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# "That's Empowering!": The Influence of Community Activism Curriculum on Gifted Adolescents' Self-Concepts

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“That’s Empowering!”:  
The Influence of Community Activism Curriculum  
on Gifted Adolescents’ Self-Concepts

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

by

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## **Abstract**

The first of the following manuscripts addresses the experiences of a group of gifted middle school students as they engaged in community action projects that provided them opportunity to become activists in their school, neighborhood, and larger community. This study pays special attention to participants' self-concepts as measured by the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (2012) and through participant interviews. The study finds evidence of students' co-cognitive components of giftedness when themes of courage, sensitivity to human concerns, and sense of destiny are applied. Main themes from Harter's scale are also applied, and participant interviews reveal evidence of academic and social competence. While the data do not support statistically significant change in students' self-concepts, specific domains of self-concept see larger increases than others, and participant interviews reveal the students' perceptions of the particular ways they grew through the process of becoming activists.

The second manuscript examines qualitative data collected as students engaged in their community action projects but places special focus on the experiences of the female participants and the ways that their self-concepts were influenced by their experiences. This study develops four main themes through an inductive approach to data analysis: academic experiences, affective self, self-concept, and barriers to self-concept growth. A feminist lens was applied during data analysis. The unique female perspective of this study's participants is particularly important to this study. Participants shared their perceptions of their gendered experiences in schools and explored their experiences operating as community activists.

The final manuscript features three female participants from the greater study. The participants were selected for further study because of their insightful reflections, demonstrated growth, and interest in continuing their activist work in the future. Interview data reveal that the

participants viewed their successes as activists as informative to their development and as powerful learning experiences. However, they described having to overcome much disappointment in adults, the institutions within which they were operating, and society in general. The first main theme, disappointment, seems to be addressed by additional main themes: personal growth, determination, passion, and motivation. Connections can also be made to co-cognitive components of giftedness.

## **Acknowledgments**

The dissertation, a daunting capstone of extensive coursework, research experiences, and scholarly growth, was difficult for me to conceptualize early on in my doctoral work. I felt overwhelmed in finding a topic of study to which I could fully dedicate myself, one that I would continue to romance. I found it, though, and would consider this dissertation journey to be my greatest educational experience. I spent more time than I care to measure considering my study. I put all of my being into the design of the curriculum that I implemented with my students—students I love and care for intensely. And because I love them, I worked hard to do justice for my students and their difficult, remarkable work. I am so proud to consider this a completely collaborative work, and it is not lost on me that I could not have done this alone.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my advisor, dissertation committee chair, and ninth-grade English teacher, Dr. Christian Goering, for his encouragement, support, and guidance for the past 16 years. He celebrates with me “every step of the way,” and that has certainly lifted me up when I’ve needed it. Thank you also to my committee members, Drs. Marcia Imbeau and Jennifer Beasley, whom I respect and admire and for whom I feel so much appreciation. I entered a PhD program without veteran status in the classroom and often feared that my little experience would hinder my learning. All three of you have taught me so much about being an educator that I now never doubt the timing of this experience. I am grateful to be able to apply my learning and new perspectives with students every day.

My family, the most important aspect of my life, has always believed in me and encouraged my achievement. Thank you to my husband, Jason, who cares for me when I need care, has filled the void when I’ve been absent, and who loves me intensely. I love you. My daughter, Margot, is the brightest spot in my life, and her comedy, milestones, and tight hugs

have carried me through many hours of research, analysis, and writing. Her sweet calls to “Momma” and sloppy kisses on the lips are enough to fill my heart and keep me going. She has shown me the existence of a new love that has been my greatest joy, and I could not be more thankful to her and her birthmother, Trisha, for giving me the gift of motherhood. Thank you to my own mom, Denise, and my sister, Laura, for always building me up when I am down, listening to my concerns and fears, and reassuring me of my capability and efforts. Their love is big and undying, and mine for them is the same. I must also acknowledge my dad, Steven, whose memory is ever-present in my heart. He is the one who instilled in me an intense value of education, a desire to achieve at my highest levels, and an understanding of the importance of working toward the greater good. I miss him beyond measure, but he’s always by my side.

Many educators throughout my very long career as a student have influenced my academic and professional trajectory, and I treasure their commitment to me and to all of their students. They have served as incredible examples to me and have encouraged me along each mile-marker of my journey. Thank you to the gifted facilitators who taught me, mentored me, and advised me: Robin Corbin, Alice Bertels, and Kathy Bowen. You do important work everyday, both for your students and for the teachers who have been so fortunate to work with you. Thank you to Lori Walker, my department head when teaching high school English, who took the time to encourage me to pursue my PhD one day during hall duty. Her belief in me, especially on that specific day and in that specific moment, directly led me to my PhD program and all of the learning that would follow.

