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### Abstract

This research explored the experiences of gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade. The current literature indicates that gifted girls often struggle emotionally during this transition. Seven research participants were selected and interviewed over a four-month period. Grounded theory methodology was used to analyze data, generate subsequent interview questions, and build theory. This study indicated that these gifted girls transition was facilitated by their strong identities, which enabled them to balance their social and academic lives. Their strong identities allowed them to choose strategies that helped them build connections with both gifted and nongifted peers. These relationships contributed significantly to their sense of self, and in turn supported their transition experiences.

### Keywords

Gifted Girls, Middle School Girls, Identity Development, Gifted Girls Development, and Grounded Theory Girls

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# **The Experience of Gifted Girls Transitioning from Elementary School to Sixth and Seventh Grade: A Grounded Theory**

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## **Introduction**

The concept of giftedness has been defined in many ways, but it is most often defined as high academic ability. The most prominent method of defining giftedness is the utilization of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R). A score on the WISC-R of 130 is the minimum score for identification as gifted (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, & Guerin, 1994). Students may also be identified as gifted through standardized testing given in schools, usually in early or mid-elementary school. Giftedness is an attribute often associated with success and ease of life; this may lead to a notion that gifted kids "have it all" (Bernal, 2003). With this association comes a general view in the fields of education and counseling that everyone has gifts and as such there is no reason to provide those who are gifted with extra services (Bernal). However, those who work directly with gifted children and adolescents suggest that they have unique social and emotional issues (Kerr, 1994; Moon, 2002; Reis 2002; Rimm, 2002). Moon stated, "The most common counseling need of this population is assistance in coping with stressors related to growing up as a gifted child in a society that does not always recognize, understand, or welcome giftedness" (p. 213).

The transition from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade may be a difficult time for girls, gifted or not. Specifically, the process of determining how to fit in with others is a critical and often difficult part of identity development for girls during

this time (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988). The literature suggested that how girls fit in with peers and how they see themselves is largely dependent on their connection with others (Gilligan et al.; Stern, 1991; Schwartz, 2005) and stressed that a strong sense of identity allows girls to more easily identify their place in the world (Schwartz). While this is also true for gifted girls, the literature indicated that gifted girls, in particular, may struggle during the transition from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade (Bain & Bell, 2004; Dai, 2002; Kerr, 1994; Reis, 2002; Rimm, 2002).

In elementary school, gifted girls tend to be accepted for their gifts, but upon entering sixth and seventh grade they may experience pressures to fit into the mainstream and may begin to experience difficulties due to these pressures (Bain & Bell, 2004; Kerr, 1994; Kilbourne, 2004; Moore & MacKinnon, 2001; Rimm, 2002). The research also indicated that relationships play an important role in identity development for gifted girls during this transition, particularly relationships with friends and teachers (Kerr; Rimm). Academics may also play a role in this transition for gifted girls; however, McCoach and Siegle (2003) found the influence of academics to be positive for gifted students, while others (Bernal, 2003; Bybee, Glick, & Zigler, 1990; Jones, 2003) found the influence of academics to be more neutral, if not negative.

While the existing literature does provide some idea of what gifted girls may be experiencing as they transition into sixth and seventh grade, much of it pertains to gifted children in general or is narrowly focused on the influence of academics upon self-concept and does not address the holistic experience of these girls. A greater understanding of the experience of gifted girls during this transition is pivotal to ensuring that counselors serve them appropriately. Rimm (2002) stated, "counselors need to be trained to understand the peer pressures and isolations that gifted children feel so that social isolation doesn't lead to anger toward themselves and others" (p. 17). Unfortunately, gifted girls of this age are largely ignored in the current literature; Bain and Bell, 2004; Bybee et al., 1990; Dai, 2002; Kerr, 1994; and Moon, 2002 all called for further research of this population. Additionally, the available research is primarily quantitative and lacks the voice of the girls it hopes to represent. This study attempts to answer this call and addresses the limitations of the existing research.

This study addresses the gap in the literature related to gifted girls transitioning into sixth and seventh grade. Through this research, educators and counselors will gain a broader understanding of this population and the challenges they face. For this research the grand research question under study was: what is the experience of gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade?

### **Researcher Perspective**

One of the gifts of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher the opportunity to talk about the lens through which they view their research. This research was conducted from a feminist perspective. As a feminist researcher I believe that gender and social forces shape girls' sense of themselves and their identity development. I also believe that the socialization process begins at a very early age and may or may not be within their awareness during adolescents. The idea that gender impacts participants' experiences of giftedness was something that I expected to see, but, interestingly, the girls did not discuss this unless it was part of a question I asked.

