THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HIGHLY GIFTED ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN A RADICALLY ACCELERATED HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM

by

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study employs Gilligan's (2003) "Listening Guide" to examine the experiences of eight highly gifted adolescent girls, ages 13-16, who are attending Canada's only radically accelerated, high school to university transition program.

Adolescence is seen as a precarious time for girls and in this period gifted girls have been known to "disappear" as they experience a decline of positive self-concept and loss of identity as gifted individuals. Academic acceleration and self-awareness building are recommended in the literature as two protective strategies against some of the pitfalls gifted adolescent girls encounter. Recent conceptions of giftedness provide alternatives to traditional performance based measures in favour of experiential, phenomenological and feminist approaches that emphasize the quality of an individual's experience, as defined for example by "asynchronous or uneven development, complexity, intensity and heightened awareness" (Silverman, 1997), or social positioning and relative access to resources as a factor in talent development.

Through phenomenological interviews and group discussion, this study engages gifted adolescent girls in an examination of their thoughts, feelings and day-to-day experiences as students attending a radically accelerated high school with the goal of early entrance to university. Ten themes that represent the experience of being a highly gifted adolescent girl in a radically accelerated high school program emerged: gendered asynchrony; time outside of school; being gifted; how I learn best; adjusting habits and attitudes regarding the increased workload and pace; favouritism; competition and aggression; a complicated closeness; living social complexity; and fitting in and making friends. The researcher and the participants co-analyzed the data using Gilligan's "Listening Guide". This enables a view from the inside out of what gifted adolescent girls have to lose or gain from radical acceleration and helps them build

conscious awareness of the meaning of their experiences. Despite the vast amount of research accomplished in the field of gifted education and psychology, the experience of participants during the research process is never investigated and the suitability of a particular method to gifted individuals is never queried. As such, the perceived benefits of a phenomenological and voice-centered method in working with a population of highly gifted adolescent girls are investigated.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Review of the Literature

The Mystery of the Disappearing Gifted Girl

Highly gifted adolescent girls are subject to unique peer and heteronormative pressures resulting from being both highly intelligent and female. In their teenage years, increasing pressure to fit in and perform their gender roles effectively forces girls to choose between being gifted and being accepted by their peers (Clark, 1992; Kerr, 1991, 1994; Reis, 2002; Sands & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Barbara Clark maintains that gifted girls believe that they will be regarded as "...less feminine, less desirable, and less likely to be happy if they are too successful...." (p. 470). As girls cross the threshold of puberty and enter an arena concerned with dating and sexual appeal, they are forced to choose between intelligence and academic success, on the one hand, and attractiveness on the other (Sands & Howard-Hamilton). The impact of this conflict results frequently in a loss of positive self-concept as gifted girls sacrifice aspects of their "giftedness" in an attempt to meet social expectations. Gifted girls often "disappear" as they reach their later adolescent years (Gross, 1998), and gifted women's academic and vocational achievement compared to that of gifted men continues to decline throughout adulthood (Clark). Matthews and Smyth (1997) confirm:

> Internal (intraspychic) and external (real-world) barriers persist, continuing to work against women's achievement. In addition, the growing political conservatism and calls for a return to "traditional values" are making many women's career explorations more circumscribed today than in the recent past. (p. 34)

Studies have shown that while the self-concept of gifted boys tends to ameliorate throughout their school years, the self-concept of gifted girls deteriorates (Klein & Zehms, 1996; Luscombe & Riley, 2001). Self-concept may be defined in general terms as the image that we

hold of ourselves, which encompasses "our attitudes, feelings and knowledge about our abilities, skills, appearance, and social acceptability" (Byrne, as cited in Hoge & Renzulli, 1993, p. 449). It is a dynamic and multi-dimensional construct in that it includes cognitive, perceptual, affective and evaluative factors (Byrne, 1996; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). For this reason, self-concept is recognized from a social-cognitive perspective as a "hot" variable in that it mediates the attainment of other psychological and behavioural outcomes (Hau & Marsh, 2003).

In this way, the outstanding potential of gifted females is lost not only to themselves but also to society at large. The impact of subtle and overt messages to fit in and to be less than they are, or to re-prioritize their concerns, often leads to feelings of guilt and shame as gifted girls struggle to adjust. Commonly girls blame themselves for not being accepted, feeling that there must be something wrong with them. Masking their giftedness and trying to pass for one of the group is a strategy most employed by gifted adolescent girls (Gross, 1998; Swiatek, 2000), and this process of alienation from themselves and others inevitably leads to lowered self-esteem and increased rates of depression (Jackson, 2003; Kline & Short, 1991). Carol Gilligan (1982), psychologist and feminist researcher, spoke of girls having a "different voice". This "differentness" entails girls' search for interconnectedness and relationships as the essence of their identity. In light of this, Kline and Short (1991) suggest that lowered achievement of gifted girls is in part due to the fact that

> Adolescent females cope with conflict between their identity as gifted individuals and their identity as women. As gifted individuals they are expected to develop their abilities and direct energies for their own potential. As females they are expected to be giving and selfless, deferring to their primary relationships. (p.119)

Thus, highly gifted girls are in the tough bind of desiring social connections that typically do not value, recognize or nurture their gifts. In a scholastic environment based on grades and competition girls still usually get the message that they should succeed at school. However, the caveat is that, in order to fit in, they need to be good, but not better than their peers. It is a balancing act and the psychic energy employed to maintain the effort is directly related to a loss of self (Gross, 1998).

Protecting Against Loss of Self

Certain efforts have been mounted to directly intervene in this process of loss of positive self-concept and to help girls navigate the conflicts between "acting female" and "acting intelligent" (Hollinger, 1993; Kerr, 1991, 1994; McKormick & Wolf, 1993; Sands & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). A number of studies suggest that academic acceleration is a reliable intervention to protect against many of the risks that inhibit the healthy development of gifted learners (Kulik & Kulik, 1984; Richardson & Persson-Benbow, 1990; Rogers & Kimpston, 1992; Swiatek &.Persson-Benbow, 1991). Particularly, gifted adolescent girls attending an early entrance to university program (EEP), meaning a homogeneous ability grouping of peers who move into university out of grade school, typically after a year or two in a transition school, seem to have a different experience of themselves as gifted individuals, in that their self-concept and their identity related to their gifts and achievements survives more or less intact into the transition to university (Noble, 1995; Olszewski-Kabilius, 1995). Years of research belie the popular notion of social maladjustment resulting from acceleration (Gross, 2004). For example, Janos and Robinson (1985) found that "for a constituency of exceptionally talented – but quite young - students, college enrollment, particularly when undertaken in concert with other able and motivated peers, can be both academically enhancing and facilitative of personal and social growth" (p.495). In their study of early entrants at the University of Washington, Noble and

Smyth (1995) found that early entrance programs were particularly important for young women because they exposed them "to a rare combination of acceptance and encouragement at a critical age and might help to inoculate them against less supportive environments as they grow older"(p.54).

Of note is that most of the research detailing the positive effects of early entrance programs is conducted by the academics and staff affiliated with the programs themselves. The growing acceptance of practitioner and participant-observer research is to be noted, yet the research reviewed in this field is not self-consciously "practitioner research." As such, the researchers do not name their biases and the effect of their status as insiders to the programs on the research, as would be the custom in research conducted within interpretive or critical paradigms, such as phenomenological or feminist based research. I believe that the unexamined positionality of the researcher is a weakness in the literature presented but that this fact alone does not discount the vast amount of research accomplished. To add support to the findings of positive outcomes an external model can be considered.

Gifted Identity Formation Model as Applied to Radical Acceleration Programs

Andrew Mahoney (1998), a consultant in gifted education, proposed the use of differentiated models to understand the specific identity formation needs of gifted individuals. His *Gifted Identity Formation Model* provides a set of four constructs that underpin identity formation in the individual. These constructs need to be present within the central life systems of a gifted girl's life, such as family of origin and extended family, school, friendships and the cultural environment (films, television, books, etc.), in order for her to achieve a positive identity formation and thus a positive self-concept, as a gifted individual. The four constructs are validation, affirmation, affiliation, and affinity. There is no hierarchical or sequential unfolding of the constructs, and there exists an infinite number of ways in which the constructs can

manifest, or not, across the various systems in a girl's life. In typical school settings these needs are often not met consistently, if at all, for gifted girls and lead to a diminished sense of self and lowered regard for their gifts and talents. The experiences of adolescent girls in the early entrance programs seem to align themselves better with the conditions articulated by Mahoney for positive identity formation. The examples below provide ways in which the identities of gifted girls are potentially positively affected by an early entrance programs according to the four constructs identified by Mahoney.

Validation. The process by which the adolescent's giftedness is recognized and acknowledged positively by her and others who are in primary relationships with her, such as parents, teachers and educational institutions. Being accepted into a gifted program is a common form of validation for gifted learners. By necessity, a girl who has been admitted into an early entrance program will have a strong sense of having her academic gifts validated.

*Affirmation. T*he continuous reinforcement of the nuances of being gifted from learning experiences, supportive people and processes in the world, that reinforces to the self: I am gifted. Being accepted into an appropriate program, which provides ongoing challenge and mirroring of the girls' abilities, would be a form of affirmation.

*Affiliation. T*he opportunity to associate and build relationships with people of similar intensities and abilities - mainly peers, siblings and secondary relationships. This entails the chance to belong and enjoy community without a loss of identity.

A*ffinity. T*he identification of a life's passion and nourishment of the soul is known as affinity. Through typically available counselling and enhanced career guidance, as found, for example, at the EEP at the University of Washington in Seattle, girls have access to strategies and encouragement to better channel their talents and energies effectively towards the actualization of their potential.

In their study of academic and psychological adjustments of early entrance students, Janos and Robinson (1985), former directors of the Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, state: "From its inception the Early Entrance Program has attempted to address the presumed needs of most of its participants for affiliation with others like themselves – needs for others not merely the same age, but also bright, exploratory, and willing to work hard to learn" (p.514). A query into students' own perspective on this issue by Adams-Byers, Whitsell and Moon (2004) shows that while more gifted students rated heterogeneous groupings to have positive social-emotional effects these were mainly due to their feeling of being at the top of the class and the threat to this standing when placed with same ability peers. By and large the students in this study also named homogenous groupings as a "safe haven, a place they could be themselves without fear of ridicule" (p. 16).

Understanding Giftedness: Research Trends

The task of defining giftedness plagues researchers in the field and has not been resolved. For traditionally accepted characteristics see Clark (1992) and Colangelo and Davis (1991); for some background on discussions and current theory of giftedness as asynchronous development see Alsop (2003) and Silverman (1997); and for a feminist model of talent development see Noble, Subotnik and Arnold (1999). In particular, the theory of asynchronous development and the feminist model of talent development have attempted to move away from traditional talent and achievement measures external to the individual in favour of the quality of the individual experience, the former in terms of psychological forces and the latter in terms of an individual's experience within a social context. The theory of asynchronous development understands giftedness as the experience of developing cognitively, emotionally and socially on trajectories that are out of sync with one another as well as with the norm. Perhaps unique in its flavour, this theory does not conceive of giftedness as a boon. "Asynchrony comprises uneven development,

complexity, intensity, heightened awareness, risk of social alienation, and vulnerability. It is not a source of envy any more than its mirror image retardation.... (it) is not a competitive concept: More asynchrony is not better." (Silverman, p. 36).

The feminist model takes into account an individual's social position and relative access to resources in assessing their accomplishments. Thus the achievements, for example, of a woman living in poverty with little access to post-secondary education would be recognized in context of the barriers she had to overcome to accomplish her goals in this social reality. The model also recognizes that women may excel in spheres that have traditionally been ignored or devalued. In either case, it is the inner-world and subjective experience of the gifted person that has become of interest here rather than a perceived context-neutral, external achievement-based system.

Helping Build Self-Awareness and Resiliency: Research as Self-Discovery

Coleman (2001) and Adams-Byers, Whitsell and Moon (2004) argue that, while gifted students in special programs have been studied, it has mainly been from the perspective of the researcher and not from the students' own perspective. Silverman (1999) maintains that the experience of being gifted is not one that ought to be measured by the external achievements of grades, products and manifested talents but that it is the internal reality created by asynchronous development that defines the unique experience of a gifted individual. As such, "achievements and talents tell only a small part of the story. They are the tip of the iceberg. To really understand the phenomenon, one must plumb the depths of the gifted experience" (p. 38). Silverman was speaking to adult researchers in the community of gifted education, yet I believe that the gifted students themselves, perhaps more than anyone, need to be researchers into their own unusual experiences in order to ensure their emotional well being in a world that rarely reflects their reality. Particularly, in an academic setting that is highly focused on grades and achievement,

such as a radical acceleration program, gifted students need to not be fooled into thinking that their giftedness and thus their identity is solely, or even closely, evidenced by grades and quantitative achievement measures, but that instead the quality of their subjective experiences is, in fact, the actual core of their selves and essential to an understanding of who they are. That which an adolescent girl believes to be true about her abilities and the role they play in her life will determine whether or not she identifies as a gifted person, or whether she squelches and denies her abilities. Noble, Subotnik and Arnold (1999) believe that resiliency is one of the personality traits that gifted women possess, and that in order to be resilient women they "must understand what giftedness - in general and theirs in particular - entails. They must cultivate a strong sense of self and a solid working knowledge of their values and needs" (p.144).

A widely found definition of resiliency pertaining to the educational context is "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (Wang, Hartel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 46, as cited in Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2004, p, 39). While it is argued that school environments play a crucial role in the "skills, opportunities and relationships that promote resiliency", there are only a few studies that examine the phenomenon in school settings (Waxman, Gray & Padron), and these studies are not inclusive of gifted children or others labeled with Special Education needs. There is a serious lack of research examining the resiliency of students labeled as atypical learners. Within the gifted education literature Neihart (2002) maintains that schools have the ability to be a protective factor against the risks faced by gifted adolescents, particularly if they incorporate an affective component to the curriculum. In a list of attributes and psychological skills that are essential to the achievement of gifted individuals, Noble (2003) lists "know thyself" as the first commandment.

Phenomenological Research in the Field of Gifted Education

Cross, Stewart and Coleman (2003) suggest that the research community of gifted education is "far behind other fields of endeavor in terms of research philosophies and approaches" (p. 201) and posit a phenomenological approach as a useful method to investigate the life-world of select communities of gifted students. With regards to issues of risk and resiliency, Neihart (2002) stresses the importance of understanding the subjective experience of gifted individuals and asserts that, "In the future, qualitative studies that compare the phenomenological worlds of successful gifted individuals will be invaluable in advancing our understanding of the processes involved" (p. 118).

The concern that traditional research methodologies have worked to circumscribe and limit participant responses in the field of gifted research (Cross, Coleman & Stewart, 2003) is one that can be addressed through the openness of the phenomenological approach, in that it does not rely on hypotheses and pre-determined theories to make sense of the data, but requires the researcher to remain "as open as possible to the text (data) in order to discover what "is there" (Karlsson, 1993, p.16). The intent of phenomenology begins to address this concern of lost perspectives and responses by opening up the field for all possible participant responses without preconceptions or limits. This is a valuable approach in working with gifted participants given their creativity and divergent minds. This process may be particularly well suited to gifted girls with potentially high verbal and intra- and interpersonal abilities, and provide them with a forum to express what they experience in a way that is suited to their skills and abilities.