I have lived a life surrounded by strong, independent, kind women who have taught me to work to be the same. Many of my best friends are women I met as a child and who continue to inspire me each day as they juggle their marriages, children, careers, and friendships. Danielle

Caldwell, Kimberly Grieves, Ramsi Thompson, Elise Keister, and Meaghan Graber deserve special recognition for being my confidantes, cheerleaders, and sisters. Pat Handshy, my second mother, is a woman whom I admire and adore, and no matter how much time I spend away from her, I am rejuvenated by her presence. Her strength, intellect, and humor bring me great joy and pride. I will spend my life working to be deserving of these women's love.

Thank you to my colleagues who cheer me on and celebrate alongside me: Jennifer, Laura, Kim, Arla, Aesha, Kelly, Jennifer, Cornelius, and Tom. You love our students big and well, and I could not be prouder to work alongside you.

I must also acknowledge the place that became my office—or should I say coffice? Immeasurable hours were spent at Blackbird Cafe working on this study. It was there that I could tap into intense concentration, remained comfortable, learned to love coffee, and became one of those customers who can order *the usual* without question. Dream come true.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the children who will grow to be our leaders, innovators, caregivers, and general do-gooders. It is my great privilege to work with them every day, and it is my hope that they all will choose to do *good* with their gifts and efforts. Don't give up.

And girls: You are my heart, and I believe in you. Yes, *you*.



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This research seeks to shed light on the authentic learning experiences of gifted middle school students as they engaged as community activists. The central study examines the influence of such experiences on students' self-concepts and the ways in which they exercised their co-cognitive components of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002) in response to their learning. This study uses both inductive and deductive approaches to analyzing qualitative data in order to address different research questions, which reveals a variety of open codes which converge into main themes. These main themes construct new meaning in several instances and support the literature in others. The introduction includes a brief history of gifted education and the purpose of its programming, discussion of the important intersections of student activism, self-concept, exercise of co-cognitive components of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002), and social capital (Renzulli, 2002), a brief overview of the chapters that follow, and the significance of this study.

#### ***Gifted Education and the Programming that Best Provides for its Students***

Children identified as *gifted* do not make up a homogeneous student population; great diversity is found within groups of students identified as gifted and talented, just as great diversity is found within the general student population. For this reason, collaboration among all invested parties is important to the connections needed in order to best serve all students and properly foster positive attitudes toward gifted education (NAGC, 2014a). Educational environments for these students, and all students, must be safe and encouraging and fostering of exploration and discovery (NAGC, 2013). All children deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential, and society stands to benefit if our most gifted and talented students receive the best

educational opportunities available in order to maximize their potential and lead them into work that better life for all.

Gifted education programming exists to provide necessary challenges to students who consistently achieve at levels beyond their age peers. Gifted students have unique academic, social, and emotional needs that should be met in the school setting. Individualized programming plans are important to the process of challenging gifted students and assisting them in navigating their academic, social, emotional, and career-related aspirations (NAGC, 2014a). The design and implementation of individualized programming requires a great deal of collaboration in order to identify students' specific, individual needs and decide upon the best instructional and learning opportunity approaches. When possible, schools deploy gifted education specialists to manage their students' individualized education plans, provide services, and collaborate with other educators in the best interests of their students.

Students are evaluated for gifted identification based on a variety of criteria. While most gifted educators no longer define giftedness by IQ alone (Borland, 2009), such myths persist. States and school districts tend to establish criteria for identification, in many cases despite outdated definitions of giftedness (NAGC, 2014c), and some states place gifted education services under the umbrella of special education while others do not. The National Association for Gifted Children (2014b) defines giftedness as:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports). (p.1)

Gifted students are not always highly motivated (NAGC, 2013), and Renzulli (1984)

even identifies two different kinds of giftedness, *schoolhouse giftedness* and *creative-productive giftedness*. Gifted programming can work to address the needs of its students on both ends of the

spectrum through differentiation. Curriculum and instructional differentiation allow educators to respond to students' individual differences through a variety of approaches to content, process, and product (Kanevsky, 2011; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). One goal of differentiation is to align student characteristics having to do with their individual learning with approaches to their learning experiences (Kanevsky, 2011). Tomlinson & Imbeau (2010) explain that teaching all students in the same way accomplishes little compared to meeting students at their readiness level with material that addresses their interests and prioritizes their learning profile information. While academic rigor is an important focus of gifted education because of students' advanced intellectual ability (Parker, 1989), one that can be addressed through differentiation, gifted students require challenge beyond academic needs. Programming should work to challenge students intellectually and creatively (Dixon, 2014), as well as emotionally and socially. Those students who are not intellectually and creatively engaged are more likely to disengage from school and learning (Rogers, 2007).

