours (more detailed discussion of this is presented in 4.5). Coping strategies were also evident in his attempt to resolve the cognitive dissonance between preschool and intellectual activities outside the preschool program by declaring himself unable to sit on ‘baby chairs’ at preschool. The emotional support his teacher provided undoubtedly played an important part in Michael’s eventual emotional stability at preschool but I contend the misreading of his learning needs because of a reliance on the DAP philosophy limited his teacher’s ability to evaluate and support his learning.

In this case study, so far, the difference between Michael’s developmental learning needs and an appropriate educational response indicates vulnerability for Michael within the reciprocal-socialisation process. I argue that Michael was vulnerable as a result of his heightened sensitivity combined with the challenge his behaviour presented to his teachers, and the happenstance cognitive provision he experienced within the early childhood curriculum.

It is of interest to note that the emotional vulnerability of young gifted children at the beginning of school life described by Whitmore (1986) focussed on the characteristic behaviours of gifted children, which created barriers for both the child and the teacher in developing positive emotional, social and cognitive interactions within the school culture. The findings of this case study suggest an alternative view — it was the preschool culture rather than predominantly individual characteristics that created difficulties in the integration of this gifted child. This may simply be the outcome of different children and different cultures, or it may reflect a change in the view of the child and the school culture over approximately two decades since Whitmore’s original study (1986).

Nonetheless, there does appear to be a constant in these differing perspectives on behaviours that is important in the reciprocal-socialisation process. Continuity of learning cultures (Bernstein’s learning schema, 1996) between home and preschool was demonstrably absent for Michael and thus arguably contributed significantly to his emotional response to preschool. The evidence in this case study suggests that Michael demonstrated his resiliency by attempting to resolve for himself how he was to manage his emotional responses to the preschool program. The evidence presented in this section of the chapter indicates an interaction between his cognitive ability and emotional resilience which enabled him to develop a repertoire of behaviours that matched the learning opportunities available at
preschool. His dependency on his watch was one example; another was his effort to joke with the TA about his anxiety.

The implication of Michael’s emotional-cognitive response to his experience of preschool is the need for an alternative educational perspective. This study suggests that when a child, who because of advanced development, is not like age-typical peers, a sociocultural perspective offers more opportunities for understanding different behaviours. In an early childhood program, Michael’s emotional behaviours, which were problematic and difficult for his teacher to change, appear less challenging when considered in the social context of his past and present experiences. For instance, there was sufficient information about Michael’s prior experience of preschool to indicate that his early emotional reactions to attending the M-EEC were, in part, a learned response to preschool. Such an understanding of Michael’s previous experience of learning together with an awareness of the learning characteristics of gifted children, for example, Michael’s enjoyment of advanced cognitive activities and his demonstrated responsiveness to directed learning, called for different strategies to resolve his distress over separation and the marked difference between preschool and his home learning environment.

In view of Michael’s heightened emotional reaction to the absence of a familiar and stimulating intellectual program at the M-EEC, it is ironic that it was his ongoing heightened emotional response that justified his teacher’s concentration on the emotional elements of his development. Evidence of Michael’s resiliency in response to the dearth of intellectual stimulation was also found in his response to the most explicit learning goal voiced by his teacher — to be a friend with the other children. This is the third and final section of the chapter in which Michael’s efforts to establish connection with his teachers and the other children are described.
4.5 Characteristics of Michael’s social learning at preschool

The results presented in this section provide documentation of Michael’s social responses to the preschool program. The focus is on those social behaviours influenced by accepted characteristics of gifted children (Appendix A) apparent in Michael’s behaviour, and includes the influence of the teacher’s curriculum and pedagogical responses to his behaviour. Two important themes emerged from the data analysis as significant in Michael’s social development at preschool: the influence of Michael’s gifted behaviours on his search for relationships within the preschool environment; and Michael’s search for a sense-of-self as a preschool student. A discussion of each theme will be presented at the end of this section.

From early in the second term Michael appeared to be responding to his teacher’s primary social goal — for all the children in her class to develop friendships. He pursued this goal with intensity but as in the other areas of Michael’s learning at preschool the pathway was anything but straightforward. Michael’s cognitive needs had been anticipated by his teacher as an important early focus in his participation at preschool, but as this interview excerpt reveals, social goals were the primary focus.

ANNE: What do you consider are the most important things to achieve with a child like Michael during the time they have at preschool?

MICHAEL’S TEACHER Really it’s about social skills; being part of a class, to do things with the other children. By the end of the year you expect them to be integrated into the class with the other children. It’s quite important to leave kindergarten (preschool) with the confidence to engage with other children: it’s when they can’t do that — if Michael was still wandering around now [late in the year] and not engaging with other children that’s when we would consider him having a second year at kinder (preschool). (TI-12/05. p. 154)
Michael’s search for relationships

Michael’s teacher was steadfast in her resolve to focus on the social development of all the children in her class. From the first days of the new preschool year her message was: *We do things with our friends at preschool* (FN-02/05, p.8). However, while she focussed on Michael ‘being with other children’ it was clear that his first goal was to be with her. Michael showed no early reaction to his teacher’s constant message about friends, instead he focussed on his teacher in a way that was intense and physical.

Social connection between Michael and his teacher

In the early weeks at preschool Michael followed his teacher everywhere, he wanted to touch her and stroke her arm and where physical contact was not possible he watched her, seeming to want to know her whereabouts at all times. His father commented that such attempts to be close to his teacher resembled Michael’s behaviour at home with his mother who, his father said, Michael adored. Thus the first proactive response that was visible in Michael’s adjustment to the preschool program was to establish a connection with his teacher. The description contained in the following observation illustrates Michael’s typical early response to his teacher at preschool.
It is Michael’s fourth day and the class is playing outside. Michael is not exploring the garden as the others are; he is pacing around and around the garden seat. He keeps glancing at his teacher, checking it appears, that she is still nearby. His teacher calls him over and tries to interest him in Misty the rabbit, while also calling his attention to the other children who are with her. He listens to her but as soon as her attention goes to another child he returns to the garden seat, sits on it for 20 seconds and then is up and pacing around it again. His hands are behind his back, round and round the garden seat he paces; his eyes are brimming with tears although he is not audibly crying. (FN-02/05. p. 7)

At my next observation session, the children are again outside. This day Michael is shadowing his teacher as she moved around interacting with the children who were all playing happily on the outside climbing equipment. At 10.40 am she told him gently but firmly (although she did not specifically tell any other child) I am going inside for a coffee break, the TA is out here with you. Michael immediately looked and sounded alarmed; he asked her, How long will you be? She replied firmly, About ten minutes. He followed her to the door and just stood near it, looking anxious and lost, although he kept looking at his watch. At 10.51 he went up to the TA and said in a worried voice, My teacher has been gone eleven minutes; I think she is running a bit late. The TA responded authoritatively, Only the teachers here worry about the time. You go and play. Michael ignored this response as he continued to stand and watch the door until his teacher returned. He ran to her and queried why she was more than ten minutes. She gave a wry smile and said: That’s alright; I just needed to drink my coffee. She reached out, took hold of his hand, and they walked across the playground (FN- 02/05. p. 15).

Within several weeks of the beginning of first term Michael’s teacher found the intensity of his attention to her claustrophobic and decided she had to establish a boundary with Michael. She told him that if he needed her and she was helping another child he could not interrupt the interaction and must go to another teacher. Michael immediately accepted this boundary but it was late first term before he would readily go to the TA or other staff. In the weeks following his teacher’s instruction he would visibly restrain himself from interrupting her but would stand looking lost with tears rolling down his face, or would
resume the pacing behaviour that had become very familiar to his teachers. Nonetheless, his teacher continued to respond to Michael with a warm and friendly manner.

Michael’s teacher had expected that, like other children of this age, Michael would be developmentally ready to engage with the new adults he encountered and be interested in social interactions and friendships with his peers. The complete absence of such an inclination in Michael’s behaviour led to a sense of frustration for her. As the weeks went by, Michael continued to shadow her movements and show no interest in other children in his class. His teacher subsequently decided her strategy, of responding to his wish to be close to her and to be continually reassured, was not working — it was making him dependent on her as well as blocking opportunities for him to become engaged with others. Eventually his teacher concluded a different approach was needed and together with the TA they started to reduce the level and intensity of contact they had with Michael (FN -03/05. p. 16).

It was not apparent that a reorientation of their interactions with Michael had an impact on his feeling of security. The change of strategy occurred at the end of first term when Michael’s attempts to be physically close to his teacher had started to decrease. My observations indicated however, that it took Michael most of first term to feel secure in his relationship with his teacher. Michael’s developing relationship with his teacher suggests his heightened sensitivity disposed him to need more than the usual congenial relationship with a new teacher — he needed an intensely close connection with her.

While time to become familiar with his new teacher was plainly a factor in Michael’s feeling of security, observations of his behaviours throughout the year indicated that Michael was able to respond appropriately to new situations if direct and detailed expectations were given to him. Thus, it was the explicit message from his parents — they expected him to stop crying each morning — that appeared to be significant in precipitating the sudden cessation of this behaviour. But this was not his teacher’s usual pedagogical approach — instead she tried to encourage emerging behaviours and not to impose expectations of behaviours which she considered children may not be developmentally ready to exhibit (e.g. CSM 7 & 9). While explicit guidance by Michael’s teacher as to how Michael might interact with her was minimal, nonetheless both his teacher and the TA appeared to affirm Michael as a member of the class despite the frustrations they felt about behaviours they found hard to interpret. Michael articulated this feeling of acceptance at the end of the year:
The thing I have liked [about the M-EEC] is when people are nice to me. My teacher is always very nice to me, and always the TA is nice to me too — we talk about interesting things. (FN-12/05. p. 154)

Social connection between Michael and his peers

Once Michael’s intense feeling of connection to his teacher appeared to be established, he started to show awareness of his classmates. From late first term there was an observable change. Michael first accepted albeit passively, the social approaches of several other children, then from early in second term actively sought out just one of the girls, Amy, to be his friend (see boxed example 4.3, ‘No sociodramatic play’).

Information about Michael’s early social interactions at his previous preschools had indicated to his teacher that there had been few if any social interactions between him and the other children — he was reported by Teacher B\textsuperscript{11} to have spent considerable time reading in the library corner. Further, Teacher B had communicated to Michael’s ‘(M-EEC) teacher that Michael had marked immaturities in regard to social interactions with other children that needed to be addressed (TN-12/04. p. 3).

This judgement reinforced the perception of Michael’s teacher that social interactions were very important in order to prompt Michael’s development of appropriate age-typical behaviours (CSM3-03/05. pp. 15-18). Michael’s parents likewise considered that he needed opportunities to expand his social skills. During the two orientation visits to the M-EEC Michael had interacted a little with the current and older students in a way that seemed friendly and confident and he had certainly not appeared socially immature. Indeed during his year at preschool he made a number of comments that suggested a mature concept of friendship — identified as characteristic of gifted children (Gross, 2000). For instance, one day Michael, in a conversation with the TA about their activities over the previous weekend, had volunteered that his mother had been ill and in hospital recently. He told the TA that friends had helped his father during this time and then commented — \textit{Friends help you if you are not well} (FN-05/05. p. 32).

There are distinctive elements in preschool social interactions — friendship at this age is typically egocentric, with a friend characteristically being ‘someone who will play the games I want to play’ (Harter, 1996). But as Michael started to interact frequently with Amy

\textsuperscript{11} Teacher B taught Michael when he attended his second preschool - Preschool B - and had shared professional information with his M-EEC teacher prior to his attendance at the M-EEC.
there was nothing self-centred about his play. Michael always appeared to adapt to the game Amy initiated, with play always following her narrative or her interests as discussed earlier (see 4.3. ‘How did Michael engage with learning opportunities at preschool?’). Only once, late in the year, was there an observed instance where Michael made any demands on the other children that appeared to reflect his level of ability or interests.

One day Michael persisted for over an hour in trying to join Amy and Kim, in the outside cubby house, in a game of ‘mother and baby’. At the beginning Amy as usual had the central role and was a mother ‘having a baby’ while Kim was the doctor. Michael made suggestions about what he could do to help or what he could do as the father, and asked continually — What happens next? There was no meaningful response to his requests and he finally started to demand a turn at being the mother. Michael argued — it was only fair as they had both had a turn, and he should be allowed a turn. Eventually Amy said OK in a sulky voice and Michael lay down on the bed. Amy then said she had to fetch something, and together with Kim skipped out of the cubby house and off to the sandpit. They did not return. After a few minutes Michael called out to them and eventually got up and went to find them. He very patiently asked if they were still playing the game, they affirmed this and Michael restated firmly that it was his turn to be the mother. Michael returned to the cubby house and lay down again but they did not follow. The game did not evolve past this point; after about five minutes Michael again went to find the other two. They were still playing in the sandpit and he just stood looking at them with a perplexed look on his face — but they appeared to take no notice of him. He wandered away aimlessly, then seeing the TA, went directly over to her and started a conversation. (FN-11/05. p.141)

Michael’s attempt to gain an equal part or introduce his own ideas into the play was simply ignored by Amy and Kim and there was no indication that he tried again in future interactions to change their narrative.

Amy’s ability and interests were age-typical, so play with her offered no cognitive interactions at the level Michael so clearly enjoyed, nevertheless he persisted for the rest of the year in maintaining a friendship with her. From the beginning of Michael’s effort to be a friend with Amy his contact was intense — he constantly approached her, touched her arm and tried a variety of verbal approaches. He would say gently how much he liked or loved
her, what lovely hair she had, or how nice she looked today. His teacher noted that this approach was similar to Michael’s development of a relationship with her. In contrast, Amy never reciprocated Michael’s interest — at best she appeared tolerant of his overtures and at other times quite unfriendly and would push him away. This relationship also required Michael to tolerate Kim who was usually antagonistic towards him, but he appeared extraordinarily forbearing of Kim’s response to him.

In a conversation with me about friends, including why he liked Amy, Michael could not articulate his reasons. His replies were simply that she was his friend and further as Kim was Amy’s good friend it appeared he thought it natural she was with Amy despite her unfriendliness towards him (FN-06/05. p. 50). No matter that Michael’s efforts to develop a friendship appeared so different to age-typical children Michael declared himself happy with his friendship with Amy, and did appear at the end of the year to have achieved a confidence about himself as a friend.

**Perspective on preschool teacher’s teaching response to Michael’s social development**

Towards the end of term one, with feelings of increasing frustration about Michael’s negligible social interactions with other children, his teacher had approached Michael’s parents with her solution to his apparent lack of interest in the other children. She suggested to Michael’s parents, with a degree of emphasis, that they should alter their conversations with Michael at the end of each day from what he learnt at preschool today and instead start asking him who he played with. Michael’s parents thanked her for the advice and the very next day Michael started talking about friends, saying that one needs lots of friends at preschool. Michael’s teacher understood this sudden change in behaviour to be the result of his parents’ direction to Michael to start being more friendly towards the other children (FN-03/05. p.18).

Although his teacher was puzzled by the absence of any similarity between Michael and Amy that might provide a basis for friendship between them, she was delighted and relieved by this development. Her difficulties in understanding Michael’s learning needs across all learning domains had reduced her curriculum goals for him in second term to just one ILG focussed on Michael’s social development:

For Michael to develop social interactions with his peers in the class. (FN-03/05. p. 18)

Michael’s teacher was aware of other children in the class who were more likely to have some interests in common with Michael and she expressed her surprise that he had not
approached or showed an interest in them. She also voiced her concern about his overly intense efforts at friendship. But her response to Michael’s increasing interactions with other children remained consistent with the DAP framework with her teaching approach being encouraging rather than directive. There were, in contrast to his teacher’s emphasis on social development, no plans or interventions to develop his friendships with other children — those his teacher considered were more like Michael in interests and ability — nor was there overt guidance to assist him in refining his social skills.

**Michael’s search for a preschool identity**

Development of a sense-of-self becomes more comprehensive as children grow older, with this process accepted as starting at an earlier age for gifted children (Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991). Gross (1996) has identified within the gifted education literature the need for concern about identity development in gifted children. Her contention is that a reconfiguring of sense-of-self or identity in a formal learning environment contains challenges for them not present for children who develop in a more age-typical way (Gross, 1996, 1998, 2000). Consideration in this study of the development of a sense-of-self or identity in young gifted children is explored in reference to this discussion in the gifted education literature.

In contrast to Michael’s early demarcation of himself as ‘not a child’, his teacher’s perspective of his learning and development was that Michael’s emotional and social behaviours did not indicate an advanced or mature sense-of-self. Rather, she evaluated his behaviours as less than age-typical, identifying his need to:

- attain a greater degree of emotional self-regulation in order to operate confidently in a new environment;
- tolerate frustration;
- enjoy periods of play with peers; and
- appear positive about himself.

These behaviours are components of emotional competency usually identifiable, at least to some degree, in the four to five year old preschool child (Rolfe, 2004).

To gain some perspective on Michael’s development of a preschool identity it is necessary to refer back to reports of Michael’s experiences at home. Some background on
Michael and his family has already been presented and this together with other information from his parents about family life indicated that Michael had a well-developed and secure sense-of-self within his family. Hoge and McSheffrey (1991) propose that a sense-of-self is apparent in the social, emotional and intellectual behaviours apparent in a child’s interactions within any particular learning environment. This concept provides a framework within which to view Michael’s reorientation of his sense of identity at preschool.

**Family sense-of-self**

Michael’s family’s social activities were usually within their own cultural group and included regular social contact with other children. His parents reported Michael interacted especially well with older children, sharing games and jokes with them as he did with adults. This concurs with findings in the literature that many gifted children interact more readily with older people, rather than those who are their chronological peers (Harrison, 2005a; Morelock & Morrison, 1996). Michael also had regular contact with children his own age on these occasions and his parents’ estimation was that he managed this confidently although he seemed a little reserved and often unsure what to talk about. Michael’s father explained that the only social difficulty had been with adults who seemed patronising and talked down to Michael, a situation Michael disliked intensely. It was during family discussions following these incidents that they had agreed with him that he was not a child like others of his age so they would call him a small person (FN-02/05. p. 4).

Emotionally his parents appraised Michael as a gentle little boy, generally happy, confident and very affectionate although inclined to be very cautious about risk-taking. His father said his strategy in these situations was to help Michael decide on a goal, provide initial support and gradually withdraw it until Michael was doing it on his own. This approach represents Wood’s (1989) description of scaffolding instruction and as a learning approach characteristic of Michael’s home learning schema it is in marked contrast to the pedagogical methods at preschool. Michael’s parents acknowledged that he probably lacked independence in learning. They described finding themselves drawn into considerable involvement with Michael’s learning through the difficulty of meeting his intellectual needs in combination with his age-typical skills. For instance, his intellectual ability in mathematics was much greater than his skill in writing numbers and setting out an algorithm on paper. Hence, they accepted the need to write the algorithm for him. This form of involvement is reported in the literature as common for parents of gifted children (Snowdon & Christian,
where marked unevenness in levels of development creates hurdles in learning not experienced by age-typical children.

Michael’s interest in intellectual learning was evident to his parents at a very early age. While they did consider that they had stimulated this through providing books for him, his parents reported they had not started offering more formal learning until Michael’s rapid attainment of literacy and numeracy learning became evident between the ages of three and four. Once his parents had begun offering more formal concepts and skills they commented that Michael was most persistent in pursuing further learning — he learnt quickly and constantly asked for more. Nonetheless, his parents said, they were conscious of keeping a balance in his life. They wanted to respond to Michael’s interests yet not force early learning in any one area of knowledge, and they ensured there was a range of other activities and interests in his life (FN-09/05.p.118). Michael had widely varying interests — at one time his parents helped him follow his interest in geography and said they struggled with questions from him such as: *If there is a North and South Pole why isn’t an East and West pole?* (FN-05/05 p. 34) They found this a very demanding aspect of parenting and said they frequently felt exhausted trying to maintain the level of intellectual stimulus that Michael appeared to require.

Michael’s understanding of himself would have been affected by his parents’ experiences of growing up in a different culture. They were conscious of these differences and talked openly about the challenges presented to them as parents and acknowledged not always knowing what behaviours Australian parents taught their children when young. Michael’s sense-of-self would also be influenced by his position in the family as an only child. As a consequence he had more opportunity and incentive to interact with adults than would possibly have occurred if there had been other children in the family. His parents wished to encourage his learning and were willing to spend considerable time supporting his interest.

Despite the challenges Michael’s parents said he presented to their parenting skills, the impression gained by Michael’s teacher and myself during the home visit (FN-02/05, p. 11-15), as well as many other interactions with his parents, was that Michael’s sense-of-self within his family seemed strong and secure. He enthusiastically expressed his interest in learning and his parents were supportive. There were parental rules and expectations of Michael’s behaviour, with his parents appearing to be authoritative but not authoritarian or
indulgent. The extent of his feeling of security with his parents was underlined when in May his mother had to go into hospital for a short time and then later in August his father was away overseas at a conference. On both occasions Michael reported these events with a casualness that appeared to his teacher to be in sharp contrast to his volatile feelings about separation at preschool. Notwithstanding Michael’s position as an only child and the potentially different ethnic-cultural background, the behaviours that Michael’s teacher identified as problematic at preschool — for instance Michael’s differences from his age-typical peers — were clearly characteristic of gifted development. It was the accelerated and intense interactions with his parents that his teacher had identified as different and which she considered contributed to the difficulties Michael experienced in establishing himself in his peer group.

**Preschool sense-of-self**

It is accepted that all children need to build a new sense-of-self when they join a new learning environment (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007), but the preschool environment also aims to provide familiar, age-typical activities, such as play, to support integration (DEECD, 2009a; Kennedy & Barblett, 2010). Michael presented himself on his first day with a definite and alternative view of himself, and his response to preschool suggested that establishing a preschool sense-of-self was a particular challenge for him.

**M-EEC experience**

Michael’s important responses to the preschool program have already been described but when revisited in relation to his sense of identity several stages in his process of reorientation are apparent. These will be considered from the perspective suggested by Hoge and McSheffrey (1991) — the intellectual, the emotional and the social sense-of-self. The early months of Michael’s adjustment to preschool illustrate that despite his confidence in his level of learning (for instance, his display of self-efficacy in pursuing learning about Bach, 4.3, ‘How did Michael engage with learning opportunities at preschool?’) he had little sense of himself as learning intellectually at preschool. At the end of the year Michael could recall his feelings about himself as a learner at preschool at that stage, which he expressed in this way:

[Early in the year] I was upset, I didn’t think there was anything to do here [at the M-EEC] I wanted to be at home; I had things to do at home with Mum. (FN-12/05, p. 151)
As Michael became emotionally secure with his teacher and he increasingly felt a sense of belonging to the class the evidence suggests he began to pursue a personal goal. From early in second term (early April) to the end of the year (late in December) his interactions with other children were primarily focussed on developing himself as a friend. When he talked about himself, or indicated his interest in activity at preschool it is the social facet that is overt. Michael’s ‘voice’ conveys this clearly.

ANNE: What have you learnt at the M-EEC?

MICHAEL: Mmmm – Long ago I had no friends, in January, on the first day. I have learnt to jump from the top of the climbing frame like the others, and I have learnt about being a friend. I was nice to these other children and so they wanted to be my friend.

I feel happy at kinder[garten] now with friends. (MI-12/05. p. 152)

The acquisition of social skills had challenges for Michael, as it does for all children, but as in other areas of Michael’s learning his pathway was made distinctive by his characteristically gifted behaviours — in this case, his intensity. This was exemplified in his sudden focus on being a friend with Amy, where he displayed such an intense effort to connect with Amy that Michael’s teacher finally felt she had to counsel him. Her message to Michael about his approach to Amy was unusually directive. She instructed him about allowing personal space and that constant interaction by talking, or touching, or even hugging someone else was intrusive and he needed to stop contacting Amy so frequently. Michael’s reaction was immediate; he retreated from this behaviour and his attempts to restrain the extent to which he touched and spoke to Amy appeared as intense as his previous efforts to establish a relationship.

While observations of Michael, from second term, indicated his ever-increasing efforts to establish a social relationship with Amy, at this time instances of his intellectual interests or ability became more clearly confined to particular situations. Michael spent time reading in the library corner or engaging in spontaneous conversations with the TA on complex topics, otherwise there were few indications of his advanced development.
Michael’s social interactions occupied more time in his preschool day and his behaviour in these became, in an increasing number of situations, like that of other children. These behaviours were most apparent in the visual art experiences and the sociodramatic play experiences previously discussed. Michael’s demonstration at preschool of emotional and social behaviours similar to those of the other children, illustrate his development, I believe, of a sense-of-self as a preschool student. The following example from the data illustrated Michael’s attempt to participate as a preschool student, but also a lapse into his ‘true self’ which interrupted his connection with the other children. The children are the only ones who provide guided participation in social interactions during play — in this instance, in a conversation on a popular topic at preschool, birthday parties.

Amy, Kim, Michael and Abby are sitting at the drawing table and while they draw Kim introduced a common conversation opener; *Who wants to come to my birthday party?* Michael, along with the others put his hand up, and in turn said the same as the other children *Can I come?* Kim nodded and Amy picked up the conversation and asked the same question. Michael again put up his hand with the others but unlike them he immediately stood and leaning over to her, asked firmly but politely, *But where is your house? What is your address? Will it be alright with your parents?* Amy accepted this change from the usual narrative and nodding her head told him the name of the street. Michael sat down looking satisfied. Next Abby proposed that she will have a fairy party and while all the girls follow the conversational pattern and simply ask to come, Michael asks his questions again. Abby frowns at him, and appears to think about this, and finally says, *I don’t have boys at a fairy party.* Michael looked bewildered at this response and after sitting and staring around at all the others for a minute or so, he stood up and left, taking his drawing over the TA where he started a conversation with her about rockets in space — a topic he was currently interested in. (FN-08/05. p. 96)

For the remainder of the year I observed a steady increase in behaviours similar to those of the other preschool children. Confirmation of this is provided by comments late in the year from his teacher and the TA, that recently Michael has started complaining to them about injustices in the playground — *exactly like the other children.* They viewed this as a
regression to an immature dependency on the teacher to resolve problems, but I suggested alternatively it was an indication of Michael’s skill at imitating the other children. Michael’s teacher was however sceptical of this interpretation, commenting it did not make sense that with his advanced ability he would copy immature behaviours (FN-12/05. p. 150). In this last term of the year (October to December) my observation suggests that Michael’s sense-of-self at preschool was clearly visible in two guises. One was apparent when Michael had the occasional one-to-one interactions with an adult involving complex language and ideas, and the second, more frequently observed, when he was with the other children, behaving in ways similar to them.

