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“Nothing is ever easy”: Parent Perceptions of Intensity in Their Gifted Adolescent Children

Kate H. Guthrie

Piedmont College, kguthrie@piedmont.edu

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Abstract

Due to asynchronous development, gifted children often experience the world differently than their same-aged peers. Some experience unique intensities, or overexcitabilities, that render modifications in teaching and parenting. These intensities typically take on characteristics of emotional, intellectual, imagination, psychomotor, or sensual overexcitability. In this in-depth interview study, I explored parent perceptions of intensity in their gifted adolescent children. Three mothers participated and completed the Overexcitability Inventory for Parents-Two (OIP-II) prior to each interview. The parent responses to the OIP-II served as an elicitation device to begin our conversations. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes among the participants’ perceptions: (1) challenging behaviors of intense gifted children, (2) consequences of intensity, and (3) a parent’s search for understanding. These findings inform the understanding of intensity and overexcitability from parents’ points of view and provide insight into how intense gifted children behave outside of the classroom. I conclude the article with questions to consider regarding how to better support parents of young gifted children.

Keywords

Gifted Children, Parents of Gifted Children, Overexcitability, Intensity, Social and Emotional Development, OIP-II, Basic Qualitative Design, In-Depth Interviews, Semi-Structured Interviews, Thematic Analysis

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“Nothing is ever easy”: Parent Perceptions of Intensity in Their Gifted Adolescent Children

Kate H. Guthrie

Piedmont College, Athens, Georgia, USA

Due to asynchronous development, gifted children often experience the world differently than their same-aged peers. Some experience unique intensities, or overexcitabilities, that render modifications in teaching and parenting. These intensities typically take on characteristics of emotional, intellectual, imagination, psychomotor, or sensual overexcitability. In this in-depth interview study, I explored parent perceptions of intensity in their gifted adolescent children. Three mothers participated and completed the Overexcitability Inventory for Parents-Two (OIP-II) prior to each interview. The parent responses to the OIP-II served as an elicitation device to begin our conversations. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes among the participants' perceptions: (1) challenging behaviors of intense gifted children, (2) consequences of intensity, and (3) a parent's search for understanding. These findings inform the understanding of intensity and overexcitability from parents' points of view and provide insight into how intense gifted children behave outside of the classroom. I conclude the article with questions to consider regarding how to better support parents of young gifted children.

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Introduction

In education, the term *gifted* has many meanings. Gifted children often excel in academics and have extraordinary abilities and talents that far surpass those of their peers. Due to their high intellectual abilities, many parents and teachers expect gifted students to have high achievement in many or all areas of academics, be role models in the classroom, and enjoy learning for learning's sake. Because learning may come easily to gifted children, some parents and teachers may be quick to assume that they do not face any problems or challenges in schools (Moon, 2009) or that they do not have unique social and emotional needs (Peterson, 2009). Their intellectual prowess gives the impression that gifted children are more mature than their same-aged peers.

However, those close to gifted children will be the first to admit that these notions are misconceptions. Some gifted children experience underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000) or struggle with having advanced intellectual abilities in addition to a learning disability (e.g., twice exceptional gifted students; see Olenchak & Reis, 2002). They also face unique social and emotional challenges different from their same-aged peers. For example, some gifted children experience social stigmatization from being labeled gifted (Coleman, 1985; Neihart, 2002; Swiatek, 1998), unhealthy perfectionism (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010; Silverman, 2007), and hyper-sensitivities or intensities (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a; see Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006). *Intensity*, also referred to as overexcitability, is a characteristic commonly found among gifted individuals that describes hypersensitive or prolonged

responses to stimuli (Dabrowski, 1964). Intensities and overexcitabilities are common topics of interest in the study of the social and emotional development of gifted children.

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perceptions of intensity in their gifted children. Through in-depth interviews with three different parents of intense gifted adolescents, I learned how parents came to recognize and understand how their children's intellect and intensities intersected. Better understanding the unique perspectives of parents of gifted children may help inform the fields of early childhood education, middle grades education, and gifted education of how characteristics associated with giftedness may manifest outside of the classroom.

A Conceptual Overview of Giftedness and Intensity

There are many definitions of giftedness. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) defines gifted individuals as:

...Those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports). (2010)

The definition of a gifted child or student differs state to state, as state funding and identification practices vary across the United States. Like NAGC's definition, most state definitions choose to focus on outstanding aptitude and achievement. However, when definitions only focus on aptitude and achievement, constructs that can be measured and are norm-referenced, some of the more qualitative aspects of giftedness are overlooked.

For example, a hallmark characteristic of giftedness is *asynchronous development* (see Silverman, 1997), or a sense of being *out of sync*. A gifted child's advanced intellectual development may far surpass their emotional or physical development, which can cause a number of social and emotional challenges in school. A gifted girl may feel as though she is a 16-year-old stuck in an 8-year-old's body, which may mean she has trouble making friends when she's surrounded in a class of other 8-year-olds. Although conventional definitions of giftedness imply a sense of being significantly different from the norm, particularly in the area of academic achievement, unique aspects of development are often missing from local and state definitions.

The current study roots itself in a more holistic definition of giftedness created by The Columbus Group:

...asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, n.d.)

Since achievement is the primary focus of schools and their gifted programs, little attention is placed on how gifted students experience the world differently than their non-gifted peers. This

definition is distinctive in that it highlights the internal experiences (e.g., intensity) of giftedness, characteristics that are often neglected because they are difficult to measure.

Informed by Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD; 1964), intensities receive a lot of attention in the field of gifted education. Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychologist and psychiatrist, devoted much of his work to understanding creatively, artistically, and intellectually gifted youth (Daniels & Piechowski, 2010). For Dabrowski, TPD was a unique approach to human development among individuals who have *high developmental potential* (Bailey, 2011; Dabrowski, 1964). Dabrowski saw how an individual's inner forces (e.g., intensities) often generated overstimulation, conflict, and pain – a breakdown or *disintegration* of oneself (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a; Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006). Yet, the same inner forces that caused strife also provoked them to search for a way through pain, strife, and disharmony (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009b) – a positive approach to disintegration. Dabrowski (1964) argued that disintegration among those with high developmental potential could be both a positive and necessary experience.

