

2015

# Addressing the social, emotional, and academic needs of gifted high school students

Elizabeth A. Kregel  
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A Dissertation

entitled

Addressing the Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs  
of Gifted High School Students

by

Elizabeth A. Kregel

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Curriculum and Instruction

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The University of Toledo  
August 2015

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An Abstract of  
Addressing the Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs  
of Gifted High School Students

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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Being a gifted high school student means far more than taking hard classes and getting good grades. Gifted high school students have specific social, emotional, and academic needs that make them different than non-gifted students. It was my intent with this phenomenological case study to describe the essence of being a gifted high school student. After studying the lived experiences of gifted high school juniors and seniors in two suburban school districts, I was able to uncover what makes gifted students tick. I learned what the participants viewed as the advantages and disadvantages of being a gifted high school student and what educators can do to help ensure that these students' needs are being met.

The three research questions that drove the study were as follows: How do gifted high school students describe what it is like to be identified as gifted? How do gifted students describe the extent to which their needs are being met or are not being met in schools? What are similarities and differences in gifted high school students' experiences in schools that provide their students with Written Education Plans (WEPs) and those schools that do not provide WEPs? A participant survey, classroom observation, and

semi-structured interviews were the data collection methods that were used in order to capture the participants' lived experiences.

The results of this study revealed that while gifted high school students may be sufficiently challenged through Advanced Placement (AP) classes, their social and emotional needs are often overlooked in schools. Just because a school used WEPs for its gifted students does not mean students' needs are being met. Teachers, counselors, and administrators do not necessarily understand the obstacles that gifted high school students incur daily, such as battling perfectionism and dealing with pressure and competition. Schools and districts need programs in place that will ensure gifted students' social, emotional, and academic needs are met and that the students are given the necessary tools for success.

*Keywords:* Gifted Education, Social Needs, Emotional Needs, Academic Needs

For my parents, Jim and Cindy. This journey would not have been possible without your unwavering love and support. I truly cannot thank you enough. I have and always will strive to make you proud. I love you.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	vi
Table of Contents	vii
List of Tables	xii
List of Figures	xiii
I. Introduction to the Study	1
A. Problem Statement	1
B. Purpose Statement	3
C. Context of Study	4
D. Significance	10
E. Definition of Terms	11
II. Review of Literature	12
A. Introduction	12
B. Theoretical Framework	12
a. Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development	13
b. Bloom's Taxonomy	16
C. Dogmatism	19
D. Understanding the Gifted Student	20
a. Common Characteristics	20
b. Asynchronous Development	21
c. Risk Factors	22
d. Social and Emotional Needs	22

e. Perfectionism	25
f. Underachievement	26
g. Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities	28
h. Implications	31
E. Curriculum for Gifted Students at the Secondary Level	32
a. Acceleration	35
a. Ohio's Acceleration Policy	36
b. Enrichment	38
c. Differentiated Instruction	39
F. Attachment	42
G. Engagement	43
H. Conclusion	45
III. Methodology	46
A. Participants and Sampling	47
B. Data Collection and Procedures	50
a. Participant Survey	51
b. Classroom Observations	52
c. Interviews	54
C. Data Analysis	56
D. Validation Strategies	60
E. Researcher Role	62
F. Limitations	62
IV. Results	66

A. Themes	67
B. Participants	70
a. Brianne	70
b. Elena	71
c. Joey	71
d. Noah	72
e. Riley	73
f. Abby	74
g. Alexa	74
h. Grant	75
i. Kate	75
j. Max	76
C. Uncovering Self-Identification of Giftedness	76
a. Social Needs	76
a. Friendships	76
b. Classroom Interaction with Peers	81
c. Social Needs of Gifted vs. Non-Gifted Students	86
d. Extracurricular Activities	90
e. Attachment to Family, Friends, and Teachers	96
b. Emotional Needs	101
a. Dealing with Perfectionism	101
b. Combatting Pressure	106
c. Being Labeled	115

D. Addressing the Needs of Gifted High School Students	121
a. Academic Needs	122
a. AP Curriculum	122
b. Engagement vs. Boredom	131
c. Homogeneous Grouping	136
d. Written Education Plans (WEPs)	142
E. Cross-Case Analysis: WEPs vs. No WEPs	145
a. Social Needs	145
b. Emotional Needs	146
c. Academic Needs	146
d. Differences	148
V. Discussion	150
A. Examining the Results	150
B. Reviewing the Major Findings	152
C. Reconnecting to the Literature	156
a. Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development	156
D. Curriculum Theories	157
b. Bloom’s Taxonomy	157
c. Gifted Education Curriculum Theory	158
D. New Literature	160
E. Future Studies	162
F. Final Thoughts	164
References	166

Appendices	171
A. Written Education Plan (WEP) Template	171
B. Participant Survey	174
C. Field Note Template	182
D. Interview Protocol	183

## List of Tables

Table 1	School Demographics.....	49
Table 2	Participant Demographics.....	51
Table 3	Data Codes and Code Descriptions.....	58

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Research Design.....	56
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## Chapter One

### Introduction to the Study

#### Problem Statement

Because of a lack of mandates for services and federal funding, if a school district implements gifted education services, those services are often only provided in elementary and middle schools and cease to exist at the high school level. It is assumed by many that gifted students will take honors, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses in high school and will therefore be sufficiently challenged and have their needs met. However, taking these higher-level courses does not automatically mean that the students' social, emotional, and academic needs are being met. Delisle and Galbraith (2002) explain that most gifted students learn and behave differently than their peers; consequently, traditional classrooms, even those that provide challenging curriculum, do not always provide the most effective environment for gifted students.

According to *Gifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2002), a document that was prepared by the Ohio Gifted Task Force, schools are not currently held accountable for ensuring that children who are gifted are served according to their needs or that they reach their full potential. However, if "Ohio is to enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a leader in gifted education, accountability for all children, including children who are gifted, will need to be an integral component of all policy and accountability decisions" (*Gifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2002). In fact, in the Executive Summary, the task force stated the following:

While it is critical for Ohio educational leaders to "leave no child behind" in the plans to reform the education system, it is equally important to "hold no child

back" from maximizing his or her abilities and potential contributions to society. Ohio can no longer tell its brightest students "not yet" or "we can't teach you that" when they strive to move faster than their peers through the traditional school curriculum. Providing an appropriate education for children who are gifted is indeed an investment in our economy and, ultimately, a successful future for our state (*Gifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, p. 3).

All students deserve to have their needs met so that they are able to learn, grow, and be successful. However, if gifted students are not being provided the tools to succeed, the education system is doing them a disservice and potentially stunting their academic growth.

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) attempted to collect data from each state in the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 State of the States in Gifted Education surveys regarding identification of gifted students and funding for gifted programs. Not all states responded, however, and of those that did respond, not all of them answered every survey question. When asked if the state has a mandate for gifted and talented identification or services, 43 states responded. Thirty-two states reported having mandates, and 11 states did not. When asked what areas are included in the mandate, 28 states reported gifted and talented identification, 26 reported identification and services, nine responded "other," and one responded "not specified." For the state of Ohio, data were collected in 2011-2012, and there were 1,717,323 students enrolled in schools throughout the state. Of those students, 265,555 were identified as gifted. While Ohio

mandates identification and reporting for gifted education for schools receiving state funds, it does not mandate services (NAGC, 2014).

Therefore, just because a student is identified as gifted, that does not automatically mean that his/her social, emotional, or academic needs are being met. In fact, according to “2001-2002 data, only 37% of the 248,000 students identified as gifted receive[d] services through state and local funds” (State Board of Education Policy Statement on the Future of Gifted Education in Ohio, 2003). If the state of Ohio’s goal is to ensure that all students reach their potential, then all students who have been identified as gifted must receive appropriate services.

### **Purpose Statement**

Smutny (2003) explains that there is a lack of literature regarding high school gifted services because, as previously stated, it is not common for high schools to offer gifted education programs. Therefore, the findings in this study can assist in helping researchers and educators better understand the complexities of gifted high school students, specifically what can and should be done to ensure that these students’ needs are met and that they are successful both inside and outside the classroom. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the essence of being a gifted high school student. The central questions on which this study focused were as follows:

1. How do gifted high school students describe what it is like to be identified as gifted?
2. How do gifted students describe the extent to which their needs are being met or are not being met in schools?

3. What are similarities and differences in gifted high school students' experiences in schools that provide their students with Written Education Plans (WEPs) and those schools that do not provide WEPs?

In order to answer these research questions, I worked with gifted high school students from a total of four high schools in two different school districts. Both districts had gifted coordinators, and one of the districts used Written Education Plans (WEPs) (see Appendix A) while the other one did not. I used criterion sampling to select five participants from each district. All participants completed a survey so I could gauge their thoughts and feelings about being gifted high school students. I also conducted classroom observations and one-on-one interviews to better understand the similarities and differences between students being served with a WEP and those not being served with a WEP.

### **Context of Study**

According to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), "Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude or competence in one or more domains" (2014). In Ohio, students can be identified as gifted in one or more of the following specific academic areas: mathematics; science; reading, writing or a combination; and social studies (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15). Children who are identified as gifted in specific academic areas perform or show the potential to perform at high levels of achievement in one or more content areas. A student may be identified as gifted in a specific academic area if "within the preceding twenty-four months the child performs at or above the ninety-fifth percentile at the national level on

an approved individual or group standardized achievement test of specific academic ability in that field” (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15, p. 3).

In addition to specific academic abilities, Ohio students can also be identified as creatively gifted which is described as “exhibiting creative thinking ability superior to children of a similar age” (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15, p. 3). Creativity is often characterized by uniqueness, originality, and the ability to make something new, novel, and useful. In order for identification to occur, a student must score “one standard deviation above the mean, minus the standard error of measurement, on an approved individual or group intelligence test” within the previous twenty-four months and complete one of the following: a student can attain a sufficient score on an approved individual or group test of creative ability as established by the department of education, or a student can exhibit sufficient performance as established by the department of education on an approved checklist by a trained individual of creative behaviors” (Ohio Administrative Code).

Ohio students can also be identified as gifted in superior cognitive ability. In order for identification to occur, a student must score two standard deviations above the mean minus the standard error of measurement on an intelligence test, perform at or above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile on a basic or composite battery of a nationally-normed achievement test, or attain an approved score on an above grade-level standardized, nationally normed test within the preceding twenty-four months. Children who are gifted in superior cognitive ability demonstrate or how potential to demonstrate high levels of ability in cognitive areas such as the following: problem solving, abstract thinking, memory, and

comprehension. These children acquire skills at a faster rate and with more depth and greater complexity than other children their age (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15).

Finally, Ohio students can be identified as exhibiting visual or performing arts ability superior to that of children of a similar age. Children who are gifted in visual or performing arts ability perform or show the potential to perform at high levels of achievement in one or more of the following artistic areas: drawing, painting, sculpting, music, dance, and drama. In order for a student to be identified as gifted in this area, there are two requirements. First, a student must demonstrate “to a trained individual through a display of work, an audition, or other performance or exhibition, superior ability in a visual or performing arts area” (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15). In addition, students must exhibit “to a trained individual sufficient performance on an approved checklist of behaviors related to a specific arts area” as established by the department of education.

The board of education in each school district that receives state funds in the state of Ohio must adopt a plan for identifying and reporting children who are gifted. That plan is then submitted to ODE for approval. If the plan contains all necessary components, it must be approved within 60 days (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15). Once a student is screened or assessed for being gifted, that student’s parents must be notified within 30 days of the district’s receipt of the assessment results (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15).

The Ohio operating standards for serving gifted students state that “gifted and talented students need differentiated curriculum and instruction in order to fully develop their cognitive, academic, creative and artistic abilities” (Ohio Administrative Code

3301-51-15, p. 7). The services that gifted students receive must be consistent with their area or areas of identification and differentiated to meet their individual needs. Such instruction may be provided in large groups, small groups, and/or individually in a variety of settings including general education settings, resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, magnet schools, Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment opportunities, honors courses, educational options, advanced online courses, and internships with businesses (Ohio Administrative Code).

According to the Ohio Administrative Code, all school districts in Ohio reporting services to gifted students must have on file a copy of a Written Education Plan (WEP) for each student served. A WEP is a document that provides a description of the services being provided to the individual student, including goals for the student in each service specified and methods of evaluating progress toward achieving those goals. (See Appendix for blank WEP template.) WEPs also specify “staff members responsible for ensuring that specified services are delivered” as well as “policies regarding the waiver of assignments and the scheduling of tests missed while participating in any gifted services provided outside the general education classroom” (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-51-15, p.10). In addition, a WEP specifies a date by which the WEP will be reviewed for revision. There is no standard WEP form that the state of Ohio mandates; instead, districts or individual schools design their own WEPs and then submit them to ODE for approval. Therefore, there are a variety of WEP templates that are used throughout the state.

In 2005, the Ohio Association for Gifted Children (OAGC) developed a Written Education Plan (WEP) grant in order to better understand WEPs and how they are being

used throughout the state of Ohio. The grant team used four sources of information for their study: a literature review, a review of policies by states that had either recommended or mandated WEPs for gifted students, a survey of interested parties, such as parents, students, and administrators, in the education of gifted students in Ohio, and a series of focus groups in three selected districts identified by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) that have either had success in the implementation of WEPs or that had identified this task as important for improvement (OAGC, 2005). As the grant team reviewed these sources of data, a number of gaps were identified between best and actual practice with regard to WEP development and implementation. First, best practices illustrate that the WEP should be used as a tool that drives services for identified gifted students. However, the grant team found that “many, if not most, districts use the WEP as a tool to document students in a prescribed district program. Due to funding and time limitations, district programs, not WEPs, continue to drive gifted services (OAGC, 2005, p.14).

Secondly, best practices indicate that a WEP should be a living document and revised as necessary. However, in most districts WEPs are generic in nature, and the “lack of participation by all necessary parties needed to fully realize the potential of the WEP document renders the WEP a document of record” instead of a document that drives service (OAGC, p.14). Third, the WEP should be a communication tool between students, teachers, and parents; however, the lack of communication was a major finding in this study. In fact, grant members reported that the “lack of communication and participation between gifted staff, administrators, classroom teachers, and parents is perhaps one of the most striking findings in this study” (OAGC, p.14). Due to a lack of

resources, such as time and funding, “the WEP continues to be a stand-alone document in many districts with very little awareness and input from the appropriate parties” (OAGC, p. 14). Fourth, ideally the WEP would be an individual gifted student planning document based on need. However, as “indicated by the survey results, analysis of district WEP forms, and the case studies, the WEP in many districts tends to be ‘cookie cutter’ in nature with very little attempt at individualization” (OAGC, p.14). Throughout the state, many districts use the WEP to document a student’s placement in current district programs rather than document services driven by individual student need. Finally, best practices indicate that a WEP should be used to measure the effectiveness of services provided for gifted students. However, the “lack of true evaluation of services on both the district and student level was apparent in all areas reviewed by the grant team” (OAGC, p.14). The team concluded that Ohio appears to be emphasizing data-driven educational policy decisions and that the evaluation of WEP effectiveness needs to be included in this movement (OAGC).

Though the OAGC grant team’s data is from 2005, there are still many districts in Ohio that do not adhere to WEP best practices, indicating their gifted students are not being sufficiently served. However, ODE has now created the Gifted Indicator, which includes “the performance of students as gifted on state assessments and value-added measure disaggregated for students identified as gifted” (Ohio Department of Education, 2014, p. 1). The Gifted Indicator was reported for the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years upon release of the 2014 report card. On the 2015 report card, the Gifted Indicator will become part of the graded measure, Indicators Met, and will carry the same weight as all other indicators in the measure. Consequently, if districts want to perform well on

the Gifted Indicator, they need to ensure that best practices are in place so that gifted students are growing and performing appropriately.

In the document, *Gifted in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Ohio Task Force, 2002), it is recommended that services for gifted students be provided by educators who are trained to deliver services to gifted students, instruction be differentiated, the WEP address the social and emotional skills and needs of gifted students, and services be provided in conducive classroom settings. Furthermore, this document states, “Without a system that supports acceleration, differentiation options and other appropriate services, the probability increases that children who are gifted will become alienated from school” (Ohio Task Force, 2002, p.2).

VanTassel-Baska, Brown, Feng, Stambaugh, and Worlev (2005) discuss the idea that most of the struggles gifted students face arise due to a mismatch in curriculum, pacing of instruction, or lack of interest in a particular subject area (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2005). According to the literature and reported best practices for gifted students, instructional strategies that include ability grouping and the inclusion of emotional and behavioral responsiveness within the academic framework can have a significant impact on the success or failure of gifted student populations (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2005). Gifted students have unique social, emotional, and academic needs that cannot be ignored if they are expected to maximize their potential.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study can be used to help stakeholders, including gifted education coordinators, school administrators, teachers, and parents better understand the academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted high school students. Specifically, the

findings of this study illustrate whether WEPs can play a significant role in the overall experiences of gifted high school students. According to the Ohio Task Force (2003), research indicates that identified gifted students who receive appropriate services benefit from three to six months of additional learning per year when compared to equally gifted peers who do not receive such services. Because this effect is cumulative, “a student who receives appropriate gifted services throughout his or her career will realize a substantial increase in learning (three to six years) and have ever-higher levels of talent to share” (State Board of Education Policy Statement on the Future of Gifted Education in Ohio, 2003, p. 4). The findings of this study will inform which services are most beneficial to gifted high school students so that their needs are being met.

### **Definition of Terms**

Throughout this dissertation, the term *gifted student* refers to a student who has been formally identified as gifted by his/her school or school district.

The term *non-gifted student* refers to any student not formally identified as gifted by his/her school or school district.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

The following review of literature begins with the theoretical framework for this study, which encompasses Piaget's stages of cognitive development and Bloom's taxonomy and how these hierarchies relate to gifted education. The review of literature also outlines characteristics, specifically social and emotional needs, common in gifted students and how these characteristics affect their learning and everyday life. There are several overarching facets of gifted education curriculum theory that have driven the literature review. Gifted education curriculum theory posits that gifted students have unique learning needs that must be met if these students are to be sufficiently challenged. In addition to having specific academic needs, gifted students may also have social and emotional needs that differ from traditional students, and these needs should be addressed so that gifted students are well-adjusted and successful.

This chapter discusses curriculum modifications, including acceleration, enrichment, and differentiated instruction. Finally, this chapter includes a discussion on issues with attachment and engagement that gifted students often face and the effects of these issues.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Understanding how learning occurs can help teachers be aware of how gifted learners may differ from traditional students. Most hierarchical theories of learning share the notion that as a child develops and matures, his/her understanding of the world is limited first by neural development and second by his or her ability to incorporate

experiences into a definition of the world (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2004). Basic developmental theories form the foundation of available information on characteristics of gifted learners and how to work with them. Understanding how learning occurs in general can help educators be aware of how gifted learners may differ from their peers, as well as decide which techniques are likely to be most effective with gifted students (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2004). Possibly the theories that are best known to educators and have the widest application to education are the developmental hierarchies of Jean Piaget and Benjamin Bloom. Although these two theorists divided their hierarchies differently, the concepts and applications are similar.

**Piaget's stages of cognitive development.** According to Piaget (1952), there are four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operations, and formal operations. Piaget believed children think differently than adults and that all children go through the four stages of cognitive development. These stages are universal, meaning the same sequence of development occurs in children all over the world (Piaget, 1952). Development is biologically based and changes as the child matures. Therefore, cognition develops in all children in the same sequence of stages. Each child goes through the stages in the same order, and no stage can be missed out; however, some individuals may never attain the later stages. There are, however, individual differences in the rate at which children progress through the stages (Piaget, 1952).

Piaget did not claim that a particular stage was reached at a certain age; however, descriptions of the stages often include an indication of the age at which the average child would reach each stage (Piaget, 1952). During the sensorimotor stage, which often occurs from birth to age two, the child learns through physical interaction with the environment.

The child lacks object permanence, or the awareness of objects that are out of sight. At this stage, the child is learning the basics of action-reaction. During the pre-operational stage, which occurs from ages two to around seven or eight, children cannot think abstractly and therefore need concrete physical situations or props for learning (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2004). For example, oranges and apples are fruit. The child must have a chance to touch and eat each of them (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). During the concrete operational stage, which often occurs from ages seven or eight to eleven, the child still relies heavily on concrete situations and props for learning, but he/she is beginning to think abstractly (Piaget, 1952). Accumulated experience with the environment has led to logical thinking, and the child begins conceptualizing about his/her surroundings (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2004). Finally, during the formal operations stage, which often occurs from eleven onward, individuals are able to use conceptual reasoning and abstraction (Piaget, 1952). In most cases, having reached adolescence, the individual thinks, perceives, and processes information much like an adult. He/she is able to consider hypothetical situations and deal with broad, overarching issues and theories (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2004). At this stage, “there are few to no limitations on what the adolescent can learn; learning depends on his or her intellectual potential and environmental experiences” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004, p. 109).

Because Piaget's theory is based upon biological maturation and stages, the concept of readiness is important. Readiness centers around when certain information or concepts should be taught to children. According to Piaget's theory, children should not be taught certain concepts until they have reached the appropriate stage of cognitive

development (Piaget, 1957). For example, an average six year old in the pre-operational stage would likely have great difficulty completing a task that required abstract reasoning, whereas an average 13 year old in the formal operations stage would not be as likely to struggle.

According to Piaget (1957), classrooms should be student-centered with opportunities for discovery learning because problem-solving skills cannot be taught; they must be discovered. Instead of lecturing, teachers should facilitate learning. In order to facilitate learning, teachers should focus on the process of learning rather than the product of learning (Piaget, 1957). Doing so means varying instructional strategies and curriculum materials to ensure that all students are learning. Piaget (1957) also believed that teachers should use collaborative as well as individual activities so that students can learn from each other. When teachers implement group work or partner work, students have the opportunity to collaborate with one another in order to complete the task or problem at hand. This collaboration allows the students' varying ideas and problem solving techniques to surface, thereby creating rich learning opportunities. Finally, teachers should evaluate student development so that appropriate tasks are implemented (Piaget, 1957). For example, if a student is clearly excelling with reading comprehension and seems unchallenged and bored, the teacher might consider providing that student with more challenging texts to keep the student engaged and motivated. Evaluating students' development should be done regularly so that students have the ability to work to their potential (Piaget, 1952).

While Piaget's cognitive stages are hierarchical, environmental factors have the ability to speed up or slow down cognitive development (Piaget, 1957). Therefore, if gifted students are not appropriately challenged, their cognitive growth can potentially be stunted. If gifted high school students are not receiving gifted services, such as curriculum modifications, their cognitive growth may be slowed because they are not sufficiently challenged and therefore not pushed to meet their maximum potential (Piaget, 1957). Gifted students are often in the formal operations stage when their peers are still in the pre-operational or concrete operations stages. When a child is developmentally advanced, he/she has different learning abilities and needs. This is where Bloom's Taxonomy can be a particularly useful. Students in the formal operations developmental stage need learning experiences at the upper end of Bloom's Taxonomy. Essentially, all assignments should offer the student the opportunity to utilize higher level thinking skills like analyzing, evaluating, and creating, as defined by Bloom (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003).

**Bloom's taxonomy.** Bloom's Taxonomy was created in 1956 by a committee of educational psychologists under the leadership of Dr. Benjamin Bloom in order to promote higher forms of thinking in education, such as analyzing and evaluating concepts, processes, procedures, and principles rather than just remembering facts, known as rote learning (Bloom et al., 1956). The cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy involves knowledge and the development of intellectual skills. This includes the recall or recognition of specific facts, procedural patterns, and concepts that serve in the development of intellectual abilities and skills. Originally there were six major categories of cognitive processes, starting from the simplest to the most complex:

knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom et al., 1956).

In the mid-1990s, Lorin Anderson, a former student of Bloom, and David Krathwohl, revisited the cognitive domain and made some significant revisions. The names of the six categories changed from noun to verb forms, and the categories were also rearranged (Anderson et al., 2001). The revised categories are as follows: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. The new taxonomy reflects a more active form of thinking (Anderson et al., 2001).

According to the Davidson Institute for Talent Development (2004), the purpose of Bloom's Taxonomy is to classify the goals of education for use as "the basis for building curricula and tests" thereby improving teacher performance (p. 1). Bloom's Taxonomy offers teachers a tool for developing a student-centered classroom by providing the framework for articulating specific outcomes in terms of student learning. The result is a classroom environment that emphasizes student skills rather than rote information. Implementing Bloom's Taxonomy also allows flexibility for teachers who are working with students of different levels. By setting higher outcomes for high-ability students, teachers can develop a lesson plan and set of activities that will satisfy the needs of students at various levels.

According to Bloom's definition, analyzing is the ability to break down information and concepts and understand the difference between inference and fact. Goals include recognizing fallacies in logic, comparing and contrasting major assumptions of competing theories, and using deductive reasoning. For example, a student at this level may be able to troubleshoot a piece of equipment by using logical

deduction and recognize logical fallacies in reasoning (Anderson et al., 2001).

Additionally, “students at this level might determine which container has the largest volume by measuring and computing their volumes based on their knowledge and reference materials” (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003, p.1). Some examples of key words that are used with analysis are as follows: analyzes, breaks down, compares, contrasts, differentiates, and infers (Anderson et al., 2001).

Evaluating is the ability to judge the value of ideas and information (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). Students at this level might use their knowledge of geometry and physics and information from wind tunnel testing to determine the most fuel-efficient design for a new automobile or airplane. Goals include selecting the best proposal based on a variety of variables and critiquing the work of others based on appropriate standards (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003). Some examples of key words that are used with evaluating are as follows: appraises, compares, contrasts, critiques, evaluates, and discriminates (Anderson et al., 2001).

Finally, creating, the highest level of Bloom’s taxonomy, involves building a structure or pattern from diverse elements and putting parts together to form a whole with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure (Anderson et al., 2001). Doing so may involve reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003). Students at this level might devise a formula for finding the area of an irregular shape based on their knowledge of the rules and theorems of geometry. Goals include writing a logical argument to an ethical dilemma; designing a program, procedure or machine to

accomplish a specified task; or revising existing programs, procedures, or machines to improve performance (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003). Some examples of key words that are used with creating are as follows: categorizes, combines, creates, composes, modifies, and reconstructs (Anderson et al., 2001).