Objectives

In light of the need for greater insight into the experience of accelerated gifted girls, the possible benefits that accrue to gifted girls through a gain in self-awareness, and the need for a "gifted-friendly" research methodology that compliments the way of being of gifted individuals,

I: (1) employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of highly gifted adolescent girls participating in a radically accelerated program, (2) assisted the girls to reflect on their experiences and foster a conscious awareness of what it means for them to be a gifted girl in a radically accelerated program; and (3) investigated the perceived benefits of a phenomenological research method in working with a population of highly gifted learners.

Research Questions

This study endeavored to understand the lived experience of highly gifted adolescent girls participating in a radically accelerated program through the following research questions: What is the lived experience of highly gifted adolescent gifted girls in a radically accelerated academic program? How do the girls perceive their giftedness in this setting? What is it like being a girl in this setting? What is the experience of gifted girls who participate in a phenomenological research project?

Significance of the Study

Given the scarcity of phenomenological research conducted in the gifted research community, and the complete absence of such research accomplished with gifted adolescent girls, this study will provide some insight and a deeper understanding into the lived experiences of gifted girls in radically accelerated settings.

The fact of the "disappearing gifted girl" whose achievement does not measure up to her potential is a social trend that has not been reversed and has perhaps worsened as of late (Matthews & Steinhauer, 1998). The findings of research on early entrance programs suggest that girls who attend them have a different experience of themselves as gifted individuals than girls in a mainstream setting, which in turn contributes to greater chances for achievement - potentially across the lifespan (Noble & Smyth, 1994). However, very little is actually known about the inner-world and life experiences of being in an early entrance program from the girls'

perspectives. Given the persistent trend of declining positive self-concept in gifted girls in regular academic settings and the positive nature of the outcomes as suggested by the research on early entrance programs, a closer examination of the implications of the radical acceleration experience undertaken as part of a homogenous cohort on the gifted identity formation of highly gifted adolescent girls is required.

This student centered perspective of the experience of giftedness provides a foundation to our understanding of unique radically accelerated environments through the perspectives of the participants, and enriches our understanding not only of the experiences of gifted adolescent girls participating in these programs but of the theories pertaining to gifted identity formation, self-concept and gendered performances of intelligence in varied contexts.

> Through its exploration of situated human consciousness, phenomenology can help to make sense in psychological and human terms of some of the findings of traditional research, which are typically presented in statistical language....It is one thing to discern a pattern, it is quite another to grasp its meaning." (Halling, 2002, p. 20)

Finally, the participants were invited to comment directly not only on the findings of the project but also on the experience of participating in a phenomenological study. What is it like for them to be researched via a particular method? Is phenomenology a "gifted friendly" way to approach research? Positivist and quantitative perspectives frame the large majority of the research in the field of gifted education (Coleman, 2004). Despite the vast amount of research accomplished in the field, the experience of gifted individuals during the actual research process is never investigated and the suitability of a particular method to the participant is likewise never queried. Typically, it is the research questions and the researchers' interests that guide the methodological decisions in traditional research. I believe that as co-researchers in the process

of discovering their own selves, the girls in this study have invaluable insight into the validity of the method to enable this process.

CHAPTER II

Research Design and Methodology

Overall Approach and Rationale

"Perhaps we may at first think of phenomenology as a kind of deliberate naivety through which it is possible to encounter a world unencumbered with presuppositions…" (Everndon, 1993, p.57). Phenomenology as a distinct philosophical movement originated in the work of Edmund Husserl near the turn of the 20th century. It has given rise to related philosophical traditions such as existentialism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, and cultural criticism (Moran, 2000). As a qualitative research technique that seeks to describe and interpret the "life-world" of living things it focuses on human experience as opposed to human characteristics. Phenomenology seeks to make "human behaviour intelligible with reference to the point of view of the actor" (Halling, 2002, p.19), and uses open questions and conversational style interviews to facilitate this reflection.

> Phenomenology requires a return to the things themselves, to a world that precedes knowledge and yet is basic to it, as countryside is to geography and blossoms to botany….All that is admitted is experience. What causes it is not at issue; what it means is. The first requirement is not explanation but description. (Everndon, 1993, p. 58).

Some assert that phenomenology is "the purest social science because it (is) subject to the fewest a priori assumptions" (Cross, Coleman & Stewart, 2003, p. 201).

Reflexivity, Positionality and Validity

> It is indeed true that central to phenomenology, and indeed part of its continuing appeal, is its attempt to provide a rigorous defense of the fundamental and inextricable role of subjectivity and consciousness in all knowledge and in descriptions of the world. But phenomenology attempts to recognize and describe the role of consciousness in the

> achievement (*Leitsung*) of *knowledge* and is not a wallowing in the subjective domain purely for its own sake.... Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity. (Moran, 2000, p. 15)

As I endeavor to ground myself in this philosophical and practical position of openness and receptivity to the lived experience of the participants, I understand that the experiences themselves are perceived through my own worldview as much as through that of the participants. Phenomenology is "a system of interpretation that helps us perceive and conceive ourselves, our contacts and interchanges with others, and everything else within the realm of experience" (Wagner, 1983, p.8) Heidegger, an originator of phenomenological thought, maintained that "all questioning carries certain presumptions which govern the enquiry and even predominate to a certain extent what can be discovered" but that the way out of this involves a "relatedness backwards or forward"(Moran, p. 237). This is in essence reflexivity, I believe, and in fact Moran goes on to explain that "Heidegger recognizes that we have to take account of the mood we are in when examining how we relate to Being" (p. 237).

Ceglowski (2000) takes up the idea of emotional awareness as a missing element of researcher practice; locates the power of our lived experiences in our emotions and attributes the gap between research theory and practice to the absence of feeling in theories. Reflexivity is perpetual self-consciousness, not just of feelings, but also of "the intersections of author, other, text, and world" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 35). Michelle Fine (1994), untangling the complexities of "Othering" inscribed into so much qualitative work, explains that working collaboratively and with self-conscious examination of our relations allows us to resist the false dualism of "Othering" and that "the project at hand is to unravel, critically, the blurred boundaries in our relation, and in our texts..." (p.75).

My own interest in gifted education and psychology, as well as the intersections between personal experiences and their impact on self as researcher, have their origins first in my personal experiences as a child who was labeled gifted and who took part in a pilot program within the Toronto French Catholic school district in the early 1980s and then attended a full-time gifted program in Ottawa throughout high school. Secondly, origins stem from my own desire to untangle my self and the personal meanings of this experience from my current work with gifted girls. I possess a deep intuitive knowledge of the subject matter of giftedness based in part on my experiences as a child, as well as my continuing experiences as a student and as an educator. Given this, I have tried to do a lot of personal work, mainly reading and journaling, to help distinguish what is about me, what is about a gifted girl who I am working with, and what is about "giftedness" and "gender roles" as I currently wish to understand them as phenomena within a particular context. "Within phenomenology, the goal is not to try to eliminate subjectivity, but rather to try to clarify the role of subjectivity when correct knowledge is attained" (Giorgi, 2002, p.2). I work here towards a precision of self-consciousness, or self-awareness, which allows me to recognize and represent myself accurately throughout this process. This is not a surgery where I extract parts of myself and place them to the side. Bracketing one's self is a false ideal, perhaps impossible according to some (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, as cited in Ehrich, 2003). I prefer the often-quoted Zen concept of 'Beginner's Mind,' (Suzuki, 1970) in which I am making myself radically available to 'what is', through working to clear my mental space of obstructing views, and recognizing the obstructions as what they are, my own conceptions. Working from this awareness enabled me to consider the resulting 'data' in terms of how much of "me," my hopes, my fears, my knowledge, my theories and curiosities, were colouring the view of what was front of me. Through knowing myself I could recognize what is of me and what is of other. I do this through minding and being curious about my words, thoughts and actions, subtle and obvious. As much as I work

to create a research event in which the participants are co-researchers and are enabled to increase their own self-awareness, I aim to know and understand myself, my emotions, my reactions, and do the psychic work that I would have my participants do.

It goes without saying that this discernment is a work in progress, and will always be evolving as I learn and grow. For example, when I did my Bachelor of Education, I discovered that I held beliefs such as, "No student really likes school", or "School isn't supposed to be interesting" (!) based, I suppose, on my own loathing of school as a child and years of boredom in regular classes. As an educator, these beliefs ran contrary to what I aspired to impart, yet they were ingrained somewhere just beyond reach until I began to reframe my experiences within the understanding of myself as an atypical learner. The unearthing of these beliefs told me as much about myself as it did about the needs of the students I was teaching.

The ethical considerations of working with a group of adolescents, particularly adolescent girls who are marginalized within the system and perhaps struggling in fairly intense ways with issues of identity and achievement, creates a need for a framework which provides support and connection for the participants, as well as clearly defined, but not inflexible boundaries and clarity of purpose in roles. Alison Tom (1997) calls this a 'deliberate relationship' with the key elements of transparency and presence, which allow for an authentic connection to exist when there are power imbalances and potential for abuse.

Tom (1997) also touches upon the notion of "caring about" (p.18) as found in a therapeutic relationship and this resonates for me in terms of my epistemological and ontological perspectives, and in fact goes to the heart of my understanding of phenomenology. In articulating an approach to research, care is at the forefront and directs all of my actions. Research is essentially about care for me. I care deeply about the lives and experiences of my participants; this leads to great curiosity, as well as respect. In helping them build self-awareness I essentially

want them to care equally about themselves, to be curious about their own lives, to respect themselves and to be stewards of their own gifts, talents and unique contributions. Drawing on the work of Witherell and Noddings, Ceglowski (2000) articulates it thus, "A caring relation assumes a relational, or connective, notion of the Self, one that holds that the Self is formed and given meaning in the context of its relations with Others'" (p. 96). Drawing on Heidegger, Evernden (1993) interprets the essence of being, and thus the essence of experience and the phenomenological goal, as a 'field of care.'

> Essentially Heidegger tries to give us a phenomenological description of human being – he gives us the 'essence' of who we are....he made a provocative beginning by describing us as a being for whom Being is an issue and whose way of relating to the planet is through 'care,' (p.57)

"Researcher know thyself" is the object of reflexivity and posits as fact the existence of Cartesian unified self that is capable of reflecting upon and knowing itself (Pillow, 2003). Determining whether this self in fact exists and can then act to know itself, is a persistent conundrum and beyond the reaches of this study. The classic formulation of "I think, therefore I am", seen as the root of the mind-body dualism that has plagued modernity has been re-understood by some to be more aptly translated to: "Consciousness, therefore being.", which can be better understood as a merging or collapsing of the two states rather than the long thought dichotomy (Wilber, 1998). "Knowing thyself" does not necessarily assume that there is an essential self, that it can be pinned down, differentiated from others and described. I believe that there is no end to this mission of "knowing thyself", that deep descent into subjectivity, which may appear to some as a dangerous plunge into the so-called pool of narcissus acts instead of as a portal to a true understanding of others. Intersubjectivity begins with I. The exercise of attempting this whole-heartedly is deeply meaningful because in engagement with others, it

creates not only valid qualitative research but also authentic relationships and ethical conduct. This is the essence of "care-full" research.

Participants and Setting

This study's goal was to engage a group of highly gifted adolescent girls in a process of exploration regarding themselves and their experiences as girls at school. The participants were eight highly gifted adolescent girls who are attending the University Transition Program, a school jointly run by the Vancouver School Board, University of British Columbia and BC Ministry of Education, located on the campus of the University of British Columbia. The University Transition Program provides a radically accelerated two-year high school experience for approximately 20 students a year, at the end of which the students are eligible to attend university. The students complete core B.C. high school curriculum in Math, Language Arts and Sciences and many opt to participate in provincial and national academic competitions, such as the Euclid Math Competition, which greaten their potential for scholarships and acceptance into competitive university programs. Beginning in September of 2005 the program introduced a Self & Society curriculum, which broadens the scope of the traditional academic fare and provides cross-curricular and problem-based learning opportunities within the subjects of Media Awareness; Human Learning and Development, and Social Justice.

The school is nestled on the second floor of an otherwise un-noteworthy academic building. It comprises one central lounge/eating and reception area, one administrative office and three classrooms stretched out along the length of a hallway off the main lounge and entrance area. A small sign entitled "Transition Program" on the outer periphery of the main complex signals the school's location; most would not realize that an unusual high school was located in this building if they were not specifically informed.

Typical applicants to the University Transition program are between the ages of 13 and 15, currently completing Grade 7, 8, or 9, and achieving beyond the 99th percentile in standardized tests of mathematics, reading and intellectual abilities. By virtue of its location in the city of Vancouver on the Pacific seaboard, home to Canada's largest population of Asian immigrants, the school attracts a high number of Chinese and Chinese-Canadian students. Six out of the eight participants were of Chinese descent and two Caucasian. Our understanding of what it means to be a "gifted girl" in this setting is decidedly impacted by what it means to be an adolescent girl of Chinese descent living in Vancouver. The intersection between culture, race and giftedness as social phenomena is still a neglected field within gifted education and a brief survey of the literature brings to the fore the fact that the studies to date have been by and large from a positivist, quantitative perspective examining the differences between various measures across race, age and gender groups, with little eye to critical understanding of these categories, or towards an understanding of socially-constructed notions of gendered and racialized performances of intelligence within specific contexts.

Margie Kitano (1997) examined and described the factors affecting achievement across the lifespan of gifted Asian American women and found that the family's intense focus on educational achievement and hard work were common. Jiannong Shi (2004) discusses conceptions of intelligence within traditional Chinese cultural as rooted in the notions of diligence, willingness, knowledge held collectively, and the multiple ways a human can express intelligence. In a cross-cultural examination of the stereotypes most likely to be held by and about groups of students from various ethnicities, Asian youth were most likely to perceive their own group academically in the following ways: "Hard working; do well in school; expected by others to be smart and good in math and sciences; pressure from parents to succeed." (Kao, 2000, p. 414). Very little work exists from an interpretive or critical perspective examining the

experiences of race, gender and intelligence of Chinese gifted girls, and none exists in a Canadian context. In fact Vasquez and De las Fuentes (1999), remind us that overall "very little research has been conducted on the unique lives of adolescent girls of colour....When researchers have examined gender socialization of adolescents, they rarely include girls of colour..."(p. 151).

Recruitment: Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

After ethics approval from the University of British Columbia and the Vancouver School Board, girls were recruited through face-to-face encounters via two discussion groups for girls which were run on site at the school by the researcher and program coordinator. I discussed my research project with the groups near the beginning of the academic year and requested volunteer participants. Girls were then asked to think about it and had the option of taking the parental consent and student assent forms home to read and discuss with their parents (Appendices A and B). They were able to contact me by email if they had further questions and/or were interested in participating. Involvement in the study did not overlap with participation in the discussion group beyond the initial request for participants. Of note is that some of the girls knew me based on having attended four group discussion sessions in the Spring of 2004 and/or having participated in the pilot study version of this study, which entailed only the journal writing component. I clarified that participation in the pilot study did not oblige them in any way to participate in this further study.

Regarding the trustworthiness of responses, given the changes that have been made to the study after the pilot, the lack of discussion of interaction around the written journal data, the increased scope of the current study, and the time elapsed, I felt that girls who participated in the pilot should be welcome to participate in this study if they chose, without fear that prior involvement would unduly effect their responses. Adolescence is a time of great change and

growth; several months away from the program can easily create entirely new feelings and attitudes that could now be explored. As one of the objectives of the study was increased self-awareness, it is not in the disinterest of the study or the participants that a prior exploration of their situation occurred.

