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**AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS INVOLVED  
IN THE DEVELOPING SELF-CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENTS  
IN A CONGREGATED PROGRAM FOR  
GIFTED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

by

**Barbara Kuhnke Frame**

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
of the University of Ottawa  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Education**



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## *ABSTRACT*

For many years educators have acknowledged the need to provide special services for their intellectually gifted students. Such services ought to have a positive effect on the developing self-concepts and self-esteem of the young people involved, but there is little research to establish that this does happen. Most studies of relationships between school programs and self-concept have been quantitative, and the results have been confusing and often contradictory. It is possible that the multi-dimensional nature of the construct of self-concept, coupled with the complexity of the dynamics impacting on the self-concept, render this area of study unbecoming for quantitative methodologies. Qualitative research, which seeks to provide a holistic view and to understand people's own experiences and situations, may offer more meaningful results.

This qualitative study focused on some of the factors and dynamics which may be affecting the self-concept and ensuing self-esteem of adolescents in a congregated high school program for academically gifted students. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve of these students, six from the graduating class and six who had just completed their first year in the program. Questions were organized around the areas commonly emphasized by renowned self-concept theorists and were further defined by a comprehensive review of the literature.

The interview data revealed that although students reflected positively on the opportunity to be with other students who had similar abilities and interests, and although they formed their closest friendships with

other gifted students, they perceived social acceptance to be more difficult for them than for age-peers not identified as gifted. This was particularly evident in female responses.

The gifted students appeared to have a strong sense of instrumentality and accepted decision-making as primarily their own responsibility, but they felt powerless to make pertinent decisions within the school and were therefore frustrated. Many of them also had diminished feelings of usefulness or helpfulness once enrolled in the gifted program.

With regard to the increased level of competition, the findings were divided by gender. Most of the males enjoyed or accepted the competition but most of the females expressed active dislike for it and/or opted out of the competitiveness within the gifted program. In addition, the students frequently perceived the expectations of their teachers to be overpowering; they were already dealing with their own perfectionism, idealism and extraordinary self-expectations. They emphasized the crucial role that teachers and other school professionals play in affecting their present and future achievements, attitudes and decision-making.

By reporting the students' own perceptions of their experiences and situations, this research adds to our understanding of the multiple, interwoven dynamics affecting the continuously developing self-concept of these gifted adolescents.

**INTRODUCTION  
and  
STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Following the Terman studies of the 1920's, educators began to acknowledge the need to provide special services for gifted and talented students. Probably the best known and researched of these early programs was the Leta Hollingworth project, known as the Terman Classes at the Speyer School in New York City (Hollingworth, 1942). These enrichment classes were specifically for academically gifted youngsters, and the goals were to provide for their social and emotional needs as well as their intellectual needs.

Between 1940 and 1970, North American educators interested in the areas of intelligence, giftedness and creativity were influenced by the research of J.P. Guilford, A.F. Osborn, Abraham Maslow, Jerome Bruner, Benjamin Bloom, Howard Gardner, E. Paul Torrance, Arnold Toynbee, Jean Piaget and others. As a result of the research, and of strong lobby groups, the United States Congress in 1975 passed the Education For All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142, which guaranteed appropriate special education for all exceptional children, including gifted children. Another bill passed in 1978 provided the necessary financial aid for the programs for those children.

In Canada, special educational programs for gifted children have existed for many years in a variety of locations. However, it is only recently that provinces such as British Columbia (1985), Alberta (1983), Saskatchewan (1981) and Ontario (1984) passed the necessary legislation and funding to provide for such programs. The other provinces do not appear to have specific legislation in this area yet. New Brunswick has as its aim "the integration

of all exceptional students" and therefore claims to use the Renzulli Enrichment Model (1977) as its primary delivery system to gifted learners (New Brunswick Department of Education, personal communication, 1988). Newfoundland has not "singled out" gifted children, but hopes that "the curriculum offered throughout the schools... has made adequate provision for suggested enrichment activities" (Newfoundland Department of Education, personal communication, 1988). Nova Scotia "does not advocate segregated classrooms for gifted and talented students" but does advocate a wide variety of experience and opportunity for students... mainly in the form of curriculum enrichment and extra-curricular activities" (Nova Scotia Department of Education, personal communication, 1988). Manitoba does not have an official policy regarding gifted education as programming is the responsibility of the school divisions, but funding for gifted programs has been provided by the Ministry for a number of years (Manitoba Department of Education, personal communication, 1988). Prince Edward Island also has no official policy in this area, but attempts to provide enrichment activities within the regular curriculum as well as offering an accelerated option of entering university after grade 11 (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, personal communication, 1988).

Now that there is a more general acceptance for the idea that gifted learners require special education services, educators are interested in determining the benefits of the various models of delivery. Which models are most beneficial to the students, or to put it another way, which students are likely to derive optimum benefits from a particular program model?

A wide variety of such models now exist: full integration with regular students; partial integration and partial withdrawal; acceleration of the

regular curriculum; enrichment within the regular curriculum; a completely differentiated curriculum; the revolving door model (Renzulli, 1977) which accommodates the changing needs and identification patterns of the students; and finally, participation in a congregated setting for intellectually gifted students, either as special classes within a regular school, or as an entire school.

Recognizing the importance of the development of a positive self-concept for students, many educators are particularly concerned with the possible impact of a program model on the self-concept and self-esteem of the students participating. For example, how might young people be affected by being grouped or congregated in a class for intellectually gifted students only?

In one attempt to answer this question, White and Renzulli (1988) used archival resources from the Hollingworth legacy to track down 28 of the original students from the Speyer School. Their aim was to investigate the perceptions of these former students regarding the effects that participation in these congregated gifted classes had on their later lives. Results indicated that the respondents placed great value on the opportunity to have been in a class with other gifted children, not only because of the academic competition that they felt necessary, but also because of the affective components associated with being grouped with peers. Subjects reflected positively on the opportunity that they were given to work at their own pace, and to work independently, learning research skills at a young age. Further, they had very positive memories of having been recognized as "special." Some felt that the whole Terman Class experience was what gave them the confidence to seek further educational experiences, and thus it directly affected their adult lives and careers. It would appear that the self-concept and self-esteem of these

participants had been affected in a very positive way, and therefore the special classes had an enormous positive impact upon the rest of their lives.

However, other research in this area is far from conclusive and indeed much of it is contradictory. Some research has indicated that gifted students have generally higher self-concept ratings than do other students (Maddux, Sheiber and Bass, 1982). Others have found that to be true for males but not for females (Kelly and Colangelo, 1984). Milgram and Milgram (1976) found that elementary level gifted students did have generally higher self-concept ratings but students in grade 7 and up did not. The same research also pointed out that even at the elementary level, the small group of students who had extremely superior intellectual abilities were found to have significantly lower self-concept ratings than other gifted students and non-gifted students. Hultgren and Marquardt (1986) reported that although students in grades 7, 8 and 9 did perceive themselves to be more capable in academic areas, they saw themselves as less competent physically, athletically and socially, and they therefore had lower global self-esteem ratings. A recent study of Ontario students (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham and Crombie, 1989) found that gifted students in regular classrooms had higher academic self-concept than either non-gifted students or gifted students in congregated classes. The same study found no differences in either social or physical self-concept areas.

We know with some certainty that the development of a positive self-image and a strong sense of self-esteem is vital during childhood, and crucial to a successful transition from adolescence into adulthood (Coopersmith, 1967; Erikson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1969). Educators have for some years now been convinced that a student's self-concept can be directly affected by his

experiences at school (Bills, 1981; Rogers, 1969; Ross and Parker, 1980; Silvernail, 1981). Thus it appears particularly useful to study further some of the effects that a current model of delivery may have on the self-concept and self-esteem of the gifted students involved.

This investigation is concerned with a model of congregated classes for gifted students at the high school level, that is, grades 9 to 12/13 in Ontario. It focuses on some of the dynamics and factors involved in the developing self-image of students enrolled in the first year of the program (grade 9) and the graduating year (grade 12/13). How do these adolescents perceive their experiences as members of classes for gifted students only, within a regular academic high school? What dynamics and factors may be affecting their self-concept and self-esteem? How do the perceptions of the younger students, in the program for their first year, differ from those of the students in their final year?

Coopersmith (1967) established that children arrive at detailed self-appraisals by mid-childhood and that these appraisals, which continue to change, cover the general areas of competence, power or control, virtue or moral self-approval and significance or worthiness to others. His self-esteem questionnaire covered four main headings: school, family, peers and "general self", with a focus on competence and social acceptance. Harter (1983), a psychologist known to be one of the leading researchers in the field of self-concept, used similar divisions or domains of assessing self-concept: cognitive competence, social competence, physical competence, and general self-worth. Offer (1982), a psychiatrist and researcher specializing in adolescence, constructed a self-image questionnaire specifically for this age group and referred to domains much like those of Coopersmith and Harter: coping self,

social self, familial self, sexual self and general psychological self. Dusek and Flaherty (1981), in their study of the development of adolescent self-concept, also employed very similar facets for data collection: achievement/leadership, sociability/congeniality, leadership and masculinity/femininity, and finally general adjustment (see chart 1).

Maslow (1954) established a hierarchy of "needs", stating that an individual must satisfy a lower-order need before being able to move on to the next level, and before ultimately (or idealistically) achieving self-actualization (or we might say, a healthy, mature integrated personality). These begin with the basic physical needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc.), and move on to the need for physical and personal safety, the need for "belongingness" or to feel that one belongs and is part of a family or group, the need to be loved, and finally the need for the esteem of others toward an individual, and of the individual for himself or herself. Maslow's "need for belongingness" and "need for the esteem of others" are thus similar to what self-concept researchers have described as the need for the development of a positive self-concept in the domains of "social self" and "psychological self".

**CHART I**

An analysis of the areas studied by adherents of the multi-dimensional theory of self-concept yielded the following comparison chart.

DOMAINS OF SELF-CONCEPT AS DESCRIBED BY PROMINENT RESEARCHERS			
Offer	Coopersmith	Harter	Dusek and Flaherty
Coping Self	Competence (mental and physical)	Competence (cognitive and physical)	Achievement/ Leadership (smart, superior, confident)
Part of psychological self	Virtue or moral self-approval	Behavioural conduct (general self-worth)	Adjustment (satisfied, happy, steady)
Part of psychological self	Power/Control	Behavioural conduct (general self-worth)	Masculinity/ Feminity and Leadership
Social Self Familial Self	Significance or Worthiness to Others	Social Acceptance Social Competence	Congeniability/ Sociability

Self-concept development during adolescence has often been regarded as unstable and discontinuous - a period of storm and stress and identity crises (Erikson, 1963). If this is true, then a study of factors involved in the development of self-concept of gifted adolescents might be impossible, due to the unpredictability and therefore unreliability of response. In other words, a researcher could get different responses from the same subjects at different times, depending on the day or time or mood or recent events in the subjects' lives. However, in an attempt to test this theory of "storm and stress," Dusek and Flaherty (1981) studied 330 adolescents over a three year period. Their results describe the development of the adolescent self-concept as the result of continual and gradual growth, based on social environment as well as on the emergent cognitive skills and competencies. They found no evidence for the theories of discontinuity, but they did feel that "due to the complex nature of adolescent development... researchers must collect data allowing for the study of multiple aspects of development" (p. 48) and that "detailed and accurate descriptions of the nature of the adolescent self-concept are necessary for the understanding of adolescence as a developmental phenomenon" (p. 12). Therefore, a study of factors impacting on adolescent self-concept is indeed warranted, but should perhaps be done using means other than a quantitative self-concept questionnaire.

How important is a school program to the development of the self-concept? An educational program which impacts on social environment, cognitive skills and competencies would have the possibility of significantly affecting the developing self-concepts of the students involved. Possibly these effects would even be heightened among gifted adolescents, who have been found to have abnormal sensitivities (or hypersensitivities) to their environment, to their peers, and to the expectations and perceptions of others

toward them (Clark, 1983; Dauber & Benbow, 1990; Dixon, Meyer and Hardy, 1986; Hollingworth, 1942; Manaster & Powell, 1983; Rogers, 1986; Torrance, 1961; Whitmore, 1980).

How might gifted adolescents in a congregated high school program perceive the effect of being designated a gifted learner? How might their self-concept be affected by placement in a class with other gifted students? How might this program be affecting their choices and future direction? How do they perceive that it impacts upon their relationships with their family members and age-peers? How might it influence their expectations for themselves? How do they perceive that it has affected the expectations of others for them? How might placement in such a class affect their developing social skills?

By investigating and reporting the students' own perceptions in these and other areas, this study of gifted adolescents adds to our understanding of these dynamics, and therefore to our ability as educators to enhance and support the development of a positive self-concept and a strong sense of self-esteem for the gifted adolescent, using whatever programming is appropriate for that student.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The major question to be studied is: at this time in their lives, how do gifted adolescents in a congregated high school program perceive and describe the factors and dynamics which may be influencing the developing self-concept domains and the ensuing self-esteem?

## *OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS*

For purposes of this research, the term "gifted" will refer only to those students formally identified by the Ottawa Board of Education as "intellectually gifted". These students were selected on the basis of several criteria: ability testing; math and reading achievement tests; teacher, principal and/or parent nominations; and checklists from home and school (see Appendix I for details).

The terms "self-concept" and "self-image" will be used to describe the multi-dimensional theory that the individual constructs about himself or herself (Harter, 1983). The self-concept or self-image thus includes a variety of social and cognitive domains, within which an individual evaluates his or her competence.

"Social Self" will refer to the domain of the self-concept which includes perceptions of social acceptance and competence, both within and outside of the family structure. "Coping Self" will refer to the domain concerned with competence, both cognitive and physical, and achievement. "Psychological Self" will refer to general perceptions of self-worth, including what Coopersmith (1967) termed "moral self-approval", and will furthermore include perceptions of leadership and emotional adjustment.