Dabrowski was particularly interested in the emotional development among intellectually or artistically gifted youth, and how such children were often intense, sensitive, and experienced emotional extremes (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009b). Dabrowski (1964) found children with heightened intellectual abilities often had hypersensitive or prolonged responses to stimuli compared to same aged peers. He called these inner forces *overexcitabilities* (OE; e.g., intensities). For example, a highly intellectual child learning about world hunger may be moved to tears to the point where he is inconsolable, and his experience of deep sadness for the less fortunate around the world may last for days or even weeks. OE can be summarized using five categories: Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, Imaginational, and Emotional. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the five areas of OE by listing behaviors or characteristics commonly expressed by gifted children.

Moreover, gifted individuals have been found to have higher OE than non-gifted individuals (Bouchet & Falk, 2001; Piirto & Fraas, 2012). Gifted children may experience one, several, or all of the OEs at heightened levels. Daniels and Piechowski (2010) described these OEs as “color filters or channels through which the world is perceived and felt” (p. 315), meaning that life and school experiences of gifted students with OE may be qualitatively different from their peers.”

Table 1. *Forms and Expressions of Overexcitability*

Overexcitability	Forms and expressions
Psychomotor	Surplus of energy Psychomotor expression of emotional tension Impulsive or compulsive behavior May have a need to always be moving
Sensual	Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure Sensual expression of emotional tension Experiencing the world with deeper senses Heightened sensitivity to taste, touch, sound, sight, and smell May have strong pleasant or unpleasant reactions to sensual stimuli
Intellectual	Intensified activity of the mind Penchant for probing questions and problem solving Reflective thought Desire to understand and find meaning Deep curiosity Inability to quiet the mind

Imaginational	Free play of the imagination Capacity for living in a world of fantasy Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension Low tolerance of boredom; need for novelty May often visualize the worst possible outcome
Emotional	Feelings and emotions intensified; awareness of emotions in self and others Strong somatic expressions Strong affective expressions Capacity for strong attachments, deep relationships Well-differentiated feelings toward self, inner dialogue and self-reflection Intense reactions to emotional stimuli

Note. Adapted from Daniels and Piechowski (2010, p. 315) and Harrison and Van Haneghan (2011).

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perceptions of intensity or overexcitability in gifted adolescent children. Studies focusing on parent perceptions of gifted children are lacking. Qualitative studies of intensity among gifted adolescents are often overshadowed by popular quantitative methodological studies (see Bouchet & Falk, 2001; Mofield & Parker Peters, 2015; Perrone-McGovern, Simon-Dack, Beduna, Williams, & Esche, 2015). Due to this, the voices of parents of gifted adolescents are missing as many studies choose to amplify the voices and interpretations of the researcher.

I used the following questions to guide this in-depth interview study: (1) How do parents describe intensity¹ in their gifted adolescent children?, (2) What are parents' perceptions of intensity in their gifted adolescent children?, and (3) How do parents support their gifted adolescent children in managing their intensity? Given the theoretical framework of this study, the answers to these questions were best supported by qualitative inquiry methods, as responses required participant reflection that varied in content and length.

Theoretical Framework

Theories help us understand how we understand and relate to the world around us. Dabrowski's TPD, mentioned above, provided a conceptual framework through which I viewed intensity in gifted children. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) served as an additional theoretical framework for this study. According to Blumer, symbolic interactionism is rooted in the belief that human beings live in a world of objects and are guided by the meanings of those objects. The ways in which we interact with objects (e.g., relationships, other people, organizations, identities, etc.) influences how we make sense of those objects. This framework places weight on an individual's sense making of the world and creation of meaning in social situations (Blumer, 1969; Prasad, 2005). Symbolic interactionism influenced the research design and methods since the purpose of the study was to better understand how parents of gifted adolescents make meaning of intensity and giftedness in their children. How parents understand, interact, and are influenced by the meanings they place on the ideas of *intensity* and *giftedness* have the potential to impact how they relate to their gifted children.

¹Parent participants referred to their children as being "intense" as opposed to over excitable or hypersensitive. The term *intensity* was chosen to represent this phenomenon in each interview.

Researcher Background

I came to this research as a doctoral student interested in learning more about how parents of gifted children, and gifted children themselves, view and relate to the five categories of intensity/OE. As an experienced middle and high school math teacher, I had worked with a wide range of gifted adolescents in my classroom. The more I learned about intensities in gifted individuals, the more my perspectives of the characteristics and behaviors of my students changed for the better. I found myself educating parents of gifted children on the five categories of intensities, and they often expressed deep interest and relief in learning that their gifted child was not the only child with these characteristics. Also, I came to this study as a mother. At the time, my child was still in pre-school and although he sometimes indicated glimpses of intensity as it related to his intellectual development, he did not display any extreme characteristics similar to those I had read about in the literature. Aware of my own experiences, I approached this study with curiosity about how parents of gifted adolescents made meaning of their gifted child's intensity.

Additionally, since "there are no 'pure,' 'raw' data, uncontaminated by human thought or action" (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007, p. 27), the use of the first-person narrative throughout the article is purposeful. Researchers are the main instrument in qualitative studies, and the reader should be aware of the researcher's influence throughout the study's design, data collection, and analysis (Wolcott, 2009). Replacing "the researcher" with "I" and other first-person pronouns are intended to reveal my own subjectivity and participation in the study. In the next section, I discuss the theoretical framework I found to be most appropriate for supporting this study's purpose and design.

Methods

To support inquiry of parent perceptions, I designed this study as a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) since I was interested in uncovering and interpreting parents' meaning making of intensity and giftedness. In-depth, semi-structured interviews provided the best method for data collection because of their potential for deep exploration of personal experiences. Although the term "interview" covers a wide range of practices (Seidman, 2012), this study was influenced by deMarrais' (2004) notion of an interview as being a conversation in which both the researcher and the participant work towards a shared meaning. Compared to structured and unstructured interviews, the semi-structured interview approach allowed for each interview to vary according to each individual (Roulston, 2010). All procedures in the study were approved by my university's Institutional Review Board, and I included steps to obtain consent both when I recruited participants and again when we met in person.