Data Collection Methods

The design is a qualitative phenomenological approach consisting of three components: (1) semi-structured interviews; (2) journal entries; and (3) discussion groups.

Interviews. All participants took part in individual interviews consisting of a series of semi-structured questions. The interviews were tape-recorded. Questions such as: "Tell me about your experience at school. Can you tell me more about that? What was that like?" will form the basic structure. "A hermeneutic interview is an interpretive conversation wherein both partners reflectively orient themselves to the interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view" (Van Manen, 2002, Inquiry: Hermeneutics interview reflection section).

As part of this reflective process, the participants uncovered along with the researcher deeper understandings of their situation. In this way it was a collaborative investigation of their lived experience, and the girls in this study were co-participants in this discovery. Cole and Knowles (2001) maintain: "It is as much about creating an atmosphere of security, intentional meaning making, reflexivity, and genuine interaction around topics…" (p.75). Thus, in in-depth interviewing, the technique is not a standardized formulae of questions and answers leading to discovery; instead it is as Miller and Crabtree (2004) say, "a listening space where meaning is constructed through an interexchange/cocreation of verbal viewpoints…" (p.185). In the same article Miller and Crabtree refer to it also as a "conversational research journey" (pp.185-186) and a "communicative performance" (p.185).

Each interview was transcribed to a moderate degree of detail by a hired transcriptionist. Aware that I was not undertaking an intensive analysis of speech patterns, issues such as length of pauses and precision of the "umms" and "ahhs" were not worried about. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and errors corrected by myself as I listened to the recordings. The transcribed interviews were brought back to the participants for member-checking prior to analysis. Girls were invited to make any changes that they saw fit. This ensured the accuracy of the transcription and also allowed a girl to consider her degree and manner of disclosure, and to, as much as possible, enabled her to make decisions at every step of the way towards the final version regarding how her words were represented. I was cautioned by Katherine Borland (2004) who in interpreting a story told by her grandmother Bea felt in retrospect that:

Had I talked to Bea about my ideas before I committed them to writing, presented her with drafts, or even arranged to have her read the paper with me so that we might discuss misunderstandings and differences as they arose, her sense of having been robbed of textual authority might not have been as strong as it was. (p. 532)

Journal entries. The participants were asked to write a series of journal entries over a 2 month period exploring their thoughts and feelings about themselves and their school experience. Girls were asked to complete two entries a week of approximately 15 minutes of reflection each, for a total of six entries. Most girls did much more; some did about this much. The girls were provided with a spiral bound notebook but did not have to use this if they preferred another method. The instruction that they were given is that anything they wished to include was worthwhile and that it should focus on themselves and their life in and around school. Journal writing is a suggested method for helping to build self-awareness and resiliency in adolescents (Magee, 1999; Smith, 2000). Given the often hidden and private nature of gifted girls' struggles, as well as the sophisticated masking techniques employed to negotiate their world (Gross, 1998),

journal writing ideally will respect the protective nature of their coping skills yet provide an avenue for new insights and self awareness. In order to make the challenge of "know thyself" possible, gifted girls participating in a radical acceleration program focused on academic challenge and success require the time, space and permission to explore their inner worlds that journal writing could provide.

Discussion group. The eight participants were invited to come together and discuss their experiences of the project in a discussion group format after the interviews, individual member-checks and journals have been completed and an initial data analysis attempted. This discussion was an hour in length and was structured around the "Outline for Wrap-up Meeting" (Appendix C) that each participant received. This meeting gave the girls the opportunity to come together, share what they have noticed from their reflections, hear from one another and provide feedback as to the accuracy of the themes detected by the researcher. Within this group insights were voiced and commonalities and differences explored. In order to check-in with the participants and have them reflect and comment on the themes detected, they were asked: (1) Is this what the experience of being at this school is like for you (referring to the categories of the study outlined on their sheet)? and (2) What have you noticed about your school experience after the journal writing that you maybe hadn't thought of before? The final purpose of the group discussion is to inquire as to the experience of the phenomenological research process itself and to inquire as to the "gifted" friendly nature of the inquiry method. Girls were asked two questions: (1) What was it like participating in this study? (2) What is the best way to study what it means to be gifted?

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this analysis the interview data will used almost solely. There was a substantial difference between the journal written and interview data, in overall tone, content and depth of issues disclosed. It was determined that conflating the two sources would obscure

important differences that would be worth studying at a later data. As such, the findings that emerged from the analysis of the interview data will serve as a platform to construct a follow-up analysis of the journal data.

Phenomenological reduction

The interview data was analyzed in two distinct ways. The first was a phenomenological reduction, as follows:

Step 1: Read through all interviews from start to finish without analysis

Step 2: Read through again and divide text into meaning units, reflecting shifts in meaning.

Step 3: Label each meaning unit with a coded phrase/distillation (ex: "A10 Marks dropped", is Aisling's 10th meaning unit)

Step 4: Group these coded phrases/distillations into disctinct categories reflecting their differences

Step 5: For each category, excerpt statements from original interview texts and reconnect with appropriate coded labels.

Step 6: Read through collection of excerpted statements for each category.

Step 7: Analyse the collected excerpts for sub themes,

Step 8: Distill the collected statements into one paragraph that describes this category/experience.

Step 9: Use these paragraphs as the basis for the writing of the results section.

This phenomenological reduction enabled a distillation of participants' experiences in order to express the essential phenomena of being a highly gifted adolescent girl in this accelerated program.

Co-Analysis of data via the "Listening Guide"

Yet, "the whole purpose of the method is to discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participant that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252). The Listening Guide is a method of "psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche." (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsh, 2003, p. 157). It is a sequential method of reading, or rather listening to, the various, multi-layered voices within a single text and offers an alternative to the typical coding schemes that are devised in qualitative research. Gilligan's Listening Guide is specifically designed to uncover lost aspects of an individual's self as revealed by her "voice" in a text. Anderson and Jack (1991) ask: "How do we hear the weaker signal of thoughts and feelings that differ from conventional expectations?" (p. 11). Fine (1994) requests that we "stop trying to know the Other or give voice to the Other and listen, instead, to the plural voices of those Othered, as constructors and agents of knowledge" (p.75). I believe that the Listening Guide is particularly suited to drawing out all of these signals that would otherwise be lost. I was interested in the meanings ascribed to experiences as particular to young adolescent girls, and I was interested in engaging girls in a process of self-discovery. As such, I created a modification of Carol Gilligan's "Listening Guide" (Appendix D) and invited the girls to take a new look at their interview texts through the creation and analysis of a series of "I poems".

CHAPTER III

Results

Overview of Phenomenal Categories

Ten categories constitute the fabric of experience that characterizes life of a highly gifted girl in an accelerated high school program: 1) The gendering of asynchrony: "Boys are so immature!"; 2) Time outside of school: "Leaving space for life"; 3) Being a gifted girl: "Not a nerdy guy with glasses"; 4) How I learn best: "It's that much better when I can focus on what I want"; 5) Adjusting habits and attitudes regarding the increased workload and pace: "I do homework now, I never had to before"; 6) Favoritism: The root of all your success!; 7) Competition and aggression: The grades between us; 8) A complicated closeness: Competition and affiliation; 9): Living social complexity: Me and my meta-view; 10) Fitting in and making friends: Finding and losing self. These categories and their underlying themes represent the essential aspects of the experiences of an adolescent girl in a radically accelerated high school environment. The following descriptions are supported by the words of the participants; all of the given names are pseudonyms chosen by the girls. The names of teachers and classmates are also fabricated to protect confidentiality. A table detailing the sub-themes within each category can be found in the Appendices (Appendix E).

The gendering of asynchrony: "Boys are so immature!"

There is an overall sense that differences in maturity levels exist in the program; that even though the school accomplishes academic acceleration, girls experience a range of social and emotional maturation in their classmates.

> "It seems like we're already at some sort of grade 11/12 social level but it also seems like we're a bit behind. It's different for everyone…um, you would have these people who are sort of still stuck in grade 3 in thinking…." (Aisling)

"Cause you know how people they're like oh even though they're young, Trans is still making them socially grow up faster too. But that's not true, I don't think it's true." (Mira)

Girls' experience is marked by the differences in social, emotional, physical and sexual maturity levels especially compared to the boys in the program. Girls experience themselves as more emotionally sophisticated and sensitive to subtleties, which make them extra-sensitive to the gender differences and experience of being "more mature".

"It's kind of difficult…because like the girls, like I know there's like studies and stuff, they're obviously more mature at our age than guys, right. So all the girls are, you know, quiet and like introspective and sort of like they're just like they get along with each other and stuff and then like I think that the girls get along with each other but they don't get along with the guys. And then so there's sort of like a big difference between like gender." (Mira)

"Transition girls are more complicated than guys. Guys are easier to understand…I would argue that girls are more sensitive to the changes around Trans. " (Sally)

The boys' behaviour and ways of relating are perceived by the girls as more obvious and physical than that of the girls.

"I've noticed that like in P.E. class for some reason there's a difference between being a boy and being a girl because like the boys, I noticed like they bash each other around and everything and they don't seem to mind." (Serena)

"They're like, if you make fun of them and then after awhile they get annoyed at you, they punch you a few times and then you punch them back and you start laughing and they start laughing and it's yeah it's all over." (Sally)

> "Girls. I think that socially we are more adapted just cause we can actually talk to someone without them like yelling or punching or kicking." (Erica)

One girl suggests that there has been some fortunate change on this front compared to last year:

> ...it's different from my (gifted program last year) because, uh, the boys don't end up fighting like in PE anymore, no one goes away with broken braces...(Chuckle). They actually think, they have more control over their tempers and maybe it's the school, maybe it's because they're older." (Aisling)

Girls find that the boys are more likely to take up airspace and make "stupid" comments,

> "...and (in class) he starts yelling about that for the next three minutes and I sit beside him so my ears hurt and it's just really annoying." (Sally)
>
> "and they're the ones that always like talk out in class and like make stupid comments and stuff." (Mira)

Differences in social and physical maturity as evidenced by behaviour are enmeshed with sexual maturation as some girls, especially the older ones, notice that their development has superceded the boys in the program,

> "Dating? No, like zero, absolutely zero possibility. That's why me and my friend, we always like complain like there are no guys that we could ever meet there...." (Mira)

Girls relate to the boys in two main ways, which work to mitigate or downplay this asynchrony. Girls spend time managing the social behaviour of boys,

> "And sometimes I just can't take it and he just acts so annoying so I tell him and he doesn't know and I tell him again and he still totally ignores it and I have to tell him again and again and again. I tell him everything. Until everything is fine." (Aisling)
>
> "Like cause the guys are all like into like, you know, sexual comments and stuff. And we're always like "oh my gosh you guys, stop saying that, it's so immature." (Mira)

And girls enter the boys' social reality and hope for acceptance,

"But a couple of them they make these jokes and you start laughing and they laugh too. It's not just like "What are you laughing at, you know, this joke's really for guys." (Bob)

Girls also relate through "acting immature" along with the boys,

Ashlin: Yeah, we've gone through most of the bumpy rut, the bumpy ride that the puberty we're leveling out now and then of course the males come in and go through this raging hormone phase and we just sit there and go "you are so immature."

Pamela: Yeah?

Ashlin: Unless we find acting that way amusing as well.

Pamela: Okay. And then you can relate?

Ashlin: Yeah.

One girl who was a bit older on entering the program felt that she could relate to the girls but frequently felt a marked maturity difference between herself and the boys. After awhile she started to feel that she had "gone backwards" and was becoming less mature as a result. "I almost felt like I sort of went back a few years. I feel like I didn't really grow, you know" (Mira). Her experience also suggests that the less mature way of being that the girls are relating with includes a lack of empathy, as a bit later she comments "I felt like I was more stupid....I feel like when I first came to the program before people were saying like stupid jokes and just totally like making fun of somebody and then I'd be like that's not funny, that's so immature. And then now I find myself sort of laughing with them" (Mira).

Time Outside of School: "Leaving space for life."

There is a universal sense that available time outside the program has shrunk considerably because of the demands of homework in this accelerated environment. Life patterns, relationships and habits shift overall as a result, showing the results of stress.

> "Oh and this year now I'm just getting used to it.... And so like I sleep, I only get like 7 hours of sleep and then so like I was really tired and then like my skin is all like gross and stuff.... before I would, you know, come home, do some homework and then we would go like walk our dog together or something. But now that's totally stopped because I have no time. Like I come home, do some homework, eat, do some more homework" (Mira)

Girls notice that their relationships with self and others need tending and or safeguarding or else they will get taken over by the demands of the program,

> "Well I'm trying not to let (the program) sort of ruin the rest of my life which is basically eating, sleeping, talking with friends, um, going in the Internet reading things and drawing...Yeah, I'm trying to leave space for life." (Aisling)

When homework overwhelms, stress mounts and relationships with others become more difficult,

> "And so like I feel like, you know, my dad he always complains, he's like you always have to do homework... And then like I feel that, you know, I have less time to play with my little brother and I feel that I'm being more like, like more like curt, like short tempered and stuff and I'm like, you know, go away, go away, I'm doing my homework and like stressed out. " (Mira)

While most girls maintain involvement in extra-curricular activities they do notice that they need to make new choices about how to spend their time outside of school and that some things fall by the wayside or are less important to them now,

"Very busy. Like after school, um, I used to have all this free time and I could do all these things after school too. I still do most of my activities after school....but, um, like a couple things you don't pay too much attention to them anymore." (Bob)

"A lot busier and like cancelled a few of my after-school lessons too but it's not that bad." (Serena)

Girls realize what is really important to them, either by what they are forced to sacrifice and miss in their life, or by what they decide to keep despite the conflicting pressures. Creative endeavors in particular were an area that some girls try to maintain involvement with outside the program.

"Like my mom has actually suggested that I stop taking voice lessons and when she suggested that I looked at her as if she had turned into a bat or something and was going to suck my blood because that's not even an option for me". (Ashlin)

"I still think that oh I have superior artistic abilities *of course* and, um, I guess that's just because it's not as much something people would develop why draw all the time when you can get A++ in every single subject. And since I know I can get higher marks... I don't feel bad". (Aisling)

Watson: Although the program doesn't have drama or music or art or any of those things, um, you have to do them on your own time.

Pamela: Are you doing that?

Watson: Yeah, I am. Which keeps balance in my life because otherwise I would be like PMS year round.

Being a gifted girl: "Not a guy with nerdy glasses"

Girls often come into the program with internal (sense of self in relation to others) and external (knowledge of stereotypes or research findings) understandings of what it means to be a gifted student. Internally girls may have a sense of being different from others and struggle to recognize the source of this difference. Being seen as outside the norm continuously may lead to feeling "crazy", but feeling "crazy" or perceiving one's behaviour in relation to others in this way, becomes the internal norm.

Ashlin: Basically like my definition of the word gifted would be someone who's absolutely insane but not insane as in lost their minds, insane as in blown off the wall strange.

Pamela: So what's it like being that kind of person? What's it like going through your day like that?

Ashlin: You don't notice it. Like I just think of myself as me. There's nothing particularly abnormal about me if you ask me.