Giftedness is an area that is highly under-researched in the field of counseling, particularly how giftedness may affect girls' social and emotional needs. And the research that exists tends to pathologize how girls move through their adolescences. I was skeptical that it was always that terrible. I was interested in exploring and adding a new understanding of these experiences to the literature.

### **Method**

The decision to use a qualitative methodology rather than a quantitative methodology stems from the researcher's question and population of study (Patton, 2002). Given the exploratory nature of the research question and the study's purpose of holistically understanding a process of transition, the researchers chose a qualitative research method, specifically, grounded theory. Grounded theory was determined to be the most appropriate research method for gathering, analyzing, and deducing theory of the experiences of gifted girls transitioning to sixth and seventh grade.

Qualitative methods focus on process and are ways of finding out what people do, know, think, and feel (Patton, 2002). For researchers working with diverse populations, attempting to fit individual experiences into measures standardized to the dominant population does not make sense. The use of quantitative methods "requires the use of standardized measures so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can be fit into predetermined response categories" (Patton, p. 14). Qualitative research allows participants to express their reality and is a more appropriate choice for a diverse population, such as gifted girls.

Grounded theory is designed to support the researcher in creating a research product that is creative but follows specific guidelines to ensure the research is sound and reflective of the participants' views (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The guidelines of grounded theory assist the researcher in every aspect of the research, from choosing the research question to analyzing the data. Grounded theory methods also provide a structure for the identification of key concepts, which are then used to develop a theory. The process of creating a theory involves coding the data to build concepts, themes, and relationships. As Strauss and Corbin stated, the emerging theory is directly related to the participants' reality. Following the structure of analysis defined by Strauss and Corbin provides the findings with the rigor necessary to contribute to the knowledge base about this population and to serve as a foundation for other research related to gifted girls.

### **Participants**

Prior to beginning the study, the research and data collection with minors was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Oregon State University. Participants were then selected via snowball sampling, which Patton (2002) described as informants assisting researchers in connecting with research participants. Experts in the field of giftedness were used to access study participants. The principal researcher identified two experts who were involved with a program for talented and gifted youth in the Northwest United States. The experts were asked to contact several girls and their families to determine if they would be interested in having their contact information passed on to the

researchers for possible participation in a study. From there, the experts had no knowledge of which participants followed through with the study and which did not.

There were a total of seven participants: three were in the fifth grade at the beginning of the study, one was in sixth grade, and three were seniors in high school. Given the timeline of the study, fifth and sixth grade at the beginning of the study represented sixth and seventh grade at the end of the study. The three high school seniors were identified as gifted when they were in elementary school. These three young women were used as confirming cases, which are used to confirm emerging data and add depth and richness to the findings (Patton, 2002). These young women provided a unique perspective on the experience of being a gifted girl transitioning into sixth and seventh grade.

Due to the location of the study and the importance of conducting the research in person, the diversity of the participants was more limited than was hoped for. The demographic information of the participants was as follows: six of the participants identified as Caucasian, one identified as Native American and Caucasian. Three of the participants identified as lower socio-economic status, three as middle socio-economic status, and one as high socio-economic status. Five of the participants grew up in rural areas and two in urban areas.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collection for this study began with the first set of interviews. Each participant was interviewed until saturation was achieved, in this case three times over a period of four months. Following the individual interviews, one focus group was conducted. The focus group was used for both exploratory and confirmatory purposes.

Data analysis in grounded theory is a process of finding themes and concepts in the data. These concepts are then used to build theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Questions are the primary analytic tools. Four questions were created to begin exploration of the grand research question: (a) What does it mean for you to be gifted? (b) How do you see yourself in relation to your peers? (c) What does it mean to be gifted and a girl? (d) Are there differences between sixth and seventh grade and elementary school? These questions were sensitive to the existing literature yet sufficiently open to allow the participants to express their reality. Data from the initial questions were analyzed and provided the basis for the questions used in subsequent interviews. This process of interviews, analysis, and question generation continued throughout the study.

Researchers included transcripts, audiotapes, and the principal researcher's journal as data. Transcripts were created from the audiotapes and checked against the audiotapes for accuracy. Then transcripts were systematically analyzed using grounded theory procedures including open coding, axial coding, selective coding, process coding, and the development of a conditional matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This coding process generated dimensions, properties, categories and contexts that described the experience of gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade.

## **Trustworthiness**

Several procedures were used to meet the criteria of trustworthy research. First, prolonged engagement was used to build trust, help the researcher learn the participants' cultures, and to prevent any misinformation from being generated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted three times over a period of four months with each participant. A focus group was also conducted following the completion of the individual interviews.