**Michael’s teacher’s perspective on Michael’s search for identity**

Throughout Michael’s time at the M-EEC his teacher remained uncertain in her perception of Michael’s social development. Maintaining a focus within the DAP framework, she sought to understand Michael’s behaviour through evaluating it against the milestones of age-typical behaviour, but this age-stage comparison did little to clarify the behaviours his teacher observed. Illustrating her difficulty was the frequency with which Michael’s teacher returned during case study meetings to queries about his development — What were his needs? Why did he seem so immature sometimes and so knowledgeable and quick at other times? While Michael’s teacher had a high level of awareness of Michael’s social, emotional and intellectual behaviours, on occasions I believe she misinterpreted his behaviours perceiving them as an outcome of immature development. At the end of the year Michael’s teacher summarised his social and emotional development as somewhat unstable (TI-12.05. pp. 154-163). She remained puzzled and concerned about the intensity of his behaviours despite their recognition as being characteristic of gifted children (Piechowski, 1997).

**Discussion**

Michael’s social behaviours reveal how one gifted child managed the need for social connection as well as the important developmental task of reorientation of his sense-of-self within the preschool learning environment. A number of significant characteristics were identified that illustrated the influence of Michael’s advanced development on his experience of this facet of the reciprocal-socialisation process.

*Teacher-child relationship*
The data indicates that there was continuity for Michael between the social and emotional relationships at home and those at preschool with the generally affirmative response by Michael’s teacher to his need for a relationship with her at the level of an attachment bond being an important contribution to Michael’s feeling of continuity. In this situation, such support ameliorated the impact of the discontinuity of his cognitive experiences at preschool. The development of positive relationships between teachers and children is recognised as essential in helping children to feel they belong in a formal educational environment and provides a secure basis from which children start to develop their learning (Bowman, et al., 2001; Brooker, 2008; Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2006; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). Some scholars call for these relationships to be of a quality that would be considered an attachment bond to support children to cope with the challenges of the transition process (Brooker, 2008; Rolfe, 2004). While there are a number of studies in the gifted education literature that discuss relationship difficulties between teachers and gifted children (see 2.5) there is no mention of the importance of an attachment bond in potentially resolving these difficulties. I argue that at the beginning of the reciprocal-socialisation process in a new formal learning environment the characteristic intensity of a gifted child suggests a greater likelihood that they will need a teacher-child relationship at the level of an attachment bond. Achievement of this may be an important influence in avoiding the relationship difficulties noted by other writers and thus would contribute to the positive experience of transition for a gifted child.

Peer relationships

The skills of working cooperatively within a mainstream class and the ability to make new friends is reported as essential if gifted children are to adjust socially to school (Harrison, 2005a; Whitton, 2005) and I contend the same need is present at the preschool level. Whitmore (1986) in her seminal study of very young gifted children at school noted their poor development of such skills. The evidence from Michael’s social interactions at preschool indicates his ability to learn through imitation of typical preschool behaviour illustrating Bandura’s (2002) concept of vicarious learning and the influence of the sociostructure of the classroom. In this case, Michael’s responses reveal the influence of teacher’ modelling (preschool teacher and parents as teachers) on the way in which a young gifted child employed cognitive ability in learning appropriate social skills. However, Michael’s behaviours and his teacher’s responses suggest a distinctive modification to the outcome of his vicarious learning.
Michael’s social interactions at preschool with Amy and Kim indicate his efforts to conform to preschool-style social behaviours through imitating his peers, but I argue that this required Michael to develop in a way that was quite different to usual expectations of social learning in the preschool context. Because Michael’s more mature social interactions received little if any affirmation from the teacher or the other children — for instance, in his tolerance of Amy and Kim’s disregard for his feelings in their play situations — he developed a preschool-student persona to enable him to adjust socially to preschool. This involved Michael adopting simpler, more age-typical ways of socially interacting with other children.

The evidence from Michael’s social interactions with his peers reveals the positive influence on him of direct and explicit guidance about co-operating with others and making friends. Notwithstanding this responsiveness in Michael there was little indication of overt guidance and where it was apparent and appeared to be influential it derived mostly from Michael’s parents — for example, when his parents explicitly told him he was expected to make friends with the other children at preschool, and in the reported conversations at home concerning his developing friendship with Amy. This is further evidence that familiar learning strategies from the mode of learning at home influenced Michael’s development at preschool — this time in his social skills. However, it also illustrates the influence or causative effect of teacher modelling that is not an informed response to the characteristics of a gifted child.

Typically, it is assumed that children’s developing social skills illustrate a maturation towards less egocentric notions of ‘being a friend’ (Ladd et al., 1996). Michael’s learning of social skills could not be evaluated in this way. While his social responses to other children required, probably at an unconscious level, an understanding of alternative ways of interacting with differing social groups his strategy illustrates a different approach. Through imitation of typical preschool ways of interacting socially Michael was demonstrating a more complex level of social skills than is usually expected from preschool-age children. Such behaviour may be an indicator of the greater maturity in the perceptions of friendships held by gifted children proposed by Gross (2000), but this premise would require further investigation.
Developing a sense-of-self

Gross’ (1998) discussion of identity development for gifted children notes a tension between their advanced development and social expectations of their behaviour. She contends that the advanced development of gifted children inclines them to interact socially in a way that is different to what would be expected of their age. As a result gifted children become aware of their difference from their age peers, and this creates for them the need to choose social acceptance or being true to ‘one’s self’. The first choice necessitates minimising or denying one’s own sense-of-self while the other puts at risk the acceptance of the social group. Gross’ (1998) focus was on gifted adolescents, however, Harrison (2005b) also reports this ‘forced choice’ occurring amongst children early in their school lives.

Michael’s experience of developing a sense of identity at preschool demonstrated some aspects of this dilemma. His teacher considered it inappropriate to provide for Michael’s advanced cognitive abilities in the manner of his home learning, and hence Michael had no fulfilling intellectual continuity between home and preschool, resulting in minimal confirmation for him of this aspect of his sense-of-self. The initial impact of this intellectual discontinuity between home and preschool learning was illustrated by his highly emotional state early in the year. Gross (1998) and Harrison (2005b) express concern that the cognitive and developmental differences of gifted children incline them to mask their personal identity, but I contend that Michael did not seek to hide his identity, rather he developed an alternative repertoire of behaviours that were generally suitable for preschool. The evidence indicates that Michael did not make a forced-choice between intellectual learning and social relationships. Instead he chose, or was able to maintain, both his intellectual interests — albeit as a minor part of his preschool identity — and his developing repertoire of appropriate preschool social behaviours. The former provided some intellectual satisfaction through conversations with adults at preschool and the latter enabled his acceptance within his peer group. Together they facilitated a sense of identity for Michael as a preschool student.

Observations in this study suggest that with few opportunities at preschool for Michael to develop his intellectual interests he applied his cognitive ability to becoming a friend. His teacher’s goal for all her students was quite explicitly social — the most important activity at preschool was to be a friend and Michael eventually applied himself with great persistence to this end goal. As a consequence his interactions within his peer group increased and he gained his teacher’s approval of his behaviour.
It is acknowledged in the literature that for young children in formal learning environments supportive relationships with adults are important in achieving a reorientation of sense-of-self (Arthur, et al., 2008; Berk, 2003; Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Yet, the DAP perspective held by Michael’s teacher restricted her pedagogical support for learning needs that were very different to age-typical expectations. The expected psychosocial development is that preschool children build on the skills and learning already established to construct more mature identities (Erikson, 1968), not that they maintain distinctive complex as well as simple repertoires of behaviours expressing their identity. Michael’s development of a preschool-student persona involved a complex response from a preschool child, one that is also indicative of a high sense of personal efficacy to manage and develop differing forms of interpersonal relationships (Bandura, 2002).

The nature of the discontinuity between home and preschool that was present for Michael has been identified by Brooker (2002) as a serious hurdle for children from cultural backgrounds that provide children with different schemas for learning. Without skilled adult support and understanding of the ‘re-learning’ that needs to occur, many of these children do not make the necessary adjustments to their schema of learning and a subsequent satisfactory re-orientation to being a student in a formal learning environment. Michael as a gifted child appeared to experience a similar situation and to be similarly vulnerable. Therefore, Michael’s realisation of a separate sense-of-self at preschool while still maintaining his home sense-of-self was a significant cognitive achievement.

There is, however, occasion for concern about Michael’s need to develop a preschool identity that was markedly different from that at home. It is possible that at the end of Michael’s preschool year the missed opportunities to confirm and promote the strength of his sense-of-self may have contributed to his stress about the transition activities at school.

4.6 Conclusion

The findings from this case study of transitioning to a formal learning environment at preschool reveal characteristics of the experience of reciprocal-socialisation for this gifted child and his teacher. Presentation and discussion of the findings respond to the primary research question about influences on the learning experiences of gifted children when they transition into a formal learning environment.

This study revealed that the focus of the DAP framework on individual learning relative to age-typical expectations of knowledge and skills made it challenging for Michael’s
teacher to identify and plan for his advanced cognitive learning, as well as the attendant social and emotional differences in Michael’s behaviours. As a result the important influences in Michael’s home learning schema were not imported into the preschool learning environment. The most significant difficulty was that the differences in Michael’s behaviours from those expected by his teacher masked, for her, the holistic nature of his responses. Although positive development was observed in Michael’s social and emotional adjustment to the preschool learning environment, the influences in the sociostructure that enabled this outcome were more happenstance than the result of informed teaching practice. As a consequence Michael’s experiences at preschool highlight the lack of professional knowledge about characteristically gifted behaviour.

**Key Findings — Preschool Case Study**

As signalled in the introduction to this chapter the key findings are summarised at the end and the following list provides a reiteration of the key findings presented in this chapter.

**Influences on cognitive learning at preschool**

- The DAP model was inadequate in providing for the cognitive learning needs of a gifted child like Michael.
- The established mode of learning at home was a strong influence on Michael’s response to the preschool program.
- The lack of continuity in learning modes between home and preschool motivated the intense emotional distress that accompanied Michael’s early experiences at the M-EEC.
- Michael displayed his cognitive ability at preschool in adopting two separate personas:
  - the first one displayed his level of cognitive ability and was observable in his interactions with adults; and
  - the second illustrated an increasing skill to imitate typical preschool behaviours, being observable in his interactions with other children and within his participation in preschool activities.
- Michael’s preschool teacher lacked knowledge of characteristics of advanced development so was unable to evaluate Michael’s different or atypical behaviours.
Influences on emotional development at preschool

- Michael’s teacher was hindered in her interpretations of his learning needs by compartmentalising emotional and cognitive learning as unconnected areas of learning at preschool.
- The Columbus Group perception of connection between emotional characteristics and advanced cognitive ability was illustrated in a preschool-aged child.
- Michael’s emotional responses to preschool confirmed the early childhood education emphasis on the importance of an educational response that acknowledges holistic influences on development.

Influences on social development

— search for relationships at preschool

- Developing a relationship at the level of an attachment bond with his teacher was most important to Michael and underpinned other positive interactions at preschool.
- Michael’s development of peer relationships was based on imitation rather than a maturing social skill.
- His preschool teacher’s pedagogy, based on a ‘developmental approach’ to children’s social learning, did not support Michael’s preferred way of learning — for instance adult-given-goals.

— search for a sense of identity at preschool

- Cognitive dissonance for Michael between the identity valued at home and that at preschool required him to adopt a preschool student persona to gain a sense of belonging. The associated repertoire of behaviours was separate from his ‘true-self” behaviours expressed when interacting with adults.
- Michael was vulnerable in developing a sense of identity at preschool because he received minimal adult support in coping with the difference between home and preschool mode of learning.

Nonetheless, the skills that Michael displayed and the learning he achieved in establishing himself as a member of a preschool formal learning environment and as a potential friend with other children were valuable in his transition into the beginners’ grade at school. Michael continued into school the next year with a group of other children from the
M-EEC, which included Kim but not Amy. Michael’s teacher was, however, not confident about his prospective adjustment, commenting that his progress at school would depend on the development of his social relationships with both his new teacher and with his peer group. This case study closely followed Michael’s adaptation in the early months of his school year, followed by regular but less frequent contact over the remainder of the year. Michael’s progress, along with that of the other six young gifted children who participated in this study, will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Five

School Case Study

He has loved learning about reading and such things. We were really sure that he would just love being in that environment where he would be told things he could learn [unlike preschool], and he had something to keep him busy all day. And he does - he loves it. (Parent Interview/Stephen. 11/05)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the experiences of seven young gifted children — Cathy, Justin, Lily, Peter, Stephen, Susan and Michael — transitioning into a new formal learning environment. Their experiences were followed over the length of their first year at school, in the prep class, but it is their interactions with people within the school environment that provide the focus for the research reported in this chapter. Starting school is accepted as a major transition for young children (Fabian, 2007) yet research attention to young gifted children and their experience of formal learning environments has appeared in the gifted education literature only recently (Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Koshy, Mitchell & Williams, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; 2007; Whitton, 2005). The conceptualisation of reciprocal-socialisation discussed in Chapter One provides the basis for the exploration and discussion of the children’s characteristically gifted behaviours and the interaction between them, the school curricula and the teachers’ pedagogy.

Data was generated from late in the preschool year to the end of the first year of school in 2005 for the first six of the children. Michael however, entered school a year later than the others and it was of especial interest given the intense study of his preschool experiences to be able to observe his transition into school. His experiences were also followed over the full academic year.

Chapter Five follows a similar pattern to the previous chapter. It presents an in-depth qualitative description, based on primary data of the experiences of this group of gifted children in their first year at school. The style of presentation of information and the codes used for identification of sources are consistent with those used in Chapter Four. Individual participants, apart from the children, are introduced when they first appear in the narrative. The chapter is presented in three sections. The first section introduces the participants and
describes relevant aspects of both the children’s anticipation of starting school and their early days at school. The second section describes the cognitive interactions required of these children at school and their responses to these expectations. Motivation is discussed in this section as an associated aspect of cognitive interactions within the reciprocal-socialisation process. These first two sections are followed by a discussion synthesising the information provided in them.

The third section presents the two distinct themes that emerged as important in the children’s social and emotional development at school, each of these is followed by a discussion of the evidence. The first theme concerns the development of relationships in the school environment and the second theme documents development of a sense of school identity for a gifted student. The research question and key findings are revisited at the close of the chapter. A synthesis of findings from both the school case study and Michael’s experience of preschool is presented in Chapter Six.

**Participants**

The seven children in the sample group attended three different primary schools with some children in the same class. Stephen and Cathy were in the same class, as were Peter and Lily. Michael, Justin and Susan were in different classes from the remainder of the group. Altogether five primary school teachers were involved in the study. Additional background on the teacher, and the children was presented in Chapter Three (3.4. ‘Case study participants’).

**Table 6: Children’s ages at the start of school**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Chronological age (CA) at beginning of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>4 years, 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>5 years, 1 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>5 years, 4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>5 years, 5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>5 years, 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>5 years, 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>5 years, 7 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beginning school

It is accepted that there are multiple factors that influence children’s early experiences of school. Most important from the outset are the attitudes and actions experienced by the child and their family as they become involved in the school learning environment. Connections between preschool, home and school and the extent to which they make the child known to the school as well as the school known to the child are deemed significant (Brostrom, 2005; Docket & Perry, 2007a; Niesal & Griebel, 2005; Yeboah, 2002). The extent to which these qualities were present in the transition process provided a context in which to understand the adjustment by these gifted children to school.

The preschool to school transition program offered by the schools to their prospective students provided some connection between the child, their family and the school, although the primary focus was on ‘school being familiar to the child’. The program consisted of two scheduled days when all new students were invited to visit their school accompanied by their parents. For all children there were fun school-type activities provided, and an opportunity to meet their prospective teacher. A meeting for all parents with a senior teacher occurred during the children’s visit, aiming to inform parents about the organisational practices of the school as well as the (gentle) introductory program to school learning for the children (e.g. PI-10/05. p. 23. Peter).

The two scheduled days for children’s visits to school took place in the last weeks of the children’s preschool year. For Michael, Cathy, Lily and Susan who were the first children in their respective families to start school, this provided their first introduction to school. For Peter, Justin and Stephen, in addition to the orientation days, there were pre-existing social links with the school which supported the transition. The attendance of an older child in the family had meant the school environment was familiar to some extent to the family, and appeared to have promoted confidence in the parents that the younger child already knew the school and possibly the person who would become their class teacher (e.g. PI-10/05. p. 1/Stephen). For the children a most important aspect of their orientation days was the feeling that they had formed an initial social connection with the teacher. Lily’s enthusiastic comments after her school visit typified the children’s level of comfort:

I know my teacher now. I know her name, it’s Mrs G. And do you know, she has exactly the same name as my mother. (FN-12/04 Lily)
In a conversation with them following their orientation days, I sought to clarify what they knew about the school context and school learning. Susan self-assuredly declared that school was about learning numbers and addition, while Cathy, Lily, Peter and Justin described school learning, or reasons for going to school, only in the context of the activities provided on the orientation day — Cathy for instance was insistent that ‘what you did at school was make Christmas cards’. However, having given me some succinct comments about school activity they all returned to the topic of their new teacher, which appeared to be their primary interest, and talked freely about meeting her.

Michael was the exception in feeling distinctly unsure about his ability to cope at school. Becoming acquainted with his teacher, and experiencing school type activities, had not reassured him about the prospect of this new learning environment. As a result, everyone close to Michael at preschool felt great concern over the potential success of his transition to a new learning environment and a new set of relationships. Michael’s feelings of stress about school continued over the summer holidays with him expressing anxiety to his parents and to other family friends about the unknown elements of school. As at preschool, these comments reflected his ability to imagine or anticipate future events:

I’m a bit worried about it – not about the teacher or the other children [those he knew from preschool] - but about the children I don’t know, [and] the things I don’t know. (FN-01/06. p. 164)

Early connections between the school and the parents of these children were variable and influenced to some extent by the formal identification of advanced cognitive development. A link with the school had been established by Michael’s parents while Michael was still at preschool. On the basis of Michael’s IQ assessment as well as concern about his emotional difficulties at preschool his parents were keen to talk to the school principal about his perception of his learning needs. A meeting was arranged between Michael’s parents, his preschool teacher, his future prep teacher and the school principal to discuss Michael’s IQ assessment and his emotional and social learning needs. The school principal and Michael’s prospective school teacher were receptive to Michael’s probable need for an individual learning program. They also noted his preschool teacher’s information about Michael’s intense emotional responses to new situations and his anticipated need for support in social interactions with his peers. Michael’s parents later reported, to their surprise and delight, his school teacher contacted them towards the end of the summer holidays and
asked if she could visit them at home. A successful visit took place and appeared to cause a change-of-heart for Michael about the prospect of school (see further discussion in 5.3).

In Stephen’s case his IQ assessment had been the basis on which his parents were granted permission to enrol him for early entry to school (3.4 ‘Brief profiles of the children participants’) and his mother was subsequently proactive in communicating with the school about his learning needs. Stephen was to attend the same school as his older sister and his mother had asked especially that Stephen be included in the prep class of the teacher who had taught his sister. His mother was confident that this would support him emotionally. In addition, once Stephen’s parents were informed that he had been accepted for school the following year his mother ensured that, where feasible, Stephen had increased contact with both his prospective teacher and the classroom environment. Further, Stephen’s mother requested a meeting with Stephen’s future prep teacher close to the orientation days. Both she and Stephen’s teacher commented separately that this had been a convivial and detailed discussion of how and to what extent the school would provide for and continue Stephen’s current level of learning (FN-05/05. p. 25: PI-10/05.p. 1/Stephen).

Comments from the parents of both Stephen and Michael on communicating with the school about their child’s cognitive, social and emotional needs, as well as their subsequent contact of the prospective teacher revealed a feeling of authority or confidence derived from the formal IQ reports of their child’s level of cognitive development. In contrast, parents of the children who had not been formally identified as advanced were notably reticent to communicate with the teacher about their child’s individual development. For instance, these parents seemed surprised when I asked them about their early contact with the school. Comments from Cathy and Lily’s mothers’ revealed an awareness, common to all the latter group of parents, that only particular topics of parental information were of interest to the school:

Well [considerable pause] we had the portfolio and readiness list from the preschool — but there was no request or encouragement from the school. I think there was a form we could fill in about her but it was orientated to parents whose child may have had specific difficulties. We just didn’t say anything about her. (PI-12/05. pp. 23/Lily)

There were no questions or talk about her in particular – I met with the principal before Cathy started school and he just talked about the school and learning in general. I gathered that if I had any concerns about her ability to learn or her behaviours I could say something – but I
didn’t have anything specific like that to say about her. Information from kinder (preschool) was apparently not of interest to them. (PI-10/05. p. 31/Cathy)

All parents had understood from the school that if their child had a developmental delay, or behavioural difficulties, or there were family problems the school appreciated being given such information. Otherwise, as Lily’s mother had expressed, there was no invitation to share even the portfolio that the teacher had compiled during Lily's year at preschool. Consequently the parents conveyed their reticence to communicate with the school teacher about prior learning unless a problem existed.

Susan’s mother reported her attempts to facilitate Susan’s transition in terms of establishing some familiarity for Susan with the physical surroundings of school. For instance, taking Susan to play on the climbing equipment in the playground on several weekends before school started — Susan gets anxious about going to places she does not know. Apart from these efforts, her comments expressed trust that the teacher would get to know Susan once she started school and subsequently provide for her learning needs (PI-11/05. p. 23/Susan). Such expectations of school and the teacher were present among the other parents, and, with the exception of Michael and Stephen’s parents, included a belief that their child was ready for school-type learning and the teachers would know what was appropriate.

Orientation activities did not include, for most of the teachers, any contact or action to establish links with or information about the new students beyond the organised orientation days. Comments from them indicated they viewed orientation activities presented by the school as sufficient to establish connections with the children and their families. Where there was previous contact initiated by the parents, as with Michael and Stephen, the teachers acknowledged parents’ concerns and appropriate educational responses were planned. My questions to teachers about early contact, in this case between preschool and school, were also met with surprise by most of them. Comments from all but Justin’s teacher indicated they did not consider such contact relevant to their establishing a relationship with their new students — they said they had never visited the preschools or talked to any of the teachers (e.g. TI-08/05. p.1/Lily & Peter). Justin’s teacher alone made contact, phoning the preschool teachers of all her students prior to them starting at school. The information she asked them to share concerned only social, emotional, physical difficulties or delay — intellectual abilities and/ or strengths were not addressed.
The children in this study all managed the early days of school confidently and smoothly. They had been moderately excited about becoming a school child, although, apart from Michael, the children did not have overly high expectations or worries about what school may be like. Separation from parents was straightforward with no tears or other signs of stress. My observations, as well as those of the parents, suggested that in the first few days of school these children were comfortable and confident in their new environment.

5.2 Characteristics of cognitive learning at school

As in Chapter Four, to assist in exploring the children’s interactions with the educational program, I have scrutinised behaviours within the major areas of learning and development. In contrast to the Preschool Case Study, the School Case Study revealed important behaviours within either the cognitive or socio-emotional domains. This is not to suggest that they are separate, as again in this second case study the children’s behaviours demonstrated their learning experiences were interactive and mutually supportive of other areas of learning — i.e. holistic. However, distinguishing between major areas of developmental learning did assist in examining behaviours relevant to the children’s experience of a formal learning environment. The following section considers the characteristically-gifted cognitive responses by the children to the school program — including intellectual learning and motivational behaviours. As this study is interested in the reciprocal-socialisation experience of the children it also describes the teacher response to the children’s intellectual and motivational behaviours.

Teacher action to identify children’s learning

All teachers focussed on identifying children’s level of knowledge in the early weeks of school. This offered the possibility teachers could be alerted to advanced cognitive ability in these children, thus their practice would align with the emphasis in the gifted education literature on the importance of early identification of a child’s ability level (Gross, 1999; Harrison, 2003). In response to my question about how they developed an awareness of individual children’s learning development and different learning needs, most teachers explained their use of a formal, standardised assessment measure, ‘The Early Years Assessment’12.

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12 The Early Years Assessment instrument was recommended by The Victorian Department of Education at that time — 2005. Its use was not mandatory in the state’s schools but this mode of assessment was standard procedure. (Personal communication by Justin’s teacher)
This assessment was intended to establish baseline entry levels in the key learning areas of the curriculum — numeracy and literacy. Justin, Stephen, Peter, Cathy and Lily’s teachers adopted this approach, scheduling times for assessing in the early weeks of school in line with their school’s standard procedure of identifying levels of learning in key learning areas. They indicated that this enabled them to divide the children in their class into four working groups on a spectrum of how much or little the children knew about the mainstream curriculum literacy and numeracy concepts. Lily, Cathy, Justin Peter and Stephen were placed in the group in their class that ostensibly were the most advanced and were offered more complex work tasks.