"Self-esteem" is then seen as an affective superordinate or global evaluation of the self, and will depend on the importance that the individual places on each social or cognitive domain. (Bandura, 1971; Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1982; Rosenberg, 1979) For example, an individual may acknowledge

himself to be a superb cook, but if cooking is not a valued area of competence for him, this judgment will have little impact on his self-esteem. On the other hand, someone who judges herself to be a poor mathematician, but places high value on mathematical ability, will experience diminished self-esteem as a result. Finally, the person who discovers her strong abilities in science, and gives great import to scientific expertise, will experience increased self-esteem.

The study involved two congregated classes of gifted high school students: a group which had just completed their first year (grade 9) in the program, and a group which had just completed their final year (grade 12 or 13) in the program. The first group will be referred to as the "younger group", and the second group as the "graduating group" or "older group".

The term "congregated class" refers to the fact that these gifted students were selected from all schools within the Ottawa Board of Education, and placed together in a central high school, where they are in the same homeroom and the same four or more gifted-level courses.

Achievement will refer to the carrying out or accomplishment of certain goals or aims, both academic and non-academic.

## *REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE*

What does the literature say about the self-concept of gifted young people, in the areas of psychological self, social self and coping self? Further, what research has been done to document any relationships between various program models for gifted education and their impact on the self-concept of the students? In order to answer those questions, the review of the literature will be divided into four main sections.

The first section, entitled Psychological Characteristics of Gifted Adolescents, will include research concerning discernible differences between gifted and non-gifted adolescents. The second section, Social Self, will include research regarding relationships between social interactions and the self-concept of gifted adolescents. It will also cover studies of the social adjustment of gifted students. The third section, Coping Self, will be concerned with relationships between achievement and self-concept of gifted adolescents, and will include research dealing with gender differences in this area. The final section will be a review of research dealing with Relationships Between Special Educational Programs and the Self-Concept of Gifted Adolescents.

### *Psychological Characteristics of Gifted Adolescents*

Whether or not one ascribes to the "storm and stress" theory of adolescent development, most professionals would agree that adolescence is a special time in the human life span. Rapid physical and physiological growth and the onset of puberty cannot help but affect the self-concept of the adolescent in a variety of ways (Dusek and Flaherty, 1981; Erikson, 1963). Intellectually gifted adolescents will naturally experience all of those developmental hurdles in much the same way as will other adolescents.

However, much research has established that the added attribute of giftedness does provide another continuum of complications for those particular adolescents (Clark, 1983; Culross and Jenkins-Friedman, 1988; Dauber and Benbow, 1990; Delisle, 1990; Geffen, 1987; Hollinger and Fleming, 1988; Jenkins-Friedman and Murphy, 1988; Kelly and Colangelo, 1984; Kerr, 1985; Klein and Cantor, 1976; Leroux, 1988; Newell, Hammig, Jurich and Johnson, 1990; Rogers, 1986; Silverman, 1981; Stern and Zevon, 1990). Therefore it is reasonable to begin this review of the literature by outlining some of the discernible differences between gifted adolescents and their age-peers.

Studies dealing with the psychosocial characteristics of gifted persons have been published since the nineteenth century. Numerous studies have established that gifted young people are often "out of state, phase, and/or sync." (Manaster & Powell, 1983). This is attributed to the fact that gifted adolescents are different from other young people in terms of cognitive and creative development, and they have interests that vary widely from those of

their age-peers. They therefore feel that they often do not or cannot "fit in" to their particular social structure (Dauber & Benbow, 1990; Rogers, 1986).

Dixon, Meyer and Hardy (1986) synthesized their findings into six areas in which significant differences may be found among gifted students: extreme introspection, including criticism of self and others; hypersensitivities to feelings and expectations of self and others; earlier and more intense sense of personal and social values; heightened idealism/perfectionism which may result in difficult relationships; keen sense of humour and non-conformist attitudes; and high levels of imagination, energy and enthusiasm. These characteristics are supported by researchers such as Emerick (1990), Leroux (1988) and Renzulli (1978).

Many studies have shown that gifted children and adolescents are extremely, even abnormally sensitive to their environment, to any changes in their environment, to the significant others in their lives, and to the perceptions of others toward themselves (Clark, 1983; Delisle, 1984; Hollingworth, 1942, Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988; Roeper, 1981; Torrance, 1961; VanTassel-Baska, 1983; Whitmore, 1980).

Interviews with gifted adolescents revealed their perceptions of being more sensitive than others, and having to live with special abilities which they did not always regard as a blessing. In their words:

We are not "normal" and we know it... Multiple meanings, innuendos, and self-consciousness plague us. Intensive self analysis, self-criticism, and the inability to recognize that we have limits make us despondent. In fact, most times our soul-searching leaves us more discombobbled than we were at the outset.

(American Association for Gifted Children, 1978, p.9)

Gifted children have more difficulty than others in making sense of the world around them, and during adolescence this may be exaggerated. "Adolescence is a special time; for those who are gifted it causes some additional concerns of which we must be aware" (Clark, 1983, p.105). Dixon, Meyer and Hardy (1986) concur that although gifted adolescents share many of the characteristics and vulnerabilities of the typical adolescent, these young people may experience psychosocial difficulty due to their increased vulnerability. Some researchers have found that gifted females demonstrate more such sensitivities than do gifted males (Groth, 1969; Hollinger and Fleming, 1984; Lewis, 1968; Reis, 1987).

In a recent review of literature pertaining to characteristics of gifted adolescents which seem to make them more vulnerable to suicide, Hayes and Sloat (1990) concluded that being gifted intellectually does not protect an adolescent from viewing suicide as a possible solution to stressful problems. In fact, they found that gifted adolescents were potentially more prone to suicide because their sensitivity and perceptiveness were out of step with their emotional maturity. They concluded that gifted young people may "lack the maturity and judgment to deal successfully with many problems and issues of which their less capable agemates may not even be aware" (p. 102).

Hayes and Sloat (1990) also point out five areas or recurring themes that contribute to this vulnerability: perfectionism, supersensitivity (both physiological and social), deficit social skills and/or social isolation, the tendency to set unrealistic expectations (for themselves and for others), and the lack of appropriate educational provisions or interventions.

Delisle (1990) affirms the role that perfectionism plays in causing depression and suicidal tendencies among gifted adolescents, but also stresses societal expectations: the expectations of parents, teachers and other adults that gifted students are our future problem-solvers, leaders, and most responsible citizens. The result may be that the student feels overwhelmed and powerless, confused and alone, realizing that on her own, she cannot possibly live up to everyone's expectations. Delisle also refers to "premature or dissynchronous development", meaning that because development over intellectual, social, physical and emotional areas does not happen in a harmonious fashion, the gifted child or adolescent is confused, and often confounded by comments of adults. "Such comments as 'I expected better behaviour from a smart girl like you' equate two areas of development - intellectual and social - that may have little in common." (p. 224) Real pain is felt by young people who have not yet realized that "all areas of development seldom follow the same straightline path" (p. 224).

Therefore, since researchers have determined that there are definite and often measurable psychological differences between gifted adolescents and their age-peers, these differences warrant further investigation. The perceptions of the gifted adolescents themselves could well provide insights that would be of use to the educators and professionals dealing with such students. Referring to gifted programs, Silverman (1981) asserted that one good reason for them would be to provide a safe psychological environment for the emotional development of gifted young people, and to be sure that we are not transforming emotional sensitivity into emotional disturbance, in which case we risk losing these individuals permanently.

*The Social Self: Relationships Between  
Social Interactions and Self-Concept*

Social interactions are of the utmost importance in the formation of self-concept because as children mature, they consider more and more the actions and reactions of others (Selman, 1980), and thus social experiences assume greater importance in the direction that their lives will take. In the past, many professionals have felt that "in compiling the studies of the social-emotional characteristics of gifted children, a very positive profile emerges" with the exception of the highly gifted child, for whom "the question of social adjustment takes on an added dimension" (Clark, 1983, p. 81-82). However, much of the recent research - especially that dealing with gifted adolescents - contradicts this idea.

Some researchers have re-emphasized the concept of the "looking-glass self" to which Charles Cooley (1902) referred - that is, the idea that an individual perceives and defines herself as she thinks others perceive and define her. Yamamoto's work in this area found that the acceptance of the self is an ongoing process through which one comes to "know and appreciate himself better, and, as a corollary, to understand others better" (Yamamoto, 1972, p. 8). In other words, it is through social contacts that a young person learns to define and understand herself, and through this self-awareness, she becomes more able to appreciate and understand others. Many social theorists assign great importance to this relationship between social interactions and self-concept, believing that if a young person for some reason does not establish successful social interactions, then her poor self-concept in this area

could result in serious emotional disturbances later in life (Sullivan, 1953; Bandura, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969; Selman, 1980).

Gifted children may well have more difficulty than other children in establishing these successful social interactions. A recent study of 184 gifted high school students (Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988) found that 90 percent of the respondents listed social issues as the greatest disadvantage of being gifted. With regard to the overall effect of their giftedness on others, only 5 percent perceived this in a positive light.

Dauber and Benbow (1990) reported that peer relationships appear to be affected by level of giftedness and by the area or domain of specific talent, and that more emphasis needs to be placed on developing the gifted students' peer interaction skills. What, then, might be the effects of congregating gifted young people? Might they begin to perceive their giftedness in a different light, thus resulting in an altered self-concept? Kohlberg (1969) stated that changes in the self-concept will in turn affect the young person's social interactions and his environment, and therefore will have far-reaching futuristic effects. Harter's (1983) study of over 2,000 students found a high correlation between the way children perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by others. She also found that their self-esteem is situationally dependent and that they distinguish between their competencies in different areas and in different social settings. Of specific concern for gifted students, then, is the idea that the ways in which young people think about the self and other people, which depend to a large extent on their levels of cognitive development, may be revised once their reference group (i.e. classmates) is altered.

For the gifted female adolescent, social self-concept is also central to the issue of achievement (which will be dealt with in detail in the next section), and appears as well to be heavily linked to her sense of instrumentality or ability to make and act upon her own decisions (Hollinger and Fleming, 1988). Independence and decisiveness are generally seen as instrumental traits, and are stereotypically viewed as masculine. Traits such as kindness, gentleness and cooperativeness are known as expressive traits and are stereotypically viewed as feminine (Bem, 1978). Since achievement is therefore more congruent with self-perceptions of instrumentality (rather than expressiveness) a gifted young woman who perceives herself to be highly instrumental would be less likely to feel a conflict between high achievement and social acceptance. Society, however, sends mixed messages about the role of gifted females: are they to be assertive and instrumental, or are they to be supporting, nurturing and possibly passive and docile (Luftig and Nichols, 1990)? Gifted girls are particularly at risk in terms of developing positive social relationships with non-gifted age-peers. They are rated as among the lowest in popularity by their peers (Luftig and Nichols, 1990; Van Tassel-Baska, 1989).

Some researchers have reported family relationship problems when there are one or more gifted children (Sunderlin, 1981; Thiel and Thiel, 1977). In a recent review of parental concerns regarding gifted children, Keirouz (1990) stated that "it is possible that having a gifted child in the family creates problems and may have a negative impact on the marital relationship." She also found that "gifted children perceive high amounts of negative affect in their relationships with siblings."

In summary, social interactions may directly affect the self-concept of gifted young people, both in the present and for the future. While this is also true for other adolescents, for gifted persons, the extent of their cognitive development may well affect their perceptions of their social environment.

In addition, the gifted female adolescent who perceives herself as "feminine" may well experience feelings of confusion or consternation as she attempts to deal with her own capabilities for independence, leadership and instrumentality. Other research related to these particular areas will be reviewed in the next section, which deals with "The Coping Self: Relationships Between Achievement and Self-Concept."

*The Coping Self: Relationships Between  
Achievement and Self-Concept*

Is there any reason to expect that a relationship between self-concept and achievement does exist, and in particular, why attempt to examine gifted students' perceptions of any dynamics behind such a relationship? For although educators have long been concerned with enhancing student self-concept in order to bolster achievement, and although many gifted programs themselves aim to enhance student self-concept in order to capitalize on gifted behaviours and achievement, it would appear that research results in this area are discouraging.

Two comprehensive analyses of such studies (Hansford and Hattie, 1982; Wylie, 1979) concluded there was little reason to expect any relationship between self-concept and level of achievement or performance. Wylie (1979) suggests, however, that this has been due to a lack of respect for the complexity of the construct of self-concept, and that "self-concept research has addressed itself to substantive problems before problems of definition, measurement, and interpretation have been resolved" (Wylie, 1979, p. 412). The Hansford and Hattie (1982) study affirmed this, and also concluded that although a global measure of self-concept did little to predict achievement, domain-specific measures were useful as predictors of achievement in particular areas. Therefore, further research which respects the multidimensional nature of the self-concept and the complex dynamics affecting the self-concept could add to our knowledge of the relationship between self-concept and achievement.

What does the literature reflect concerning the conditions necessary for the development of a positive self-concept and its relationship to achievement for gifted students? This review will consider first some of the more significant research that does deal with global aspects, and will then discuss work that has been done using domain-specific points of view.

In considering self-actualization and the conditions necessary for this state, Maslow (1954) emphasized the need for accepting and approving one's "deeper self" before one can truly achieve at all. Bruner (1966) also posited that success at school and achievement in general was accomplished by the development of an inner motivation or reward system and a positive self-concept. Although cognitive abilities may be important to achievement, Gardner (1983) believes that the self and self-knowledge, and feelings about the self, "preside over and mediate among the other forms and lines of intelligence" (p. 276).

A study begun in 1960 and concluded in 1974 (Card, Steel, and Areles, 1980) had as its objective the analysis of the extent to which known sex differences in academic achievement held up when early potential for achievement was controlled. Subjects were initially in grade nine, and then were followed up at 1, 5, and 11 years after the completion of high school, to measure educational and occupational achievements. Although the females in the sample had initially scored higher in educational achievement than the males, 11 years after high school, the males rated higher in educational achievements and salary. In addition, the differences in educational achievements and salary between the "high potential" males and females were consistently and significantly greater than the differences between the comparison groups. It appeared that "between the ages of 23 and 29, the

high potential men "took off" as far as career-related achievement was concerned. High potential women stood still or lost ground" (p. 15). Within that high potential subgroup, achievement-related growth was determined by gender more than by socioeconomic status.