Several measures were used to control researcher bias and produce credibility. Prior to conducting the study, the researchers explored and clarified their biases. The researchers' biases included beliefs that during the transition to sixth and seventh grade: (a) the pressure to fit in outweighed participants' need to express their giftedness, (b) the participants were confused about what they wanted to be and who they thought they should be, and (c) participants' teachers and parents did not fully understand their giftedness and their struggles. Throughout the study, the researchers consulted peers who asked critical questions about the findings to help keep researcher biases in check. By being clear about biases and debriefing with peers, the researchers limited the impact of these biases upon analysis and theory.

Credibility was also obtained through the use of triangulation. Throughout the process, three high school-aged gifted girls were interviewed about their experience of transitioning to sixth and seventh grade. Their recalled experiences were compared to the experiences of the younger participants. Additionally, multiple literature reviews were used to triangulate the findings. A literature review was conducted after each round of interviews and coding was completed. The main findings from each round were compared to current literature to provide another level of credibility. Finally a focus group was conducted with available participants. This gave the participants an opportunity to ensure that the findings reflected their experience. The participants confirmed that the findings accurately reflected their experiences of transitioning to sixth and seventh grade.

Through the use of techniques that promote credibility, this grounded theory is transferable. It not only represents the experience of the participants but also provides information that may be useful to other settings and studies.

## **Results**

The following is a grounded theory of the experience of gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade. A figure illustrating the connection between the properties, dimensions and categories can be found in the Appendix. The theoretical structure emerged from the data gathering process and was confirmed during a focus group. This theory encompasses both academic and social experiences that the participants expressed as being critical to the transition from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade. This theory also includes a larger context that was expressed which was the participants' view of themselves and the overall change that they experienced.

For the participants, the experience of transitioning from elementary school into sixth and seventh grade appeared to be a time of adaptation, growth, and academic and social success. Underlying the experiences they described the changes that occurred in

their lives and their uniquely developed sense of identity. The participants in this study understood their giftedness in terms of their academic and social functioning, their drive to work hard and achieve at high levels, and their experience of being smarter than other students in their classes. Connected to their academic and social functioning seemed to be a desire to connect with others, which impacted their daily experiences. Two contexts, change and a uniquely developed sense of identity, encapsulated all of the participants' experiences.

## **Change**

The first context, change, included all the changes the girls experienced as they moved to different schools, found new friends, and began to experience new things. This context also included changes that were developmental in nature. Participants reported that they experienced changes in the way they interacted with peers and fitting in became critical;

I would say middle school is an awkward time anyway, and you have the feel that you need to fit in. That is true for everyone to act a way, look a way to fit in with social norm. At the same time, when you are gifted, maybe they think about it more. Everyone wants to fit in, because they don't want to be left out.

The participants expressed that their relationships with friends changed as they got older. They noticed that they had begun to talk with friends about deeper and more varied topics.

Well, you talk about more grown up stuff than you do when you are little. Like when we were in kindergarten, we talk about stuff that is stupid.

Like then you are just starting to talk about real stuff that is important and like little kids talk, but not about important stuff. We kind of got to let out our feelings and stuff.

They notice that they had stopped "playing" with their friends and started "hanging out."

Well, in fifth grade, it was like when you do something with someone, you do things at their house and with a parent there. Now that we are more independent, we might go to the movies or the river to swim or the riverfront. So, our parents will drop us off, and we will be there for like three hours. So the stuff we do together has changed.

During this time, they began to focus their attention more externally to boys, clothes, and sports. The amount of freedom they had from their parents also changed. They often went out rather than to someone's house to be together.

Well, in fifth grade, like no one had boyfriends and stuff, and like now my friends like have boyfriends and are going out and stuff that is different.

Sixth grade is a really transitional year. You start to notice guys don't haven't cooties. You notice more about people. Clothes become more important. You have dances. There is also a difference in what you and your friends are doing. Like you might start going out and really talking instead of just playing.

For the gifted girls in this study, adjusting to these changes was sometimes difficult and sometimes easy. Participants focused on change in two major areas. The first type of change was in how they experienced being gifted.

...it affects who you meet. Like what programs you are in. You meet people in those programs who are talented and gifted, so as you embrace parts of who you are, like being gifted. You start to meet people who have those same interests. Like sports or classes you take. So, you start, a lot of your friends, not all of them were considered gifted, but so maybe you just have more relationships and you are placed with those kinds of people in summer camp or classes.

The other area of change they focused on was in how they dealt with their giftedness in connecting with others.

I think it can come from maybe feeling like an outsider because of that. Like you feel like you are getting treated a little different, so you think maybe that is not a good thing. Or I think they are only seeing me as gifted, and I want them to see me as something else, more than that. Or they are ignoring me, because they think I am totally different because of that. So, I think you maybe try to cover it up a little bit, or to show something else. Like trying to show like "I am really not that gifted, I am just like you guys." Like, I think that is probably where that comes from. Like I want to fit and be seen as more than just gifted, or have people look beyond the fact that I am gifted.