In contrast, Michael’s teacher while also approaching assessment in a formal manner reported that she considered it important to establish the upper limits of his current ability and skills. Results from criterion based tests, for example the Edwards Test (Edwards, P., 1977), informed her that Michael had:

- a reading level of thirteen years and a comprehension level of nine years;
- an ability to work at the grade four level of maths; and
- some specific skills that had not been developed: i.e. he did not know how to use a dictionary for unknown words, or how to employ these words in a sentence of his own. (FN-03/06 pp. 168 & 172)

Having established Michael’s levels in academic knowledge and skills, his teacher provided complex and stimulating activities from the very beginning of the year, aiming to build on his emerging learning and skills (TI-03/06. p. 187/Michael). Subsequently Michael’s father commented:

At school, [by the third week] Michael has started learning Greek and is keeping up his Italian. He has spelling homework to do, learning to spell long words that are new to him, and he is continuing his maths at grade-four level. He has been made the class representative for the School Council. He feels good about himself at school. (FN-02/06. p. 168)

Conversely, Susan’s teacher insisted that informal early assessment was preferable. This was in line with her school’s policy, and also accorded with her personal philosophy that the most important quality of early school experience for children is their social and emotional adjustment. She stated that *if we test them straight away, if we focus on work too quickly, they don’t know us so well, and it might just unnerv them about school* (TI-08/05. p.
2/Susan). So Susan’s teacher offered her prep students play activities during the early weeks, developing her assessment of their learning through observations of their general play, plus children’s responses to basic literacy and numeracy games she instigated. Susan’s teacher was confident that through this more sensitive approach she could identify the literacy and numeracy understandings and the relevant skills each child had developed. The only formal assessment she carried out in a child’s prep year was a shortened ‘Numeracy Interview’ (DEET, 2001) undertaken midyear. This she used, not for teaching goals, but to inform the midyear reports for the parents.

**Other avenues of identification**

I had anticipated that because children who are beginning school do not enter with a history of learning outcomes and assessment, prep teachers would be alert to a range of information sources about their new students. However, our discussions revealed instead, their view was that information from parents or the preschool teacher about levels of learning or formal intellectual skills were not pertinent to school learning. All, but one, of the teachers were openly dismissive of the value of information about cognitive learning from other sources. Peter’s teacher commented:

> No, I don’t ask for any background. Apart from any health issues, I like to see them with new eyes. (FN-02/05. p. 3/ Peter)

Stephen’s and Michael’s teachers expressed the same opinion — they did not seek information about cognitive development from other sources. But, the existence of a formal IQ report on Stephen and Michael’s cognitive ability appeared to circumvent this barrier to communication. As described earlier (5.1 ‘Beginning school’) both these parents and their teachers had reported valuable discussions about the formal assessment, including their own observations of their child’s ability levels and advanced academic skills, as well as social and emotional behaviours. Such discussions had occurred on several occasions although it resulted in a different course of action by each teacher. Michael’s teacher conducted her own further investigations into his level of learning, whereas Stephen’s teacher was confident that classroom work would provide an adequate indication of his cognitive development.

In contrast, parents of the children with no formal or external identification of advanced learning ability clearly felt that there was no ‘invitation’ from the school to share information that might identify learning advanced on age-typical expectations. Although, they were aware of ‘permission’ to nominate deficit levels of learning, as outlined above,
clearly none of them felt that their awareness of their child’s current level of learning would be acknowledged by the teacher as relevant information to assist their child entering school. These views, held by the parents of the children who had not been formally identified as cognitively advanced, in combination with those of the teachers on the reliability of sources of information about prior learning, reveal a marginalisation of parental information about their own child. Despite advocacy in the early childhood field, as well as the gifted education field of the reliability and value of parental information about their own child (Arthur, et al., 2008; Porter, 2005) the views expressed by these teachers indicate that advanced development (in contrast to delayed development) requires formal and external identification. This situation creates a barrier to the identification of learning needs in children who are cognitively advanced in comparison to their age-peers.

Barriers to identification were also illustrated in the minimal levels of communication between preschool and school teachers. During the transition process the prep teachers did not express either an awareness of, or any interest in, detailed knowledge of a particular child held by the preschool teacher. Nor did they attempt to establish professional links to share such information. Equally, there were no reported approaches from the preschool teachers to contact the prep teachers. The only form of communication evident was the readiness-summary or the portfolio developed by the preschool teacher — referred to by Lily’s mother — and the sharing of this information was dependent on the initiative of the parents and invitation of the school. This situation confirms other findings that school and early childhood services are not well integrated (Dockett & Perry, 2007a).

While the comments of parents and teachers revealed a barrier to information about children’s cognitive development from sources other than the teachers’ testing, there remained the possibility that identification of advanced ability may be assisted by the activities in the classroom. This would require learning activities that were sufficiently open-ended to allow children to demonstrate their level of ability. Observations of the early days of the school year indicated very few activities of this nature; a situation that was not surprising in view of the teachers’ replies to my question about their early educational goals for children. Stephen’s teacher described her educational aims as follows:

The academic, intellectual stuff doesn’t matter yet. These early days are focussed on training [her class] to be a group and building their confidence in being at school. (FN-02/05. p. 16)

This view was representative of all the teachers in the study.
I observed that the programs, early in the school year, offered play activities, or relatively simple learning tasks with concrete outcomes. According to the teachers this was deliberately organised to be similar to the children’s preschool experiences, although when asked for the details of important elements of such prior experiences they were vague about the learning or skills development that may have occurred at preschool. Nonetheless, the teachers were confident that the simple learning activities observable in their classrooms were similar to preschool and as such enabled all children to feel happy and comfortable at school. As Lily’s teacher commented:

Their (children’s) concentration is not very long … they need a lot of variety in activity. So I keep everything simple and relaxed, it’s important for them to feel successful in learning at school. (TI-08/05. p. 1/Lily)

However, provision of activities designed to offer simple success considerably reduces any early opportunities for children to informally display advanced abilities. It shows a lack of awareness of diversity that I argue includes children with advanced levels of learning. It also confirms a belief in the gifted education field that teachers in mainstream education are unaware of findings about the expectations or characteristics of young gifted children as they start school, particularly in regard to their drive for new learning (AAEGT, 2006; Harrison, 2005b; Whitton, 2005).

Overall, the interaction of the differing attitudes and actions revealed in the children’s early experiences of school leaves room for concern about fulfilment of their learning needs. The children and parents expressed a general feeling of goodwill and hopeful expectation about the promise of new learning at school. However, the limited methods of collecting information about children’s learning needs — including demarcations about permissible sources and types of information — offered minimal opportunities to identify needs different to the teachers’ preconceptions of appropriate learning. These characteristics of the school sociostructure (Bandura, 2002) suggest a culture that has the potential to limit the agency of gifted children in developing their own learning. Apart from the approach adopted by Michael’s teacher, the limitations of the early identification process and curriculum opportunities meant it was possible that if the teacher had missed or underestimated indicators of advanced development, there were few other avenues to provide additional insight about the child.
Learning at school

All seven children started school feeling confident about themselves as learners — *I’m coming to school to learn lots of new things: I’m good at learning* (CI-01/05.p. 5/Lily). They may not have been sure what they would do at school or what they would learn but they were self-assured and it was no surprise that the initial separation from parents and the experiences of the first few days was not a challenge to them. At the end of the year the teachers of these children summarised their academic progress as excellent. However, of particular interest to this study were the interactions between the educational program and the children’s advanced abilities. How were the children’s levels of learning and characteristic behaviours expressed at school? How did the teacher respond in terms of the curriculum and pedagogy to these behaviours? Was the school program satisfying to them?

Formal cognitive learning

Following completion of the standardised assessments most of the teachers divided their class (about week five or six) into approximately four working groups. These groups reflected levels of competency indicated by the initial assessments with Stephen, Cathy, Lily, Peter and Justin being placed into the group considered to have the highest cognitive functioning level in their class. In this group, they were given learning content and tasks in the key learning areas of the curriculum that were more advanced than those given to the other groups. The subsequent adjustment to the curriculum content was not, however, a truly differentiated curriculum (as outlined in Maker & Nielson, 1995; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) but represented some extension of the mainstream curriculum through more complex tasks.

It was apparent that this approach offered extension only at the estimated level of the group, not that of the individual. For example, observations in Stephen and Cathy’s class, during the fourth month of the academic year, describe them as working on word recognition following a whole class learning activity on zoo animals earlier in the week. Other groups in the class were required to match an animal picture with its written name or use the appropriate written word to label parts of the animal — head, leg, etc. Stephen and Cathy’s group were asked to nominate a sentence about an animal and to write it. The teacher assisted them to do this, discussing grammar and the spelling rules governing their sentences. They were both enthusiastically engaged in this task although Stephen accomplished this with more speed and ease than Cathy did (FN-05/05. p. 10/ Cathy).
In this situation, unless learning is sufficiently differentiated, there can be a ceiling effect on children’s display of potential ability (Harrison, 2005b). Children’s performance on the task may only confirm original judgements of ability or the child may mask what is already known, believing it is inappropriate in this context. In this way potential for more advanced learning can remain hidden from the teacher. The evidence indicated that such an effect was present in the learning offered to these children in their prep year as there was no indication that variable performance — such as Stephen’s quick and correctly completed tasks — impacted the work they were offered. Consistently, the task was the same for each member of the working group. Nonetheless, the children displayed few negative reactions to the classroom program. They stated at various times that they liked school learning, with most — Justin being the outspoken exception (5.3. ‘Situations of risk’) — reaffirming late in the year their enjoyment of school learning. Parent comments, as in the excerpt about Stephen at the beginning of the chapter, indicated that their child enjoyed school, concurring with the teachers’ judgment at the end of the year that the children had all made excellent progress in learning.

Michael’s experience at school was markedly different from those of the other children. His work appeared to be truly differentiated with many of the characteristics of a qualitatively different approach (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Observations of Michael’s learning experiences indicated that they were clearly more complex than for others in his class. His teacher’s descriptions of the learning goals she set for Michael, the learning approaches, and the expected end product, indicated they were all derived from her awareness of his current level of learning (TI-03/06.p. 187). One observation of Michael shows him working on a set of comprehension questions following the reading of a text on the characteristics of mammals. The reading and writing required in the task appeared to be moderately challenging for him, requiring him to check the meaning of several words in the class dictionary and pay attention to the layout of his answers. The tasks for other ability groups in his class on this day were to identify single words on cards, or work through spelling tasks about basic words from their reader. Later, after morning recess, Michael went to the next classroom to join the grade four children for a maths class where the teacher introduced the technique of addition for three digit numbers. Michael immediately engaged with the teacher’s lesson and was able to quickly calculate mentally the proposed algorithms although he needed specific direction from his teacher on how to write the task on paper. Such help was provided (FN- 04/06. pp. 197-199).
No planned extension was apparent in Susan’s learning activities. In her class there were three grade levels, so that daily she was informally exposed to prep, grade one and grade two levels of learning content. Susan listened attentively to the grade one and two work and would often respond, usually accurately, to teacher questions about the content of this work. Yet there was no evident explicit curricula response to this indication of ability. The work tasks given to her were the same as for all the preps, although Susan’s standard of work clearly demonstrated more complex and advanced cognitive processing than her prep classmates — an outcome affirmed by her teacher.

Some teaching support for Susan to advance at a slightly accelerated rate was identifiable in her progress at reading. At the end of the year her teacher reported that Susan’s reading level had reached the grade one level (beyond the level expected by the end of preps), which her teacher described as very good progress, very good indeed, more than that achieved by any of the other preps (FN-12/05. p. 13/Susan). It was the only area of Susan’s learning where her teacher acknowledged advancement beyond prep level. As Susan’s mental age was approximately 30 months in advance of her chronological age (when I assessed her at preschool) it is open to question as to whether a level of advancement, slightly ahead of her grade level in reading really represented her potential ability.

The absence of awareness in teachers, of the learning needs of children who are advanced learners (AAEGT, 2006), was demonstrated in the pedagogical approach of Susan’s teacher to the prep curriculum. She stated that among the many advantages to the multi-age system implemented in her school was the opportunity for any child to show that they were capable of more complex learning. But in discussing how these ‘advantages’ might be implemented Susan’s teacher kept returning to her concern about social and emotional development for all her students, she reasoned that it could put unnecessary pressure on Susan to offer her work tasks at grade one or two level. Although, Susan’s teacher acknowledged that Susan openly talked about liking to do this level of work and that on several occasions she had produced her own (usually comparable) version of the work done by the older children. Nonetheless, Susan’s teacher was concerned that if Susan was actually working with the older children this might impact on their self-esteem because they were working with ‘a prep’.

Susan quite clearly felt very confident about her ability as she talked frequently to her mother and her teacher, about her learning all the grade one and two work. But the evidence
was persistent that her teacher considered social and emotional well-being as being the most important for a child beginning school and that the best course to ensure Susan’s establishment of her sense-of-self as a school child was for her to proceed successfully through the mainstream prep-curriculum with her classmates.

The unavoidable conclusion about Susan’s experience of the prep class is that there were inadequate opportunities at school for Susan’s intellectual learning and her level of ability was probably being seriously underestimated. Her teacher’s professional viewpoint appeared to be that maintaining the standard program for the preps maximised a child’s intellectual success, which also ensured positive social and emotional adjustment to the new formal learning environment of school. I believe this misjudgement of Susan’s learning needs, rather than supporting the development of her self-efficacy as a learner at school, acted to derail her development of realistic social skills and saw her at the end of the prep year being rebuffed by the other children in her class (see 5.3. ‘Friendship and advanced development’, and, Chapter 6. ‘Holistic development and learning’).

Informal cognitive learning

Reports of the children’s comments about school indicated that there was an unexpected, informal intellectual stimulus that contributed to their satisfaction. Although the formal provision of learning material for Lily, Cathy, Justin, Stephen and Peter remained at their ability group level (that is at an estimation only of ability level), or grade level for Susan, over the duration of the year, the teachers informally interacted with them individually at a more complex level than with most other children in their class. The children were very responsive to these informal interactions and I argue it contributed to a particular form of continuity of the transition experience. That is, for these intellectually advanced children, there were experiences at school that were intellectually and socially continuous with their experiences of interactions at home.

The nature of the interactions varied among individuals and according to the situation, but there was a common characteristic in that they offered a level of cognitive complexity that corresponds with the recommendations for differentiation found in the literature (Van Tassel-Baska, 2005). While the early assessment measures and limited receptivity to a range of information about children suggested the potential for teachers to form inadequate formal estimations of ability levels, these informal exchanges did convey a willingness by the teachers to be responsive to more advanced ideas and abilities in children.
The following excerpts from the data illustrate the nature of these informal exchanges. At times they included an extension of the formal learning offered, while at other times they were present in personal interactions that involved more complex cognitive processing. For example, Stephen and Cathy’s teacher was observed to include an intellectual challenge, in addition to the core learning in a lesson. She commented later that these were usually spontaneous but they involved more complexity than she expected most of the children to grasp, and were obviously satisfying to some of the children. For instance, one day talking to the class in simple language about adding 2 to 4, she asked casually — *and what do you do if you have a number like 10 or 12 to add?* Stephen threw his hand up in the air and at a nod from his teacher he quickly replied — *you count on from the bigger number; 12 and 4 is 16* (FN-02/05, p. 19/Stephen). Stephen appeared to really enjoy this type of interaction and his response was always immediate, well before any of the other children. Observations of this and other responses that Stephen made to his teacher suggested that his enjoyment of this form of challenge and his teacher’s responsiveness to his quick replies were part of an exchange that they both enjoyed. Stephen’s mother commented to me that she had noticed on her ‘parent-helper days’ that his teacher offered such informal extensions frequently to Stephen and it seemed to establish a close relationship between them.

Justin’s teacher reported becoming aware about five months into the academic year that he would respond quickly to additional complexity in class work. Her recollections of their interactions suggested an enjoyment of Justin’s alertness and enthusiastic response to cognitive challenges:

I found Justin is pretty sharp. Now I feed him ‘titbits’ that I wouldn’t give the others; like if we were to count up to 1,000 — what would come next? He loves this, his eyes shine and he works away at it. (FN-05/05, p. 10/Justin)

In addition she was tolerant of the emotional and social behaviours that were a consequence of his advanced ability, as this interview late in the year reveals:

Recently we were doing something with numbers … and he looked a bit ‘browned off’ with it and me. So I asked him, *Do you think this is a bit easy?* And he said firmly, *Yes, I’d like to do something much harder. I can do these at home really easily.* So I said, *Well, we will finish these and then I will find the next set and you can try those.* We were nearly finished, if we had just started I don’t think I would have persisted [with them], but I also said to him, *The reality is that sometimes you are required to continue doing something you don’t really like – this is life.* (TI-08/05, p. 22/ Justin)
Justin’s responsiveness to complexity was confirmed in his mother’s observation of his learning at home.

Justin has become fascinated by the TV show, The Simpsons which he watches with his older sister. What really engages him is not just the slapstick comedy but the double meaning of words and the motivations of Homer. He is really into the complexity of it. He quizzes us about what things mean or offers his own interpretations to me, his dad or his sister. (PI-11/05.p. 37)

Informal and stimulating interactions between Michael and his teacher also occurred but Michael’s teacher appeared more systematic in her support of these interactions. In addition to the ILG, she sought other opportunities to extend Michael and one such opportunity was to select him as the class representative on the school student-council. Prep-grade children at this school were not usually members of the student council as they are seen as too young and new to the school. However, Michael’s teacher felt that he would be capable of this role. She described it as a potentially valuable boost to his confidence because it would involve him in:

experiences of communicating with others of different ages and abilities. He could use his reading, writing and mathematical skills and it would prompt him to develop his organisational skills — this area is weak compared to the level of his other skills. Then he needs to report back to his class about what was discussed or find out information for the next meeting. (FN-04/06. pp. 190-191)

The parents’ reports indicate these informal exchanges between the teacher and their child were both stimulating and satisfying as part of the experience of school. All the children had told their parents of such interactions and the anecdotes conveyed their enjoyment of this type of connection with their teacher.

Cathy’s mother commented:

Cathy likes telling jokes and she often told me about the jokes she had with her teacher but I didn’t ‘make much of it’ [think this was anything special] as we share jokes at home. I was a bit surprised when her teacher said at the parent-teacher interview what a good sense of humour Cathy had — Cathy will have a joke with me [the teacher] and she has enough intelligence [at 5 years] to understand my jokes. (PI-10/05. p. 6/Cathy)

Peter’s mother reported:

Peter and his dad like discussing science things and he helps him do experiments at home. Peter likes to take his science experiments into school when it is his turn to share something from
home with the class. Sometimes these were a bit complicated — like how light splits across the spectrum — and when I have been there most of the other children do not understand what he tries to explain. But his teacher is really encouraging and commends him for thinking about such things. So he feels really positive about his contribution and tells me all the praise she gives him for his effort. I think it is really about sharing his interest with his teacher. (PI-10/05. p. 30)

There was an added socioemotional benefit in these interactions. The children’s comments to their parents about such incidents were not solely concerned with the level of complexity or advanced knowledge involved. They convey as well a feeling from the child of acceptance by the teacher of their interests and of a way of communicating that is ‘normal’ from home but idiosyncratic in comparison to those of their age-typical peers. However, with the exception of Michael’s teacher, teacher awareness of the individual child’s responsiveness to greater cognitive complexity did not appear to prompt reconsideration by the teacher of a learning program beyond the mainstream curriculum of the class. The formal learning tasks for Justin, Stephen, Peter, Lily, and Cathy remained appropriate for the level of their allocated group.

**Motivation to learn**

Overall, observations of the children’s motivation to learn at school provided little to hint that provision of intellectual learning opportunities was, for most of them, probably only an approximation of their level of potential ability. The children’s responses to the learning activities at school illustrated key motivational behaviours — specifically, expressions of high levels of feelings of self-efficacy and locus of control, as well as mastery learning (Bandura, 2002; Gottfried & Gottfried, 2004). Expression of these appeared characteristic of gifted children to the extent that they illustrated a high level of intensity and perfectionism in response to work tasks (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). While perfectionism is not typically listed in the literature as an example of motivational behaviour, in these young children it was difficult to differentiate between an intense focus on completing work involving new concepts (mastery learning) or an intense effort to complete work accurately and to be absolutely correct (perfectionism). Thus, I have included this aspect of behaviour in the discussion on the children’s motivation to engage in school work.
Overview of children’s approach to school learning

From the very beginning of the year I observed a ready engagement by these gifted children with school-type learning and this was a feature of their response to school work over the length of the year. In class the children were usually highly attendive to both the teacher’s instructions about concepts and to the associated work tasks. This behaviour was distinctive as it was not readily observed in other children in their class. As a response to learning it was evident across each of the five different classes observed, even where learning opportunities were different as a result of varying pedagogical approaches. There were naturally times when the children were clearly not interested in the learning content and as discussed in the following sections on socio-emotional learning several children became temporarily disillusioned with the learning content several weeks after starting school. But these difficulties were reported only by the parents and apart from this period the only notable indication of negative attitudes towards school work was a protest by Justin late in the year about school work that was too easy.

The following anecdotes from the field notes illustrate the presence of high levels of motivation in the response by these children to learning opportunities at school. On the third day of school, Stephen was sitting with his class on the floor in front of his teacher. Using some plastic rectangles with the attributes of thick and thin, big and small, his teacher was introducing these concepts. Ten minutes into the session most children were still settling down after recess — wriggling, whispering to others and looking around. But Stephen was sitting quite still, and with his gaze focussed on his teacher he looked ‘a hundred per cent’ involved. He put his hand up for all the (very basic) questions about this topic and even though he was not asked to answer, he continued to look intensely focussed; he mouthed each of the answers and these looked correct (FN-02/05. p. 15/Stephen).

Susan’s comments about enjoying learning at school were representative of the opinions expressed by all the children: I like the work at school; I like the hard work [Susan meant the grade 1 and 2 work and she emphasised the hard work] (CI-11/05. p. 21/Susan). Despite the simplicity of the tasks given to Susan and her evident desire for more challenge, she remained cooperative and willing to engage in the learning activities given by her teacher. Conversations with all the parents provided examples of these attitudes, as typified by a comment from Michael’s father:
Michael’s spelling this week has been words from the school’s motto: two of them being *resilience* and *persistence*. He is excited about leaning the meaning of these words and how to spell them, and has been practising at home. (FN-02/06. p. 169)

Teacher observations verified the high level of engagement with the directed learning in class. Eight months into the school year, Stephen’s teacher commented on his attitude to work:

Stephen would never give me anything but his best work. (TI-08/05. p. 13/Stephen)

Similarly Justin’s teacher noted:

Justin very definitely wants to learn [and] to learn more than everybody else. (FN-11/05. p. 26)

Such motivational behaviours appeared to contribute not only to a conspicuous level of learning competence but also reinforced the relationship with the teacher. Each teacher commented that they found these children, as a result of their enthusiasm for learning, easy and rewarding to work with. When I asked Lily’s teacher to comment on Lily’s approach to learning at school, she was full of praise for her, saying:

Even though [Lily] has the benefit of inherited [high] ability she is a wonderful worker, she has good work habits, a wonderful listening ability which is reflected in her recall; she does beautiful work and presents it beautifully. (TI-08/05. p. 12/Lily)

**Particular motivational behaviours - self efficacy and locus of control**

For the majority of work tasks I observed, the children were efficient in carrying out instructions and remained focussed on the task for as long as it took to finish. Occasionally, when they needed to seek further help they would confidently ask the teacher and once assistance was given their task-focus resumed. If help was not available, they would either ask others working near them, or go on with other sections of the task. They were not observed to express concern, look worried or be distracted in a way that others around them frequently did. Overall, they conveyed a high level of self-confidence in their ability to engage with and carry out the tasks they were given by the teacher, in contrast to many of the other children in their class, especially in the early days of the year.

The level of confidence to engage with school work is richly illustrated in an observation of Justin as he changes from the group lesson with the teacher to his work group.
On this day he jumped up from where the group had been sitting on the floor and walked briskly to his work table. He quickly sorted through the pile of workbooks, saying the names of the owner on each, even though they were upside down for him. While most in the class, are milling around at this point, saying: Where are the books? Do we have pencils? and asking their friend to sit next to them, Justin paid no attention to this ‘buzz of activity’. Having finally found his workbook he turned to a clean page and with head down he worked swiftly on his task — practise-writing of the letter ‘u’ followed by a number of ‘u’ words. He finished before the others at his table and continued immediately with the next task (FN– 06/05. p. 14/Justin).

Efficacy and a locus of control were also apparent when tasks were completed. The children displayed initiative by moving onto the next step or expected activity without the usual reminder from the teacher, or distractions of conversations with others. They were usually amongst the first to finish, or when tasks were specific to their ability grouping they would accomplish more in the time allocated than most others in their group. Some studies have reported that young gifted children are more inclined to show high levels of motivation when the topic interests them but lower levels when it is a given task (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004), but this was not observed with this group of children. It could be said they embraced all the tasks given to them by the teacher.

**Particular motivational behaviours - mastery learning**

In a questionnaire filled out before school started (Appendix B) the children’s parents had described behaviours at home that clearly indicated intrinsic motivation to learn. Curiosity, independence in learning, persistence, and an interest in challenging or novel tasks were behaviours described by the parents as typical. Evidence of the same behaviour was found in the children’s responses to learning at school. Such an approach to learning was noted both by the teachers and by the parents, as Cathy’s mother commented:

I knew she was learning to read quite well but I didn’t realise, till the teacher-parent interview that she was reading at the same level as the two other most able children in the class Cathy wasn’t reading before she started school but she is confident about herself and her learning at school. At home we encourage her to do things well but she is keen herself to know what every word says (in her reading) and loves learning to write – she sits at the computer (at home) and writes away for ages so, she says, to do better writing at school. (PI-10/05. p.31/ Cathy)
These are accepted in teaching practice as illustrating an orientation towards mastery learning (Whitton, et al., 2004).

Mastery learning approaches, encouraged at home, provided the children with an established motivational orientation that aligned readily with the attitudes of their teacher. Justin’s teacher illustrated this in her class. In a reading activity in April (third month of Australian school year) she took all the children through a list of sight words (reading words that required memorising —the, and, of, was, etc.). Some children, Justin included, could already read them and they said the indicated word confidently and loudly, while others in the group would echo them. His teacher commented positively on this process:

Some children are hearing what the others say and then saying it as well. I love to hear that – that’s how you learn. (FN-04/05. p.9/Justin)

In combination with the teacher’s mastery learning approach, these children overtly displayed their attraction to learning new knowledge or skills. Justin in particular illustrated this when reporting his own reading progress. With great satisfaction and pride in his voice he told me late in the year: I have learned to read at school and so far I’ve read 198 books and [with the] two for tonight, it will be 200 readers (Justin’s emphasis. CI-11/05. p.32/Justin). His teacher confirmed the achievement, noting Justin had only the very basic building blocks for literacy at the beginning of the year and had made exceptional progress.