Appropriate gifted education services provided to identified students include options for differentiation, grouping, acceleration, curriculum compacting, and opportunities for dialogic discourse. Important for educators to understand, research suggests a connection between affective and cognitive functioning, in that social and emotional issues can both positively and negatively effect students' performance in school (Ferguson, 2006). If gifted students' social and emotional needs are cared for, they will be more likely to appropriately respond to difficult issues in school and other areas of their lives. Gifted students may experience perfectionism (Hébert, 2011), may exhibit co-cognitive components of giftedness (Renzulli, Koehler, & Fogarty, 2006), have high expectations for themselves (Hébert, 2011), may be resilient in the

face of difficulty (Hébert, 2011), may be advanced in terms of moral maturity, and may possess a variety of overexcitabilities (Hébert, 2011; NAGC, 2009).

### ***The Intersection of Giftedness, Activism, and Self-Concept***

The implementation of community activism as curriculum holds the potential to address gifted students' academic and affective needs as it provides students with the opportunity to think critically as they solve complex problems but also to learn about their communities, interact and engage with diverse populations, exercise empathy, and develop intense care for others. These opportunities for growth likely have some effect on students' self-concepts—an individual's cognitive view of herself as constructed by internal and external comparisons (Gore & Cross, 2014; Huitt, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003). The literature generally views self-concept as a construct in which specific domains culminate into an overarching global concept of self (Cross, O'Reilly, Mihyeon, Mammadov, & Cross, 2015; Rinn, Mendaglio, Rudasill, & McQueen, 2010; Rudasill & Callahan, 2008; Vogl & Preckel, 2013). Although gifted students' self-concepts tend to be stronger and less variable than those of the general population (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rudasill, Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009), they do experience a decrease in adolescence (Bain & Bell, 2004). In order to combat that and encourage the acquisition of social capital (Renzulli, 2002), it is important that our gifted populations have opportunities to increase self-concept, use their gifts and talents for the greater good, and exercise their co-cognitive components of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002).

### ***Community Action Curriculum as Gifted Education Programming***

Creative problem-solving (CPS) is widely used as a method for solving problems in the real world, so why do we not then utilize the process with students, as well? A CPS model was modified to fit the needs of a specific gifted education program and its students as they sought to

solve community problems in grade-level teams. Implementing the action is often the final step in many CPS models; however, in an education setting, this is not current practice. Beyond implementing action, this curriculum required students to reflect, evaluate, and adjust their action plans based on what they saw as their successes and failures, and then students were expected to share their work with others during a family presentation night hosted in conjunction with the school's English for Speakers of Other Languages program.

Each grade-level activism team identified a community issue important to them and then developed essential questions to guide their work. The following essential questions were established:

- 6<sup>th</sup>-Grade Activism Team: *How do we get devices and internet access to all students who need them?*
- 7<sup>th</sup>-Grade Activism Team: *How can we prevent distracted driving in our community?*
- 8<sup>th</sup>-Grade Activism Team #1: *How can we help the underserved in Lawrence with their finances?*
- 8<sup>th</sup>-Grade Activism Team #2: *How can we reduce the amount of plastic used in local cafeterias?*

Once grade-level teams had established the questions that would guide their action, students followed these steps in problem-solving:

1. Identify the problem
2. Research the problem
3. Formulate challenges
4. Generate ideas
5. Combine and evaluate ideas
6. Draw up action plan
7. Implement action plan
8. Reflect, evaluate, adjust
9. Share results and new understandings
- 10.

Students worked toward understanding of their chosen community problems, reached out to community organizations for information and support, worked together to identify and develop an action plan that they felt would make a difference and that had not been

previously attempted, and implemented the action plan with the help of community partnerships. Throughout this process, students were expected to submit weekly journal entries detailing their progress, feelings, concerns, and collaboration. They had many opportunities to communicate with their peers in class, as well as outside of class, both in-person and through the use of an online classroom forum. The online classroom provided opportunities for group chats, one-on-one messaging, e-mail service, class polls, calendar reminders, and one-way journal entries shared with the facilitator. This constant expectation of self-reflection and project evaluation increased productivity and quality of work, and the expectation that students would adjust their approach when they weren't seeing success made for a more fruitful experience.

At the conclusion of the semester, students hosted their parents and families for a presentation night that provided the opportunity for students to share their work with an audience, communicate their problem-solving, and make others aware of community problems. The curriculum provided for small group and one-on-one interviews, conducted throughout the project implementation, which revealed insights into students' growth and evolving understandings of themselves and the world around them.

### ***Chapter Overview***

What follows is an examination of the impact of community action learning—the deepest level of service learning—on gifted students' self-concepts, desire to contribute to the greater good, and ability to exercise co-cognitive components of giftedness. The first manuscript (see Chapter 2) explores findings of the central study, a single case study of how students' self-concepts were influenced by engagement as community activists. Use of the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (2012) provides quantitative measures of self-concept

growth, and small-group and one-on-one interviews reveal students' perceptions of themselves and their activism work throughout the process. Data analysis reveals growth in self-concept according to qualitative measures but no statistically significant growth according to quantitative measures of self-concept. Main themes coded from interviews coincide with specific co-cognitive components of giftedness.