### **Uniquely Developed Sense of Identity**

In addition to change, the way the girls in this study understood their identity contributed to their transition from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade. This sense of identity served as the foundation for all of the other components of the experience--without it the experience would not have seemed the same. For the participants, a strong sense of identity was an inseparable component of being gifted; it drove the way they connected to others and shaped their overall experience of transitioning into sixth and seventh grade.

Based on their strong identities, the participants discussed making choices about how they functioned academically and socially. They recognized the behaviors that they

would need in order to fit in, such as not discussing academics, having balance in their lives, and working to have friends beyond their gifted peers. These insights, along with a clear understanding of what was important in their lives, seemed to stem from understanding themselves.

Books, my friends, my family...doing the best I can is important to me.

Well, family is the most important thing in my life. Sisters and brothers and moms and dads teach you life lessons... Family is very important. Friends are very important part of life.

These gifted girls had a deep sense of belonging with friends and family that they carried with them as they navigated the transition to sixth and seventh grade.

My family supporting me is important. I got some fish. They are important. I think my friends and school is pretty important. Like I know a lot of kids would not say that, but school is important and just the people in my life and what they give me.

I spend a lot of time with my family, and I like to spend a lot of time with my friends.

Some participants also talked more specifically about the ways in which they understood themselves.

I know that I am smart and stuff. I know that I am hyper sometimes. Now I am really tired. Yeah, I know I am smart and should not beat myself up for getting a bad grade and stuff...I think that is it. Like I am really trying to figure myself out. Like I know I can be hyper and annoying that is probably the rest.

I like history... I like reading. I like historical fiction. I don't like textbooks... I am a supportive friend. I like to make people happy. Even if I don't like someone and they are sad, I will try to cheer them up. I don't like to see people sad... I guess I have a good family; I have supportive friends that care about me.

Having this unique sense of identity and the changes that occurred as a result of this transition could not be separated out from the other properties and dimensions of these participants' experiences. How these contexts interacted with other categories and properties will be discussed further.

## **Being Gifted**

Within the contexts of change and uniquely developed identity, one category that emerged from the data was being gifted. Being gifted was expressed as the ways in which giftedness influenced or affected the participants' lives. This category was central to the lives of the participants and had an impact on choices they made both in and out of school. The participants described several components that encompassed what it meant to be gifted. The first component of being gifted was being driven and working harder than their non-gifted peers. They also expressed that how they functioned each day as a gifted girl was a part of being gifted. This included choosing to be active and have balance in their lives. They also articulated that being smarter than others was a part of being gifted, including comfort with schoolwork and good teacher relationships.

Part of the way they described being gifted was having an internalized drive to succeed.

Right, like I would feel bad about some things. Like people might say "that is really good you got an A," and I would be like "I only got a 98. I should have gotten 102." Like that kind of thing.

This drive also helped them meet the expectations of others.

It helps (being driven). My mom and dad really want me to do well in school. My sister is talented and gifted and she got like good scholarships and they want that for me, too.

My sister is gifted, and my parents are both smart, so it wasn't like "wow we have a really gifted person in the family." I was always just part of the family. My sister was valedictorian and is at an Ivy League school.

It doesn't really help with fit in. More like it helps with expectations, because like they are my family. They would like me either way.

Their drive came from external relationships, such as those with parents and teachers, and their own internal awareness of what they were capable of. The gifted girls in this study put a lot of pressure on themselves academically and in other areas, such as sports or music or non-academic school activities. They felt driven to be successful and do everything to the best of their ability. This drive seemingly could cause frustration or anxiety, yet for these participants this drive was simply a part of them and did not cause undue difficulty.

The participants stated that part of what kept their drive from becoming overwhelming was having balance in their lives. These participants recognized that there is more to life than academics and added social activities to their daily routine.

I always wanted to have fun in life...I knew, this is also from my parents that school comes first, but you need to make time for fun, work, and sports.

Even though the participants were driven to do well in these activities, the activities themselves provided a necessary balance in their lives that they reported helped them fit in and cope with day-to-day experiences.

I was not the most popular girl, but I fit in because of the activities I did. With those activities, it was easier, because I met all kinds of different people.

Absolutely, definitely it was the activities that helped me. I wouldn't have had my friends and would not have fit in as well without them.

Most often the activities chosen were sports. Sports provided opportunities for these gifted girls to connect with peers in non-academic settings, and, they felt, gave them a sense of normalcy and connection in their lives. Being active in school and sports provided these gifted girls with balance that helped them in their daily functioning.

I became more driven finding what I was interested in and what I wanted to focus on, the kinds of things that made me happy and doing a bunch of things. I enjoyed and worked harder for those.