Participants

This study focused on the perspectives and experiences of three parents of gifted adolescent children (i.e., children 10-17 years of age²) who described their children as being "intense." Recruitment was purposive and first started with my own personal network. Recruiting participants with whom I had already established rapport also provided the opportunity for rich data collection (Risko et al., 2008)—an opportunity that may not have been possible for an "outsider" researcher (Roulston, 2010, p. 98). One parent was referred to me by the first participant I interviewed. The study was first introduced to participants over the

²This age range follows the developmental time period of adolescents according to the World Health Organization (n.d.).

phone or by an emailed recruitment letter in which I described the nature of the study and gave an overview of the study procedures. We decided on a day and time for each interview, and a comfortable location was determined by the participants. Each of the participants chose to conduct the interview in their homes while their children were at school. All names appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

To gather parent perceptions of intensity in their gifted children, a one-time 60-minute semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews were designed to allow questions to be “tailored to fit comfortably into the experience” (deMarrais, 2004, p. 53). Prior to each interview, participants completed an online form of the Overexcitability Inventory for Parents-Two (OIP-II; Falk & Silverman, 2016). This 28-item questionnaire asked parents to rate each statement based on how it best described his/her child in relation to the categories of overexcitability, with Emotional OE elaborated as two distinct categories: sensitivity and empathy. I chose to use the OIP-II as an elicitation device in order to focus our conversation on certain areas of overexcitability, specific to each participant’s child. For instance, seeing that a parent rated their child high in a certain area, I could ask the parent, “You scored this statement as ‘Very much like my child.’ Tell me more about that.” Sample statements of the OIP-II are address in Table 2. To support our semi-structured environment, an interview guide was prepared prior to the data collection phase of the study (Roulston, 2010). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and emailed to participants for verification. One participant shared additional reflections, via an email addendum, on the day following our conversation.

Table 2. *Sample OIP-II Statements*

Rating scale	Sample statements
1 = Not at all like my child	Psychomotor OE:
2 = Not much like my child	My child is more energetic than most people her/his age
3 = Somewhat like my child	My child feels like her/his body is constantly in motion
4 = A lot like my child	
5 = Very much like my child	Sensual OE:
NA = Not applicable*	My child feels music throughout her/his whole body
	My child is moved by beauty in nature
	Emotional OE (sensitivity):
	My child has strong feelings of joy, anger, excitement, and despair
	My child can feel a mixture of different emotions all at once
	Emotional OE (empathy):
	My child feels other people’s feelings
	My child is deeply concerned about others
	Intellectual OE:
	My child observes and analyzes everything
	Theories get my child’s mind going
	Imaginational OE:
	My child’s pretend world is very real to her/him
	When my child gets bored, s/he begins to daydream

Note. Not Applicable responses receive a score of 0.

Data Analysis

I chose Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis as the primary analytical approach since themes "capture something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). After transcribing, reading, and re-reading each transcript, I completed several rounds of coding using a mixture of descriptive, value, and in-vivo codes. Open coding in this way allowed me to stay close to my data by keeping the data "rooted in the participants own language" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 7). I used MAXQDA 12 for Mac (VERBI Software, 2016), a qualitative data analysis software, to assist with data management, coding, and analysis.

After I completed several rounds of coding, I searched for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by developing thematic categories of codes. I found similarities and relationships among codes and the data they represented and grouped similar codes together. This categorical way of thinking helped me to conceptually frame my data (Freeman, 2017) in order to recognize broader themes among the participant's perspectives and experiences. Table 3 displays a code map of the first iteration of codes and the second iteration of thematic categories of codes.

Table 3. *Code Map of First Iteration of Codes and Second Iteration of Thematic Categories of Codes*

Second Iteration: Thematic categories of codes		
A. Descriptions of Intensity	E. Characteristics of Child	H. Emotional Reactions to Intensity
B. Judgement of Intensity	F. Child at School	I. Parent Understandings of Intensity
C. Evolution of Intensity	G. Parenting Experiences	
D. Solutions/Strategies		
First Iteration: Codes (sub-codes are listed in parentheses)		
A. child is different from others (advanced development, late development, comparison to sibling(s), not normal, not typical to gifted, observing other's kids)	E. behavior as a young child/baby	H. parent emotions
A. parent definition	E. personality	H. he also pulls us in
A. what intensity looks like (intellectual, emotional, psychomotor, imaginal, sensual)	E. picky with food	H. asking 'do you hate life? why is it so hard?'
A. child's awareness	E. creates all these rules	H. need for therapy/help
B. asset vs. burden	E. shies away from nervous things	H. we felt lost all the time
B. school challenges	E. maturity	H. we can't handle this
B. trouble sleeping	E. self-aware	H. I can't reach him
B. challenges for parents	E. meticulous/driven	H. out of control
	E. social	H. in control
	E. perfectionistic (afraid of messing up, OCD tendencies,	H. we didn't understand it
		H. don't know how to handle this
		H. his intensity drives us to another place
		H. parent cried every day
		H. parent feels failure

B. stress/anxiety/depression B. disconnect	if not good at it, sense of control)	H. attitude (education, gifted education)
C. lessening of intensity (lessens as child gets older, it gets better!, evolves over time)	F. school-general	I. understanding “giftedness”/intensity
C. parent views of future (future, we’re working on that, parent worries about social acceptance, worried about child)	F. dream child at school	I. coupled with like the most amazing with the most challenging
D. solutions/strategies	F. handwriting (terrible handwriting, handwriting and interest in English)	I. just takes work
D. school environment	F. interest in science and math	I. confidence child will overcome
D. professional help	F. advanced classes at school	I. dis-equilibrium in development
D. parent-strategies	F. improvement at new school	I. we knew something was up
D. child-strategies	F. doesn’t want to stand out	I. so that’s what I first started noticing
	F. handles school well	I. bright vs. gifted
	F. interest/disinterest with school	I. relation to others’ understanding of intensity (we would tell people, people didn’t believe us, asking doctor)
	F. teachers love her	
	F. trouble for talking	
	F. school isn’t too challenging	
	F. Montessori	
	G. parenting	
	G. nothing is every easy	
	G. was our first kid	
	G. parent coaching	
	G. managing talking at home	
	G. parenting other children is easier	

Next, I looked for patterns and common experiences among each of the transcripts and considered these threads as potential themes. After defining and re-defining potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I constructed a thematic matrix (Kuckartz, 2014) to demonstrate how each participant’s statements reflected each theme. To demonstrate, Table 4 displays an abbreviation of my thematic matrix for Theme 1: Challenging behaviors of intense gifted children. For brevity, only one sample quote supports each subtheme. The cumulative thematic matrix included multiple quotes per subtheme, thus guiding my interpretation of each theme.