The second manuscript (see Chapter 3) shifts focus to 12 female participants from the central study and examines the ways in which gender influenced their engagement as activists and also influenced their self-concept growth as a result. Questions guiding this study were: 1.) In what ways were the adolescent female participants' self-concepts changed after engaging with their communities as activists? and 2.) How did the female participants make sense of their experiences as students and community activists? A feminist lens is applied to data analysis and helps to root the focus on gender and the female experience within the community action projects being studied. An inductive approach to data analysis is implemented, which reveals insights regarding the participants' academic and affective identities, self-concept, and barriers to self-concept.

A multiple-case study, which focuses on the experiences of three female participants from the central study, composes the third manuscript (see Chapter 4). The three participants were selected for deeper study because of their devotion and persistence while implementing their community action projects, their commitment to leadership, insightful expression of their ideas, feelings, and experiences, and their desire to continue as activists in the future. Small-group and one-on-one interviews reveal common themes surrounding their disappointment in society and the participants' responses to such disappointment. The deeper insight these three individuals provide—regarding their authentic learning experiences, their



ability to cope with society's disappointments, and their intense persistence—sheds a great deal of light on the power of authentic, real-world learning experiences and their long-term effects for students. Additionally, this study should inform practice in gifted education programming and help educators to understand the influence they have in designing and implementing powerful programming.

### ***Significance of the Study***

As a gifted facilitator, I see firsthand the hunger in our gifted populations for challenging yet meaningful programming that meet students' needs beyond traditional academics. I work with students who express almost-constant feelings of boredom in school, frustration with a system that assumes they will "be fine" no matter what, and disappointment in a lack of options that satisfy them socially and emotionally. I also work with students who hold incredible potential but who don't attempt to fulfill it and are not in touch with their ability to empathize or use their talents in benevolent ways. For these reasons and others, it has been important to me to develop programming for my students that is relevant, relatable, and important to them. It is my hope that their gifted programming empowers them to be independent and capable, and that they learn lessons beyond what is expected in the traditional curriculum. This study, though, is also significant in the context of current literature.

While review of the literature reveals many disparate findings on meeting gifted students' academic and affective needs—the self-concepts of gifted student populations, approaches to increasing social capital for our gifted students, the power of service learning in school settings, and various understandings of giftedness, including the acknowledgment of co-cognitive components of giftedness—no research yet exists to examine the intersection of

these important ideas. The examination of these intersections through the research that follows will make significant contributions to current literature as we gain an understanding of how we can challenge our gifted students while also fostering self-concept growth, addressing gender issues, encouraging social capital acquisition, and providing opportunities for our kids to exercise their co-cognitive traits. The three analyses, taken as one body of work, reveal that truly authentic learning experiences are powerful for gifted students and their influence can be seen in a variety of significant ways. Big-picture programming may more effectively meet our gifted students' needs and challenge them in more lasting ways than common, short-term approaches.

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## Chapter 2

“We’re helping people”:

Gifted Middle School Students’ Self-Concepts while Engaged in Activism

Ashley D. Beason-Manes, Christian Z. Goering, and Marcia B. Imbeau

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the experiences of gifted middle school students who engaged in community action gifted programming as activists in their school, neighborhood, and larger community. Participants' self-concepts were measured using the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children at the beginning of the study and again at the end, which did not reveal statistically significant growth in self-concept. However, participant interviews regarding their self-concepts revealed changes in students' cognitive views of themselves as they progressed through their community action projects and viewed themselves more as activists. The study finds evidence of students' co-cognitive components of giftedness when themes of courage, sensitivity to human concerns, and sense of destiny emerge from the data. When main themes from Harter's self-concept scale were applied, participant interviews revealed themes of academic competence and social competence in support of these same domains of self-concept.

*Keywords:* gifted education, community action, service learning, self-concept, activism, co-cognitive components of giftedness

“We’re helping people”:

### Gifted Middle School Students’ Self-Concepts while Engaged in Activism

School and learning are too often contained in traditional classroom settings, and the value of engaging in hands-on, real-world application learning outside of classroom walls should instead be acknowledged and embraced. The mission statements of most schools—elementary, middle, secondary, and institutions of higher education—often contain some statement in regard to the well-rounded citizens and critically-thinking members of society that they seek to create in their students. Their mission statements rarely solely address academic accomplishment and standardized test scores. When the big picture is examined, educators hope to assist in developing thoughtful, empathetic, compassionate, critically-thinking individuals who are capable of making well-informed decisions, taking political action, and working toward the greater good of society. Why then, do we too often circumscribe our evaluation of our students’ learning experiences within the four walls of a traditional classroom? Perhaps some of the best ways of instilling qualities such as compassion and philanthropy and civil action in our students is by providing them with opportunities for authentic inquiry and experiences working in their communities for causes they believe in and for which they are willing to struggle. Perhaps by allowing our students some leadership in their own educations and providing them exposure to their own communities’ problems, the plight of others, and the empowerment found in activism and advocating for others, students will learn the greatest lessons of all and their self-concepts will grow.