**Particular motivational behaviours - perfectionism and competitiveness**

Stephen, Justin, Lily, Susan, and Michael all displayed perfectionist traits at school and these were conspicuous throughout the field notes. Such behaviours were individual to each child but were recognised by the teachers as perfectionist or competitive traits. Lily would take great care with her written work and even though she looked very pleased when she was the first one to finish work (this was usually the case), she also paid attention to the detail and ensured that her work was well presented. Competitive traits in Justin were noted by his teacher and his mother who, in an amused voice, shared an example of his behaviour:

The teacher puts the boxes of different level readers, out of sequence, as reading progress is not meant to be competitive, but Justin just mentally adjusts things and knows exactly where he is compared to the others. All that competitive stuff seems to be very motivating for him. (FN–11/05. p.35/Justin)

In contrast, Stephen was not competitive with the others in his class but was intensely focussed in his desire for his work to be correct — to be perfect in this sense. His teacher had
noted to me very early in the year that he was a perfectionist and commented that as a result he took longer to do things than the others. At that time she did not consider it a problem (FN-02/05. p.15/Stephen). But later in the year she commented that he continued to be perfectionistic and as result to be hesitant about some challenges and therefore, she now felt it was a problem:

When I ask him questions [that suggest mastery learning approaches] such as “How would you work this out?” or “What do you think the answer could be?” He won’t say anything at all to me. He needs a different attitude. (TI-08/05. p. 4/Stephen)

His teacher subsequently took steps to encourage Stephen to ‘take a risk’. She noted later that her changed expectations of him had not affected his willingness to learn or his close relationship to her. Stephen’s parents commented at a later date:

The perfectionism has improved dramatically. We do not see this behaviour at all now. I think he still has a tendency to be like that — but the school has an emphasis on risk taking, [which] is fabulous. (PI-10/05. p. 2/Stephen)

Late in the year, the teachers of these five children commented that from their early observation of competitive and perfectionist behaviours amongst these children the behaviours had declined. Where they were still apparent, the teachers were firmly of the opinion that overall, it was not a problem and certainly had not affected their learning. Neither had the various expressions of these motivational behaviours seemingly influenced the relationships between these children and others in their class. This finding contrasts with that of Whitmore (1986) where perfectionism and competitiveness had created difficulties for the gifted children both in regard to interactions with the teacher and learning environment, and with the other children.

Discussion

This first section of the chapter has examined the children’s early experiences of beginning school, as well as their subsequent cognitive experience of the school learning program. The children’s characteristically advanced cognitive behaviours within their experience of school have illustrated a number of influences on the process of reciprocal-socialisation for them. These will be discussed within three themes that emerged from the data; (i) the nature of identification of ability and learning, (ii) the children’s experience of the curriculum and (iii) the motivation to learn.
Identification

Objective measures are a formal source of identification of ability levels, but current views are that evidence such as observations or anecdotes from parents or other professionals ought to be employed with all young children (Arthur, et al., 2008; DEECD, 2009a). In the gifted education literature it is accepted that reliable identifications of young gifted children can be made when information is combined from different sources (Harrison, 2003; Koshy & Robinson, 2006). Such informal approaches are advocated as important to develop a professional understanding of gifted children in early childhood settings (Harrison, 2003; Porter, 2005).

Description of the assessment approaches used by most of the teachers in this case study indicated that the measures were predominantly formal and were orientated towards baseline competency in the knowledge and skills expected to be learnt at this age. Such a focus on minimum benchmarks of learning leads to a framing of formal learning opportunities in response to a minimum standard rather than encouraging recognition by teachers of advanced levels of learning. In effect, this perspective imposes a ceiling on the level of learning that could be expressed by most of the children in this study. As well, the restricted lines of communication resulted in a flow of information mostly from the teachers to the parents. Information from the parents indicated that any lines of communication from parents to teachers were understood as restricted to those topics prejudged as pertinent by teachers. This acted to exclude information about the child from prior-to-school or outside school settings and unless a child had social and emotional difficulties it limited flow of any other knowledge about the children’s levels of learning. In brief, teachers acted as if they alone could reliably assess learning needs.

A departure from this status quo occurred only when the parents of Stephen and Michael presented a formal psychometric assessment of their child’s ability to the school. Subsequently Michael’s school teacher demonstrated that she was open to a more two-way flow of information about Michael’s learning needs and adopted a pedagogical approach that would continue to identify his particular learning needs. Stephen’s teacher also as a result demonstrated more openness to collaborative communication about him although her pedagogical response continued to be based on the mainstream curriculum.

I contend that as a consequence of the restricted approach to assessment by most of the teachers there are challenges to the opportunity for identification of potential ability and
thus positive learning experiences for gifted children. From these practices teachers could arrive at a judgement that at best only broadly represented the child’s level of ability rather than an awareness of the individual level of ability or learning. This is a happenstance approach to identification. The subsequent allocation of most of these children to the group in the class given more complex tasks represents some extension to the mainstream curriculum, but nonetheless confines the teacher’s awareness of a child’s ability to the conceptual level of the learning offered. The limitations in the identification process found in this study add to the finding of Hodge and Kemp (2006) that teachers had difficulty informally judging advanced development in young children. Therefore, there is some concern for the positive progress of these young gifted children given acceptance in the literature that gifted children are more likely to stop and stall in their schooling if identification does not indicate the need for differing learning content and approaches (Porter, 2005)

The children’s experience of the curriculum

Differentiation of the curriculum is considered essential for the learning needs of children with advanced cognitive ability. The types and methods of differentiation are the subject of much discussion in the gifted education field but there is agreement that a level of cognitive stimulus, adequate for the level of advancement, is important at all levels of education (see for example Rogers, 2002; Van Tassell-Baska, 2005). Whitton (2005) reported that in anticipation of starting school, young gifted children rated the opportunity for new learning as the most important activity at school. Despite appropriate differentiation occurring only for Michael, the evidence from this study suggests that some opportunity for the children to experience intellectually satisfying learning and/or interactions (even in a limited form) — for instance, formal and informal exchanges with their teachers — contributed to the children’s experience of school as a satisfying experience. The children’s reports indicated that this aspect of experience at school was personally satisfying for them, making a social, an emotional, and a cognitive contribution to their experience of school (see 5.3. ‘Socioemotional areas of learning’).

There is a view in the transition literature which suggests that the quality of children’s adjustment to school will be affected by the extent of change from the early childhood focus on diverse learning opportunities (play based learning) to a ‘more constrained’ learning at school (Margetts, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Such a change in pedagogy was present for these young gifted children but their behaviours indicated that the changes were
welcomed and their concomitant response to learning at school was positive. In contrast, evidence of an adverse effect of the pedagogy at school was found when there was too close a resemblance to that of the preschool (greater detail of this effect is provided in the next section, 5.3. ‘Developing as a learner at school’).  

Much emphasis in the gifted education literature is placed on the importance of a differentiated curriculum for gifted children (e.g. Gross, 1999a; Porter, 2005; Van Tassel Baska, 2005). The evidence of this study indicates the need for a more nuanced understanding of how differentiation may occur for very young gifted children. Despite Michael being the only one of the group who experienced a program specific to his intellectual learning needs at school, all the children, including Susan for whom there was a minimal individual curricula response, maintained a positive attitude. I argue that the children’s satisfaction with school was the outcome of combined aspects of their experience. A satisfactory level of cognitive stimulus was an important facet of their experience, but it was the combination of both satisfying formal learning and spontaneous inclusion of some challenging intellectual exchanges with their teacher which appeared to be influential in the children’s feelings about school. This is again a happenstance outcome, as it reveals unplanned elements in the school program as influential in the children’s satisfaction with school learning.

A finding that intellectual satisfaction with school had resulted from both formal and informal opportunities to learn is not to contradict recommendations of a stimulating intellectual curriculum for young gifted children. However, it does suggest an emphasis solely or primarily on the formal intellectual curricula provision for young gifted children at school is too narrow. Such an emphasis could minimise or hide other aspects of the experience of transitioning into a formal learning environment that are important to young gifted children. Integral in the children’s interaction with learning opportunities at school was their motivation to learn. Behaviours expressing this facet of their response to the school curriculum emerged from this study as an influential and to some extent separate aspect of their early experience of school.

Motivation to learn

Bandura (2002) proposes the importance of high self-efficacy beliefs as they motivate successful learning by children and Bernstein (1996) identifies motivational focus (performance or mastery) as shaped by the home learning experiences. Observations
suggested that these young gifted children illustrated both these factors in their positive adjustment to school. An individual confidence about their ability to learn combined with a mastery focus on learning had been supported and developed in the children’s home environment and subsequently interacted in a causal way with the pedagogical approach of their teacher. In the sociostructure provided in the prep classrooms observed in this study, the teachers also supported mastery-learning goals and responded positively towards the gifted children’s expressions of self-efficacy. Although, observations suggested this was their standard teaching practice as, with the exception of Michael’s teacher, their teaching responses did not reveal awareness of the needs of gifted children. In other words, as at preschool, positive development of a gifted child was to some extent happenstance.

In addition, the children’s behaviours expressing motivation suggested that even in gifted children at the early childhood level there is, as Gottfried and Gottfried (2004) propose an intrinsic motivation to engage with academic learning. For instance, while Justin’s approach to learning was openly competitive and therefore potentially similar to performance goal motivation, there appeared to be little, if any, reinforcement of this by his teacher. He did not have an elevated status in the classroom or appear to depend on external rewards as motivation for learning. He certainly liked to openly celebrate his achievements — such as his progress at reading — but his motivation to learn appeared to be essentially intrinsic.

Behaviours typical of high levels of motivation are commonly presented in lists of the characteristics of gifted children (Appendix A; Morelock & Morrison, 1996; Porter, 2005). Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) found from investigations of young gifted children at school that motivational type behaviours varied significantly according to the individual child. While such variation was not evident in the young gifted children in this study, differences in findings could be attributed to the individual research design and context, or to differences within individual children, and as such are not necessarily contradictory of earlier findings.

Conclusions drawn from this study are that high levels of motivation to engage in intellectual learning were an important behaviour in the children’s first year of school. Despite learning opportunities for most of the children that were not specific responses to identified learning needs, an enthusiastic motivation to engage in school work continued to be a highly visible behaviour throughout the year. Each teacher expressed a high level of approval of the children’s approach to work, and awareness that their level of motivation was more pronounced in comparison with others in their class. As a consequence, these overt
motivational behaviours appeared to influence several aspects of the children’s experience of school. They contributed to the development of intellectual competence at school as well as enhancing the relationship with the teacher. Hence, the observation in this study of motivational behaviours apparently not tied to a close teaching response to level of learning ability, affirms the proposal by Gottfried and Gottfried (2004) that academic intrinsic motivation is a characteristic of giftedness, in and of itself.
5.3 Socioemotional areas of learning

In this third section of the chapter, the social and emotional influences within the children’s experiences are presented and discussed. Central to the concept of reciprocal-socialisation employed in this study is an understanding that the child’s educational experience in a new formal learning environment is shaped by the interactions that occur between people in that environment. Therefore, relationships between the child and teacher, and between the child and peers are highly significant. The description of these relationships in the children’s early experiences of the school environment focuses on those social and emotional behaviours that indicated characteristics of giftedness.

Also important in the experience of relationships for the child transitioning into a formal learning environment is a reorientation of a sense-of-self as a school child (Pollard & Filer, 1999). Michael’s experience at preschool illustrated the difficulties for a gifted child in establishing a sense of identity in the preschool setting. Subsequently, the process of gifted children re-interpreting their sense-of-self as they experienced the school learning environment was part of the reflexive consideration of the data in this second case study. This section is presented in two parts. The first part considers the relationships and the influence of social and emotional behaviours on the children’s engagement with the educational program at school. The second part reports on the children’s search for a sense of identity as a school student.

Relationships between children and teachers

A short list of socioemotional behaviours relevant to young gifted children was included in Table 2. Those relevant in this study to the children’s experience of school were:

- enjoys company of older children and adults, and/or
- needs intellectual peers;
- highly developed empathy;
- perfectionist;
- heightened sensitivity and intensity; and
- early development of self-concept and awareness of being different to peers.
Beginning a relationship

For all the children some form of early link to the teacher had been an important aspect of beginning school although the nature of this link — who initiated it and how it developed — varied, as noted previously. For the children in this study early connections with the teacher were characterised by their meaningfulness for the individual child.

Teachers facilitating connection

For Justin and Michael the influential step in establishing some connection was initiated by the teacher. The link for Michael was the outcome of interactions between his parents, the preschool teacher and his school teacher. Importantly, awareness by Michael’s preschool teacher of his need to feel secure as well as his difficulty in separating from his father during the school orientation visit had prompted her to speak about this to his prospective school teacher. Michael’s preschool teacher suggested that the success, or otherwise, of Michael’s transition into school would depend on the strength of the new teacher-child relationship.

The home-visit to Michael, in January, by his school teacher was welcomed and consequently considered by Michael’s parents to have been a great success. They felt it initiated his relationship with the teacher and led, to their complete amazement, to Michael saying on the first day at school: OK, I am here now, I know my teacher and she knows me … goodbye … you can go. His teacher also acknowledged the visit as valuable in establishing a connection with Michael, although she commented that she did not usually visit children at home — she just didn’t have time (FN-01/06, & 03/06. pp. 166 & 183).

A previous relationship existed between Justin’s family and his teacher as she had taught his older sister. Justin’s mother commented that this teacher was delighted to re-connect with the family and made a special point of saying at the orientation visits the previous year - make sure you say you want Justin in my class13 (PI-11/05. p. 40/Justin). His mother subsequently did request this, and in retrospect considered that the special connection she felt existed had heightened the teacher’s awareness and tolerance of Justin’s idiosyncratic learning needs, contributing to his positive experience of the first year at school.

13 Parents at this school could make a request to the Principal for a particular teacher for their child. The principal always made the proviso they may not be able to accommodate such parental requests, but would if possible.
Parents facilitating connection

When discussing this early aspect of school with the parents, most expressed awareness that for their child a sense of familiarity with the school and a feeling of ‘knowing’ the teacher were essential to start school successfully. As a consequence they were proactive in facilitating this where they were able. Stephen’s parents, although most concerned about an appropriate curriculum, also felt it was important to share social and emotional information to help the teacher know their child. This occurred in the meetings they arranged with their child’s teacher. Peter’s mother was active through her involvement at school as a support volunteer in Peter’s older brother’s grade. When the opportunity presented itself, both Peter and Stephen’s mothers requested their child be with a prep teacher they already knew. The school had concurred. After the orientation days Peter’s mother had been opportune in taking any chance, when Peter was with her at school, to have an informal conversation with Peter’s future prep teacher. She felt this had helped them to become acquainted.

A great effort was made by Susan’s mother to ensure that Susan had a supportive link with the school — she felt it was important to Susan that school felt familiar and a place where she belonged. In support of this feeling Susan’s mother shared her enthusiasm about the school with Susan over the summer holidays. She remembers saying to Susan that they were joining a new community, where they would feel part of a big family. In addition, to consolidate a feeling for Susan of belonging to the community around the school, she moved to a new house closer to the school, visited the school playground with her whenever possible and attended a school fete prior to the start of the school year. Susan’s mother felt confident as well that a prep teacher was someone who would offer Susan attention and interest in her learning (PI-11/05. p. 27/Susan).

In contrast, Lily and Cathy’s mothers reported a lack of opportunity to establish any connection beyond that provided by the orientation days. Nonetheless, Lily had found her own social and emotional link in the similarity of names. It appears Cathy was sustained by a great self-confidence in establishing contact with others. Her mother described her awareness of Cathy’s high level of confidence, including her estimation that Cathy was socially, emotionally and intellectually, quite ready for school. She commented — I felt it was a small transition for her. I had no conscious thoughts of her needing any help to start school (PI-10/05.p. 6/Cathy).
Where parents had established a link they were confident that their child’s start at school had been supported as a result. However, the one-sidedness in making a connection between the child and the school is evident and it is uncertain whether the supportive effect of individual connections would have been present if the initiative had been left entirely to the school. This situation also leaves room to ponder the outcome if parents of the children who had not been formally identified as cognitively advanced had attempted to establish connections which included advocacy for their child’s advanced cognitive development. Overall, the practices evidenced in this study suggest a lack of awareness of the importance of such connections — despite the current advocacy of this (Brooker, 2008; Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework – DEECD, 2009a).

**Development of the teacher – child relationship**

Michael and Justin’s teachers were the only ones who stated the value of a close bond between teacher and student in supporting children to adjust to school — they noted this as particularly important for ‘these children’ [those who were different from age-typical children]. Justin’s teacher expressed it clearly in her reflection on the administration of The Early Years Assessment task early in the year:

A side benefit [to doing the early assessment] is that each child feels more closely attached to you because they have had this individual time with you. They feel they have made friends with you a lot more after that. I notice that even those children who turn out to be more challenging, like Justin, feel more secure at school. It is important, that they feel they can trust you. (TI-11/05. p. 2/Justin)

Despite the variability in overt recognition of the value of a close bond, observations indicated all the teachers had a caring and supportive manner when interacting with their students.

It is the ‘children’s voices’ though, that provide rich detail about the importance to them of a very close relationship with their teacher. Comments to their parents revealed warm feelings about their teacher, in particular centred on their enjoyment of the new learning provided by her. My invitation to talk about their teacher, revealed strength of feeling that for some of the children was potentially at the level of an attachment bond. Lily commented to me:

Well - she teaches me well and she is a **really nice** teacher. I feel **very happy** at school. I learn **lots of important things** from her. (CI-09/05. p. 3/Lily’s emphasis).
Her mother confirmed Lily’s strong feelings:

She loves everything about her teacher. The learning provided, the recognition of Lily’s interests, and the clear and detailed explanation about everything that happens at school. But the significance of this relationship for Lily became really apparent after she had been quite ill in the middle of the year. After several weeks away from school Lily was hesitant about going back to school. She thought she would have missed so much work she now wouldn’t know what to do and that the other children would have forgotten her. But she felt so close to her teacher that she reassured herself that her teacher would help her — she really trusted her teacher. Her teacher was in fact very sensitive to Lily’s feelings and made sure she settled back and re-established herself in the class — with work and with the other children. (PI-12/05. pp.15 – 16/Lily)

Peter said, I’m happy — of course. (CI-09/05.p. 9/Peter) His mother elaborated on his response when he was not present:

Actually he loves her, he really does; the way he talks about her at home and the conversations they have, he just loves her. We think this was very important to him as he didn’t feel so close to his preschool teacher — there wasn’t much to keep him interested. (CI-09/05. p. 10/Peter)

Justin’s mother shared his comments from a recent conversation she had with him about his feelings for his teacher. With his usual expressiveness Justin had said:

You know mum, she (his teacher) is just like Miss Honey (Roald Dahl’s ‘Matilda’). His feelings for her are very warm; he is very, very fond of her. (PI-11/05/Justin)

Acceptance of different behaviours

The informal interactions between teacher and child (discussed in the first section of this chapter) provided a form of intellectual extension for the children and were also an integral part of the social and emotional relationship between these children and their teacher. The children’s comments highlighted their importance and the teachers also noted it as an attractive element in their relationship with this child. For instance, Lily and Peter’s teacher commented that she enjoyed learning something new from their interests (for example, Peter’s science experiments) in a way that did not occur with other children in the class. Cathy, Justin, Susan and Michael’s teachers all reported enjoying the sense of humour that these children displayed; they could enjoy a joke with them that they could appreciate as an adult, they didn’t have to pretend to be amused.
Social interactions were observed to include conversations at a more mature level than those of their age-typical class mates with some exchanges having the potential to be confronting. One example from observations of Michael at school illustrates this different element in the relationship. Michael’s school teacher organised the school chess club which Michael had joined. On his own initiative he had brought a book about chess to school to lend her so she could improve her game. Several days later I observed him stop by her desk on the way out to recess and ask, in a polite yet solicitous voice:

How are you going with the book on chess that I lent you last week? You know you shouldn’t try to read too much at once. Only read eight to ten pages at a time, don’t try to read too far ahead.

Michael’s teacher raised her eyebrows and looked somewhat surprised by this comment, then smiled and replied graciously — thank you Michael; I will follow your advice — and with a satisfied smile Michael then hurried out of the room after the other children (FN- 04/06. p. 211).

Justin was also very articulate and confident, and had protested to his teacher and, his mother said, to anyone who would listen about school happenings with which he did not agree. One such instance concerned Justin’s view it was unfair that preps had only limited opportunities to play on the school oval, Justin told me about this problem with school when we talked together late in the year — I have talked to Mrs H (his school teacher) about it and written to Mr P (school principal). I think they should do something about it (CI-11/05.p 28/Justin).

The respective teachers of both Michael and Justin did not find such assertiveness in these five year olds confronting, rather they accepted the level of confidence and ability as indicating an interesting personality. Justin’s teacher said (with a little affectionate laugh), I manage his zeal for causes, his determined pursuit of his own goals, his insistence on his right way to do things. I do little nips and tucks around the edges [of his behaviour] (TI-08/05. p. 22/Justin). While both Michael and Justin’s teachers were somewhat amused by such confidence they also appeared sensitive to a disparity between sophisticated behaviour and inexperience of social contexts or interactions. In sharing these incidents they did not appear to need to control or prevent such behaviours, but conveyed a feeling that they accepted and liked these children for themselves.
Stephen’s interaction with his teacher and his responses to the curriculum were also affected by behaviour associated with his giftedness — perfectionism (for example, Silverman, 1993). This trait, combined with a significant age difference (because of early entry), as well as Stephen’s overwhelming shyness, had the potential to marginalise him in the class (see Gross’ report of experiences of early entry for gifted children, 1993). As illustrated in his teacher’s comment about Stephen, she maintained a positive approach to his idiosyncratic participation in the class work:

In some ways I see him as strong despite his age because he doesn’t have to cling to an adult [like many of the other preps] — but in other ways it is really, really difficult to find out what he knows. He is frustrating — but that’s ok, I keep working at it. (TI-08/05. p. 13/Stephen)

His parents reported that:

It could have been a difficult relationship. On one hand there was our claim that he was advanced but there was also his difficulty about speaking much to her. Instead she has been quite warm but also clear about what she expects in terms of work. He loves the work and he just loves her (mother’s emphasis). One day when I went to pick him up she called me aside and said quite excitedly, Stephen talked to me today, she was really quite pleased. There is a really strong feeling between them. (PI-10/05.p. 7/Stephen)

Observations of each child indicated that age-different behaviours continued to be evident across the length of the school year and their teachers continued to be accepting of this in their interactions with them. Each teacher showed a willingness to maintain a positive working relationship with them.

**Relationships between the children and their peers**

Analysis of the social interactions between the participant children and other children at school suggested that they had developed in a positive way. As the children talked late in the year about this aspect of school life, they all said they had friends at school and sounded enthusiastic about playing with them. They named the children they liked to play with; some were friendships that had continued from preschool while others were new friends. They talked about activities they could choose to do with friends and when I invited them to draw a picture about what they liked at school, most drew about playing with friends (see Figure 3). Their parents reported that the development of relationships with other children had been satisfactory as did their teachers. Observations of the children’s friendships with others
indicated that characteristically gifted behaviours had been influential in the development of relationships with their peers.

Friendship at school

With the exception of Stephen, the children in the study started school with other children who they said were friends from preschool, although the exact nature of this varied from child to child. For some of them this included their best friend — Peter had his best friend Charlie, and Justin had his closest friend Nick in his new class. For the others, ‘friends’ were in reality those children with whom they had been acquainted at preschool; Susan, Lily, and Cathy entered school with children they regarded as friends but there was no evidence to indicate a relationship any closer than a daily acquaintance with each other. Michael also started with children with whom he had differing degrees of connection, which ranged from the ‘friendship’ with Kim to others he was acquainted with from his preschool class.

Parents were very aware of their child’s daily interactions with other children and how happy or otherwise, they were with their friendships. Late in the year most parents viewed social connection to be well established for their child to the extent that these friendships continued outside school hours. Susan’s mother was the only one concerned about the nature of her daughter’s school friendships. She voiced uncertainty about how well this was progressing, especially as Susan was usually reluctant to discuss it. However, she sounded reassured in reporting Susan’s own account that she played with lots of others at school and especially liked the older children. Her mother did seem disappointed though, that Susan did not yet have a best friend, or any close friends (PI-11/05. p. 25/Susan). Susan’s own description of her friendships at school was brief and did not convey the enthusiasm of the other children about playing with friends although she considered herself to have friends as the following reveals.

ANNE: Can we talk about playing with others at school?  
SUSAN: (replying very abruptly) Yes. I play with my friends.

Several other questions to expand on this were unproductive, with Susan replying in a disdainful tone: I don’t know.

ANNE Is it sometimes hard playing with other children?  
SUSAN: Of course not. (FN-12/05.p. 11/Susan)
When the teacher of each child was asked specifically about the development of social relationships most of them reported that the child in question had progressed appropriately — having friends to play with and showing the expected and desirable level of social skills. Comments from Lily and Justin’s teachers about the children’s friendships illustrate this:

Lily has made new friends at school and is in a group that always plays together. Boys and girls, and they play imaginatively. They play proper games, not just comparing the latest toys or giveaway toys from a fast food outlet, like many others of their age nowadays. They are kind to each other, and she is well liked. (TI-08/05. p. 13/Lily)

Justin has widened his group of friends to others in the class, [but] I would say that Nick is still important because he has known him from kinder [preschool] and he is very much in his heart. (TI-08/05/p. 22/Justin)

Comments from Susan’s teacher indicate again that she was the exception. Her mother’s uncertainty about development in this domain was echoed by a contradictory summary of Susan’s progress from her teacher (see conversation excerpt between Susan’s teacher and me in the next section).