Table 4. *Abbreviated Thematic Matrix for Theme 1: Challenging Behaviors of Intense Gifted Children*

Theme 1 subthemes	Examples found in data	Sample quotes
Unable to quiet one's mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constant talking - Difficulty relaxing or sleeping - Constant analyzing - Overthinks simple concepts 	“These are the times when we can see what is going on in his head [because he talks all the time], but it's intense for us because it doesn't end.”
Emotional overreactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fearful of the unknown - Overwhelmed by spontaneity - Excessive worry - Overly empathic 	“And he just <i>totally</i> overreacts... [it's] a really strong reaction that has happened over and over and over and over and over.”
Excessive need for attention when young child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to be held - Extreme tantrums - Need for attention from siblings and parents 	“He has never, <i>never</i> , ever been good with playing by himself. Even as an infant... We couldn't leave him in a room to just play... So when he's bored, he doesn't know what to do. So even though I'm saying like he has all this creativity... he has to be near somebody at the same time.”

Attention to Qualitative Quality

Being able to trust the results of qualitative research is important (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study was marked by rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, and ethics, all of which are characteristics that point to high quality qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Rich rigor is supported by this study's multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks and appropriate data collection and analysis procedures (Tracy, 2010). Discussing my subjectivity and role as the researcher and being transparent about my data analysis procedures are indicators of sincerity (Tracy, 2010). Credibility was demonstrated in two ways: (1) collecting parents' ratings of their children's intensities via the OIP-II served as an additional form of data collection to support the interview, and (2) I included rich details and used direct quotes within each of my findings in order to “show rather than tell” (Tracy, 2010). Lastly, this study was ethical as its procedures for working with human subjects were approved by my university's Institutional Review Board, and as the researcher, I was mindful of my character and actions when interviewing each of my participants (Tracy, 2010).

Findings

The findings of this study are organized into three sections. First, I orient the reader by providing an introduction to the participants and their children. Second, I describe how the participants defined intensity in their own words. Third, I present the three themes, and their subthemes, that were discovered from my data analysis procedures.

An Introduction to Participants and Their Children

Three mothers agreed to participate in this in-depth interview study: Rae (son: Nicholas), Anna (son: Zach), and Mariah (daughter: Laila). In addition to the children receiving some form of gifted or creative education services, the children discussed in this study all embodied the definition of giftedness as asynchronous development (see Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, n.d.). Coincidentally, each of the participants' children were first-born, and each parent spoke of how being a first-time mom meant that trying to understand their child's intensity was even more difficult. They were not sure which behaviors were normal and which were not. As the children got older, all three attended Montessori school at various stages in the early years of schooling and later transitioned to non-Montessori public and private schools. Two of the mothers reflected how, early on, no one seemed to understand their experiences of parenting. I would like to note that each of these mothers lived in the same city; therefore, they may have had similar experiences with raising children in the same community. A summary of the children's overexcitabilities, as reported by their parents on the OIP-II, are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of Parent Reports of Their Children's OE via the OIP-II

	Areas of OE					Emotional	
	Psychomotor	Sensual	Intellectual	Imaginational	Sensitivity	Empathy	
Nicholas	Low	Typical for gifted	High	High	Low	Low	
Zach	Typical for gifted	Low	High	Typical for gifted	Typical for gifted	Typical for gifted	
Laila	Low	High	Typical for gifted	Typical for gifted	High	High	

Note. Results indicate the child's OE compared to the normed population of gifted children.

Towards the beginning of each interview, I prompted the participants to describe what they meant when they said their gifted child was *intense*. Mariah shared how she viewed intensity as being "something that is more than normal. [It's] how a child experiences something to a greater degree than an age mate would." She also mentioned that she believed different children have different "degrees" of intensity. Rae described intensity as the following:

When I think of intense, I guess I think of extreme. [E]verything is at the extreme level whether it's good or bad—temper tantrums are super extreme in a negative way with lots of emotion, but then just plain discourse is also extreme and while there is no negative emotion connected, it's still intense. Nothing is ever simple and after a while, it just wears on you.

Similarly, Anna defined intensity by sharing how she saw it in her son. He talked constantly, had trouble controlling his anger and impulses, and how "his intensity is pretty much *all the time*... Yeah. Pretty much *all* – all the time." How each parent witnessed and experienced their intense gifted children lead to rich discussion and the emergence the following three themes: (1) challenging behaviors of intense gifted children, (2) consequences of intensity, and (3) a parent's search for understanding.

Theme 1: Challenging Behaviors of Intense Gifted Children

Navigating the early years of development and schooling was not easy for any of the mothers. As they became more aware of how other children behaved, whether it was friends' children, preschool classmates, or their child's siblings, each of the parents expressed that their gifted child's behaviors were, in Rae's words, "not normal." Intensity was predominantly seen as a challenge for parents and their children because it made even the simplest things, such as a trip to an ice cream parlor or playing with peers at a play date, difficult. In this study, I found the theme of *challenging behaviors of intense gifted children* best represented the myriad of ways in which the mothers felt their children's responses to stimuli were over-the-top and demanding. This theme is best described using three subthemes: unable to quiet one's mind, emotional overreactions, and an excessive need for attention.