Feeling outside of the norm can also result in having an independent, distinct perspective on how things ought to be, such as with this girl who says: "I'm fairly independent. Um, I have my own personal moral system…." (Dr. Watson)

There was some difference in internal perceptions of self as a gifted individual between Caucasian and Asian participants. A Chinese girl here describes giftedness as a product of hard work, but this notwithstanding she still sees this in terms of "distant" from the norm.

"Yeah, and if you like, uh, you have to sort of still work hard. Like if you're gifted you have a bit of a sort of distance set. Like you've already done something because you've already got that sort of head start but you still have to like turn on the car if you're gonna go anywhere, right." (Bob)

External perceptions of what it means to be gifted are absorbed and girls have an assortment of ideas of what gifted people are like and how they may fit into this picture.

> "Yeah, cause sometimes, when you think gifted sometimes you think male is gifted. It's a guy with nerdy glasses." (Bob)
>
> "It's like the people think oh they're gifted, okay they can get over 80 in everything because they're smart little whiz kids who have no life". (Dr. Watson)
>
> "...they're supposed to have high highly developed morals but I've heard because of some reading on gifted kids. I'm just really shocked." (Aisling)

Generally there is a disclaiming of the label "gifted", or of even being one of the really smart ones,

> "Um, well, I don't know, for smart kids what does it but just for me..." (Mira)
>
> "Well you see I'm not brilliant like some people so I, like I do okay in everything." (Erica)

and concern of being categorized along stereotypical lines through participating in the program.

> "When I first came I was, you know, really reluctant cause I had never been identified as gifted before. Like I knew I was smart, I was in an enriched program and whatever, enriched math and stuff but nobody had said like you're gifted, your IQ is bla bla bla, right. And so I was really sort of wary of that whole gifted category and I was really afraid that people were all like crazy smart and nerdy and like geeks but to some extent is kind of true at this program." (Mira)

But as Mira's comment suggests, throughout the experience of being in the program girls renegotiate their sense of themselves in relation to these stereotypes, some discover that there may be some truth to some of the stereotypes and that really it is okay to be that way,

> "Because like if you tell someone else they think oh you're in this gifted program, you

must be really different, everyone must be so like geniuses and stuff. But then like if you actually think about it the people are still like, suddenly they're still like, they're basically the same." (Serena)

Others react against these perceived expectations and look for alternative ways of being,

"I'm very anti-conformity and I find the (school board) can be very conformity type stuff… cause a lot of the time it's, this is how you should be acting in society and this is how you should be thinking. That's the message I get, I don't know if that was intended or not, but that's what I'm getting out of it. Which is why I'm very either argumentative or non participatory. Okay. (Chuckle) Um, so like anybody trying to tell me what to do, I don't necessarily do the opposite but I'm very against it…" (Dr. Watson)

"…there are people that tell me, I'm all these things, um, and no I'm no, I'm just girl, you know…. (Ashlin)

Overall, girls go through a process of making sense of themselves in reference to their understanding of what it means to be gifted and in relation to others in the program who have been labeled, for some this leads to a disclaiming and to other a reframing in order to temper the perceived stereotypes.

How I learn best: "It's that much better when I can focus on what I want."

Regardless of whether or not they have an official choice in what subjects they take or how they are taught, girls make definitive choices with regards to their learning. These are often conscious decisions that reflect their interests or the perceived utility of a subject in relation to their life, their sense of themselves and their goals.

"Um, actually I could sacrifice some of my own time to just get perfect in everything and I don't think I would have to sacrifice a lot of time, maybe just one hour because I

usually spend 30 minutes of it just doing nothing. So yeah not really but I just want to leave a lot of time for myself." (Aisling)

"It's that much better when you just focus on what you need, what you want...." (Erica)

"Something I really don't need to know about for what I want to do…I tend to say to things in my head. If I know I won't need them I don't tend to bother memorizing them." (Ashlin)

"And here it's still I choose what I want to do….Like do I want to get perfect in everything? Or do I only want to get perfect in these because I really don't think… I really don't care about the subjects at all? (Aisling)

Understanding of their learning styles as well as their overall feelings of success and well-being in that subject or classroom setting is present.

"Like how'd you say, I prefer lectures. I seriously prefer writing it down and then listening, but then I'm also a bit slow in the way that I need to, instead of having discussions and if you're having, and if you're throwing stuff at me that isn't on what the notes…" (Sally)

"…there's some problems with me not particularly liking my subjects. For example, I'm a rather arts centered person so physics and math are, just to put it lightly, not some of my priorities right now." (Ashlin)

"It's geared towards math people. It's geared towards good test takers of which I'm not" (Dr. Watson).

These choices relate directly to how much time and energy they invest in a subject.

"Well it's just kind of annoying cause like for me, for me I really don't like History and I never had, never have, but like last year, um, I still had to and that makes sense because you have to have like the basics. But then now I have to take History 12, which I really

don't want to so I don't want to spend time and waste time like writing all the essays and all that stuff that I actually don't need....It's just when you add up all the work, it's, I don't know, definitely I think it's just a waste of time". (Erica)

"Which is why I failed physics, because frankly I don't care and I didn't study at all." (Watson)

Math and Sciences are classes that girls frequently struggle in, usually after being highly successful in elementary school, but the following comments highlight particularly how not doing well in the subject relates to girls' feelings and attitudes towards the subject.

"Um, and sciences I'm not doing too well either. Even though it really fascinates me, um, sometimes but there are some parts that just, I find tedious. Um, but that's more of a, a word I can use to describe physics, I mean it's tedious." (Ashlin)

"I've tried to understand everything but in math I cannot understand the concepts and use them as well as I used to be able to....I'm not doing much math homework because it's an option and because I don't really think that much of math". (Aisling)

Girls situate their learning by making connections between subjects and connections between grade levels.

"But now it's, I actually like all of them and I feel that they all have some sort of connection. Like physics can connect to chemistry and like English and all that and they can go together." (Bob)

"In Lit cause I've had, like I did two years of English Enriched before so I knew, I knew how to write a formal essay. I didn't have to start from scratch...." (Mira)

They examine their experience in a subject or classroom setting to make sense of their degree of success.

"Like I can multitask but not to the point where I'm writing and trying to understand one piece of information and listening and trying to understand another piece of information. (Sally)

"It's just, I just have to pay more attention and I usually because I tried to pay so much attention and in the first part, I get everything in the first half of the class and by the second half I'm falling asleep because I'm tired." (Aisling)

Girls' experience as learners is shaped by high degrees of self-definition and desire for autonomy. When the school is not providing for this way of being girls still exercise choices that resonate with their interests, goals and views of themselves as learners. When these views come into conflict with achievement girls tend to sacrifice achievement to honour their interests and view of themselves.

Adjusting to the Increased Workload and Pace: "I Do Homework Now, I Never Had to Before."

Overall, girls experience the effect of an increased workload and faster pace.

"It's been really different from all the other programs I've been through and everything is sort of compacted and accelerated. I'm really feeling quite stretched by it a bit." (Aisling)

"I really like the pace, like cause we're actually going and like we're really learning stuff. You know how it's like, oh, we're doing something every day!" (Bob)

For most of the girls this represents their first significant academic challenge. Never having had to work, or do much homework before, if any, was a theme almost universally.

"I do homework now. I didn't before. I – I never did homework before. I didn't when I was in public school. I didn't get homework when I was in (any of my previous programs). I just didn't do homework (Chuckle) and now I kind of have to".

(Dr. Watson)

At some point during the program most girls reach their edge and have to apply more effort to their schoolwork in order to achieve at the same level.

> "It's a lot more, the work is a lot more difficult because it's more advanced in things. So like where I think elementary school I was used to getting like all high marks without really having to do anything, I find I have to work harder to like get the marks I want. (Serena)

This can be a struggle especially when the increased effort still does not lead to the results that they are used to achieving. Experiencing lowered achievement and even failure can be a tumultuous emotional experience.

> "It's sort of a slap in the face sometimes cause you expect more of yourself, right." (Ashlin)
>
> "Well, it's bothering me. It's like really frustrating! Now I understand why Aaron gets so messed up because he's always complaining that he's trying and he's doing what he's supposed to do and yet he's not getting the marks that he wants to see, and now I understand what that feels like because that's what's happening to me." (Sally)

Their perceptions of their abilities and of themselves shift in several ways, sometimes through comparison with classmates who are more able than them.

> "And so I felt really mmm, really weird cause like they're all people younger than me and yet they were the same intellectual level. So I was like BRAAARR so, you know, like I sort of think that this program is the only place that can make me feel stupid!!... I sort of felt I was smarter because I was in the program but still I felt dumber because I wasn't like the smartest person." (Mira)

Sometimes through comparison with themselves, they see more effort producing lower than typical marks.

> "Yeah, it really beats up your confidence level a bit but it's something you get used to." (Ashlin)

Even though most of these girls were very successful in Math and Science at a primary level many of them start to feel that it is "beyond them".

> "I'm passing physics with around 80 something % and math with only around 50 something but that doesn't really make sense and it's taught by the same teacher…generally I've known that I can get 100 percent." (Aisling)
>
> "Now it's a struggle to catch up because I was never ahead (i.e. accelerated) in math at all….I did math level 8 and it was extremely boring so I went ahead and did the entire textbook and for the last three months sat in the corner playing with my mind for a while…And now that we've jumped to this, a very fast and very high level of math, it's difficult." (Ashlin)
>
> "I don't understand chemistry and then everybody's like well chemistry's just like math, if you understand math then you would understand chemistry. And I'm just like well I don't like math either, so that's not particularly helping me here." (Sally)

Girls sometimes enter the program with trepidation, anticipating the amount of work that will be required.

> "Yeah cause when I got accepted I was sort of like oh no am I really sure I really want to do this …you just feel sort of like that kind of thing that you can do it but you're sort of nervous that you might not." (Bob)

Girls employ a range of strategies to deal with consequences of encountering failure and their shifting sense of self in the face of their lowered achievement. Most often a change in work

habits and an attitude that accepts that less than perfect marks are a part of the picture now are strategies employed. For the most part girls are actively engaged with trying to improve their achievement.

> "Um, every once in awhile something will go over my head and I will completely miss it. Like and I'll just have to go to my tutor which for whom I thank heaven and earth for and we go, we go over that." (Ashlin)
>
> "...we just finished first term and I don't know why but I've been trying and I haven't been getting the same marks I was last year. ...But I'm gonna see if I can change some stuff." (Sally)
>
> "You get used to laughing at your low marks and get used to failing sometimes when you've done the kind of studying that you've just realized doesn't work for you. Like for me I've just discovered this morning that studying the day before and right before the test doesn't work for me at all". (Ashlin)

By feeling supported by peers and parents the pressure that girls feel can be mitigated. For some this is present;

> "But so far like after I've come it's sort of like, um, it kind of reassures you that, you know, you can do this because there are so many other people who are here to support you. Yeah, and like, you know, parents are supportive, your friends are supportive and it helps." (Bob)

For others it isn't the case:

> "I mean like teachers expect me to behave in a certain way and students expect me to behave in a certain way. My parents expect me to behave in a certain way and it's just like juggling this and this, juggling this and that. And then one day I'm gonna drop some of the balls and that's not gonna be so great." (Sally)

Favoritism: The root of all your success.

The issue of certain girls being perceived as favoured by teachers more than other girls, and more than all the boys, was a central concern for a period with some of the girls. Over the course of the year this experience apparently diminished, (according to one of the "favoured" girl's comments during member checking of the transcripts), but at the time of the interviews it was quite central. I will look at it because I believe that it illuminates larger concerns related to the gendering of achievement and fits in with the subsequent categories of competition/aggression, closeness and living social complexity.

The experience of "favouritism" was one of feeling that success in the program was out of the control of the students and contingent upon being favoured by a teacher.

> "Like even with, especially with the favorites, it's really hard to do well. And I think that's like the main problem or whatever I have with (the program) is that if you aren't the teacher's favorite, too bad. And it's like you can work your butt off and nothing's gonna change and yeah." (Erica)
>
> "And there are the people who the program is working really well for and they're mostly the favourite people." (Dr. Watson)

Favoritism became an often-used rationale by other students, girls and boys, to explain why some female students excelled consistently. This was felt as an attempt to discredit hard work and undermine feelings of success, and seemingly level the playing field for those who felt at a lesser advantage.

> "Sometimes I do work harder than, you know, than somebody else who's saying that (I'm favoured). And I do deserve more marks than you, right. But then they just use that for everything, yeah" (Mira).
>
> "Like academically it's very, it's not that they're like sitting in a thing of self pity but it's

just like when someone comes up to you and says oh yeah you only got such and such a mark because the teacher favours you, it doesn't help cause it's just like oh that's how I got my mark, oh no. Like once I leave here I'm going to die, I'm never going to pass anything because my teachers aren't gonna like me and la la la la la and it just goes on." (Erica)

The experience was an affront to the sense of fair play for those on both sides of the issue.

"They favour the girls but it's not fair, and even if it is my favourite it's really just not fair." (Dr. Watson)

The favoritism was seen as an open secret,

"I mean and anyone in the class could tell you who the favourites are. Cause it's just so obvious. (Erica)

"I'm sure every teacher has like a favourite student, the brightest student in the class or whatever. But they shouldn't be, you know, showing it so blatantly." (Mira)

and beyond the control of those who were "unfavoured,"

"And I guess the most frustrating part about it is that there's no way you can prove it, you just know." (Erica)

beyond the control of those who were "favoured,"

"Uh, Elaine, one of the favoured students officially, like I don't know if she does it intentionally or not but…" (Dr. Watson)

"It puts me in a difficult position because I'm the one that he's favouring but like and people sort of resent me a bit for that but I don't know what to do, right. I can't really do anything, right".(Mira)

and even somewhat beyond the control of those doing the "favouring."

"I don't think they even realize it sometimes that they're favouring somebody…" (Mira)

"I don't think they can even help it because, only because the program is so small, right, and they know everybody on a personal level." (Mira)

This created anger for girls all around,

"It brings feelings of hatred. It really does. We get upset a lot because it's unfair." (Dr. Watson)

"It's getting really annoying cause now everything I say, everything I do, like the other people they're I think, like they're, they're not very happy cause they're not the ones being favoured or whatever…" (Mira)

Being a good student in a stereotypically "female" way was seen as a pre-requisite for being favoured,

"I do feel that some teachers like favour me because I'm, you know, I'm like more mature, I'm older or like and I work harder." (Mira)

"I mean there's reasons why a lot of girls are favoured, right, because oh they go to class, they're neat, they actually listen, they sit there, they do all their stuff, right" (Erica)

and the word "sexism" was applied by the boys and by some girl students who felt excluded from this special regard based on this criteria.

"…sexism actually happens to be my favourite because they favour the girls…" (Dr. Watson)

"Cause a lot of girls are favoured and if you talk to any of the guys they'll come out, oh our teachers are sexist. Um, I don't think that's true but like it, if you just look at it from an outsider's view then it would seem that way." (Erica)

Competition and aggression: The grades between us

Girls experience a high level of competitiveness and a degree of relational aggression, particularly related to achievement.

"It's really complicated because there's a lot of tension and competitiveness with the whole marks thing…" (Erica)

Underlying and overt tension exists and results in displays of verbal or physical one-upmanship to manage feelings inherent with feeling "lesser than" or "greater than".