Nurturing higher-order thinking skills by incorporating analyzing, evaluating, and creating into everyday teaching allows gifted students to be appropriately challenged and therefore continuing to learn and grow during Piaget's formal operations stage. If gifted students do not receive proper services throughout their schooling, their growth could be slowed, and they may be unable to maximize their potential.

### **Dogmatism**

According to Ambrose, Sternberg, and Sriraman (2012), dogmatism is defined as the tendency to lay down principles as incontrovertibly true without consideration of evidence or the opinions of others. It is human nature to maintain beliefs that fit the status quo until those ideas are proven false. This same notion remains true concerning gifted education. Many dogmatists believe that gifted students do not need any special help: they will do fine on their own, they learn the same as average-ability students, and gifted students are happy, popular, and well-adjusted in school.

Therefore, dogmatists struggle to understand that gifted students require specific services in order to be successful. Dogmatists who cannot break free of their established educational beliefs and theories often struggle to work effectively with gifted students because many of these students do not learn or behave in traditional manners. Dogmatists would likely believe that as long as gifted high school students are in rigorous classes and being challenged, their needs are being met. In order to create a paradigm shift and to

help dogmatists understand the complexities of gifted students, it is necessary to understand the intricacies of the gifted learner and what can and should be done to nurture these students so that they are successful (Ambrose et al., 2012).

### **Understanding the Gifted Student**

**Common characteristics.** Gifted students are not like traditional students in that they think differently, learn differently, and behave differently. Research indicates that there are numerous characteristics that are common among gifted students, and these characteristics illustrate the importance of gifted students having the opportunity to be included in gifted programs even throughout high school. Delisle and Galbraith (2002) discuss some of these characteristics, including the idea that gifted students often show persistent intellectual curiosity, ask searching questions, and show exceptional interest in the nature of humankind and the universe. Even at a young age, gifted children tend to exhibit interest in the universe and how the world works, and they often appease their curiosity by asking questions. A gifted three year old may ask her mom why the sky is blue or why the grass is green as opposed to a non-gifted three year old who may ask more traditional questions such as, “When will daddy be home from work?”

Gifted students are also often interested in the subtleties of words and their uses, they learn quickly and easily, and they retain what is learned. Therefore, gifted students learn at an accelerated pace and do not need frequent reviews of material covered like traditional students require. Behaviorally, gifted students often set unrealistically high standards for themselves and are critical in evaluating and correcting their own efforts. They may also exhibit social poise and an ability to communicate with adults in a mature way. Because gifted students have high standards for themselves and have set goals, they

are critical of themselves if they struggle in reaching a goal. In addition, gifted students are often intrinsically motivated and enjoy learning for the sake of learning not just to earn a grade. Finally, gifted students often get excitement and pleasure from intellectual challenges and demonstrate an alert and subtle sense of humor. While traditional students may become overwhelmed by a multifaceted, hands-on project, gifted students see the same project as an opportunity for a challenging learning and growing experience (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

**Asynchronous development.** Although gifted students show advanced skills in cognitive or specific academic domains, they may or may not have age appropriate skills in social or emotional domains of functioning. This uneven development is known as asynchronous development, which is common among gifted students. The asynchronous development between intellectual and social growth of gifted students can create conflicts unique to the gifted child (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). For example, gifted children may have the ability to understand complex concepts cognitively and yet be unable to adjust to the emotional underpinnings of certain concepts. This disparity can be difficult for others to understand and can result in expectations of the gifted child that are incongruent with the social or emotional abilities of that child.

Some common asynchronous characteristics of gifted students that can lead to social and emotional difficulties relate to advanced verbal and reasoning skills and the drive to achieve perfection. On one hand, these characteristics may serve to advance the student intellectually and academically. Yet these same characteristics can also result in an inability to meet deadlines, fear of failure, difficulty accepting criticism/heightened sensitivity, and feelings of anxiety, anger, or even depression. These students can often

feel out-of-sync with their peers and have to deal with age-based social and emotional expectations (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

**Risk factors.** Research indicates that due to the unique qualities and needs of gifted students, there are some common risk factors of which educators need to be aware. These risk factors are associated with high rates of dropping out of school when their academic, social, and emotional needs are not met (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). In addition, studies have shown that gifted students who do not face academic challenges in the K-12 setting are more likely to drop out of post secondary programs. Interestingly, when gifted students are not allowed to reach beyond the curriculum, they are often labeled “underachievers.” Teachers who have a better understanding of the unique qualities of gifted students are able to provide higher caliber academic opportunities to support the students’ academic needs (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

**Social and emotional needs.** One principle of gifted education theory is that the needs of gifted learners cut across cognitive, affective, social, and emotional areas of curriculum experiences (Heller, Monks, & Sternberg, 2000). All children and adolescents have social and emotional needs, and there are certain needs that are more common for gifted students to possess. First, it is common for gifted students to blame themselves for being different, and the lack of acceptance from those around them intensifies their feelings of inadequacy (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). While gifted students may conceptualize they that are different from their peers, they may not understand exactly how and why they are different, which can be frustrating. When their peers do not accept them, gifted students often feel inadequate and like they are not good enough for those around them, which can cause them to have low self-esteem (Kennedy, 2012).

Second, gifted students often need help in learning skills related to social adaptation. For example, they need to understand the difference between cooperation and competition and when each is appropriate (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). Being able to handle cooperation and competition is essential in order to work well and play well with others; however, gifted students often struggle with group activities. Their strong views about what is “right” may make it difficult for them to compromise with others or to appreciate another person’s perspective. Furthermore, their “sensitivity about evaluations or fears of hurting others’ feelings can lead them to avoid or overreact to even mild forms of competition. Because they are used to performing well, they may also find it hard to cope with setbacks, struggles, or losses” (Kennedy, 2012, p. 1).

Thirdly, gifted students need to understand the implications of tending to work and play alone “as those tendencies relate to making and keeping friends, social popularity, and social leadership” (VanTassel-Baska, 1983, p. 42). It is common for gifted students to want to work and/or play alone because they have often have difficulty with social relationships because they feel different and are sometimes ostracized from their peers. However, constantly choosing to work and play independently only further disconnects gifted students from their peers and makes them stand out even more. Therefore, it is important that gifted students understand the importance of socializing with others even when it may be awkward or uncomfortable (VanTassel-Baska, 1983).

According to Robinson, Shore, and Enersen (2007), self-concept is built through relationships with others, and children develop knowledge about themselves by comparison with others, particularly similar peers, and then make assertions about their own personal identity. As previously mentioned, for many gifted students, finding true

friends can be a daunting and frustrating task since gifted students tend to be introverted and like to have alone time. But being anti-social makes it nearly impossible to make friends and to build a positive self-concept, thereby causing loneliness and potential depression (Robinson et al., 2007).

Next, gifted students need to know how to channel their sensitivity because vulnerability to criticism can be devastating to extremely sensitive students (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). If gifted students are extremely sensitive and therefore adverse to criticism, they are in danger of constantly having their feelings hurt. Because criticism from others is a real part of life, gifted students must learn how to effectively deal with criticism by remembering that criticism does not need to be viewed as a personal attack or something associated with failure. Instead, criticism should be viewed as a tool for maturation and growth and a way to becoming a better person.

Gifted students also need opportunities to be given an honest appraisal of their ideas and products. If these students are not made aware of both strengths and weaknesses in their work, they do not have the opportunity to learn and grow (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). It is common for gifted students to be the smartest person in their class; therefore, their teachers hold their work in high regard and may use it as models for other students. But if gifted students are not sufficiently challenged and instead are constantly told their work is flawless, they will not have the opportunity to grow and rise to the next level. Like any other student, it is important that gifted students receive a fair assessment of their strengths and weaknesses so that they can strive for greatness.

In addition, gifted students also need to learn to have reasonable expectations for themselves and to understand that it is acceptable to not excel at everything (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). Because gifted students are used to excelling at everything, they often believe that they have to excel at everything they do, and if they are not the best, they are failures. The extreme pressure that gifted students place on themselves can be unhealthy because of this incessant strive for perfection. If gifted students believe they must be the best at everything they attempt, when they do not reach their own high standards, their self-esteem often plummets.

**Perfectionism.** Gifted students and adults are often prone to perfectionism which is unhealthy. According to Delisle and Galbraith (2002), perfectionism “means that you can *never* fail, you *always* need approval, and if you come in second, you’re a loser” (p. 64). The pursuit of excellence is somewhat different and means taking risks, trying new things, growing, changing, and sometimes failing. Perfectionism is dangerous in that it can inhibit one’s ability to do well and “can take a heavy toll on [one’s] self-esteem, relationships, creativity, health, and capacity to enjoy life” (p. 64). Gifted students often have the sense that what they accomplish is never enough and that they have to do whatever it takes to rise to the top. Therefore, because of the great pressure gifted students may place on themselves, perfectionism can be debilitating, and debilitation disables perfectionism. According to Heller et al. (2000), “about 15 to 20% of gifted people will now and then suffer from their perfectionism” (p. 199). Because of the need to be the best, there are certain characteristics that perfectionists exhibit.

First, perfectionists rarely delegate work to others and always have to be in control because they fear the work will not be top-notch quality and are not willing to

take the risk. Second, perfectionists compete fiercely because they are constantly battling to be the best at whatever task they are undertaking. Therefore, perfectionists greatly struggle when it comes to cooperating with others because to them, every facet of life is a competition (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Perfectionists also tend to pay more attention to negative than positive comments because they know the negative comments mean something is wrong and must be fixed, or else perfection is unattainable. Finally, perfectionists are quick to criticize others but often refuse to hear criticism of themselves because to them, criticism is equated with being a failure (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

**Underachievement.** While many gifted students are often thought of as perfectionists, some gifted students are referred to as underachievers. When teachers work with students who do not perform well academically, those students are often labeled as underachievers, and gifted students are no exception. However, underachievement is quite complex and often misunderstood (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Underachievement is a behavior and therefore can change over time; however, usually underachievement is seen as a problem of attitude (“He’s just being stubborn; he can do the work”) or personality (“If she weren’t so lazy, she could pass that course”) (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 169). However, attitude and personality cannot be modified as directly as behaviors can. Speaking of “underachieving behaviors” pinpoints students’ actions that they have the ability to alter.

According to Borland (2003), it is commonly reported that underachievement begins during the late elementary grades, certainly by middle or high school and that it begins earlier for males than for females. Gifted “students may achieve easily and without effort through the earlier years in school but falter when they meet the challenges

of strenuous effort, real production, or increased homework” (p. 192). It is then that these students are labeled underachievers.

Underachievement is content-specific and situation-specific. Gifted students who are not successful in school are often quite successful in outside activities, such as sports, jobs, and social events. Just because a student is not successful in the classroom does not mean that student is not successful in any endeavor. Furthermore, even students who do poorly in most school subjects usually display a talent or interest in at least one school subject (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Gifted students are not usually unsuccessful in every subject. When a child is labeled as an underachiever, any positive behaviors that the child displays are disregarded. Since it is more useful to label the student’s behavior rather than the student, a student should be identified as “underachieving in math and language arts” rather than as an “underachieving student” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 170).

In addition, underachievement is closely tied to self-image development. A student who learns to see him/herself in terms of failure eventually begins to place self-imposed limits on what is possible. Therefore, any academic successes are deemed as lucky accidents while low grades or lack of success reinforce that student’s negative perceptions about him/herself (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). This self-deprecating attitude often results in comments either spoken or unspoken such as the following: “Why should I even try? I’m just going to fail anyway,” or “Even if I do succeed, people will say it’s because I cheated” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 170). Essentially, students who fall victim to this mentality simply give up because they assume that putting forth any effort is a waste of time.

Finally, underachievement implies that adults disapprove of a child's behavior. "When teachers and parents expect too much too soon, the children may develop a lack of confidence, fear of failure, anxiety, and stress" (Heller et al., 2000, p. 199). Students who are labeled underachievers suffer knowing that they are disappointing parents or teachers. Therefore, these students "learn to assess their abilities relative to what they have not accomplished instead of what they are capable of doing" (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 171). Additionally, these students also see victory squelched by the collapse of unmet goals, so when parents or teachers praise the so-called underachiever for a successful grade or project, the student may dismiss the compliment as meaningless, assuming it will never happen again.

According to Renzulli, Reid, and Gubbins (1991) as cited by Moon (2004), future research must attempt to unravel the complex causes of academic underachievement and provide interventions that help reverse underachievement behavior. The absence of any clear and precise definition of underachievement restricts research-based comparisons and hinders the quest for suitable interventions. The research literature mentions only a small number of interventions, most of which involve counseling and some form of curriculum modification or differentiation. Therefore, "future research should focus on evaluating the efficacy of both instructional and counseling treatments" (Moon, 2004, p. 208).

**Dabrowski's overexcitabilities.** Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) was a Polish psychologist and psychiatrist who developed The Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD). The major premise of TPD is that conflict and inner suffering are necessary in order for a person to experience advanced development and "movement towards a

hierarchy of values based on altruism” (Lind, 2001, p. 3). From his work, Dabrowski observed that not all people move toward an advanced level of development, “but that innate ability/intelligence combined with overexcitability (OE) were predictive of potential for higher-level development” (Lind, 2001, p. 3).

Overexcitabilities are inborn intensities indicating a heightened ability to respond to stimuli. OEs are characterized by increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity. Not all gifted people have OEs, and non-gifted people can certainly have OEs as well; however, they are more common among the gifted population (Lind, 2001). A person can possess one or more OEs. An overexcitability is a stimulus-response different from the norm which causes a person to react more strongly than normal for a longer period of time to even a small stimulus. Dabrowski identified the following five areas of overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional.

A psychomotor overexcitability includes the capacity for being active and energetic. Psychomotor OE individuals never seem to be still, and they are often extremely talkative (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). When feeling emotionally tense, these individuals may talk impulsively, act impulsively, misbehave and act out, display nervous habits, compulsively organize, or become quite competitive. They obtain great joy from their endless physical and verbal enthusiasm, but others may find them overwhelming (Lind, 2001).

A sensual overexcitability is expressed as a heightened experience of sensual pleasure or displeasure emanating from sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Those individuals with sensual OE have a far more expansive experience from their sensual input than the average person. They have an increased an early appreciation of aesthetic

pleasures such as music, language, and art, and they derive endless pleasure from tastes, smells, textures, sounds, and sights. When emotionally tense, these individuals may overeat, go on buying sprees, or seek the physical sensation of being the center of attraction (Lind, 2001). Others may withdraw from stimulation. Sensually overexcitable children may find clothing tags, classroom noise, or smells from the cafeteria so distracting that schoolwork becomes secondary (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977).

An imaginal overexcitability reflects heightened play of the imagination with rich association of images and impressions, frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, and elaborate dreams (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). Often children who possess imaginative OE mix truth with fiction or create their own private worlds with imaginary companions and dramatizations to escape boredom. These children typically find it difficult to stay tuned into a classroom where creativity and imagination are secondary to adhering to a standard curriculum. They may write or draw instead of completing assignments in class, for example (Lind, 2001).

An intellectual overexcitability “is demonstrated by a marked need to seek understanding and truth, to gain knowledge, and to analyze, and synthesize” (Lind, 2001, p.3). Those high in intellectual OE have extremely active minds, are intensely curious, are often avid readers, and are usually keen observers. They are able to concentrate, engaged in prolonged intellectual effort, and are steadfast when it comes to problem solving. These individuals are also independent of thought and sometimes appear critical of and impatient with others who cannot sustain their intellectual pace (Lind, 2001).

Finally, an emotional overexcitability is reflected in heightened and intense feelings, extremes of complex emotions, identification with others’ feelings, and strong

affective expression (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). Those individuals with emotional OE have a remarkable capacity for deep relationships and have compassion, empathy, and sensitivity in relationships. They are aware of their own feelings, of how they are growing and changing, and they often carry on inner dialogues and practice self-judgment. Children high in emotional OE are often accused of “overreacting.” Furthermore, their compassion and concern for others, their focus on relationships, and the intensity of their feelings may interfere with everyday tasks such as homework and chores.

It can be quite difficult to live and work with overexcitable individuals. Those who are not overexcitable often find these individuals’ behaviors to be unexplainable, strange, and frustrating. However, there are resources available, such as literature “regarding counseling, learning styles, special education, and classroom management; parenting books; even popular business texts” (Lind, 2011, p. 5). As previously mentioned, one does not have to be gifted to have an OE; however, OEs are more common among gifted individuals. Therefore, it may be helpful for parents and teachers of the gifted to understand OEs and effective strategies for working with these individuals both at home and at school.

**Implications.** Gifted students are commonly plagued by their social and emotional needs because they are not receiving adequate services at school. Therefore, instead of learning how to effectively cope with their issues, the issues often continue to permeate, thereby causing more stress and frustration for gifted students. If curriculum were properly adapted for gifted students, many of their social and emotional needs

would be effectively dealt with, which would make school and learning much more enjoyable for gifted students.

### **Curriculum for Gifted Students at the Secondary Level**

Key beliefs and assumptions have guided the thinking of most curriculum theory in gifted education (Passow, 1996). One belief in gifted education curriculum theory is that all learners should be provided curriculum opportunities that allow them to attain optimum levels of learning (Heller, et al., 2000). Gifted students often learn differently than traditional students; therefore, their curriculum should be different as well. Gifted education curriculum theory also emphasizes the idea that gifted learners have different learning needs compared with typical learners. Therefore, curriculum must be adapted or designed to accommodate these needs (Heller et al., 2000).

A. Harry Passow from Teachers College at Columbia University (1996) explains that curriculum for the gifted and talented at the secondary level should involve more than deciding whether to accelerate, enrich, or group students. Rather, it should consist of the total learning environment and encompass the general education, special education and co-curricular planning together with the climate, which is created throughout a school. According to Passow (1996), curriculum planning for the gifted should not consist of schools merely placing gifted students in honors courses, AP courses, or IB courses and pretending like the curriculum has been specifically created for gifted learners.

Instead, curriculum planning should begin with a clear concept of program goals and objectives, and it should consist of a number of decisions about content, scope, sequence, integration, articulation and balance as well as about resource use, time, space,

and organization (VanTassel-Baska, 2004). Gifted education curriculum theory maintains that curriculum experiences for gifted learners need to be carefully planned, written down, and implemented in order to maximize potential effect (Heller et al., 2000). Creating a curriculum is an intricate and complex process, and it is imperative to keep the characteristics of gifted children in mind so that proper resources and materials are chosen and employed to yield success for students.

Regardless of their specific talents, interests, or degree of talent, there are some common goals for all gifted youth. Passow (1996) asserts that all gifted children must acquire the knowledge, skills, insights, attitudes, and motivations that will enable them to deal competently with themselves and with those around them. They also need to be able to build a sound liberal education foundation to sustain the rigorous development of specialized competencies at the higher levels which they can handle. Furthermore, gifted students need to be able to provide the self-understanding, inner consistency, and ethical standards to see their own uniqueness in terms of responsibility to society (VanTassel-Baska, 2004).

These goals are different from the goals of traditional learners in that there is greater emphasis placed on characteristics common in gifted children such as intellect, initiative, creative effort, critical thinking ability, higher order analytical and synthesis skills (VanTassel-Baska, 2004). When translating these characteristics into learning objectives within specific subjects, gifted students will be able to plunge deeper into learning, explore farther and deeper, and acquire more advanced concepts, meanings, and relationships. Another facet of gifted education curriculum theory is that curriculum

development for gifted learners is an ongoing process that uses evaluation as a central tool for future planning and revision of curriculum documents (Heller et al., 2000).

There is no question that curriculum for gifted students is directly related to their style of learning and behavior patterns. Therefore, because gifted students learn differently and behave differently than other students, they require a specific, specialized curriculum that best meets their needs. There is not a “one size fits all” curriculum that should be used. Rather, curriculum and instructional methods should be regularly evaluated to ensure that gifted students are maximizing their potential. The curriculum evaluation process is crucial if students are expected to grow.

Another aspect of gifted education curriculum theory is that gifted learners are best served by a confluent approach that allows for accelerated and advanced learning and enriched and extended experiences (Heller et al., 2000). When asked what kinds of programs are appropriate for gifted students at the elementary and secondary levels, most educators’ and researchers’ responses fall into three categories: grade level and course acceleration, enrichment, and differentiation, according to Smutny (2003). Acceleration refers to a program of instruction that allows gifted students to move rapidly through fundamental skills and knowledge to more challenging aspects of a subject or field of study, especially in subjects that are learned sequentially, such as math. However, if high school gifted students are in traditional classes, the teachers may not have training in gifted education and would therefore have a difficult time understanding how acceleration works for gifted students.

Teachers who lack gifted education training often mistakenly believe that acceleration simply means moving rapidly through curriculum. They forget the major

premise that one of the benefits of acceleration is that it allows gifted students to spend more time studying challenging, complex material. Acceleration does not mean racing through curriculum just to get finished or getting more work piled on because one is smart (Smutny, 2003).

**Acceleration.** One form of acceleration is grade level acceleration, which involves moving the gifted child ahead of his or her age or grade mates. Sometimes this movement is into a higher grade. For example, a third grader might move into fifth grade upon completion of third grade. Davis and Rimm (as cited by Smutny, 2003) discuss the idea that if a district does allow a student to skip a grade, doing so should be done before junior high, as most school districts do not allow early entrance to junior high or high school. At the high school level while skipping a grade is not an option, early college admission is an alternative for gifted students (Smutny, 2003). However, Smutny explains that “early college entrance can be an unpopular option with school districts. In cases where a student demonstrates social maturity and an intellectual readiness for college-level work, parents, teachers, and school counselors may be able to convince the district to make an exception” (Smutny, 2003). In other words, research indicates that even if gifted high school students could benefit from starting college early, most school districts frown upon this idea.

Another form of acceleration is course acceleration, which allows students to engage in advanced studies, often for college credit, during high school. Smutny (2003) explains that some schools and colleges permit students to earn high school and college credits simultaneously, and others offer students the opportunity to begin college with college credits already earned. One way that this is possible is through Advanced

Placement (AP) courses. AP classes are sponsored by the College Board and allow high-ability students to take college-level classes and college-level exams in a variety of subjects, including foreign languages, mathematics, English literature and composition, the arts, science, and history. There are currently thirty-seven AP courses offered, according to the College Board (2014). AP exams occur yearly and include a 90-minute multiple choice and 90-minute essay test. Colleges and universities differ on their policies regarding AP credit. Some do not accept AP credits while others accept AP credit but differ in how much AP credit can be applied to a college program (Smutny, 2013). Adelman (1999) as cited by Robinson, Shore, and Enersen, noted that participation in rigorous high school coursework, such as AP, is the best predictor of success in college.

**Ohio's acceleration policy.** According to "Model Student Acceleration Policy for Advanced Learners" developed by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) in 2006, research conducted nationally and within Ohio's public schools has demonstrated that academic acceleration can be a powerful and cost-effective strategy for providing appropriately challenging, standards-based instruction for students who are ready to learn above grade-level content. Acceleration has also been shown to increase motivation, reduce boredom, and enhance the social and emotional well-being of appropriately selected students. However, for a variety of reasons, acceleration is currently underutilized in Ohio. When ODE developed the acceleration policy in 2006, the goal was that school districts would be able to use the model in order to increase their use of accelerated learning strategies to better meet the needs of advanced learners in order to help them reach their full potential.

The four different types of acceleration that Ohio uses are as follows: whole-grade acceleration, individual subject acceleration, early admission to kindergarten, and early high school graduation. Whole-grade acceleration is the practice of assigning a student to a higher grade level than is typical given the student's age on a full-time basis for the purpose of providing access to appropriately challenging learning opportunities (Model Student Acceleration Policy, 2006). For example, after completing the first grade, a student is placed in third grade at the beginning of the next school year. Individual subject acceleration is the practice of assigning a student to a higher grade level than is typical given the student's age for the purpose of providing access to appropriately challenging learning opportunities in one or more subject areas (Model Student Acceleration Policy, 2006). For example, a fourth grade student performing above grade level in reading and math may go to a fifth grade teacher each day for instruction in those two subjects and return to fourth grade for instruction in the other subject areas. Early admission to kindergarten is the practice of admitting a student to kindergarten who has not yet reached the typical age at which students are admitted to kindergarten for the purpose of providing access to appropriately challenging learning opportunities (Model Student Acceleration Policy, 2006). Finally, early high school graduation is the practice of facilitating completion of the high school program in fewer than four years for the purpose of providing earlier than typical access to post-secondary educational opportunities (Model Student Acceleration Policy, 2006).

Ohio schools are not mandated to adhere to the state's acceleration policy, as individual districts may decide what if any gifted policies or programs are implemented. If schools or districts utilize an acceleration policy, the students being accelerated may be

given a Written Acceleration Plan (WAP). Like WEPs, there are different types of WAPs that may be used. The purpose of a WAP is to document the type of acceleration being implemented, the placement of the student in an accelerated setting, strategies to support a successful transition to the accelerated setting, requirements and procedures for earning high school credit prior to entering high school (if applicable), and an appropriate transition period for accelerated placement for early entrants to kindergarten, grade-level accelerated students, and students accelerated in individual content areas (Model Student Acceleration Policy, 2006).

**Enrichment.** A second strategy is enrichment, and using enrichment in the classroom allows gifted students to explore topics in greater depth and breadth. In enriched classes, the emphasis is on giving students a richer and more varied educational experience than they would receive in regular classes (Brody, 2004). Subjects that lend themselves to enrichment include literature, science, and social studies. In some enriched classes, students spend as much as half their time on cultural material, such as foreign languages, music, and art, which are areas not covered on standard achievement tests (Brody). Enriched classes most often occur through pull-out programs which are programs that allow gifted students to be pulled from their regular classes once or twice a week to meet with the gifted teacher or coordinator. Therefore, if schools or districts do not offer pull-out programs, exposing gifted students to an enriched curriculum is not always possible.

If students do not have access to pull-out programs, there are still possible enrichment options for them. There are supplemental programs, such as specialty camps and mentorships that are offered on the weekends and during the summer months that

help gifted students “discover and define their interests, explore new concepts, and even take risks” (p. 61). For example, mentorships provide middle and high school students with exposure to a variety of fields of study, which could help foster college or career readiness. The Governors’ School Program, which consists of state-supported summer residential schools for gifted teenagers, is another enrichment option. These programs offer classes in areas such as math, science and technology, the arts and entertainment, and humanities and social studies (Brody). Gifted students have the opportunity to be around other gifted peers and to explore subjects in greater depth than they could in the regular classroom.