The researchers concluded that it is more difficult for women than for men to translate their potential for achievement into education- and work-related achievement. They attributed much of this to the traditional role expectation of women to accept more responsibility for child-rearing and home-making. Women who had high potential for achievement in their early high school years were especially affected by the conflict between marriage/parenthood and career-related achievement. The authors anticipated that this might change "as high potential women are freed of family responsibilities and make gains in terms of realizing their potential for achievement" (p. 20).

Kerr (1985) also found that post-high school achievement appeared to be more difficult for females than for males who were highly able academically. In a study of her former classmates in a congregated class for gifted students, she discovered that as adults, almost all the males had completed advanced university degrees and were involved in professional or semi-professional occupations. However, one third of the females were at home, two thirds were working in traditional female occupations, and one quarter had never completed a bachelor's degree. This reconfirms the seminal work of Terman and Ogden (1947).

Coopersmith (1967) established that children arrive at self-appraisals sometime before mid-childhood, and that these appraisals do not

simply depend on achievement, they are also determined by specific expectations and by the relationship of one's achievement to one's expectations. If a person has not met her own aspirations, then her achievements - regardless how high - may be seen by her to be inferior. Self-esteem will then be low in that area. He concluded that "the concept of self is thus multidimensional, with the different dimensions reflecting both the diversity of experience, attributes and capacity and different emphases in the process of abstraction" (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 21).

In an attempt to examine some of the dynamics affecting high school students who experienced high achievement in scientific areas, Subotnik (1988) found a significant difference between the self-concept and expectations of the males and females. Whereas male students attributed their success in this area to their own intelligence and creativity, females were more likely to attribute it to their hard work and dedication.

A recent study by Olszewski-Kubilius, Kulieke, Shaw, Willis and Krasney (1990) was designed to examine factors that may predict success or achievement within accelerated high school math classes. One of their findings was that academic self-competence and independence did relate to the learning rate for both males and females, but these feelings of competence had apparently been affected or even determined by tutoring and parental assistance for females as opposed to participation in math clubs and competitions for males.

Virginia Crandall (1967) found that neither intelligence nor motivation per se were reliable predictors of achievement, but that positive expectations for success were such predictors. In other words, a child who had

come to expect that her own efforts would result in success was more liable to continue to strive for and achieve that success. Other researchers are less willing to make such generalized conclusions, although they do acknowledge the role that the ability to make and carry out decisions plays in determining achievement to some extent.

Some studies have found that gifted children generally see themselves as in control of success or failure (Delisle and Renzulli, 1982; Finchman and Barling, 1978; Milgram and Milgram, 1976).

In a study of 284 gifted and talented female adolescents, Hollinger and Fleming (1984) found that the low self-esteem of many of the females was a significant barrier to their feelings of instrumentality (i.e. the feeling that they were capable of producing positive results) and autonomy. They asserted that underachievement in high school could predetermine later underachievement in the career pursuits of these females. Another internal barrier they explored was that of non-assertiveness, which would be particularly detrimental in an academic atmosphere of increased competition. In addition, Hollinger and Fleming investigated the phenomenon of female adolescents' avoidance of success, or fear of success. They theorized that personal unconcern, as referred to by Spence and Helmreich (1978) as a component of the fear of success motive, may be a primary personality characteristic of a young woman who was "not evidencing fear of success despite her apparent success" (p. 135).

In their research, Hollinger and Fleming found that the females with the lowest social self-esteem scores also had the lowest self-perceptions of instrumentality and expressiveness, and only moderate scores on work,

mastery and competitiveness measures. They described this as "the antithesis of androgyny" and therefore counterproductive to creativity. The authors suggested that there is a great need to help the adolescent possessing such characteristics to work toward enhancing her feelings of instrumentality.

The results of this study also noted that of the 284 gifted adolescent females studied, 85 showed no evidence of internal barriers (this was somewhat less than one third of the sample). These were the young women characterized by a strong feeling of instrumentality and expressiveness along with a strong orientation toward work and mastery.

Another study by Hollinger and Fleming (1988) examined the antecedents and correlates of general life satisfaction as reported by 108 gifted and talented young women while in high school, and again three years after leaving high school. They reported that self-perceptions of instrumentality in high school were predictive of occupational confidence and life satisfaction.

Perceiving herself as assertive or instrumental appears to play an important role in creating the gifted and talented young woman's sense of confidence in her ability to achieve her occupational goals while prompting her to report general satisfaction with her life, whatever her achieved goals to date. (p. 257)

Again, they underscore the need to foster such self-perceptions of agency or instrumentality because "the gifted and talented female adolescent may, as a function of socialization, fail to recognize the instrumental qualities required in her role as a poet or a dancer" (p. 258). This is one of the few studies which has a longitudinal perspective with respect to the developing self-image of female adolescents, and that is why it is included in such detail here.

Leroux (1988) studied 60 gifted adolescents who were in special programs in Ontario. She found that the gifted females perceived themselves more positively "as psychologically integrated copers and doers than males" (p. 11). However, "the gifted males perceived themselves more positively as independent achievers, more in control of emotions and impulses than the females" (p. 12) - that is, they were stronger internalizers than the females. She too found evidence of heightened sensitivities in gifted adolescents - to their own individual adjustment to the world, and also to the stereotyped conformity expected of adolescents. These young people found it both difficult and stressful to not conform to social expectations. Her research concluded that adult professionals who work with gifted adolescents need to focus on encouraging the development of a strong, positive sense of self during this frequently stressful time in their lives.

The formation of a definite sense of instrumentality may be a crucial factor in the level of personal satisfaction and achievement as an adult. It is certainly a "critical dimension of self-evaluation and the self-theory" (Harter, 1983, p. 303).

In conclusion, it would appear that the relationship between self-concept and achievement must be seen as multi-dimensional and complex rather than basic and simplistic. Few studies are available to document relationships between domain-specific achievement areas and self-concept of gifted young people, but of those reported, most include gender differences in their findings. The current study will contribute to the area of domain-specific relationships and will further explore such gender differences by investigating the perceptions of the students themselves.

*Relationships Between Special Programs  
for the Gifted and the Developing  
Self-Concepts of the Students Involved*

Is there a correlation between self-concept and special programming for gifted children, and specifically, how might congregating gifted young people in school programs affect their self-concept? This area is related to the section which dealt with the relationships between social interaction and self-concept of gifted children, but this section will emphasize specific research dealing with the effects of special education programs on the self-concepts of the students involved. Many of these reports from the literature are inconclusive, but point to the need for further research. Coleman and Fults (1982) found that gifted students in a homogeneous class had lower self-concept ratings than did gifted students in a heterogeneous class. Hultgren and Marquardt (1986) and Ross and Parker (1980) found that integrated children in grades 5 through 8 tended to have lower self-concept ratings than non-gifted students in the social and physical areas, but higher self-concept in academic and scholastic achievement areas. Milgram and Milgram (1976) reported that although gifted children in grades 4, 5 and 6 had higher self-concept scores than their non-gifted peers, these scores declined throughout the junior high years, and at that point the non-gifted group had generally higher self-concept ratings. Kelly and Colangelo (1984) found that adolescent gifted males had higher global and academic self-concept scores than did their non-gifted peers, but the females did not.

Several studies have noted that there is a significant decline in self-concept among students admitted to a congregated gifted program for the

first time (Culross and Jenkins-Friedman, 1988; Jenkins-Friedman and Murphy, 1988; Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988).

Fults (1981) and Rogers (1980) both found generally lower self-concepts for gifted students than for non-gifted age peers, but other researchers have found no significant differences (Klein and Cantor, 1976).

Few longitudinal studies have been reported, but Chapman and McAlpine (1988) studied the academic self-concepts of intellectually gifted students and regular students over a two-year period. They found that the mainstreamed or integrated gifted students in the study reported higher self-perceptions of ability than their non-gifted peers, but gifted students did not hold more positive perceptions across all school-related areas - only in the academic areas in which they excelled. However, in this study, none of the gifted students had access to any special educational programming.

In a study of the social adjustment of gifted children in Ontario Schools, Schneider et al. (1989) concluded that most gifted children suffer no peer acceptance difficulties and are generally well-adjusted individuals. He reported that there were no significant differences in social competence ratings between gifted and control samples in grades 8 and 10. Unfortunately, this study did not attempt to differentiate between students in different modes of programming (i.e. pull-out, in-class enrichment, full-time congregated class, and so on).

To summarize, the research in this area is inconclusive and often directly contradictory. This is not surprising, in light of the fact that the definition of giftedness is itself elusive and identification procedures for gifted

students vary from one locale to another. The gifted subjects of one researcher may be very dissimilar to the gifted subjects of someone else. Programming options differ from study to study. In addition, there are many instruments or tests used to measure self-concept and self-esteem; each one has a somewhat different theoretical orientation and will thus be measuring different aspects of the self-perceptions.

Educators continue to study ways of enhancing self-concept and self-esteem because of the enormous influence these constructs exert over motivation, achievement and life-span learning. This study may add to our knowledge in the area by presenting the subjective and personal perceptions of adolescents themselves regarding the dynamics surrounding their developing self-concepts. Very few studies have been done using the time-consuming method of qualitative analysis, and yet this may well be the ideal method for examining a topic of this complexity. It would allow for the emergence of information which could not be gathered with the use of a standard self-concept inventory or questionnaire.

The table following will summarize the key concepts from the Review of the Literature.

## CHART II

## KEY CONCEPTS FROM THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

CONCEPT	REFERENCES
<p><b>PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF: CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED YOUNG PEOPLE</b></p> <hr/> <p>Idealism/perfectionism for self and others</p> <p>Dissynchronous development including unusually early commitment to justice and/or political issues</p> <p>Hypersensitivities and increased vulnerability</p>	<p>Delisle, 1990; Dixon, Meyer &amp; Hardy, 1986; Ehrlick, 1982; Hayes &amp; Sloat, 1990; Hollingworth, 1942; Leroux, 1988; Renzulli, 1978; Roeper, 1981; Torrance, 1961</p> <p>Clark, 1983; Dauber &amp; Benbow, 1990; Delisle, 1990; Dixon, Meyer &amp; Hardy, 1986; Hayes &amp; Sloat, 1990; Hollingworth, 1942; Manaster &amp; Powell, 1983; Rogers, 1986; Roeper, 1981; Torrance, 1961</p> <p>Clark, 1983; Dixon, Meyer &amp; Hardy, 1986; Ehrlick, 1982; Groth, 1969; Hayes &amp; Sloat, 1990, Hollinger &amp; Fleming, 1984; Hollingworth, 1942; Kerr, Colangelo &amp; Gaeth, 1988; Leroux, 1988; Lewis, 1968; Roeper, 1981, Silverman, 1981, VanTassel-Baska, 1983</p>
<p><b>SOCIAL SELF: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS (INTRA- AND EXTRA-FAMILIAL) AND SELF-CONCEPT FOR GIFTED YOUNG PEOPLE</b></p> <hr/> <p>Difficulty resolving need for "belongingness" (outside of family)</p> <p>Deficient social skills</p>	<p>Ehrlick, 1982; Hollingworth, 1942; Kerr, Colangelo &amp; Gaeth, 1988; Renzulli, 1978; Roeper, 1981, Silverman, 1983; VanTassel-Baska, 1983</p> <p>Dauber &amp; Benbow, 1990; Hayes &amp; Sloat, 1990; Kerr, Colangelo &amp; Gaeth, 1988; Roeper, 1981; Rogers, 1986; Silverman, 1981</p>

CONCEPT	REFERENCES
<p><b>COPING SELF: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-CONCEPT FOR GIFTED YOUNG PEOPLE</b></p> <hr/> <p>Achievement highly dependent upon positive self-concept</p> <p>No quantitatively documented relationship between self-concept and achievement has been found</p> <p>Defined gender differences in achievement of gifted students/graduates</p> <p>Gifted students are "internalizers," i.e., they see themselves as in control of success and failure</p>	<p>Bruner, 1966; Gardner, 1983; Maslow, 1954; Purkey, 1970</p> <p>Wylie, 1979; Hansford &amp; Hattie, 1982</p> <p>Card, Steel &amp; Areles, 1980; Hollinger &amp; Fleming, 1988, Kelly, Colangelo &amp; Gaeth, 1988; Kerr 1985, Lewis, 1968; Luftig &amp; Nichols, 1990; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1990; Terman, 1947; VanTassel-Baska, 1988</p> <p>Collier, Jacobson &amp; Stahl, 1987; Delisle &amp; Renzulli, 1982; Milgram &amp; Milgram, 1976; Rogers, 1986; Subotnik, 1988</p>
<p><b>RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND SELF-CONCEPT FOR GIFTED STUDENTS</b></p> <hr/> <p>Gifted students have "generally higher" self-concept ratings</p> <p>Gifted students have "generally lower" self-concept ratings</p> <p>No significant difference exists between self-concept of gifted, non-gifted</p>	<p>Kelly &amp; Colangelo, 1984 (for males only); Milgram &amp; Milgram, 1976 (at elementary level only)</p> <p>Fults, 1981, Rogers, 1980</p> <p>Klein &amp; Cantor, 1976; Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham &amp; Crombie, 1989</p>

CONCEPT	REFERENCES
<p>Integrated gifted students have higher self-concept ratings than congregated gifted students</p>	<p>Coleman &amp; Fults, 1982</p>
<p>Integrated gifted students have higher academic self-concept ratings than non-gifted students</p>	<p>Chapman &amp; McAlpine, 1988; Hultgren &amp; Marquardt, 1986; Milgram &amp; Milgram, 1976; Ross &amp; Parker, 1980</p>
<p>Integrated gifted students have lower social and physical self-concept ratings than non-gifted students</p>	<p>Hultgren &amp; Marquardt, 1986; Ross &amp; Parker, 1980</p>
<p>Gifted students experience a temporary decline in self-concept when first enrolled in a congregated program</p>	<p>Culross, 1988, Jenkins-Friedman &amp; Murphy, 1988; Kerr, Colangelo &amp; Gaeth; 1988</p>

### *Summary*

A comprehensive review of the literature revealed a number of studies establishing many psychological characteristics peculiar to gifted young people. Thus there will be a clear basis for discussion after reporting the findings from this particular research. Gifted adolescents are different from other adolescents; their perceptions and interpretations of themselves and of their environment can be expected to be unlike that of other adolescents.