While the literature tends to place great emphasis on cognitive challenge within gifted education programs, other research has shown the benefit of also providing focus on gifted students’ affective needs and interests. Students’ co-cognitive characteristics should be taken into

account in the classroom and beyond (Renzulli, 2002). Important to the question of whether or not gifted students benefit from service learning or engagement with activism is the observation that most gifted students possess higher levels of empathy, moral responsibility, self-examination and reflection, and sensitivity than their age peers (Terry, 2008). In fact, Silverman (1994) found that as a child's IQ increased, the development of moral concerns came earlier in the student's life (as cited in Terry, 2008). Gifted students who may be considered the ideal student are likely to become disengaged with learning when their unique needs—both cognitive and co-cognitive—are ignored (Stewart, Webster, & Bai, 2013). According to Berv (1998), taking effort toward the development of a better society is an important aspect of responsible citizenship. Working toward the betterment of society cannot be accomplished through traditional educational means, within the confines of the classroom walls. Students must experience social encounters, action-oriented problem-solving, and real-world struggles that provide insight (North, 2008) in addition to new didactic knowledge, and their learning must be allowed to be defined in rounder, fuller ways. This is the learning that is internalized and memorable, the learning that creates change for students and influences their educational decision-making.

The present study addresses gifted students' needs for authentic learning and access to multidimensional, real-world experiences through the design and implementation of a community activism curriculum which asked participants to form activism teams that worked to address a community issue of choice. Students worked to identify problems in their school, neighborhood, and city communities and followed a creative problem-solving process in order to conduct research on the problem, identify challenges, develop possible solutions, implement plans of action, and reflect on their successes and struggles. Their work was student-led and student-monitored. Four activism teams were formed in order to address such issues as distracted



driving, financial need among socioeconomically disenfranchised citizens, students' in-home internet access, and the reduction of plastics use in school cafeterias. Students educated their communities about the issues, formed community partnerships, hosted public events, and appealed to their school board for support. This study asks participants to reflect on their experiences as student activists and the ways in which these experiences influenced their self-concepts.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Community Activism**

The implementation of youth activism in school settings serves many purposes and contributes to the popular school mission of developing compassionate, productive members of society. While school is often thought of and often implemented in very traditional terms, the use of activism as learning experience breaks from convention but also often produces beneficial results (Renzulli, 2002; Terry, 2003; Terry, 2008; Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, & Sisk, 2008). The current culture of standardized teaching, learning, and performance does not necessarily encourage opportunities for educational activism (North, 2008). In fact, according to North (2008), research in recent years has suggested that students who learn in “democratic education programs” (much like the traditional institution of education which we see across the U.S.) learn to engage with their communities in uncritical ways, or they understand social issues within their communities but lack any understanding of how to solve such problems. Students must find themselves with educational opportunities that allow them to learn from events and experiences and not just about them (North, 2008). Learning *from* an experience requires action and reflection, even sometimes examination of internal conflict, while learning *about* an event or

experience is passive, requires little understanding, and can be done at a great cognitive distance (North, 2008).

Schindel (2008) recognizes the value in and power of youth activists. Contemporary youth have great influence on discourse, popular culture, and social norms; additionally they know how to mobilize as a group, they know how to access and disseminate resources, and their creativity allows for great impact (Schindel, 2008). However, participation in political activism and membership in service organizations has decreased over recent decades, perhaps causing young people to focus on individual goals and objectives for successes encouraged by contemporary culture rather than the greater good of their communities (Renzulli, 2002). Daniels and Ahmed (2015) suggest that contemporary American schools have created passive bystanders who lack the skills necessary to think critically and take action when problems need solving. This highlights the importance of providing students with opportunities for activism and social justice learning in schools. It is imperative that students find their voices while in school, that they learn in all traditional senses but that they also collaborate, problem-solve, and investigate (Daniels & Ahmed, 2015). By nurturing today's students into "upstanders," educators and the institution of American schools will do society a favor (Daniels & Ahmed, 2015). Students who do not experience educational opportunities for giving back and fostering lasting positive change in society may be more likely to develop insensitivity to social injustices and the significant problems found in American society today (Stewart et al., 2013). Students must be viewed as capable of solving important problems; they must be seen as valuable to America's future, not just as sources of today's trouble (Levinson, 2012). The standards initiative aims to produce "college and career ready" students, but what happens in educators' classrooms today and the learning they facilitate for their students can go beyond college and career readiness. As Daniels

and Ahmed (2015) suggest, students could become “citizen ready” instead, ready to “struggle for themselves and others” with the necessary tools for civic action and empowerment (p. 40).