"Like they know they shouldn't have said that but they say it anyways and they just get that moment of happiness." (Mira)

"Well just because of the, uh, environment. Cause like, I don't know I guess a lot of people feel threatened, not just with like school but it's just like oh no, you're getting better marks than me, you're going to make fun of me, rrrr, rrrr, that kind of thing." (Erica)

This takes the form of covert and overt emotional and physical acts,

"Girls, if you say something that they don't particularly like, they, well they just like, it's like they, um, hold that grudge…it's like deeper inside and then the next time if something comes up that you're ridiculed for then that girl would laugh. It's, it's harder. (Sally)

"…there are girls in (the program) who put on like a strong persona and then I guess the only way that you can show that is by physical violence. But it's not, like the thing that I'm saying is that I can't say that they're being violent cause they aren't. They're just like messing around. But it's violence in that you're punching and kicking people. (Erica)

usury in order to get homework and test answers,

"…if I work particularly hard on something like hours of work and someone just asks "can I see it, like can you send it to me?" and I'm just like thinking I know the

stereotypical Sally would do it but then I'm thinking about it and I spent hours on this and he or she can just copy off of it and it hardly seems fair." (Sally)

"...and so it's just like oh look, this person's smart, let's go sit beside her or her because oh cause I can just look at her paper and, you know, do well." (Erica)

power plays to control student politics,

"They seem to kind of try to seek power or, they're trying to install some sort of government within their own school body in a way." (Aisling)

and sexist comments,

"Um, boys tend to have a bigger ego sort of. Like you can kind of tell sometimes when they talk they kind of make the girls seem like oh you're worse than me or you have to listen to me and, but some of them they're, they actually like talk to you and they have intelligent conversations. (Bob)

"Sometimes it is like we have gone back fifty years based on the things that they say." (comment made at the wrap-up discussion)

Students' emotions ride a wave based on perceived achievement or non-achievement,

"... normally I wouldn't care (i.e. about their comments) but just because it was that week, it just really made me so angry and I was like crying and stuff... I was, you know, frustrated that I couldn't do good and they were like stupid things that I forgot on the test and stuff." (Mira)

"But then I noticed like some people they, uh, ask you what your mark is and then if you tell them, you know, you got higher marks, if you tell them your mark is slightly higher than them they don't seem too happy about it. If their mark is higher than yours they seem like more livelier." (Serena)

Girls feel that this dynamic is a fact of life somewhat and that because they need to focus on marks-based achievement asking for a stop to this behaviour is not realistic on the part of teachers.

> "No matter how many times teachers say like "Oh your marks don't matter, bla bla bla, don't compare marks, da da da" but the thing is marks do matter. And like, I'm not stupid enough to like think oh yeah my marks didn't matter, I can get 60's in everything and no one's gonna care." (Erica)

A complicated closeness: Competition and affiliation

Without a doubt the small size of the program is a fundamental aspect of the experience for the girls.

> "It's kind of hard to adjust for the first few weeks. It's so much smaller than the regular schools and like there's like a limited amount of people in the program." (Serena)

The program is located in a physically small space,

> "...it's more the physical factor, when we're forced in such a puny building with so many people it's really, it's quite, you don't even realize how small it is!" (Aisling)

the number of students is small compared to other schools,

> "Like we don't have a student council or anything because we're so like kind of like a little family tight knit. You can just talk and everybody will listen so it's not like a giant school." (Bob)

and there are only a few teachers.

> "I can't really compare it to high school cause I, well I wasn't in high school cause I was in a middle school. But lockers are smaller, (the program) is smaller, we've got three teachers..." (Erica)

For the majority though the close rapport and individual relationships that develop with teachers as a result are a boon.

> "...the teachers are great people, like I can talk to them as like not as a student to a teacher but as a person to another person and they're really nice and all that." (Sally)
>
> "...the teaching is really different than at a normal school. Cause since the program is so small there's a lot more teacher interaction, right, which is, which is good." (Mira)
>
> "So you know they kind of develop a close relationship with the students than like in a regular high school where you only have one class and one teacher." (Bob)

The limited social circle necessitates a degree of acceptance for others.

> "With this school it's a small group anyway and in a normal school I would have that many friends in a group to be friends with anyway. So it's not, it's like okay, this is the school, I'm going to be friends with everyone, cool." (Aisling)
>
> "...one of the things I'm learning from Trans is that you have to deal with it and like you can't change people but you can change yourself and, and yeah, that's about it." (Erica)
>
> "... there's some little groups and some people don't particularly like other people and stuff like that but overall good people..." (Sally)

The smallness of the group size results in a feeling of everyone bonding rather quickly.

> "Um, well I think we, like it takes awhile to make friends but we've done it pretty quickly it's happened..." (Bob)

The girls especially feel the results of this quick familiarization.

> "I think the girls, yeah we've bonded a little faster than the boys....at Camp Summit, right, we had this, uh, like all of us went into one tent and we were playing truth or dare but like the year 2 boys, they were sort of like oh the year 1 boys, ah, whatever, right.

But the year 2's were all talking like in one tent and we were laughing and stuff. And so that was the second day at school." (Bob)

"...social wise it's like it's been pretty good cause we (the girls) all have formed bonds and I think that's pretty good." (Sally)

Their ability to read others, their personalities and feelings, is amplified through the close proximity.

"You know, you know everybody. Like if you give a definition, like a name of someone from the program, I can tell you most of their personality very quickly." (Ashlin)

This can sometimes lead to over-stepping of boundaries and lack of privacy.

"What gets me the most is the way she looks through my planner, journal and test papers without asking. What mark I get shouldn't be any of her business." (Serena, taken from journal written response).

Change proves to be more difficult as girls are bonded to one another and their actions felt intimately by others.

"Yeah, and because of the small group there isn't much room for change and it's not like like many people flow and join together and flow away again, you know. It's the same." (Aisling)

By being close to other highly gifted girls, a girl may see herself reflected in others and identify with others quite strongly; without a strong sense of self this can lead to confusing another's actions with a threat to her own being.

"And we were friends and in all honesty we share a lot of interests. We're incredibly similar and she just, she doesn't know how to deal with the fact that, I think what started this entire thing is I went to hang out with somebody else and I spent time with other people other than her and she didn't know how to handle it." (Dr. Watson)

So, this closeness is not without complications obviously. Discords are quickly felt throughout the group; arguments erupt and gossip circulates. Girls see themselves as more connected to one another than to the boys in the program and the divide between the genders contributes to conflict and misunderstandings.

> "I think that the girls get along with each other but they don't get along with the guys. And then so there's sort of like a big difference between like gender." (Mira)
>
> "...everybody knows everybody, not necessarily that everybody particularly likes everybody else." (Ashlin)
>
> "Oh yeah, a lot of gossiping goes around.... Like just things go around and around and around and people sticking like love notes in other people's lockers from certain people..." (Erica)

Bonds are also created somewhat due to the pressures and insecurities that students feel. There is a sense of being in it together and just trying to get through sometimes.

> "...maybe we realize that like we have to stick together to, you know, cause there are stress levels and stuff." (Bob)
>
> "...we're fairly bonded together actually. ....Just because we're upset about what's going on it's kind of like, um, we're all upset, we all want change, some more than others." (Dr. Watson)
>
> "...Well I would call it not sort of a clique but more of a sort of safety net." (Aisling)

Intimacy and authenticity in relationships are sometimes accessed through dealing honestly with these discords. Girls learn about resolving difficulties in their relationships as these difficulties are more obvious and unavoidable in these close quarters, and resolving them becomes important to their ability to work together and thus get along in the program.

"Like we have closer bonds and we argue, it's not just surface and then we actually talk about things to each other and if something goes wrong then you know about it…" (Sally)

Living social complexity: Me and my meta-view

Some girls observe, comprehend and respond to their social world through a lens of complexity. While all of the girls in the study were very astute and sensitive in their observations of themselves, their classmates and school life,

"I found that a lot of the kids here, they're like pressured by their parents to get good marks and they, they don't have very much fun sometimes. Like some of them they don't want to go home, like they want to stay back and do Reach and do all the stuff that they can, like not to go home because they don't want their parents to like oh like do your homework, do piano, do this." (Bob)

"It's actually kind of difficult because some people would, oh someone likes someone, what do you think about it and you don't really want to offend the person who's asking you but you don't want to like join in and offend the person who's in the rumor. That's kind of difficult and yeah." (Serena)

some girls' experience of their social word stood out as distinctly complex in flavor.

"It's actually pretty good because usually in normal school I find the social aspects very dull and tedious and petty." (Aisling)

They reached for more unusual ways of trying to express their experience of the world even within this group of unusual girls,

"I had a black board, a standard classroom sized blackboard and I covered it trying to explain and connect everybody. It was, it was a, it was halfway between tedious and fun and exhilarating to figure out kind of your part of something." (Ashlin)

and noticed and responded to nuances of behaviour that were not commonly acknowledged.

Sally: But every time I looked at that person and every time that person looked at me I could tell that person was really depressed and really unhappy and that person was about to cry because of that mark. So it's just that they (the guys) wouldn't understand something like that.

Pamela: Okay. Do you find that you notice that a lot how the people are feeling or what's going on for them?

Sally: Yeah, like because I, I think that girls understand more of what's going on. Like we're more sensitive to it.

Pamela: Okay. Would you say all girls or some girls more?

Sally: Some girls more than others. Some people don't understand at all.

This *living social complexity* takes into account their own behaviour in reference to the inner realties of their classmates and social dynamics at play.

"But some people are total strangers, I never talk to them, I pass them in the hallways and it's like they don't exist because you just don't have these like overlapping spheres of communication." (Aisling)

Their actions are filtered through this understanding as they assess the appropriateness of their actions, and respond to situations based on the underlying information that they accrue.

"Oh well like, um, there are times I just avoid people cause I know what they're going to say…" (Erica)

"Like it's if I pick up stuff like that then I would try to help but it all depends on how good and how close I am to that person, right." (Sally)

Girls act with agency within this inter-subjective realm. They take on roles or respond in ways that are sensitive to the undercurrents or hidden stresses or needs of their classmates.

Aisling: And so, um, I've given him what I call honesty tickets.

Pamela: Okay.

Aisling: So he will only have two, and he still has one unused.

Pamela: Tell me about the honesty tickets.

Aisling: Well it's just an idea because I thought, I don't know, I wish people would give me a chance to sort of invite me to ask questions and with the year 2's, um, they sort of do that but with the year 1's people seem sort of closed and off in their own little space sometimes.

This entails taking a meta-position. Girls sometimes read the system as a whole and seek to respond with this system in mind, sometimes with the expressed goal of creating change overall.

> "Which is why we wanted student reps on the Steering Committee because people on the Steering Committee don't remember going to school and have no idea at all what it's like to actually be in (the program) and therefore we should have student representatives, one boy, one girl from each year, four students who they say what's going on in (the program), how they feel and we have ideas on how to fix things." (Dr. Watson)

This awareness also begets a sense of responsibility often,

> "I feel that in the past I've noticed things and I've never spoken up about it but after coming to (this school) I'm like oh my gosh, first of all, no one's speaking up, I must speak up and so clearly that's the role I've take on, I've taken on a emergency backup rule/glue or whatever." (Aisling)

Reality is shaped overtly by awareness of the invisible and intangible realities of being human.

> "For me it seems that (the program's) at a standstill like until the next year. It's almost as if you can hear them, it's, I didn't even notice the end of the term, I still think it's same old, same old and then I then at end the term yeah I there's not as much things to mark

time. As regular high school's like mmm, as well. And also, you can also judge time by the changing relationships with people and last year I've heard there were changes but this year so far I've seen almost nothing." (Aisling)

Rapport with others is sometimes built on this awareness

Pamela: Sure. Um, like people can walk around and never say things and just keep it all inside.

Aisling: A lot of them do, especially the quiet people. Like the loud people, half of them don't seem to notice anything because they're the ones causing everything.

Pamela: Okay.

Aisling: But the quiet people I like better sometimes. I try to keep in contact with them.

Finding language to express this reality and awareness can be a challenge.

"...it's almost like everybody's suspended in water that's flowing. In Transition it's sort of like one block comes in, another block gets pushed out and the past block is sort of like staying with the past year." (Aisling)

Making friends and fitting in: Finding and losing self.

Making and having friends is an important part of the experience of being a girl at Transition. It is not uncommon for girls to experience the loss of friends upon entering the program

"...like I had to leave my old friends behind and I felt pretty sad about that but when I came to Trans then I met the people in my year right now..." (Sally)

"Well like social life like it's kind of sad for me because I've lost many of my old friends." (Mira)

and also be concerned about the loss of friends again upon entering university

"I keep on thinking oh I'll see this group of people more anyway but I have to remember that it's a short period of time. But I've never been in any program for a long time because I always move sort of..."(Aisling)

Girls' experience of friendship is marked particularly with a search for authenticity and insight into the social and academic pressures that they face together.

"Well it feels kind of like oh, who am I really talking to, right. Like when you're talking to them in class they sound like they're totally different than if they're by themselves." (Bob)

"...we have to have complete honesty or it just like the program's going to crumble without it" (Aisling)

Complete honesty is sometimes best kept to yourself though if you want to get along in this environment.

"I like everybody (Chuckle), no I don't... that's being human. Um, I like most people like and the people, like I can't really say I don't like them." (Sally)

Knowing when to be real and when to be "fake" create vital tension and are sometimes one and the same when the ultimate goal is beyond these two distinctions.

"I just find that I notice a lot of things and when I speak up I notice other people notice...but you have to speak up before others would sort of, I think you sometimes have to be fake." (Aisling)

Fitting in means two separate things for the girls in the program. Some girls feel that in past school experiences they didn't fit in all that well

"So I didn't enjoy my high school time mainly because of some of the people that go there but and I knew I was gonna have to work at fitting in." (Ashlin)

"It's so hard because I'm used to not being quite open coming from a normal school. In normal school I find that if I'm open people don't understand me and they just misinterpret what I say." (Aisling)

but now despite their unique characteristics there is a general ability for them to fit in and that others "get them" more readily, and/or share their interests more than in past school environments. This is a relief to them and they enjoy this fact.

"I find that, um, it's easier to get along with people because they have more of the same interests as me. Like I really like to read but in like normal school people are like oh do you like to read, like a book worm and they're more interested in computer games and things. Well people here they're like interested in all kinds of things and like yeah." (Serena)

Others found that fitting in was more of a gradual process and that it created a shift in their perceptions and way of being,

"Yeah, so like sort of my like perceptions are all askewed sort of now…." (Mira)

" "Yeah, it is different. It's just, I don't know, it took awhile. It took a long while. Like a lot of them, like one thing for me is that a lot of them swear and stuff and I don't know, I just, I'm not used to that and that's part of the whole public school thing here, right, cause I don't know, I used to be like sheltered or whatever." (Erica)

For some fitting in is a conscious act,

"Well fitting in is not much of a problem, if you know how to fit in and making friends is not much of a problem if you know how to make friends…" (Aisling)

"…and I guess like one of the things I'm learning from Trans is that you have to deal with it and like you can't change people but you can change yourself…" (Erica)

"I was social before. I tend to change every time I go to a new school cause I've lived

everywhere. I've lived in 11 houses and gone to about 9 schools. So I've had to change environments a lot. So I essentially adapt. One school I was popular girl, one school I was a loner because I had a close circle of friends, right, it didn't matter." (Dr. Watson)

and others observe the shifts that "fitting in" have meant retrospectively,

"Well it's funny cause like in (this school) and being in public schools I've noticed that I have changed a lot, like socializing, the way I act, the way I say things, the way I do things and like I know I've even done a lot of that before and suddenly I just see that I am." (Sally)

For some girls fitting into this culture marked by a heavy workload, competition and a complicated closeness means supporting others' achievement and possibly compliance to the needs of others before their own. Fitting in and having authentic friendships become at odds under those conditions.