**Differentiated instruction.** Differentiated instruction is a third instructional strategy that works well for gifted students. Differentiated instruction is a term that many educators reference, but not all of them truly understand what it means to differentiate instruction. Differentiated instruction has great potential for both student learning and teacher effectiveness, but the concept itself needs to be unpacked so educators can make sense of what differentiated instruction is, how it can be used, and how it is beneficial if properly implemented.

In *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (1999), Tomlinson defines differentiated instruction as an approach to teaching in which “teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity” (p. 2). In short, differentiated instruction is instruction that is centered around students’ ability levels and interests.

A common misconception is that implementing differentiated instruction means that a teacher must create individual lessons plans for each student, but this is not the case. If more educators understood what differentiated instruction really means, they would also understand its importance and how using it in the classroom helps ensure learning and success for all students, which are, of course, the goals of education.

When it comes to differentiated instruction, three questions that must be taken into consideration are as follows: What is the teacher differentiating? How is he/she differentiating? Why is he/she differentiating? Teachers have the ability to modify content, or what students will learn; process, or learning activities; product, or how students demonstrate what they can do as a result of learning; and learning environment, which encompasses the classroom conditions that set the tone for learning (Tomlinson, 2004). Each of these elements is adjusted in response to student ability level, interests, and learning profile. Therefore, flexibility is a critical component of a differentiated instruction classroom.

There are several key principles of a differentiated classroom. First, the teacher is clear about goals and expectations. This clarity allows students to know what they will be learning and what is expected of them, and they understand the purpose in the learning activities. Teachers do not just hand students work and tell them to complete it just because they said so. Second, the teacher understands, appreciates, and builds upon student differences. Instead of incorrectly assuming that all students have similar backgrounds and learn in the same ways, teachers embrace student diversity and use it to inform their curricular and instructional decisions. Third, students and teachers are collaborators in learning. This means that teachers and students work together in deciding

how to best meet the students' needs. For example, a teacher could use choice boards, tiered activities, learning contracts, or compacting, all of which provide students with learning choices, which helps instill a sense of autonomy in students. Finally, in a differentiated classroom, instruction and assessment are inseparable. In a traditional classroom, assessment is most common at the end of learning to see "who got it" whereas in a differentiated classroom, assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to understand how to make instruction more responsive to students' needs (Tomlinson, 2004).

Like any other approach to teaching, there are both pros and cons to differentiated instruction. If effectively implemented, differentiated instruction allows students to be more motivated to learn since they are able to learn at their own pace through instruction and materials that adhere to their abilities and strengths, thus making the content more enjoyable and meaningful to them (Tomlinson, 2004). Furthermore, time is used flexibly in accordance with student need whereas in a traditional classroom, time is relatively inflexible. In a traditional classroom, the teacher often directs student behavior, but in a differentiated instruction classroom, the teacher facilitates students' skills at becoming more autonomous learners. Finally, in differentiated instruction classrooms, many learning profile options are provided for, and students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning decisions (Tomlinson, 2004). Therefore, both teaching and learning are rewarding since teachers are positively reaching students, and students are experiencing authentic learning.

Winebrenner (1996) parallels Tomlinson's suggestions on how to best implement differentiated instruction in the classroom and asserts that the most potent motivator in any classroom is for students to consistently have meaningful choices. This means giving

students choices on what they will learn, how they will learn, and how they will express what they have learned. When “kids make choices that reflect their learning style strengths, and when teachers accept products other than written papers, we can almost always expect dramatic results. Kids will do whatever is necessary to learn something they really want to know about” (Winebrenner, 1996, p. 64). However, if students are never given choices in what they learn or how they learn, they are much less likely to exhibit genuine interest or to put forth their best effort.

### **Attachment**

Because gifted students have unique social, emotional, academic needs, they can be considered an at-risk population. If attachment and engagement levels are improved for gifted students, the risk factors decrease. According to Bowlby (1969) Hirschi (1969), attachment experiences begin to form in early childhood and are later generalized into other social relationships with peers and caretakers outside of the home. “Attachment is the emotional and social bonding between children and parents, and a determinant of relating patterns in adolescence and adulthood” (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009, p.53). Several recent studies have investigated the relationship between attachment and learning-related outcomes:

According to Hirschi, when attachment is strong, individuals bond with their family, school, and community; however, when it is weak, they are more likely to engage in socially inappropriate or delinquent behaviors such as vandalism, bullying, theft, and drug experimentation. By extension, adolescents are more likely to complete school when they have positive feelings of attachment toward their peers, teachers, and school (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009, p.55)

Attachment with teachers and others in the school environment and engagement in the school environment have been shown to be positively linked with learning outcomes (Reio, Jr. et al., 2009). Researchers postulate that this is because attachment to others provides support within the educational environment. This is especially important for students with high-risk indicators such as low socio-economic status, learning difficulties, or unstable home environments due to various factors. The school environment requires students to engage in curriculum, teacher instruction, and peer interaction as a part of the educational process. However, many gifted students struggle with doing so because they are bored, frustrated, and have a difficult time making and keeping friends (VanTassel-Baska, 1983).

When students struggle with forming secure attachments in the school environment, they are deprived of social and cognitive interactions that are essential to engaging in educational activities. Such deprivation may occur with gifted students because they possess traits that are neither common to nor appreciated by all. It is more rare than common for gifted students to “inhabit a social milieu where any and all individual differences, both visible and invisible, are accepted” (Delisle, 1992, p. 99). Therefore, it is not uncommon for gifted students to be extremely introverted and to have a difficult time relating to and forming bonds with those around them, such as teachers and peers (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). If gifted students had an easier time forming attachments with others, their social and emotional issues would likely decrease.

### **Engagement**

School engagement is the academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective involvement students demonstrate in the school environment (Stout & Christenson,

2009). In order to address student engagement, the student's motivation to learn and sense of connection with the school environment must also be considered (Stout & Christenson). Students must engage in the academic process in order to learn. School engagement skills include student motivation to learn, ability to stay on task, ability to listen to instruction, academic organization, school attendance, and other school-related characteristics and competencies that indicate some type of involvement with school. To measure student engagement, researchers measure student school-related behavioral skills. Highly engaged students demonstrate homework completion, class participation, and report a sense of belonging in the school environment. Truancy, lack of student participation in the school environment, and reduced feelings of belonging are all characteristics of student disengagement from school and are early risk factors that can lead to student dropout (Stout & Christenson, 2009).

Gifted students are often bored in class because the material is not challenging, so they zone out and become disengaged. Therefore, these students do not apply themselves or work to their potential, and school becomes torturous and something to be dreaded because of their lack of attachment to others as well as the lack of engagement to school in general (VanTassel-Baska, 1983). Engagement, in part, reflects the connection a student has with the school environment, including academic work, relationships with teachers and peers, and other environmental aspects. Academic and behavioral characteristics are observable, whereas cognitive and emotional characteristics are internal constructs and cannot be observed by an outside force (Stout & Christenson, 2009). Cognitive and behavioral engagement is related to student motivation, and because gifted students do not always receive proper services, they often lack motivation.

Student feelings about the school environment are factors that affect the degree to which the student will engage or disengage with the academic and social expectations of the environment. Students with high levels of cognitive and behavioral engagement also possess high levels of personal motivation (Stout & Christenson, 2009). Therefore, if gifted students were provided necessary services, not only would their engagement increase, their motivation would increase as well.

### **Conclusion**

Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Bloom's taxonomy, gifted education curriculum theory, and the review of literature framed this study and allowed me to broaden my understanding of gifted students in order to most effectively design the study. I will be focusing on the participants' social, emotional, and academic needs in order to determine which gifted education services are the most beneficial for gifted high school students.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

A phenomenological case study approach was used throughout this participatory study to explore the essence of what it is like to be a gifted high school student in the two school districts used in this study. The descriptive results were used to determine which types of gifted education services are most beneficial to high school students and to inform best practices in schools to ensure that gifted students' academic, social, and emotional needs are being met. This chapter includes a discussion of the participants, research design, and procedure.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because in order to understand the essence of being an identified gifted high school student, student surveys, classroom observations and one-on-one interviews were the primary data collection methods. In addition, the sample size was small, and participants were not randomly selected, as they would have been in a quantitative study. Instead, the gifted coordinator in both school districts determined which students met the selection criteria, which is discussed in a later section. Furthermore, the data analysis that was used is non-statistical, and the outcomes of the study were exploratory and not generalizable to all gifted high school students.

A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study for several reasons. First, according to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. This study focused on the participants' experiences of being gifted high school students. As a phenomenologist, I described what all participants have in common as gifted high school students in order to determine the universal essence. I used Moustaka's transcendental or

psychological phenomenology, which focuses on the description of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, I had to bracket out my experiences with gifted education in order to have a fresh perspective on the topic.

This chapter will detail the methodological approach used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do gifted high school students describe what it is like to be identified as gifted?
2. How do gifted students describe the extent to which their needs are being met or are not being met in schools?
3. What are similarities and differences in gifted high school students' experiences in schools that provide their students with Written Education Plans (WEPs) and those schools that do not provide WEPs?

### **Participants and Sampling**

A total of four Ohio high schools in two different school districts were used in this study. Both school districts had gifted education coordinators who were willing to cooperate with me. The school districts, the individual schools, and all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. The demographics of each school can be found in Table 1.

School A, which will be referred to as Arlington High School, was a suburban high school outside of a large midwestern city. Arlington was the only high school in this district, and there were a total of 7,569 students in the district. Arlington offered 17 Advanced Placement (AP) courses. According to the district's gifted coordinator, all gifted students at Arlington had a WEP from the time they were identified as gifted until

they graduated from high school. According to the 2013-2014 state report card, Alder Valley met 23 out of 24 Gifted Indicators and therefore received 95.8% and an A for Indicators met.

Schools B, C, and D were part of a suburban school district outside of a large midwestern city. There were a total of 13,732 students in the district. School B will be referred to as Kennedy High School, School C will be referred to as Halier High School, and School D will be referred to as Wayton High School. Schools B, C, and D were all part of a school district that will be referred to as Rollins. Rollins had strict procedures in place for research that is conducted within the district. Therefore, the district officials decided that in order to keep maintain fairness, I would have to use participants from each of the three high schools. There were two participants from Kennedy High School and Wayton High School, and there was one participant from Halier High School. All three high schools operated on the same bell schedule and had the same course offerings. According to the district's gifted coordinator, high school students in Rollins do not have WEPs. Gifted students have a WEP from the time they are identified as gifted until they enter high school. Halier High School, Kennedy High School, and Wayton High School all offered 17 AP courses, the same number of AP courses Arlington offered. According to the 2013-1014 state report card, Rollins met 24 out of 24 Gifted Indicators and therefore received 100% and an A for Indicators Met.

Criterion sampling was used to obtain participants for this study, which occurs when individuals are chosen because they meet specific criteria (Creswell, 2007), and in order to determine if the participants meet the criteria described below, I worked with the gifted coordinators since they had access to the necessary information. In order for a

student to participate, he/she must have been formally identified as gifted in at least one area, must have been enrolled in AP Literature or AP Language and Composition as well as AP Statistics or AP Calculus AB or BC, and must have been a junior or a senior.

Table 1

*School Demographics*

Category	Arlington	Halier	Wayton	Kennedy
White	89.3	76.0	62.3	77.1
Black	4.2	4.7	8.2	1.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.8	12.2	12.9	17.4
Hispanic	1.5	2.6	8.2	1.7
Multiracial	3.8	4.4	8.3	2.7
Economically Disadvantaged	37.6	11.2	28.8	2.3
Total Number of Students	2,232	1,793	1,141	1,340

*Note.* All figures with the exception of Total Number of Students are out of 100%.

I decided that it would be most beneficial if the participants were juniors or seniors so that they will have had at least two and one half years in high school and would therefore have more experience being gifted high school students. I chose the AP classes above as selection criteria for several reasons. To begin, I wanted to be able to observe the participants at both ends of the academic spectrum. Math classes and English classes operate quite differently, and I thought it was important to observe participants in both settings. Additionally, I believed there would be more consistency between the classes in both school districts since AP teachers must be AP trained and certified, and College Board must approve all AP course syllabi.

After obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), those students who met selection criteria were asked to participate in the study. I worked with the districts' gifted education coordinators to choose five participants from both of the school districts so that ten students total participated. There were three females and two males from each district who were chosen to participate. All ten of the participants were gifted in superior cognitive ability, and they were also gifted in at least one subject area (reading, science, social studies, math).

Due to the multiple data collection methods, it was not necessary to include a large number of participants in this study. The goal of qualitative studies is not to generalize, so it was more important to collect extensive detail about each of the ten participants than to have a larger sample size (Glesne, 2011). However, in order to determine patterns within the data, it was necessary to have multiple participants from both school districts, and having multiple participants from both districts was also important in case someone dropped out of the study.

Table 2 outlines the demographics of each participant. It includes the ten participants' pseudonyms, their race, their school district, and their school. The table also illustrates the specific academic area(s) in which the participants have been formally identified as gifted and whether the participants have been identified as having superior cognitive giftedness. Finally, the table illustrates whether the participants have a WEP in place at their school.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

Data sources for this study included surveys completed by each participant, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, all of which were important for

data triangulation. When constructing both the interview protocol and observation protocol, Creswell's (2007) model was used and is discussed in further detail in a later section.

Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Race	Grade	School District	School	Academic Gifted Area(s)	Superior Cognitive ID?	WEP Used?
Brianne	White	12	Alder Valley	Arlington	R	Yes	Yes
Elena	White	12	Alder Valley	Arlington	R, S, M	Yes	Yes
Joey	White	12	Alder Valley	Arlington	R, S, SS, M	Yes	Yes
Noah	White	12	Alder Valley	Arlington	R, S, SS, M	Yes	Yes
Riley	White	12	Alder Valley	Arlington	R, S, M	Yes	Yes
Abby	Asian	11	Rollins	Wayton	R, S, M	Yes	No
Alexa	Asian	11	Rollins	Kennedy	R, S, SS, M	Yes	No
Grant	Asian	11	Rollins	Kennedy	R, S, SS, M	Yes	No
Kate	Asian	12	Rollins	Halier	R, S, SS, M	Yes	No
Max	White	11	Rollins	Wayton	R, S, SS, M	Yes	No

*Note.* R= Reading. S=Science. SS=Social Studies. M=Math.

**Participant survey.** A survey (see Appendix B) was distributed to each participant before observations or interviews began in order to better understand the participants' thoughts and feelings about being gifted. The survey used was discussed in *Gifted Program Evaluation* (Newmeister & Burney, 2012) and was used in schools and school districts in the past three years in order for gifted coordinators and school

administrators to gain insight into students' views on gifted services they were receiving. The survey was designed for students in grades 6-12, so it was ideal for the participants. There were three different sections in the survey: Coursework; Affective Needs, Attitudes, and Guidance; and Program Effectiveness. Within each section, there were between four and ten questions that addressed specific components of gifted education, and participants responded to each question using the Likert scale: 1 (Not at all) 2 (Somewhat) 3 (Adequately) 4 (To a Great Extent) 5 (Do Not Know).

Each of the three sections also contained a space in which participants could write in any comments they had from that particular section. I did not quantify the results of the survey; instead, the responses were used to help me create interview questions. For example, in the Coursework section, several participants used the comment box to write about the value of being able to take AP classes in high school. Therefore, I knew it would be important to discuss AP classes during the interviews. Before the participants completed the survey, they knew they would be interviewed, so some of them wrote comments in the comment boxes, such as "Remind me to tell you about my experience last year in math when you interview me" (Riley Survey). When I interviewed the participants, I made certain to address the areas to which the participants alluded on the surveys.

**Classroom observations.** During classroom observations, I assumed the role of an observer, not a participant. I observed each participant in his/her AP math class twice as well as his/her AP English class twice. I observed the entire class period for a total of four observations for each participant. Arlington High School had seven class periods that were 50 minutes each, so each participant was observed for a total of 200 minutes.

The three high schools in the Rollins school district had seven class periods that were 48 minutes each, so each participant was observed for a total of 192 minutes.

The participants understood that I would be observing them in their English and math classes, and they were told they did not have to have any contact with me when they were in class. That way the other students in class would not be aware of what or whom I was observing. I did not want to disrupt instruction and wanted the classroom environment to be as normal as possible.

I sent the participants' AP math and English teachers a letter via email that detailed the purpose of the observations and explained that I was not there to critique the teachers. In the letter, I provided each teacher with the names of the participants that I would be observing in class and the weeks that I would be observing. The teachers did not know exactly which days or class periods I would be in the classrooms; however, when I was there, the teachers knew why. In the letter, I told the teachers that if the students asked why I was there, they could tell the students I was observing the teachers themselves. Most teachers did not introduce me and continued on with class as normal. There were only two classes in which the students asked why I was there, and the students were told I was there to observe the teacher. All of the teachers were extremely cooperative and appeared to have had no qualms about me observing their classes.

An observational protocol was designed (see Appendix C), and that protocol included designated places for both descriptive and analytic notes (Creswell, 2007). During the classroom observations, I took field notes on each participant's engagement during both instruction and independent/group work time, and I also took field notes on

each participant's attachment, specifically with his/her peers and teachers. In addition, I collected artifacts, such as class work and homework. The artifacts helped me become more familiar with what was being taught in class and how the participants were performing on their work. I was able to reference collected artifacts during the interviews.

The first two classroom observations were conducted within one week of each other, and the second two classroom observations were also conducted within one week of each other. This way, observation data was fresh in my mind, making interviews easier for both the participants and me. If there were unexpected scheduling issues, such as snow days, and the two observations were unable to be conducted within a one-week period, they were conducted as closely to the one-week mark as possible. There were two instances at Arlington in which snow days affected the established schedule. In both of those cases, observations were one and one half weeks apart instead of one week; however, the proceeding interviews still ran smoothly.

**Interviews.** While observations were important in this study, they only provided a limited view of participants' experience as gifted high school students. Therefore, in addition to classroom observations, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they included pre-determined questions but remained open to following unexpected leads that arose and allowed for depth-probing, so points of interest could be pursued (Glesne, 2011). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was important to allow open discussions so themes could emerge and the multiple dimensions of being a gifted high school student could be discovered. An interview protocol was developed (see Appendix D) so that there was

consistency among the interviews. All participants were asked the same questions, but the follow-up questions sometimes varied slightly among participants.

I conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interview was conducted after classroom observations one and two, and the second interview was conducted after classroom observations three and four. The interviews were conducted after two successive classroom observations, either later on the day of the second observation or the following day. I interviewed students before school, during lunch, during a study hall, or after school so that participants did not have to miss any class. I knew that gifted students generally do not like missing instructional time, and I did not think the teachers would appreciate my pulling the students out from class.

The participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences in the classroom, and I used probing questions as needed throughout the interviews (Creswell, 2007). The overarching focus for each participant was as follows: “Tell me about your experience being a gifted student here at (particular school name).” The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. I explained to the participants that the interviews would be audio recorded so that I could transcribe the interviews, and I asked them if they had any questions before we began. The interview protocol consisted of seven or eight open-ended questions for each participant. The questions asked were descriptive, and participants were asked to describe their experiences being a gifted high school student. The research design for this study is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Participants: 10 Gifted High School Students



Figure 1. Research Design.

**Data Analysis**

For data analysis of phenomenological studies, Creswell (2007) offers a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. First, I described my personal

experiences with high school gifted education, which was the phenomenon under study. I described my experiences teaching gifted education in order to set aside my personal experiences as much as possible so that the focus of the study was directed to the participants. Second, I found significant statements in the interview transcripts and classroom observation notes about the participants' experiences with gifted education. These statements were then coded in order to help with further analysis. I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, produced by QSR International in order to help code the collected data. The codes and code descriptions that were used can be found in Table 3 on the following page.

The significant statements were then grouped into larger units of information called themes. Once the themes were developed, I wrote a description of what the participants had experienced with gifted education, and verbatim examples were included. I then wrote a description of how the experiences happened, and this was called structural description. To do this, I reflected on the setting and context in which the participants experienced the phenomenon whether it was at home, school, or elsewhere. Finally, I wrote a composite description of the phenomenon, incorporating both the textual and structural descriptions. This description was the essence of the experience and was the culminating factor of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007).

After I collected and analyzed the participant surveys, conducted two classroom observations, and conducted a follow-up interview, data was analyzed before the next data collection period. The same process was followed for the second data collection period. This sequence was important to keep the amount of data manageable and to keep the data collection periods separate. Once data were collected, a cross-case analysis was

conducted in order to illuminate similarities and differences between the students' experiences in the two school districts. According to Creswell (2007), a cross-case analysis occurs when the researcher examines more than one case in order to examine themes across cases to discern themes that are common to all cases.

Table 3

*Data Codes and Code Descriptions*

Code	Description
Academic Needs	Needs participants face as far as school work and classes themselves are concerned
AP Classes	AP classes that participants are enrolled in during high school
Being Challenged	Are classes challenging as opposed to boring
Course Options	Have the participants had the opportunity to take electives during high school, or did the AP/honors/IB course schedule prevent them from doing so?
Favorite Subject	The subject/class that participants deem as their favorite
Least Favorite Subject	The subject/class that participants deem as their least favorite
Study Skills and Time Management	Studying for upcoming tests or reviewing material taught in class and managing time for homework, studying, and extracurriculars
Attachment	An emotional bond between others
Family	The emotional attachment participants have with family members
Friends	The emotional attachment participants have with their friends

(continued)

Code	Description
Teachers	The emotional attachment participants have with their teachers
College	Post Secondary education
Future Plans	The plans participants have after graduating from high school
Impact of Giftedness	The way participants believe their giftedness will impact their college experience
Emotional Needs	The emotional needs participants experience as gifted high school students
Needs of Gifted vs. Non-Gifted Students	The way in which emotional needs vary between gifted and non-gifted high school students
Lack of Engagement	Bored or unengaged in class
Note-taking in Class	How does taking notes impact participants' level of engagement
Extracurricular Activities	The activities that participants engage in outside of school
Major Code: Gifted Services	Services provided to students whom have been formally identified as gifted
Elementary and Middle School Programs	Gifted programs at the elementary and middle school levels (pull-out, Care, etc.)
Homogeneous Grouping in High School	Grouping all gifted students together for classes (AP Lit Gifted vs. AP Lit)
Gifted Identification	Age/grade participants were identified as gifted
Written Education Plan (WEP)	Participants' familiarity or lack thereof with WEPs at the high school level
Being Labeled as Gifted	Assigning gifted students to a special category with different expectations than other students (continued)

Code	Description
Being Gifted vs. Working Hard	How much can being gifted as opposed to hard work and dedication be attributed to success in school
Perfectionism	Constantly striving to be the best and to achieve the top results
Perfectionism with Extracurriculars	Striving to be the best in activities outside of school
Perfectionism with School Work	Striving to be the best in classes
Pressure	The burden of mental distress
Pressure from Adults	Mental distress coming from adults at school, such as teachers, administrators, and counselors, to take the hardest classes
Pressure from Parents	Mental distress or lack thereof from parents to take the hardest classes
Self-Imposed Pressure	Mental distress imposed by oneself to take the hardest classes
Social Needs	Needs relating to friends and relationships
Socializing vs. Isolation	Being social with friends as opposed to isolating oneself and not interacting with friends
Classroom Interaction with Non-Gifted and Gifted Students	The social interaction between gifted and non-gifted students in class
Gifted vs. Non-Gifted Friends	Similarities and differences among participants' friends whom are and are not gifted

### **Validation Strategies**

Creswell (2007) outlines several validation strategies commonly used by qualitative researchers. I implemented several of these strategies to address the credibility of this study. First, I triangulated findings from several different sources and methods of

data to corroborate evidence, including interview data from two one-on-one interviews with each participant, classroom observation data, and survey responses from each participant.

I also utilized peer debriefing, which occurs when another individual reviews and asks questions about the research and function as an external check of the process (Creswell, 2007). A fellow doctoral candidate who is familiar with conducting qualitative research but holds impartial views of the study served as a peer reviewer. This individual analyzed my interpretations to ensure that I was being honest as a researcher, and the peer debriefer also analyzed the coding assignment and initial data analysis findings to ensure the patterns and themes that I found were justified. I used peer debriefing after both data collection periods: Observation 1, Observation 2, and Interview 1 and then again after Observation 3, Observation 4, and Interview 2. The peer debriefer agreed with my coding scheme, and if she felt like certain quotes from the interview transcripts could fit under more than one code, the peer debriefer and I discussed these quotes until we came to a consensus of which code was the best fit.

In addition to peer debriefing, Creswell (2007) also suggests using member checks, which involves taking data and initial interpretations back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy. Researchers conduct member checks in various ways. Some researchers show participants the raw data, and others show the participants written analyses of the data. Due to the small sample size of this study, it was reasonable for me to conduct member checks with every participant after both data collection periods. The participants had a chance to read through their interview transcripts to make sure the

transcripts were accurate. None of the participants requested that anything be changed on the transcripts.

### **Researcher Role**

My role in this study was one of an outsider. I did not have connections to either of the schools or districts used in the study. I did, however, have extensive experience teaching gifted high school students, so I was comfortable conducting classroom observations and interviews with the participants. I felt comfortable working with students who were identified as gifted in any area. I taught at a public high school in a large urban school district in Texas and was part of a gifted education pilot program. In this program, gifted students had the opportunity to be in homogeneous classes for all core subject areas: English, mathematics, science, and social studies.

I taught gifted English I and gifted English II, and these were homogeneous classes. I also taught English I and English II as heterogeneous classes, so I had experience working with gifted students in both homogeneous and heterogeneous classes. It was important for me to bracket out my personal experiences, assumptions, and biases regarding gifted education so that they did not interfere with data collection or analysis. I had to remain as objective as possible throughout the entire study.

### **Limitations**

After collecting and analyzing the data for this study, I acknowledged there were limitations and ways in which the study could have been improved. First, there was a lack of ethnic diversity among the participants, as all ten of them were White or Asian. The lack of diversity was not intended, but it was reflective of the demographics of the two

school districts that were used in the study. With that being said, there was also a lack of diversity in the districts that were used in the study. The districts chosen had to be similar so that fair comparisons could be made, so both school districts were suburban. If this study were to be repeated, I would try to have more ethnic diversity among participants and more diversity among school districts so that urban, rural, and suburban districts could be involved.