Schools possess an incredible opportunity for creating an ideal micro-society, one where all student voices are heard and valued. If this were the environment in which students were educated, they could positively identify with an important and powerful American institution and would more likely develop a prevailing sense of duty to their school communities (Levinson, 2012). More than anything in school, students need to see that their concerns, ideas, and beliefs are taken seriously and that the concerns, ideas, and beliefs of their peers are also taken seriously, no matter the students’ backgrounds or what it is they have to say (Levinson, 2012). When students have the opportunity to put forth goals that are important to them and the opportunity to witness the success of those goals through civic engagement, students will become excited about their learning experiences and the future (Levinson, 2012). Guided experiential civic education should allow young people opportunities to be heard and listened to and to experience successes in working toward change and making a difference; when that happens, students are more likely to feel a greater sense of commitment and motivation (Levinson, 2012). Proper introduction to civic action and encouragement of student ownership in their work goes a long way in the educational experience but also in establishing a desire to continue work in community activism.

Participation in activism as youth promotes a healthy identity and greater confidence in oneself (Stewart et al., 2013). When students are given opportunities to participate in and engage with experiences that develop in them self-confidence, positive self-concept, and self-reliance, they are more likely to take positive risks toward achieving a greater good for society (Stewart et al., 2013). It is important, also, to engage students by addressing their unique needs, including

their interests and learning styles (Berv, 1998). Just as differentiation is important in the traditional classroom setting, it is important that educators recognize the unique qualities, intelligences, and skills in their students when facilitating civic engagement learning opportunities (Berv, 1998). Student success is enhanced when they are given opportunities to express and explore their strengths (Berv, 1998). In fact, Levinson (2012) found in her reviews of the literature that students' commitment to issues is more likely to grow out of their participation in and engagement with the issues than the other way around.

Shifts from traditional learning toward educational experiences that foster civic action and social justice begin in the classroom and rely on the efforts of the teacher. The teacher must make initial decisions about how to implement social justice education and the opportunities she wishes to create for her students (Leder, Plotnik, & Venkateswaran, 1999). Educators must feel a responsibility for creating the space for such educational experiences and must be willing to resist some of the dominant practices found in most secondary classrooms (North, 2008). Students should be encouraged to construct their own knowledge based on their own experiences, their successes and failures, and, according to North (2008), they should be held responsible for the meanings behind their new political and social understandings. While the research on gifted students and service learning is limited, within the literature on gifted and talented students, service learning is the most prevalently examined form of student activism (Stewart et al., 2013). Research suggests that there may be developmental benefits to service learning for gifted populations and that educators should work to incorporate community action in more student learning (Terry, 2003). Because service learning holds great potential for significant differentiation according to student needs and interests, Terry (2003) recommends

that service learning be used as an effective curriculum that connects gifted students to real-life application and opportunities for authentic learning experiences.

### **Activism and Co-cognitive Components of Gifted Education**

A concern of stakeholders in gifted education is that gifted students develop to use their gifts and talents in ways that promote good and benefit society. While the definition of giftedness continues to be somewhat controversial, no one has been successful in explaining why some gifted individuals dedicate their time, energy, and talents to the betterment of society and others do not (Renzulli, 2002; Terry et al., 2008). If the development of superior attributes can be understood, perhaps such an understanding will help parents and educators in developing the learning experiences and educational environments that will assist in shaping gifted children into potentially powerful innovators for good (Renzulli, 2002; Terry et al., 2008). Renzulli (2002) recommends that investments be made in fostering the development of co-cognitive traits in our gifted children in order to further invest in social capital, which benefits society by encouraging cooperation for the greater good. Prior to Renzulli's 2002 article, no one had examined "the relationship between the characteristics of gifted leaders and their motivation to use their gifts for the production of social capital" (p. 35). It is likely that the future will bring more difficult problems to society than have been seen before, but it is also likely that the solutions to such problems may be solvable by today's gifted and talented youth (Terry, 2003).

To successfully shift from traditional pedagogy and educational philosophy to something more progressive and inclusive requires resources outside of the educator's own instructional toolbox. Teachers willing to embrace social justice education and activism, as well as the evolution required of them as educators, must also seek assistance from organizations outside of their classrooms and schools that can support their goals of civic action and social justice

(Levinson, 2012). Educators must solicit the support and engagement of students' parents, local colleges and universities, and members of the community that are activists themselves

(Levinson, 2012). Support of the community ensures that the educator's work in the classroom is not seen as suspicious or controversial outside of the classroom (Levinson, 2012). A call for action, rather than just academic study of social injustice, will likely assist in transforming the perceptions of others in the community (North, 2008). Teachers will also find it beneficial to become familiar with available opportunities in the community that might connect students with mentors who share their concerns and passions for a specific issue (Renzulli, 2002). This transfers responsibility so that it may be shared among educators, students, and community members.