Sally: ...I'm just like thinking I know the stereotypical Sally would do it (i.e. be "nice" and give someone my homework to copy) but then I'm thinking about it and I spent hours on this and he or she can just copy off of it and it hardly seems fair. So –

Pamela: Has that happened a lot for you being put in that position–?

Sally: To me? Um, well I guess a lot cause last year I was, I was stereotyped basically of being really helpful, being really nice and really being willing to share and getting good marks at the same time so –

Pamela: What do you think would happen if you said no?

Sally: Well they would think that, well Sally you're changing and changing's not good. And I'm, I guess in a way I'm scared to lose my friends because I don't know, they're helping me, they're helping to keep me sane in (this program).

Snapshots: We Are the Girls You Are Talking About

The themes and sub themes explored above help us understand the setting as a whole and how girls experience their lives therein. Each structure attempts to speak for each girl in part, and together they represent the girls' experience collectively. Missing from this view are representations of the girls as individuals. These snapshots introduce us to the girls more intimately. They are not intended as in-depth case studies, or psychological portraits. They mainly show the incredible diversity of personalities underlying this study and hopefully give the reader (you) an opportunity to relate to the girls a bit more one-on-one, as I had the pleasure to do.

Many of the girls completed "I poems", which locate them succinctly within the complexity of their academic, social and emotional worlds. When possible these will be used as the focal point for meeting the girls in the following vignettes. These snapshots are not the entire story; they are an attempt to capture a moment in the dynamic flow of life experience that altogether is each girl's way of being. The themes of the study will be woven through, as well as my impressions as a researcher. Just as with a typical snapshot, they are framed by the researcher/picture taker's interests , to help us know and appreciate the subject within the context of a certain time and place in her life.

Aisling.

And sometimes I just can't take it
So I tell—and I tell again.
I'm not used to being quite open
I've been trying to be.
I feel.

I never talk to them
I pass them in hallways
And pretty much I am.
I haven't really noticed it.
I don't know.

I wish people would give me a chance
To invite me to ask questions
I guess, I find.
I don't feel bad
Because I know.

It's almost as if you can hear them
I didn't even notice
I've seen almost nothing.

Aisling's poem teaches us much about the essence of what it means to be *living social complexity* and *making and having authentic friendships*. She finds that this program is "actually pretty good because usually in normal school I find the social aspects very dull and tedious and petty." Her I poem suggests she is struggling with the ideal of remaining open, being authentic about her feelings and communicating them in an environment that is not always receptive. She is consoled by her own knowing, picks up on the underlying "voices" in the environment and yet ends up with little confidence that she has actually "seen" something. Can she trust what she knows in this setting? The struggle to know and voice what she knows and feels is tied to her desire to improve the environment and encourage others to be authentic. She says:

> "I feel that in the past I've noticed things and I've never spoken up about it but after coming to (this school) I'm like, oh my gosh, first of all, no one's speaking up, I must speak up and so clearly that's the role I've take on, I've taken on a emergency backup role/glue or whatever"

Ashlin

"It's more like leave me alone please, I'm, I felt like I was always different. But I felt the same."

Ashlin tells us about the experience of *being a gifted girl* and *fitting in* as a creatively gifted girl, which for her was often a struggle between perceptions of others and her own internal reality. She says:

"I always felt odd like in grade 4 I would have lines up, people behind me asking me to edit their stuff or to correct their homework or everything. It made me feel a little, um, strange."

She came into the program highly determined and wanting to *make choices in her learning* that are based on a clear view of who she is and what she wants out of life.

Ashlin: But so to me school comes, sometimes it has to come second for some things that I can't give up because that's the reason I came here. So that though particularly at this school it (arts) wouldn't be part of my life but I did it so that I can get all the stuff that was supposed to come first done with so that's all I could have is a dark stage with one spotlight.

Pamela: So you can clear your schedule?

Ashlin: Yeah.

For her not fitting into an academically focused school culture is a trade off that allows her to bypass the irrelevance of a regular high school.

Pamela: What's it like being an art-centered person at this school?

Ashlin: You feel like the odd woman out. But you live with it. I came here because I do not want to go through the boredom and everything else that comes with high school. Five years of stuff you don't want to do.

The reality of this experience creates a tension between her own desires, how own way of learning and being and having to meet school expectations in order to achieve. She frames learning to meet these external expectations as maturing.

"Something I really don't need to know about for what I want to do (I: Right) and I tend to say to things in my head. If I know I won't need them I don't tend to bother

memorizing them. So it's a, it's another aspect of me having to mature very very quickly."

Bob

I mean, I get angry sometimes.
I have a couple of friends who just changed when they found out about marks.
I'd thought that they would actually THINK.
I wonder how many personalities you can have.
I want to know.
I mean, you can laugh.
I mean, do they like being mean?
...I used the same word twice.
I never really liked people with bouncy moods.
I think that'll be it.

Bob speaks strongly in her interviews about her search for *authenticity in friendships* and relationships in general, and how observing others changing temperaments can be disconcerting for her.

"Like when I talk to them I can be like "oh so how do you like this and how do you like that" but then they sound like, they make these jokes because, you know, they're with their friends."

She is careful to not be disingenuous with others out of a sense of knowing how it feels to be so treated.

"... I try not to do it because I know how it feels when other people do it to me, so."

I witnessed some bullying
If you know what I mean.
I really thought we could do better.
I'm just hoping.
I'll write more tomorrow.

She has an outstanding sense of community responsibility, leadership skills and has been involved in a wide range of extra-curricular activities in the past.

"...like on Mondays I had library monitor at lunch... Wednesday I had playground buddy

and on Fridays, um, it was a half day dismissal so I didn't have lunch hour. Then on like Thursdays at recess I would have, um, concession stand and all that so I would have like my whole day filled up and then like I would be able to do all these kind of things."

She has a strong sense of herself, which enables her to take credit for her accomplishment and examine her areas of weakness. She makes the most out of opportunities presented to her:

"But like I think it's more like inner strength and also like this sort of thing because like I'm not very big and I, and like a lot of them aren't very big either but you can still carry that giant tank on your back and then you feel really good when you come out cause you're like oh I just saw a bunch of star fish and then you saw a crab and then I saw jelly fish and all that and then you'd feel like oh I've done something, I'm so cool, right."

This sense of herself leads her to question stereotypes about what it means to be a gifted girl,

"The study is pretty cool because yeah I've, not a lot of people really study girls… sometimes, when you think gifted sometimes you think male is gifted. It's a guy with nerdy glasses."

and gives her the energy to achieve

"I think gifted is just part of it but you have to work hard…. you still have to like turn on the car if you're gonna go anywhere, right."

Dr. Watson.

Dr. Watson has not had an easy time of her experience in this program.

"It's been pretty awful. I really haven't enjoyed myself at all. Uh, both last year and parts of this year for different reasons."

She tells us much about the potential for relational aggression amongst girls and the complications of closeness.

"I sat in the hallways. I never talked to anybody except Claire when I was her friend.

And we were friends and in all honesty we share a lot of interests."

She told of an experience of being physically attacked by this girl and the fall-out of the event, which was that she, herself, was accused of bullying. The girls involved in the conflict were the only two Caucasian girls in their year; both were doing poorly academically. In listening to the story I wondered what it was that the only two Caucasian girls in the year, both underachieving, had learned to dislike so much in one another. How had the story gotten so convoluted and remained unresolved? What was being left unsaid, and by whom?

> "Essentially she decided she didn't, she was gonna call me a bully yet refused to give me any reason why or an example of how I was bullying her and started taking it out on me by basically bullying me. And, uh, in the end it peaked at the point where she dragged me down a hallway and bashed my head on a chair and tried to put caterpillars in my hair and I'm terrified of bugs, right, so that would have been pretty bad. And Greta blamed me. Like I was the bully all year."

The upset that this created for her resulted in a vivid retelling of the experience a year later as the centerpiece of her experience in this school. More than any of the girls she was doing poorly academically and expressed little interest in most of her subjects.

> "I practically failed my courses and had a lot of difficulty getting into this year because I was kind of dealing with a lot more than just school work"
>
> "I failed physics, because frankly I don't care and I didn't study at all."

A change in school policies at the beginning of her second year, which required her to carry a full-course load frustrated her and created a desire for change in the school.

> "Just because we're upset about what's going on it's kind of like, um, we're all upset, we all want change, some more than others, I'm fairly radical as opposed to there are some conservatives of course."

Her story represented a dramatic eruption perhaps of the subtler competition/aggression dynamics that girls manage daily; and also represents the experience of a highly gifted girl who is having difficulties conforming to the highly academic culture.

Erica

Erica's complacent appearance belies an extremely perceptive and sensitive intuition that resulted in one of the stronger voices in this study, much to my surprise. She did not hand in any journals because she "is not much of a journal person." She told us a lot about favouritism and competition and aggression in the program and helped me to understand how the environment impacted the girls' behaviour.

I mean there's reasons why a lot of girls are favored
I can't say that my teacher's sexist because it's not right
I think that socially we are more adapted

There was an edge of anger and frustration to her voice, lots of deep sighing at least that perhaps compelled the story to emerge.

> "Like (sigh) cause I completely freaked out today cause I had a lab and like just standards keep changing."

In talking about how the girls in the program would use physical aggression with one another to release stress she says:

> "I don't know, I, I used to punch people just because it feels really good. But I avoid it now because people have been saying something about me being too strong but then I never knew I was strong so now I stop."

Her strong Christian background gives her a conservative outlook.

> "I just, I'm not used to that and that's part of the whole public school thing here, right, cause I don't know, I used to be like sheltered or whatever."

Mira

Mira was the oldest girl in the study and this was a theme throughout her interviews.

"So like I'm the oldest person at Trans. So like my experience has obviously been different than the younger people…"

She spoke of how adapting to this particular setting had taken a toll because she felt less mature than when she began the program.

"Like I actually feel that I'm sort of like going through like stuff that I went through two years ago again."

During the member checking of the interview transcript Mira stressed how she had become more tolerant of others as a result though, and that this has been a major change for her through the experience of the program.

"I've become more like tolerant of people, of people that I've never met before. Like this whole genre of people that I never knew that are more like accepting, like –

Of all the participants, Mira felt that the competitive atmosphere motivated her somewhat and, even though she recognized and felt the stress overall, it did not present a big problem for her. She felt proud of her high achievements, but maybe would be even more proud if she had been competing with students her own age!

"I'm not enjoying it as much as I could if I knew that it was, I was competing with people at the same like age or something,"

Sally

Sally tells us a lot about struggling to be herself while working to meet others' expectations. School achievement is a place that she can both find and lose herself. She possesses great insight into herself as a learner,

I prefer lectures
I seriously prefer writing, but-

I'm also a bit slow,
I need time to digest the information
I have a certain aptitude for taking notes and understanding,
I'll go back, I'll look at it, and I'll go: Oh!
I GET IT! If
I write it, I'll understand more.
I just listen sometimes, but
I'm not registering it,
I'm not thinking,
I try to concentrate more on my work.
I miss key points,
I wasn't listening,
I was focusing on writing.
I'm human.

She pushes herself hard, has high standards for herself and questions her methods when she does not achieve the results she wants.

> "Extremely frustrating cause I'm like I did the work, I did, I did this, I did that so how come I didn't get the marks and I'm just like well there must be something wrong with my understanding of it or there must be something wrong here, right."

Others in her life have suggested that she not study as much, which she sometimes concedes too, "Well they actually, no Sally stop studying, Sally stop doing that and I'm like yeah, okay"

She works hard to meet external expectations but she is beginning to notice the impact these have on her life. She compares the task of managing expectations with juggling:

> "...it's just like juggling this and this, juggling this and that. And then one day I'm gonna drop some of the balls and that's not gonna be so great."

One of the ways that she gets along is to be "nice" to everyone as much as possible; this has begun to take a toll that she is questioning.

"Yeah, cause like I'm nice so I'm required to keep up that, that, um, like a figure and keep up that willingness to keep on in and sometimes it gets really tiring cause it's like yeah okay I know I'm nice but does that really mean I have to give you all of this?"

She questions the utility of this way of being, but is not yet sure how to break the "too nice" habit. She worries about the risks of being a high achieving girl socialized to behave in particular ways. During the wrap up discussion she said,

"It is like we are expected to achieve in traditionally male dominated fields but be traditionally feminine at the same time"

Serena

Serena represents the fresh voice of a newcomer to the program. Her interview was the shortest of the lot by far. She gave the impression of a positive, uncomplicated- almost graceful, approach to life.

I think
I find
I like
I find
I write
I feel
I guess
I can say
I've noticed
I am

She spoke the most positively about her experiences and felt everyone got along well. She felt that she was finding common ground with classmates around interests and developing friendships.

> "So everyone talks with everyone, like no one's like really fighting with anyone else or anything."

She was also one of the few girls who did not talk about how immature the boys could be, and felt that they treated the girls with respect, especially in Recreation where they were careful not to bash her around like they do with one another.

> "I've noticed that like in P.E. class for some reason there's a difference between being a boy and being a girl because like the boys, I noticed like they bash each other around and everything and they don't seem to mind. But then if you're a girl and to accidentally like

> just walk by you or brush or brush you or something and they go oh sorry, sorry, sorry…"

She navigated delicate social situations, such as those involving love notes and gossip, by trying not to hurt anyone's feelings.

In thinking about Serena I remembered that she told me that she loves to write, and so I referred to her journal for additional insight. Even though they are not being specifically analyzed at this point, they did offer more depth to her view and provided some additional insight.

She says of the accelerated pace

> "Mr. Jones does everything in a ferocious pace. He talks fast, he writes fast, he teaches fast….Sometimes I feel like my life is just this huge rat race, while everyone is trying to catch up with everything while the teachers are leading the race, zooming past and disappearing before you know it."

CHAPTER IV

Discussion

Phenomenological Approach: Together We Weave a Fabric of Experience

The process of a traditional phenomenological reduction has the goal of determining essential structures of experience that can be applied transcendentally across individuals and contexts. I found that in the case of working with individuals in the same setting, such as a small school, the set of phenomenal structures interwove and formed in fact a fabric of experience. By virtue particularly of their proximity and shared school culture the structures are interconnected expressions of this environment or field; what occurs for one girl in the program is related to, and speaks of, the lives of the others. In this way seemingly discreet structures are interwoven across individuals and through aspects of their lives; these structures are threads in a shared fabric of experience. This is not unlike a merging of voices in a choir, each unique voice rising on the individual breath from deep within, yet once in the open the voice becomes part of the common experience, blending and belonging in order to create something bigger, something that can be experienced by all. This discussion section will characterize this fabric, locate it within the larger quilt, and explore ways of continuing the weaving from this point onwards.