**Friendship and advanced development**

Characteristics of the children’s peer interactions and friendships seemed indicative of advanced abilities (Emotional and Social Characteristics — Appendix A) and the evidence in
this study suggested that these traits were attractive to other children, thus enhancing their social interactions. In some interactions the children took on a leadership role, alternatively they were reported as liked by other children because of an ability to communicate a level of friendliness or empathy that was greater than usual. These traits were illustrated in the following comments.

Justin’s teacher’s comments:

Despite his bossiness, the other children are very attracted to him and he is highly popular. He has [the] ideas and the other children are drawn to him for that, I think. (TI-08/05. p. 23/Justin)

Cathy’s mother’s assessment of friendships:

I think she feels very confident about herself and because of that is a bit of a leader with the others at school. When we arrive at school there is always a little group of girls who rush up to her, wanting to talk to her, asking her what they will play today. (PI-10/05. p. 30/Cathy)

Cathy’s teacher had a similar opinion of Cathy:

Cathy is mature socially – she doesn’t like to hurt others’ feelings I think that is why she has lots of friends but also she is so switched on to other people: she could manage all these groups of children [within the class] if you asked her. (Teacher gave a little rueful laugh) (TI- 08/05. p. 21/Cathy)

In other situations, cognitively advanced behaviours and developing social skills exposed the children to difficulties, which could have hindered relationship development with other children. Michael’s advanced concept of friendship, evident at preschool, also seemed to prompt a loyal attempt to continue his ‘friendship’ (from preschool) with Kim because she was Amy’s best friend. Social contact between them continued until his teacher and parents intervened. They had observed that Kim was distracting Michael from listening to the teacher and attending to his work, or was telling him to exclude some children from games at recess time. At times Kim would also exclude Michael from games, which upset him as he could not understand why a ‘friend’ would do this. Eventually his parents and teacher judged it as an unproductive relationship and directed Michael not to sit with her. Following this step his teacher actively promoted his interactions with other children (FN-03/06. p.189).

As at preschool, Michael was compliant about adult direction of social interactions but also confident about forming relationships with others. Both Michael’s parents and I observed the increase in his group of friends throughout the year to include children within his class, his grade six ‘buddy’, the older children within the student council and his grade
four maths-class friends. His father reported that Michael and his grade six buddy, Steve, enjoyed doing their maths homework together during ‘Kids Club’ [after school-care] (FN-02/06. p. 170).

For Peter, Lily and Stephen individual sensitivity was present to a degree that it resulted in considerable difficulties for them. Observations of their relationships indicated that high levels of sensitivity combined with inexperience because of age, or lack of awareness of school behaviours sometimes created tensions in developing friendships at school for these children. Stephen demonstrated both a high level of empathy and advanced moral concerns in his relationships with other children at school. His parents considered these traits had resulted in a wide circle of friends for him but also exposed him to situations that were difficult for him to resolve. His parents remembered one incident had upset him deeply (when he was just a few months past his fifth birthday):

Some of the older children regularly teased Nigel, who had an intellectual disability and one day they started calling out ‘Nigel’s a bully’. Stephen didn’t know how to stop it. He knew the teasing was wrong and that Nigel did not understand what the names meant, but he didn’t know to go to the teacher. He waited till he got home to tell us. While he never wanted to NOT go to school he worried about some of the other children at school for a while. (PI-10/05. p. 4/Stephen)

Another facet of their evolving social development was the tendency by some to use their advanced ability to gain advantages over other children, probably with little or limited awareness that these had the potential to hurt or upset other children and thus alienate them. Justin’s teacher identified this potential in him. She commented:

Justin’s logic and reasoning was superior to that of the other children. He would use it to support his argument for how to organise their games but also to gain a greater share of equipment, or computer time. He could often be right, but when I would hear him arguing [for this latter goal] I would step in and explain to him that there were other ways of seeing the situation. In other words, he has to accept other children’s rights.

The others do like him though, and there isn’t any real conflict with other children. He gets intense about situations that aren’t going his way, but I think the others don’t notice all that much. I just know the look he gets on his face – as if he is about to explode – a ‘how dare you not do what I say’ look. (TI-8/05.p. 22/Justin)

His teacher laughed at the memory but also described these behaviours as needing her intervention to support Justin’s continuing development of appropriate social skills.
Susan’s teacher noted behaviour that seemed similarly arrogant and although she was critical of it, unlike Justin’s teacher she seemed unsure about assessing Susan’s development. Her conclusion about Susan’s social learning is contradictory as this excerpt from our interview conversation reveals.

ANNE: What do you notice about Susan’s social skills development?

SUSAN’S TEACHER: Because Susan is so confident and quite clever she is aware that she can dominate others. One day she was calling one of the Grade 1’s a ‘baby’ and on another day she was breaking the other children into groups of clever (and therefore her friend) or not so clever.

Susan has displayed these condescending behaviours over much of the year. But she plays only with the preps, not with the older children as she states. She does not have a best friend. However, I think her social skills are OK. (FN-12/05. p. 13/Susan)

These descriptions of Susan’s interactions do not suggest good social progress and my observations a week later corroborate this view. Susan was confidently making numerous social approaches to other children but these drew negative comments from them and she was rebuffed whenever she asked to participate. The general message was the same as in this comment from a classmate; Go away, I don’t trust you (FN-12/05. p. 10/Susan). These comments however, did not appear to upset her and she would just drift away to another activity.

Such comments from other young children are unusual for them and of a nature that suggest a pattern of negative social interactions. A plausible explanation when considering the contradiction between the teacher’s estimation and my observations of Susan’s social skills is that the teacher noted frequent social interactions but not perhaps the quality of the social exchanges, as Susan’s interactions were not disruptive to the general atmosphere of the class. So her teacher’s summary of Susan’s social development — that social progress had been OK — was possibly based on the basis of frequency of interactions or lack of conflict, rather than on markers of good social development in this age group.

My observations indicated that none of Susan’s interactions seemed to be at the comfortable, friendly level that is found in friendships at that age. Rather it appeared that Susan’s different behaviours without the ‘nips and tucks around the edges’ that Justin’s teacher provided were marginalising her. When these observations were shared with her
teacher, her response was a thoughtful: *That is interesting: I think it’s probably accurate now I think about it* (FN-12/05. p. 13/Susan). This represented a distinct change of mind from her previous assessment of Susan’s social progress and raises questions about understanding of social and emotional wellbeing at school.

It is to be expected that all children experience interruptions, difficulties, and make mistakes in the development of social relationships, so in these occurrences the young gifted children were similar to any other child. Whether the particular occurrences would have resulted in any long term difficulties for these children is not possible to predict, as they were usually resolved sensitively and apparently adequately by the adults except, it appeared, in Susan’s case. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the different behaviours had their origin in characteristics of advanced development — Justin’s logic and reasoning or Stephen’s empathy — and it is this aspect that indicates the importance of these behaviours in the children’s development of peer relationships in the reciprocal-socialisation process.

**Discussion**

Relationships have been identified in this study as an important influence on these young gifted children in their adjustment to school. While the transition literature places the primary emphasis on continuity in relationships with peers, I argue continuity in teacher-child relationships is also influential. While the change from preschool to school inevitably requires most children to adapt to a new teacher, this study found that for these young gifted children continuity in the qualities of the adult-child relationship was an important influence on a successful transition.

*Relationships between the young gifted children and their teacher*

The actions of Susan, Michael, Stephen, and Peter’s parents to establish a social and emotional connection they knew would support their child in starting school was influential for these young gifted children. Although only Michael and Stephen’s parents explicitly identified intellectual difference in their child to the teacher, the evidence suggests the parents of these four children were aware of particular emotional and social needs in their child and sought to make connections with the teacher or school in a way that was appropriate for their child’s needs. The children’s comments also suggested the importance to them of an early feeling of knowing their teacher or of belonging at school (see 5.1. ‘Beginning school’) thus confirming the parents’ judgement about this aspect of beginning school.
Parental support of this nature has been noted by Docket and Perry (2005) when children were culturally or ethnically different and I propose that the behaviour of the parents of the gifted children in this study was similar. While Whitton (2005) found parents of young gifted children were first and foremost concerned about a satisfactory school response to intellectual needs, evidence in this study indicates these parents were also concerned about a relationship between their child and the teacher that would meet their child’s social and emotional needs. Further research would be needed to establish the extent to which differences as a result of advanced development were important in the parents’ action to forge a meaningful link with the teacher and the school. However, this case study indicates its potential contribution to a positive experience of reciprocal-socialisation for a gifted child.

The relationship between the teacher and these gifted children was also influenced by their characteristic social, emotional and intellectual behaviour. The children’s view of the relationship illustrated that there was an intensity to the connection with their teacher at a level that is characteristic of the feelings of young gifted children (Roeper, 1982) and for some of them indicated feelings at the level of an attachment bond (Rolfe, 2004). In a way that was similar to Michael’s relationship with his teacher at preschool, Justin, Stephen, Lily, Peter and Michael all expressed intense feelings about both interacting with and learning from their school teacher. Also important to all the children, in these relationships, was the informal intellectual stimulus from social interactions with their teachers. These included a variety of exchanges from shared humour to Michael’s direction to his teacher about reading the chess handbook.

The importance of supporting attachment behaviours in the early stages of adjustment to a new learning environment is discussed in regard to children younger than three years (Brooker, 2008). Rolfe (2004) argues that it needs to also be considered relevant to children beginning school as the emotional security afforded by feelings of attachment has implications for all aspects of cognitive learning; for instance, motivational behaviours as well as receptivity to and performance in new learning are enhanced by a firm bond where the child feels safe and able to trust the teacher. Discussions by Gross (1999a) and Harrison (2005b) of the early experiences of gifted children at school include the absence of a good relationship with the teacher as one of the difficulties they face.

The findings of this study show that the quality of the relationship enjoyed by these children with their teacher contributed to the teachers, parents and children’s overall
judgement of the first year as satisfactory. The relationship illustrated a close emotional and social bond, enhanced by the teachers’ acceptance of atypical behaviours in the gifted children, echoing that of home. While only Michael experienced a differentiated learning program (5.2. ‘Learning at school’), their experiences indicate that where the teacher responded in a positive way to the whole child the children made correspondingly satisfactory progress in all developmental areas of learning. There is recognition in the literature of the influence of multiple factors in children’s adjustment to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Niesal & Griebel, 2005). The multiple factors found in this study illustrate this influence in the reciprocal-socialisation process for young gifted children. However, this finding also provides information, I have not found elsewhere in the literature, on the particular factors that are influential on the establishment by a gifted child of a feeling of belonging at school.

I argue that an emphasis in the gifted education literature on the importance of cognitive provision for gifted children (for example, Gross, 1999a) may minimise teachers’ awareness of the holistic nature of their learning. As a result, there may be minimal attention paid to the interactive effect between learning opportunities for young gifted children and their characteristically gifted behaviours in cognitive, social and emotional domains. Such interactions are multidirectional and the experience of these young gifted children suggest that affirming relationships with their teachers generally ameliorated less than satisfactory intellectual content in their learning program.

**Relationships between young gifted children and their school peers**

Friendship is discussed as potentially difficult to cultivate for gifted children because a different trajectory of development results in social differences (Silverman, 1993). As a result establishment of friendships can be impeded by advanced cognitive development which creates: higher expectations of the quality of friendship (Gross, 2000); a lack of shared interests (Harrison, 2005); or too great a difference in ability levels between age-peers for friendships to occur (Morelock & Morrison, 1996). Differentials such as these can result in inexperience with making friends and thus a lower level of social skills (Whitmore, 1986) and as a consequence social connection can be more elusive for this sector of the school population. While social connection did appear to present some difficulties for Susan, advanced cognitive development was identifiable as actually providing advantages in establishing friendships for the other children.
Starting school with friends is accepted as contributing to the success of the transition process as it offers children continuity in social connection with others, which in turn provides security while children adapt to the new learning culture (Brooker, 2002; Brostrom, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian, 2000). Conversely, the absence of connection with peers is linked with difficulties in adjusting (Margetts, 2002). In looking for an explanation for the contribution that friendships made to the experience of reciprocal-socialisation for these gifted children, it was initially difficult to find common elements that illustrated continuity in social connection.

At the start of school, relationships for these children included well established and close friendships from preschool for Peter and Justin in contrast to Michael’s ‘loyal friendship’ with Kim. Lily, Susan and Cathy were ‘just’ acquainted with others from preschool, and Stephen had no continuing peer relationships from preschool. As the year progressed, Michael, Lily, Cathy, Stephen, Peter, and Justin all appeared to develop satisfying connections with new friends and the proposed challenges for gifted children in establishing friendships were not conspicuous — such as higher expectations of social interactions with others, or no other children with whom to share cognitive interests (Gross, 2000; 2005). Justin and Cathy for instance, appeared to play a leadership role rather than seeking ‘like minds’. By contrast, Michael developed friendships across a range of ages which included those characteristics of friendship said to be distinctive of gifted children; for instance, friendships with older children (Michael’s friends in grade four) of similar intellectual ability. Michael’s diverse relationships with other children at school were reported by his teacher and parents as an important part of Michael’s satisfaction with school.

Absence in the data of consistent characteristics with regard to developing relationships with their peers during the change from preschool to school, gave rise to further questions about the meaning of continuity of social connection for young gifted children. However, when the diverse nature of the children’s friendships was considered on the basis of their quality, continuity in their social relationships was evident. Friendship quality for all children is evaluated on the basis of its ability to offer three attributes: its potential to offer social validation; exclusivity (having a special friend); and low levels of conflict (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). Through this lens of ‘quality’ the characteristics of the friendships established by most of the gifted children became comparable. Observations of their peer relationships indicated several or all three elements of these were present. Conversely, Susan’s relationships did not show consistent evidence of any of these
characteristics, indicating a lower level of social and emotional validation of her at school and in turn offering some explanation for her less than satisfactory social connection with peers.

A perspective on continuity of friendship that calls attention to the quality of the connection for a gifted child rather than being focussed on the presence of established acquaintance, offers an insight into friendship as a contributor to the children’s satisfaction with school. Although I contend, with the exception of Michael, cognitive provision at school was not based on an adequate identification of ability level, there was clear evidence that for Lily, Cathy, Justin, Peter, and Stephen satisfying friendships at school contributed significantly to their general opinion that they liked going to school. However, the picture that emerged of the friendships established by these young gifted children illustrated only a few examples of the qualities of friendship identified in the literature as important for gifted children — for example, friends who were of a like mind (Gross, 2001; Harrison, 2005b; Morelock & Morrison, 1996). The evidence in this study indicates that in the children’s experience of adjusting to school the contribution made by friendships to the children’s positive perception of school was that relationships with their peers were validating — the important quality being their friendships enabled them to continue being themselves. The experience of quality friendships thus became an emotional, social and cognitive resource in the school environment.

**Developing a sense-of-self at school**

A sense-of-self is observable in the behaviours expressing a child’s attitudes, beliefs and values about themselves (Sroufe, 1995). Identity develops first through interactions and relationships with parents then progresses, as interactions and relationships outside the home are experienced, to a more complex understanding of the self (Sroufe, 1995). Adjusting successfully to a formal learning environment requires all young students to align their sense-of-self with expectations of behaviour and learning in the new educational environment (Lam & Pollard, 2006). To develop an awareness of changes and thus influences on the gifted children’s sense-of-self at school it was necessary to first consider the mode of learning and skills, and the associated relationships before they started school. Thus, characteristics of advanced development in the children’s home and preschool sense of identity were explored for an understanding of how they responded to the new learning environment of school.
Developing as a learner at home

Data gathered from the children’s parents suggested that in the home environment their children sought out and participated enthusiastically in complex cognitive experiences. Parents supported these activities, providing in response to their child’s interest, specific skills and knowledge. For Michael and Stephen, this had enabled them to develop advanced skills, in reading, writing and number prior to starting school. The other children were more age-typical in levels of academic learning but they had been involved in a range of complex and enriching experiences that implied a strong interest in learning and the motivation to concentrate and persist in achieving a goal. Reports of typical activities at home were:

He (at 4 years) enjoys complicated conversations with his father about possible constructions [for example] – how they would make a [real] rocket ship. (PQ-09/04/Justin)\(^{14}\)

We introduced Cathy to board games at about 3 [years old] and she has always enjoyed them: triominoes, card games, scrabble: she sees the game through to its end and often wants to play again. (PQ-09/04/Cathy)

Lily (at 4 years) told us she wanted to learn to swing across the top of the climbing frame at the local park. We go there frequently. She has kept trying, using different techniques to manage different manoeuvres, asking us and others for help until she could do it. (PQ-09/04/Lily)

Peter and Susan’s parents described similar, eager participation in complex cognitive activity, notably advanced for four year olds, at home. Some of these activities were prompted by the children — Susan would initiate with her mother complex discussions about the meaning of words: for instance those that sound the same but are spelt differently. Other activities were those initiated by adults — Peter was always ready to do science activities with his father: Why won’t oil and water mix together? (PQ-09/04. Peter & Susan) These parental observations of activities at home identify a well-developed sense-of-self as a learner in these children.

Developing as a learner at preschool

Analysis of the engagement with cognitive learning at preschool for these gifted children\(^{15}\) indicated that they were not engaged in learning at a level or way that was similar to home. Lily, Susan, Stephen, and Peter usually appeared detached from the self-initiated

\(^{14}\) PQ - Parent Questionnaire: Appendix C.

\(^{15}\) ‘These gifted children’ – in this section most reference is to the group of children with the exception of Michael as he did not attend at the same time. Where he enters the narrative he is specifically mentioned.
learning opportunities of the program at preschool. Observational notes of Susan and Lily reveal that they wandered a lot, only occasionally becoming involved in a self-chosen-activity. Parental comments confirmed their lack of engagement — both girls regularly had ‘morning tummy aches’ on preschool days, and complained that it was boring at the M-EEC. Peter’s behaviour showed disengagement in the frequent observations of him preoccupied with little toys or toy advertising brochures he had brought from home. This activity was always interrupted by a request from his teacher for him to return these to his backpack on his home-peg. Notwithstanding his preoccupation with these, he was interested and readily involved when a structured activity was presented, for instance, when the specialist art teacher arrived for the weekly art session with the children.

Stephen also showed most interest and engagement in learning opportunities at preschool when there was a directed group experience, as illustrated in one of the fortnightly music groups. The music teacher was teaching a counting song to this three year old group. Stephen enthusiastically joined in the singing, doing the correct actions for the song. He looked more attentive and skilful than the other three year olds taking part in the activity — he anticipated the next number and therefore the next set of actions, and remained focussed on the singing and actions for the entire song, not interrupting with tangential comments as many of the others did (FN-09/04. p. 2). In contrast, when free play was timetabled he often participated in an activity in exactly the same way as the other three year olds. This appeared similar to Michael’s response to free play. For instance, during one observation visit Stephen was at the play dough table where he casually rolled the play dough flat, squeezed it into a ball and then rolled it out again, exactly as the others did. While they looked interested in what they were doing, there was a desultory air to Stephen’s activity.

Stephen’s mother had shared information with his teacher about Stephen’s interest in learning from others at home. He was rapidly learning to read and write and do ‘number sums’, especially supported by his older sister’s insistence that he play ‘school’ with her (FN-09/04. p. 2). This was not coerced involvement rather, Stephen was very eager to keep learning. In response, his preschool teacher had observed that his play or participation at preschool did not indicate any accelerated learning. Subsequently his parents decided in the June of his preschool year to have his IQ assessed (3.4). While his knowledge and skill in academic learning at home was accelerating at this time, his teacher at preschool maintained a DAP orientated program for all her students with learning opportunities she considered appropriate for three year olds. This program provided no invitation to display the learning
that was developing in his home environment. Stephen’s parents informed his preschool teacher of the outcome of the IQ assessment and she subsequently encouraged him to demonstrate his reading and writing skills, but Stephen simply refused to read or write for her. It was therefore unsurprising she had difficulty believing the report of Stephen’s rapidly developing academic learning at home and her subsequent comments to me conveyed considerable doubt about the ‘real development’ of these skills (FN-09/04. p. 3).

My observations of Stephen revealed a gifted child adapting to the attitudes, beliefs and values about learning endorsed by the learning opportunities and relationships characteristic of his educational environment — as Michael had done. It may have been that the preschool program offered no genuine opportunities for him to display his learning or extend his knowledge and skills. As Stephen was quite shy, it is also possible he was too reticent to introduce his learning interests at preschool. Whatever the reason, observations of Stephen’s behaviours in the learning environment at preschool indicate that he responded to activities at preschool in an age-typical (three year old) way, while at home his academic skills were advancing rapidly. The evidence suggests that Stephen had been active in reorientating his sense-of-self to conform to the new learning environment but also that he was responding to preschool just as Gross (1998) argues older gifted children are forced to respond to school, by erecting a mask that concealed their real interest and ability in new learning, something Stephen quickly learnt to do.

For these gifted children, while an identity that included responses to satisfying cognitive experiences may not have been fostered at preschool, the data indicated most of the children appeared to have a sense of belonging socially — within their class and within a particular group of their peers. Stephen looked animated when interacting with other children even though the games were usually at an age-typical level. A typical observation of him with other children is one where he joins some boys crawling around and around the block shelves meowing at each other (FN-10/04. p. 8). Peter spent considerable time with his best friend Charlie, usually looking at toy catalogues. Susan and Lily both described themselves as having good friends at preschool and they were observed at times in imaginative play with a few other children either indoors or outside in the garden.

Observations of Justin and Cathy illustrated their frequent engagement in social activities at preschool. They were both described by their parents as happy at preschool and
they each had a clear role as a peer group leader (FN-09 to 12/04). Cathy’s preschool teacher commented:

She suggests and leads activities, and is maternal towards much younger friends. (FN- 10/04. p. 8)

Playing a variety of games with other children for most of the day, their social skills and interactions suggested a well-developed social identity. In one respect they were similar to Michael as an advanced cognitive ability was observable in their social interactions. But where Michael attempted to build an alternative set of age appropriate social skills through imitation of a few particular children, Cathy and Justin were leaders. Observations of their play reveals them as the usual instigator and organiser of games as well as the one who settled conflicts between other children. This is complex activity for a 4 to 5 year old child and I suggest it could be sufficiently cognitively satisfying to maintain their cognitive engagement with activity at preschool, in contrast to the frequent lack of engagement observed in Lily, Susan, and Peter. When, in the last days of the year, I had a conversation with each child in the study about learning at preschool, they expressed a predominantly social sense of their preschool-self. Justin summarised his learning at preschool in this way:

I have learnt [this year at preschool] that you should not punch people. That everyone is [to be] a friend. I learnt how to sing and how to play with the others. (FN-12/04. p. 10/Justin)

The interactions of all these children within their class, illustrated their confidence and a satisfactory level of emotional competence. This was apparent in their positive and friendly relationships with their teachers and their ability to manage themselves within a peer group throughout the typical experiences of the preschool day. The emotional characteristics identified in the gifted education literature (Table 2, p. 34) were not present as difficulties — for instance, heightened sensitivity or intensity — and their interactions within the preschool learning program were very different to those of Michael during his preschool year.

Overall, the children appeared to sustain differing identities between the home and preschool learning environment. The evidence suggests that a well-established ‘cognitive-learner-identity’ had been encouraged at home, while preschool had fostered a social and emotional identity as a member of a peer group but had not identified or encouraged their identity as a cognitive learner. This outcome creates vulnerability in the children’s continuing involvement with learning in an educational program. A formal learning environment that has an emphasis on social and emotional identity but with weak links to overt intellectual
learning, especially for children whose intellectual learning is advanced, is potentially less likely to prepare children adequately for school where there is a potentially stronger focus on an intellectual curriculum.

**Developing as a learner at school**

Before school began, the children’s sense-of-self as a prospective school student was positive with an assuredness about their capacity to become part of this learning environment. Michael was the one exception to this attitude of self-confidence until his school teacher visited him at home. As described, this had led to a change in his perspective and in complete contrast to his start at preschool he had separated from his parents smoothly and happily on his first morning at school. Michael’s new found self-confidence as a member of a class, participating in the learning program persisted for the length of his first year.

Observations of the other children in the study during their very early days indicated they also had a smooth transition into the new role of school student. They were at ease in the classroom with their teacher and with other children — interacting confidently with children they knew from preschool and others who were new classmates. All complied readily with the teacher’s timetable, her statement of class rules and teacher directed learning activities. Stephen and Michael displayed a distinct eagerness about new learning provided in their school environment. Stephen’s response in the group numeracy lesson with his teacher exemplifies this as does Michael’s enthusiasm about difficult spelling words for homework (5.2). The ‘culture shock’ described by Brostrom (2005) as an outcome of disparity between preschool and school curriculum and pedagogy was not apparent for these children.

However, in the following weeks this optimistic progress faltered in those children who had not been formally identified as intellectually advanced. They appeared to lose confidence in learning at school or in themselves as learners. Maintenance by the teachers of a learning environment that was ‘like preschool’ or conformed to teacher preconceptions about age-typical learning appeared to precipitate tension at home. Peter’s parents reported:

> Although he started school — just taking it in his stride — the early days were shorter than he had been used to at preschool, with a lot of just play and repetitive-learning type activities. So by the time full days started with some stimulating school learning Peter was saying he didn’t like school and we had to enforce that he had to go. They [teachers] need [to do] something more challenging; instead of leaving it to four weeks or so into term. (PI-10/05. p. 28/Peter)

Susan’s mother reported Susan’s early disappointment:
Susan very quickly [at beginning of the year] started to say that school was boring, because I think the days were so short and she expected more ‘work’. She would come home bursting to do more activity and would want me to answer lots of questions and teach her more about things they had done at school that day. This was difficult for me and disappointing for her. (PI-11/05. p. 24)

Lily’s mother reported that after a week or so at school Lily unusually started arguing with us at home about ‘how things were said’.