The balance they found that helped them in daily functioning also helped them to feel normal. The participants found that being a gifted girl led to a feeling of difference. These gifted girls noticed that they were smarter. They got their work done quicker, and they were much more driven than their non-gifted peers. They also had a different relationship with teachers and higher expectations placed on them. Feeling different had the potential to produce feelings of isolation and anxiety. Participating in sports, student government, music, etc. were important to their experience because these activities helped them to connect with others, which contributed to their feeling normal.

## **Connecting**

Connecting emerged as the second major concept describing the experience of these gifted girls transitioning to sixth and seventh grade. Connecting was described by the participants as the way they maintained the pivotal relationships with friends and family as they experienced the transition to sixth and seventh grade. Much of the participants' focus was related to their changing relationships, fitting in with gifted peers and non-gifted peers, and feeling connected to both friends and family, and all of the girls talked about measures they took to ensure these connections.

One way the girls worked to find connections and fit in was through participation in non-academic activities. In these non-academic activities, they were often seen as the same as their peers. Participation in non-academic activities also contributed to their sense of self and their identity as a gifted girl. The participants stated that these

opportunities provided them an opportunity to be “more than just gifted.” Participating in extra-curricular non-academic activities also provided them with friendships that were not about school. They were not the girl in class with a high IQ, but another girl on the soccer team. These gifted girls often took a leadership role in these extra-curricular activities, but their leadership role was viewed as normal and accepted.

I have other things. Like I sew and do photography outside of school, and I do excel in those areas, but it is with a different group of people, and those people don't also see me getting high scores and stuff in school.

This normalcy provided them with another way to connect with others and a way to maintain friendships. These participants expressed that extracurricular programs contributed to their success in this time of transition. Having strength in music or sports took the attention off gifted girls' intelligence and put it into areas that could be more widely seen, like a music concert or soccer match.

These gifted girls negotiated balance between being driven, wanting to meet expectations, and wanting to fit in. The way they navigated school was done without a lot of thought. It stemmed from their identity as a gifted girl. It seemed to help them make choices academically that allowed them to fit in and stay connected and this became a critical component of the experience of sixth and seventh grade for these gifted girls.

How well they fit in and how connected they felt with peers was expressed as of great importance to the participants. Participants related having different experiences fitting in with gifted peers and non-gifted peers. They also experienced a shift in their relationships and the way they felt connected. The participants found that fitting in with gifted peers was easy and the most comfortable.

I was with like six other gifted kids. So, for me it was normal, or fairly normal...

...To know more people that are like you than just a couple of kids. It is a lot easier.

With gifted peers, they were able to truly be themselves. They did not have to moderate their giftedness.

...I knew kids like me who were cool.

It is really easy if you know somebody else is gifted, because it is easier to relate to them.

With non-gifted peers the participants found that social navigation was more complicated. One of the key components of maintaining connections with non-gifted peers was regulating their giftedness. For these participants, regulating their giftedness came in the form of not always answering the questions in class, not sharing grades, or complaining about the difficulty of an assignment that was not truly difficult for them.

It was more like the teacher said something and asked a question we should know. This was something that the other people should know, too. So those were the kinds of things that other people could do, too. So, even if I did know the answers, it did not feel like I was answering more.

This regulation served two purposes for participants. First, it kept them from standing out too much. Second, it protected their friends' feelings and their relationships.

I just keep it to myself I guess. I don't want to rub it into their face.

I think it is a good thing, because you don't want to lose your friendship and make them feel bad so they don't want to be your friend anymore.

Participants viewed protecting relationships with peers as critical. The participants expressed that they did not want to make their friends feel bad or less than. They inherently wished to nurture relationships, and regulating their giftedness was one way this was done. Regulating giftedness did not feel harmful or negative to the gifted girls in this study; it was a way they balanced being smart and maintaining their friendships.

It doesn't really affect them. Like you can act as dumb as you want to so it doesn't affect them.

(If they know I am gifted) I would get more homework, harder homework and other stuff...getting like harder stuff to do and my friends might feel bad because they are not in the same program as me.

Participants experienced regulating their giftedness as an important way to maintain connections with others, which contributed to their functioning as gifted girls. Because they had a sense of belonging and strong identities, they had less difficulty making choices about regulating their giftedness. These participants expressed that downplaying their giftedness was more like being a good friend than giving up a part of themselves;

I think also I notice that now I don't do that (hide giftedness) much, unless, like I have a friend who gets really stressed, and so I will kind of not say anything. It is not so much like hiding it, but being sensitive to your friends.

Yeah, if you don't, you will lose them.

If you are not liking it, then maybe it is negative, but for me it is just to be sensitive.