Unable to quiet one's mind. Parents described how their children's advanced intellect lead to a general inability to quiet their minds. Participants shared:
His mind is *always going*. (Anna)

Just thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking, think- thinking. And then like the "What if?" thing. So like, "Well if I do this, then that will happen tomorrow, and then that will happen the next day," and then you know ten steps down the line and, "Oh my gosh - what if I don't get [this work] done in time and it's—I have to do it at school or something. (Rae)

And for the two of the children, their constant thinking translated into constant talking:

These are the times when we can see what is going on in his head, but it's intense for us because it doesn't end. We deal with it by [implementing] silent breaks where he's not allowed to talk...He does not like these silent breaks, but we need them. (Rae)

He demands *a lot* or like *space* and attention... And he talks constantly. Like he just never, never stops talking. (Anna)

For parents, these behaviors were challenging to manage when their children were young. Their children's advanced intellect and verbal abilities were unlike those of their friends' children. They felt that from a very young age, their children's mental capacities created storms inside their minds that were difficult to calm.

These behaviors complicated daily life such as bedtime routines, family dynamics, and even the atmosphere of their school classrooms. With Nicholas, Rae described a time in which, after learning about black holes, Nicholas would lie awake at night and get wrapped up in his fear that the world was going to spin too close to a black hole. Rae remembered telling him, "Dude, man. You're 3.5 [years old]...The world doesn't have to be this intense for you." Mariah, too, claimed that her daughter had difficulty settling her thoughts and calming her mind so much so that it took her a long time to fall asleep at night. With Zach, Anna commented, "[None of my other children] can talk, because *he* talks all the time...It's just constant 'BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH!' all the time. It really is." And, his constant talking was seen as a disruption in his Montessori classroom.

With analytic prowess and an active imagination, being an intense gifted child meant that the children described in this study experienced their inner worlds differently than other children. Their mental capacities far exceed those of their siblings or their peers, and the parents in this study admitted that these behaviors were especially difficult when their children were young (e.g., from toddler age to elementary school age).

Emotional overreactions. The children's inability to quiet their minds also contributed to what the parents described as emotional overreactions that were unusual for children the same age. As I spoke with each of the parents, they all described how their children seemed to emotionally overreact to typical or normal stimuli.

Once he felt like he wasn't safe, he just *lost it* and started screaming every bad word he could think of which was just like calling him[self] *stupid*. [He] just lost it. (Anna)

He was like, "I was talking to the mailman, and I - I just - I just felt like I was never going to see him again." And he would like feel that for two weeks and I would be like, (pauses) "He's depressed! He's depressed!" (Anna)

[Simple] transitions are *very difficult* for her. So, once she's able to, you know, get used to a new environment, then she's okay, but it's very anxiety ridden. (Mariah)

For Nicholas, Rae described how his excessive worry and inability to handle spontaneity was sometimes too much to handle. For instance, she shared a memory of surprising him with wanting to take him for ice-cream one day after Kindergarten. She was excited to enjoy a sunny afternoon with her son, but Nicholas quickly began crying. She recalled turning around to ask him what was wrong, and she described his reaction:

He's like (mimics Nicholas's dramatic, distraught voice), "Well. Do you notice how sunny it is outside?" and I was like "Yes! That's the point - to get ice cream." And he was like, (mimics Nicholas' dramatic, distraught voice with a gasp) "Well because the sun is so strong it's probably going to melt my ice cream fast—too fast. And I'll have to lick it faster in order for it—so it won't drip—and then I'm going to get that thing. What's that thing that makes your head hurt?" And I was like, "A brain freeze?" and he was like (continues dramatic voice) "Yes. I might get a brain freeze. I think it's a bad idea. Do you think instead we can get something like a donut that won't hurt my head?" (Rae)

The parents were clear in that their children seemed to be always like this—constantly experiencing extreme emotions. These emotional overreactions demonstrated how, in some cases, their children's emotional development lagged behind their intellectual development. This sense of being out-of-sync caused confusion for their children. They either had trouble understanding what they were feeling, or their emotional responses were so intense, that their intellect could not make sense of their reactions. These behaviors were challenging for the mothers because they created stressful environments in the home, and the mothers had a hard time coaching their children how to reasonably respond to emotional stimuli.

Excessive need for attention. Another subtheme I found was the children's need for excessive attention. Although this subtheme was not as robust as others, it gave unique insight into how parents perceived their child's intensities. All three children were described as having an excessive need for attention. For example, when Laila was a baby, her excessive need for attention manifested from her sensual intensity. Mariah described Laila's need to be held as extreme and shared how her daughter's need to be touched, or "on her body," at all times was exhausting as a first-time mom. For Nicholas, Rae described his excessive need for attention as being expressed in his inability to play by himself. If he was not being intellectually stimulated, he became bored and frustrated which led to multiple tantrums a day. Zach, too, was constantly seeking attention from his siblings and parents. He would try to get their

attention by his constant talking. Anna noted how Zach claimed that talking – the constant sharing of what was on his mind – made him “feel better.”

This constant need for attention was draining for the mothers and other family members. The need to be touched, played with, or heard *all of the time* was a lot to deal with as a mother. Each of the children in this study had younger siblings, and the mothers commented how their intense gifted children, each of them first-born, were unlike their younger brothers and sisters. In Anna’s words, parenting Zach “made the other children seem *really easy*.” For Anna and Rae in particular, beyond the fact that they gained experience as a parent as they had more children, parenting Zach and Nicholas’ younger siblings was easier because their younger siblings did not have intensities in the ways their first-born children did.

Theme 2: Consequences of Challenging Behaviors

The challenging behaviors mentioned above undoubtedly led to stressful experiences for both the children and their mothers. Although gifted education literature acknowledges how asynchronous development creates unique challenges for gifted children and individuals, less attention is directed to understanding the parent perceptions and experiences of their children’s development. In this study, I found the theme of *consequences of challenging behaviors* best represented the ways in which the mothers claimed intensities impacted their children’s relationships with other children and performance at school. Their children’s intensities also affected each participant’s sense of competence as a parent. This theme is best described using four subthemes: child struggles to connect with peers, difficulties for the child at school, intense emotional reactions in parents, and parents feeling isolated.