We eventually realised that a comparatively simple expression of knowledge had currency in Lily’s classroom at that time whereas we had relatively complex conversations at home and this seemed to have confused her. Lily thought that there was only one way to know things, or say things — the way they were expressed in class, at school. This obviously would be a way that suited most of the children in her class. For instance, over the summer Lily often watched the cricket on TV with her father and used to confidently read out the scores from the numbers on the screen: i.e. saying, *six [out] for one hundred and fourteen [runs]*: but after a few weeks at school she started saying, *you don’t read numbers like that, its one - one - four [114]*. We tried to explain the standard way of saying the score but Lily would just become more unsure and upset about these differences — *we weren’t right; the school way was* — so we just stopped saying anything that differed from her teacher. However, this knocked her confidence in what she knew about numbers and it has taken her much of the year to get back to having some confidence about her level of numeracy (PI-12/05. p. 16/Lily).

Despite early unsatisfying learning appearing to challenge the children’s interest in school, and thus destabilise their experiences as a school student, this did not continue to be a prominent issue. By the end of Term 1 the children were observed to be settled, involved with learning and with other children at school. The findings indicate that in some situations the children were proactive in adapting to their new environment. Susan did not express disappointment about not being offered the work of the older children but participated as much as she could in the learning offered to them. Her comments about learning Grade One and Grade Two work suggest she considered herself as a participant anyway. For the other children events occurred over time that resolved the issue. For instance, Peter became more
settled once his teacher offered stimulating learning on a regular basis and Justin’s teacher eventually recognised his need for cognitive challenge and provided, where she was able, informal intellectual challenges for him. In some situations the challenge to the child’s understanding of being a school-learner simply became part of school life — Lily’s loss of confidence about her ability to do maths at school remained as part of her everyday experience of school. However, the eventual satisfactory adjustment by these children to life at school was another example of the process of adjustment occurring through happenstance rather than as the outcome of awareness of particular learning needs.

At the end of the year the children, teachers and parents expressed satisfaction with the children’s overall engagement with school learning as well as their learning outcomes. Each teacher commented that these children were sociable and willing members of the class and their standard of learning was assessed by the teacher as excellent. The parents expressed similar opinions although being more intimately aware of their own child’s response to school some made qualifying observations that will be addressed in the next section — Situations of risk. The children’s reflection on the outcome of their school year was not on the abstract notion of engagement with learning or on their level of achievement in relation to the overall class, but expressed their enjoyment of learning at school and their confidence about themselves as school students. Cathy for instance said in her interview with me:

At school you learn. I am now good at reading, and writing, maths, and [then in a rush of words] I am very, very, very good at the monkey bars. (CI-09/05. p. 23/Cathy)

Lily represented similar feelings in her picture ‘Figure 4’ — This is my reading and writing group and I am drawing about reading and writing as I am really good at it. We are writing ‘ay’ words. I noted that Lily drew each figure, in the writing book on the table, with a correct orientation to the chair (where the other members of her group would sit). She did not turn the paper to do this.
A new school environment will require all children to negotiate differences in learning expectations, different relationships, and rules and importantly their sense-of-self. This adjustment will involve challenges to and opportunities for continued development. The findings of this study indicate that in addition to the adaptation required of all children when transitioning into a new learning environment there were particular situations of risk for some of the young gifted children. An interaction between characteristically gifted behaviours and teacher practice that was not sensitive to these characteristics resulted in situations where some of the children were vulnerable to less successful experiences of the transition process.

Observations of Susan’s interactions with others at school suggest that to develop a sense-of-self at school Susan needed to reconcile awareness of the type of intellectual stimulation present in her home environment (for example, use and enjoyment of complex vocabulary) with the mainstream level of stimulation at school. While a lack of continuity between Susan’s enjoyment of a high level of intellectual interaction and her learning opportunities at school did not result in her losing interest or reacting negatively to learning at school, it did have an interactive influence on her, being apparent in her sense-of-self as a social member of her class. The evidence suggests Susan attempted to understand herself at school by introducing her own definition of herself into her relationships with the other children. Through grouping other children at school as clever (like her) or not clever she appears to be endeavoursing to establish her place in the peer group. But this was not a
positive social approach and appeared to have undermined her place in the peer group, thus not contributing to a healthy sense-of-self as a school student.

Justin was the most assertive of all the children but he also seemed at the end of the year to be in a position of risk because of his advanced cognitive development. When I talked with Justin about school, late in the year, he had very firm opinions on learning at school and talked at length about his current dissatisfaction with learning at school — he voiced his concern that preps, although this was specifically himself, were not given sufficiently stimulating work. During our conversation he was responding to this situation as he did to others, by doing something about it. On a large piece of paper he had written:

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Well I think that preps should have harder work.
Because they have work that you don’t have to do.
They taught me how to spell ‘cat’,
I learnt this last year.
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**Figure 5: Justin’s dissatisfaction with schoolwork (CI-11/05. pp. 35 & 41/Justin)**

He planned to hand this ‘letter’ to his teacher the next day.

Following Justin’s description of his feelings about this situation his mother commented — once he had left the room — that she had concerns about future vulnerability for him. She did consider his prep teacher had made a considerable contribution to Justin’s generally positive experience of his first year at school; his teacher’s acceptance of Justin’s assertive and competitive behaviours, and some extension in the prep grade had maintained his engagement. However, his mother was not confident that Justin’s future engagement with learning at school would be guaranteed simply by a positive start. Her concluding comments to our conversation on this topic were:
ANNE: What do you think about his ability to achieve at school?

JUSTIN’S MOTHER: [reflectively] Well, he will be able to do whatever he wants, I imagine: [long pause] it will be a matter of whether they can recognise his needs and maintain his motivation.

ANNE: Do you think that could be problematic?

JUSTIN’S MOTHER: Mmmm, yes. [then in a quite rueful tone] I think it could be very uncertain. (PI–11/05.p. 40/Justin)

The early difficulty for Lily between how learning at home and school was expressed, (described in the above observation of her ability to read cricket scores) illustrates a conflict with formal learning that was also present for Justin — and identified in Michael’s preschool experience. Finding that there were different ways at school of expressing learning is an example of children learning the ‘school’s pedagogic discourse’ (Bernstein, 1996). For children who are advanced this process can involve — at school or preschool — not simply new concepts or more formal expressions of learning as described by Bernstein but as Lily found, having to ‘learn a different and simple set of words at school with which to express knowledge already gained’, or alternatively as Justin’s opinion illustrated — having to accept that school learning was about things he already knew.

Discussion

Reorientating their sense-of-self as a learner is the necessary achievement that underpins all children’s experience of the first year in a new school learning environment (Bernstein, 1996). The general opinion expressed at the end of the year by the children, the parents and the teachers in this study, was that the children’s first year of school had been a positive and successful year. This view suggests a satisfactory reorientation to a school identity by the children, a process that requires the achievement of competence in intellectual learning as well as managing the emotional autonomy and sense of social belonging implicit in integration into a new learning environment (Lam & Pollard, 2006). The documentation of their experiences at school illustrated the presence of these competencies in most of the children although, as noted, the manifestation of them in Susan’s interaction with the school program leaves some room for concern about how successful the process had been for Susan.

In contrast to the apparent achievement of a satisfactory adjustment to a school sense-of-self by these young gifted children, there are views expressed in the gifted education field suggesting that the reorientation of a sense-of-self for gifted children is challenging
Harrison, 2005; Sankar-DeLeeuw 2004; Whitmore, 1986). Whitmore’s (1986) seminal work on young gifted children at school reports that well-developed home learning schemas and social and emotional developmental differences from age-typical children create difficulties for them in navigating the required adaptation to school. More recent discussion on young gifted children by Harrison (2005) and Sankar-DeLeeuw (2004) also suggests difficulties for them, although I have found no other reports of specific investigations into how they reorientate their sense-of-self in a new formal learning environment.

This study has shown there were pedagogical practices that appeared to support the children in establishing an identity as a school student. The intellectual goals presented in the school learning environment and teacher recognition of high levels of motivation in the children were elements in the new environment similar to those described by the parents of the children as typical of the home environment. While the practice of most teachers stopped well short of the recommendations of identification of ability and a differentiated approach to curriculum delivery for gifted children (Harrison, 2003; Porter, 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, 2005), the conclusion of this study is that for most of the children there was sufficient learning of interest to maintain their engagement. These familiar aspects in a learning environment provided affirmation of the children’s intellectual interests and thus a sense of continuity in their sense-of-self.

Nonetheless, this study also revealed teaching practices that required the children to ‘adjust downward’ knowledge already gained, as in the experiences of Justin and Lily described in the previous section. This adjustment is an illustration of one way the school’s pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 1996) can disadvantage a gifted child. It has the potential to confuse the development of a sense-of-self when the child feels, as Lily did, that she needed to choose the (simple) school way over the more proficient skill she had already achieved. If the process of adjustment to school requires a gifted child to choose between continued learning at a level already achieved or conformity to a normative expectation of appropriate learning at school, then this puts their reorientation of sense-of-self as a learner at risk. This potential outcome demonstrates the reciprocal-causality identified by Bandura (2001) in the interaction between the personal agency of the child and the influence of the sociostructure, and illustrates how this may impact on a gifted child.

The reconfiguration of a sense-of-self to an appropriate identity at school also requires social and emotional adjustment (Pollard & Filer, 1999). This process for these young gifted
children appeared to be assisted by a similarity between preschool expectations of social and emotional competency and those of school. Reports on the children’s preschool experience suggested that it had fostered their feeling of belonging socially within a class, as well as a sufficient level of emotional competency to be independent of parents. Development of these skills would support adjustment to the new class at school. There was, in the experiences of these children, no evidence that they experienced the psycho-social conflict described by Whitmore (1986) between maintaining their high levels of interest in learning and the classroom expectations of conformity. Thus, my concern expressed earlier in this chapter, that the very different pedagogical approach of preschool and school may have confused the children’s adjustment to school proved to be without basis. The adjustment achieved by these young gifted children demonstrated the recognition present in the transition literature that children are active in reconstructing their sense-of-self in a new environment (Brooker, 2008). While satisfactory provision for cognitive, as well as social and emotional development had not occurred at preschool, a combination of prior satisfactory development of these aspects at home and preschool appear to have provided these children with a foundation to support a reorientation of self as a school student.

However, this study also found school practices with a potentially adverse impact on social and emotional learning for these young gifted children. Pedagogical practices indicated minimal awareness of the necessity for children to reinvent their sense-of-self as a school learner and what this may involve for a child who is developmentally advanced. For instance, although all teachers emphasised social and emotional development as important for preps throughout their first year, there was an absence of evidence — apart from Michael’s teacher — that they identified individual learning needs in these areas of developmental learning and implemented appropriate learning opportunities. The apparent absence of such planning, combined with teaching practice that was orientated towards normative cognitive learning and showed little apparent awareness by teachers of the characteristics of gifted children, indicates that while the children worked at reorientating their sense of identity there was no explicit support for this from their teachers. I argue that the ‘necessary achievement’ of reorientating a sense-of-self as a learner in the first year of school (Bernstein, 1996) occurred, for these young gifted children, largely by happenstance.
5.4 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter have described important behaviours found amongst a sample group of seven gifted children, their teachers and their parents, as the children experienced their first year of school. From an exploration of the children’s experiences of entering the new peer group learning environment of school this study has sought information that answered the main Research Question.

Bandura’s (2001) theoretical model of triadic reciprocal causation provides an explanation of how sociostructural factors operate through the psychological self-structure to produce behavioural effects. This dynamic interplay has been presented in this study as the reciprocal-socialisation process in a formal learning environment. The findings of this School Case Study reveal how particular sociostructural factors influenced young gifted children and their subsequent behavioural responses within the transition process. The resulting behaviours demonstrated by the children indicated that the outcome of transition for them was positive when their holistic development was facilitated. Even when provision for intellectual learning at school was confined to teacher preconceptions about appropriate learning for the prep grade the children maintained positive development if there were satisfactory opportunities for learning in other areas. For instance, feelings of attachment to their teacher accompanied satisfaction by most children with intellectual learning opportunities although, for most of them the latter was only an approximate response to their ability level. Exploration of Michael’s experience as a gifted child transitioning into school provides the clearest illustration of the effect of holistic development on adjustment. Explicit identification of his intellectual learning needs, as well as an awareness of his individual social and emotional needs made a significant contribution to a positive first year. As a consequence the contrast between Michael’s beginning at preschool and beginning at school could hardly be greater.

As signalled in the introduction to this chapter the key findings are summarised at this point. The following list provides a reiteration of the key findings presented in this chapter.
Key Findings in — School Case Study

Cognitive learning at school

— influences on engagement with school learning

- The children’s engagement with learning was positively influenced by the continuity between home and school learning schemas.

- The children’s high level of motivation to engage in learning was an important influence in the reciprocal-socialisation process as it prompted both learning achievement and positive socioemotional development.

- Teacher practice, which generally overlooked opportunities to identify diversity in children represented by high levels of ability, influenced the potential for satisfactory differentiation of the curriculum.

- Teacher practice that included informal, intellectually stimulating interactions between the teacher and the gifted child contributed to adjustment to school but usually occurred by happenstance.

Social and emotional development at school

— influences on the search for relationships at school

- Early connections with the school were influential in assisting establishment of strong social connections with the teacher.

- A strong social and emotional attachment by the gifted children with their teacher was facilitated by teacher acceptance of and responsiveness to atypical behaviours that were characteristic of giftedness.

- Good social relationships with peers were characterised by friendships which enabled the children to be themselves and included acceptance of characteristically gifted traits.

— influences on the search for a sense of identity

- A feeling of belonging at school was positively influenced when the transition process into school included an extension of approaches to learning from their home learning environment that they found both familiar and satisfying

- Continuity between preschool and school in expectations of social and emotional
behaviour contributed to the ease with which the young gifted children adapted to the new environment of school.

- Elements in school practice that responded to levels of cognitive ability, advanced on mainstream expectations, positively supported the reorientation of a sense-of-self by these gifted children.
- Overt recognition by teachers of elements of school practice supportive of gifted children reorientation of sense-of-self was minimal, resulting in happenstance adjustment by most of the children.

This case study of the reciprocal-socialisation process at school provides substantiation for a recent call to the early childhood field to generate a diverse knowledge base about the learning and development of young children (Edwards, Blaise & Hammer, 2009). In Chapter Two of this thesis it was argued there was a need to include young gifted children in the early childhood education conceptualisations of diversity. While this case study has focussed on a small group of gifted children and their teachers, the close observations and rich data have contributed evidence of the importance of taking into consideration the characteristics of young gifted children in thinking about diverse early learning and growth in educational environments. In Chapter Six, the final chapter of the thesis, the particular influences on the experiences of young gifted children in the reciprocal-socialisation process are explored.
Chapter Six

Drawing the threads together

It is only when the stories of these uniquely different outsiders are heard and understood that the community can climb to the next rung of the moral ladder. The process by which the stranger becomes a fully participating member of the group is one which we must act upon in our classrooms. (Paley, 1992, p 58)

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this in-depth study was to explore the process of reciprocal-socialisation for seven young gifted children in a formal learning environment. Research attention to this age group of gifted children and their early experiences of formal learning environments, especially at the preschool level, is scarce. In the first part of this concluding chapter themes that synthesise the findings across the two case studies are discussed in relation to the key research question:

What influences a gifted child’s learning experiences when transitioning into a formal educational environment?

The next section of the chapter describes the contributions this study makes to the field of gifted education. This is followed by recommendations for supporting gifted learners in their first years of formal education and suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the research journey.

6.2 Synthesising the findings of two case studies

In essence, the research question asks about the behaviours and characteristics of the participants in the transition process into a formal learning environment which influenced the learning experiences of young gifted children. Two learning environments were observed — preschool and a prep class — and despite major curricula and pedagogical differences in their educational programs there were similarities in the children’s experience within these environments. It was important to step back from the particularity of each case study to consider what insights they provided about the children’s experiences. Characteristics of the interactions between young gifted children and a formal learning environments have been reported in the literature — including children’s social and emotional vulnerability (Roedell,
1986), the problematic issue of identification (Harrison, 2005; Hodge & Kemp, 2006), the potential difficulty of providing a differentiated curriculum (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004), and the rarity of differentiation for young gifted children (Gross, 1993, 1999). Confirmation of these characteristics was found in the two case studies, however, it was also evident there were additional characteristics influencing the children’s learning experiences that to date have not been raised elsewhere. These characteristics are the focus for the following discussion.

**Holistic development and learning**

The findings of the case studies revealed that the holistic nature of development influenced the gifted children’s experience of reciprocal-socialisation in the formal learning environment. Observations of their preschool and prep grade experiences indicated an interaction among social, emotional, and cognitive behaviours. Accepted understanding of the holistic nature of child development is that “cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development are [each] complementary and mutually supportive, all requiring attention [of the teacher]” (Bowman, et al., 2001, p. 7).

*How might holistic development interact with advanced cognitive development?*

The children’s engagement with the learning program revealed that when opportunities for learning did not satisfy their intellectual learning needs they appeared stressed and their social and emotional behaviours appeared ‘out of step’ with those expected for their age. Michael’s intense emotional reactions to the unfamiliar learning activities at preschool have provided the most detailed documentation of these responses but they were also evidenced in the behaviours of the other children. For instance, Peter’s parents reported that while Peter separated happily from his mother at the start of the school year, he soon showed some early signs of being a school resister. It took some time for them to realise that his early interest had waned because he found the play-based activities in the early days, repetitive and boring (5.3. ‘Developing as a learner at school’).

While this study has reported detail about the children’s negative behavioural responses to the formal learning environment, positive influences and behaviours were also of interest and were identified. Responses from the children, their parents and teachers have contributed information about successful practices and positive learning outcomes to those already cited by other researchers (Hodge & Kemp, 2002; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004), and details of these practices are presented in Chapters Four and Five. However, in addition to these reports of successful practices, a synthesis of the findings in these two case studies
reveals a correlation between positive social, emotional and intellectual responses by the children and particular aspects of both the preschool and beginning-school environment. This correlation reveals that positive development by the children occurred when there were four particular features of the curriculum and pedagogy.

1. Opportunities to develop a close relationship with their teacher that is accepting of a child with different behaviours, and included willingness by the teacher to establish an attachment bond.

2. An affirmative connectedness with their peers.

3. Opportunities to develop a positive and confident sense of themselves as a learner.

4. Learning experiences that responded to the children’s cognitive level of development.

Where any three of these aspects of the learning environment were present or encouraged, I argue that the combination enabled the children to experience the reciprocal-socialisation process, at preschool and school, in a positive way. Conversely, where two or more of these were not observed then the engagement with learning was correspondingly lower or absent (see for example section 5.3. ‘Friendship and advanced development’). An unambiguous illustration of this finding was provided by the marked contrast between Michael’s early lack of engagement at preschool, and his later enthusiastic engagement at school.

This finding confirms, to some extent, evidence of the importance for young gifted children of adequate cognitive provision (Gross, 1999a; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Whitton, 2005), in addition to recommendations in the transition literature that social connections and the opportunity to re-develop the sense-of-self as a student are important (Brooker, 2008; Ladd, et al., 1996; Rolfe, 2004). The finding is also of interest because the responses of the children confirm that each feature in the learning environment was insufficient in itself. It was outside the scope of this study to ascertain whether there were relative differences in importance or impact of these individual features, but my observations suggest that they all influenced the children’s adjustment to the learning environment in an interactive way and possibly had a cumulative effect.
I suggest, however, that where most of the children were deemed to be content at school despite a lack of intellectual stimulus that matched the actual measure of their cognitive ability, a sufficient level of satisfaction in the other features may have had a compensatory effect. This is a tentative claim that needs further investigation, but this research indicates the characteristic social and emotional behaviours of gifted children should receive similar attention to advanced cognitive ability in the curriculum focus. To ensure positive experiences for the young gifted child in the formal learning environment it is important that educational planning and practice supports characteristically gifted development in all of the four curricula and pedagogical features I have identified as sustaining the children’s engagement with the learning environment. Further, this study has identified the need for awareness in the transition of young gifted children of the simultaneous influence of learning in all developmental areas. This finding does not appear to have been discussed elsewhere in the gifted education literature but was apparent in this study as an important influence on the children’s transition to formal learning experiences.

Do teachers recognise holistic development as an influence on learning?

The potential for the teachers in this study to recognise and respond to the holistic development of the children’s behaviours appeared limited by the particular perceptions they held of developmental learning. While both case studies revealed awareness by them that positive development in young children required attention to social, emotional and cognitive learning, they viewed developmental learning in a compartmentalised way. Such thinking was reflected at both an institutional level and at the individual teacher level, limiting the teachers acceptance of social, emotional and cognitive learning as complementary and mutually supportive (Bowman, et al., 2001). This compartmentalisation effectively concealed from teachers the connection between those aspects of the educational program that were unsatisfactory and the concomitant responses by the children.

I argue that compartmentalisation was especially influential in the experiences of these gifted children because the outcome involved behaviours not easily identified as age-typical. For instance, the connection between unsatisfactory levels of intellectual programming for Susan and her social behaviours at school could be observed in her inappropriate categorisation of class mates into those who were ‘clever or not clever’. Her teacher could only ‘see’ the lack of social skills apparent in such behaviour. Michael’s school teacher, in contrast, displayed a conspicuously different perception in seeing a link between
Michael’s cognitive, social and emotional learning and behaviours at school and the need to actively implement learning opportunities that would support his holistic development (5.2).

The recent publication of the Victorian Early Years Learning Framework (DEECD, 2009a), advises early childhood education teachers in Victoria that best teaching practice with young children takes into account all aspects of learning — social, emotional, intellectual and physical — as each prompts growth in ability across all areas of development. In this study the quality of child-teacher interactions across all those aspects of development was an important indicator of the extent to which the process of reciprocal-socialisation was a positive or a negative experience for these young gifted children. I argue that such awareness is especially pertinent when teaching young gifted children because, as noted by Croft (2003), their learning needs differ from children who are mainstream learners and they are more profoundly impacted by teacher attitudes and actions. Thus, the characteristics in the response of these gifted children to both educational settings are a reminder of the need to remain aware of the holistic influence on learning for young gifted children.

**Continuity as an influence on engagement with learning**

The second influential characteristic of the children’s experience of reciprocal-socialisation into a new learning environment was the extent to which there was continuity in the process. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes that continuity in children’s experiences of a new microsystem is a significant contextual influence on their positive development. Transition literature details this as continuity in learning, learning cultures, and relationships (Brooker, 2008; Brostrom, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004). The extent of continuity or the discontinuity of these aspects of transition experience is accepted as predictive of a child’s successful engagement with learning in a formal learning environment (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007). The evidence from this study illustrated continuity as important in the children’s interactions with learning, with their teacher and other children and consequently with their engagement with learning. But, I argue, the children’s advanced development resulted in different experiences of continuity from those suggested in the literature.

*How might continuity in experiences of the learning environment be affected by advanced development?*

‘Culture shock’ is a descriptor employed by Brostrom (2005) to highlight a potentially detrimental effect on children when preschool and school hold markedly different
expectations of intellectual learning and pedagogical approaches to learning. Thus, it is recommended that educational practice should support similarities between learning environments (Brooker, 2008; Margetts, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 2002; Walker, 2007). Practices that reflected this perspective were observable in the prevalence of free-play-based activities in the school classrooms at the beginning of the year, as well as the teachers’ reports that they avoided imposing intellectual learning goals on children as they settled into the new learning environment. The majority of the teachers advocated explicitly the importance of social and emotional learning for their very young students, rather than prioritising their intellectual learning.

This de-emphasising of the intellectual focus of learning introduced a separation between home learning and that of the formal learning environment rather than supporting continuity. The parents’ reports of home modes of learning, referred to by Bernstein (1996) as their home learning schema, described intense and enthusiastic child-parent learning interactions including guidance about learning goals, direct instruction about how to proceed with a task, and frequent interactions to develop specific understandings or skills. Such learning support is identified as typical of the home lives of gifted children, but not so of more age-typical children (Gottfried, et al., 1994). Examples of the learning opportunities experienced by the children in this study ranged from Justin’s conversations at the age of four with his father about building a (real) rocket ship, to Michael’s knowledge of the number system.

While this research study reveals that the children all had an established home learning schema that reflected their advanced cognitive ability, their schemas bore little similarity to the mode of learning expected at preschool. I argue that the difference between the preschool mode of child-centred, play-based learning and that of the children’s home learning schema produced a discontinuity for the children, influencing their subsequent preschool learning experiences. Such discontinuity prompted a very negative response by Michael. While the other children were less emotional in their responses, the observed detachment of Peter, Lily, Susan and Stephen from the usual age-typical enthusiastic engagement with self-chosen learning at preschool reflects a similar reaction to the different modes of learning.

In contrast, school learning elicited marked enthusiasm from all the children. Disappointment was only evident when content was not new or interesting to them, for
instance, when the early days at school involved much time occupied in free play. Observations of the children’s engagement with learning in their prep year, illustrated that the degree to which there were opportunities for new and intellectually satisfying learning coincided with the children’s general view that they liked going to school. This expands the finding by Whitton (2005) that prior to beginning school the most important element about this projected change for young gifted children was the prospect of new learning possibilities.

I argue that in the nexus between home, preschool, and school learning, the positive influence of continuity on the reciprocal-socialisation process for these young gifted children was present in the similarity of the home and school learning environment. In contrast, the preschool learning environment with its different approach to learning and pedagogy did not provide cognitive continuity with either the children’s home learning schema or with that of the beginning-school class. This is not to disregard the potential value of cognitive and pedagogical continuity between preschool and school but to suggest that for these young gifted children it was only present when the learning schema was familiar and included teacher-directed opportunities for new learning.

My proposal that the children responded positively to the mainstream curriculum, appears contrary to other reports in the literature that school curricula and pedagogy do not adequately support young gifted children (Gross, 1999a; Harrison, 2005b; Hodge & Kemp, 2006). Children’s responses to learning and educational classroom practice obviously interconnect but this study did not aim to estimate or measure the link between them, rather it explored the influences and behaviours that appeared important in this context.