These gifted girls reported having a deeper connection with non-gifted peers than with gifted peers. Whether this was the result of wanting to move away from their giftedness or was a product of changing priorities was unknown by the participants. It

may have been both. Maintaining a connection is successful for gifted girls who have richness in their own lives to share. The participants found that having more balance in their lives helped them make this developmental shift easier;

Junior high is more social; there is an entire group of people to talk to. You really start to branch out more, make a new group of friends. There are more kids, so you have to try to make friends.

Having a lot of friends who don't really care is not what I wanted. I had a small group that supported me.

When you are yourself, you can find people who are like you. That is when you are happy, when you find people who like you for who you are because of what you think you should be like and how you should act. I think girls start out wanting to fit in, and then I found out that is not important. I found my own friends who love being around you and that helps you. When you are with people who like you for yourself it helps you find yourself, too. It helps me find myself and know what I want versus what society wants me to have.

### **Relationship Between Categories**

There were several ways that the categories were related to each other. These relationships provide added richness to the description of participants' experience of transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade. One relationship between categories is the connection between being gifted and connecting. The participants described the way that they experienced giftedness as affecting them academically, but also the way that it affected their relationships and the choices they made to help them connect with others. One way this is illustrated is in the area of working hard and doing well in school.

### **Working Hard/Connecting**

The desire to work hard and do well carried with it the risk of standing out academically, which was related to and affected the way that they functioned socially. Standing out academically could lead to social isolation, being picked on, and a lack of connection. To prevent this, the participants worked to connect with others. The gifted girls in this study reported regulating their giftedness in the classroom by perhaps not answering the teachers' questions or not sharing their high score on an exam when other students in the class did not do well.

...with teachers, I don't remember having any special relationships with them because I was gifted. I think I may have shied away from that because I was gifted. I also may have just not liked my teachers. I still don't get into, like I may talk to a teacher, but I don't have a really strong relationship with any teachers. I think I might shy away from being seen

as the teacher's pet or whatever, but it is just not something I have ever done.

Well my friends would be like, "oh I got a B" or "oh I got a C" and I would be like "oh I am not going to talk about my grades, because like I don't want to make other people feel bad." So, I didn't avoid, well I kind of avoided talking about it. If it came up with my good friends, then I didn't have trouble talking about it. But if it was just a general class discussion, I would, I don't know, I wouldn't avoid it because I felt self-conscious about it. I didn't really want to make people feel bad.

The choice to meet the expectations of teachers or to attempt to blend in and connect with friends was a difficult one for participants. All of the gifted girls in this study made the choice to blend in more and found that they had a much easier time fitting in than other gifted girls they observed who did not attempt to regulate their giftedness.

Some of the girls, people did not want to be friends with because of the middle school act. Like they were always book and always had that weird look. I didn't mind it, because I knew them, but some of the other kids did. I knew like that we were all the same, and, I mean, we were just a little smarter and they just dressed differently and acted differently than me and some of my other friends who are gifted and talented. I don't know exactly what it is, but it seemed like by their looks they did not fit in as well. Even though we were all the same, they just acted more nerdy, geeky, and they really weren't. They just appeared that way.

It is fine, 'cause like I am still not like all brains. Like there are some girls who are like "I have to get my work done," and some people don't like them because of that.

Maybe they are more inclined to do what they want so they don't fit in.

### **Being Driven/Fitting In**

Making the choice to blend in and still get their work done appeared related to the participants' sense of identity. A strong sense of identity helped them navigate relationships with teachers. These girls were confident in their identity and did not feel a need to stand out in class, which also helped maintain friendships. They were able to get their work done on time and done well. They often tried to do more than was assigned and were willing to help others if needed. This commitment to schoolwork strengthened the relationships with their teachers. They stated that they were not as compelled to be the teacher's favorite or do extra work in the presence of others simply for the teacher's approval. They did not spend a lot of extra time around the teacher, which helped to preserve the relationship with the teacher and strengthen their relationships with peers. They were driven to do well and confident in their abilities, so they needed very little

attention from the teacher but were focused in class, did not get into trouble, and maintained their relationships.

In summary, the experience of these gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade was not as difficult as the literature indicates. Because they had a strong sense of identity, these gifted girls were able to balance their desire to work hard academically and their interest in extra-curricular activities. By balancing their academic lives, they were able to make friends and build connections. The connections they built significantly contributed to their sense of identity and their experiences of transitioning to sixth and seventh grade.

### **Discussion**

This grounded theory on the experience of gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade provides details of this event that are based on the data collected during the interview process. These details include the individuals' views of giftedness, the way they connected with others, and their unique sense of identity. This research used grounded theory methodology as the frame to validate and understand the experience from the participants' perspective. As noted previously, the methodology included specific procedures to produce trustworthy findings. However, as in any research, there are limitations to the findings.