The review also covered the literature dealing with social interactions and social self-concept of gifted young people. Most of the studies found that socializing and social acceptance are not easy for the gifted young person, and that is especially true for the females. Yet social interactions were shown to impact significantly upon the developing self-concept. A connection has been found between the social self-concept of the gifted young female and her present and future achievement; society's mixed messages probably enter into this.

The third section was a review of the literature concerned with the Coping Self domain (that is, competence and achievement) for gifted young people. The research has established that the development of the feeling of "instrumentality" is crucial to the achievement of the gifted young person. That is, young people who learn to trust in their own abilities to effect positive change while in high school are likely to be achievers in later life. Simply being gifted does not ensure this. Gender differences are again apparent, in that gifted young females experience more difficulty in this area than did the males.

In addition, many studies have been done comparing the global or general self-concept ratings of gifted and non-gifted students. These results were often inconclusive, contradictory or simply unable to be compared due to dissimilarities of subjects, settings, programs and test instruments.

Few studies have been concerned with possible program influences upon the self-concept of gifted adolescents, although there was agreement among many researchers that adolescence itself is a critical period, and that gifted adolescents appear to be even more sensitive and vulnerable than other adolescents. Educational programs in general are known to impact upon the students' self-concept in a variety of ways and a program that alters a student's peer group and social structure significantly could affect it even more. Thus the impact of special programming for both male and female gifted students deserves further study.

Research concerning the relationship of self-concept to special program approaches should be amenable to the multi-dimensional nature of self-concept and to the diversity of multiple realities in such a study. A qualitative study is indicated.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. HOW DO GIFTED ADOLESCENTS PERCEIVE THE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF PLACEMENT IN A CONGREGATED CLASS FOR GIFTED STUDENTS ONLY?
  - a) How might being designated or labelled "gifted" affect their self-concept? ("psychological self")
  - b) How might the altered social structure or peer grouping affect their self-concept? ("social self")
  - c) How does the academic standard and competition in such a group affect the self-concept of the students involved? ("coping self")
  - d) How do the expectations and attitudes of the teachers affect the self-concept of these students? ("psychological self" and "coping self")
  - e) How do these adolescents perceive that relationships with non-gifted peers and family members have been affected by their placement in a congregated gifted class? ("social self")
  
2. WHAT MIGHT SOME OF THE FAR-REACHING EFFECTS OF SUCH A PLACEMENT BE?
  - a) How have these classes impacted upon the students' decision-making abilities and career expectations? That is, how has the power/control aspect of the "coping self" been affected?
  - b) How has the altered peer group affected their expectations for themselves regarding achievement? That is, how has the cognitive competence facet of the "coping self" been affected?

## METHODOLOGY

### *The Rationale for a Qualitative Methodology*

A qualitative data-gathering procedure was chosen because of the possibility that it would be more amenable to the diversity of multiple realities and perceptions that exist in such a complex area of study (Borg & Gall, 1989). The Review of the Literature has established that much research concerning the relationship or self-concept to educational practices and programs has been inconclusive and/or contradictory. Educators have been frustrated to find that their efforts in enhancing self-concept and self-esteem have produced few measurable results, according to the research. The Review of the Literature also indicated that this could be because of concomitant problems with definitions, relationships between constructs, the multi-dimensional nature of the constructs, and the nature of the quantitative instruments employed to measure the constructs being evaluated. Is it possible that a qualitative approach might provide insights that were rendered unavailable when quantitative measures were used?

Qualitative research seeks to understand people's perceptions of events in their own environment, and to gain a holistic view of the area under study (Stainback and Stainback, 1984). It is, therefore, anything but simplistic, and will not result in simplistic conclusions. "What sets qualitative research apart most clearly from other forms of research is the belief that the particular physical, historical, material and social environment in which people find themselves has a great bearing on what they think and how they act" (Smith, 1987, p. 178). Therefore this study will be interpretative and interactive, but it will also be done systematically. "Although ethnographers

customarily depend on generative and inductive strategies in the early phases of a research study, they direct later stages of the interactive collection/analysis process to deductive verification of findings" (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982, p. 34). Proponents of qualitative research, such as LeCompte and Goetz, readily acknowledge that internal reliability for such studies can be problematic, but can be enhanced through the use of a tape recorder, detailed notes and observations, and later verifications with the informants.

Stainback and Stainback (1984) stated that qualitative research may be particularly appropriate in the field of special education, where the gap between theory and practice has often been wide. "Drawing qualitative research procedures into the current repertoire of procedures for systematic inquiry in special education could lead to the development of better grounded ideas and theories in special education, a more holistic approach to inquiry, and more attention to the social and educational relevance of research efforts" (Stainback and Stainback, 1984, p. 406). They do conclude, however, that one must explore and scrutinize qualitative research with as much insight and critical analysis as one does when evaluating quantitative studies.

### *The Rationale for Individual In-Depth Interviews*

There are many possible approaches to a qualitative study. The in-depth interview was selected as the vehicle for information collection, because it is, by definition, "modeled after a conversation between equals, rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange... [and] directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 77). Taylor and Bogdan describe this method as particularly appropriate for discovering information about events and activities that cannot be observed directly, and where there are time constraints. For example, one might discover much about the dynamics surrounding the development of self-concept of adolescents if one could "shadow" a dozen such adolescents for a period of four years or so; but reality does not allow for such a study. Therefore, one needs to rely on the perceptions and feelings of the adolescents, as reported to an interviewer who has been able to establish the appropriate atmosphere and rapport.

### *The Data-Gathering Process*

A methodology involving in-depth interviews with twelve students - six from grade 9, and six from grade 13 - was decided upon as an appropriate data-gathering approach to the problem. Although at first glance this does not appear to be a large number of respondents, it does in fact represent approximately 25% of the students in each class and it was expected that these twelve students would provide a sufficient range of perspectives to develop insights into the areas being studied. If this had not been the case, that is, if such a range of perspectives had not been provided, additional students would have been contacted for further interviews.

Selecting students at the grade 9 level and the grade 12/13 level of the program would allow for some comparisons between the perceptions of students in their first year of the gifted high school program, and students in their graduation year. Selection details will follow later.

The investigator first familiarized herself with the program, policies and school setting, and spoke with the administrators, teachers and several students involved in the gifted program. At the time of the study, the program had been in operation for five years. The grade 13 students had thus been members of the first congregated gifted class. The students had been identified as "intellectually gifted" on the basis of teacher recommendations, parent recommendations, achievement and ability testing (details are in Appendix I).

Permission for the research was obtained from the Research Department of the Ottawa Board of Education. An explanatory letter

(Appendix III) was then sent home with all students involved in the grade 9 and 13 gifted classes. Those students who were under the age of majority were required to return an informed consent form from their parent or guardian. Confidentiality was assured with the understanding that all descriptive data would be anonymous.

The investigator then spent three days at the school, meeting with the students in groups of ten to eighteen, in order to establish rapport and to focus on potential categories and questions to be used in the interviews. Each group met two or three times, for about 40 minutes on each occasion. The initial interview questions, structured in the areas or domains of self-concept dealt with in the Introduction and in the Review of the Literature, were based upon questions previously field-tested and used for interviewing gifted high school students in Southern Ontario (Leroux, 1988). The questions were further refined by the researcher after studying questions posed on the Coopersmith (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory and the Offer (Offer, Ostrov and Howard, 1982) Self-Image Questionnaire. Interview questions were to be open-ended rather than closed, which is to say, the questions were structured so that simple "yes" or "no" answers would not occur. Instead, respondents would hopefully provide more personal and insightful information because they were given the freedom to diverge.

At the group session, a tape recorder was used to record reactions and responses to the questions, and observer notes were taken as well. If the phrasing of the question was unclear or not in the students' vernacular, they were quick to provide the appropriate language. Reactions and responses to these open-ended questions were also used to redefine and focus the categories and questions which would direct the individual interviews. In this way, the

group sessions could be referred to as "focus groups", which are recognized to be of assistance in establishing the parameters of an issue, learning the participants' "language" in order to further pursue the data collection, and defining response categories (Berwald & Bellerose, 1990).

The questions were then reworded in the language of the students, and with an emphasis on the dynamics that they appeared to give importance to. For example, in-school issues were ascribed great importance in the conversations, as were peer relationships. The importance of family relationships was acknowledged but was not discussed at length by the students. This is in keeping with the naturalistic approach; that is, a refinement of the problem and revisions to the process are necessary to the unfolding of the information being gathered (Spradley, 1979). [See Appendix II for the interview questions.]

Twelve participants from the focus groups then were selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews. Merriam's criteria (1991) was used to select the interviewees. This number, representing approximately 25 percent of the total number of gifted students in the grade 9 and 13 groups, would hopefully be adequate to provide information to arrive at common threads or themes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The intention was not to establish numerical comparisons or statistics. If more participants had been needed to clarify issues, additional students would have been contacted. A purposive selection (Patton, 1980) was used in order to achieve maximum variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The respondents selected represented varying family structures, parent occupations, socioeconomic status, and cultures. To achieve internal validity, and to possibly differentiate gender effects, three females and three males would be selected from each grade grouping. This number of respondents does not justify generalizing about gender differences, but it does

allow for some discussion and comparisons with information presented in the Review of the Literature.

After selecting these twelve participants, the researcher contacted them by telephone and asked each of them to take part in an individual interview. All twelve were receptive and agreed to be interviewed. They were assured that all information would be confidential. They understood that the interviews would be taped, using an unobtrusive mini-recorder, and that any verbatim comments used in the document would be ascribed to a pseudonym (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Each interview took place in the subject's chosen location: his or her own home, the interviewer's home, a quiet restaurant, or in one case, in a neighbourhood park. The length of each interview was between one and two hours, with the first 10 or 15 minutes used for casual conversation to establish an open atmosphere and comfort. Interviews were semi-structured around the set of questions [Appendix II], with the participants being given freedom to diverge to areas of further interest to them. The ratio of interviewer to respondent "talk" was approximately 1:10.

In conducting interview research, the qualifications of the interviewer are naturally of some importance (Borg and Gall, 1989; McMillan and Schumacher, 1984; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). This researcher has an undergraduate degree and also graduate level courses in psychology and guidance (including interview techniques), and has had considerable experience in a variety of interviewing roles with adolescents.

Although the intent of these interviews was not therapeutic, the empathy-oriented, sensitive listening approach of Carl Rogers (1975) was to be employed, as this would be in perfect keeping with the naturalistic paradigm:

Empathy... involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, ...to whatever he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings.

(Rogers, 1975, p.4)

The young people being interviewed spoke freely and openly about their experiences, so much so that frequently an appropriate closure for the interview was not easy to achieve. All twelve were good informants, in that they were thoughtful about responses and able to verbalize those thoughts clearly and distinctly. One respondent did not have as good a command of the English language as did others; therefore fewer of her quotes are included but her themes were echoed in the comments of others. If the interviewer's paraphrasing was inappropriate at times, the students were quick to say so and to clarify exactly what they were trying to express.

A category identified in the Review of the Literature and supported by two or more respondents became a research category. If an issue pervaded one person's description, this too became a category, but was described as a unique phenomenon.

While the interview was in progress, the researcher made brief notes of non-verbal cues, inconsistencies or repeated themes in order to probe for further details later in the interview, and to assist with the subsequent analysis. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, resulting in a total of over 300 pages of typed transcript. In order to deal with reliability, some

participants were contacted after the interview, to clarify some of the information or follow up on points he or she had made during the interview.

### *The Process of Analysis*

As research that would "elicit from subjects their own interpretation of reality" (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p. 54), the interview transcripts were then subjected to a technique of analytic induction. This involved reading and listening to and re-reading the transcripts to search for repetitive themes, to further refine the categories and to note consistencies within the sub-groups (grade 9 girls, grade 9 boys, grade 13 girls, grade 13 boys) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The transcripts were coded according to the main subject areas established in the Introduction and in the Review of the Literature: Psychological Self, Social Self, and Coping Self. Within these categories, the following sub-categories were evident: Perfectionism; Idealism; Intolerance; Early Commitment to "Causes" or Justice Issues; Hypersensitivities; Selection of Close Friends; Feelings of Social Isolation and Social Acceptance; Close Family Relationships; A Need to Feel Important to Others; About Competition and Feelings of Competence; Feelings of Instrumentality; and Impact of Labelling.

What is at issue is the best means to "make sense" of the data in ways that will, first, facilitate the continuing unfolding of the inquiry, and, second, lead to maximal understanding (in the sense of *verstehen*) of the phenomenon being studied.

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 224)

A system of index cards was developed to cross-reference information from the typed pages. Responses were first colour-coded according to the categories of Psychological Self, Coping Self and Social Self and were then assigned to a series of index cards labelled with the sub-categories

(above) that emerged from the data. "Data analysis is open-ended and inductive... in contrast to the focused and deductive analysis common in conventional inquiry" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 224).

Although there were interview questions that resulted in unanimous or majority responses, it was not intended that such responses would be reported and others ignored. Exceptional responses are reported as such; common consensus responses are also reported to be clearly that.

The next chapters will present the findings from the interviews. These will be reported thematically but not judgmentally, and discussion of the implications of the informants' comments will be reserved for the chapter following the findings section.

## *FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS*

This chapter will present the perceptions of the gifted adolescents. The findings will be reported in paraphrase form, but will use many direct quotations in order to clearly express the respondents' feelings and points of view. The presentation of the findings will follow those categories established in the process of analysis.

Within the general domain of Psychological Self, responses will be presented concerning Perfectionism, Idealism, Intolerance, Early Commitment to Causes or Justice Issues; and Hypersensitivities.

Within the general domain of Social Self, responses will be presented concerning Selection of Close Friends, Feelings of Social Isolation and Social Acceptance (including the use of the term "normal" to describe non-gifted age-peers), and Close Family Relationships.

Within the general domain of Coping Self, responses will be presented concerning A Need to Feel Important to Others, About Competition and Feelings of Competence, Feelings of Instrumentality, and the Impact of Labelling.