Reconciling Risk and Giftedness in Adolescent Girls

I began the study with a strong feeling that gifted girls were categorically different than other girls their age. This understanding was rooted in a literature that typically understands giftedness in girls as a risk factor in environments that are not equipped to support this way of being. I ended the study with a sense that these girls were both different and the same as other adolescent girls. But different and the same in what ways? *In this radically accelerated environment giftedness did not place these girls at risk.* Some were at different levels of comfort with being gifted than others: one girl was selecting out of achieving almost completely, but the

majority were doing fairly well academically, were learning new skills and habits of mind to deal with changes and challenges that came their way, and they were making friends and maturing while maintaining a sense of themselves. In this protected environment, some of these girls at least are at risk mainly because they are adolescent girls, at risk for the same reasons that adolescent girls are always at risk. Girls' ability to know and express themselves are precariously balanced at this point in their lives with a need to affiliate and conform to the needs and expectations of others.

> We have witnessed girls shift from engagement in a rich social world of childhood, in which thoughts and feelings- both good and bad- are spoken about directly and publicly, to a struggle at the edge of adolescence to hold on to what they feel and think and therefore know…." (Brown, 1991, p. 73)

The following "I poem" by Aisling expresses how she is both finding and losing herself at this point in her life and this losing revolves around her thinking and understanding processes, her knowing self.

And I think...
I really don't think;
I really don't care.

I found—
I'm starting
I'm thinking,
I've tried to understand everything
I used to be able to

I just
I know I can understand—
I'm just not.
I'm trying not to
I'm trying to leave space
I guess.

Another girl upon reflecting on her "I Poem" was surprised to find that there wasn't much of "I" in a long paragraph.

I mean there's reasons why a lot of girls are favored

I can't say that my teacher's sexist because it's not right
I think that socially we are more adapted
(Erica)

She says of this simply: "Considering that this excerpt came from a paragraph of seven lines, it's kind of weird that this is all I got out of it."

Yet, if we compare their poems with those of two others in the program we see that this is not a universal experience for the girls here. Not all girls here seem to even be experiencing this loss of self that plagues the majority of adolescent girls. These two girls write from a place of self-assuredness when it comes to knowing themselves; even when failing a test the sense of "knowing what I know" shines through.

I've been totally preoccupied.
I should have found time.
I didn't really like having five tests.
I TOTALLY screwed it up the first time.
I can still remember studying.
I think…
I FAILED.
I didn't know how to get the answer.
I was just too tired.
I got 24/25 on the make-up exam.
I know that I understand.
(Bob)

I think
I find
I like
I find
I write
I feel
I guess
I can say
I've noticed
I am
(Serena)

Giftedness provides heightened sensitivity to these issues and concerns, but in this environment did not place them at risk per se. So does the giftedness-as-risk issue disappear in a radically accelerated environment, as it is no longer a feature that sets a girl apart from her peers?

Is giftedness in women so entwined with the concept of social-emotional risk that it is hard to conceive of one without the other? What does it mean to be a gifted adolescent girl who is well adjusted and comfortable with her gifts and talents? Not much is known about this actually. As Mahoney (1998) instructed us with his *Model of Positive Gifted Identity Formation*, individuals need to feel supported in various ways across the major systems in their life in order to maintain a strong positive sense of themselves. If anything could be said about the experience of being a radically accelerated high school student, it is that it affects every aspect of a girl's life. We know this because, when asked to talk about their experiences, girls talked about their lives as a whole, inner-life, family, friends, academics, relationships with teachers, hopes and fears about romantic relationships. They talked about the past and the future, about feelings, thoughts and physical realities. The forest was vast and the trees many. It is this very encompassing nature of the experience that impacts the multiple systems in a girl's life and that helps to make gifted girls in a radically accelerated high school program at risk to about the same degree as non-gifted girls their age. Within this study we have girls who are more or less at risk, just as within a regular school, given the myriad factors that make up their lives, but the majority of girls in this study are not suffering due to their giftedness per se.

Implications for Practice: Recouping Girls' Sense of Knowing Through Responding to Socially Complex Perspectives

Despite the relative benefits of an optimal academic environment one finding in particular seems to create a lack of affiliation for certain girls and threatens their ability to know and trust themselves. In this case it was found that girls sense of knowing as deeply rooted in their ability to *live social complexity* created potential conflicts and disruptions in their ability to affiliate in this environment, which in turn weakened their sense of knowing and trusting of themselves. It is easy enough and important to appreciate that if you provide an "optimal match"

for students in terms of academic fit, then they will do much better across different aspects of their lives, given the enormous role that school plays in a young person's life and the various aspects of self that are impacted through schooling. This has been born out in the acceleration literature, which provides ample support for the benefits of acceleration when appropriate and warnings of the risks faced by students who ought to be accelerated but are not. (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). It has also been born out in the self-concept literature that sees self-concept as a "hot variable" that impacts the life-system as a whole (Hau &Marsh, 2003).

But how these girls view their worlds and interact with them, the cognitive-emotional structure that informs the experiential structures perhaps, is decidedly different, and is not addressed by an academically accelerated school. Girls who are struggling with their giftedness in this setting are struggling primarily with their heightened ability to read and respond to the complexity that they observe in themselves and their environment. This is born out in the "I poems" in that the two girls mentioned above who are struggling with knowing what they know, are probably two of the more "complex" girls in the study. Again, it needs to be stressed that all of the girls were capable of observing complexity and nuance, able to make astute observations and having insight into others; it is just that certain girls lived through this channel more than others. Some girls took this knowing into new realms- uncharted realms- even in this rarified environment and this is where their troubles with knowing and not knowing began. Their very way of knowing is predicated upon reading the environment and the feedback that they are getting is that their way of being is still too unique to be reliable. This *living social complexity* is the ground of their giftedness, and it is around this aspect that these girls need to affiliate in order for their knowing sense to be honoured and well integrated into their way of being. In tandem, enabling methods of self-inquiry that provide trustworthiness to their (inner) data and results would help them trust their experience of the world and 'know what they know'.

> The process of self-dialogue makes possible the derivation of a body of scientific knowledge that is useful. Such a process is guided by a conception that knowledge grows out of direct human experience and can be discovered and explicated initially through self-inquiry. (Moustakas,1990, p.16)

Gifted Girls Telling Their Stories

Brown (1991) cautions that

> A girl who chooses to authorize her life experiences by speaking openly about them resists the security of convention and moves into uncharted territory; she sets herself adrift, disconnects from the mainland; she risks being, for a time, storyless. (p.71)

To be storyless is frightening but opens up the opportunity for new understandings to emerge. The question of 'who am I' resonates with profundity in this open, uncharted space. There was knowledge upon entering this study that these were girls on the margins and that they already suffer a disconnect from the stories that most relate to and through. They were already disconnected from the mainland in many ways- except in this instance they are disconnected together, as a small group. It is unusual and creates a change perhaps in their way of being that is of interest. There was no need to launch them further into the storyless abyss; that is where they came from. They already had different stories that set them apart; the goal was to integrate their knowing into a larger picture to help them make sense of their experiences collectively. Thus, through a process of interviews and journal writing, the threads of experience were gently drawn up and out from the inner worlds of the girls and into a shared, relational sphere, and through the processes of listening, discussion and reflection, individually, in pairs and finally in a group, the threads were sent back down again for inner verification, and in this way we intentionally wove a fabric, or at least our section in a larger quilt.

Girls and Competition

The girls in this program compete with one another and the boys over grades and academic success. The atmosphere that this creates complicates relationships, creates tensions and most significantly creates the likelihood that students will try to one-up one another through subtle and overt acts of aggression. Yet, these girls participate in an arena that is meaningful to them according to their abilities, not according to their looks or sexual appeal. They are not vying for the approval of their male classmates; they are vying for academic success and access to higher education. The pitfall that gifted girls typically encounter in a regular high school environment is the pressure to conform to societal expectations of femininity, which are in conflict with high achievement. Girls are rewarded with social acceptance for being identified with the attention that they garner from appearances. In this program, girls are rewarded and identified with the success they garner from achievement. Sexism and gender role stereotyping appear mainly as a function of the larger competitive environment, as an attempt to one-up one another, and girls respond to this pressure often by competing back, not by conforming to sexist expectations. This does not mean that it does not take a negative toll; it is an expression of relational aggression and impedes genuine connection between the girls and the boys. Yet, in a relative world, where girls are taught to compete with one another for success in varying guises, competing on the basis of grades and achievement provides opportunities for self-knowing and development of potential that could be lost otherwise.

But let's consider how this achievement centered milieu impacts girls who in particular see the world through complexity; who are sensitive to the relational breakdowns and lack of connection that are implicit in the competitive environment. When we see girls resisting the demands of achievement it is always useful to consider what they are lacking in terms of their needs for connection. In a non-accelerated environment that coerces less achievement from girls

through threat of loss of relationship, the issue becomes more obvious. Girls' search for connection is at the expense of achievement. But this study did not show that an environment that is predicated on competition for academic success creates optimal grounds for connection for these girls; it showed that closeness in the program is complicated by the demands of competition and that some aggression exists. This seemingly puts competition and connection on two opposite poles. Yet truly they are not opposites, but instead different ways of being. It is a potential conflict, not a contrast. The experience of girls whose way of being expresses to a high degree the complexity of their environment shows that in a highly competitive system they lose their sense of clear knowing. This is not because girls cannot compete or that girls are biologically predisposed to nurturing and non-competitiveness. If we consider that their knowing self, their ability to live social complexity, is an expression of the structure of the environment; that their knowing is based on holding the relational sphere within their selves, then the setting up of a conflict between achievement and connection in the environment is experienced as a conflict within their own selves. It is the environment that creates a conflict between the two ways of being; they are expressing this conflict for the environment due to their ability to live social complexity. A conscious weaving together of competition and closeness in the environment, finding ways for the two structures to work together instead of at odds, may resolve their psychic struggle. When relationships and connections in their surroundings are compromised, neglected or severed due to exclusive competition and relational aggression, girls who live their social complexity experience literal disconnection and loss of knowing a part of themselves.

> The idea that an organism regards parts of its environment as belonging to its field of self seems strange only when we begin with the assumption that visual boundaries are more real than experiential boundaries. (Evernden, 1985, p. 45)

This is what compels girls to be agents for change in the social sphere; it is a radical recovery, search for wholeness and expression of their ideal self. "My Being is not something that takes place inside my skin…; my Being, rather, is spread over a field or region which is the world of its care and concern" (Barrett, 1962, as cited in Evernden, 1985, p. 43)

Cross-Cultural Experiences of Being a Highly Gifted Girl in this Program

Culture impacts all aspects of one's experience of being in the world as interactions are translated into meanings that are widely varied. As the majority of the girls in this study were of Chinese descent this provides a unique view into what it means to be a Chinese-Canadian gifted girl. Shi's (2004) view that intelligence within traditional Chinese cultural is rooted in the notion of diligence and the idea that one's endeavor is a component in the structure of intelligence, resonates with my findings. In terms of *Adjusting to the Increased Workload and Pace* the study found that once confronted with the need to work for their marks, girls responded by making decisions around their time and effort. Diligence was seen as the given that underpinned their success, and at least on the surface girls accepted that if they did not put the time or effort in then they would not do well. Willingness to re-examine learning behaviours and make changes to these was highly present. If time and effort did not pay off as hoped and marks declined, this created potential confusion, but overall girls responded by looking to change their own behaviour to understand how they could succeed -they would for example talk with teachers, spend more time studying, work in groups and review their notes more frequently.

But these are still adolescent girls, studying in English, living in Canada, not Traditional Confucian China. That they are almost fitting the stereotype too well, in theory, made me wonder. Vasquez and De Las Fuentes (1999) warned that the cross-generational familial obligation for Asian American adolescent girls could create a great deal of pressure and conflict if not conformed to. Yet, both girls of Chinese and Caucasian descent had a variety of

experiences with their parents. One Chinese girl felt a tremendous amount of pressure (Sally), another felt a great deal of support (Bob). One Chinese girl's experience with her father was that he was complaining that she did too much homework and had no more time left for the family (Mira). One Caucasian girl felt pressure from her mother "whose mantra is school comes first" (Ashlin); another never mentioned her parents at all (Dr. Watson). Up close, Chinese girls' experiences of their parents were not so uniform despite the cultural norms that more than likely dictated a relatively high amount of focus on academic achievement (Kitano, 1997). This is not a statement about the parents' behaviour, it is a statement about the girls' experience of their parents' supposed behaviour, or their experiences of the cultural expectations that informed their larger family system. Girls were aware of the stereotype of "Chinese as good at school" and played with this. Aisling depicted the stereotypical Asian high school student as saying: "I'm going to be an Asian nerd, I'm going to get 90 percent in everything!" in reference to the ideas she was trying to not adopt for herself. Yet, she is doing very well academically, suggesting that she has little compunction about taking what she wants and discarding the rest; or perhaps a need to separate herself from this stereotype in order to value her own experience as a high achieving girl. That they are both aware of the stereotypes and responding to them in their own ways is undeniable. Unlike the Caucasian girls, none of the Chinese girls experienced themselves as "odd" for being gifted and all understood hard work to be a component, even if they did not say so explicitly. An understanding of how Chinese Canadian girls, and gifted girls in particular, are carving out identities, and making choices for themselves given the cultural menu they have been offered has only been touched on and deserves continued study.

Validity: There's Validity and Then There's Validity

The findings are valid in the regular or traditional sense of the word. I followed a rigorous analytic process that has a well-established track record in the scientific community. I

did thorough member checking of the transcripts with each of the participants to clarify potential misunderstandings, and we did another group check-in to verify my initial findings. Both checks resulted in very high agreement that I was on the right track. Yet, in my estimation the findings are valid primarily in that they emerged through and enabled a weaving that represents the underlying integrity of the girls' reality. My findings are *Valid* in that they result from a meaningful and authentic process relevant to the needs of the girls in the study. I draw on Eisner (1998) and his understanding of the term validity within the world of a qualitative study.

We have a trade-off. If we rely upon standardized test instruments or observation schedules to describe states of affairs, we have no assurance that the particular instruments used will be sensitive or appropriate to what the instrument maker could not anticipate, namely the unique features of a particular classroom. For those features of a classroom for which the instrument is relevant, however we can secure greater reliability. The need for relevance is the need for validity. There is now and has been a classic tension between what is reliable and what is valid. (p.55)

This study attempted to model how a study could be responsive to the participants according to their unique characteristics and location in the world. This would be the quality to seek through replication. Working with gifted girls whose way of being entails *living social complexity* and having credibility otherwise would be impossible. Vying to trust my own knowledge increases my trustworthiness as an element of this process.

This will make some people nervous though, which is understandable in our scientific culture; the problem is that I feel nervous when this is not the case. I am pre-occupied with helping gifted girls know what they know, to trust and voice their "intuitions" of the world Not being able to remove subjectivity is one reason that phenomenology is a philosophy of intuition. Within phenomenology, intuition is a technical term meaning being present to

consciousness. Since all knowledge is correlated with subjectivity, what matters is how a conscious subject is present to an even or a state of affairs in the world. (Giorgi, 2002, p.9) In intuition, from the subsidiary or observable factors one utilizes an internal capacity to make inferences and arrive at knowledge of underlying structures or dynamics. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23)

Reflexivity, Positionality and Tracing my Own Process

In practicing reflexively, I began to notice that the problem was not one of my capacities to observe my thoughts and action. A cataloguing of observations would be uneventful, tedious actually, and only important to communicate if I made a story out of them that said something meaningful. It was the underlying process that was of interest; the shape of the path that I followed as a researcher.

> "The problem isn't one of self-reflection, I am always reflecting on my thoughts and actions, myself in relation. The problem is one of giving shape and voice to this perpetual process; isolating the noise, the frequencies…" (Pamela's journal, March 2005).