The first limitation was related to the prolonged engagement. The research participants were interviewed individually three times over a period of four months. A focus group was also conducted following the completion of the individual interviews. Given the interviewer's skills as a counselor, we were confident that this time frame was enough to build trust and rapport. However, working with the participants for a longer period of time may have had an impact on the findings, as the participants would have moved further into sixth or seventh grade, which may have affected their reporting of experiences.

Multiple literature reviews were also used to triangulate the findings. The review of the literature may also have had limitations in that the articles in the literature tended to have much the same information, and few of the articles were based on qualitative research with participants of similar age. Most of the information was based on anecdotal data or quantitative data from large sample sizes. However, this research does add significantly to the limited literature relating specifically to this population (for example Reis, 2002; Kerr, 1994). The gifted girls in this study experienced the transition from elementary school to sixth or seventh grade more positively than had previously been discussed, despite making choices to regulate their giftedness. The girls' experience of regulating their giftedness to facilitate connections with peers did not appear damaging, which one might assume from the literature. This study indicates that regulating giftedness may be adaptive rather than pathological.

There is also a sizable body of literature, particularly in the education field, specifically related to underachieving gifted students and to school climate issues. The trends in that area seem to be finding that the school climate that does not support giftedness tends to contribute to underachievement and higher dropout rates. Other social factors that affect all children, such as poverty, family of origin issues, substance use in the home etc. also greatly affect gifted student achievement. The girls in this study came

from two parent, stable homes, yet the focus of this research was on how they were able to navigate their social system and did not focus as much on their academic issues, which adds a new layer to the way we see this population.

Although attempts were made to control researcher bias by peer debriefing and member checks, it is always a risk with this type of research. Acknowledging any biases and working with peers helps to limit the impact of biases upon analysis and theory.

During the focus group, the participants confirmed that the findings accurately reflected their experiences of sixth and seventh grade. One limitation to doing the member checking in a focus group setting is that members may not feel as comfortable expressing themselves; however, this did not seem to be a limitation in this research. Another limitation to this research is that only three of the participants were available for the focus group.

Procedures were also in place to address the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings. From this study, there are several factors to consider related to transferability. The sample size was small, with participants of various socio-economic statuses but of only one ethnic background. Professionals who work with gifted students provided the participant sample. These particular students stood out due to their articulate nature and other factors that are unknown. These participants may have been better adjusted than others, and their adjustment should be considered when evaluating for transferability. This research cannot be transferred to all gifted girls in this age range, which is a limitation to the study.

## **Implications**

This qualitative research study has developed a grounded theory of the experience of sixth and seventh grade for gifted girls. This theory focuses on the way a strong sense of identity informs giftedness and a sense of connectedness with others. The experience of these research participants was unique to other research with this population. Given the uniqueness of the findings, there are implications for individuals working with this population in multiple capacities.

This research has implications for individuals who will be working with gifted girls in this age range. For school counselors, this research helps to offset the other literature on the mental health of gifted girls and the view that gifted girls struggle to the point where they have difficulty fitting in and where regulating giftedness is pathologized. This research demonstrates that, for gifted girls at this age, fitting in is the most important component of their social lives, but these participants managed to fit in, feel connected, and feel whole. This research also demonstrates that while there is a hiding or regulating of giftedness in some settings, regulating giftedness is done in order to maintain connections and does not always feel bad.

This research also can educate counselors-in-training on the importance of fitting in and finding connections in the schools. For counselors working with gifted students who are struggling, this awareness can help focus their work with the students. Rather than focusing on their classroom behaviors, they can focus on other areas that students might be interested in. The importance of non-academic activities is clear in this research and should be a part of school counselors' work with gifted girls. A need for balance and connection with others can also be a focus of counseling. Counselors can work with

gifted students on getting to know themselves and developing a sense of self. There are several models of counseling that may be useful with this population including solution-focused, feminist, narrative, and group therapies.

For educators this research illustrates the need for gifted students to be allowed freedom in the classroom to participate when they desire, but it also shows the strong need for girls to be left to work on their own when needed. The gifted girls in this study demonstrated the critical need for girls to negotiate the way that they will fit in with both gifted and non-gifted peers, and for these girls that included regulating their giftedness both in and out of the classroom. Teachers can support this by not calling on gifted students for answers and not using them as classroom assistants or to help other students unless they volunteer for this role.

### Conclusion

Sixth, seventh, and twelfth grade gifted girls shared their perceptions and experiences of transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade. Through data analysis, a theory of those experiences was created and confirmed. These girls described the importance of having balance in their lives and of ensuring that they participated in sports, student government, and music. This balance contributed to their feeling normal and feeling connected to others. They found that being successful in sixth and seventh grade was dependent on fitting in, and they often had to make choices to regulate their giftedness in order to fit in. This regulating was for them a way to protect friendships, to be courteous to others, and to keep from standing out. They shared that these skills were an important part of life and that they held no negative feelings about this choice.