Child struggles to connect with others. The parents I spoke with felt their gifted children’s advanced intellect, unique interests, and heightened awareness influenced the ways in which they interacted with other children. Laila was always very quiet in her school classrooms, and both Zach and Nicholas avoided playing with large groups of other children. Perceived as unusual for their age, parents shared stories that demonstrated how their children did not play with other children the way they expected:

I remember very clearly... He was probably like three, and we went to [a museum.] We looked at all the dinosaur bones and it was so *awesome* and everything was *great* until we got to the kid area and he was just like (mimics child’s frozen face), he just *froze*, and was like “Let’s leave. Let’s get out of here.” Because there were a bunch of kids running around. They were acting crazy and he was just like, (whispers) “Ohh. Let’s get out of here right now.” (Anna)

“He doesn’t care if any kids like him or not. And all these kids follow him because they’ve been interested in what he’s doing...He’ll play with them, but he doesn’t *notice* [them]. It’s so weird.” (Rae)

In talking with the parents, I caught a glimpse of how they were concerned for this children’s social development. They described their children as “observers,” not interested in interacting with other children their age, and they were worried that a consequence of this behavior would be trouble finding like-minded peers in school as they grew older.

Difficulties for child at school. The children’s expressions of intensity also translated into experiencing difficulties a school. Although many assume that children with advanced intellect and achievement find school to be easy, for some gifted children, this is not the case. For example, even though their children’s intellect was more advanced than their classmates, they had trouble with learning foundational skills:

And so finally he was like five, and he was just so angry, and homework was causing such a problem because he had to write. And he was like, “It’s because I might have to—I probably will mess up. Because my hand doesn’t make as small as I need it to. And I’ll probably mess up. And I’d have to erase it and do it again. And it’s just not right the first time.” And I was like, “Oh my gosh!” and then the same thing with reading... And so he would refuse. He told us from as long as since we can remember that he refused to write until he knew he could do it right. And he also refused to color. He never colored because he couldn’t stay in the lines...Where all these other kids are like “Dee nee nee nah,” Nicholas would just be like “Whatever. I’m done.” He hated it. (Rae)
 [He] had trouble with the handwriting and stuff and so he like, anything that he doesn’t - so he’s that kind of person where if it’s not easy for him, he doesn’t want to do it. So if there’s any kind of hang-up about anything, he’s like “Nope! Not doing it.” (Anna)

Furthermore, I found the parents felt their children’s intensities affected how they were perceived by teachers. For example, Laila’s preference to observe, her sensitive emotions, and her advanced intellectual ability made the classroom environment difficult for her to navigate. Attention from teachers and classmates made Laila uncomfortable, and so she kept to herself. This meant her advanced abilities went unnoticed at first, and Mariah had to consistently advocate for her daughter to convince the teachers to consider Laila for gifted identification. Anna, too, had to advocate for her son and expressed her concern for how traditional schooling would be quick to focus only on Zach’s weaknesses and overlook his strengths.

Despite the fact that their children had documented advanced intellectual development, the parents felt their children’s uneven development in other areas overshadowed their gifts and talents. All three of the children discussed in this study were presently considered “successful” in school, but their parents shared how the children’s early years of school were not always easy.

Intense emotional reactions in parents. Throughout each of the interviews, parents described situations in which they felt their child’s intensities created deep emotional responses in them as mothers. When the children were very young, parents reported having a hard time supporting their children. “He produces emotional reactions in us that we have a very hard time controlling” (Rae). “You think as a parent, you’re doing something *wrong*” (Mariah).

Learning how to respond effectively was difficult, and sometimes, the parents expressed feeling a sense of guilt. They reported that the amount of attention their intense gifted children needed at times would pull them away from giving attention to their other children. Despite their own efforts of trying different parenting strategies and eventual mentoring from professional therapists, connecting with their children sometimes seemed impossible. It was as though their children’s intensities created a barrier that parents had trouble breaking through. For the three mothers in this study, raising intense gifted children was exhausting.

Parents feeling isolated. Especially when their children were young, parents shared how they felt isolated in their experiences of raising their children. Other parents and family members did not understand, which left the mothers of this study feeling alone.

I think like when you don’t know what something is, and you don’t have the tools for how to handle it, then you don’t handle it well. Um, because you don’t know what to do. And so, we felt lost all the time. Like, “We don’t understand.” And nobody believed us either. And we kept telling people. And we were like, “They don’t believe us.” Because at the same time, he is so—He is a dream child in school. So, the teachers don’t see it, you know?... They *see* the way he talks

and the way he does things that he's definitely gifted but they don't see the intense side... And so we kind of felt lost all the time and that nobody believed us and we were just imagining things. And I was like, "We are *not* imagining things!" And then um, so in the end, I'm not a person to let things just keep going. So, I was like "Man, we're getting help. I've exhausted all of my tools, and so we're getting help." (Rae)

As a child, he was like a *nightmare*. And, you know, you're searching for someone going, "*Help me!*" You know... And so, I was like, "*University!* What kind of programs do you have to help me figure out what's going on with my child?!" (Anna)

Even Mariah, who was well versed in characteristics of gifted children, felt she was the only one who could give herself advice: "I almost had to like pep talk myself. Like, 'Okay. So, *you know* really smart children are more intense. They're more emotional... It's not just that they're *smarter*. They're all of these other things that they're *more of*.'"

Not only did intensities have direct consequences for Nicholas, Zach, and Laila, but their children's challenging behaviors also influenced the experiences of their mothers. The combined experiences of not being able to understand their children and not being able to help support their children eventually became too much for the parents and they began to search for professionals in the area who could help, as described in the final theme.

Theme 3: A Parent's Search for Understanding

The challenging behaviors and consequences of those behaviors were undoubtedly stressful for each of the parents. The gifted children of this study were different than children described in traditional parenting resources, and Rae, Anna, and Mariah shared how difficult it was to "reach" their child. They did not know why their children experienced the world in the ways they did. And as their children grew older, they learned that there was actually very little they could do to decrease the ways in which their gifted children experienced their intensities. In this study, I found the theme of *a parent's search for understanding* to represent stories of the mothers' journeys to better understand the unique and intense behaviors of their children. This theme is best described using two subthemes: connecting intensity with giftedness and finding support.