Current definitions of giftedness often neglect the co-cognitive components of giftedness as identified by Renzulli (2002). The co-cognitive components of giftedness include optimism, courage, romance with a topic, sensitivity to human concerns, physical and mental energy, and vision or a sense of destiny (Renzulli, 2002; Terry et al., 2008). Optimism is the belief that the future holds good outcomes as determined cognitively, emotionally, and motivationally (Renzulli, 2002). Courage is the desire and ability to brave through difficulty and even danger when fears may get in the way (Renzulli, 2002). Romance with a topic includes passion about a discipline, which may be characterized by powerful emotion and motivates one's determination and dedication to a topic (Renzulli, 2002). Sensitivity to human concerns involves one's ability to empathize and comprehend another individual's world and life (Renzulli, 2002). Physical and mental energy are found in everyone, but when someone possesses a great deal of physical or mental energy, such that commitment to accomplishment is intense, it may be considered a co-cognitive component of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002). Sense of destiny is a difficult component of

giftedness to define but may be described as internal locus of control, self-efficacy, and motivation (Renzulli, 2002). Sense of destiny directs behavior and planning for the future (Renzulli, 2002).

Service learning at the Community Action level often provides opportunities for further development of co-cognitive components of giftedness such that it sensitizes students to the needs of their communities while also contributing to their knowledge and understandings of curricular study (Terry et al., 2008). Service learning can potentially transform students' perspectives on different groups of people and different areas of their communities by asking them to interact with people whom they might not usually and to serve and take action in ways they might not ordinarily (Stewart et al., 2013). Through participation in service learning and other instances of activism, students are likely to increase their awareness of the inequality and oppression present in their communities, in turn increasing their concern for oppressed community members and increasing their compassion, empathy, and drive for working toward the greater good (Stewart et al., 2013).

### **Self-concept**

While there is a general consensus in recent research as to the best ways of defining self-concept, variation still exists. Most scholars view self-concept as a constructed, cognitive view of oneself which takes into consideration one's interaction with his or her environment, his or her expectations of self and the expectations of others, internal and external comparisons, relationships, abilities, and personal beliefs (Gore & Cross, 2014; Huitt, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). Additionally, hierarchical models of self-concept have been developed which illustrate a variety of domain-specific self-concepts enveloped by a larger, overarching global self-concept (Cross, O'Reilly, Mihyeon, Mammadov, & Cross, 2015; Rinn,

Mendaglio, Rudasill, & McQueen, 2010; Rudasill & Callahan, 2008; Vogl & Preckel, 2013). Such a global self-concept can be defined as the way one views oneself (Pajares & Schunk, 2001) and may be the most common understanding of self-concept. Components of self-concept, which measure more domain-specific assessment of self, include: physical, academic, social, behavioral, and transpersonal self-concepts (Betz, 1994; Harter, 2008; Huitt, 2011; McConnell, 2011). The physical self-concept relates to appearance and material possessions, while the academic self-concept consists of intellectual ability and performance in school settings (Huitt, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Wang & Neihart, 2015; Wilson, Siegle, McCoach, Little, & Reis, 2014). Academic self-concept further breaks down into a general academic self-concept and content-related academic self-concept, which is descriptive of one's feelings about his or her abilities and performances in specific subject areas (Huitt, 2011). Social self-concept describes relationships and interactions with other people, as well as acceptance by others (Huitt, 2011; Vogl & Preckel, 2013).

Evidence suggests that there is a natural evolution of self-concept through the lifetime. Early in life, perceptions of self are more concrete, such as observations of one's appearance and behaviors exhibited (Villatte, Hugon, & de Leonardis, 2011). As people develop and mature, their self-concepts become more and more abstract, eventually including their beliefs and morals (Villatte et al., 2011). Self-concept is often continuously evolving based on a process of constant comparison (Bosacki, Bialecka-Pikul, & Szpak, 2015; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rinn et al., 2010; Rudasill & Callahan, 2013). Individuals compare themselves internally, which refers to comparing performance or achievement to one's expectation or perceived ability, and they also compare themselves externally, which is when an individual evaluates his or her ability, performance, or value as compared to that of his or her peers (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Pajares



& Schunk, 2001). Additionally, internal comparison can take place between specific domains of self-concept, such as academic ability versus athletic ability (Rudasill & Callahan, 2013). This phenomenon of internal and external comparisons used in constructing self-concept is known as the “internal/external frame of reference model of self-concept development” (McCoach & Siegle, 2003, p. 61). Because of the ways that comparisons contribute to the formation and variability in an individual’s self-concept, it was important for the researcher to place special emphasis on teamwork and collaboration during the implementation of students’ community activism projects.