I suggest the findings of this study illustrate the influence of the sociocultural context on the young gifted children’s engagement with a formal learning environment. When accelerated intellectual concepts and skills have been a significant characteristic of a prior environment then, if the reciprocal-socialisation process is to be positive, it is important that a bridge is provided between the learning schemas of home and the new formal learning environment. This was noted by Brooker (2002) in regard to differing ethnic and cultural expectations of formal learning environments but has not been remarked on, as far as I am aware, in considering practice with young gifted children. While this may involve teachers in accepting modes and levels of learning that are markedly different from their perception of good educational practice — as occurred with the preschool teacher’s view of Michael’s early formal academic learning — it is, nonetheless, also recommended as good practice to be
aware of the individual perspectives, expectations and experiences of all children as they make the transition into a new learning environment (Brostrom, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2004). Reorientation of early educational practice to respond to developmental differences does not necessarily require radical changes (Mallory & New 1994), but I argue it does require a greater awareness than was observed in this study of how continuity in classroom curricula and pedagogical practices support a young gifted child.

*How might continuity in experiences of relationships be influenced by advanced development?*

The literature emphasises the importance of continuity of relationships as children transition from their preschool setting to school (Brooker, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This is usually discussed in relation to maintaining peer relationships, although Brooker (2008) includes continuity in teachers’ ways of relating to children as a factor in the success of transition. A sense of connection with both their teacher and with other children was important to these children. This study indicated that the elements in these relationships that affirmed their characteristic behaviour as gifted children were also those that provided continuity.

*Continuity in experiences of relationships with teachers*

The children all reported that they had a very warm relationship with their teacher. Michael at preschool as well as at school, as well as Justin, Stephen, and Peter at school all appeared to establish an intense connection (5.3). Although each relationship between teacher and young child involved the expected nurturing behaviours from an early childhood teacher it also included a specific aspect that was important to the gifted child. Each child had responded positively to the implicit acceptance by the teacher of behaviours, which were in practice very different from those of age-typical children. Examples include: Justin’s assertiveness about the provision by his school teacher of work that was too easy for him; Michael’s directive to his school teacher about the pace at which she should read the chess guide he had lent her; and Cathy’s school teacher’s observation that her interpersonal skill was potentially at the level of managing the whole class.

Guidelines for teachers advise them of the importance for all children of a warm relationship, as it establishes a feeling of belonging and a secure base from which engagement with learning can occur (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010). Nonetheless in addition to a warm persona, the acceptance displayed by the teachers of
social, emotional as well as intellectual behaviours that were different from the age-typical child, affirmed the gifted children’s sense-of-self. I argue this quality in the child–adult relationship echoed that of home and as such supported a feeling of continuity. This finding provides detail for the suggestion in the gifted education literature that the negative effects on engagement with learning by gifted children at school, because of behaviours deemed difficult or different, may be ameliorated by a close relationship with their teacher (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 2005b).

*Continuity in experiences of relationships with age peers*

Making the transition with children who are friends or acquaintances is emphasised in the literature as an important contributor to children’s feelings of continuity (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Margetts 2002; Yeboah, 2002). For gifted children, this element of continuity has been reported as having a lower priority than new opportunities at school for learning (Whitton, 2005) and while this study does not seek to establish the level of influence of continuity of peer relationships in relation to other influences, it does concur that continuity in relationships was an important aspect. However this study did find that, contrary to the suggestions in some transition studies (e.g. Margetts, 2000), continuity was not provided simply in the continuing presence of other children with whom the gifted children were acquainted.

Social connection with other children at the commencement of preschool was not investigated in this study, although it is known that for Michael this was not present. However, it was explored as an influence in the children’s experience of the learning environment of school. Reports on the children’s social connections with peers were positive overall, with the exception of Susan for whom the success of her experiences with other children was questionable. The differing configurations of the gifted children’s friendships suggest the recommendation that transitioning with friends assists continuity of experience for children is too one-dimensional to be informative about their experience.

Notwithstanding the diversity of relationships the children had with their peers, the quality that provided continuity in their social connections was that friendships provided an affirmation of their sense-of-self even when their behaviours were very different, and included acceptance of the child’s intellectual ability. It is this quality that was present in the friendships observable at school; for instance, the new friendships established between Michael and the older grade four children, and when Justin’s bossy (but usually correct)
declarations about the right thing to do, did not estrange him from his classmates. Regardless of the different nature of the friendships this aspect was present and enabled a sense of continuity because the children were able to feel socially accepted by others and yet still remain themselves.

Awareness of this aspect of continuity offers detail that is relevant to the needs of young gifted children as well as a different focus on continuity of friendships as influential in transitions. In the gifted education literature it is proposed that gifted children develop mature understandings of friendship and find connections with age peers difficult because of a different perception of appropriate behaviours (Gross, 2000). This aligns with accepted recommendations that development of social skills by gifted children depends on continuity of experiences with intellectual peers rather than age peers (Clark, 2002; Morelock & Morrison, 1996). There was no evidence in this study that the observations of positive social connection at school for most of the children could be explained primarily by either their experience of transitioning with friends or relationships with ‘like-minded’ children. I argue that in the children’s diverse experiences of friendship it is the affirmation of their sense-of-self in social interactions with other children that has the most explanatory power for the satisfactory relationships the children reported forming at school. This is a perspective on friendship for a young gifted child that offers insight on how social connection can be supported, especially when their level of cognitive advancement introduces behavioural differences from their age-typical peers.

*How might continuity in communication influence reciprocal-socialisation?*

Good communication channels, as children transition into school, are emphasised as making an important contribution to continuity in children’s experience of learning environments (Brooker, 2008; Docket & Perry, 2001; Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006). Observations in this study indicated that in most cases there was no communication between preschool and school and only restricted opportunities for parents to communicate with school teachers.

The communication channels observed were characterised by being open to information about deficit learning, but selective and unidirectional about other developmental learning. The children’s parents were reticent to communicate with teachers unless invited, especially about intellectual learning, and teachers were selective about what they ‘would hear’. For instance, only where a formal assessment of ability was present — Michael and
Stephen — did parents and teachers feel communication about ability levels was appropriate. While communication between parents and teacher at preschool about Michael’s progress was a more open and two-way process, the observations in this study illustrated hurdles, not in what information was shared but how it was understood.

There are current standards for quality educational provision in Victoria that emphasise the importance for preschool and school of extensive and open communication about each child (DEECD, 2009a; VIT, 2007). I argue that the observations in this study of attitudinal barriers between teachers and parents became academic barriers to communication about a child’s ability. This outcome illustrates particular problems for the learning progress of young gifted children. When children have learning needs and behaviours advanced on those who are age-typical there is a greater need for extensive and open communication which should incorporate a multidirectional flow of information. While it is understandably difficult for teachers to evaluate such information without knowledge of the particular characteristics of gifted children, the observations in this study of these barriers emphasise the need for more informed professional practice.

**Happenstance outcomes in the reciprocal-socialisation process**

The third characteristic viewed as important, in this study of gifted children and their transition into a formal learning environment, is a happenstance element. The children expressed overall satisfaction about their experiences at school, and Michael also in part declared positive feelings about preschool at the end of the year. Yet there was little about the curricula and pedagogical practices observed at preschool and school that aligned with recommended educational practice for gifted children. So what insight do these incongruent findings offer about the influences on the learning experiences of young gifted children in a formal learning environment?

The gifted education literature offers a fairly uniform message about teaching practices for gifted children. It conveys consensus that an appropriate intellectual learning program with a stress on the importance of differentiated learning is essential if gifted children are to engage successfully with a formal learning environment (Gross & van Vliet, 2003; Tomlinson, Callahan, & Lelli, 1997; Van Tassel-Baska, 2003, 2005). Where this is not available some writers call attention to subsequent difficulties for a gifted child in forming a healthy self-concept, in developing positive attitudes towards learning, and in establishing satisfactory social skills (Gross, 1993, 1999a; Harrison, 2005; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, &
Moon, 2002). While the majority of studies have occurred with older children, Whitmore (1986) reports that this impact can begin early in gifted children’s experience of formal learning environments.

In contrast to these recommendations, observations of the curricula and pedagogical practices at preschool and school indicated that Michael’s experience of a differentiated program at school was the exception, and the other children had no access to a program that would accord with recommendations in the gifted education literature. Practices that assessed children’s learning appeared confined to preconceptions of what was age-typical, and the provision of intellectual learning offered little opportunity for awareness of advanced levels of ability. Further, while the teachers in this study acknowledged the early educational program as influential on later intellectual achievement levels at school, the emphasis in their practice was on the importance of social and emotional learning for young children with a concomitant minimisation of the significance of academic learning. They said it was important for their young students to adjust happily and successfully to their new learning environment and thus a focus on intellectual progress was not appropriate at this early stage.

Despite the foregrounding by teachers of children’s social and emotional needs, in practice there was little evidence of proactive planning for their development. Discussions with the teachers about their practice suggested that they approached social and emotional support for their new students by minimising intellectual demands, potentially enabling children to adjust socially and emotionally to their new learning environment. These perceptions, however, do not encompass what is known about the intellectual, social and emotional characteristics of young gifted children or how learning proceeds in a holistic way.

Nonetheless in listening to the voices of the children, they were more positive than negative about their learning experiences. Reports from their parents and their teachers suggested that they observed the children to be settled and most were happy. They had an overall view of the children’s experience of their new learning environment as satisfactory. Yet this study found little evidence that the children’s satisfaction with the particular aspects of the learning program were the outcome of explicit aims in the program, or that teachers had identified learning needs — including intellectual learning — and subsequently planned for their development. In seeking to resolve a conceptual tension between what is known about the learning needs of gifted children and the generally positive attitudes of the teachers, parents and children towards the experience of the prep year, I conclude that there had been a
‘satisfactory enough’ interaction between the children’s characteristic behaviours and the new learning environment for the main players to feel content with progress to that stage. On this basis I conclude that the children’s satisfaction with learning was the result of teacher responses that by chance met their learning needs. In other words the children’s positive experience of learning was generally happenstance.

Teachers of course cannot be expected to plan comprehensively for each individual in their class, and to respond satisfactorily to the characteristics of gifted learners if they are unaware of these characteristics. But if inclusiveness of developmental diversity — that is, addressing the holistic learning needs of a gifted student — is reliant on happenstance rather than deliberate planning, this introduces considerable risk that the learning needs of young gifted children will not be met. A consequent outcome is poor development of a positive disposition to a formal learning program; an unsatisfactory learning outcome. An increased understanding by teachers of the intellectual, social and emotional characteristics of young gifted children would provide them with a more informed basis from which to develop a gifted child’s long term engagement with a formal learning environment. Such knowledge would avoid happenstance being a significant factor in positive experiences of school for young gifted children.

**Vulnerability of young gifted children**

This study has identified challenges and difficulties that were particular to the process of reciprocal-socialisation for these young gifted children. Where they illustrated the potential to put at risk positive participation in the learning environment then I consider the children were vulnerable. These influences have already been discussed in this chapter and are in brief:

- a propensity in the educational environment to compartmentalise developmental behaviours and expectations of learning, so advanced learning and characteristic social and emotional behaviours were not apparent;
- elements of discontinuity which created barriers to understanding the sociocultural context of these gifted children; and
- the presence of happenstance in the provision of satisfactory cognitive experiences and socioemotional adjustment to the new learning environment.
Specifically these aspects were most evident in the situations where the cognitive program or opportunities were not responsive to the individual children’s levels of ability or learning. Vulnerability exists, however, not simply in the disappointment of expectations but in the influence on other areas of learning or development. Social and/or emotional difficulties experienced by each child, at some point, illustrated this influence in the reciprocal-socialisation process at preschool and school.

It is accepted in the gifted education literature that advanced ability results in a different developmental trajectory and in different learning needs (Silverman, 1993). It is this different trajectory that creates circumstances where young gifted children are less likely to successfully engage in formal learning at school (Harrison, 2005; Roedell, 1986; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004). Observations of these children indicated that their participation in both the preschool and beginning-school learning program was affected by their characteristically gifted behaviours. I argue that where the educational response was not informed by awareness of the children’s different developmental and learning needs they were vulnerable to an insecure engagement with learning. That this vulnerability did not result in significant difficulties in their engagement within the duration of this study does not negate the presence of vulnerability — although, Michael’s experience at preschool could be regarded as a serious difficulty in engagement.

A decision for teachers about whether a situation was creating a challenge for a gifted child or making them vulnerable might be difficult at times. I believe, however, that the difference is discernable and is indicated by the context. Where there is the opportunity for a child to resolve a difficulty then a situation can be considered a challenge. Where there are not the resources, personal or sociocultural, then children are vulnerable because a resolution is outside their control. It is reasonable to contemplate: how much vulnerability is too much? The response must be that there is no precise measure, but I believe that teachers and parents need to be aware of potential vulnerability and ensure there is support for a young gifted child.

In a new learning environment, adjustment is required of all children. It is accepted that in the process there will be individual challenges and difficulties (Brooker, 2008), but they can also lead to development and greater resilience (Rolfe, 2004). The importance of a positive experience of transition is emphasised as having an influence on later successful achievement at school, with early social and emotional difficulties having the potential to
impact on later learning and development (Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). I argue that where vulnerability is created, or is a continuing state, it has the potential to damage gifted children’s early engagement with a formal learning environment.

6.3 Contribution to the field

A principal motivation for this study was to contribute to the very limited body of knowledge that supports teachers and parents in addressing the educational needs of young gifted children and to respond to the calls in the literature for further research (Gross, 1999b; Harrison, 2005a; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Koshy & Robinson, 2006; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Whitton, 2005). The qualitative case study approach adopted for this study provided opportunities for the reader to enter “into the setting, and into the experience, in such a way that we can understand the phenomena studied and draw our own interpretations about meanings and significance” (Patton, 2002, p. 438). From this standpoint I anticipate that the contribution of this study will be in part, particular to the interest and perspective of the reader.

Notwithstanding this property of a case study, I consider the key contribution of this study lies in the reported observations, over the duration of a full academic year, of the experiences of young gifted children in a formal learning environment. Such an in-depth study of young gifted children has not been reported elsewhere. This case study provides extensive information about the experience of young gifted children in the reciprocal-socialisation process that informs the early childhood and gifted education fields about particular elements of learning experiences for young gifted children. These elements require attention if positive educational programming is to occur for young gifted children.

Characteristically gifted behaviour

Some information that emerged from this study confirms reports that characteristic behaviours found in older gifted children are also present in younger gifted children when young, and influence their interactions within a formal learning environment, for instance, mature social skills (Gross, 2000) and emotional intensity (Piechowski, 1997). This thesis also presents new information on the expression of characteristically gifted behaviours that have not been discussed elsewhere in the literature, for instance, a need in some of the children for an intense level of social connection with their teacher that corresponded to an attachment relationship. Some findings discussed in this thesis have received only minimal
emphasis in regard to the learning needs of young gifted children, for instance, all the children illustrated holistic learning and development in their responses to the learning environment. In essence, the findings have contributed to an awareness of behaviours described as characteristic of young gifted children and how they are expressed in the process of reciprocal-socialisation in a formal learning environment.

Teacher practice and young gifted children

This research revealed information about teacher practice and how it influenced these young gifted children. Although there is an increasing body of research in Australia on teacher interactions with gifted children (Hall, 2001; Hodge, 2010; Hodge & Kemp, 2002; Lassig, 2009; Lee, 2002; Plunkett, 2000; Wellisch, 1999), few studies have investigated this in an early childhood setting and from a qualitative stance. The case studies presented here have contributed to the gifted education and early childhood literature through identifying teacher practices that were both supportive and unsupportive of young gifted children. Although the positive practices that were identified were frequently happenstance rather than planned, they nonetheless provided information about teacher responses that were effective in engaging these children in formal learning.

Illustration in this study of the characteristic behaviours of young gifted children and the outcome of specific teaching practices indicates the need for change in the teaching responses to the learning needs of these children. Awareness of positive and negative influences on young gifted children’s engagement with learning, addresses the continuing absence in the literature of information on provision for young gifted children in the mixed ability educational programs typical of Australian preschools and schools.

Curriculum, pedagogical approaches and young gifted children

While there are distinctive differences between preschool and school curriculum and pedagogy, this study revealed the difficulties created in both learning environments by practices that were not sensitised to the diversity represented by developmentally advanced children. Observations of the children’s experiences within the preschool program illustrated how developmental approaches to delivering the curriculum (Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Bredekamp, 1986) hindered teacher responses to the child’s real interest in advanced intellectual learning. Similarly, the curriculum and pedagogical practices experienced by most of the children at school appeared to be based on preconceptions about what was important for young children in the prep class, rather than offering opportunities for
realistically identifying learning needs. It is important for teachers to be aware that higher levels of ability, as an aspect of diversity, could be masked by this approach.

Recognition of the importance of being responsive to diversity in educational practice is present in the current curriculum documents for early childhood education (DEECD, 2009a, VCAA, 2007). This study illustrates that where such practices responded satisfactorily to ‘cognitive diversity’, as in Michael’s experience at school, they enabled satisfying intellectual development accompanied by positive social and emotional development. In brief, Michael was happy at school in a way that he was not at preschool. By illustrating the difficulties as well as the possible positive outcomes of these differing curricula and pedagogical approaches this study contributes an emphasis on the importance for young gifted children of teaching practice that understands the child within their sociocultural context. In particular the study identifies the influence of the home learning schema on the adjustment of young gifted children when they enter a new learning environment. This study has identified an outstanding need for a dialogue about teaching practices in early childhood education that is more inclusive of young gifted children, as well as policy changes which support appropriate teaching practice.

6.4 Key Recommendations

This thesis has drawn attention to some aspects of teaching practice that supported positive experiences of reciprocal-socialisation for these children and also revealed teaching behaviours that had a negative impact on their development. While a few of the positive outcomes were the result of teacher awareness and differentiated practice, many others were found to be happenstance, making the children’s ongoing development vulnerable. As a consequence the following recommendations are made in relation to educational practice with young gifted children.
Recommendation 1

Explicit recognition is needed at the institutional level (preschool and school) and at the classroom level that there are characteristic cognitive behaviours of gifted children that indicate the need for teacher practice to embody high aspirations for student learning.

Teacher knowledge is essential for identifying behaviours that may indicate potential ability levels. This is important because identification is recognised as impacting on the subsequent levels of academic achievement in young gifted children (Gross, 1993; Koshy & Robinson, 2006). While the curricula and pedagogical practices of the preschool and the schools investigated in these two case studies were different, there was nonetheless a similarity between the practices of the teachers. In both preschool and school the expectations of children’s learning were confined by preconceptions about age-typical levels of skill and learning. This emphasises the need in early formal learning environments to expand teacher awareness of behaviours indicating advanced cognitive ability as well as the importance of educational practice that responds to this development in children.

Recommendation 2

The different behavioural characteristics of young gifted children make it necessary for teachers to understand the concept of holistic development and the way in which the development of the social, emotional and cognitive domains are complementary and mutually supportive of a child’s learning.

Children’s positive engagement with learning and later successful learning outcomes in a formal learning environment are recognised as influenced by their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual learning and skill (Ayoub & Fischer, 2006). Observations of the children in this study illustrated this interactivity with the resulting behaviours being significantly different from those of their age-typical peers. Affirmation of such behaviours through positive relationships with their teachers and with their peers appeared to support a continuing positive experience within the children’s experience of their formal learning environment. This finding highlights the need for the children’s teachers (and for all teachers)
to be aware of the presence of characteristically different behaviours and how these influence the process of reciprocal-socialisation for a young gifted child.

**Recommendation 3**

Teaching practice at the early childhood level needs to provide a differentiated learning program that is appropriate for children with advanced cognitive ability.

There is a need for recognition at both the preschool and beginning school level that teacher skill in differentiation is necessary and entails professional skills in both choosing appropriate content and instruction methods that are intellectually stimulating for gifted children (Van Tassel-Baska & Stambaugh 2005). An increase in awareness of relevant content for a gifted child is particularly needed in the preschool learning environment. This could be facilitated by changes in teacher education (expanded in Recommendation 5) and supporting preschool teachers to provide appropriate intellectual content through increased communication between the preschool and school sectors. Such professional interactions would have the added benefit of informing the prep teacher in the following year of an individual child’s level of cognitive development. Appropriate differentiation could also be facilitated by more explicit information in the new early childhood curriculum (DEECD, 2009a) about beginning concepts appropriate to subject learning in, for example, literacy and numeracy.

**Recommendation 4**

Systemic educational practices in relation to communication between parents, preschool teachers and school teachers need to be open and active in the use of family and educators’ understanding of these children.

This is a recommendation accepted as germane to all children, (Brooker, 2008; DEECD, 2009; Docket & Perry, 2001), but it is particularly important when children have a different developmental trajectory. An understanding of best practice in education from a sociocultural perspective indicates the need to know the relevant influences on a child’s previous learning (Rogoff, 1996). On this basis there is a need for teachers to be aware of the relevance of
background information on the child who is cognitively advanced, their family and previous learning environments. This requires schools and preschools to develop communication structures which enable an interactive and ongoing dialogue. Implementation of this will support planning of satisfactory learning experiences for gifted children.

Recommendation 5

Teachers and school curriculum co-ordinators need to be provided with preservice and sustained professional learning in gifted education. Such support requires the validation of appropriate perspectives and educational practices from those organisations which provide leadership in the early childhood field.

The first four recommendations focus on changing particular aspects of teacher practice. However, they each indicate that teacher education must address the needs of gifted children. Professional learning that incorporates the characteristics of young gifted children as well as differentiated approaches to educational programming and learning could be facilitated by inclusion of appropriate information into preservice education as well as in-service opportunities for practising teachers. Comprehensive, professional in-service materials on the education of gifted children, funded by the Commonwealth Government, are available online and in hard copies (Gross, et al., 2005) to support programmes. Research evidence indicates that this provision for teachers at the primary and secondary level can enhance their professional practice (Goodnough, 2001; Gross, 1994; Koshy, et al., 2006).

The observations of this study reinforce the recommendations that have appeared at an official level (AAEGT, 2006; Commonwealth of Australia, 2001), which state the need to raise teacher awareness of the characteristics of young gifted children and to provide for their learning needs. In addition to the philosophical perspectives established during teacher education courses, guidance for teacher practice in the early childhood sector in Australia is provided by a number of organisations which assume a leadership role. This is implemented through the influence they exert on policy and through responsibility for regulations and guidelines for the early childhood field. The most significant are 1) the National Childcare Accreditation Council which publishes the Quality Improvement and Accreditation Guidelines (NCAC, 2006); 2) Early Childhood Australia which undertakes professional advocacy at Commonwealth Government level and provides a range of publications to inform
and guide the field (see ECA web reference); 3) the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development which both regulates and guides provision for early childhood education in Victoria (see DEECD web reference).

Recent official publications from these bodies illustrate the argument made at the beginning of this thesis that young gifted children remain largely invisible in the literature of the field. Changes are needed in these documents to include young gifted children in the descriptions of children who require support to access learning in a formal environment. This would provide official advocacy for the need illustrated in this study for greater awareness by teachers of young gifted children.

### 6.5 Limitations of the research and future research directions

As with any study, I acknowledge there are limitations in the design and execution of this study. By design, the number of participants in this qualitative study of young gifted children was small but this aspect of the study also indicates that the views represented may not be typical. While the children were chosen for the opportunity they offered to learn from the cases (Stake, 2005), I recognise that the ‘realities’ of all participants reflected in the findings require careful consideration before they are applied or extended to other contexts.

Further, this in-depth study is inevitably limited by the subjectivity I bring into the research process, from the initial motivation for the study to the data collecting, the analysis, and interpretation. As an early childhood teacher with the additional experience of providing programs for young gifted children my prior experiences were valuable. They enabled insights into the nuances and subtleties that were part of the educational context of early childhood education in Australia and into the interaction between families with gifted children and educational settings. However, I acknowledge these experiences were also an influence which I have attempted to mitigate as a researcher undertaking a qualitative research study. Notwithstanding the inherent limitation and scope of this study, avenues for further research present themselves on a number of levels and I suggest the following directions which have the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of how to support the transition experiences of young gifted children.
Direction 1: Further research is needed into the developmental learning needs of young gifted children

Currently there is only a small foundation of empirical information available about young gifted children; as discussed in Chapter Two. To build a valid foundation on which to support educational provision for young gifted children it is necessary to have a range of studies and perspectives that provide a substantial body of evidence-based information about early childhood provision for them. These two case studies reveal the need for additional studies in the areas of social and emotional development in combination with cognitive learning by young gifted children. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of how to support their early learning. In addition, the current situation of minimal knowledge about the learning experiences of young gifted children in preschool indicates a particular need to increase our understanding of their transition into this setting.

Direction 2: Investigation into the perspectives of young gifted children about their educational experiences would be valuable

Including children as effective contributors to research is accepted as enriching the context and quality of the data (Docket & Perry, 2007b) and enhancing the researcher’s insights (Brooker, 2001). It was outside the scope of this study to collect extensive data on the children’s perspectives of their experiences of transition but further exploration of ‘their voices’ would contribute to our understanding of influences on their learning. Gifted children are recognised as having a characteristically well-developed home learning schema (Gottfried, et al., 1994) and it would substantiate our understanding of influences on their learning to know more about how they perceive the required adjustment between home and preschool or school. This could yield distinctive perceptions about the nature and influence of the sociocultural context of learning for young gifted children, providing information about an area that, to date, has received little research attention.

Direction 3: Research is needed into how teachers understand and make educational provision for young gifted children

Integral to this study was consideration of the interaction between the characteristically gifted behaviours of the children and the response by the teacher. As the focus in this study was however, primarily on the children the information generated from the teachers was limited. Further inquiry into uncovering teacher perceptions of giftedness in young children and teacher understanding of the need for differentiated learning programs
may reveal other influences in the reciprocal-socialisation process that are not yet reported. Investigation of the following questions would contribute to a greater understanding of the learning experiences of young gifted children.