The fact that there was one school used in one district and three schools used in the other district was another limitation in this study. The district officials in Rollins insisted that in order for the study to be conducted, all three high schools had to be used to uphold the idea of equality within the district. So while the schools themselves were different, as previously mentioned, all three high schools operated on identical bell schedules, had the same course offerings, had similar district policies and procedures, and had similar demographics. But for future studies, the number of schools used in both districts would be the same.

Another limitation in this study was that there was an imbalance among the participants' grade levels. In Alder Valley, all five participants were seniors, and in Rollins, four participants were juniors, and one participant was a senior. Being a junior or a senior was part of the selection criteria; however, ideally, the grade levels of the participants from both districts would have matched. In other words, if there were three juniors and two seniors in one district, there would be three juniors and two seniors from the other district as well.

Another limitation in this study was the fact that I was unable to access participants' Value Added scores. I believe that having access to this information would have enhanced my study, as schools and school districts are constantly trying to increase their Value Added scores in our age of accountability. Having the participants' Value Added scores would have provided more insights into their educational history, allowing me to analyze their growth over the years. However, both gifted coordinators would not allow me to access the participants' Value Added scores because the district officials did not allow such data to be released except to parents.

Another limitation in this study centered around social desirability bias. Social desirability bias describes the tendency of research study participants to answer survey or interview questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. For example, when I asked participants if they had healthy attachments or relationships with their families, friends, and teachers, social desirability could have influenced their responses. Even if participants had unhealthy relationships with their parents, for example, they may not have felt comfortable admitting that was the case. Sometimes social desirability causes participants to say what sounds good or what they believe the researcher wants to hear instead of the truth. Therefore, I had to keep social desirability bias in mind when analyzing the data.

A final limitation in this study was the fact that all ten of the participants were achievers even though Sylvia Rimm's research indicates that up to 50% of gifted students are underachievers (Rimm, 2008). In other words, there was a discrepancy between what research illustrates and what my participants demonstrated in regard to underachievement. The reason I believe underachievement did not surface during this

study is because both gifted coordinators were able to hand select the participants. With that being said, the gifted coordinators were more likely to select successful students with good grades as opposed to students with mediocre or low grades. It would make sense for the gifted coordinators to want to select successful students to represent their district in this study.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results**

The experiences of gifted high school students were explored in this study using a phenomenological case study approach. This chapter presents the key findings after analyzing participants' surveys about gifted education services, observing each of the ten participants four times and conducting two one-on-one interviews with each participant. The results of the study enhance the knowledge of gifted high school students' experiences in the following ways: understanding how gifted high school students describe what it is like to be identified as gifted; understanding the extent to which gifted students' social, emotional, and academic needs are being met or are not being met in schools; and understanding the similarities and differences in gifted high school students' experiences in schools that provide their students with Written Education Plans (WEPs) and those schools that do not provide WEPs.

Chapter four begins with a discussion of the essential themes and sub-themes that arose during data analysis, and brief background information for each participant is included. In order to answer the research questions, this chapter is divided into the following sections: Uncovering Self-Identification of Giftedness, Addressing Gifted High School Students' Needs, and Cross-Analysis: WEPs vs. No WEPs. Within in each section, the themes and sub-themes are explored with data from each of the ten participants. After the data is presented, a summation follows which presents a brief analysis of the findings within each the

## Themes

As stated within the methodology, phenomenological analysis required me to bracket out my own experiences, preconceptions, and assumptions during the analysis phase. I then isolated thematic statements that were present through all or a majority of the participants' experiences which were then described as essential themes and sub-themes.

The first essential theme, social needs, included such needs as love, acceptance, belonging, and the need for relationships. Having healthy attachments to various social groups including family, friends, teachers, a church, or other religious organizations allows one to satisfy his/her social needs. Social needs were divided into sub-themes that included the following: friendships, classroom interaction with peers, social needs of gifted vs. non-gifted students, extracurricular activities, attachment to family, attachment to friends, and attachment to teachers.

The first sub-theme, friendships, focused on the participants' experiences with their friends throughout high school. This included friendships with other gifted peers as well as friendships with non-gifted peers.

The second sub-theme was classroom interaction with peers, which centered around the interactions of the participants with their gifted and non-gifted peers in class and the similarities and differences between gifted and non-gifted student interaction.

The third sub-theme was social needs of gifted vs. non-gifted students, and this theme highlighted the similarities and differences between gifted high school students'

social needs and non-gifted high school students' social needs, according to the participants' experience.

The fourth sub-theme, extracurricular activities, focused on activities the participants were active in outside of school, such as clubs, sports, church, and other organizations.

The final sub-themes dealt with the emotional bond the participants had with their family, friends, and teachers.

The essential theme, emotional needs, centered around the needs individuals had to feel a sense of security, a sense of autonomy and control, a sense of competence and achievement, and a sense of belonging whether it was within a family, school, or work place. Emotional needs was divided into sub-themes that included the following: dealing with perfectionism, combatting pressure, and being labeled.

The sub-theme dealing with perfectionism referred to participants' desire to constantly want to be the best and wanting to achieve top results. Some of the participants self-identified as perfectionists only with academics, while others self-identified as perfectionists with academics as well as with extracurricular activities.

Combatting pressure was the next sub-theme, which focused on participants dealing with the mental distress placed upon them to succeed academically. For some, this pressure was from external sources, such as family, peers, and adults at school, while others placed this pressure on themselves.

Finally, the last sub-theme, being labeled, focused on the participants feeling as if because they were gifted, they had been assigned to a special category with different expectations than other students. Two participants also explained that in addition to being labeled as gifted, they had also experienced being labeled through stereotyping.

The essential theme, academic needs, focused on the needs learners possessed regarding their academic success in a school setting. Academic needs was divided into sub-themes that included the following: AP curriculum, engagement vs. boredom, homogenous grouping, and Written Education Plans (WEPs).

The first sub-theme, AP curriculum, centered around the Advanced Placement (AP) courses that the participants took and the extent to which these courses met their academic needs.

The next sub-theme was engagement vs. boredom, which referred to the degree to which participants were on-task and actively listening, learning, and participating in class as opposed to sitting passively and unengaged in what was happening.

Homogeneous grouping was a sub-theme that focused on the participants' views of grouping all gifted students together for classes. Implementing homogeneous grouping could mean there was an AP Literature class for gifted students and another AP Literature class for non-gifted, high-achieving students.

Finally, the last sub-theme was Written Education Plans (WEPs), and this centered on the participants' experiences with WEPs and their perceived value or lack thereof.

## **Participants**

The five participants from the Alder Valley school district whom were given pseudonyms were as follows: Brianne, Elena, Joey, Noah, and Riley. According to the Alder Valley gifted coordinator, WEPs were used for all students in the district who had been identified as gifted.

The five participants from the Rollins school district whom were given pseudonyms were as follows: Abby, Alexa, Grant, Kate, and Max. The Rollins gifted coordinator said that WEPs were not used for gifted high school students in the district. WEPs stop being used once gifted students started high school.

**Brianne.** Brianne was a senior at Arlington High School, and she was gifted in reading. When Brianne was in third grade, she was tested to determine if she was gifted, and she missed the identification cut-off by a few points. Soon after, she was tested again but scored worse. She said had she been identified as gifted in third grade, she would have been forced to attend a different elementary school that served gifted students. Her parents did not want her to move schools, so even if she had been identified in third grade, she still would not have been in a gifted program. It was in sixth grade that she was tested again and participated in her middle school's gifted program.

Brianne seemed to be the most outgoing out of all of my participants at Arlington. She had an upbeat personality, and it was obvious that she was popular throughout the school because when I would be in the halls with her walking to class or to interview her, students and teachers were constantly calling her name and saying hello. Brianne was extremely friendly and would smile back and speak to everyone whom addressed her.

Brianne would be studying physics the next year at a mid-size public university with the hopes of becoming a research scientist. She was accepted into the university's honors program and was looking forward to completing as many internships and co-ops as possible to give her a competitive edge when applying to graduate school.

**Elena.** Elena was a senior at Arlington High School, and she was gifted in reading, science, and math. Elena was identified as gifted in third grade, and during her first interview she said she would guess that she is gifted in social studies, science, and English but not math. Elena was sweet, bubbly, and talkative, and said she felt “cool” being asked to participate in this study.

Elena was active on student council throughout her high school career, and this past school year she had served as student body treasurer. She also did diving, ran track, and was part of Spanish Honor Society. In the fall, Elena would be attending a mid-size private university where she would be majoring in physical therapy. Elena chose to study physical therapy because she had always been an athlete and was interested in anatomy and how the body worked. Elena explained that she would work extremely hard in college to make sure she earned good grades since she would eventually have to get a doctorate in physical therapy.

**Joey.** Joey was a senior at Arlington High School, and he was gifted in reading, science, social studies, and math. Joey was identified as gifted in third grade. During his first interview, Joey said he was not positive in which areas he was gifted but said if he had to guess, he would say science, math, and English, but he is the strongest in science and math.

Joey was actively involved in Arlington's music program; he played the cymbals and participated in the school's musicals. He was also in a band outside of school. In addition, Joey was in National Honor Society and German club. Joey was fairly shy, but his passion for band radiated from him, and it was obvious that Arlington's music department shaped his high school career. In the fall, Joey would be attending a mid-size public university where he would be majoring in materials science and engineering. He was considering perhaps minoring in German, as he had studied it throughout his four years of high school and has even gone on a school trip to Germany. Joey also planned on continuing to play in a band during college.

**Noah.** Noah was a senior at Arlington High School, and he was gifted in reading, science, social studies, and math. Noah was identified as gifted in third grade and participated in the gifted program for elementary and middle school. During his first interview, Noah said he was not sure in which areas he was gifted but said if he had to guess, it would probably be reading and social studies but not math and science. Noah was quiet and reserved, but he worked well with others in class, and if people would speak to him in the halls, he would respond back.

Noah played varsity soccer for Arlington, and he used to play baseball as well, but soccer was been his main extracurricular focus in high school. Noah explained to me that he wished he would have been joined more clubs and that he would have played an instrument and been involved in school musicals. Noah said up until that year, he was only interested in sports and did not give himself the opportunity to try anything new. However, he believed being involved in the school musicals, for example, would have been a rewarding experience.

At the time that I was working with Noah, he did not yet know where he would be attending college in the fall. He said he would like to go out of state but did not know if doing so was a financial possibility. Wherever Noah ends up, he intends to study business, and he was interested in real estate and development. Noah said he would potentially be interested in studying architecture if did not enjoy his business classes.

**Riley.** Riley was a senior at Arlington High School, and she was gifted in reading, science, and math. Riley was identified as gifted in third grade. During her first interview, Riley said she was not positive the areas in which she is gifted but said she would assume English and math for sure and possibly science and social studies as well. When I first met Riley, I could tell how mature she was for her age.

Alder Valley's gifted coordinator and I met with the five Arlington participants one afternoon so that consent and assent forms could be distributed, and the students could have the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the study. Riley said that she did not have any questions but told me she had a lot to say about her experience as a gifted student and was looking forward to our interviews. Riley seemed quiet and reserved around her peers, but she was quite talkative with adults throughout the school. During both interviews, Riley and I took the entire 40 minutes, and I had to give her a pass to class since she would be a few minutes late.

Riley's greatest passion was field hockey. She played for Arlington and for a club team, which meant that she played year-round. Riley would be playing field hockey for a large public university in the fall where she would be majoring in sport industry with the hopes of being a field hockey coach. Riley explained that while she took rigorous classes,

tries hard, and got good grades, if she could drop out of school and just play field hockey, she would. Riley said she hoped that her college experience was more fulfilling than her high school experience in the sense that she wanted to be able to have more of a social life than she did in high school.

**Abby.** Abby was a junior at Wayton High School and was gifted in reading, science, and math. Abby was polite and well-spoken but extremely shy and introverted. She was one of the editors for the school literary magazine, and she was an active member of Wayton's service club. Abby explained that even though writing for the literary magazine was not technically considered an extracurricular activity, there was a lot of work and collaboration completed outside of school, so she and the other editors considered it an extracurricular activity.

After high school, Abby wanted to go to college somewhere in California. She was not sure what she wanted to major in, but she did know she would eventually like to attend law school.

**Alexa.** Alexa was a senior at Kennedy High School, and she was gifted in reading, science, social studies, and math. Alexa was quiet yet confident, and she was eager to participate in the study. Alexa was on the cross country team and the Science Olympiad team, and she also played the violin, participated in various orchestras outside of school, and was a member of National Honor Society. After high school, Alexa wants to study either chemical or biomedical engineering at UC Berkeley or Carnegie Mellon.

**Grant.** Grant was a junior at Kennedy High School, and he was gifted in reading, science, social studies, and math. Grant was extremely shy and reserved but was polite and respectful. Grant played the cello at Kennedy, and he was also on the tennis team and cross country team. In addition, Grant was involved in Model United Nations, Science Olympiad, math team, and science team. Grant was not sure exactly where he wanted to go to college, but he knew he wanted to go somewhere out west or in the northeast. He wanted to study industrial engineering or some form of business, such as finance.

**Kate.** Kate was a senior at Halier High School, and she was gifted in reading, science, social studies, and math. Out of all ten participants, Kate seemed to be the most outgoing and self-confident. Kate ran cross country and track, and she was captain of both teams. She was also student body vice present and vice president of National Honor Society. Kate explained that she enjoyed being busy and involved in as many activities as possible.

In the fall, Kate would be attending a large public university on a full academic scholarship. She was selected to be part of the university's most elite honors program in which 25 students from the entire freshman class are chosen. The students were selected based on academic achievement in high school, and they were brought to campus for two rounds of interviews. The selected 25 students received a full academic scholarship as well as a stipend and had the privilege of being mentored by a professor of their choice for their four years of college. Kate said while she was not entirely sure what her major would be, she was fairly positive it would be something business-related, as she enjoyed interacting with people and having leadership roles.

**Max.** Max was a junior at Wayton High School, and he was gifted in reading, science, social studies, and math. Max seemed like a free spirit and that he was mature beyond his years. Max was the president of Wayton’s Junior State of America (JSA) chapter, which was a political debate and activism club. Max explained that participating in JSA was quite time-consuming because he participated at the school, state, and national levels. Max was extremely passionate about politics and found history and government fascinating. After Max graduated from high school, he wanted to pursue computer science. He was interested in attending The Ohio State University, Carnegie Mellon, or Cornell, but UC Berkeley was his first choice.

### **Uncovering Self-Identification of Giftedness**

In answering research question one, “How do gifted high school students describe what it is like to be identified as gifted?”, the themes that arose the most frequently were the two essential themes, social needs and emotional needs, and each of their sub-themes: friendships; classroom interaction with peers; social needs of gifted vs. non-gifted students; extracurricular activities; attachment to family, friends, and teachers; dealing with perfectionism; combatting pressure; and being labeled. Each sub-theme includes a discussion about how that particular theme relates to high school gifted students’ sense of self-identification.

#### **Social Needs**

**Friendships.** In discussing friendships with the participants, I was trying to discover if the participants affiliated with both non-gifted and gifted peers or one or the other and why. Brianne believed most of her friends were gifted like her, and she said if

she did not have as many friends, high school would have been miserable. Last year she did not have any friends in her lunch, so she ate by herself. While she enjoyed the alone time to relax, she wished she would have had people to whom she could have talked because being alone got old after awhile.

I asked Brianne if she could go back and re-do high school again, would she choose to be gifted or not. She said she would definitely be gifted because it is fun to hang out with people who are smart because she is able to learn new and interesting information. Brianne said she wants to learn as much as possible about everything, and she wants to know why things are made the way they are, and spending time with her gifted peers allows her to constantly learn new information.

Elena explained that her best friend was gifted but that she also had friends whom were not gifted. She said having gifted friends “is definitely helpful, but I don’t think that being gifted means you can’t be friends with non-gifted people. I think you can have things in common in other ways” (Elena Interview 1). After listening to her response, I asked Elena if she felt like her non-gifted friends understood her as well as her gifted friends. She responded:

I don’t think so. Here at [Arlington], we’re usually with the same people for all of our classes, and since I take mostly advanced classes, I think I’m with a lot of my gifted peers, so I feel like I haven’t had a lot of opportunity to interact with other students. But I definitely think that if I did, they wouldn’t understand me as well as the people that I’ve been around. (Elena Interview 2)

During our first interview, when Joey was talking about being involved in Arlington's band, I asked him about his friends, specifically if his closest friends were gifted like him. He explained the following:

No. I'm actually really involved in band here, so a lot of my friends are in band as well. Some people are [gifted] in [band] because I feel like it draws from every part of this school. So there are the gifted people in there, and I'm pretty good friends with them. And then I'm friends with people outside of band as well. My closest friend, I don't believe he is [gifted]. I choose my friends based on having common interests not whether they are gifted. (Joey Interview 1)

According to Noah, because he was involved in soccer during all four years of high school, most of his friends were on the soccer team with him because they spent so much time together. Noah explained that a majority of his friends are gifted, and he said by majority, he means slightly more than half.

Riley was got good grades in all of her classes, and she also excelled at field hockey. During our interviews, Riley explained that balancing extracurricular activities such as club field hockey, high school field hockey, having friends, and getting good grades in AP classes was extremely challenging, and something had to give. She therefore chose to minimize her social life. While Riley's social life was not her main priority, she still had friends. Most of her friends played field hockey and were a year younger than her, so while she did not have classes with most of her friends, she saw them at field hockey practice and games. Riley was not sure if her closest friends were gifted because she said it was something they did not discuss.

Riley said that most times she was okay with her choice to minimize her social life, but sometimes she did wish she had more friends. She explained that her dad is the one who worries about her lack of friends. When I asked why exactly her dad was worried, she explained the following:

I think he worries that I'm isolating myself from people. I like my quiet time. I like my alone time. Sometimes I don't want to be around people. During field hockey season I wasn't happy because even though I got to see my friends every day, it was in an environment I hated with people I didn't like. And I cut myself off more or less, and that's what most of his concern was because I was cutting myself off from other people. (Riley Interview 2)

Abby said that most of her friends were gifted like her because they understood each other well in all aspects of life. But she had some non-gifted friends as well. However, she acknowledged that her gifted friends tend to understand her more than her non-gifted friends.

Alexa said that her closest friends were Asian like her, and she said that has always been the case. Her friends were also gifted, and she said they connected so well because they understood each other both culturally and academically.

Grant did not elaborate much on his friends. He simply said he has friends, and when I asked him if his friends were gifted, Grant responded, "All of them" (Grant Interview 1).

When Kate and I were discussing her friends, she explained that she is extremely social and has always had a big circle of friends. I asked Kate if her friends are gifted like her, and she responded with the following:

One of my best friends is just like me. We're like the same person. But she's in the IB program. But a lot of my friends are not which is funny because you would think that I would. I think my personality is, I wanna be friends with everyone. So I have a group of friends that is completely diverse. (Kate Interview 1)

Finally, during my first interview with Max, when I asked him about his friends, he said that he had both gifted and non-gifted friends. He tried to have a wide variety of friends.

After analyzing the participants' data regarding friends and friendships, I was certainly able to see commonalities. Most of the participants, with the exception of Alexa and Grant, explained that they had both gifted and non-gifted friends but that their gifted friends understood them better because they had similar mindsets and ways of thinking. As several of the participants stated, gifted students are often in classes together all day, and they therefore do not have a whole lot of opportunity to interact with their non-gifted peers during the school day except for lunch and some electives.

Joey, Noah, and Riley talked about the fact that they did not choose their friends based on whether or not their friends were gifted but rather if they shared common interests, such as band, soccer, or field hockey. So while gifted students may have a great deal in common academically, they can also have other interests, such as extracurriculars, in common with non-gifted students as well. Because Joey, Noah, and Riley spent extensive time at practices and games, it is not surprising that they developed strong friendships with their peers whom shared common interests.

Based on what the participants shared, their being identified as gifted did not mean that they were exclusively friends with other gifted peers. Instead, most of them had both gifted and non-gifted friends. While several of the participants acknowledged that their gifted friends better understand them, non-gifted students would likely give a similar answer, that their non-gifted friends best understand them. Individuals are most comfortable with others to whom they can connect and share common interests.

**Classroom interaction with peers.** In discussing classroom interaction with peers with the participants, I wanted to understand if the participants interacted with both non-gifted and gifted peers in class or one group or the other and why. I also wanted to understand if the participants believed non-gifted and gifted students interact with each other similarly or differently in class. When I asked Brianna about her interaction with other gifted peers and non-gifted peers in class, she responded:

I think it's really nice to be in classes that challenge you, and when you're gifted or whatever, this high school definitely has classes that do that. And I think those classes also put you in with other students who are gifted, and that's really nice, too, because you can relate to them sometimes better than to those students who aren't gifted. I feel like a lot of times gifted students in class are all on the same page. I think we see the world differently sometimes, I guess. I think a lot of normal teenage students, and I mean, this is kind of stereotypical, but they just have fun and do whatever in high school, and there's a lot of drama about little things, and that doesn't really happen a lot with gifted kids. I mean there is drama, but it's about who has a higher grade. We can relate to, we know stuff about math or science or whatever, and we can talk about that stuff in class and out of class.

But you can't always talk about that stuff with kids who aren't in those classes.

(Brienne Interview 1)

When I asked Elena if she liked working in groups or by herself in class, she quickly responded that she liked working alone, and I asked her why that was the case. She said she did not like having to rely on other people and that she would rather do the work to ensure that it is completed on time and correctly.

Elena said while she enjoyed having the chance to interact with non-gifted students in her classes, sometimes non-gifted students were intimidated by gifted students.

If one student does struggle more, I definitely think there is intimidation. I felt intimidated in my calculus class, for example. I don't think I'm gifted in math. I don't think I tested gifted, and I definitely felt intimidated by the kids who I know are gifted in math. They were doing really well, and I wasn't, and that was not good. (Elena Interview 2)

When I asked Joey if he thought gifted and non-gifted students have different social needs, he said no, that he thought their needs were the same. Joey did go on to say that in his government class, he was with a rowdy group of non-gifted students who seemed to be more concerned with socializing than learning, and their off-task behavior did irritate him from time to time.

Noah said he believed gifted students have more complex concerns and thoughts because the classes that gifted students take open them up to new thought processes and wordly ideas. He explained that he enjoyed being in classes with gifted students more than with non-gifted students:

In classes with gifted kids, there's more discussion, and there's more of teachers just leading things instead of sit down, take notes, listen to the teacher talk. It allows for more back and forth with students. (Noah Interview 1)

Riley said she would sometimes become irritated in classes if non-gifted students were engaging in off-task behavior, such as texting or doing other homework while the teacher was instructing. However, she tried to block out distractions and pay careful attention to the teacher so she would understand the content being taught.

When I asked Abby if she thought gifted and non-gifted students had different social needs or behaved differently in class, she said she was not sure because she had classes with only gifted students every day.

Alexa believed that gifted and non-gifted students interact differently and have different social needs. In her non-AP Spanish class, Alexa enjoyed talking to non-gifted students, but she said those students seemed to feel uncomfortable talking to her and acted as if they were not allowed to interact with her because she was smarter than them. Alexa said she wanted to tell them, "It's okay; you can talk to me. It's perfectly fine" (Alexa Interview 2).

Alexa also explained that in this Spanish class, she noticed that gifted students like herself paid attention when the teacher was instructing while the non-gifted students were often off-task texting or simply just not paying attention. Alexa said she would get frustrated with their off-task behavior and wanted to tell them to pay attention.

When I asked Grant he felt like gifted and non-gifted students behaved differently in class, he responded, "Yeah, I guess. The only time we really interact would be like

sports or clubs because most of the classes are segregated into intelligence. I don't know really. I don't know about the non-gifted students" (Grant Interview 1).

Both Kate and Max responded similarly to Abby. They said they were not sure if gifted and non-gifted students behaved differently in class because they had their classes with only gifted students.

In discussing classroom interactions with peers with the participants, I noticed a distinct difference between the responses from the Alder Valley participants and the Rollins participants. Four of the five Rollins participants said they were not sure if gifted and non-gifted students interacted differently in class because they were only in classes with other gifted students. Alexa was the only Rollins participant whom discussed being in class with non-gifted students. Alexa explained that in her Spanish class, the non-gifted students seemed intimidated when she would try to talk to them, which made her uncomfortable.

Interestingly, while the Rollins participants were under the impression that they were in classes solely with other gifted students, this was not the case. There were non-gifted, high-achieving students in their AP classes as well. The participants did not recognize this, however. All five of them seemed to affiliate taking AP classes with being gifted and were under the impression that in order to take an AP class, one must be formally identified as gifted.

The Alder Valley participants were able to discuss classroom interaction in more depth because they recognized that there were non-gifted students in their classes as well. Like Alexa, Elena said she felt as if non-gifted students were sometimes intimidated by gifted students in class. While Joey said he thought that non-gifted and gifted students

have the same social needs, he did not that he was irritated in government class when non-gifted students were rowdy and off-task because he was trying to pay attention. Like Joey, Riley also explained that she would become irritated by non-gifted students' off-task behavior in class. Finally, Noah felt as though the biggest difference in classroom interaction between gifted and non-gifted students were classes themselves. Gifted students could handle more discussions while non-gifted students did better with direct lectures.

Because the Rollins participants affiliated taking AP classes with being gifted, it was not their identification as gifted students that had an impact on them but rather their identification as part of the AP program. The Rollins participants could not differentiate between the classroom interaction of gifted and non-gifted students because they believed all the students in their AP classes were gifted. Had the participants been made aware which students were in fact not gifted in those classes, it would be interesting to see if they would be able to articulate any differences.

While Alexa discussed having Spanish with non-gifted students, she was actually only assuming that the students in that class were not gifted. That class was a regular, non-AP, non-IB class, so she therefore assumed that her classmates were not gifted. Of course, I found this fascinating because she herself defies her own logic as a gifted student taking a regular class. The Rollins students seemed to identify themselves not based on whether or not they are gifted but by the classes that they take, whether AP, International Baccalaureate (IB), honors, or regular classes. Because AP courses are only typically offered to juniors and seniors, the Rollins participants explained that they took honors classes as freshmen and sophomores to keep them challenged. The Rollins

participants viewed these honors classes as preparation for AP classes since they were used to being challenged and having to critically think.