Discussion concerning these findings will be reserved for the chapter following this one.

## *Psychosocial Characteristics of Gifted Adolescents*

How did these gifted adolescents describe themselves? They spoke about feelings of impatience with themselves and others. They referred to their own perfectionistic tendencies and idealism. Intense commitments to justice issues were apparent, both personal and worldwide. Their comments reflected extreme sensitivities and some vulnerability. They did not like being labelled "gifted."

### **Perfectionism, Idealism and Intolerance**

or

**"I'm never quite satisfied..."**

In many different ways, the students consistently expressed their impatience with themselves and their drive for perfectionism. They did not feel complacent or smug about their abilities. On the contrary, they expressed insecurities and self-dissatisfaction. High expectations for themselves were very evident in the interview responses. Jonathan, in the older group, provided a lucid summary of these feelings:

I firmly believe that it's not what you have, it's what you do with it. And although... I'll always appreciate having a supposedly higher I.Q., I'll never feel satisfied by it. I'll never feel it's enough. It's one of those necessary but not sufficient things...

There was also a repeated theme of impatience and often intolerance for others; these young people did not "suffer fools gladly". There

were many responses to indicate that teachers and parents were frequently the recipients of these critical thoughts and feelings.

...there are so many teachers that are completely boring or completely turn a student off. They're not interesting at all. ...the level is so low it's ridiculous... Teachers, besides parents, they're probably the most important people in your lives...  
(Matt, grade 9)

I took a course that I really enjoyed. I didn't learn much but I had a lot of fun because I knew more than the teacher did.  
(Samuel, grade 13)

My mother gives me advice all the time... she thinks I'm listening but I'm not [because] I know a lot more about those things than she does.  
(Sue, grade 9)

The students also indicated that they often have difficulty tolerating the opinions, ideas or actions of their peers. The behaviour of their peers did not meet their own expectations.

There are several people... who I think are contemptible in what they do... it's not because they're stupid. It's just because they're fools. They could do better.  
(Jennifer, grade 9)

Class discussions turn me right off. They [classmates]... have nothing interesting to say.  
(Matt, grade 9)

I joined a lot of clubs and activities at first, but they weren't well run... the leaders were trying hard enough... it's not their fault they didn't know enough to do the job right. But I quit most of them anyway; it was just too frustrating.  
(Ron, grade 13)

## An Early Commitment to Political and Justice Issues

or

"I only want to change the world."

There was an intensity of concern for a variety of causes espoused by these twelve gifted adolescents. They were anxious to identify and deal with injustices, as they saw them, around their own school and in their own personal lives, but they seemed even more concerned about issues in the wider world. These discussions were not initiated by specific questions about such topics, but rather emerged from questions around major influences and personalities in their lives.

World issues ranged from socialist politics to children's rights:

[I was a] progressive activist type at first... there were quite a few people in the gifted program... who are unusually political, at both ends of the spectrum... I wasn't very tolerant... I tended to get more mature about it... and became more accepting of other people's beliefs... Like, if their father's a Tory M.P... it's not their fault, you know. So then I would associate with them... but not necessarily with fascists.  
(Ron, Grade 13)

When I go out and I'm with some of my friends and they see... some handicapped people... and make fun of them... I just feel bad and I say, "I think that's not nice, because I'm sure they didn't choose to be that way."  
(Daniel, Grade 9)

Stephen Biko... the only person that I didn't know personally that has had any sort of effect on my overall life... As a person he gave me more goals to work towards... He changed my thinking towards South Africa and he changed my feelings, my thoughts a lot toward Britain's leaders and Margaret Thatcher especially.  
(Megan, Grade 9)

I really love working with children, I always have... When I was younger, I could hardly sleep sometimes... worrying about kids who were having a hard time. So [when thinking about a future career] I wanted to come up with something that I would... feel I was

doing something to help them, as well as just being with them.

(Gillian, Grade 13)

In terms of personal justice issues for the students one example frequently referred to was the account of the older group's "rebellion," which came near the end of their second year in the program. Apparently the students had several major assignments which were all due at approximately the same time, and meanwhile they viewed their non-gifted peers busily studying for final exams. In their words:

I understood the program and I was handling it, I thought fairly well. I could see that other people were starting to get swamped and I was feeling swamped too... It got a little panicky and... we almost had a strike... we signed a petition and we said that we were going to hold a sit-in in the hall until something was done about it.

(Samuel, Grade 13)

...so there was everybody else studying for exams and we couldn't study for our exams because we were doing so much work... The next year they gave us out a little schedule at the start of the year and staggered major projects so there was one a month or so.

(Liz, Grade 13)

Although this situation had occurred almost three years prior to the interview, it still loomed large in the memories of the older students. The feelings of personal injustice had not left them.

Interestingly, the grade 9 students also perceived their workload in the gifted program to be unfair. In addition, they were very concerned about marks and were adamant that they should be given marks they had earned, relative to other students in the same grade, not relative to their gifted peers. Typical of their comments were these:

Some of the teachers expect you, simply because you're gifted, to do more work. Like, there's a city-wide essay that we have to do and we have to follow a special

format and the essay was supposed to be from between four to five hundred words. But our teacher made it between eight hundred and one thousand words, simply because we're gifted.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

They [teachers] tell us not to worry about marks, not to compare with last year. But last year I got all 90's and this year I'm getting 70's, so of course I compare. I deserve 90's for all the work I do.  
(Joe, Grade 9)

### **Hypersensitivities and Vulnerability**

With regard to heightened sensitivities, the students made intermittent comments throughout the interviews that indicated that they could be very easily wounded or "put down" by seemingly innocuous comments or the actions of others. In particular, they did not like being referred to as "gifted", or worse yet, "nifty-gifties" by their peers. Comments from schoolmates, teachers, or family members that served to point out their differences left the students feeling wounded. They were also deeply affected by comments that indicated that they had not lived up to expectations people had for them.

These students expressed deep sensitivity to the world around them. They worried about racial injustice, starving or abused children, the rights of the handicapped, the spread of AIDS, the political situation in North America and abroad.

They did not express vulnerabilities to outside influences or peer pressure in their personal lives. They spoke as if they felt immune to those:

I'm not into drinking or drugs. Some of my friends drink but that doesn't mean I have to... I suppose if they started to pressure me, I'd just drop them.  
(Daniel, grade 9)

We don't have that problem (drugs) at our school. At least I don't know of anyone that does. But I guess I wouldn't associate with them if they did... so maybe there are some people, but I don't know of any.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

I've always gone my own way. Maybe I wanted to be with the more "in" group, but I didn't NEED to be.  
(Liz, Grade 13)

*The Social Self: Relationships Between  
Social Interactions and Self-Concept  
for these Gifted Adolescents*

**Selection of Close Friends**

or

**"I want to be accepted, but I want to be me."**

Close relationships are important to human beings at all stages of their journey through life. Each of us seeks to satisfy the need to belong. The gifted young people were asked to talk about their own friendships and relationships, both within and outside of the family structure.

The younger students indicated that most of their closest friends were also in the school's gifted program. They were anxious to explain that this was only because they were together so much of the day. They would normally take at least four of their classes together, and in most cases, even more than four. One might expect that classes such as gym, typing or music would give them an opportunity to be in a completely heterogeneous mixture of grade nine or ten students, but the students reported that they often ended up together even in such classes. This appeared to be coincidental, and probably occurred because of timetabling logistics. That is, if these students are already enrolled in four or more gifted courses, limited space was left on their timetables to fit in their optional courses, and when a class such as gym or music or whatever WAS fitted into the schedule, it would be at a suitable time for several of them. Thus they could indeed end up with many of their gifted classmates even in non-gifted level courses.

But do the gifted students actually select other gifted students as good friends simply because they are together so much? Or are other dynamics at work? Many comments indicated that the students were most comfortable with their gifted peers. Only one student mentioned that his best friend attended another school; however, it was interesting to note that this friend had also been identified for the gifted program but had chosen not to enter it. Their friendship had been formed during enrichment classes in grades 7 and 8.

The older students had also found their closest friendships among their gifted classmates, and reflected that it must have been because

We were segregated almost entirely... at least that's how I think it was... although in my case, I hung out with some of the normal kids, if I can call them that (I suppose that's not right). But anyway most of my friends were still in the gifted groups.  
(Ron, Grade 13)

...most of the people in the gifted program hung around with people within the gifted program. Even that popular group which was made up of both gifted people and non-gifted, the gifted people in that group still were closer to each other than they were to the other people in that group, I found. It was strange.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

#### **Feelings of Social Isolation; Feelings of Acceptance**

**"I'd been picked on for three years... The first day of September in grade 9 was a much happier day."**

The students were encouraged to talk about their feelings with regard to being in a group with other gifted students. Some of the students had felt fairly comfortable in their enrichment settings in grades 5 through 8, but most of them reported a new kind of acceptance within the grade 9 gifted group.

The thing I noticed most was that there was a different, there seemed to be different attitudes of the people in the gifted program than of the people in enrichment [referring to grades 5 through 8] ...a lot of kids in the enrichment program had problems because their friends in other classes figured that they were snobbish or elitist and that type of thing and they were trying their best to get away from that image... there really is an attitude at [this school] that achievement is a good thing, socially acceptable.  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

For many of the students, the gifted program provided their first opportunity to feel as though they belonged, or were a part of a group. They remembered grades 7 and 8 as being especially difficult because it did not seem appropriate to let others know that you were smart; they described it as not being "cool" to respond or participate enthusiastically in an academic class that interested you. Girls particularly mentioned the need to conform during those years, but boys who were not heavily involved in sports also felt the pressure:

The competition at [the grade 7 & 8 school] was to be as rebellious as possible and as anti-teacher as possible so there really wasn't any academic competition or if there was, it was kept very quiet. But it was kind of scary...  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

When I came out of enrichment, [at the end of grade 8] I was not that self-confident because, well, I'd been picked on for three years... The first day of September in grade 9 was a much happier day.  
(Ron, Grade 13)

Once in the gifted program, they felt that their individualism was accepted by their classmates. Most of the students used the word "normal" to describe non-gifted age-peers, and this was not meant to be disparaging. Indeed, vocal inflections and facial expressions gave the term "normal" a positive and perhaps enviable meaning. All of the students interviewed seemed

to have accepted the idea that they "were not normal", but this acceptance could best be described as a grudging acceptance.

I think they understand [what it's like] more, because the normal kids, you know, or the advanced kids, they sort of... they've been normal all the time, you know. They might not understand the extremes.  
(Matt, Grade 9)

Referring to her new-found acceptance from friends in the program, one grade 9 girl commented:

They like that I AM individualistic. They like that I am not cool. In grade 8, one of the girls in this group came up to me and said "You know, you ought to eat lunch some time with us... You're pretty enough." I couldn't believe it. Pretty! ...So, why I like me is because I had a chance to [join their group] and I didn't want to. Here that's OK.  
(Jennifer, Grade 9)

The students placed great value on having a sense of humour themselves, and having friends with a good sense of humour. They were also attracted to "intellectual" people with similar, but not identical, interests:

I didn't hang around with people that were into drinking, drugs or smoking.  
(Jonathan, Grade 13)

I'm really looking for people who share common interests ...and well, people that, I don't know, it's hard to say it, people that I get along with... people that share at least some common view points... I guess I'd have to say people some degree of intelligence or people that I can hold a conversation with, that type of thing... it's kind of elitist and that's something I'm trying to get away from.  
(Ron, Grade 13)

They have to have basically the same interests as me... mostly, well, intellectual, and leisure... playing games, stuff like that... I'm not that much into sports.  
(Matt, Grade 9)

...but I get bored with people EXACTLY like me... The point of spending time with friends is to get different opinions and do different things... otherwise I could just spend the time with myself.  
(Megan, Grade 9)

Did they experience or perceive any conflict between being a high achiever academically and achieving social acceptance?

Although they all referred to "someone they knew" who was a super-achiever and a social isolate, each of the students interviewed claimed not to find a conflict for themselves between high achievement and social acceptance, once they were at this high school.

...the two can sometimes be mutually exclusive... I know that there are people who are super achievers that don't do anything else and that makes it difficult to make friends, but I didn't really have that problem because I already had friends, and they were making friends, and so the circle got wider.  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

...there were always people who didn't wish to socialize with anybody... people who did that constantly throughout the first year, and then after that, they got mixed in with the other people, and they sort of came out of their shells... I think they just did that [didn't socialize] because they were scared that people wouldn't like them... if they acted the way they really were.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

These adolescents differentiated between being socially accepted and having an active social life, however. Most felt that they partied less, dated less and had less fun than did their non-gifted peers. Again some were willing to blame this on the gifted program:

...there really wasn't a great opportunity to meet kids outside of the gifted program and I'm sure you must have heard that a million times... It would have been a positive thing to have been able to meet a lot of

the other kids that went to that school... (it) would have made for a better social life for me.  
(Jonathan, Grade 13)

...I had a good social life last year because... I was in the mainstream again. I was in grade 13... taking the same courses as everyone else.  
(Liz, Grade 13)

...I can't prove that because I was in the gifted program that it made for a dull social life but I would say it probably contributed.  
(Ron, Grade 13)

...I don't want to be different socially and I think being around mainstream people is important to having a normal social life.  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

Some formed boyfriend-girlfriend relationships early in their high school years but looked back on this not as "being in love" but as filling a need:

It was sort of a need to say, this is my boyfriend, I am going out with someone, somebody likes me. But there was that select group of people who were very comfortable with ALL the people in that group and they didn't seem so anxious to find just one person that was special to them.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

In summary, while the students talked about very positive feelings of acceptance from being in a group with their intellectually gifted peers, they were uncomfortable with the separation from other students in the school:

...apartheid ...apartheid of the minds.  
(Matt, Grade 9)

### Close Family Relationships

"Of course my family is important... they know and love me."

It was clear from the interviews that intra-familial relationships had significantly influenced the students' self-concepts. How did the young people describe some of the dynamics that were at work? How did they perceive these influences?