Connecting intensity with giftedness. The mothers I spoke with shared how once they started to make connections between their children's behaviors and giftedness, they found a sense of relief. For example, Rae told a story of how she attended a parent meeting when Nicholas first started at his local public elementary school. She had inquired about the school's gifted program, and at the start of the meeting, she recalled a school representative telling all of the parents in attendance, "You think you want a *gifted* child, but what you really want is a *bright* child." She was handed a paper that described 'bright vs. gifted' children, and referring to the paper listing characteristics of gifted children, Rae described her reaction:

I was looking at it going, "Oh my gosh!" and I could check like almost all of them off. And I was like, "Oh no. This is what it is." That was the first time I connected the um - the *intensity* to it. Because I hadn't understood the *intensity* component at all. And then when I saw that, I was like, "Awe." And it was also kind of a relief, like "Ah. Alright. Ah! It makes sense now." But that was a big deal to me. That piece of paper.

For Rae, this was a defining moment in understanding Nicholas' behaviors and how they connected to aspects of his advanced intellect.

Mariah experienced her connection of intensity to giftedness differently. She had a background in gifted education and was familiar with common characteristics and expressions of giftedness. After recognizing some of Laila's advanced intellectual abilities and sensitivities, she actively searched for books and articles regarding intensity and overexcitability. The more she understood about her daughter's behaviors, the more confident she felt in supporting Laila. Yet, her knowledge and experience with gifted children did not mean that raising Laila was easy. Mariah felt more empowered to share her experiences with other parents who also struggled with understanding their gifted children. Connecting with other mothers was "very liberating" for her.

From speaking with these mothers, I gathered that just the recognition of the asynchronous development helped each parent better empathize with their children. They started to accept their children's out of sync development as being typical for gifted children.

Finding support. Through their active search for knowledge, each of the parents reported helpful strategies for supporting their gifted children's intense behaviors. The primary source of support mentioned by all three of the parents was professional therapy or counseling.

I think, "What if she hadn't had [therapy]?" Well, it would be *way worse*.
(Mariah)

[His therapist helped by] giving him tools to deal with his own emotions... We'd go together, and then we would go out [of the room]. He'd be in there, and they'd talk and everything. She was able to reach him. (Rae)

In general, the therapists were able to empathize with each child, validate their experiences, and suggest methods of self-regulating emotional overreactions. The support from professionals who specialized in working with clients with asynchronous development was invaluable, both for the children and their parents.

From the professional therapy, parents learned how to adapt strategies to help their children understand and manage their intense behaviors at home. For example, Rae explained how she and her husband focused on "bringing down the 'what if factor' and the 'unexpected factor'" for Nicholas. Since Nicholas had difficulty with his fear of the unknown, Rae and her husband would try to recognize how many unexpected things would happen in the day. They would also purposefully plan changes to their family routine, such as stopping by a local donut place or a playground on the way home, and say out loud, "Unexpected!" Implementing these strategies at home was difficult for parents, especially because each stage of childhood development brought new challenges.

The mothers in this study reported they had to continually research new strategies as their children grew older. Yet overall, the parents felt their children's intensities became easier to manage over time. In Maria's words, "It just takes work."

Discussion

Intensities in gifted children have been known to manifest in challenging behaviors, and thus Theme 1's findings are confirmed in the literature. Gifted children's fear and anxiety can be attributed to the gap between cognitive and emotional development. Those who have high Intellectual and Imaginational OE may have more frequent or prolonged experiences of insomnia and fear of the unknown (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). High emotional OE may also be demonstrated as an intense concern for others, timidity and shyness, fear and anxiety, difficulty adjusting to new environments, and intensity of feeling (Tucker & Hafestein, 1997).

These behaviors relating to Emotional OE, in addition to behaviors associated with Sensual OE, are more commonly found among gifted females compared to males (Bouchet & Falk, 2001).

Since gifted children are often touted for their advanced academic or creative abilities, extreme behaviors can be frustrating and confusing for parents and teachers (Fonseca, 2011). Adults cannot assume gifted children “know better” or that they easily learn social and emotional skills as quickly as they grasp advanced academic concepts due to asynchronous development. In the words of Silverman (1997), renowned for her work in the social and emotional development of gifted children, “Developmentally advanced children, like the developmentally delayed, are at risk in a society that prizes sameness” (p. 38). A gifted 12-year-old may have the intellectual capacity of a 22-year-old but with the emotional intelligence of a 6-year-old. Although giftedness often implies a sense of *advanced* development in certain areas, it may perhaps be better described as *complex* development (Silverman, 1997). Gifted children often do not develop at the same pace in each area (e.g., physical, emotional, etc.; Silverman, 1997).

Aspects of Theme 2 are also supported by literature. Because gifted children have qualitatively different experiences of the worlds compared to their non-gifted peers (Fahlman, 2004; Peterson, 2009), making friends with other children is often difficult. Common social issues resulting from asynchronous development include experiencing cognitive adolescence much earlier than their same-aged peers (Moon & Dixon, 2006) and feeling out of place among their peers (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Their heightened sensitivities and awareness of their differences from their same-aged peers may lead to further dissonance and emotional stress (Bailey, 2011). For gifted youth who have unique intensities, navigating childhood and adolescence poses additional social challenges, especially since traditional school curricula and grade levels are organized by the physical age of the child rather than intellectual ability. Thus, deep friendships among intense gifted children are rare. For many gifted adolescents, “the lack of uncomplicated access to true peers – others who are like them intellectually, socially, emotionally – may effectively stunt social/emotional development” (Jackson & Moyle, 2009, p. 62).

Intensity and sensitivity are also considered “sisters” to perfectionism (Silverman, 2007), and may cause issues in the classroom. For Nicholas, his writing abilities were considered to be delayed compared to his same-aged peers. He knew what the perfect letter or word *should* look like, and he was not satisfied with producing anything less, and thus took longer to write than most kids.