These gifted girls had a strong sense of who they were, and it was this sense of self that guided their choices and connections with others. They did not mind not answering questions in class repeatedly. They knew they knew the answer and that was enough. It is with this strong identity that they were able to be successful in a challenging environment. These girls demonstrated that making an adjustment to their interactions with others could make a difference in how they were perceived and how they fit in. They shared a voice of strength that was inspirational and powerful.

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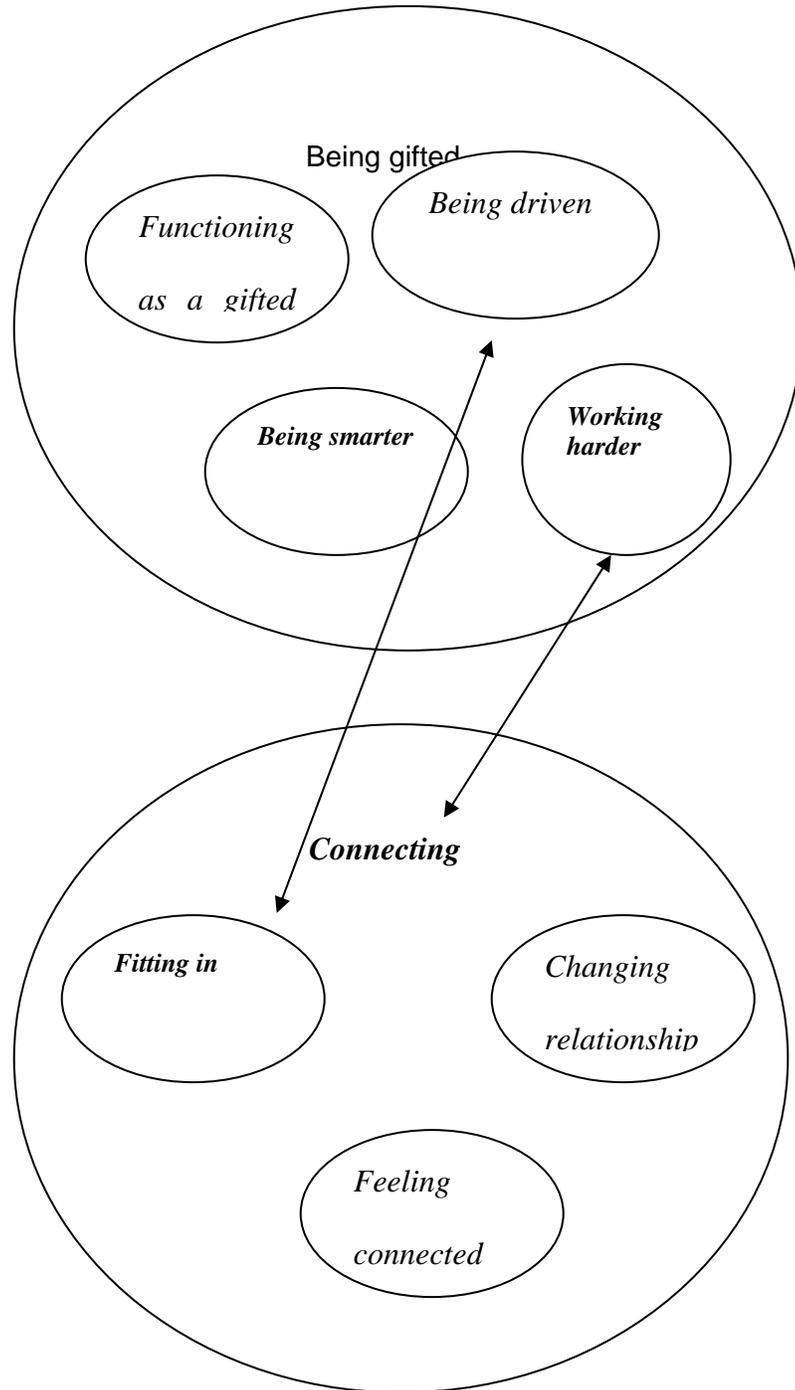
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### Appendix

Illustration of the grounded theory of experience of gifted girls transitioning from elementary school to sixth and seventh grade.

*Change and Uniquely developed sense of identity*



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### Author Note

Jennifer received her Ph.D. from Oregon State University in Counselor Education and Supervision. Her primary clinical focus has always been with children and adolescents, either in shelter settings, or in schools. Her research interests are with girls, identity development, feminist issues and qualitative research. She is an assistant professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She can be contacted at Pepperell MSU, Mankato, Department of Counseling and Personnel; 107 Armstrong Hall; Mankato, MN 56001; E-mail: Jennifer.pepperell@mnsu.edu; Telephone: 507-389-5837; Fax: 507-389-5074

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