All students freely discussed family impact on decision-making, and the older students were glad to talk about their family relationships in general. The younger students were more guarded in their response, but all of them referred to loving and supportive homes, regardless of the parents' marital or socioeconomic status, which varied widely from one student to the next. Students who discussed their family settings in detail described them as close, accepting, sometimes competitive, sometimes protective:

Our family is very, very close. My best friend would be my sister... We're quite competitive... We're all urging each other on.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

Our family's always very supportive and while we all strive to achieve, we're still... very accepting of one another...  
(Jonathan, Grade 13)

It turned out that my mother is my best friend... We talk constantly about everything.  
(Liz, Grade 13)

My family's very important to me... but I'm not going to go into specifics.  
(Megan, Grade 9)

My family's not competitive... my brother's in the gifted program... but there's no jealousy or competition... we don't really care how each other do... We (my family) fight about things, but generally we understand each other.  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

I come from a very close knit family. It seems to be kind of common here [at Lisgar] ...but they made a very big thing out of protecting me from opportunities where I would fail and this I think conditioned me for a long time.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

Although these students came from a variety of settings - single-parent, dual-parent, and parent plus step-parent homes - the consistent theme was that of clearly defined support and affection. The older students were more open and willing to acknowledge and discuss this at length than were the younger ones, but all of the students described their family relationships in positive terms. The caring and support of their families appeared to be very important to them. This aspect of dynamics affecting the self-concept will be dealt with further in the Discussion section.

*The Coping Self: Relationships Between  
Achievement and Self-Concept*

**The Need To Feel Important to Others**

**"I used to be a leader, a helper..."**

The interview data included many comments which indicated that these gifted students had a great need to feel useful and therefore important to others. Many of them referred to the opportunities they had had in lower grades to provide leadership and assistance to other students and to teachers. They had become accustomed to having others look to them for help, and they remembered this in a very positive light. These students had tutored classmates, organized school activities, been team captains for debates and for sporting events, shown teachers how to use computers and audio-visual equipment, and so on. Jennifer's comments were typical:

We were looked up to. [In grades 7 and 8] ...we were the only two who, if anybody had a problem or something, they would always come to us for help.  
(Jennifer, Grade 9)

Now that she was in the gifted program, she felt that her usefulness to others had declined, and that no one needed her expertise or her leadership.

Well, they're all smarter than me here. Who would ever need my help?  
(Jennifer, Grade 9)

A few of the students spoke of the pleasure they now found in a variety of club involvements and sports in high school. It was interesting to note that each of those students was actually in a leadership role for that activity.

### About Competition and Feelings of Competence

"Competition's not for me, I leave it to the boys."

The students were unanimous in their feeling that entrance into the gifted program meant a much higher level of competition than they had felt in previous grades. However, males and females appeared to deal with this competitive spirit in very different ways. While the males viewed the competition as interesting, challenging, healthy or even fun, all but one of the females did not appreciate the competitiveness and had developed various coping strategies in order to "handle" it. The one female who saw value in the competitive aspect of academic studies was the same female who wished she could operate her life on logic only and dispense with emotions. She felt that competition at school would somehow toughen her for adult life.

Being the top dog... didn't matter to me... partly because everybody realized that it was impossible to be top dog all the time.  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

I like it [competition]. Last year I always got the top mark in science... I didn't have to do anything to get it. This year I have to work for it... sometimes I don't get it. It's just more interesting that way.  
(Joe, Grade 9)

I didn't like it... I wasn't one of the smartest kids any more. I guess my confidence in myself sort of went down.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

If they get a 90 without studying and I study for five hours and I get an 80, sure I'm going to be a little upset ...I felt extremely competent when... I was the best person in the class.  
(Megan, Grade 9)

The one female exception stated:

...we have one girl who's better than me - well, that's not right - I mean, she has a better average than I do. She's really good at math; but I'm determined [to do better than her].  
(Jennifer, Grade 9)

Several of the respondents did refer to feeling "stressed-out," pressured or anxious about the competition.

Others, particularly the girls, appeared to have developed strategies for dealing with these feelings of decreased competence. They rationalized that marks weren't that important anyway, that they didn't want to spend too much time on studying and homework (there was more to life than school work), or that they simply were less capable than the students who now got the best marks.

There were all these smart people and I realized... well, I don't want to be doing homework for the rest of my life. I really didn't like being placed in all that competition with the other smart people.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

I'm not one of them [achieving excellence]... and my real friends don't care...  
(Megan, Grade 9)

Some of the kids are just super-brains, you know, so I'm not up to them. I do a lot of other things.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

Some of the other dynamics contributing to the students feelings of competence within a subject or course were explored. The students often felt very positive about their own specific capabilities if their marks and other achievement in a course were superior to everyone else - but this seemed only to be true for a course that "mattered" to them, in terms of their own current interests or relevance for their future.

I got 100% on the city-wide exam... I think it was the only 100% in the gifted class... I did exceptionally well for some reason. That was fun!  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

I was the best in the typing class. I would have preferred if she [the teacher] had said nothing... it wasn't important because... so now I know I'd make a

good secretary but that doesn't mean I want to become one!  
(Megan, Grade 9)

I feel good about a course if I feel I'm learning something, that I'm doing something worthwhile. Also, if I can see where it's going, that helps too ...in the sense that it has a real application somewhere down the line.  
(Ron, Grade 13)

I felt really stupid when he would leave us to do the work... he'd say, work at your own pace, solve it yourself, and when you went to him with a question, he would say, "well, that's what I want you to tell me" and it was the most annoying thing... I learned a lot less that year.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

In addition to "being the best" and feeling that the material being studied was relevant for them, there were other factors that seemed to influence the students' feelings of competence in a course of study. One of the most significant themes was that of whether or not the students could assimilate the new material, and that often depended upon their ability to relate it to previous knowledge and/or experience. They could only assimilate knowledge that made sense to them. Their feelings of competence were strengthened when their attempts to make sense of new material were respected by the teacher, and when their "why" and "what if" questions were answered or explored.

The most interesting subject I take is Law. That's because I ask a lot of questions and I say "what if" a lot and I really want to know.  
(Jennifer, Grade 9)

Most of the girls I know did enjoy English more. I enjoyed reading and commenting and trying to figure out how that person was thinking, rather than just going through obscure formulas... which I couldn't ever figure out or find out the point of.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

The young people's comments indicated that their feelings of competence within any course or activity depended more than anything upon the instructor. They referred to teachers who had encouraged them to become involved and interested in an area that they had previously dismissed as boring or too difficult. Other teachers had added to their feelings of competence by providing explanations or presenting material in such a way that the students were able to relate it to previous knowledge or experience, and thus assimilate the new knowledge with ease. The students referred to teachers who not only accepted their somewhat bizarre sense of humour, but who would enter into it themselves. This sense of humour seemed to be a necessary aid in accepting their own shortcomings and feelings of incompetence in a given subject area. As one of the younger girls stated:

Science! I am so stupid in Science! We have to take Gifted Science and everyone knows more than me ...I never studied Science before this year... But it's OK... he [the teacher] just jokes about it and it's not a big deal... He's there after school and I get lots of extra help.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

The data revealed some interesting divisions along gender lines. Five of the six girls enjoyed and felt very capable in the areas of English Literature and Creative Writing. Four of the girls held an active dislike for science. As Liz, in grade 13, said:

[The attitude was] because you're smart, you have to be good in science and if you're good in science that was a mark of how intelligent you really are ...if you can't be a rocket scientist, what good are you, anyway? ...that's ridiculous! ...I hated it.

Five of the boys felt that they had less talent in English than in other subjects, but none mentioned a dislike for the subject. Five girls, but only one boy, included music as one of their main extra-curricular and in-

school activities. Only one girl spoke about her involvement in sports, but for four of the boys, sports were very important.

### Feelings of Instrumentality

"The important decisions are made by ME."

These interviews gave strong support to the theory that there is a link between intellectual giftedness and a determination to be in charge of decision-making. These young people saw themselves as responsible for their own successes and failures, and also for important choices and decisions, both in the present and in the future.

Although peers do influence their decision-making to some extent, the younger adolescents spoke as though THEY themselves were the primary forces.

I wouldn't do it because "someone" is doing it... I would say I'm the primary influence on decisions I make.

(Megan, Grade 9)

I would never do anything that I'm not comfortable with... they might be my "influence", maybe to do something that otherwise I wouldn't have thought of, but that's a different situation.

(Sue, Grade 9)

With some things, you just do your own thing. Maybe they [friends] don't like it but that's just your own decision.

(Matt, Grade 9)

[about his girlfriend] I don't know if she influences things that I do; it's just WHEN I do things... and it's sort of the same thing for her.

(Daniel, Grade 9)

Peers had even less influence over the decisions made by students in the older group, and to some extent parental input seemed to have assumed a slightly greater importance. The parents were not the choice-

makers, but their opinions and advice were given more weight by the older students than by the younger students.

It's more important to me that my family's happy with a decision than my friends, because I can always find more friends.

(Samuel, Grade 13)

My parents were a little leery about... going to university at 16, and that was their advice and that was sort of in back of my mind, but that wasn't the main way I made the decision. My decision was that I didn't want to be going to university at 16.

(Gillian, Grade 13)

The students in the younger group seemed to allow their parents to control certain academic aspects of their lives - for example, whether or not they would attend the program at Lisgar. Several stated that they did not feel it was their choice to be there, and that given the choice, they would not be in the gifted program:

She [mother] wanted me to go to... for the enrichment program... and I didn't really want to go. I was really mad when I found out I had to go but I went there and I ended up liking it... at Lisgar, I didn't really want to go there either... I wanted to go to... but my mum again wanted me to go into gifted so she pushed me to go to Lisgar.

(Daniel, grade 9)

As the interview progressed, it was clear that this was practically the only area in which Daniel's mom was allowed to make a decision for him. Sue's attitude was similar. She and Daniel were representative of the other students, in that they were very much in charge of choosing their own courses and activities.

She [mother] doesn't choose my courses or anything - well, she has to sign the form and we talk about it, but that doesn't often change anything - but she was the one who said I should go to this program and give it a try. Or I wouldn't have.

(Sue, Grade 9)

The viewpoints and examples set by their siblings, particularly older siblings, tended to exert more influence in their lives than did that of either friends or parents.

I was influenced a lot by my brothers and sisters... I've looked at what they were doing and became interested in that.

(Jonathan, Grade 13)

Usually he does [influence the decisions I make]. Obviously HIS advice is something that I usually listen to... I would listen to him more than I would listen to my friends.

(Matt, Grade 9)

I already know that I don't want to be anything like my older sister.

(Megan, Grade 9)

Teachers and other school professionals seemed to influence the feelings of instrumentality of these students, but in the localized environment of the institution only. The students felt, for example, that their protest over too heavy a workload and too many written assignments had accomplished little.

...they took away maybe one or two [assignments] but they said "we can't really take away the rest, you have to do them" and so we just ended up doing them.

(Gillian, Grade 13)

The younger students also expressed feelings of powerlessness within the institution. They clearly saw teachers, administrators and guidance counsellors as the power-holders.

In general we just complain amongst ourselves... most students don't feel that anything can be done about it.

(Matt, Grade 9)

When it came to making choices and plans for the future - universities, careers and family life - the students were very vocal about their need to feel in control of that.

My parents are both [professionals]... and when I was young, I thought that I wanted to have the same career. I've since decided that I have no interest at all [in that field], so there's the extent of their influence.  
(Samuel, Grade 13)

Nobody helped me make that choice... My mother, maybe... I would discuss it with her. But I think it was really my own choice [of university and career].  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

The younger students expressed the same wish to control their own future, and they were determined not to allow anyone to push them to make choices until THEY were ready to do that. At this point in their lives (the end of grade 9), they were not interested in selecting a career path.

I have not made any future plans or anything... I'm not really concerned with that yet... I'm not about to ...I'm not ready to decide what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

All I know is that I don't want to go into medicine... I don't like cutting people open. But I'm not making any decisions yet.  
(Matt, Grade 9)

Most of the young women included marriage and family life as being important to them. The younger participants appeared to give this more consideration and emphasis than the older ones.

I might not have a career. My career might be raising a family.  
(Megan, Grade 9)

I certainly assume that I'll have a family... and a career.  
(Sue, Grade 9)

The older girls also referred to including a family in their futures, but did not give it top priority any more.

It's [marriage] not my first priority. I feel that's just going to come along naturally.  
(Gillian, Grade 13)

I'm not certain about my career plans yet but... I need to be well established before thinking about marrying anyone.  
(Liz, Grade 13)

Jennifer (grade 9), the student who enjoyed competition and said that her closest friends were all male, spoke at length about career possibilities and options for her future, but did not once refer to the inclusion of a family in these plans. When asked for her thoughts on that subject, she said that she rarely thought about such things and hardly knew what to say.

None of the boys volunteered that having a family was part of their plan, and appeared to be surprised that anyone would even ask at this stage of their lives.

Also with respect to future plans, the writer found it interesting that two of the girls in the graduating class had done exceptionally well in math and science courses, and had taken several of these at the O.A.C. level. One of those girls was planning to enter nursing the following year, because "I want to work with children... I was trying to decide between being a nurse or a teacher" (Gillian). Her mother, a medical para-professional, had encouraged her to apply for medical school but Gillian did not want to do this since it would take a long time, require a great deal of effort and money (although her parents had assured her they would take care of the finances), and because she might not be accepted if she did apply:

...there might be other people who have higher marks...  
a more impressive resume than me... I wanted to  
choose something that I could definitely get into.

*The Impact of Labelling*

or

**"Don't call me "nifty gifty"!"**

**Being picked out by my peers as being smart was okay.  
...whereas being picked out by adults as being smart  
was not something I liked. (Gillian, grade 13)**

This theme was echoed by almost every student interviewed (Jennifer didn't mention it). No specific question seemed to initiate comments about the labelling; some of the young people raised the subject when they were talking about their friendships, others raised it when discussing achievement and competition. Still others mentioned it near the end of the interview, in response to the interviewer's paraphrasing of important points and attempt to reach closure. It was clear that this issue affected the students personally.