Not only did each of the children experience consequences of their behaviors, but so did their parents. Raising extraordinary children brings with it some extraordinary challenges including understanding the child’s unique gifts and abilities, coping with intensities, sensitivities, and perfectionism, and dealing with a general lack of public understanding and responsiveness of gifted children (Silverman & Kearney, 1989). A parent’s journey toward understanding their child’s asynchronous development paired with their own feeling of a ‘lack of true peers’ (e.g., other parents who have similar experiences) can leave a parent feeling frustrated and alone.

Theme 3 is supported by literature that advocates for special considerations for parents raising intense gifted children. Intensity can be the driving force behind a child’s ability to achieve amazing things (Fonseca, 2011), but intense behaviors can be hard to deal with as a parent (Silverman & Kearney, 1989). One of the outstanding myths about gifted children is that they are easier to parent than other children because their advanced intellectual abilities make them seem as if they are older than their developmental age (Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011; Moon & Dixon, 2006). But for a parent who is unaware of the inner world of an intense gifted child, understanding his or her unique needs does not come easy. In the words of Daniels and

Meckstroth (2009), “Gifted children can be exhausting, demanding, and perplexing enigmas. They often amaze, delight, and confound the adults who know, love, and teach them” (p. 34). Providing educational opportunities for parents to learn about giftedness and intensity and how to help children manage their intensities as they grow may be beneficial in supporting parents raising gifted children.

Although there was much agreement between this study’s findings and the literature, this study is unique in two ways. First, recent qualitative studies with parents of intense gifted children is currently lacking. There is parenting literature, but the field of gifted education could benefit from additional, and more recent, inquiry into the experiences and perspectives of parents. Second, the use of the OIP-II as an elicitation device proved helpful in generating rich responses from participants. In my search among the literature, I have not seen this measure used in this way. Having parents complete the questionnaire ahead of time may have also been helpful as it potentially stimulated reflection prior to my arrival to each participant’s home. Since I had to score each questionnaire ahead of time, the summary information I gathered (Table 5) from parents’ responses helped me in tailoring the interview questions specifically to areas of high intensity.

Limitations

Perhaps due to purposive sampling, the participants in this study were all mothers. Additional perspectives from fathers could have provided different perspectives of intensity among gifted adolescent children. The small sample size, although acceptable for in-depth interview studies, limits the variety of stories and experiences of gifted adolescents. I also want to inform readers of how, in general, the intense behaviors in gifted youth may also be a sign of depression, anxiety, autism, ADHD, and other diagnoses. For example, Mariah shared how Laila’s intensity and anxiety went hand in hand. Simply judging all intensities as giftedness may result in misdiagnoses or missed diagnoses (Amend, 2009; Kerr & McKay, 2014), and careful consideration should be made to seek additional support if necessary.

Implications

Supporting the social and emotional development of gifted children is crucial for helping them reach their full potential. Yet, many parents are unaware of how to help their child. With asynchronous development, simple parenting techniques geared toward age development might not be appropriate for gifted children whose development is out-of-sync. The parents I spoke with eventually sought support for understanding how their children’s intense behaviors were connected to their advanced intellects. And for Rae, Anna, and Mariah, making this connection was important for them. The notion of *intensity* took on new meaning for them once they understood how giftedness and advanced abilities influenced their child’s intellectual, social, and emotional development.

However, making the connection back to giftedness implies that parents are aware of giftedness in the first place. A standard practice among most public education systems that fund gifted education in the United States is to actively identify gifted students in the early years of elementary school, typically around Grade 2, although some schools identify as early as Preschool or Kindergarten. I wonder *if* or *how* parents can see the relationships between intense behaviors and giftedness prior to being formally identified in elementary school. What if Rae had learned about giftedness and identified it in Nicholas earlier? Would earlier recognition of the normalcy of his behaviors among intense gifted children have helped Rae in any way?

Furthermore, experts caution against isolating intensity and OE as individual phenomena, and encourage researchers, educators, counselors, and parents to view OE in the

context of Dabrowski's TPD (Kane, 2009; Mendaglio, 2012). Even though these inner forces sometimes caused frustration, pain, or a breakdown of oneself (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a), these intensities could also help propel individuals to find ways to navigate through pain, strife, and disharmony (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009b)—to reach a higher self. Through their intensities, they experience life more richly. Instead of viewing development as the common stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, Dabrowski saw development as powered by the tension between the higher and the lower self. Daniels and Piechowski (2009a) wrote:

For Dabrowski, the drama of inner seeking, figuring out the world, feeling anguish, questioning the meaning of human existence, testing one's values and ideals, growing in empathy and understanding of others – these are the elements that encompass the striving for optimal human development. (p. 7)

Dabrowski found these experiences to be common among those with advanced intellectual or artistic abilities and were often accompanied by intensities and OE. Therefore, in what ways would situating intensity and overexcitability in light of Dabrowski's TPD have helped or continued to help Rae, Anna, and Mariah better understand their gifted child's development?

Lastly, the parents interviewed in this study eventually learned not to assume their gifted child's social and emotional development is on the same level with his or her intellectual abilities. The parent participants in this study needed support in learning how to navigate their gifted child's development. This included acquiring strategies to implement in the home, finding professional support in their community, and knowing how to advocate for their children at school. Appropriate support from parents and other professionals can help provide a gifted child with tools and resources they can work with as they continue to grow and develop into their full potential. In what ways can the field of gifted education and counseling provide opportunities for support to parents of gifted children throughout all stages of early childhood, childhood, and adolescent development? Future research may want to be more inclusive to the perspectives and experiences of parents of gifted children and adolescents in order to have a more holistic view of how gifted children develop outside of the classroom.

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Author Note

Kate H. Guthrie, Ph.D., is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Education and a Director of Educational Research at Piedmont College. She earned her doctorate in Educational Psychology, with an emphasis in Gifted and Creative Education, from the University of Georgia and has worked for the Torrance Center for Creativity and Talent Development as an Instructional Coordinator. She is an experienced high school math teacher and has worked with diverse populations of adolescents. Her research focuses on qualitative inquiry and the social and emotional needs of gifted adolescent females. Additionally, she is a certified professional therapeutic yoga teacher in her community, and she often incorporates mindfulness exercises to her qualitative inquiry with gifted adolescents. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: kguthrie@piedmont.edu.

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