The Alder Valley participants knew there were both gifted and non-gifted students in their classes and were well aware which ones were which, and several of the participants discussed their frustration with non-gifted students' off-task behavior in classes. I do not believe that the participants were asserting that all gifted students are always on task in class nor that the only students ever off-task are non-gifted students. However, in their experience, gifted students seem to be more conscientious about paying attention and remaining on-task in class, which may be part of their identification as gifted students.

**Social needs of gifted vs. non-gifted students.** In discussing social needs of gifted vs. non-gifted students, I was seeking to understand if the participants believed non-gifted and gifted high school students had similar or different social needs and why. The participants' responses were as follows:

Socially, some [non-gifted students] are a little less adept at either communicating, or some of them have trouble with sarcasm. Others are fine with it. They don't understand sometimes that what they're saying can be not really mean but can be taken the wrong way. They can be very straightforward sometimes. Some [non-gifted] kids are totally fine. (Brienne Interview 2)

I definitely think so. Often times, I think gifted students will have different personalities, and they need different types of friends and interactions to fulfill those needs. (Elena Interview 2)

I haven't really noticed a difference I don't think. That's just from purely my perspective. I don't really have anything to compare it to. It's likely. I just can't think of any reasons right now off the top of my head. (Joey Interview 1)

Probably not. There's probably some differences there. I don't really know how I would explain them. But they probably don't do the exact same things and talk about the same kind of stuff. (Noah Interview 2)

Riley explained that she felt as if gifted students have more complex thought processes and are more concerned about getting good grades and being prepared for the future. Non-gifted students, on the other hand, were more concerned with relationship drama and other trivial issues, not about getting straight As.

Abby said she felt like the biggest social difference between gifted and non-gifted students was that if she chose not to go to a party because she wanted to study instead, gifted students would understand whereas non-gifted students would not. She believed non-gifted students are often more concerned about their social lives than they are about their grades.

Alexa believed that gifted and non-gifted students do not have different social needs, but they have different academic needs.

Grant said he was not sure if gifted and non-gifted students have different social needs because he is gifted and in class with other gifted students and can therefore not make assumptions about non-gifted students.

When I asked whether Kate thought gifted and non-gifted students had different social needs, her response was as follows:

Yeah. I think so. I know a lot of non-gifted student who are carefree. A lot of my friends are athletic, very athletic, so they have already committed to schools and have gotten scholarships, and they have this attitude about school that's like, oh I don't have to do this homework assignment because I'm already, I'm fine.

Whereas I feel like every homework assignment needs to be completed. Me, academically, that's how I can get by whereas someone else can use their athletic talents. (Kate Interview 2)

Max said he believed non-gifted and gifted students have different social needs:

Yeah, definitely, and you see a lot of friendships forming based around these different needs. You see a lot of smarter kids being friends with smarter kids and average kids being friends with average kids. Not only do they think in more similar ways, but at this point they also have the same classes. Taking only gifted classes, you're only going to be around gifted people. It's more likely you'll form relationships with those people. You've got kids who have their extracurriculars and their sports, and they have an intense schedule. So they end up with a lot of not only in class work but homework and then taking care of all this other stuff, you get home at like 9 or 10 pm. They don't have time to do this work without sacrificing their sleep. I don't think it's all that different from things that stress out gifted kids necessarily. It's just, it's on different level, different sorts of course work they have to do. The gifted students are going to be comfortable with more

higher-level work. Average students are going to be comfortable with more an average-level work. So they're probably both stressing to similar extents. Just it's what they're comfortable with that determines that. (Max Interview 2)

In analyzing the data pertaining to social needs of gifted vs. non-gifted students, there was a variety of responses among all of the participants. Both Joey and Alexa believed that non-gifted and gifted students have the same social needs, and Grant said he was not sure because he did not really interact with non-gifted students. Several participants discussed the idea of non-gifted and gifted high schoolers having different concerns or points of stress. For example, Riley believed that gifted students were concerned about their grades and their future whereas non-gifted students were concerned about relationship drama or other seemingly trivial matters.

Max's response stood out the most because it seemed to be the most insightful. In his opinion, both non-gifted and gifted students experience stress with academics but at their respective levels. Gifted students are more likely to stress about high-level courses, such as AP or IB, while non-gifted students may stress over regular classes. In Max's opinion being gifted does not necessarily mean one will be more stressed than someone non-gifted; the stress is simply relative to the level of coursework one takes.

While there was variation among their responses, for several participants, being identified as gifted was associated with more concern about academics, specifically grades. These participants feel as though their non-gifted peers were not so stressed academically and were able to lead a more carefree existence but if they were to experience stress, it was seen to be stress regarding relationships or non-academic issues.

**Extracurricular activities.** In discussing extracurricular activities with the participants, I wanted to learn about the activities in which the participants were involved and the impact of those activities on the participants' high school experiences. Brianne was involved in numerous extracurricular activities that kept her busy. She was active on student council, she took ballet, pointe, and jazz classes, and she participated in youth group at her church. Prior to this year, Brianne was also in Arlington's marching band. Brianne enjoyed being active and remaining busy and said she was still able to prioritize and make sure that her grades were her main priority. However, senior year time management became more difficult because Brianne said she had "senioritis."

During our first interview, I asked Elena what the most stressful part of high school was for her, and she responded as follows:

Lots of different things. But school was definitely one of them, just feeling like I have to get As all the time. If I don't, I fail. I have to get my homework done. I'm also involved in lots of things, so worrying about having time for everything was extremely stressful. (Elena Interview 1)

Because Elena was on student council, ran on the track team, was on the diving team, and was part of Spanish Honor Society, she had to balance a fairly hectic schedule. Elena said she greatly enjoyed all of her extracurricular activities, but doing well in school and getting As were her main priorities.

Joey was involved in band, German club, and National Honor Society during high school, but band was by far his greatest extracurricular passion. Joey said being involved in band was by far his favorite part of high school because it was something at which he greatly excelled, and he met many great friends. While band was his greatest passion,

Joey still worked very hard in school to ensure that he was performing well and getting good grades.

During our first interview, I asked Noah if he thought there were any obstacles to being a gifted high school student, and his response involved soccer, which did not surprise me:

[Being gifted] definitely puts a strain on other things outside of school. Like during the first quarter and a half, soccer season was going on, so it was really hard to get all my homework done, and sometimes even paying attention in class was hard when I would be worried about a game that night or practice or whatever. So I would say sometimes being gifted puts a strain on having a social life. But other than that, no. (Noah Interview 1)

Riley's field hockey experience significantly shaped her high school career at Arlington both positively and negatively:

I like school. But with all the homework and all the testing and all the classes, it's just very stressful. And I love playing field hockey. That's what I wanna do. I wanna be a coach. And that's what I'm majoring in, sport industry. I like to play. I like to go to the gym and work out and train. To be honest, if I could drop out of school and just play field hockey all the time, I would. (Riley Interview 2)

Riley went on to explain that she had a terrible field hockey experience at Arlington and that it was so awful she believed it ruined high school for her. She said her coaches were mentally abusive, and the athletic director did nothing about the allegations. In addition, Riley had a difficult time developing bonds with her teammates because she was socially awkward her freshman and sophomore years and was therefore extremely

shy and introverted. While Riley was unhappy with high school field hockey, because she knew she wanted to play field hockey in college, she could not quit the team.

Riley explained that she is looking forward to college in the fall because she can put high school behind her and have a more positive, well-rounded experience. When I asked her what she is most excited about, she responded as follows:

Well, I'm starting over. When you go to college, you're starting over. You're starting from scratch again. I mean, college is really starting from scratch.

Everyone goes in, and no one knows anybody. So you can remake yourself however you want. And that's what I'm planning on doing. Yes, I'm going to work hard in school. Obviously, I'm going to work hard at field hockey. But I'm also going to go out with my teammates cause those are going to be my friends.

I'm gonna go out. I'm gonna hang out with people. Sometimes I may say that I'm not gonna do my homework because I want to enjoy my time in college as opposed to what I've done for the entirety of my high school career, which is work and work and work and work. (Riley Interview 1)

During high school, Abby was an editor for Wayton's literary magazine, and she was involved in a service club called Interact. Out of the ten participants, Abby was involved in the least amount of extracurricular activities. Abby said if she could change anything about high school, she would concentrate less on academics and join more clubs and be involved in more activities. She explained that it was difficult for her to balance academics, extracurriculars, and a social life, so she decided it would be best to concentrate the least on extracurriculars, even though she now regrets that decision. She wished she would have been more involved in extracurriculars.

Alexa was on the cross country team and the Science Olympiad team, and played the violin, participated in various orchestras outside of school, and was a member of National Honor Society. She explained that she enjoyed her extracurriculars, but academics were her main priority. If Alexa could change anything about Kennedy High School itself, she said she would have more clubs available for students to join.

I was talking to friends, and there's this thing called JSAY, and it's similar to the debate club here, but it seems a little more well-rounded. So it would be cool to have some clubs we could start. We didn't start any new clubs this year or last year, so it would be nice to include some more. (Alexa Interview 2)

Grant played the cello at Kennedy, and he was also on the tennis team and cross country team. In addition, Grant was involved in Model United Nations, Science Olympiad, math team, and science team. Grant said that while he was often busy with extracurricular activities, he ensured that his academics came first.

Kate ran cross country and track, and she was captain of both teams. She was also student body vice president and vice president of National Honor Society. Kate said she thrived on being busy and involved in as many organizations as possible. I asked her if it was difficult balancing her extracurriculars with her school work and social life, and she responded as follows:

Yeah, I think it's difficult because it's like this whole week I haven't been home at all because I'm just involved in so many activities, and I go from babysitting to work to my meetings to school. I have so many things I'm involved in, and sometimes I feel like I'm spreading myself way too thin. But honestly, that's something I have adapted to, and that's like my lifestyle. So sometimes if it's like

a Saturday and I have nothing to do, that's weird for me. I feel like I need to do something. (Kate Interview 2)

Like the other participants, Kate explained that while she greatly enjoyed being busy and being involved in as many activities as possible, her grades were always her first priority.

Max explained that it was difficult at times for him to balance academics, extracurricular activities, and a social life. He said the best way to deal with the struggle was to prioritize and decide which two of three were most important at the time. When I asked Max in which extracurricular activities he was involved, he responded as follows:

I am the president of our school's JSA chapter. It stands for Junior State of America. It's a political debate and activism club. That's what I spend most of my time on in my extracurricular sphere. It's not just within the school. There's a national organization, and then on the state level, there's a lot of work that gets done, too, that I'm involved in. So that's a bit time-consuming. (Max Interview 1)

Max greatly enjoyed his involvement in JSA, but he said his grades had to come first even when he would rather be working on JSA instead of studying for a test.

All ten participants were involved in extracurricular activities to some extent, and all them explained that academics always remained their first priority. Most participants acknowledged that balancing academics, extracurricular activities, and a social life was quite challenging, making time management extremely important. It is not surprising that all ten participants deemed academics as their first priority because excelling academically is one of the most common characteristics of gifted students. They strive to

perform their very best in the classroom no matter what, even if it means skipping a club meeting or missing out on an outing with friends.

For Riley, field hockey was not just another extracurricular activity; it was the source of her identity. Even though she had a terribly negative experience with her high school team, Riley could not quit if she wanted to play in college. She therefore played on her high school team as well as a club team. However, balancing both teams, her grades, and her social life was too much, so she chose to essentially give up her social life. While Riley explained that she was fairly content with her decision to not have a social life in high school, she was adamant that she would have a social life in college.

There were other participants who were highly passionate about their extracurricular activities, such as Joey with band and Max with JSA; however, Riley's passion about field hockey was unsurpassed. The quote that perfectly summed up her intensive passion was when she said, "To be honest, if I could drop out of school and just play field hockey all the time, I would" (Riley Interview 1). While field hockey may have been Riley's greatest passion, she certainly did not allow her grades to go by the wayside. She chose to give up her social life so that she could continue to excel academically while balancing field hockey.

All ten participants demonstrated the idea that being identified as gifted also meant keeping academics the main priority even when doing so was exceedingly difficult. It was easy for some students to skip a homework assignment or not study for a test because practice, a game, or meeting got in the way. However, it was common for many gifted students to go to the proverbial extra mile to ensure that all school work was completed and that they were performing well on assignments and assessments.

**Attachment to family, friends, and teachers.** In discussing attachment to family, friends, and teachers, I was attempting to learn more about the relationships the participants had with these groups of people and how those relationships affected their high school experiences. Brianne's attachments to her family, friends, and teachers were very important to her:

My family has always been really supportive of everything I've tried. They have encouraged me to try my best. My friends are similar. They're in a lot of AP classes like I am. They encourage me and push me to be better. My teachers are the same. I take challenging classes, but they're good teachers, and they help me.

(Brianne Interview 2)

I asked Elena if she felt like she had healthy attachments to her family, friends, and teachers, and she said that she did. I then asked her how those attachments affected her high school career.

My parents and teachers have always pushed me to do my best, and I desire to please them. And they have been really good at praising me, especially my parents. My parents know that I like being praised, so if I do well in school, they always tell me like, "Oh, that's really great. Keep it up." And my teachers have been really encouraging. I haven't had any teachers that I did not get along with.

Most of my teachers here have been really great. (Elena Interview 2)

Elena said if her parents did not praise her, she would want to please them so badly that she would try to "work even harder and kill myself even more because I strive to please others so much" (Elena Interview 2).

I asked Joey if he felt as though he had healthy attachments with his family, friends, and teachers, and he was very quick to respond:

Yeah, I do, definitely with my peers. It's the group of people I spend a lot of time with just because we are practicing frequently. I still have some pretty good friends outside of band as well. And definitely some teachers. My German teacher, I've had her for three years, and I went to Germany with her this summer. I'm definitely pretty close to her. And there's some other teachers that even if I've only had them for a year, I have a good relationship with them as well. And my family, it's the same. (Joey Interview 2)

Joey said he has an older sister and that he is close with his family and that they have always been supportive.

When I asked Noah if he believed he had healthy attachments with his family, friends, and teachers, he said he did, but he did not have a lot to say about the topic. I asked him how these relationships have shaped his high school experience.

With family, they have always supported me doing as well as possible in school.

Other than that, I don't know if they've affected it. I mean having supportive friends and family always helps. But I don't know if they had a direct effect on it.

(Noah Interview 2)

Noah explained that he believed he had healthy attachments with his teachers but was only exceptionally close with two of them. Noah said the only reason he is close to one of them is because that teacher had been his homeroom teacher for all four years at Arlington.

I asked Riley if she felt like she had healthy relationships, or attachments, to your family, teachers, and peers, and she responded:

Family, absolutely. Most of my teachers, yes. Friends, all the relationships that I have are healthy. I don't have a ton of friends which is the part that worries my dad. There's a group I hang out with, but they're all a year younger than I am, so it's hard to spend a lot of time with them in school and stuff. I have acquaintances, but they're not people I would choose to hang out with. All my relationships have been healthy. (Riley Interview 2)

I asked Abby if she felt like she had healthy attachments to her family, friends, and teachers. She said she does believe she has healthy attachments, but in the past she had some unhealthy attachments to some friends, but they are no longer friends, so she does not have to deal with those unhealthy attachments any longer. Abby explained that she was close with her journalism teacher since she writes for the literary magazine and spends a lot of time with that teacher.

Alexa explained that she believes she has healthy attachments with her family, friends, and teachers. She said her family and friends have always supported her no matter what. When I asked her about her attachment with her teachers, her response was as follows:

Yeah, I haven't had any of my teachers for more than one year. I think just generally if I like the class more, I will be more engaged with the teacher and if the teacher is willing to make the relationships with the students. I don't usually go and try to get closer with teachers; it's something I need to improve on, I guess. (Alexa Interview 2)

Grant said that he has healthy attachments to his family, friends, and teachers. I asked Grant how he chose which teachers he was close to, and he responded, “How many years I’ve taken classes with them. Like [teacher’s name]. I’ve had her for English for two years. And then I had my Stats teacher for two years because she taught me Pre-Calc” (Grant Interview 1).

I asked Kate if she believed she had healthy attachments, and she responded as follows:

Yeah. I would definitely say so. Relationships in my life are my strongest suit. Since you asked, one of the toughest things for me this year, one of my best friends who she has been my best friend since like Kindergarten and is like a sister to me. This year something that has frustrated her a lot and that has taken a toll on our relationship is that she feels like she’s in the background a lot. So she wrote this letter to me and was like [name], you are going to a good college, you get better grades than me, my parents like you better than they like me, our friends always navigate to you, our guy friends are always prestiging you over me, and I feel like I’m in the background sometimes, and that’s very hard for me. So that has been a struggle this year, but everything else has been okay. (Kate Interview 1)

When I asked Max about his attachments, he did not elaborate much. He simply responded, “I have good relationships with people. They are excellent sources of support” (Max Interview 1).

Because gifted students are often misunderstood by others, they sometimes have issues forming secure attachments or bonds with those around them. However, this did

not seem to be the case in this study. Instead, when analyzing the attachment data, support was what stood out the most; all of the participants mentioned support in some capacity in relation to their families, friends, and teachers. Not one participant said his/her family was not supportive, and most participants said their friends were supportive as well. When it came to teachers, participants seemed to be close to those teachers whom they had for more than one class, which makes sense. Being identified as gifted did not seem to negatively affect the participants' ability to form secure, healthy bonds.

Riley's discussion of her attachment to her friends definitely stood out. As discussed in the previous sections, Riley did not have much of a social life, but she said she still had some friends, mostly girls on her field hockey team. Because Riley is so mature, I thought it was interesting that she said her friends are all a year younger than her because if anything, I would have expected Riley to associate with individuals older than her. I also thought it was interesting that Riley interchanged "friends" and "acquaintances" when she spoke. To me, the difference between friends and acquaintances is very distinct, but for Riley this does not appear to be the case. Because she did not socialize with many peers outside of school and field hockey and therefore did not have a close-knit group of friends, perhaps the distinction is not as clear to her. While Riley did not have many close friends, she felt as though she had healthy attachments with her family and teachers.

Kate's discussion about her best friend also stood out to me. Her best friend was clearly tired of constantly feeling as if she were living in Kate's shadow and was likely jealous of Kate as well. It was not as if Kate received her friend's letter and could then

move on as if nothing happened. Instead, Kate said her friend began distancing herself from Kate and purposely avoiding her because she said it was too painful to be Kate's friend. Kate tried talking to her and working things out, but her friend insisted that she needed to keep the distance between them. Kate said this reaction deeply hurt her feelings, and it was difficult to adjust to her best friend of thirteen years no longer being a part of her life. However, she always knew that she would essentially be starting over in college in a few months and would have a chance to make new friends. With the exception of this one friend, Kate said all of her other attachments to family members, friends, and teachers were healthy.

### **Emotional Needs**

**Dealing with perfectionism.** When I discussed perfectionism with the participants, I wanted to discover if they self-identified as being perfectionists, if they were perfectionists with both academics and extracurricular activities, and how perfectionism affected their high school experiences. Brianne said she thought she was a perfectionist but said she was not as intense as some of her friends. She believed she was a perfectionist in most aspects of her life because she enjoyed being good at what she does. She strived to get good grades and to excel at her extracurricular activities, especially dance, because it was something she great enjoys.

When I asked Elena if she thought she was a perfectionist, she said she definitely did. She said she was a perfectionist in all aspects of her life, including academics and extracurricular activities. I then asked Elena why she believed she became a perfectionist and if she wished she were not one.

I don't know. I was always like the stereotypical good kid. Like if I had to write my name on the board in elementary school, I'd bawl my eyes out. I guess my mom was like that a lot in elementary school. So I think it's like genetics. In some ways, like I wish I didn't feel like I had to get an A on everything. I wish I could just relax. But sometimes I like being a perfectionist because I just feel like I'm being neat. (Elena Interview 1)

Elena clarified that she did not mind if she received a B on an assignment, but getting a B on a report card was very emotionally difficult for her as a perfectionist. Elena received three Bs total on her report cards throughout high school and said she would be graduating 27<sup>th</sup> out of over 590 students.

When I asked Joey if he thought gifted and non-gifted students have different emotional needs, he said no, that he believed their needs were similar. I then asked Joey if he considered himself a perfectionist, and his responded as follows:

Yes and no. There are some times that I try to be the best, like definitely in band. I'm very interested in that. I actually auditioned for and will be participating in an independent group this summer. The group I will be playing with is pretty big in the band community. But for other things, for example, yesterday I was working on homework, and there was a calculus problem, and I was working on it, and the key was nearby. I got pretty close. I didn't quite get the answer, but I figured it was close enough and knew we would be going over it the next day. So if I'm working on something for a while and I get close, it's usually good enough. But there are some things I definitely try to do really well. I'm more of a perfectionist with band than school work. (Joey Interview 1)

When I asked Noah if he considered himself a perfectionist, he said he did in certain areas, especially those areas that are of great interest to him.

Yes, I want to be as best as I can be at soccer and then for some reason art. Like I'm not the best artist, but I can just sit and work on something I'm doing. I'm in Art 2 right now, and I have trouble turning things in sometimes because I'm still trying to perfect it. I was just thinking about this today. Recently I've noticed that I've found it or something, or I've started to improve because I'm in Art 2 now, and it's like I'm actually putting out some decent work. (Noah Interview 1)

Noah worked hard in school and got good grades, and he said soccer and art are the two areas in which he is the greatest perfectionist. He had always wanted to excel in soccer, but his strive to excel at art was much more recent.

When I asked Riley during our first interview if she considers herself a perfectionist, her reply was, "Oh, absolutely!" (Riley Interview 1). She said she was a perfectionist with field hockey and to an extent with her school work. Riley only received one B in her high school career, which was in calculus her junior year. While she was devastated to get her first B, with her family's support, she learned to not put so much pressure on herself. I asked Riley if she believed there are both advantages and disadvantages to being a perfectionist.

I think it depends on our external environment because if you are surrounded by people who pressure you, who tell you that you have to do these things and you have to be the best at that and get the highest scores on this, then you're gonna go crazy. But I'm lucky that my parents have always told me, just do your best. We don't care what your grades are as long as we know you're working your butt off.

So I think with that external support, you're going to be able to manage [perfectionism]. Eventually it's going to like relax a little bit. But if you have the external pressure, then it's going to drive you crazy. (Riley Interview 1)

When I asked Abby if she was a perfectionist, she said she was a perfectionist when it comes to academics, but she wishes she were not because she gets extremely stressed out when she gets anything less than an A; even an A- stresses her out. Abby explained she was also a perfectionist when it came to her work on the literary magazine, but she is not a perfectionist with clubs. In fact, she stated, "I put my grades and academics above extracurriculars, so I skip meetings sometimes to make sure I get my work done" (Abby Interview 1).

When I asked Alexa if she considered herself a perfectionist, she said she considers herself a perfectionist in general but especially with her school work. She explained that she was not a perfectionist in orchestra; she was okay with not being the top chair. But for activities in which she is genuinely interested, she considers herself a perfectionist and wants to be the best she can possibly be.

When I asked Grant if he considered himself a perfectionist, he said he is only a perfectionist when it comes to grades. He said he wants to do the best he can in all that he does, but his perfectionism is only apparent with his grades.

Kate explained that she felt like she was a perfectionist her entire life, especially when it came to academics:

It depends what extracurricular. Running, for example, that's something that, it's almost like I like people to perceive me as a perfectionist, as pathetic as that

sounds. Like in running, I want people to see me as always getting good times, constantly hitting the mark every time. But surprisingly, school work is the biggest area where I think I am a perfectionist. (Kate Interview 1)

I then asked Kate if she had maintained straight As:

Last year I got my first A- because I had had all As. But then I got my first A-, and it's kind of ridiculous when I think back to it because I was devastated over it. I cried over an A- for a semester grade, which didn't even matter. I think it's because I had all As, and that minus just kind of distorted everything. This year I don't know if it's senioritis or if I've accepted the fact that like one B doesn't matter. But in AP Lit, I did get a B, which was fine for me this year. (Kate Interview 1)

Max said he was a perfectionist when it came to both academics and extracurriculars because he strived to be the best at everything he tries.

All ten participants self-identified as being perfectionists; this did not surprise me, as perfectionism is extremely common among gifted students. Often times, students who are perfectionists are not satisfied unless their school work is impeccable, they receive all As, and they are the best and brightest among their classmates. While it is most common for gifted students to be perfectionists with academics, they can also be perfectionists with extracurricular activities as well.

Nearly all participants said they were perfectionists with their school work, and most of them also said they were perfectionists when it came to extracurricular activities in which they were especially interested. For example, Brianne was a perfectionist with

dance, Joey was a perfectionist with band, and Kate was a perfectionist with running. The participants demonstrated a strong desire to excel at those activities in which they find great interest. This does not seem to be uncommon, as it is human nature to try to be the best at activities that we find exceptionally enjoyable and at which we excel; we are more likely to exert energy to those activities as opposed to those in which we have little or no vested interest.

Academically, gifted students are much more likely than non-gifted students to identify as perfectionists. This is because gifted students are used to taking challenging classes, getting good grades, and dominating their classmates academically. They therefore learn to settle for nothing but the best. Therefore, as the participants demonstrated, many gifted students have great difficulty earning anything less than an A, especially on report cards. For non-gifted students, earning an A- or even a B is no big deal, but for gifted students, it can feel like the end of the world. Not being academically “perfect” is a foreign concept to gifted students, so having to accept “imperfect” grades can be exceptionally difficult.

Non-gifted students can certainly be perfectionists with academics and extracurriculars as well, but perfectionism is much more common among gifted students because of the pressure they exert on themselves, which is discussed in the subsequent section.

**Combatting pressure.** As I discussed pressure with the participants, I wanted to know what kind of pressure they faced during high school and whom they felt pressure them the most, whether it was their parents, adults at school, or themselves. Brianne

experienced stress and anxiety about getting good grades while taking AP classes. Up until this year, Brianne received straight As, but this year she received Bs in Calculus. Once she received her first B, she felt like a lot of pressure was lifted off her because she no longer had the perfect straight A average. Brianne said her parents never pressured her to get straight As; she put more pressure on herself than anyone could have put on her.

One time I freaked out over a test grade I got. It was bad; it was a few years ago, and my mom was really comforting. She said even she did not always get straight As; it happens. Even if you get a B in the class, I don't care. I just want you to do your best. It was funny though because I told [my parents], before my report card comes, I just want to let you know that I got a B, and my parents were really sarcastic like, oh my gosh, you got a B. How could this have happened?