It became apparent to the writer that students who attend school out of their own neighbourhoods are frequently asked "why" - especially by adults, who probably use the "what school do you attend?" question as a conversation-starter or just something innocuous to say to a young person, but also by other young people whom they meet for the first time. They felt embarrassed to admit that they were in a program for gifted students; some of them got around this by replying that they went to Lisgar because their parents thought it was a good school. One girl would tell people that she was in "special ed." - and said that seldom did anyone ask for details!

Although they admitted to having some amount of pride in having been chosen for the program, they did not want to be seen as being different

from the other students, at least not when their "difference" had been acknowledged by adults rather than their peers. They also did not want to be seen as conceited or bragging. The "gifted" label was problematic.

We weren't trying to say, "hey, we're gifted, we're special. We wanted to mix in and be like everybody else.

(Liz, Grade 13)

There was a tendency to lump us all together as the nifty-gifties. I suppose that's better than geek.

(Samuel, Grade 13)

An attempt had been made by the professionals involved with these students to lessen this labelling impact. The name was changed from "gifted program" to "honours program." The students' perceptions were that this did not help a great deal, as they still felt somewhat isolated and definitely earmarked. One of the grade 9 girls found the new label worse because this school has an "Honour Roll" for those with averages above 80 percent and she wasn't sure she would always be able to live up to that. And while the students objected to the labelling and segregation, they did not offer or appear to have any solutions:

I didn't like being separated from the mainstream in the first three years... the problem is, I don't really know what to suggest about that... you can't have a gifted program and not have some segregation.

(Jonathan, Grade 13)

Many similar responses were already referred to in the section dealing with Social Interactions and the need for "belongingness." The ambivalence felt by these young people was evident once again: the older students had a perspective which caused them to appreciate what the program had done for them, and yet they still regretted not having been with the mainstream. This will be dealt with further in the Discussion section.

## *DISCUSSION*

As the writer stated earlier, the purpose of the research was not to generalize about factors involved in the developing self-concept of gifted adolescents, but rather to gather perceptions from some such young people who are enrolled in a congregated program, and report this information in a logical fashion. What are some of the immediate effects of such a placement on the students' self-concept? What might some of the far-reaching effects be?

It is important to remember that often the interrelationships between the facets of self-concept and factors affecting the various facets are very strong. That is, the dynamics which appear to enhance one facet of the self-concept may well enhance other domains as well. Nonetheless, for purposes of presenting this study clearly, the categories of Psychological Self, Social Self and Coping Self, which were introduced earlier, will be maintained in this discussion.

By presenting again the repetitive comments and emergent themes referred to by the participants, this research may add to or confirm the findings of others, and it may raise further questions about the impact of a congregated program on the self-images of the students involved.

### *Psychological Characteristics of Gifted Adolescents*

The data from the interviews confirmed many of the findings of other researchers regarding the peculiar characteristics of gifted young people. That is to say, these twelve gifted adolescents exhibited many of the same traits referred to researchers as "typical" for gifted young people.

For example, the term "perfectionist" is an apt descriptor (Delisle, 1990; Hayes and Sloat, 1990; Renzulli, 1978). These students appeared to have very high demands for themselves in many areas, and unreasonable demands in areas that mattered to them personally.

Impatience for themselves and for others (Dixon, Meyer and Hardy, 1986; Hollingworth, 1942; Roeper, 1981) was also evident from interview responses. They have expectations for themselves that are often unrealistically high, and when they cannot meet those expectations, their frustration and self-dissatisfaction increases. Making mistakes is not acceptable, either for themselves or for others. This particular trait would not facilitate acceptance among age-peers or even among teachers. These students may give the appearance of being smug or self-righteous, but in reality, the interview data revealed feelings of insecurity and disequilibrium. These findings are consistent with those of Clark, 1983; Emerick, 1990; Renzulli, 1978; and Rogers, 1986.

Did these young people present themselves as "out of state, phase and/or sync" (Manaster & Powell, 1983)? In at least a few ways, yes. Their intolerance for peers who were not concerned deeply about political and justice issues was indicative of an inability to understand that their age-peers were

not necessarily as taken up by these issues as they were, nor were peers likely to be as informed. A 14-year-old who describes Stephen Biko as her role model is liable to encounter difficulties finding a kindred spirit. A 17-year-old who describes his "early years" as a political activist, and talks about his new, mature ability to accept "even" the off-spring of a Tory M.P. was not likely one of in-crowd in grade nine. Not many grade ten students are so moved by the injustices of high school assignments that they will initiate a petition and a sit-in, demanding a solution. These and other examples described by the participants were in keeping with the literature that refers to the dissynchronous development of gifted adolescents. (Clark, 1983; Dauber and Benbow, 1990; Delisle, 1990). Their own early and intense commitment and concern would cause them to feel out-of-step with other age-peers. These feelings have also been reported in the research of Hayes and Sloat, 1990; Hollingworth, 1942; and Rogers, 1986.

There were many other references to an inability to tolerate and accept the ideas and opinions of others, who may not be as bright or informed. This is further convincing evidence that certain social skills are indeed deficient among many of these students. This trait of seeming intolerance and the need for social skills training have also been referred to by Dauber and Benbow, 1990; Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988; Roeper, 1981; and Rogers, 1986.

*The Social Self: The Relationship Between  
Social Interactions and Self-Concept*

What was the immediate effect, socially, of placement in a central academic high school where they would spend much of the day with other intellectually gifted students? The findings indicated that the students felt somewhat embarrassed, certainly labelled and definitely isolated from their age-peers.

On the other hand, many of the students reported a new kind of comraderie that they found among other gifted students. They spoke about having their individuality accepted within this group, and about how it was probably easier for these students to understand them, since they weren't "normal" either. The gifted students, like other adolescents, craved acceptance from others, but it had to be an acceptance that allowed them to preserve their individuality. These findings have also been reported by Clark (1983) and Hollingworth (1942). The students expressed an unwillingness to change themselves in order to be accepted and the interview data does not support traits of vulnerability to outside influences for these students (Hayes and Sloat, 1990). This could, however, be due to the fact that the relationship between the interviewer and the students was not close enough to allow a student to reveal such personal feelings.

Although almost all of these students complained about being together too much, they reported that they were most likely to find their closest friends among their gifted classmates. Several of them also reported that within the gifted program they found, for the first time, genuine

acceptance from gifted age-peers. But they did not perceive this acceptance from other (non-gifted) age-peers.

They were vocally insistant that socialization and social acceptance within the larger context of the high school were not easy for them. Attributing this to their placement in the gifted class was perhaps their way of rationalizing the phenomenon. They may have had exactly the same feelings had they attended a regular high school program in their own neighborhoods. The recent study of 184 gifted high school students (Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988) did state that 90 percent of the subjects found social acceptance to be difficult for them. Was this due to high academic achievement? Did this set them apart from others, as it apparently had in some earlier years? The students in the current study did not perceive that their social acceptance or lack thereof was related to their own high achievement, because at this academically-oriented high school, they felt strongly that achievement is valued and held up as the ideal for all students.

In additon, the older students reported that throughout their high school years, they had "partied less" and had less fun than their other age-peers. They also referred to the closeness that they had felt within their own group of gifted classmates. Bandura (1977) and Selman (1980) reported that this acceptance and these social interactions will be important to the future achievements of the students generally, and probably more important for the females.

None of the students referred to any negative impact that his or her placement in the gifted program had upon the family, or vice versa. All twelve did refer to a close and supportive family unit, within which they felt

accepted and loved. In reviewing the literature, this researcher could find no articles discussing the "typical" family structure and family life experiences of gifted students, and few studies of relationships between family life and giftedness, other than genetic links and enriching experiences. Keirouz (1990) did report that sibling relationships are often difficult, but this interview data does not support that. On the other hand, since Bruner (1966), Gardner (1983) and Maslow (1954) stress the importance of feeling loved and accepted before one can be a high achiever, and since high achievement is one of the pre-requisites for admittance to this program, it is not surprising to find that all these twelve adolescents describe their home lives as stable and nurturing.

*The Coping Self: The Relationship Between  
Achievement and Self-Concept*

These gifted students valued their ability to be useful (or worthy) to others. Prior to coming to this program, many of them had been encouraged to assist other students and also their teachers, in both academic and extra-curricular areas. This had become an accustomed pattern, and once they were in the high school gifted program, some of them missed this role. They now assessed their competencies relative to a large number of very bright, capable achievers and leaders, and they determined that they were less able and thus less useful to others. This finding is in line with those of Culross and Jenkins-Friedman (1988), Jenkins-Friedman and Murphy (1988) and Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth (1988) who reported a frequent decline in self-concept when a student is first admitted to a gifted program.

These adolescents did not perceive high achievement *per se* to be a barrier to their social acceptance, but they did mention that this particular high school clearly valued and rewarded academic excellence. In addition, several of these gifted students did not regard themselves as high achievers, probably because of their referent group, but possibly also because their own accomplishments were not up to their specifically high expectations (Coopersmith, 1967).

Simply "being the best" in any course was not enough to assure positive feelings. It had to be a course that the student viewed as important. Doing very well in a course that was viewed by the student as unimportant

did not appear to significantly affect the student's feelings of competence or instrumentality.

Other factors that affected their feelings of competence in a given course were encouragement, humour, respect and patient explanations from the instructors. What were the students' perceptions, then, regarding the attitudes and expectations of the teachers in the gifted program? Although they had enormous expectations for themselves, they felt that the lofty expectations of teachers for them were often a burden. One repeated theme was that they felt they were being required to produce more work because of their gifted status at school. They were also resentful when teachers referred to them as gifted and stated that therefore their assignments would be different from those of students in the enriched level classes. They were frustrated when explanations were too rapid or at too high a level for them to assimilate new material. Perhaps they were lacking a sufficient background of knowledge and experience which would have enabled them to make sense of the material presented. Nonetheless, the result of feeling that they were not meeting their teachers' expectations for them was evidently discouragement as well as lowered self-concept and diminished interest in those particular areas. The students who were left with the impression that "if you're not a rocket scientist, you're nothing" are unlikely to choose further science courses voluntarily, unless their current achievement in science is brilliant.

In some cases, the students spoke about feelings of anxiety and stress. In other cases, particularly with the females, they simply "opted out" by giving up or giving the impression that they didn't care.

What were the students' perceptions of academic standards and competition in such a group? Generally, the boys either enjoyed the element of increased competition, or at least didn't mind it, but most of the girls didn't care for it at all. For some, it removed the sense of security they had felt in earlier grades when they were consistently at the top, and it also eliminated (they felt) their opportunities to be helpful to others. These girls perceived their own competencies to be insufficient when in competition with others who could often do as well and better than they. Although this number of respondents does not allow for generalizations, this difference between the way that gifted young males and females handle competition has also been reported by Hollinger and Fleming (1988), Lewis (1968), Olszewski-Kubilius et al. (1990) and others.

Did these students see themselves as in control of decision-making, both now and in the future? Furthermore, how has being part of the gifted program affected these feelings of instrumentality?

Although they dealt with it differently, both males and females in this study perceived themselves as very much in control of decision-making, and their own successes and failures. They saw themselves as the primary forces in making choices, but acknowledged the influence of parents (very limited) and siblings (somewhat more important). Their own perception was that they were not easily influenced by peers when it came to making decisions around issues which they regarded as important for themselves.

The interview responses are not meant to be used statistically, but interestingly enough, they did follow closely the ratio found by Hollinger and Fleming (1984). That is, one out of three of the females was characterized

by strong feelings of instrumentality and expressiveness, and two out of three appeared to have some internal barriers to achievement. For example, consider the young woman who graduated with a high average and with six O.A.C. math and science credits and had registered for a nursing program after rejecting the M.D. program. Perhaps she was indeed committed to being a nurse and was making a wise decision; but why did she express the idea that "being a nurse or a teacher" were the only alternatives for someone like herself who wanted to do something important with and for children? And why did she not want to take the risk of applying for medical school? She herself said that it was because she was afraid she might not get in. Her comments were reminiscent of the fear of success/fear of failure theories (Horner, 1968).

The longitudinal study by Card, Steel and Areles (1980) referred to the idea that young women may be more free to achieve appropriate career goals if and when they are more free of family responsibilities. Yet the interview data revealed that all but one of these gifted young females included family life as important to their future plans, and none of the gifted young men had given it a thought. Futuristic planning for both genders needs to be more equitable.

How have these students' current feelings of instrumentality been affected? That is, has being a part of the gifted program impacted upon their feelings of being in control and capable of making decisions that are effective? An area that was consistently approached by the students was that of feeling powerless within the institution. These students perceived that they had little control over their school life. They could and did object to what they saw as injustices, but they did not feel that they had effected any meaningful change.

Many of their comments exhibited the belief that the teachers and the administration were the power-holders and they were the pawns. This came as a surprise to the writer, who in visits to the school and meetings with teachers and administrators involved in the program found a very open attitude and an atmosphere that clearly said they were working hard to try to provide the best program that they could for these students. Indeed, the coordinator of the gifted program at the school meets frequently with the students to discuss various issues that concern them, and so do the homeroom teachers.

Perhaps the question for us as educators is: In order to assist in the development of these crucial feelings of instrumentality (Hollinger & Fleming, 1984; Purkey, 1978), what can we do at school to eliminate gifted students' feelings of inferiority or powerlessness?

### *Discussion Summary*

The students talked about forming their closest friendships with other adolescents in the gifted class. They referred to the importance of having close relationships with people who are able to share your interests and world-view, to some extent. They found it difficult to be patient with slow-paced instruction or with discussion comments from less able students than themselves. Their attitudes toward peers who had not been identified as gifted often lacked empathy and sometimes even tolerance. Do gifted young people truly suffer no peer acceptance difficulties? (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham & Crombie, 1989) This was not their personal perception. The students themselves referred to their deficient social skills and feelings of isolation.

If one of our main concerns is to provide a "psychologically safe" (Silverman, 1983) educational environment for gifted adolescents, then possibly a congregated program such as this one offers strong possibilities. Given the opportunity, these young people may be in a place where they can develop a better understanding of themselves and others, given the proper assistance.