- How can preschool teachers provide accelerated and academic (if relevant to the child) content, within a play-orientated pedagogical approach?
- How can teachers actively support continuity for young gifted children between the home, the preschool and the beginning school environment?
- How can teachers support the re-invention of a sense of identity for children who are developing in a way significantly different to age-typical children?

**Direction 4: Further research is needed into the efficacy of targeted pre- and post-service education in changing teacher practice with young gifted children**

Effective change has been noted in Australia with experienced teachers who work with primary and secondary age gifted children (Lassig, 2009; Matthews & Forster 2006; Plunkett, 2000) but has been found to be less effective with pre-service teachers (Taylor & Milton, 2006). In addition, such provision has not been studied with teachers of the youngest gifted children in formal educational setting. Acceptance of the formative influence of the early years of education (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) underscores the value of future research into the efficacy of the provision of such programs for early childhood teachers.

**6.6 Conclusion**

A journey is an apt metaphor for the writing of a thesis as it illustrates the process of planning and ‘intellectual’ movement from a starting place to one that is new or largely unknown to the traveller. The ‘journey’ in this research started, as described in Chapter One, with the families of young gifted children who were uncertain about how to support their children in a formal learning environment. In a paradoxical way the journey has taken me both to a new place and back to where I began.

The ‘new place’ is one with an understanding of why young gifted children are barely visible in the early years of education and therefore have little focussed provision made for their learning. It has also afforded insights for me about significant influences on these young gifted children within the transition program and supportive teaching practices which need to be emphasised. These insights will hopefully contribute to the early childhood and gifted
education field. In addition the ‘travel’ has furthered my journey as a researcher. From the beginnings described in Chapter One — The prologue: A personal journey into gifted education — I have acquired the skills needed to investigate a ‘problem’ from a qualitative perspective. This knowledge will provide the foundation for researching new projects.

The next stage of the journey is to disseminate my findings to the early childhood and gifted education communities. I feel strongly that this knowledge should be shared so that it can empower others to provide more competently for the learning needs of young gifted children. The quote from Paley (1992) at the beginning of this chapter presents a vision for responding to diversity. If we are to strive for the moral goal of being an equitable and inclusive society then we need the knowledge to support full participation for all children in the culture of our preschools and schools. However, in investigating the responses to young gifted children within the learning culture of the preschool and prep class, it is apparent there are considerable barriers to providing adequately for their needs. In this situation “there are losses for the children themselves … and for society at large” (Koshy & Robinson, 2006, p.117), a state of affairs that must be resolved.

This awareness, as I come to the end of this thesis and reflect on my aim to better understand the early engagement of gifted children in a formal learning environment, has figuratively speaking brought me full circle back to the beginning. At this study’s conclusion I find that my thoughts are back with the families who need support to ensure that their children are visible in educational settings. In this way the journey continues.

Postscript

When a study has been closely involved with the experiences of very young children in a formal educational program there is a natural interest in how these children have progressed in subsequent years of schooling. I regret that it has only been possible to remain in contact with Michael and his family. Compensating for this limitation, however, is the satisfaction in knowing that Michael’s positive start to school has been maintained.

After consultation between his parents and the school there was agreement that for social and emotional reasons Michael would proceed through the usual grade levels with his chronological peers. In those subjects where Michael is accelerated — mathematics, science and English — the school has managed to support his acceleration. Where Michael’s learning is assessed to be at a similar level as his age peers — for instance music, art, and physical education — he continues his lessons at his grade level. At the time of writing Michael is in
his sixth year of primary school (Grade Five in Victoria). Maintaining his progress in maths has provided his teachers and his parents with the greatest challenge, as he is currently more than half way through the secondary school curriculum in maths. Michael’s parents feel uncertain about how the school will manage his ongoing acceleration and wonder when it will no longer be possible to provide for him within the primary school framework. From time to time, Michael has raised with his parents situations where his teachers require him to join in learning activities that he finds far too easy. For instance, in the name of ‘social connection’ they oblige him to take part in activities that he finds very boring — such as a recent class competition to provide the quickest answer to any multiplication sum between 1×1 and 5 × 12. Nonetheless, the most important feature of school life for Michael and his parents is that he is happy. This is an outcome that has been achieved so far through a mixture of subject acceleration, friendships he has developed with children at all grade levels, meaningful opportunities to talk to teachers, and involvement in many extracurricular activities at school.
References


Web references

DEECD — Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. www.education.vic.gov.au

ECA — Early Childhood Australia. www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

## Appendix A: Characteristics of giftedness.

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<td>More likely as infant or preschooler to score highly in intelligence tests</td>
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<td>Home environment is cognitively enriched</td>
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<td>Shows mathematical ability</td>
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<td>Shows classification and investigation skills</td>
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<td>Ability in mazes, puzzles, or numbers</td>
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<td>Enjoys company of adults, older children and gifted children</td>
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<td>Shows heightened awareness in early social interactions</td>
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<td>Expresses concern about current issues</td>
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Note: More characteristics were found in the literature than could be reasonably presented here. Those selected for Table 1 were chosen on the following basis:
• they were regularly used to describe giftedness in preschoolers;
• they were currently and frequently reported; and
• their use in Australian texts suggested that they were seen as generaliseable to young gifted children and/or transferable to Australian children.

Appendix B: Parent questionnaire about children’s learning.

Please tell me about your child: (Circle or tick the right descriptor of your child and I welcome any written descriptions you can provide to illustrate behaviour.)

Child’s name……………………………………………………… (boy or girl ?)

Date of birth………………

How many people are in your immediate family?…………………………..

Where in the family does this child come? Only child, 1st child, 2nd child, 3rd child, 4th child, other, …………………………………………………………………………..

Curiosity.

Do you notice your child showing curiosity? Sometimes Often Not yet.

Books and stories

Does your child have an interest in books and stories? Yes Not yet.

If yes, describe something about the books they particularly enjoy.

………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………………

Is your child interested in learning to read yet? Yes Not yet.

If yes, what things do you notice your child doing that are related to reading?

…………………………………………………………………………………………

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Learning

Is your child interested in any other areas of learning? (e.g. numbers, writing, music, art/drawing, science, computers, nature, etc.) Yes Not yet

If yes, give one or two typical examples;………………………………………………

Does this interest or knowledge surprise you? Yes Not really

Describe why ………………………………………………………………………

Tasks

Does your child like to choose their own task? Sometimes Often Not yet.

(for example, building with Lego, playing with toys, dressing self, etc.)
If so describe a typical task or game; .................................................................

If you ask your child to carry out a task that you have chosen; i.e. learning something new or a domestic task; what is his/her usual reaction?

........................................................................................................................

Describe a typical situation.............................................................................

........................................................................................................................

Do you think your child has developed a good level of concentration for their age?

Yes                       Not yet.

Give some examples of when you have noticed them concentrating. ...............  

........................................................................................................................

Games

What games does your child like to play (name or describe 2 -3 favourites)?

........................................................................................................................

Mischief

Does your child get up to mischief?        Sometimes            Often            Not really

If so give an example of typical or characteristic behaviour.........................

Friends

Does your child spend time with friends yet?    Often            Sometimes            Not yet.

If so, what are the ages of these friends?.............................................

When he/she is with friends what part does he/she play?

(These descriptive words may help: peacemaker, provides ideas, sensitive to others, very sensitive about themselves, follower, leader, watches first then joins in, moves in and out of play, adapts readily to others, or any other descriptions that might be more accurate.)

Describe what you have seen........................................................................

Feelings.

Choose several words that seem to best describe your child’s emotional nature? (Some of these words may help; or use others that seem more appropriate in describing your child: easy-going; shy; intense; extrovert; introvert; always happy; sensitive; perfectionist; etc. )

Does your child show their strong feelings?    Sometimes            Often            Not really
If so, give an example ………………………………………………………………………….

Does your child express feelings that worry you?  Sometimes  Often  Not really
If so, give an example………………………………………………………………………..

Does your child express feelings that surprise you?  Sometimes  Often  Not really
If so, give an example

Thank you for taking time to fill out this questionnaire; it will help me in establishing my data base.

Anne Grant.
Appendix C: Project information for participants

(Version C – provided to teachers)\(^{16}\)

**Letter of invitation to join study**

The University of Melbourne:
Department of Learning and Educational Development.

Professor Bridie Raban (supervisor)
Head Early Childhood Studies
Department of Learning and Educational Development.
Ph: 8344 0978
Ms. Anne Grant (PhD student)
Ph: 8344 0985

Dear_________________________

My name is Anne Grant; I am a PhD student at The University of Melbourne and also a teacher with many years’ experience of teaching young children. Professor B. Raban is my supervisor. I am undertaking research for my PhD on the experiences of very young children as they adjust to school. While early experiences are acknowledged as important there is little evidence about how a young child might form their early understandings about learning at school and in particular how this influences their engagement in learning at school.

Some children who are enrolled in your prep grade have been involved in this research project during 2004. To enrich and verify the data already collected we wish to continue gathering data on them as they settle into school. So I am approaching you with an invitation to assist me in my research project along with the children and their parents who have already contributed to this study. As early impressions by children are known to have a strong influence on settling-in behaviour I feel it is critical that we can collect some observations of each child in their early days at school.

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\(^{16}\) Version A: appropriate - Letter/Plain language statement & Consent form given to parents.
Version B: appropriate - Letter/Plain language statement & Consent form given to Director of preschool & Principal of school.
Version C – appropriate - Letter/Plain language statement & Consent form given to participating teachers.
Appendix C – continued:

These visits would always be planned at the convenience of the participants and we do not wish to intrude on the everyday work of the school. Please see the attached Plain Language Statement for a description of the study and issues that arise from such a study.
Appendix C – continued:

Plain language statement for teachers

The University of Melbourne:
Department of Learning and Educational Development.

**Project:** Case studies of young children adjusting to school.

**Aim:** The aim of this project is to investigate how young children adapt from their experiences at home and preschool, to the learning environment of school. This is a study designed to gain a ‘rich picture’ of the children’s development through gathering information regularly from the children, their parents and teachers. Specifically the project is aiming to explore which behaviours may be ‘important’ as children enter the new culture of preschool or school and in particular how they become engaged with learning in each particular setting. It is planned to take a qualitative approach to this study, which will involve gathering information from teachers, parents and children through several visits to the parents and regular visits to the school.

**What will you be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate you will be asked to:

- give permission for me to join your class 4 – 5 times over the year so that I can make observations of the children’s interactions in the class;

- participate in informal conversations where convenient, about each child participating, to describe some of the characteristics of each child’s learning, including social and emotional adjustment; and,

- participate at a later date in a more structured interview, lasting no longer than an hour, to discuss in detail each child’s learning behaviours and general engagement within the school culture.

Parents who have agreed to participate have filled in a short developmental questionnaire on their child; have given me permission to do a norm-referenced assessment of their child and have also been asked to participate in an interview (similar to the teacher’s), to discuss their child’s learning behaviour. The children will be asked to give permission for me to observe them, also to participate in one informal interview which will take place with their parents at home.
With the permission of the participants the interviews would be tape recorded so that I can ensure that there is an accurate record of what is said. When the tape has been transcribed you would be provided with a copy of it to ensure it is correct and or request the removal of any information.

**How will your confidentiality be protected?**

I intend to protect the anonymity and the confidentiality of all responses to the fullest possible extent within the limits of the law. Names and contact details will be kept in a filing cabinet quite separate from the computer file where the data from the responses will be entered anonymously. The researcher will be the only person who will be able to link your responses to your name and personal details. Participants and schools will not be named in any presentations, reports or publications arising from this research, however, they may be referred to by general description – a school in an inner city location. The data will be kept securely in the Department of Learning and Educational Development (LED) at The University of Melbourne, for five years before being destroyed. Information about each child’s assessment would be available only to the researcher.

**How will you receive feedback?**

Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of findings will be available, on request, at the Department of LED. It is also possible that results would be presented at academic conferences.

**Will participation prejudice participants in any way?**

Please be advised that participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without any prejudice. A decision to participate is independent of your position at the school.

**Where can further information be obtained?**

If you require any further information or have any concerns please do not hesitate to contact the researchers on the numbers give above. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the study you are welcome to contact Kate Murphy, the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 8344 2073 or fax: 9347 6739.
How do participants indicate their agreement to participate?

If you are interested in participating in this study you can indicate that you have read and understood this information by completing the details on the accompanying consent form, signing it and returning it in the envelope provided.

Anne Grant
Appendix C – continued:

**Consent form for persons participating in research projects**

**The University of Melbourne:**

**Department of Learning and Educational Development.**

**Project title:** Case studies of young children adjusting to school.

Name of teacher-participant.

Telephone number: School__________

- Mobile: ___________/Home: __________________

**Name of Investigators:** Professor Bridie Raban.

Ms Anne Grant.

I consent to participate in the research project named above, the particulars of which, including the aims, the questionnaires and informal interviews, have been explained to me. A written copy of the information has been given to me to keep.

I authorise the researcher to use with me the questionnaires, interviews and audiotaping referred to in Plain Language Statement, above.

I acknowledge I have been informed that:

a) the nature of my involvement and time commitment have been explained to me, to my satisfaction;

b) I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied;

c) the project is for the purpose of research;

d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirement.

Signature (Participant) ___________________________ Date ______

Having read this form if you are agreeable to participating in this research and to the use of the data that arises from your involvement, please fill out the consent form above, sign it, and return in the enclosed envelope to: Anne Grant c/o The University of Melbourne, 234 Queensberry St. Carlton. 3053.
Appendix D: Analysis reference question

Children’s variables

Motivation

i. Is this child positive or negative about pursuing their own task? (e.g. of intrinsic motivation?)
ii. Is this child positive or negative about pursuing a given task? (e.g. of extrinsic motivation?)
iii. Does learning appear to be for mastery or performance? (looking good/competitive?)
iv. How persistent are they on a task?
v. Does this child expect to be a successful learner?
vi. Does this child expect to be an unsuccessful learner?

vi. Is this child positive or negative about a challenge? (negative towards risk taking?)

vii. Any other indications of self-efficacy?
ix. Is this child engaged with their environment? (in a general, not specific sense: i.e. showing conformity to work or behaviour expectations)

Ability

i. What do other people say this child is good at?
ii. What does this child know they are good at?
iii. What does this child know they are not good at?
iv. Can they set a goal, or work towards one, in their activity?
v. How do they respond to more difficult tasks?
vi. Does this child seem confident of their own ability?
vii. What ability is observable?

Emotional

i. How does this child react when successful at a task?
ii. How does this child react when they fail at, or are uninterested in a task?
iii. Does this child appear to feel positively about others in learning environment?
iv. Does this child appear to be confident in him/herself in the learning environment? (including looking happy about work or activities) (negative attitude to school).
v. How does this child react when interactions with others are negative?
vi. Does this child seem aware of their own feelings at school?

Social

i. How & in what situations does this child interact with her parents?
ii. How & in what situations does this child interact with the teacher? (Including, how do they pay attention to teacher?) (Immune to teacher influence?)
iii. How & in what situations does this child interact with other children? (Socially inept: being either withdrawn or too dominating)
iv. How does this child react when successful with other children?
v. How does this child react when unsuccessful with other children?
vi. What other aspects of socialisation into school does this child mention or show awareness of?
Appendix D – continued:

**Teacher Variables**

**Motivation**

Ta. - Does the teacher value/facilitate engagement with the learning environment?
Tb. - Is the teacher positive or negative about children pursuing their own task?
Tc. - What motivation goals does the teacher encourage? (Performance/mastery)
Td. - Does the teacher facilitate persistence on a task (i.e. helping with the task)?

**Ability**

Te. - In what form does the teacher present curriculum tasks (cognitive, complex, simple, other?)
Tf. - How does the teacher respond to children’s work? (1.affectively or 2. task related)
Tg. - Does the teacher facilitate concentration on a task?
Th. - Does the teacher expect this child to be a successful learner?
Ti. - What achievement does the teacher notice?
Tj. - How does teacher know if achievement is occurring?
Tk. - Does the teacher provide individual differentiation in instruction? (Both in setting and responding to child’s work)
Tl. - How does the teacher facilitate (scaffold, extend, enrich) individual differentiation of content: i.e. complexity, abstractness, fast paced?
Tm. - Does the teacher display an awareness of the real level of development of the child? (intellectual/social/emotional: –compare teacher’s assessment to my testing result. (How does teacher make assessment – how ongoing is it?)
Tn. - Does the teacher display an awareness of detailed aspects of child’s advanced learning or skill or learning style?
To. - What awareness is evident from the teacher’s comments about other/overall aspects of this child’s play and learning; and background of child?

**Social**

Tp. - Is the teacher highly direct in management of behaviour? (E.g. gives info about behaviour, rules, expectation)
Tt. - What estimate does the teacher make about the level or nature of this child’s social dev.
Tu. - What style of social interaction is teacher involved in & in what situations?
Tv. - Does the teacher support (scaffold, extend, enrich) social development (with individual or group)

**Emotional**

Tw. - What estimate does the teacher make about the level or nature of this child’s emotional dev.
Tx. - Does the teacher support (accept, scaffold, extend, enrich) emotional development (with individual or group)
Appendix D – continued:

**Home variables**

Ha. - Do the parents take the child seriously and provide support & encouragement if required as well as interesting experiences and resources?

Hb. - What understanding or expectations do the parents have of the child’s level of functioning at home or at school?

Hc. - Are the parents positive about the group/school experience?

Hd. - Did the parents prepare and/or coach the child in preparation for school?
   (In knowledge or attitudes or skills?)

He. - What environmental conditions or behavioural characteristics do parents consider have helped in their child’s socialisation into school?

Hf. - What do they expect of or observe about the teacher?

Hg. - What do parents expect of or notice about the school?

Hh - What achievements at school are described by parents? (cognitive, social/emotional/physical)

Hk. - What learning characteristics are described by parents?

Hl. - What do parents say about their child’s motivation?

Hm. - What do parents say about their child’s social skills/interactions?

Ho. - What do parents say about their child’s emotional skills/development?

Hp. - What is the parent’s occupation, especially mothers?

Hq. - Are there siblings; older or younger siblings? Has this influenced reciprocal-socialisation and in what way?
Appendix E: Interview topic-questions

Parent interview

Preamble - In the questionnaire you filled out for me last year I developing a picture of how your child learnt at home. Talking to you at this point I am interested in getting a picture about what you see happening for your child as s/he becomes a learner at school. I want to reassure you that none of the things you say to me will be shared with the school or would be identifiable in my thesis. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these – I am interested in the perspective you have on your child’s experience.

1. How did you feel about (name of child) starting school?
2. What do you remember about how (name of child) felt about starting school?
3. What do you think is important in helping them to settle into school?
4. What things did you emphasise or consciously teach (name of child) to help her/him manage at school?
5. What are the important things in the school program for the first few weeks and months?
6. What things have you noticed that the teacher does that have helped (name of child) settle in/to learn at school?

Ability

7. Do you think the teacher has managed a good match between what (name of child) is ready to learn and what she has offered? Can you give me some examples?
8. How judgemental is (name of child) about her/himself?
9. Can you tell me some of the things that you know she has learnt this year?
10. Can you tell me about the teaching (approaches) you’ve seen or know about that (teacher) uses?
11. Do you think they are the best way to teach (name of child)?
12. When (name of child) is doing some work, at home or school, what would you emphasise? E.g.- effort, concentration, finishing, being independent, doing it really well, being fast about it, or something else?
13. How well is s/he learning at school?

Social

14. How does she feel about the other children at school?
15. Who does she like to play with?
16. What sort of things does (name of child) say about the other children at school?
17. How does she feel about her teacher?
18. What sort of things does (name of child) say about her teacher?
19. How well do you think the teacher has got to know (name of child)? Can you give me some examples?

Emotional

20. How does she feel about going to school?
21. How confident does (name of child) feel about herself at school?
22. How much does she expect to be good at school work? (Locus of control)
23. How well is she coping at school? – when things go well and when they don’t go so well? (signs of stress; difficulties; frustration;)
24. Did you get a chance to share information about your child with the teacher before school started?
Or when did you get a chance to share information about your child
25. Do you think this would help your child’s learning at school?
26. Can I ask you what sort of work you do outside your mothering/fathering role?
27. What are your memories of starting school?
28. What do you think of (name of child) ability to achieve at school?
Appendix E – continued:

**Teacher interview**

Preamble - *I am looking for your observations and assessments about this child’s learning at school. Overall what do you notice about (child’s name) level of ability, motivation to learn, ability to cope independently at school and to get along with others? I want to stress that what you say here stays only with me and that your comments go into the research project anonymously – I would be the only person who could identify who said what.*

The first few questions are general ones

1. As children start school for the first time what do you think are the most important things to achieve with them both as they settle in and over the year?
2. How do you get to know each child as a learner/as an individual?
3. How do you cope with the range of abilities amongst the children?
   (do you think you have a large range of abilities in this class?)

The next 7 questions are about (child’s name) specifically.

4. What are the main things at school s/he is good at? Can you give some specific examples?
5. What are the main things s/he is not good at?  
6. What are the main ways you form your opinion about what s/he is good at and the things s/he is not good at?  
   *Could I have some copies of documentation of these? i.e. What is their reading level and what is the maths interview level? What do you think is important to record?*
7. How easy is it to motivate (child’s name). Can you give me a typical example?  
   - can you give me an example of her/his level of motivation compared to the others in the class? (intrinsic or extrinsic *)
8. How judgemental is s/he about the things they do?
9. What do you notice about (child’s name) social skills /development?  
   E.g. How does this child get along with other children? Does s/he have a best friend?  
   How does s/he get along with you? (e.g. Close or dependent, or independent? Etc.).
10. What do you notice about (child’s name) emotional maturity?  
    E.g. How does s/he react to success and failure,  
    - what is her/his usual mood/emotional disposition and how confident is s/he about self at school ?  
    - how does s/he react to difficulties, frustration?  
    - any signs of stress? What are these?
11. What do you think of her/his ability to achieve at school?

Key words: engagement, effort, persistence, risk taker, challenge, goals – own or teacher’s, competitive, self-confident, others.

At the end of the year – on my last observation visit each teacher was invited to sum up each child’s progress – conversation started with questions, such as:  
How would you sum up this child’s progress on academic tasks?  
Can you give an example?  
How would you sum up this child’s progress, socially and emotionally?  
Can you give an example?  
Does (child’s name) seem to understand the idea of doing well at school? Can you give an example?
Appendix E - continued

Children’s interview

Preamble- I’m interested in the things you are doing at school this year and it’s a good idea to ask children who are at school to tell me about it. I’m going to write some of it down so I can think about it and I am recording what we say to help me remember exactly. Is that OK?

What do you think are some important things at school? And/or
Who is important to you at school? Would you like to draw a picture about them?
I saw you doing some …… when I visited last time and I wonder about (this aspect of school)’ or ‘I haven’t noticed this/do you know about this?
Who do you like a lot at school?
Who do you like to play with at play time?
What things do you like about your teacher – Ms/ name .. ?
Who do you like to do work with in school?
What sort of things make you feel pleased at school?
Do some of the things you have to do at school make you feel worried?
How do you feel when you do good work?
What happens when you do your work really well?
What helps you do really good work?
What things do you like to do most at school?
What are the work tasks you most like to do at school?
What things do you not like to do very much?
Do you like it when your teacher tells you what to do or -
Is it better when you choose yourself what you do?

How easy is it to do good work? Or is it hard?
What does your teacher like you to do?
What does your teacher say about your good work?
What things are you good at, at school, who tells you about this?
How do you become good at these things?
What things are you not so good at, at school?
What things do you like doing the most at school?
What things don’t you like doing at school?
Is there something we haven’t talked about which is important to you?

Thank you for talking to me - I think these are the important things you have told me … - is that correct?
Appendix F: Research-Learner Plan

Strategy for helping Michael learn an independent approach to learning.

It is apparent that Michael has a well-developed approach to learning that has enabled him to progress to a great extent, certainly at a level that is significantly well beyond other children of his age, particularly in reading, maths and thinking skills. However, as you have observed, he seems to be very dependent on an adult partner in his learning and when he is in a peer group learning situation it has been a concern he seems unable to sustain a goal or project once the adult support is not available.

Independent learning encompasses setting your own goal which arises out of an interest in a topic or from a need to acquire a skill or knowledge to support other learning. This approach is complimentary to an approach where the goals are set by others but has the advantage of encouraging intrinsic motivation, development of creativity, and development of goals for mastery rather than performance.

To assist Michael in learning this approach and support the ILG of encouraging his skill in working with other children, for instance Molly and Natasha might be interested in being included as fellow-researchers. They should be included in the introductory discussion and the following approach could be trialled.

Initiate a discussion with Michael, Molly and Natasha, explaining and emphasising the words: researching, resources, planning, reviewing. Much of this initial discussion is to introduce these words and to encourage conversation about topics of interest. This will probably need some repeating at the beginning of the first few sessions.

**Introduction:** - Say to children (including others who may want to join Michael - ‘we want you to be a researcher this term’ :

- you can choose what you want to research, (at the beginning I suggest it should Michael’s choice as far as possible)
- you find the resources (explain meaning of resources) for your research
- this part of researching is called planning.
**Step 1** - help the children decide how to do the research - this might involve reading, searching the internet, making something, practising, writing, or any other ideas of how you might find out about this topic?

**Step 2** - you or we can review what you have found out/achieved and share it with the others in our class.

**Step 3** - let’s talk about what you might like to research first of all (I expect that current interest in ancient Egypt might be a good first topic, and if the ideas flow make a list of them). Then (democratically) choose one topic/goal.

- ask Michael to think about how to do this research?
- what do you need to find out, or to make, to do this research? (prompt with ideas or materials if necessary)

You could suggest - ‘I’ll help you get started, and then you need to work by yourself. We can talk about your research in about 20 mins’ (or ½ hour, or before lunch, etc. whatever fits in with the timetable) – this is a review.

**Step 4** - discuss his progress,

- ask if this part of research is finished?

If so, plan for a time when Michael can share the immediate outcome of this research with others.

If not - plan together for a time when he can return to his research.
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GRANT, ANNE

Title:  
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