(Brianne Interview 1)

Brianne's parents reassured her that not getting straight As does not mean that she is unintelligent or a slacker. Because her parents were so supportive, Brianne was able to move past getting her first B, and she still recognized that she was highly intelligent and a hard worker

I asked Elena what she would change if she could change one thing about her experience at Arlington, and her response directly related to pressure:

Teachers pressure you so much to take every single hard class you can, and I just don't think that's, I mean, maybe someone could do it. But if you want to stay sane and you want to have a social life, like high school is supposed to be fun. I don't think that's a very good idea, and I don't think it's very fair for teachers to do. I definitely think you should push yourself, but I think at [Arlington] at least,

teachers tell you that you need to take as many hard classes as you can, and I think a lot of times I was afraid like I won't get into college if I don't do this. So I think they need to realize, yes you need to take hard classes, but at the same time, you need to make sure you're not going crazy. (Elena Interview 2)

Elena went on to say that administrators also pressured the students to take the hardest classes. For example, she said administrators would come on the announcements during scheduling week and pressure the students to sign up for as many hard classes as they can fit in their schedule. I asked Elena why she believed there was so much pressure put on students to take rigorous classes, and I found her response quite interesting:

Probably because the work force and colleges are getting more competitive in the world. Even at [local university], there are so many students who are from like India and China, so I think they're trying to get us prepared to compete with those people because that's who we're going to be fighting for jobs with, which totally makes sense. I know the education system is different in other countries. I'm not quite sure how it works, but I just feel like the way our education system is set up with our sports and extracurricular activities, it's just impossible to take all hard classes and balance everything else. (Elena Interview 2)

It was clear that Elena felt pressured by teachers and administrators to take the most difficult classes offered, so I asked her if she felt pressured by her parents to take AP classes as well.

At first my parents wanted me to take the hardest classes, but my sophomore year, I took way too many [AP] classes. I would have five hours of homework a night, and it kinda caused problems later on because I'm really Type A, and I have to

get all my homework done, and I've actually struggled with like anxiety lately, and so now my parents are like take what you can. They've even encouraged me to take like study halls. They want me to challenge myself, but they don't want it to be so much to where I'm dying. (Elena Interview 1)

In the end, though, Elena explained that she put more pressure on herself than any one person could have put on her to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades.

I felt like I always had to take the hardest class schedule and challenge myself as much as I could because I had this irrational fear that I wouldn't get into college or wouldn't get enough scholarships or wouldn't be able to do what I wanted in life if I didn't take all of these classes. I think a lot of it was from teachers, too, because they just push you so much, and every teacher wants you to take their AP test. So if you have all your teachers doing that and you have seven periods, that's a lot. (Elena Interview 1)

During our first interview, I asked Joey if he felt pressured by administrators, teachers, or counselors to take AP classes at Arlington. He responded:

Not necessarily pressured. It was more or less a suggestion, and I just went along with it. People always say take the hardest courses you can, and I wasn't really opposed to that. So I wasn't pressured into it. I did just follow the suggestion.

(Joey Interview 1)

After Joey explained that he did not feel pressured by adults at Arlington to take AP classes, I asked him if his parents put pressure on him to get good grades. He smiled and laughed a little bit as he started his response:

They try not to. It's kind of hard though. My sister was valedictorian here. She worked really hard, and that's how she [became valedictorian]. And she's naturally smart. They look at her test scores, and they look at my test scores and say you're smarter than her. You should be getting better grades than her. I just don't work as hard, which is the problem. She left pretty big shoes to fill. (Joey Interview 1)

Joey admitted that if he exerted more effort, his grades could be even better, so he understood why his parents expected better of him at times.

I asked Noah if he felt teachers, administrators, counselors, or his parents put pressure on him to take AP classes at Arlington.

Not like severely pressured or anything, but there is a push to get you up to AP level. There's a push for foreign language because you only become proficient like at the AP level. But other than that, no, I don't think there is pressure like you need to take these classes or we want to make you take these classes. (Noah Interview 1)

Noah said he did not feel pressured by his parents to take the hardest classes and to get good grades. His parents supported him and were pleased as long as Noah was trying his best. Noah explained that he put more pressure on himself than anyone else could to take challenging classes and to get good grades. He believed that those students who take AP classes likely experienced more pressure than those who did not. He had friends who took non-AP classes who rarely had homework while Noah had hours of homework each night. Noah said the greatest pressure he felt in high school was to get good grades, especially in calculus, as math was always Noah's toughest subject.

Riley was received good grades; however, at numerous times during the interviews, she discussed the amount of pressure she feels to take the hardest classes and to get those good grades.

There are a ton of class options for me, partially because I'm here at a big school. Like at smaller schools, I'm sure there wouldn't have been as much. But that being said, I think that emotionally, it's just too much, and there's an over emphasis on taking AP, IB, and honors level classes, which almost caused me to self-destruct. (Riley Interview 2)

When I asked Riley how she dealt with the pressure so she did not self-destruct, she explained that family support was a lot of it and that her parents told her that just because she could take the hardest classes did not mean she should. Listening to her parents' advice helped her maintain sanity and some semblance of a social life.

During our first interview, I asked Abby if she felt like teachers, administrators, or counselors pressured her to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades. She responded as follows:

It's not to get the best grades, but they do encourage us to take the harder classes I guess more than if you're not gifted. When filling out your schedule, they recommend that you take the hardest classes. (Abby Interview 1)

Abby knew her parents wanted her to take challenging classes and to get good grades, but she said it was not as if she were afraid to bring home grades even if they were not straights As. Abby explained that she put more pressure on herself to get straight As than anyone else put on her.

I asked Alexa if she felt as though teachers, counselors, or administrators put pressure on her to take the hardest classes offered, and she said no, that she puts pressure on herself. I then asked Alexa if she felt like her parents put pressure on her, and her response was as follows:

They used to when I was a younger student, but now that I'm older and can kind of make my own decisions, they're actually telling me to stop taking all these hard classes. They used to put pressure on me, so it's kind of made me do it to myself. (Alexa Interview 1)

Alexa said that she put more pressure on herself to excel academically than anyone else could. Taking challenging classes and getting good grades were of great importance to her.

During high school, Grant said he felt like he was pressured to take the hardest classes because he was smart. However, when I asked him if teachers, administrators, or counselors put pressure on him to take the hardest classes, he said, "No. I put pressure on myself" (Grant Interview 1). I was not sure if he did indeed feel pressure from adults at school or if he only experienced self-imposed pressure to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades. I asked Grant if he had always put pressure on himself to take hard classes and to get good grades, and he responded, "Well, yeah, you expect to work to the best of your ability, so why not just take the hardest [classes]?" (Grant Interview 1). I then asked Grant if he felt as if his parents put pressure on him, and he said, "They just want me to get good grades" (Grant Interview 1).

When I asked Kate about feeling pressured from adults at school, she explained that one of the major disadvantages to being gifted is indeed the constant pressure others put on her to excel:

I think in general teachers expect you to always be the smartest in the class, so there's a lot of pressure put on you I feel like. And there is pressure to get the best grades. Like if you get an A-, you want that A. And like normally people would be happy with a grade like that. My AP Lit teacher this year was my AP Lang teacher last year, and those are two very different classes. Lang is very writing-oriented, and that was my strong suit. And this year it's very reading-oriented. I'm not the strongest reader, but I'm a pretty strong writer, so I did really well last year, and I'm struggling a bit this year compared to last year. But [teacher] was adamant about me taking Lit. He was like you have to take it. You will be wasting your talents by taking a regular course, so I definitely felt pressured to take a higher course. (Kate Interview 1)

I then asked Kate if she felt as if her parents pressured her to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades, and she responded:

I know a lot of people expect them to, but I think it's more me. My mom, if anything, really, really wants me to go to a great school and likes hearing that I'm doing well and I'm at the top of the class and stuff. But it's more myself. I have this reputation, and I want to uphold it. My parents put a little bit of that on me. I think that if I wasn't as driven as I am, they would definitely be the ones who would drive that. But just because I am, it balances out. I think about my future a lot, and I think I need to have all AP classes because if I have regular classes, it's

gonna bring down my 5.0 GPA. So I definitely put pressure on myself more than my parents or anyone. (Kate Interview 1)

When I asked Max if he felt like adults at school pressured him, he responded as follows:

Sometimes more is expected of you, of course. And then these expectations are sometimes pretty lofty, and you get kids who are taking really, really intense schedules, and they don't have any time to get everything done. (Max Interview 1)

Max said that sort of pressure easily becomes overwhelming which was why so many students are constantly stressed out.

In discussing the idea of pressure with participants, several commonalities emerged. First, nearly every participant explained that his/her parents did not pressure him/her to take the hardest classes and to get straight As. In fact, most participants claimed their parents told them to take easier classes and even study halls and that not getting straight As was no big deal. So for the participants, the pressure they experienced in high school was not coming from their parents. However, several participants explained how they felt pressured by teachers, administrators, and counselors to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades. When it came time to schedule classes, these adults wanted to make certain the gifted students were signing up for as many AP and IB classes as possible.

Riley had the most difficult time dealing with pressure, as she said she almost began to self-destruct. I asked her exactly what she meant by "self-destruct," and she said that she felt such extreme pressure that she thought about self-mutilating to make the

pressure diminish. She felt like the pain of cutting would take away all of the pressure she was experiencing to always take the hardest classes and to get the best grades. Riley explained that in the end, she did not cut and instead turned to her parents for help. Riley said her parents were extremely supportive and helped her deal with the pressure she was experiencing, and she was able to stop herself from self-destructing.

While many participants experienced pressure from adults at school, the greatest pressure came from the participants themselves. Most of the participants said that while they experienced pressure from adults at school, it was nowhere near as intense as the self-imposed pressure they experienced. Gifted students put pressure on themselves to excel academically because as previously discussed, many of them were perfectionists and would strive to be the very best. In order to be the best, they had to take the hardest classes and get all As. Therefore, it seemed like perfectionism and self-imposed pressure combine to form somewhat of a vicious cycle that is especially common at the high school level, as gifted students compete to get into the best colleges and to obtain the most scholarship money.

**Being labeled.** When I discussed labeling with the participants, I wanted to know if they felt labeled for being gifted and if they did feel labeled, I wanted to know whether the label was positive or negative and how the label affected their high school careers. During our first interview, I asked Brianne if she felt like she was labeled at school because she was gifted. Her response was not surprising:

Sometimes. Right now it's not too bad. But freshman year and sophomore year, I felt like people were like, "You're one of those smart kids," type thing which wasn't awful, I guess. I knew the answers to a lot of stuff, but I wouldn't always

raise my hand because I got called on all the time, and after awhile, it's not like they started bullying me or whatever, but they were just like, "[Brianne] knows the answer again." (Brianne Interview 1)

Brianne's experience with being labeled "the smart kid" and being called on constantly in class was common for gifted students. Gifted students often know the answers, raise their hand, and get called on by teachers, and the other students learn to sit back and wait for the gifted students to answer. Eventually, as Brianne illustrated, gifted students stop raising their hand because they grow tired of being the only one participating and having the other students rely on them to answer.

When I asked Elena if she felt as if she were labeled at Arlington because she was gifted, she said that she did not. Instead, she felt as though she was labeled because she was smart in general. She said she felt labeled for being gifted in middle school because she was part of the pull-out program, so everyone knew which students were gifted. But at Arlington it was not like that since there was not a gifted program in place.

Joey explained that he did not feel as though he were labeled as being gifted but was more known for being smart and taking hard classes.

I asked Noah if he felt like students, teachers, or anyone else at school labeled him because he was gifted. He responded, "I wouldn't say labeled. But they recognize you're taking advanced classes. But I wouldn't say they label you" (Noah Interview 1). Noah went on to say that he did not believe that high school students at Arlington were labeled because they were gifted but rather were known for taking challenging classes and getting good grades.

During my first interview with Riley, I asked her what she got out of being gifted, and she responded, “A label. And I wouldn’t consider it a good thing” (Riley Interview 1). This was not the answer I was expecting, and I asked Riley to discuss how and why being labeled was not a good thing.

Because people are like, “Hey, you were a gifted kid in elementary and middle school, and you’re really smart. So you need to take all the hardest classes and do all the hardest stuff and apply to like Harvard and Yale and whatever. And that’s what you should do because you’re smart.” And you get this label as the smart kid, and people are like, “Oh, you’re gonna go to Princeton, and you’re gonna cure cancer. But it’s like maybe some of us don’t want to. Like me. I don’t particularly care. I want to play field hockey, and if I can’t play field hockey or coach, I’m gonna work in the food science industry. (Riley Interview 1)

I then went on to ask Riley whom she believed labeled her, and she said primarily counselors and some teachers. She believed the labeling was even worse in elementary and middle school, but because Arlington had so many students, the label was not as prominent. However, there was no denying the fact that she was gifted, and she was still deemed “the smart girl” in class.

When you’re a freshman in Honors Algebra II, which is a normal junior class, that was me and a few of my friends. Well, friends that I no longer talk to because of the whole social life thing. The kids in that class knew we were only freshmen, and they’re like, “Oh you’re so smart.” And sometimes it’s like thanks. But other times, it’s like, “Can I just be another kid in this class and not be expected to get the best grades?” (Riley Interview 1)

I asked Abby if she felt as if she were labeled for being gifted. She said perhaps she was labeled as being a nerd or being smart, but she did not think the students at Wayton even knew who was gifted and who was not gifted, so she did not believe being gifted had anything to do with her being labeled as smart.

Alexa discussed how she feels as if she is not labeled for being gifted but is stereotyped since she is Asian. She said her group of friends has always been labeled as smart nerds who have to do well in school because they are Asian. She said her peers constantly assume that all Asians get straight As and spend all of their spare time reading and studying.

When I asked Grant if he felt like he was labeled because he was gifted, he said no because there are many gifted students at Kennedy, so it was not as if he stood out. However, he did say that he felt like cultural stereotypes existed at Kennedy because since he is Asian, teachers and students alike think he is a math genius.

Kate's response when I asked if she felt as though she were labeled for being gifted was as follows:

Yeah, I think so. I have this reputation I feel like about me. Like people expect me to be a certain way. There was something going around in middle school, now that you asked. One of my friends started something called [letter, letter, Q], which stands for [first name] [last name] quality. So it was kind of funny. People would be like, oh this is [first name] [last name] quality. I just overachieve with everything I do I feel like, so people just expect everything I do to be brilliant. I only need to do this much to get an A, but I will go this far to please everyone else. (Kate Interview 2)

I then asked Kate if she could re-do high school and choose whether or not to be gifted, what would she choose? She said she would definitely be gifted again, and this is why:

Because I've really enjoyed high school, and I mean, I guess this is more of a personal thing, but I'm someone that enjoys being noticed and getting that attention, as weird as that is. I like having that reputation rather than being normal, which sounds weird. But I would rather have almost an edge, and being gifted gives me that edge. (Kate Interview 2)

Max said he felt as though being labeled as gifted is both positive and negative:

It's negative because I don't really think it's necessary to take a certain group of students who meet some criteria and cord them off and put them in their own little thing which they don't do too much, but I think education should be more of an integrative thing where everyone is pursuing their highest possible level. It's positive because it allows students who are able capable to move on when other students might be falling behind. So labeling students based on their ability allows you to sort of selectively target what each student needs individually. I'd like to see more of that though. (Max Interview 1)

While no participants believed that they were labeled as gifted, nearly all of them felt they were labeled as "the smart kid." The "smart kid" label came with being expected to take the hardest classes, to get the best grades, and to answer the most questions in class. Both Brianne and Riley mentioned their experiences in classes where they were called on so frequently that the other students began to assume they would answer all the

questions. So in the end, Brianne and Riley stopped participating because they grew tired of answering everything.

In addition to the “smart kid” label, Alexa and Grant also discussed their being labeled as “nerdy Asians.” Alexa said people at school assumed that because she was Asian, she always got straight As and read or studied in her free time. Similarly, Grant explained how his classmates assumed that he was a math genius because he was Asian. Both Alexa and Grant said people knew they were both extremely intelligent, but the two of them believed their “Asian” label outweighed their “smart” label. I certainly found this interesting, considering Abby and Kate were Asian as well but did not mention any experience with Asian stereotypes. This made me wonder if the “Asian” labeling was more prominent at Kennedy than the other two Rollins schools since that is where both Alexa and Grant went to school.

I also thought it was fascinating that Elena and Riley explained that they felt as if labeling was more salient in elementary and middle school. Because of pull-out programs in elementary and middle school, it was obvious who was and was not gifted. Therefore, it was easy to label the gifted students. However, at Arlington they believed labeling was far less likely to occur because there was no pull-out program and far more students. Elena and Riley said there are so many gifted students at Arlington that they did stand out which was good in their opinion.

Finally, Kate’s discussion about being labeled sparked my interest. Kate was quite revered among her classmates for her academic and extracurricular success and was therefore held on a pedestal of sorts. While such admiration certainly put pressure on

Kate, she explained that she liked being labeled as smart and successful and that the label gave her an edge over her peers. So Kate deemed her label as positive as opposed to negative.

All ten participants self-identified as being labeled the “smart kid.” While some participants like Riley felt like the label was negative, other participants like Kate thought it was positive. Still others like Max believed labeling had both a positive aspect to it as well as a negative one.

### **Addressing the Needs of Gifted High School Students**

In answering research question two, “How do gifted high school students describe the extent to which their needs are being met or not being met in schools?”, all three essential themes (social needs, emotional needs, and academic needs) were discussed in detail. However, the data collected about social and emotional needs seemed to lend itself more to the participants’ self-identification. For example, the participants self-identified as perfectionists, experienced self-imposed pressure, and prioritized their academics and extracurricular activities. Academics, however, seemed to fit better with addressing the participants’ needs. The participants were able to discuss how their schools were addressing their academic needs. In this section, each sub-theme of Academic Needs (AP Curriculum, Engagement vs. Boredom, Homogeneous Grouping, and WEPs) includes a discussion about how that particular theme relates to addressing gifted high school students’ needs.

## **Academic Needs**

**AP curriculum.** In discussing AP curriculum with the participants, I wanted to hear their thoughts on the advantages and/or disadvantages of taking AP classes in high school and the impact that taking AP classes has had on them throughout high school. Brianne believed the most important benefit to being a gifted high school student was having the opportunity to take AP classes that kept her challenged. In those classes she had the ability to be with other gifted students, and as previously stated, gifted students were often able to relate better to each other than they were non-gifted students.

AP Physics was Brianne's favorite class, which was two periods a day because there was a lecture period and a lab period. Brianne explained that she was always engaged in AP Physics and found the subject fascinating since she wanted to study physics in college.

Elena would graduate from Arlington with thirteen AP credits, and she explained that she was grateful she had the opportunity to take so many AP classes because she felt like she was sufficiently challenged and was well-prepared for college as a result.

While Joey said that he thought gifted and non-gifted students had the same social and emotional needs, he thought the two groups had different academic needs. When I asked him how he thought their academic needs differed, he said, "Gifted kids are pretty often more accelerated, so an average class wouldn't be very engaging or challenging. A gifted student needs to be challenged in order to excel" (Joey Interview 2). I then asked Joey if he felt as though Arlington supported his giftedness, and he explained the following:

I'd say yes, kinda indirectly though. It's not very direct like you're gifted. It's more or less for everybody. Taking honors and AP courses is an option for everybody, and it suits being gifted as well. (Joey Interview 2)

Joey said if he could re-do high school and choose whether or not to be gifted, he would definitely be gifted again because while he took harder classes and therefore experienced stress, he felt as though he was well-prepared for college and on a path for success.

During our first interview, Joey explained that English was his least favorite subject. He understood the importance of learning how to think critically about a piece of literature, but he did not believe that having to analyze symbolism would help him in his future. I asked him why he chose to take AP Language and Composition as a junior and AP Literature as a senior if he did not enjoy English.

I honestly don't know. Junior year I took AP English for the AP credit, and then the teacher recommended that I do AP English Lit as well. She told me from junior AP English to senior regular English, they read the same books and that it would just be a big repeat, and I figured I might as well just go on with it. (Joey Interview 1)

During our second interview, I asked Noah if his being gifted was a major factor in his academic success in high school, and he responded as follows:

I don't think there's really been a difference for me because I've been taking AP classes. I've been taking advanced courses, but a lot of people have. Actually, I had almost completely forgotten about taking gifted classes in elementary school until you mentioned it. I just know I take AP classes. Maybe I've worked a little bit harder. I do have maybe a little bit more of a natural talent for academics, but

it's not an every day or even every month thought that comes to me. (Noah Interview 2)

Noah explained that he had taken many AP classes during high school. He said he was not sure exactly how many, but he said the number was definitely in the double digits. Noah did not take AP classes because he knew he was gifted; instead, he took AP classes because he knew he was smart and wanted to be challenged. He said students at Arlington did not discuss whether or not they are gifted.

I told Noah I understood that being gifted was not something that surfaced in daily conversation among high school students; however, I asked him if he could think of any benefits of being gifted. He responded as follows:

I think you get more experiences and more challenges because I am not in straight honors and AP classes. I've taken general classes, and I myself have noticed a major gap in the curriculum and the challenge, really. So I think AP classes give you those experiences and get you ready for anything hard in college and also open you up to more stuff. Like AP Government, for instance, really showed me a lot about government and politics where maybe regular government wouldn't have. AP classes go more in depth I would imagine. (Noah Interview 2)

Noah said that if he could go back and re-do high school and choose whether or not he was gifted, he would definitely still remain gifted:

I like it this way. I like being able, I feel like, I feel more, I feel like school feels more meaningful when you're in the advanced classes and you're challenged and you're working. I just feel like school has more meaning than if you're just

gliding through school. Everybody goes through high school, but I'm actually taking something away. It's just more meaningful. (Noah Interview 2)

Noah illustrated that he affiliated being gifted with being able to take challenging classes, such as AP courses. Noah's favorite subjects in high school were AP Literature and AP Government because he was interested in the subject matter in both classes, and he enjoyed being challenged.

While analyzing the participants' surveys, Riley wrote several messages in the margins about topics she hoped we could explore more in-depth during our interviews. One of these topics was Arlington's AP program. Riley explained that she believed Arlington had a strong AP program with a large range of course options. However, a lot of students started to suffer burn-out because of the pressure to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades. When students stressed about their workload senior year, a common response was, "Oh, you just have senioritis." However, Riley insisted the problem was not "senioritis"; it was total burn-out.

With AP classes, you have to give up so much more time. You have to dedicate so much more energy to it. And by the time you reach your second semester of your senior year of high school, you're exhausted. I know that's how I felt, especially November and December. I was dead because you work and work and work, and there's no respite. The workload never ends. You're just climbing this hill, and it just keeps getting higher. There's no downhill portion until you get to college. To be honest, my goal in college is to maintain the GPA I need to keep my scholarship, and that's it because I want to have a social life. I want to be able to

spend time on things that I want to spend time on as opposed to working, working, working. (Riley Interview 1)

Riley discussed how at Arlington she felt like teachers and students looked down on her if she took a regular class. She chose not to take AP US History her sophomore because she had an extremely difficult schedule, so in the regular US History class, she said she was hassled for a while for not taking the AP class, but eventually the teacher and students backed off and let it go. Riley believes that non-gifted, high-achieving students are pressured to take AP classes as well, but there is an excessive amount of pressure put on the gifted students. In addition to the stress of the AP classes themselves, because she felt pressured into taking a total of eight AP classes, Riley did not have space in her schedule for many electives. She explained that high school would have been more enjoyable had there been less focus on AP classes and AP test scores and more of a chance for her to take elective classes in areas in which she is interested.

I don't think giftedness really matters all that much. I don't think it's whether a test says you're smart or not. What matters to really have success is to know yourself and know your ability and to work hard. I think your success is measured a lot more by the effort that you put in as opposed to your ability. Does ability matter? Sure. Like would my dad have done well in a calculus class? No. There's no way. If he had applied himself, he could have gotten through it. But he's just not as good in math. I just think that for most people, it's just a matter of work ethic, which seems to drop off a lot senior year. (Riley Interview 2)

Abby's favorite subject was math because she liked that there was a definite, finite answer; however, she enjoyed learning about history. English was her least favorite

subject because she did not enjoy having to complete required reading. She enjoyed writing but no other aspects of English. Abby appreciated the challenging AP curriculum at Wayton and said in AP classes, gifted students are definitely competitive with each other. When I asked her if it was a good or bad competition, she responded: “I think it depends on the people in class. Some people are not mean or anything about it, but sometimes when you want to do better than someone else, it’s a little stressful” (Abby Interview 2).

Alexa’s favorite subject was science, specifically biology and chemistry, and her least favorite subject was history. She felt like history required a lot of memorization, and she was more interested in “conceptual things” (Alexa Interview 1). However, she did enjoy AP U.S. History, which she took as a sophomore, because the class was interesting and kept her challenged. Alexa explained that the AP curriculum is intense at Kennedy because there are so many highly intelligent students. Interestingly, when I asked Alexa if there are obstacles to being gifted, she responded, “At this school, there is a lot of competition, just like trying to surpass someone or do something like a different club if you want to be at the top. It’s really hard to do that” (Alexa Interview 2). I then asked Alexa if the competition that exists is healthy or unhealthy, and she said it is both. There is competition among her friends, but it is friendly competition. However, the competition among regular classmates is not always friendly and can be quite intimidating and stressful.

I asked Alexa if she had to change anything about her high school experience, what would she change, and her response definitely surprised me:

I would have taken AP Chem my freshman year. The class below us took AP Chem their freshman year, and it allowed them to take a lot of different classes their sophomore and junior years, which I might not be able to do in the end.

(Alexa Interview 1)

Alexa wanted the opportunity to take every AP science class offered, including AP Biology, AP Chemistry, AP Physics 1, and AP Physics 2. However, in order to take each of these courses in four years, Alexa said it would have been necessary for her to take AP Chemistry as a freshman.

Grant's favorite subject was AP Calculus; he said he had always been good at math. He also said he used to like science until he took physics. I asked him what was so bad about physics, and he responded: "It's applied calculus, so you have to think about stuff. It's not just like plugging stuff into a formula. It's theory based. Some people pick it up really fast, but I don't" (Grant Interview 1). Grant enjoyed calculus but had a difficult time applying the concepts to physics, so he therefore dreaded going to physics each day, and he lost his love for science.