Labelling is perhaps a part of the issue. These are not "gifted adolescents." They are adolescents first, but possessing certain intellectual peculiarities or "gifts" which they do not always see as a bonus, because of the complications these gifts bring with them. Rather than "gifted program" or "honours program," would a term such as "challenge program", used in Alberta, be a more appropriate expression of the aims and intent?

Finally, the interviews pointed out the importance of guidance intervention for these young people (Culross & Jenkins-Friedman, 1988) so that by developing a better understanding of their own peculiarities, they can relate better to and feel more accepted by their age-peers.

The students in this study stressed once again the incredible responsibility and strong influences that teachers have. They recognized the close and supportive relationships that they were fortunate enough to have within their families, but at this stage in their lives they appeared to be moving away from the influences at home. They were now selecting their own courses, for example, and they perceived that the single most important factor in their enjoyment and achievement in any given subject was simply the instructor. The impact of teachers on their future lives and career paths is then very great. The students said this often and in a various ways. Some of their teachers led them to become involved and interested in an area that they had previously dismissed as boring. Some of their teachers added to their feelings of competence by providing explanations or presenting material in a way that enabled the students to relate it to their previous knowledge or experience so that assimilation was possible for them. Some teachers could accept and even appreciate their unusual senses of humour. Some teachers, in accepting these students as individuals worthy of positive regard communicated to other pupils the importance of accepting oneself and one another. These findings affirm the research of Delisle (1984, 1990) and Silverman (1981). The enormous impact of a teacher on the student's multi-faceted self-image was clearly apparent in all twelve interviews.

## CONCLUSIONS

By gathering the perceptions and rich descriptions of dynamics impacting on self-concept development for these twelve gifted adolescents, this study has contributed to our knowledge in that area for gifted students in a congregated educational model. This study respected the multi-dimensional nature of the self-image by reporting upon the perceptions and feelings of the students themselves rather than using a global self-concept measurement instrument. The data collected are not meant to lead to generalizations, due to the limited number of respondents, but can affirm or question the findings of other researchers in the field.

What were some of the immediate effects on the self-concept of placement in a congregated gifted class?

Although the students appreciated the opportunity to be in classes with other young people who shared many of their own characteristics, and although their closest friendships were with other gifted students, they expressed strong feelings of isolation from their age-peers and they disliked the label of "gifted." They felt that they were not as well-accepted socially as were other students, even though high achievement was held in good regard at this school. They were saying that they found it difficult to satisfy a need to belong to a larger social structure, i.e. to be accepted by other age-peers not identified as gifted. The study thus supports the research of Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth (1988), Luftig and Nichols (1990), and Van Tassel-Baska (1989).

In what ways was the self-concept affected by the altered academic standard and competition within such a group?

This study indicated that the decline in perceptions of competence, which have been found to be true for many students (Culross, 1988; Jenkins-Friedman and Murphy, 1988; Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988) may be partly due to a decline in feelings of usefulness and worthiness to others. It also found that the males in this study either enjoyed or did not dislike the increased level of competition, but the females (all but one) actively disliked this element and/or opted out of it. In this way, the study confirmed the findings of Hollinger and Fleming (1988), Olszewski-Kubilius et.al (1990), and Subotnik (1988).

The heightened expectations of the teachers were not perceived in a positive light by the students, who already had enormously high expectations and goals for themselves. The students did feel that teachers had been very influential in their lives, affecting the competence that they felt within a course and thus also affecting future directions and course choices for them. Family relationships for these particular twelve students were positive and supportive; nonetheless, the students did not feel that they were strongly influenced in decision-making by their family members - although the influence of siblings appeared to be greater than that of parents at this point in their lives. This included both present and futuristic choices, and in this sense the findings agreed with those of Delisle and Renzulli (1982), Milgram and Milgram (1976), and Rogers (1986). Gifted adolescents see themselves strongly in control and responsible for their own successes and failures, and for their own futures. Although not statistically significant, since there were only twelve respondents, the females of this study were found to have

different expectations for the future than the males, in that the females were already thinking about and planning for a family as an important part of their futures. The males were not. The females in the graduating class also had expectations for achievement that appeared to be lower than the reality of their own capabilities. These findings are in line with those of Card, Steel and Areles (1980), Clark (1983), Emerick (1990) and Kerr (1985).

Thus the research has confirmed the findings of others in the aforementioned areas. In particular, this research has added to our knowledge of the development of self-concept in the gifted adolescent by reporting thematically their own perceptions in the various domains.

### *LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY*

The researcher acknowledges that the interview data would probably be richer and more varied if more than one school had been involved. There are a variety of programs for gifted students at other sites, but the program at this school is the only English-language congregated setting for academically gifted high school students in the area.

The inclusion of a comparison group would have added to the findings, but such a group would have had to be composed of gifted students who were identified by the same procedures but who chose not to enter the congregated program. Unfortunately, such a group does not exist. The high school enrichment coordinator reported that virtually all students who were deemed eligible for the program did indeed enrol in the program.

This study does not provide a longitudinal perspective which would be of greater significance but this remains to be accomplished by further research.

*IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH GIFTED  
ADOLESCENTS IN A SCHOOL SETTING*

The writer stated at the outset that it was not her purpose to provide sweeping generalizations on the basis of twelve informants. Therefore these implications are offered tentatively and only when repetitive emergent themes from the interviews were in keeping with other well-documented research.

The students themselves acknowledged that they are not exceptionally able in all subjects and areas. Most students are not "globally gifted" (Clark, 1983; Rogers, 1986; Renzulli, 1988; Culross, 1988). In order to encourage their interests and achievements to the maximum, it may be advantageous for them to be in with a gifted group only for those areas in which they ARE gifted, and to enrol in a heterogeneous class for a subject in which they would benefit from a somewhat slower pace and more equitable peer group. This programming also needs to be flexible, as learning needs and interests change over time.

It is crucial to develop the feelings of instrumentality of these students, both male and female. On-going discussion groups between teachers and gifted students need to continue and perhaps happen more often. In order to make the students more aware of the impact that they do have within the system, results and changes could be "fed back" to them on a regular basis. In addition, their leadership abilities and helpfulness must be capitalized upon for their own sakes as well as for the benefit of others.

Counselling needs of the gifted students should be addressed in a consistent, regular way. It is posited that an increased self-awareness will lead to a smoother attainment of self-esteem (Culross & Jenkins-Friedman, 1988). What is needed is a "preventive, wellness-oriented stance relative to the affective growth of bright students" (p. 266).

Social skills possessed by other adolescents may not be already attained by academically gifted adolescents (Silverman, 1981; Dixon, 1986) and therefore need to be taught. This should commence earlier than high school, no doubt, but the need will also exist at the high school and should be addressed. Guidance counsellors should be prepared for this and should be deeply involved with these students. Indeed, all personnel working with the gifted should be prepared to act in a counselling capacity (Silverman, 1981).

Is there a solution for the labelling issue? Or will the issue exist no matter what the name for the program is? Perhaps if the programming is adjusted to model more closely Renzulli's proposed "Revolving Door" setting or his "Schoolwide Enrichment Model" (Renzulli, 1977, 1988), the labelling issue itself would not be seen as so important. The Revolving Door model allows for the changing needs and patterns of young people with gifts by encouraging them to enter gifted programming in the areas of their strengths and interests. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model was designed to apply some of the theory and technology of gifted education to the overall process of schoolwide enrichment, so that a larger population would benefit from special programming. Another result of such a model may be that gifted programs would be seen as less elitist, hence lessening the labelling issue.

The teacher is always the critical factor in a learning environment, and possibly more so in the field of special education. Carl Rogers (1969) suggested that rather than focus on "teaching", we ought to focus on the "facilitation of learning... and how learning feels from the inside" (p. 125) so that our students will feel prized, trusted and respected. It is within this climate that self-motivation can flourish and the possibility for a successful transition to adulthood and self-actualization will be enhanced. From this study it was seen that a teacher whose expectations were perceived by the students as realistic for them and who was able to offer a climate of intellectual stimulation without undue stress (Emerick, 1990) was capable of providing the invitational learning to which Purkey (1970) referred. Within this scenario, dimensions of the self-concept are able to develop positively.

This research contributes to the education of gifted adolescents by emphasizing the all-encompassing importance and influence of teaching personnel and other school professionals in the present and future lives of these young people. It also underlines the issue of labelling which has been referred to in earlier research.

## *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH*

1. Longitudinal studies which track gifted students into university and beyond are essential if educators are to be enabled to provide optimum services for the special needs of these young people. The goal of programming for the gifted is the same as for other students - that is, to empower them to reach their full achievement potential within a climate of emotional support and stability. Thus we need to know, from them, and from the perspective of their adult lives, how we can best provide for their needs.
2. A study such as this one, but incorporating a comparison group of students who were not identified as intellectually gifted, might add a different perspective to research in this area, by allowing us to extend our knowledge of similarities and exceptionalities within the age-groupings.
3. A study similar to this one, but using both quantitative and qualitative measures, would allow for different methods of triangulation to be applied.
4. Special programs would be enhanced by knowledge resulting from further studies into teacher effectiveness, and/or teaching traits which are particularly desirable for professionals working with gifted adolescents.

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## APPENDIX I

**ADMISSION CRITERIA AND SELECTION PROCESS FOR  
THE ENRICHMENT CENTRES FOR THE GIFTED IN THE  
ANGLOPHONE SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF THE  
OTTAWA BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Giftedness is "unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school programme to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated." (Ontario Ministry of Education)

Potential candidates are screened on the following criteria:

1. An initial screening will generate the names of all students who:
  - a) achieved standing in the 95th percentile\* or more on one of the two O.B.E. Mathematics Tests written in the Fall and Spring terms of grade 7 and no less than the 90th percentile\* on the other.
  - b) achieved standing in the 95th percentile\* or more on one of the two subtests of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (vocabulary and comprehension) and no less than the 90th percentile\* on the other.
  
2. A Henson-Nelson Test of Mental Ability will be administered to all nominated students. A result in the 98th percentile or more (publisher's age norms) is expected.

\* All percentiles are Ottawa grade norms

## APPENDIX I (continued)

3. Teachers, principals and parents may nominate students whom they consider gifted in BOTH the language/arts and the mathematics/science area. It is expected that in addition to standard score data, consistently strong academic achievement is reflected in report card evaluations.
4. Potential candidates, together with their parents/guardian, complete an application form for the appropriate Enrichment Centre for the Gifted.
5. An assessment, including grade 6, 7 and 8 report card evaluations, teacher checklists and home school evaluation of each candidate is submitted by the sending school
6. Where appropriate, individual educational assessment will be considered.

## APPENDIX II

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured; that is, the following questions and probes were used with much flexibility to gather perceptions relating to the research questions. For purposes of clarity, the questions are listed here under the three main domains of self-concept as established by the Review of the Literature. During the interviews, the questions were not posed in this order, nor were all the specific questions used for each interview.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF:

Would you like to tell me something about yourself? (Background, interests, activities and so on) What qualities do you have that your friends probably appreciate in you (which of your characteristics probably appeal to your friends)? What do you and your friends have in common and in what ways are you different?

## SOCIAL SELF:

Will you talk a little about people who are close to you - friends from school, friends from your neighbourhood or other contacts, girlfriends or boyfriends, dad or mom, brothers, sisters and other family members, and so on.

How would you describe your closest friends? Would you describe yourself as someone who makes new friends easily? Can you talk a little about how you feel in new social situations, such as a new school, or parties where you don't know everyone, or activities where you find new people?

**COPING SELF:**

To what extent do your family and friends influence the decisions that you need to make? What other factors seem to influence your decisions? In which courses do you feel quite competent? What seems to help you to feel that way? How important are those courses to you? How would you describe your level of achievement in those courses? Are there courses in which you feel less competent or less able? Why do you think you feel that way? How important are those courses to you? How would you describe your level of achievement in those courses? Have you found there to be any conflict between high levels of achievement, or very good marks, or active participation in classes, and acceptance by your peers? Which activities or courses have influenced your decisions for the future? In what ways? How did that happen? Can you describe other influences upon your future plans (other adults, teachers, mentors, coaches, work supervisors, relatives, and so on)? To what extent are you planning your future career now? How much influence do you feel that you have over your decisions about the future?

**ABOUT THE GIFTED PROGRAM:**

Could you talk about the best parts of your high school experience (so far)? Your positive memorable moments? What about less positive memorable moments? Can you describe some of your plans for next year? In what ways has this program influenced your plans for the future?

## APPENDIX III

## LETTER REQUESTING PARENTAL CONSENT

Dear Parents:

One of the most important aspects of parenting, most of us acknowledge, is attempting to ensure that our teenagers develop the best possible self-esteem, especially during these critical years. We know that many factors affect the way our children feel about themselves - for example, friends, families, achievements, innate abilities and ...school programs.

As a parent, teacher and researcher, my current focus is to try to find out how certain high school programs affect the self-concept and self-esteem of our young people. This is not a simple area to study, nor can we likely find any quick answers, so this is the beginning of a two-year study which has been approved by the O.B.E. and by your child's school principal.

Your child's participation could provide valuable information about this important subject and this participation would not involve a great deal of her/his time.

All sessions would be during the school day, scheduled in cooperation with the school staff to ensure little disruption to the normal routine.

What would each student's role in the research be?

1. Involvement in an initial information and planning meeting;
2. Attendance at a group input session, where the students will be asked to discuss some of their impressions and thoughts about adolescence/self-concept schooling.
3. In addition, a few volunteers will be selected to give a personal interview to present their own views in greater detail.

(Steps 2 and 3 will be repeated next year with as many of the same students as possible. Students who will leave the school this year will be contacted by mail.)

Interviews will be tape recorded for the purpose of retrieving accurate data, but ALL results will be ABSOLUTELY CONFIDENTIAL and anonymity will be observed in any reporting.

Although this is a subject around which most students are pleased to provide their input, any student who volunteers to participate may also opt to drop out at any time.

Since participation is voluntary, it is very important for your child to return the permission slip below or he/she will not be allowed to be included in the research.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this project. Hopefully the results will give us some better insights into how we as teachers and as parents can help our children to develop stronger beliefs in their own capabilities and better acceptance of themselves as special individuals.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments (737-3153 evenings).

Sincerely,

(signed)  
Barbara Frame