Constructing a story about myself, as I did prior, in order to understand the ways my own story interconnects with the participants', in essence my positionality, is a beginning, an exercise, but perhaps just the guise of reflexivity. Where am I supposed to go with this story about myself? Does it really matter that I was identified gifted as a child, went to such and such a school? Does it actually help us to understand how I conduct research? It invites suppositions about my way of being that may or may not be relevant. I was left unsure of what it meant really to this project, and fairly sure that it would mean different things to different readers of this work. Consciousness of my role in the research process was the intended goal. Reflexivity is often understood as involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce

more accurate analyses of our research. (Pillow, 2003, p.178) I began to feel that the main issue was one of being aware of my actual process and understanding how this unfolds. I could understand my process as another experiential structure, another thread in the fabric of this study. And so I had to study my own process as a phenomenon. I was helped in my thinking by the work of Clark Moustankas (1990) on heuristic research who says:

> One may enter into dialogue with the phenomenon, allowing the phenomenon to speak directly to one's own experience, to be questioned by it. In this way, one is able to encounter and examine it, again and again- until one has uncovered its multiple meanings. (p.16)

In attempting to give voice to my own process, I wrote a dialogue that allowed it to speak to me and me to speak to "it". My process spoke up as follows,

> Pamela's process: She pledges to be self-conscious, to sanitize the research process with this sanity. I freeze under her gaze. Self-consciousness is hot, not like a warm spreading heat, but like electricity. She didn't expect this and vibrates a bit. I am the orobourous that wraps tightly and she spins in place. She considers Dabrowski's intensities and laughs or else she'll cry. Here she is as I am. I am the lynchpin to her plan, the socket for her plug. I am the actual; she drops her words into my river and they worm their way into reality through my will. I manifest, I am a shy dream though and grow like a mushroom in the dark. I am a dance, a two-step recoiling and desiring. Power flows through me the length of the continuum. Except it is nothing like a continuum, it is a thundercloud, amorphous. I am the resulting lightening bolt, shocking, predictable. I am death, shocking, predictable. The humanizing experience at it's worst best worst. (Pamela's journal, March 2005)

Research as Relationship Building

Thus, this research project was one of interweaving the inner and outer processes of the researcher (myself) and the participants. As the researcher, I wove my own views and knowledge into a practice. This practice shaped all aspects of the study, particularly my way of relating with the girls. In attempting to build relationships and provide a sense of safety for a level of disclosure, I was highly conscious of the challenges to developing equitable relationships in a school environment that were free of "coercion" in the broadest sense of the word. This went beyond the ethical implications of making the study voluntary. For many of the girls school is not a site of tremendous choice and it was vital to me that the project was not simply one more thing that they had to do. I made providing choice a guiding premise as much as possible in my interactions with the girls. I was wishing to create a space that allowed the extraordinary to emerge and in this way the girls could be known.

How did I know this weaving was authentically happening? One cue was the fact that all of the participants stayed with the project until the end despite their demanding schedules; another cue was the willingness of the participants to come to a wrap-up discussion in which their identity would be revealed to one another and the sense of trust that this took, and the sense of importance that the meeting held for this to occur. The third cue was that the girls seemed to participate to the degree that they felt comfortable, most wrote journals, but not all; most wrote I poems, but not all; all were interviewed but the interviews varied in length and depth. The girls never cancelled an appointment with me and always showed up on time. Eight girls volunteered for the study. I had only asked for six, but eight came forward; this is the way when you ask women of all ages to tell their stories. They have a need to do so.

Each participated in a one-on-one interview, the shortest of which was just under 10 minutes and the longest just over 40 minutes. The remaining interviews were between 20 and 30

minutes each. Of the eight participants, six submitted personal journals, and seven attended the wrap-up discussion group, with the eighth only canceling at the last minute due to a scheduling conflict. Five of the girls also participated in a co-analysis of their data using the "I Poem Guide" (see appendices) that I created based on Gilligan's "Listening Guide." Instead of feeling frustrated that I was not "getting" all the girls to write journals or complete the I poems, I felt reassured that for the most part girls felt comfortable to be as they were, and that nothing more was asked of them other than that they try and represent this way of being in various ways. The member-checks were an opportunity to allow the girls to interact with their text as a whole. They were armed with coloured pens and time to highlight, cross out and write comments on the interview transcript if they wished. They were given copies of Carol Gilligan's article on the Listening Guide, an outline to help them with their "I Poems" and told that if they were interested they could look at text in this new way. Those that were genuinely curious and wishing to do so, did so.

Gifted Girls and Responses to Phenomenology

Based on the wrap-up discussion at the end of the study, girls' experience of the phenomenological method was very positive. They felt that it had been important to ask them about their experiences and not just teachers. They experienced feeling listened to and that someone was interested in what they had to say. The one-on-one interview format seemed for them to leave what they said as optional and "up to them". For one it was "relieving because, it provided me with a means of escape; I could rant about school to someone who actually wanted to know." One girl commented that it was like other "Gifted Ed. interviews I've done- with a twist. I actively had to analyze my own feelings." On the theme of self-discovery, another commented: "It was like pulling at the strings of my mind, and finding that they were all

knotted." Another learned that she could be "quite introverted when she began to do metacognition." One girl commented that it would be better to study them over the course of the year to see how they change and develop. Several also commented that the study had helped them look at their school life; one in particular said that as a result she made changes. Bob said that after keeping a journal as part of the study she started keeping one on her own. The positive feedback from the participants suggests that they benefited from involvement in the study and that the method was well suited their way of being as highly gifted adolescent girls.

Epilogue

Involving girls in the research process and analysis of data culminated in all of the participants attending my thesis oral defense along with other members of their school community. I emailed girls to advise them of the upcoming event, and the defense date and location was also posted on their school website with an open invitation so that participants could attend without singling themselves out necessarily; indeed other students and graduates of the program did attend. The structure of the presentation involved time for questions from audience members at the end. Girls in attendance asked over an hour of questions and thus contributed substantially to the discussion of the literature and findings, and suggested relevant directions for further study. In particular, they sought nuanced understanding of the implication of being "gifted", "asynchronous" and "living social complexity" and asked questions such as: "Could social giftedness be due to the small size of the program?" "Can you say that girls are 'okay' with being gifted?"; "Can living social complexity have an adverse effect, say cause depression?"; "How can one become 'synchronous' and will it affect me adversely later in life if I am not so?"; and "How can the school environment best deal with asynchronous development?" This event demonstrated very well both the willingness and the capacity of gifted adolescents to engage deeply with questions and concerns that involve their social and

emotional well-being. And indeed, this engagement with questions about the self is inseparable and integral to their emotional well-being. Thus creating effective environments, classrooms, research projects and conversations, that will further nurture this engagement is key. It is through the act of listening and responding to girls curiosities, reoccurring concerns and queries, and through observing and reflecting girls process as they co-create new knowledge, share information and seek answers together, that safe passage for girls into adulthood is achieved.

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Appendix C
Outline for Wrap up Meeting

PART I:
Background to the study: This study came out of my interest in what happens to gifted girls as they go to high school. Many studies have shown that girls (gifted or not) lose self-confidence, and lose their inclination to be their true selves, as they become adolescents. Gifted girls tend to say: "I'm not intelligent." A bit of research has suggested that acceleration creates a different experience and that girls aren't as likely to disown their intelligent, capable selves. This was my starting place, but really there is not much known from the girls' perspectives. So, I wanted to hear from you what it was like going to an accelerated high school, what your experience was and how you saw yourself.

Today: I want to share with you a bit about what you told me and have a discussion to see what you think/feel about my findings so far. I also think it is important that you get a chance to hear from one another on these issues. Not everything you said in the study will be included. There was a great deal of information, all of it important and valuable. I am still analyzing and synthesizing your stories and finding ways to understand them as a whole. These represent some of the most common, prevalent themes that have emerged so far.

What I want to know is if this in fact represents your experience?

1. **Closeness (social, emotional, physical - positives and negatives)**

"I started realizing that, like I got a lot of sympathy and a lot of people would come up to me and say, you know, if XX picks on you, tell me and I will like, I'll stand up for you. I got that a lot. And I like, cause it's such a close-knit group, right. It's like 40 people. Not that many." (Dr. Watson)

"...if we're in class and some teacher says something like something, says something funny then you'd all laugh and do stuff and goof around and we don't get as much done that way but it's, it's a really good thing because that just means that we're all bonded really closely and we know each other really well." (Sally)

"Like we can talk to each other and feel like there's a connection there. Like not just like oh I'm talking to this person I don't know, right..." (Bob)

"What gets me the most is the way she looks through my planner, journal, and test papers without asking..." (Serena)

"It's more the physical factor when we're forced in such a puny building with so many people it's really, it's quite, you don't even realize how small it is." (Aisling)

"I think it's easier to talk to the people because, um, it's smaller and there's like a limited amount of people you can make friends with." (Serena)

2. **Competition (marks, pressure to succeed)**

"like it's really complicated because there's a lot of tension and competitiveness with the whole marks thing and like no matter how many times teachers say like "Oh your marks don't matter, bla bla bla, don't compare marks, da da da" but the thing is marks do matter. And like, I'm not stupid enough to like think oh yeah my marks didn't matter, I can get 60's in everything and no one's gonna care." (Erica)

"It's just really getting annoying and it's mentally I guess. Like there's pressure from home. Like academically there's pressure from my parents to do well, there's pressure from other students to do well, there's pressure from other students, they're expecting of you to get high, high marks, there's pressure from myself because I need the marks to get in. And even the teachers expect me to do well…" (Sally)

"Well you see I'm not brilliant like some people so I, like I do okay in everything. I'm more like a well-rounded student except for history but I mean I still do okay and pass. But I don't do brilliantly in anything." (Erica)

"But I know some people are like totally crazy and then they're like what'd you get, what'd you get, what'd you get, what'd you get, right, and then they, and then if you get higher than them which like, you know, I usually do with some people, right, who ask me and then they're like "oh my God, I can't believe…," and then it's like so then if I get a low mark, they like they're like "ha ha ha, I got higher than you" and I was like yeah. (Mira)

"…at the beginning I didn't really feel any competition, just curiosity like what did you get on your lab or something. But then I noticed like some people they, uh, ask you what your mark is and then if you tell them, you know, you got higher marks, if you tell them your mark is slightly higher than them they don't seem too happy about it. If their mark is higher than yours they seem like more livelier but I think that's, that's human nature, you know… (Serena)

3. **Maturity/Immaturity/ Girls vs. Boys/ Asynchrony/ Uneven sexual and emotional development**

"Yeah, we've gone through most of the bumpy rut, the bumpy ride that the puberty we're levelling out now and then of course the males come in and go through this raging hormone phase and we just sit there and go "you are so immature." (Ashlin)

"And sometimes I just can't take it and he just acts so annoying so I tell him and he doesn't know and I tell him again and he still totally ignores it and I have to tell him again and again and again. I tell him everything. Until everything is fine." (Aisling)

4. **Changing study/work habits/changing view of myself as a student/homework/workload**

"It's a lot more, the work is a lot more difficult because it's more advanced in things. So like where I think elementary school I was used to getting like all high marks without really having to do anything, I find I have to work harder to like get the marks I want. (Serena)

"You get used to laughing at your low marks and get used to failing sometimes when you've done the kind of studying that you've just realized doesn't work for you. Like for me I've just discovered this morning that studying the day before and right before the test doesn't work for me at all." (Ashlin)

"Transition has taught me how to procrastinate more efficiently than learn how to learn" (Aisling)

5. **Biases/Favoritism (girls favored if they act certain ways/unfairness for 'favored' and 'unfavored')**

"I mean and anyone in the class could tell you who the favorites are." (Erica)

"It's not just singled out but some students get more because they're favourites." (Dr. Watson)

"And I just felt that was totally going overboard, I was just so frustrated. Cause that week so many people before had said that, like 'the teachers favor you Mira'... (Mira)

"Sometimes I do work harder than, you know, than somebody else who's saying that. And I do deserve more marks than you, right. But then they just use that (favortism) for everything." (Mira)

6. **Being gifted/ Being a gifted girl/ External expectations of gifted people (internal vs. external views)**

"Like I just think of myself as me. There's nothing particularly abnormal about me if you ask me, but there are people that tell me, I'm all these things, um, and no I'm no, I'm just a girl, you know. (Ashlin)

"Sometimes, when you think gifted sometimes you think 'male' is gifted. It's a guy with nerdy glasses" (Bob)

PART II: Your experience of research project

- **What in particular, if anything, did you notice about your school experience after or through journal writing that maybe you weren't so aware of before?**
- **What was it like participating in this study?**
- **What is the best way to study what it means to be gifted?**

Appendix D
Guide for I poems

The point of doing I poems is to get at a deeper analysis and reflection of your own experience by pulling out the different "threads" or "voices" that are woven through your personal story. If you find it helpful, you can use the guide below to help you to reflect on your journals and interview transcript.

I Poems

Select a passage that you would like to work on from your interview or journal and pull out the "I statements/phrases" in the order that they appear in the text. Make an "I poem" by placing each I statement on it's own line. (Cut and paste the passage and the poem below).

Reflection: What can you say about the person that wrote this poem? If you didn't know it was you, what would your impression of her be of her, her experience, her way of being? (Try to not make a negative or positive judgment, just make observations)

You can stop there, or if you wish to go deeper consider the following...

STEP 2: Often our experience of a situation is complex and there are many layers to it. Once you have pulled out the "I poem" what text are you left with? (cut and paste below). Does this text tell of a certain experience or way of being? What impression do you get about the person that spoke or wrote those words? If you are getting a different impression from this version than from the "I poems" how would you describe it?

Appendix E

Table 1: The Experience of Highly Gifted Adolescent Girls in a Radically Accelerated High School Program: Categories and Sub-themes

Category	Sub-themes
The gendering of asynchrony	Overall difference in social age/interests Girls vs boys social-emotional maturity Boys physical presence/behaviour: Sexual maturity Boys use of airspace: Girls managing boys behaviour: Girls feel/ act immature in order to relate to the boys
Time outside of school	Time for relationships with self and others: Making time for creative endeavors: Extra-curricular activities
Being a gifted girl	Feeling different, odd or crazy Acting differently Disclaiming or reframing the label Gifted=Hardworker External Perceptions of gifted people
How I learn best	Choices in learning, connected to inner self/interests/passions Decline of interest and success in math and science Insight into learning styles contributes to success
Experience of the increased workload and pace	More work, faster pace Had never had to work before Math and science are beyond me now Resilience in the face of failure and working towards success Compared to others I feel less intelligent (BFLP) Worried about abilities before entering program Feelings related to lowered achievement

Favouritism	Affront to fairness Emotional stress Everyone knows but the teacher Lack of control Being a good "female" student makes me favoured Undermining female success
Competition and aggression	Emotional ups and downs related to marks Emotional and physical aggression Some competition okay/fact of life Sexism
A complicated closeness	Smaller all around Limited social circle Intimacy Authentic Relationships with teachers Support system to deal with stress Girls closer than boys Too close for comfort
Living social complexity	Insight into others and social dynamics Meta-view/ Reading the collective structure Acting from a place of inter-subjectivity; Predicting behaviour based on underlying information
Fitting in and making friends	More acceptance for my way of being Difficult to know what to say or not say Losing some of myself to the group Search for authenticity Loss of friendships in the past