Grant explained that taking AP classes was a very important part of high school for him because the harder classes allow him to be challenged and keep him working hard. Grant received an A- one semester in Honors English II and one semester in AP U.S. History but maintained straight As other than that. He said while he was not happy about receiving his first A-, he knew he worked extremely hard and did the best he could, so he accepted the grades he received.

I asked Grant what he would change if he had to change one aspect of his high school experience, and he said, "I would have taken AP Chem freshman year so that I

could take AP Bio and the other APs before senior year” (Grant Interview 1). Grant explained that because he did not take AP Chemistry his freshman year, he will not have the opportunity to take all of the AP science classes, and he therefore feels like he was behind from the very start.

I asked Kate if she thought there were advantages to being able to take AP classes, and her response was as follows:

I definitely think there are advantages. Like I can take higher-level courses and do really well in them. I also think that you can interact with people who have the same mindset as you, and that can be really important in collaborative thinking. I definitely think there are advantages. (Kate Interview 1)

Kate said had she taken regular, non-AP classes, she would have been extremely bored in class and not nearly as well-prepared for college and the future.

When I asked Max if he thought there were benefits to being able to take AP classes, he had quite a bit to say:

Yeah. I would say so. You only get to go to high school once, so I think it’s best that you get the most you can out of it and take all the higher-level classes that you can. Not only does it get stuff out of the way for college, you’re also bettering yourself by having this knowledge. However, like I said before, individual attention is what I want to see the most. Ideally it would be in all of my classes, but that’s very hard to achieve with 1200 kids. You can’t have a specialist for every single one of them picking out what they need. If each student is pursuing

actively exactly what they need to be doing, they're going to succeed more because right now you just have a bunch of different kids at a bunch of different skill levels in a class being taught by one teacher one thing. You're not all going to meet that mark. (Max Interview 2)

When asked about their experiences with AP curriculum, all ten participants said their AP classes kept them challenged during high school and therefore met their academic needs. Non-AP classes are often too easy for gifted students, and the students are therefore not challenged or forced to apply themselves. AP classes, however, have a rigorous curriculum that is able to keep gifted students engaged. In addition to discussing the challenging curriculum, many participants also explained that taking AP classes prepared them for college because they were accustomed to rigor and high-level thinking.

However, several participants also discussed some negative implications of the AP curriculum. Both Abby and Alexa described the competition that occurred among AP students in class. While some of the competition was friendly, some of it could be intense and yet another source of pressure for gifted students. Because AP classes were full of high-performing students, students would often compete with one another to get the highest test scores and to answer the hardest questions. So while some forms of competition were more innocent and friendly in nature, there were also cases when the competition caused the participants more undue stress.

Riley believed that there were more negative aspects than positive to taking AP classes. She was adamant that there is too much pressure placed on students to take AP classes and that as a result, students are forced to work on homework for multiple hours each night, are unable to take electives, and therefore experience extreme burnout. Riley

stressed that this burnout is often incorrectly labeled “senioritis,” but it is much more serious than “senioritis.” In fact, Riley was so tired of being academically stressed with her AP classes that she said she is looking forward to college because she thinks it will actually be easier than high school. She said she is not going to consume herself with getting straight As and is going to make time to have a social life again since she did not have one in high school. Riley’s case may be extreme, as the other participants had not experienced the same degree of burnout as her. However, I am sure there are other gifted students out there like Riley whom stress themselves out so much in high school taking AP classes that they severely burnout out before even starting college.

Out of anything they could change about their high school experience, I found it fascinating that Alexa and Grant said they would have taken AP Chemistry their freshman year. My initial response to their answer was, “Wow. How very gifted of them!” Alexa and Grant were quite serious; they truly believed that they were behind because of not taking AP Chemistry as freshmen because they would not have the opportunity to take all of the AP science classes before they graduated. Like many gifted students, Alexa and Grant wanted to take as many AP classes as possible to keep themselves challenged and to prepare themselves for college.

While competition among students and pressure to get all As were seen as negative aspects of AP curriculum, the participants agreed that without being able to take AP classes, their academic needs would not have been met. They would have been bored, unengaged, and ill-prepared for college.

**Engagement vs. boredom.** As I discussed engagement and boredom with participants, I wanted to learn what kept them engaged in class and what made them

bored. Prior to being able to take AP classes her sophomore year, Brianne was not challenged and found herself bored, drifting off, and not focusing on what was happening in class. Brianne said it was difficult to stay engaged because the material was repetitive and too simple.

Elena believed the biggest academic difference between gifted and non-gifted students is that gifted students need more challenging classes to keep them engaged. Elena explained that she was bored in some non-AP classes at Arlington. I asked her for an example of a class in which she felt bored, and her response was as follows:

Biology. For math for me, I was a grade ahead because I took honors in middle school. They have honors math at the high school, but they don't have honors science at the high school. So I was a grade ahead in science, which was like normal to take in eighth grade, but then you get to the high school, and you're just taking regular biology with sophomores when I was a freshman who were learning just normal biology. And I was like, "Oh, my gosh. Let's just move on. I get this already." (Elena Interview 2)

Joey explained that he had been bored in the non-AP classes he took. For example, he chose to take regular government last year instead of AP because AP Government was a full year while regular government was only a semester. However, Joey said he regretted taking the regular class because it was so slow and boring that he dreaded going to class every day.

When I asked Noah what kept him engaged in classes, he said he was much more likely to stay engaged if he was interested in the subject or concepts being taught.

Calculus was Noah's least favorite subject, so he said he sometimes zoned out during that class simply because he was not interested in the subject matter.

When I asked Riley if she was ever bored in classes throughout high school, she explained the following:

Yeah, usually non-AP classes. It depends on the class. I haven't really taken a lot of non-AP classes. But first semester I took psychology, and that class was boring because we didn't do anything. She made us take notes, but then she would sit and go off on random topics. I would try to do my homework and be productive, and she would yell at me for trying to be productive. (Riley Interview 2)

In class Abby did not like when teachers would lecture the whole times while students were forced to sit passively. Abby liked having at least a worksheet to fill out while teachers were talking to keep her engaged and paying attention. Abby felt bored in classes when the curriculum was too easy and she was unchallenged. Abby preferred hands-on learning and discussions. She also explained that she liked taking notes in class because she enjoyed color-coding and underlining the notes that she took so she could use them to study for tests.

When I asked Alexa what keeps her engaged in class, she said her engagement level has everything to do with the teacher:

As long as the teachers are engaging and fun, it makes me want to learn more.

Our math teacher and our English teacher are pretty hyper all the time, which is pretty cool, and you can stay engaged without trying too hard. (Alexa Interview 1)

Alexa went on to explain that she was taking honors Spanish as a junior instead of IB, and she was bored because the curriculum was not challenging enough. She said generally speaking if she is not in an AP or IB class, she is bored.

When I asked Grant what kept him engaged in class, he said he wants good grades and pays attention at all times so that he can get As. Grant explained that he always took notes in class because doing so allows him to pay attention, and he is able to use the notes later to study for tests. When I asked Grant if he is ever bored in class, he said he is bored in statistics:

Stats is pretty boring. You have to memorize specific wording for an answer.

They take off points if you don't. It's really annoying. I hate memorizing the exact wording because that's how AP is graded. (Grant Interview 1)

Kate explained that what kept her the most engaged in classes were her teachers:

Definitely a good teacher for one thing. If they are very relatable and they're interactive, I will pay attention. Normally I am pretty good about paying attention.

Also the atmosphere of the class. You sat in on some the classes. They are two very different atmospheres. I think a lot of people take AP Stats because they think it's easier where AP Lit, those are the real motivated kids. Everyone's focused and getting work done. AP Stats, our teacher really doesn't have a great hold of the class. I feel like people take out their phones. AP Lit is a lot harder of a class for me, and it's something I'm interested in, so I will pay more attention to it, naturally. AP Stats, normally last year, I would have been very diligent about

paying attention, but everyone else has defocused themselves, and that gives me a reason to do the same. And I hate that, but it's reality. (Kate Interview 1)

Max's response also indicated that his ability to stay engaged in class is directly related to his teachers:

In a lot of classes, you just have teachers who are droning on, and you fill in little sections of notes. That's not really engaging. I'd like to see more interactive approaches where you have more back and forth between the students and the teacher and more individualized attention. (Max Interview 2)

All of the participants said they were bored in classes in which the curriculum was too easy. They found themselves drifting off and not paying attention, which is common for any student whom is bored in class. Most of the participants said it was far easier to stay engaged in AP classes because the curriculum was challenging and interesting, so they chose to pay attention.

In addition to curriculum itself, several Rollins participants explained that their engagement level was directly related to their teachers. If their teachers were genuinely interested in what they were teaching and they made instruction innovative and fun, students were much more likely to remain engaged. Several Rollins participants also expressed their dislike for direct lectures; they preferred more interactive approaches to teaching and learning. Direct lectures bored the participants and caused them to have difficulty paying attention.

In order to meet the participants' needs, they not only needed exposure to challenging curriculum, such as AP classes, but they also preferred dynamic teaching methods as opposed to lectures. The participants enjoyed discussion and hands-on learning experiences where they could apply what they learned. Sitting and having teachers talk at them was not conducive to having their needs met.

**Homogeneous grouping.** In discussing homogeneous grouping with the participants, I wanted to know their thoughts on being grouped homogeneously with all gifted students for all core subjects: English, math, science, and social studies throughout high school. During our first interview, I explained homogeneous grouping to Brianne and asked her if she thought gifted high school students could benefit from that type of grouping. I told her how some high schools have AP classes for non-gifted students and another section of that same AP class for gifted students and asked her if she thought having homogeneous grouping at Arlington would have been beneficial. Brianne's response is as follows:

I don't think it would be needed. With the honors and AP classes that we have, it's definitely, I don't think, necessary. We are already sufficiently challenged. In middle school, when we had those classes, it was just a really fun class actually because we got to think through problems. Sometimes we just got a packet of like logical problems that we had to like work our way through and figure out, and it was really fun. And sometimes it was like build a roller coaster out of this recycled material, and it was a lot of fun. (Brianne Interview 1)

While Brianne enjoyed her pull-out classes in middle school, she did not believe that homogeneous grouping at the high school level is necessary because gifted students are

already challenged in the classes that exist, specifically honors and AP classes. Brianne also explained that she did not think she would like homogeneous grouping because she enjoyed having classes with both non-gifted and gifted students, and she felt as though it was important that she socializes with peers who are not gifted.

As I was asking Elena if she thought homogeneous grouping would be beneficial at Arlington, she was already shaking her head no as she responded. I acknowledged that she was shaking her head no and asked her why she did not think homogeneous grouping would be beneficial.

Because I like being able to meet new people and having a variety of personalities and different ways of learning, too. I feel like if I were with gifted students who are just like me all day long, I wouldn't learn how to be social or interact with people as well as I have being with people who are all different skill levels. I definitely wouldn't like that. (Elena Interview 2)

I told Elena that I understood that she would not enjoy homogeneous grouping from a social perspective, and I asked her if she thought homogeneous grouping would have an impact on her academically whether it were negative or positive. She responded, "I don't think so. I guess if it were in a class where I struggled more, I wouldn't like it because I wouldn't want to feel like the bottom of the barrel. So, yeah, I guess it would have an academic impact, a negative one" (Elena Interview 2).

I explained homogeneous grouping to Joey and asked if he thought he would have enjoyed experiencing homogeneous grouping at Arlington. He responded as follows:

I think the mix is definitely better. It's better for everybody just because the students that do well are naturally smart or really hard workers and sometimes

both. So for the hard workers, not being able to take a class because they're not smart enough but would still do well in it isn't fair. Just having that mixed environment is pretty good I think, so maybe each group will rub off on each other. (Joey Interview 2)

When I asked Noah if he would like that type of grouping at Arlington, he said he had to think about it for a minute, and after a minute or two, he responded:

I don't know what effect that would have. I'm sure there are students in some of my classes who weren't identified as gifted who are working harder or doing better than I am. So I don't know if you can just separate those two groups, and I'm trying to think like what positives that would have. I could maybe see gifted kids pushing each other to do better. I don't know. That's a tough one. I would probably say that grouping that way might do more harm than good. Too much anxiety, probably a lot more competition, and then you're only meeting other gifted people. (Noah Interview 2)

Like Noah, when I asked Riley about homogeneous grouping at Arlington, she said she had to think for a minute, and then she responded:

That's a good question. I could see both side of the issue. On one hand, I actually really enjoyed, my sophomore year I didn't take AP US History, which was the only AP class at the time offered to sophomores. A lot of other gifted students took it. Not taking it is one of the decisions I do not regret. I really enjoyed getting a new perspective from students I hadn't interacted with much before. But at the same time, there are times when I'm in my AP class, asking myself, why are you in an AP class because you don't understand this. I think for more fact-

based classes like calculus or a science, I think it wouldn't be as relevant because either you're right, or you're not right. But in classes like English and history, I think it could be beneficial because the gifted students would be able to talk with people who actually know what they're talking about because those are more discussion and opinion-based. So when stuff requires more interpretation, then you have kids who can interpret better. (Riley Interview 2)

When I asked Abby about homogeneous grouping at Wayton, she responded: "I think I like having mixed classes because you meet people with a lot of different backgrounds and different kinds of people" (Abby Interview 2). Abby explained that she believed homogeneous grouping would do more harm than good because it was important for all students to work with a diverse group of people.

Alexa said homogeneous grouping at Kennedy would take away from her ability to interact with non-gifted peers, so she would lose out on getting to know new people and therefore thought homogeneous grouping would not be beneficial.

When I explained homogeneous grouping to Grant and asked him if he believed he would benefit from it, he responded, "I already have that" (Grant Interview 2). Grant said he was under the impression that Kennedy already implemented homogeneous grouping and that he was therefore in classes with all gifted students each day.

After explaining homogeneous grouping to Kate, she said she was not sure if she would like it:

This is a hard question. I think that, I definitely wish I would have had the opportunity to have classes with more of a variety of people because in AP

classes, which I always take, like last year I took a 5.0 schedule, all AP classes. With that, I got a lot of the same people in my classes, which is great, and I pushed myself a lot. But this year, for example, there weren't a lot of AP classes left to take. So I have classes like Global Gourmet and a lot of senior electives, and it's kind of fun because you have people that, it's like you're the top of that class. So they come to you and you can help them out and stuff whereas before it was you're just another fish in this big sea of really brilliant kids, and interacting with them is great. But also interacting with other people who I guess, I don't want to like prestige myself, but people who struggle more. It feels kind of nice to have that edge over everyone else. (Kate Interview 2)

As illustrated above, Kate felt as though there were advantages to being in class with non-gifted students, so she did not believe homogeneous grouping would be beneficial; there would be more disadvantages than advantages.

When I asked Max about homogeneous grouping, he said he thought it would be harmful to be in class with the same students all day. He explained that he embraced diversity and enjoyed getting to know different people and getting to interact with non-gifted peers was a positive experience.

When I discussed homogeneous grouping with the participants, most of them did not like the concept. Some participants, such as Brianne did not believe homogeneous grouping was necessary because gifted students were already sufficiently challenged in AP, IB, and honors classes. Those participants did not believe homogeneous grouping

would make any difference or serve a real purpose because they were already receiving a quality education and being prepared for college.

Grant was under the impression that Kennedy already had homogeneous grouping, and he said he was already in classes with only gifted students all day. While the Rollins participants believed they were in AP classes with all gifted students, Grant was the only one who felt as if homogeneous grouping already existed at his school. Perhaps the other Rollins participants were thinking about electives they had taken, which were with mixed groups, and therefore did not believe their school used homogeneous grouping.

Nearly all of the participants felt as if having heterogeneous grouping was the better option because they enjoyed having classes with a variety of people. The participants explained that they believed socializing with non-gifted peers was important, and homogeneous grouping would prevent them from doing so. They would not be able to meet students unlike themselves and would therefore experience little to no academic diversity. In addition, homogeneous grouping would reinforce fierce competition among students in class each day, as was evident in the earlier discussion regarding competition.

Kate explained how being in mixed classes, such as electives, allowed her to feel smarter because she was around non-gifted peers, which was different for her since nearly all of her classes were AP. I do not believe that Kate felt as if she were superior or better than her non-gifted peers, but I think being in a non-AP class took the pressure off of her, and she was able to relax more.

Overall, the participants felt as though homogeneous grouping would be detrimental to meeting their social, emotional, and academic needs. Being in classes with both gifted and non-gifted students allowed the participants to get to know a more diverse group of people and allowed them to have the opportunity to socialize with non-gifted students as well. In addition, some participants expressed their concern that homogeneous grouping would yield even more competition in class among students, which they did not believe was healthy.

**Written Education Plans (WEPs).** In discussing WEPs with the participants, I wanted to learn more about their experiences, if any, with WEPs at the high school level and whether the participants saw value in WEPs for gifted high schoolers. When I asked Brianne if she knew what a Written Education Plan (WEP) was and showed her an example of one, she said she remembered having them in middle school but had not seen one since then.

I showed Elena a blank WEP template and asked her if she knew what it was. She said she did not. I then explained to her the purpose of a WEP and asked her if she thought having a WEP was necessary for gifted students at Arlington. She replied:

No. I definitely think I have been serviced well. Even if I had needed harder classes, I could have easily taken them. I definitely think that [Arlington] offers enough classes that are sufficient to challenge me. Now, other schools I know don't have nearly as many experiences as [Arlington] does. So I think a Written Education Plan would definitely help those types of schools, but for a place like [Arlington], no. I don't think it makes sense to have a gifted program in place at the high school level because I think we're being challenged enough already, and

if you're not being challenged enough, you can always take higher courses. There have been lots of people who have even taken college classes while they're in high school. So I don't think a program in high school is necessary at all. (Elena Interview 2)

I then showed Joey an example of a WEP and asked him if he knew what it was used for. His response was quite interesting:

We had something similar to this that they were passing out earlier this year that they wanted signed by our parents. It wasn't very specific, but I remember getting them in each of my AP classes. They wanted them to be filled out and turned in, but I didn't catch what they were for though. They said it was for records or something so the school could say, if the state asked them, that gifted kids were being served. (Joey Interview 2)

Joey said that he forged his parents' signature, as did many of the students in his classes because they did not think the WEPs were important or served any real purpose.

I showed Noah a WEP template and asked him if he recognized it. He said he saw a sheet that said WEP before, but he did not remember filling it out and did not know its purpose.

I showed Riley a WEP template and asked if she knew what it was. She responded:

I've had people sign them, but I've never really looked at them. The school gets like money or something if they can say we're taking care of the gifted kids. They just told us to take this home and have your parents sign it and return it. But I don't know the purpose they really serve. (Riley Interview 2)

Abby remembered having a WEP in elementary school and middle school, and she said having a WEP at the high school level would be unnecessary because she was being challenged with her AP classes

When I showed Alexa a blank template of a WEP, she said she recognized it from elementary and middle school but did not remember exactly what purpose it served. I explained the purpose of a WEP to her and asked her if she thought gifted students at Kennedy could benefit from having a WEP. She said she did not believe that WEPs were necessary at the high school level because gifted students had the opportunity to take AP and IB classes and were therefore sufficiently challenged.

Grant said he liked his classes the way they were, and there would be no point in changing them with a WEP or anything else.

When I showed a WEP to Max and Kate, they both said they recognized it from elementary and middle school but did not know exactly what purpose WEPs served.

The Alder Valley gifted coordinator said that all gifted students have a WEP until they graduate; however, not one Arlington student knew what a WEP was or what purpose it served. Brianne remembered having a WEP in middle school but had not seen once since then. The other four Arlington students said they were told to have the WEP signed by their parents but were not sure why. Joey even admitted that he forged his parents' signatures. Joey explained that he was told if anyone ever came in to ask if Arlington was effectively serving their gifted students, the WEPs could be used for proof. Similarly, Riley said she thought the purpose of a WEP was so that Arlington could get money for serving gifted students. It seemed as though even though the Arlington participants remembered having WEPs in elementary and middle school, they were never

told what their purpose was, and if they were told as younger students, they had clearly forgotten.

The Rollins gifted coordinator said gifted high school students did not have WEPs; WEPs were only used through eighth grade. All five Rollins participants remembered having WEPs in elementary and middle school, and none of them believed a WEP was necessary at the high school level. They believed their academic needs were being met through AP classes, and they did not feel as if a WEP would help them socially or emotionally. Therefore, the participants said WEPs at the high school level were totally unnecessary.

Overall, the participants believed their needs were being met without WEPs. Even though the Arlington participants technically had WEPs, the WEPs were not serving their intended purpose. The participants of both schools did not believe WEPs would be useful in ensuring that their needs were met.

### **Cross-Case Analysis: WEPs vs. No WEPs**

In answering research question three, “What are similarities and differences in gifted high school students’ experiences in schools that provide their students with WEPs and those schools that do not provide WEPs?”, a cross-case analysis was conducted between the Alder Valley and Rollins participants. In completing the cross-case analysis, I found far more similarities than differences between the two school districts.

**Social needs.** As far as social needs were concerned, there were numerous similarities among participants. While most participants in both districts were friends with gifted and non-gifted students, they felt like their gifted friends understood them better because they had more in common. If the participants acknowledged having class

with non-gifted students, they were often annoyed when non-gifted students were off-task and not paying attention.

The participants believed that it was common for gifted students to be most concerned about getting good grades while non-gifted students were more concerned about relationships and non-academic matters. All participants were involved in extracurricular activities to some extent, but they made certain that academics remained their most important priority. Finally, the participants felt as if they had healthy attachments to their families, friends, and teachers.

**Emotional needs.** There were also significant similarities among participants when it came to emotional needs. All participants self-identified as perfectionists; some of them were perfectionists with just academics while others were perfectionists with both academics and extracurriculars. They strived to do their very best and wanted to excel in those activities in which they found great interest. The participants experienced pressure from adults at school, such as teachers, counselors, and administrators, to take the hardest classes and to get the best grades. While this pressure could be frustrating and overwhelming, their parents provided support and did not pressure them to take every AP class or to get straight As. Instead, all of the participants explained that they exerted self-imposed pressure, putting more pressure on themselves than anyone else could. They pressured themselves to take as many AP classes as possible and to get straight As no matter what. The participants did not feel as if they were labeled as being gifted; rather, they felt labeled as being smart and taking the hardest classes.

**Academic needs.** Finally, there were also similarities among participants when it came to academic needs. Six out of ten participants were gifted in reading, science, social

studies, and math; two out of ten were gifted in reading science, and math; and one was gifted in reading. However, all ten participants were gifted in superior cognitive ability. Therefore, all ten participants received good grades in all subject areas, even the ones in which they were not identified as gifted. Brianne, for example, was identified as gifted in reading only; however, she was maintaining an A in AP Calculus BC, and I was able to see her actively participating in both her AP English and AP math class.

All of the participants agreed that AP classes kept them challenged and helped prepare them for college. Without AP classes, the participants said they would have been bored. Joey discussed his boredom in chemistry during our second interview: “When I took regular chemistry, the material was like super easy. I would finish my work before everyone else and literally had to bring in snacks to keep myself awake. I was that bored” (Joey Interview 2).

The participants were engaged when the curriculum was interesting and challenging. Additionally, it was easier to remain engaged when teachers implemented innovative instructional strategies instead of merely lecturing. The participants believed homogeneous grouping would do more harm than good because gifted students would not have the opportunity to engage with non-gifted students, and competition among gifted students would likely increase in classes. Lastly, the participants did not see value in having WEPs at the high school level. They believed their needs were being met without having WEPs. Rollins participants believed their academic needs were being met through AP classes, and they did not feel as if a WEP would help them socially or emotionally. Therefore, the participants said WEPs at the high school were totally unnecessary.

**Differences.** The major difference between the Alder Valley and Rollins participants was that the Rollins participants were under the impression that they were in AP classes with only gifted students. They did not realize that high-achieving, non-gifted students could take AP classes as well; the district did not implement homogeneous grouping. During our first interview, Abby explained: “Yeah, AP classes are hard, but that’s why they were designed for gifted kids and why non-gifted kids can’t take them” (Abby Interview 1). It seemed as if the Rollins participants affiliated AP classes with being gifted. While there was indeed a significant gifted population at Halier, Kennedy, and Wayton, there were also many non-gifted students in AP, IB, and honors classes even though the participants did not seem to realize this was the case. The Alder Valley participants, on the other hand, understood that there were non-gifted, high-achieving students in some of their AP classes. None of the Alder Valley participants ever discussed feeling as though they were in classes with only other gifted students.

Another difference between Rollins and Alder Valley was that the Rollins participants spoke more about competition among gifted students. All five participants referenced academic competition at some point during the interviews. The consensus was that there were so many gifted students with superb academic talent in their schools that competition was rampant. During his second interview, Grant said, “In classes, we all expect each other to do well. We are all smart and capable of getting all As. So the competition can be intense” (Grant Interview 2). Some competition was considered friendly, much of the competition they experienced caused them stress; there was a constant battle to be the best. Alexa, for example, explained the following:

At this school, there is a lot of competition. Everyone wants to be better than everyone else. So in our classes, there is a constant battle to see who gets the best grades. Anything less than an A is not good enough. Dealing with that every day is really annoying and stressful. (Alexa Interview 1)

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Examining the Results**

Ever since I began teaching gifted high schoolers, I have believed that gifted education was an important field and one that should not be overlooked by researchers, administrators, teachers, counselors, or parents. In order for gifted high school students to reach optimum levels of success, their social, emotional, and academic needs must be met in schools. The results of this study illustrated that while gifted high schoolers in these two districts may be appropriately challenged in the classroom, this does not mean that schools are meeting all of their needs. There is much more to the gifted student than being intelligent.

As the participants demonstrated, gifted students often experience a great deal of pressure to take the hardest classes offered and to get the best grades. Teachers, administrators, and counselors may not even realize the amount of pressure they are putting on gifted students. These adults may be under the impression that they are simply encouraging gifted students to challenge themselves and to adhere to high expectations. However, in reality gifted students often feel like they have no choice but to take as many high-level classes as possible.

It seems that many teachers, counselors, and administrators do not realize the amount of pressure gifted students place on themselves to excel. The added pressure from these adults exacerbates the problem and makes these students far more stressed than any high schooler should be. Some students are able to implement healthy coping

mechanisms to deal with this pressure, but others do not employ such mechanisms. If educators better understood the intensity of the pressure gifted students faced, not only could they try to alleviate added pressure, but they could also work with those students who are having difficulties dealing with their pressure.

In addition to having to combat a great deal of pressure, gifted students also often have to deal with the implications of perfectionism. Many gifted students have a difficult time settling for anything less than an A, so receiving even an A- can be detrimental for gifted students. This does not mean that gifted students should always receive As merely to protect their feelings and emotions. Instead, educators need to be aware of how and why perfectionism can actually be debilitating for gifted students so that there can be support systems in place to help students whom battle perfectionism. Perfectionism is often deeply rooted for gifted students, so it is not something that disappears over night. But with consistent support and guidance, students can work through their perfectionism and learn how to best cope.

While some schools and districts implement homogeneous grouping in the hopes to best serve gifted students, homogenous grouping is not a cure-all, as there are both pros and cons to it. While homogeneous grouping allows gifted students to work together and keep each other academically stimulated in class, it can also intensify competition among students. In homogeneously grouped high school classes, there is a great likelihood that all or at least a majority of the students are perfectionists and battling to get straight As. Therefore, gifted students fiercely compete against each other to be the best. So for some gifted students, this competition and pressure are too intense, thereby causing social and emotional anguish.

Like homogeneous grouping, some schools and districts implement WEPs for their gifted students in order to meet the students' needs; however, WEPs are only useful if they are actually employed as active documents. Having students and their parents sign a WEP and then filing the WEP away in an office drawer and never looking at it again is certainly not conducive to meeting students' needs. WEPs were designed with the intention to be active documents, meaning they are to be frequently reviewed and edited as necessary changes and amendments are made. If WEPs remain stagnant and are filed away just so a school or district can say it uses them, those WEPs are doing no direct good for students. And if they are not helping to meet gifted students' needs, then there is no point to even pretending to use them.

Gifted students are wired differently than non-gifted students, and they have different needs than traditional students; therefore, they should be served differently. Educators cannot ignore gifted students' social, emotional, and academic needs if these students are expected to maximize their potential. Teachers, administrators, and counselors need to be aware of common characteristics of gifted students so that systems are in place to ensure that these students are receiving services to best meet their needs. It is not fair for gifted high schoolers to be misunderstood or to have their needs go unmet. They should not have to battle pressure, perfectionism, stress, and competition with no support from educators.

### **Reviewing the Major Findings**

This study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do gifted high school students describe what it is like to be identified as gifted?

2. How do gifted students describe the extent to which their needs are being met or are not being met in schools?
3. What are similarities and differences in gifted high school students' experiences in schools that provide their students with Written Education Plans (WEPs) and those schools that do not provide WEPs?

As discussed in chapter four, there were far more similarities than differences between the participants from Alder Valley and Rollins. The only differences that were uncovered were that the Rollins participants were under the impression that only gifted students were in their AP classes with them, and the Rollins participants seemed to experience a stronger sense of competition among each other in classes.

When I began this study, I was expecting to find that because WEPs were in place at the high school level, the Alder Valley participants' needs were met more readily than the Rollins participants whom did not have WEPs. There is no federal or state mandate for high schools to implement WEPs, and I knew that going in to the study. Therefore, because Alder Valley chose to use WEPs for its gifted high school students, I believe that Alder Valley saw value in implementing WEPs at the high school level and was excited to see how school officials used them to help students. As I began interviewing the participants, I quickly discovered that the WEPs were not being used for their intended purpose. For example, when I showed Joey a black WEP and asked him if he knew why they were used, he responded as follows:

We had something similar to this that they were passing out earlier this year that they wanted signed by our parents. It wasn't very specific, but I remember getting them in each of my AP classes. They wanted them to be filled out and turned in,

but I didn't catch what they were for though. They said it was for records or something so the school could say, if the state asked them, that gifted kids were being served. (Joey Interview 2)

Joey said that he forged his parents' signature, as did many of the students in his classes because they did not think the WEPs were important or served any real purpose.

Instead of being used as living documents to ensure that gifted students' social, emotional, and academic needs were being met, the WEPs were merely filed away. While each gifted high school student may have had a WEP on file in Alder Valley, that did not mean that the WEPs were serving any true purpose other than allowing the district to be able to tell state officials its gifted high school students all have a WEP on file.

Because the WEPs were not actually being used in Alder Valley, I do not believe any of the differences uncovered in this study have anything to do with WEPs. Instead, I believe the differences can be attributed to the school environments themselves. Both districts have impressive test scores and reputations, but there did seem to be more of a sense of competition among the Rollins schools. For example, during his second interview, Grant said, "In classes, we all expect each other to do well. We are all smart and capable of getting all As. So the competition can be intense" (Grant Interview 2).

Perhaps the competition was more intense because there were three high schools in the district, and the schools themselves were in constant competition with each other, while Arlington was the only high school in Alder Valley. In addition, in Rollins 33.7% of the students are identified as gifted, and in Alder Valley 18.6% of the students are identified as gifted (Ohio School Report Cards, 2015). Therefore, because Rollins has a

large gifted population, it makes sense that the competition among gifted students in that district would be more intense than the competition in Alder Valley.

Once I began this study, I was also surprised by the participants' adverse reaction to the idea of homogeneous grouping. While I knew that homogeneous grouping has pros and cons, most of the participants were vehemently against the idea. Over and over, the participants explained that they believed homogeneous grouping would do more harm than good. When I asked Elena if she believed homogeneous grouping would benefit gifted students at Arlington, she said that she definitely did not think homogeneous grouping would be a positive change:

Because I like being able to meet new people and having a variety of personalities and different ways of learning, too. I feel like if I were with gifted students who are just like me all day long, I wouldn't learn how to be social or interact with people as well as I have being with people who are all different skill levels. I definitely wouldn't like that. (Elena Interview 2)

The participants believed that not being able to socialize with non-gifted students would be detrimental, and the Rollins participants felt as though academic competition would become even more intense.

I found the Rollins participants' responses about competition quite curious. They claimed from the very beginning of the study that they were in classes with all gifted students. While I knew that this was not the case and that Rollins did not implement homogeneous grouping, I did not believe it to be my place to tell the participants that they were wrong, that non-gifted students were in their AP classes as well. With that being said, I do not believe that the participants made the connection that by saying they

were already in classes with all gifted students, they were saying that they were homogeneously grouped. So it was interesting that after I described homogeneous grouping, they believed that if homogeneous grouping were to be implemented in Rollins, competition would be even greater.

### **Reconnecting to the Literature**

**Piaget's theory of cognitive development.** In connecting back to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, his theory posits that while cognitive stages are hierarchical, environmental factors have the ability to speed up or slow down cognitive development. Therefore, if gifted students are not appropriately challenged, their cognitive growth can potentially be stunted. If gifted high school students are not receiving gifted services, such as curriculum modifications, their cognitive growth may be slowed because they are not sufficiently challenged and therefore not pushed to meet their maximum potential (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004).

Overall, the participants in this study felt they were being appropriately challenged with AP classes in many ways. They described the curriculum as rigorous and eliciting higher-order thinking from the students. None of the participants said that they were not sufficiently challenged. In fact, most of them explained that being able to take challenging courses during high school ensured that they were well-prepared for college. In addition, it was through their AP classes that the participants explained they were being kept engaged, while they were often bored in their non-AP classes.

While the participants in both Alder Valley and Rollins benefitted from having 17 AP classes from which to choose, there are some schools and districts that offer very few

if any AP classes. The gifted students in those schools and districts are undoubtedly at a disadvantage since they are unable to be exposed to the AP level of rigor and challenge. Because these gifted students are not sufficiently challenged, their cognitive growth has a greater chance of being slowed, in turn inhibiting their ability to reach their academic potential.

### **Curriculum Theories**

**Bloom's taxonomy.** Bloom's Taxonomy offers teachers a tool for developing a student-centered classroom by providing the framework for articulating specific outcomes in terms of student learning (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2003). Nurturing higher-order thinking skills by incorporating analyzing, evaluating, and creating into everyday teaching allows gifted students to be appropriately challenged and therefore continuing to learn and grow during Piaget's formal operations stage.

The Alder Valley and Rollins participants frequently alluded to being bored in classes in which the teachers simply lecture; they preferred more innovative instructional strategies, such as discussions, simulations, and hands-on activities. Giving gifted students the opportunity to utilize higher-order thinking skills by having them analyze, synthesize, and evaluate content is much more effective than direct lecture. Gifted students do not thrive in classrooms in which rote information is the focus; instead, they prefer classrooms that keep them appropriately challenged and engaged.

AP, IB, and Honors teachers were more likely than teachers of traditional classes to implement Bloom's higher-order categories (analyzing, evaluating, creating) because their students could handle the challenge. Not all schools have these higher-level courses,

however. Therefore, those gifted students are not exposed to the extent of challenge and rigor that other students are, and these students are likely bored in class and again being deprived of working to their potential.

**Gifted education curriculum theory.** According to gifted education curriculum theory, gifted learners are best served by a confluent approach that allows for accelerated and advanced learning and enriched and extended experiences, including acceleration, enrichment, and differentiated instruction. None of the ten participants experience grade-level acceleration, meaning they had skipped a grade at some point during their schooling. However, they had all experienced course-level acceleration, most of them since elementary school. At the high school level, the most common form of course-level acceleration was AP classes, as the AP curriculum challenged the participants and allowed them to remain engaged in learning.

From the data I gathered, the participants had not been involved in enrichment activities since middle school when most of them were part of pull-out programs and had the opportunity to work in small groups with a teacher trained in gifted education. While the participants felt that they were sufficiently challenged academically, after getting to know them throughout the study, I believe that most of them would genuinely enjoy participating in enrichment activities outside of school such as mentorships, government institutes, and specialty camps. I think such opportunities would give gifted high school students a chance to get to know other intelligent, driven teenagers and would provide gifted students a chance to broaden their knowledge in areas in which they are interested, such as medicine, writing, or engineering.

Riley, for example, expressed her concern that she was unable to take many electives during high school because she took so many AP classes. As a result, Riley felt that she was robbed of the opportunity to take classes in which she had a genuine interest. Riley greatly enjoyed cooking and learning about food, so being able to take culinary classes where she could have expanded her knowledge while delving into her interest would have been both beneficial and enjoyable. Nathan also explained that he was unable to take as many electives as he would have liked, and he had a growing interest in art. So being able to take some art classes could have been a powerful experience for him.

Differentiated instruction is an instructional technique in which teachers engage students in learning by adhering to the students' individual learning abilities, learning styles, and interests. While implementing differentiated instruction may be overwhelming for teachers at first, with practice it becomes more manageable. If implemented correctly, differentiated instruction allows teaching and learning to be customized to students' ability levels and learning outcomes. Winebrenner (1996) explained that providing students with meaningful choices can be a powerful example of differentiating instruction, as students are more likely to take ownership of their learning if they are completing a task they actually enjoy. Providing students with choices allows them to choose the option that they deem the best fit for them.

In the AP English and math classes observed for this study, differentiated instruction was used as a way of providing students with choices. In Joey's AP Literature class at Arlington, for example, the students were completing an independent novel study, and Joey said how much he enjoyed being able to choose his own novel as opposed to having to read the same book or play as everyone else in the class. The

students had parameters, such as page length that they had to follow while choosing their novels, but Joey said he enjoyed getting to read and write about a book he chose for himself.

In Grant's AP Calculus class at Kennedy, the students were able to choose which homework problems they would complete for the following day. Sometimes the teacher would tell the students to choose any four problems from numbers one through ten, for example, or the teacher would tell them they could complete either all of the evens or all of the odds. Either way, the students were able to develop a sense of autonomy over their learning because they were provided with choices.

Differentiating instruction certainly includes far more strategies than providing students with choices. Whichever strategies teachers choose to incorporate into their instructional methods, the intended result is still the same: to adhere to all students' learning needs so that all students can achieve success. Differentiated instruction is just as beneficial for gifted students as traditional students. All students have learning preferences and specific interests, and it is the job of educators to ensure that all students, regardless of their ability level, have the necessary tools to be successful.

### **New Literature**

In the literature review in chapter two, the different types of pressure gifted high school students face was not explained in detail. However, once interviews began, the participants continuously brought up pressure, specifically self-imposed pressure, and how it affected their high school experiences. Therefore, pressure became a sub-theme of emotional needs.

According to Neihart, Reis, Robinson, and Moon (2002), there are many causes of stress for gifted students, including taking advanced classes and therefore experiencing an intense workload; preparing for college and the future; and managing academics, extracurriculars, and a social life. Gifted students often feel self-imposed pressure to get the best grades and to get into a prestigious college or university. This self-imposed pressure may intensify as students matriculate through school and get closer to graduating and beginning college. As much as gifted students may want to decrease the pressure they place upon themselves, doing so is quite difficult, so having support and guidance is necessary.

There are several ways teachers and counselors can help gifted students deal with self-imposed pressure. First, it is important for teachers and counselors to help students understand their giftedness and normalize their feelings and experiences. Simply listening to them will go a long way in helping them to feel understood. Gifted students need reassurance that the way they are feeling is normal for gifted individuals. Students whom do not have gifted siblings or friends especially need this reassurance because they may feel as if no one understands them.

Secondly, educators can encourage gifted students to take risks, tolerate imperfection, and make realistic appraisals of their relative strengths and weaknesses. Gifted students often have difficulty taking risks because they fear they will fail. They also have great difficulty tolerating imperfection because to them, anything less than perfect is equated to failure. Helping these students assess their strengths and weaknesses can be useful in helping them understand that no one is perfect and that everyone has

areas to improve upon (Cross, 2005). It is important to remember that getting gifted students to make this paradigm shift takes time, and it may not be a simple process.

Finally, teachers and counselors should also try to make sure that gifted students are appropriately challenged but not overwhelmed. It is great for gifted students to be immersed in AP classes so that they are challenged and held to high expectations; however, too much of anything is not healthy. Gifted students, especially those whom experience self-imposed pressure, should also be encouraged to take electives in order to balance their schedule. Also, if a student is gifted in reading but struggles in math, that student should not feel pressured to take AP math. If gifted students feel as if they have to take all AP classes and no electives, their self-imposed pressure will continue to increase, and they will be extremely overwhelmed (Neihart et al., 2003).

Experiencing self-imposed pressure is a common characteristic among gifted students; therefore, educators must understand how to best work with these students. While exhibiting some degree of self-imposed pressure can be healthy, as it keeps students goal-oriented, gifted students tend to experience extreme amounts of self-imposed pressure. Not only does this pressure contribute to gifted students' stress levels, it can also become so overbearing that students want nothing more than to shut down. Shutting down in turn causes stress, which causes the self-imposed pressure to intensify, and the vicious cycle continues.

### **Future Studies**

There is still extensive research that can and should be completed in gifted education, specifically in the area of high school gifted education. I believe

underachievement is a very important area to research because there are still many unanswered questions about underachievement among gifted students.

Research indicates that underachievement is most likely to occur when students are in middle school or high school. As discussed in the literature review, underachievement is a behavior and therefore can change over time; however, usually underachievement is seen as a problem of attitude or personality (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Attitude and personality cannot be modified as directly as behaviors can. Speaking directly about underachieving behaviors pinpoints students' actions that they have the ability to alter. Therefore, I would like to study different intervention methods that may help gifted students amend their underachieving behavior in order to determine which methods are the most effective. If educators had a firm understanding of these interventions and how to implement them, gifted students deemed underachievers would greatly benefit.

Additionally, I am interested in conducting a future study that explores whether there is a correlation between gifted students' perceived relationships with their family, friends, and teachers and underachievement. One may postulate that gifted students with healthy relationships would be less likely to experience underachievement than gifted students with unhealthy relationships. This is an under-studied area but one that I believe could benefit gifted students. The more educators and researchers know about the correlation between relationships with others and underachievement, the more gifted students will be able to be properly served.

I am also interested in conducting a study in which the use of WEPs in low SES districts is compared and contrasted to the use of WEPs in higher SES districts. As previously discussed, because Ohio does not mandate a specific WEP that must be used, individual schools and districts are able to choose the type of WEP that deem the most effective. I would be interested in studying the similarities and differences between the WEPs used in these two types of schools to see if patterns exist. For example, it would be intriguing to determine if low SES schools gravitate to a different style of WEP than high SES schools and if so what the differences are in the WEPs.

### **Final Thoughts**

Gifted high school students are a fascinating yet misunderstood population. Just because they are getting straight As in their AP classes does mean that they are happy and well-adjusted. Gifted students have their own unique social, emotional, and academic needs, and in order to meet those needs, educators must be well-versed on common characteristics of gifted students and how to address their needs. Many educators do not receive training in gifted education in their preparation programs and therefore are unaware of how to best serve gifted students.

To that end, I believe it is crucial that districts provide professional development on gifted education for teachers, administrators, and counselors. In order for the professional development to be most effective, there should be a series of training sessions or workshops. Having a speaker come in one time to speak to a school or district about the characteristics of gifted students would only be minimally helpful. However, having a more longitudinal professional development series would provide educators with more in-depth knowledge and understanding of how to best serve gifted students. I

think that such professional development is especially necessary at the high school level since elementary and middle schools typically have gifted specialists in place that are able to work with the gifted population in pull-out programs. At the high school level, however, pull-out programs do not exist, and there are often no gifted specialists in high school buildings. If high school teachers, administrators, and counselors do not have training in gifted education, there is likely no school official on campus targeting gifted students. Thus, gifted high school students may be misunderstood and go through high school without having their needs met.

I believe that gifted students are our country's future leaders, doctors, and entrepreneurs, and it is therefore of great importance that they have all of the tools necessary to be successful as they matriculate through school. As educators, we not only want gifted students to excel academically, we also want them to understand how to effectively deal with pressure, how to manage their perfectionism, and how to maintain healthy attachments to their families, friends, and teachers. We owe it to our future to ensure that the country's best and brightest are well-prepared.

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Appendix A

Written Education Plan (WEP)

(The following is an example of a WEP template. There are many different WEP formats, and it is up to schools and districts to choose which type of WEP works best for them)

**Written Education Plan (WEP)**

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_ Male  Female

Student Identification Number \_\_\_\_\_ Student Address \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Parent Address \_\_\_\_\_ Work Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_

District of Residence \_\_\_\_\_ District of Service \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting Date \_\_\_\_\_ Does student have Written Acceleration Plan? \_\_\_\_\_ Target graduation date \_\_\_\_\_

Area (s) and date(s) of identification:

Superior Cognitive Ability \_\_\_\_\_  Creative Thinking Ability \_\_\_\_\_

Specific Academic Ability:  Reading/Writing/Combination \_\_\_\_\_  Mathematics \_\_\_\_\_  Science \_\_\_\_\_  Social Studies \_\_\_\_\_

Visual Performing Arts:  Drama \_\_\_\_\_  Dance \_\_\_\_\_  Music \_\_\_\_\_  Visual Arts \_\_\_\_\_

Student interests and learning styles:

Present levels of academic and social/emotional functioning:

(Duplicate one page for each goal)

### Written Education Plan (WEP) Annual Goal Page

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Goal:	Goal # _____ of _____
--------------	-----------------------

Content area(s) to be addressed by this goal: \_\_\_\_\_

Area of identification associated with this goal: \_\_\_\_\_

- Superior Cognitive Ability   
  Specific Academic Ability: \_\_\_\_\_   
  Creative Thinking Ability   
  Visual Performing Arts: \_\_\_\_\_

What specific program components or curricular interventions will assist in accomplishing this goal? Consider the differentiation concepts of acceleration, complexity, depth, challenge, abstractness, and/or cognitive creativity.

State the policy for waiver of assignments and scheduling of tests.

Student Progress Measures (How will this student prove mastery of this goal?)

Service Setting for this goal/objective:

- Gifted Resource Room   
  Gifted Self-Contained Class   
  Regular Education Class (GIS)   
  Regular Education Class (Gen. Ed. Teacher)
- Acceleration Placement   
  Arts Classroom (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)   
  Internship/Mentorship
- Advanced Placement   
  Educational Options   
  Dual Enrollment including PSEO

## Written Education Plan (WEP) Signature Page

Student name \_\_\_\_\_ WEP effective dates from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ Date of next review: \_\_\_\_\_

### WEP Team Meeting Participants (choose all that apply)

Check one of the following: This WEP team meeting was a  Face to face meeting  Video conference  Telephone Conference/ Conference Call  Mail Correspondence

	1 <sup>st</sup> Date	2 <sup>nd</sup> Date	3 <sup>rd</sup> Date	4 <sup>th</sup> Date
Student: signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Gifted Intervention Specialist signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Gifted Coordinator signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
General Education Teacher signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
General Education Teacher signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Parent: (signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Parent: (signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Principal/Administrator (signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Other: (signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			
Other: (signature) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated <input type="checkbox"/> Excused			

Reporting Periods 1<sup>st</sup> Date \_\_\_\_\_ 2<sup>nd</sup> Date \_\_\_\_\_ 3<sup>rd</sup> Date \_\_\_\_\_ 4<sup>th</sup> Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### Initial WEP

- I give consent to initiate gifted education and related services specified in this WEP.
- I give consent to initiate gifted education and related services specified in this WEP except for \_\_\_\_\_ at this time.
- I do not give consent for gifted education services at this time.

Parent Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### Parent Notice of District Service Options/Copy of the WEP

- I have received a copy of the Identification Procedures for the District
- I have received a copy of the District Service Options
- I have received a copy of this WEP

Parent Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix B*

Student Gifted Program Survey

**Purpose:** The purpose of this survey is to gain insights about your experiences in gifted education.

**Directions:** For all questions, there will be a scale for you to provide your ranking. Please circle your response to each question. If you just answer each questions with the scale items, the survey will likely take about ten minutes to complete. However, if possible, it would be helpful if you could provide comments to help explain your rankings.

**Coursework**

1.  
a. Do you feel challenged in your English class?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

- b. Do you feel challenged in your math class?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

Comments on Coursework Items 1a and 1b:

2. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your grade level help you develop organizational skills?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

3. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your grade level help you develop time management skills?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

4. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your grade level help you develop self-discipline?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

5. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your grade level help you develop the ability to summarize important information?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

Comments on Coursework Items 2-5:

6. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your grade level help you develop the ability to present information in a variety of formats?

a. Written formats

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

b. Oral formats

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

c. Visual formats

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

d. Technology-based formats

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

7. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your grade level help you develop the ability to present information to audiences beyond the classroom?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

Comments on Coursework Items 6a-d and 7:

8. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level influence your motivation by providing opportunities for student choice?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

9. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your school help develop your critical thinking skills?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

10. In your opinion, to what extent do the advanced classes at your school help develop your creative thinking skills?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

Comments on Coursework Items 8-10:

## **Affective Needs, Attitudes, and Guidance**

1. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level help you develop meaningful friendships?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

2. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level provide an environment where you can be your “true self”?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

3. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level allow you to explore common social and emotional concerns of gifted students?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

4. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level lead you to develop an attitude of elitism and privilege?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

5. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level influence your enthusiasm for learning?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)

5 (Do Not Know)

6. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level influence your value of the process of learning?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

Comments on Affective Needs, Attitudes, and Guidance Items 1-6:

7. In your opinion, to what extent does participation in advanced classes at your grade level lead you to develop:

a. Experiences in ways similar to a professional in a specific field?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

b. Opportunities for exposure to different types of college opportunities?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

c. Opportunities for exposure to different types of career opportunities?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

Comments on Affective Needs, Attitudes, and Guidance Items 7a-c:

**Program Effectiveness**

1. In your opinion, to what extent are you adequately prepared for the advanced curriculum expected of gifted students at your grade level?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

2. In your opinion, to what extent is participation in advanced classes at your grade level meeting your academic needs?

- 1 (Not at All)
- 2 (Somewhat)
- 3 (Adequately)
- 4 (To a Great Extent)
- 5 (Do Not Know)

3. What is the overall perception of the advanced classes at your grade level?

- 1 (Very Negative)
- 2 (Negative)
- 3 (Neutral)
- 4 (Positive)
- 5 (Very Positive)

4. What do you think the perceptions of advanced classes at your grade level are for those who do not take advanced classes?

- 1 (Very Negative)
- 2 (Negative)
- 3 (Neutral)
- 4 (Positive)

5 (Very Positive)

Comments on Program Effectiveness Items 1-4:

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This survey has been adapted from *Gifted Program Evaluation* by Kristie Speirs Neumeister, Ph.D., and Virginia H. Burney, Ph.D., 2012 by Prufrock Press Inc. (<http://www.prufrock.com>)

*Appendix C*

Field Notes Template

*Participant's Name:*

*Class:*

*Room Number:*

*Period:*

*Number of Students:*

**Descriptive Notes**

**Analytic Notes**

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## *Appendix D*

### Interview Protocols

Interviews will be will be digitally recorded and conducted one-on-one to allow for confidentiality. There will be a total of two interviews each lasting 40 minutes for a total duration of 80 minutes. Each interview will be semi-structured and will focus on the subject's thoughts about what it is like to be a gifted high school student. Subjects have the right to decline for the interview to be digitally audio recorded and may ask for the recording to be stopped at any point in the interview.

**Interview One:** Following completion of survey, observations 1 and 2, and artifact collection

1. In your survey, you answered . . . Can you tell me more about this?
2. In your English class, I heard you say . . . Can you tell me more about what you said?
3. In your math class, I heard you say . . . Can you tell me more about what you said?
4. In your English class, I saw you . . . Can you tell me more about what you did?
5. In your math class, I saw you . . . Can you tell me more about what you did?
6. What are some benefits of being a gifted high school student?
7. What are some obstacles in being a gifted high school student?

**Interview Two:** Following completion of observations 3 and 4 and artifact collection.

1. In your (artifact collected), you wrote . . . Can you tell me more about this?
  
2. In your English class, I heard you say . . . Can you tell me more about what you said?
  
3. In your math class, I heard you say . . . Can you tell me more about what you said?
  
4. In your English class, I saw you . . . Can you tell me more about what you did?
  
5. In your math class, I saw you . . . Can you tell me more about what you did?
  
6. Do you feel like your school supports your giftedness? If so, how is your giftedness supported? If not, how do you wish your giftedness were supported?
  
7. If you could change anything about your high school experience, what would you change?
  
8. Do you consider yourself a perfectionist? If so, are you a perfectionist when it comes to academics as extracurricular activities?