### **Method**

The first researcher designed a curriculum for community activism to implement with her gifted 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade students in order to address students’ co-cognitive traits and provide students with authentic academic experiences that also appealed to students’ natural inclinations toward creativity and problem-solving. Students formed activism teams by grade level and interest and then engaged with a creative problem-solving process in order to identify a community problem or issue that they felt was significant. The students formed essential questions for their projects, thoroughly researched their chosen issues, contacted community members for insights and partnerships, identified potential challenges, and developed a list of possible solutions. As teams, the students decided upon a solution to further develop and implemented a plan of action. Their final steps were to reflect on their process and progress and make adjustments as needed. Students worked to provide device and internet access to fellow students who did not have access at home, to decrease instances of distracted driving in their neighborhood, to provide free, professional financial advice to those in need, and to reduce the use of plastics in school cafeterias.

This particular case study required qualitative research methods in analysis of real-world experiences by real, living people (Yin, 2011). Their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes are best communicated through conversations and observations, and thus a qualitative approach is most appropriate (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Because this study could not entirely anticipate the experiences of participants, it was important that the researcher approached this study through an open-ended investigation that would allow for participants' organic and true perceptions and experiences to come through (Leko, 2002).

### **Participants**

The study consists of 29 middle-school-aged participants, 12 of whom were female (41%), and the remaining 17 were male (59%) (see Table 1). Three students identified as mixed race, one identified as black, one identified as Asian, one identified as Hispanic, and 23 identified as white. Ten sixth-graders, 10 seventh-graders, and 9 eighth-graders participated. Thirty students were invited to participate in the study, and 29 returned consent. Students in the middle school's gifted education program had been previously identified as gifted through an extensive evaluation process that included cognitive testing using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), achievement testing using the Woodcock-Johnson Fourth Edition, observational data collected by general education classroom teachers, review of NWEA Measures of Annual Progress test scores, parent feedback, and occasional product assessment. Assessment of need for additional challenge not provided in the general education classroom was also considered in the gifted education evaluation. Participants had engaged with gifted programming for varying lengths of time. Many students had been identified in elementary school, while some had been recently identified. The participants were the researcher's students at the middle school where she is a gifted education facilitator.

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Table 1

*Participant Descriptions*

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Participants				
<u>Participant #</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Brian	Male	6	11
2	Cole	Male	7	12
3	Jaden	Male	7	12
4	Amir	Male	8	14
5	Andrew	Male	7	13
6	Liam	Male	7	12
7	Devonte	Male	7	12
8	Quinn	Female	7	12
9	Gabby	Female	6	11
10	Eric	Male	6	12
11	Carter	Male	6	11
12	Preston	Male	6	11
13	Jacob	Male	8	13
14	Mason	Male	6	12
15	Corbin	Male	7	12
16	Tabitha	Female	6	12
17	Henry	Male	6	11
18	Avery	Female	7	12
19	Mitchell	Male	8	13
20	Lauren	Female	8	14
21	Lucas	Male	6	11
22	Cora	Female	8	14
23	Vivian	Female	7	12
24	Tucker	Male	8	14
25	Shoshanna	Female	7	13
26	Haley	Female	8	14
27	Alexandra	Female	8	13
28	Ari	Female	6	12
29	Olivia	Female	8	14

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The gifted label ensured that students would be served by an Individual Education Plan (IEP) under the special education umbrella, and students were enrolled in a gifted education class every other school day that allowed allotted time for special projects and individualized instruction. Thorough explanation of the study was provided to both students and guardians, and lines of communication were kept open throughout the study. Participants and their legal

guardians provided consent to participation in the study, and while all gifted students engaged with community activism projects, only those who had proper consent on file are included in the study.

### **Data Collection**

The first author interviewed participants on at least three occasions in small groups throughout the course of an 18-week semester. Each interview lasted between 15 and 90 minutes. Interviews took place in the gifted education classroom at various points throughout the projects because it is a familiar, comfortable setting for the participants being interviewed and that was least distracting to all involved (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2014). The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used for the initial interview and then conversational interviews were used throughout the rest of the semester (Creswell, 2007). Because the majority of the interviews were conversational, they allowed for two-way interactions, which was important for the topic at hand (Yin, 2011). The small-group interviews were helpful in collecting data on group perceptions but also allowed the researcher to focus on individuals when needed because of the small group size (Yin, 2011). The researcher also kept a journal of thoughts and perceptions throughout the study and documented observations. Participants were asked to document their thoughts and experiences regarding the project on a weekly basis in online student journal entries. Additionally, all participants completed Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (2012) at the beginning of the study and again at the conclusion of the study. The instrument measures children's (grades 2 through 8) global self-concepts and domain self-concepts in the areas of academic competence, social competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct (Harter, 2012). The academic and social competence domains of self-concept are of particular interest in this study.

## **Procedures**

In addition to the interviews, the first author documented observations, and students began journaling their experiences to comprise the entirety of the data set. Interviews were audiotaped on the researcher's laptop and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The first author transferred student journal entries from the students' online classroom into a word processing document for analysis and then calculated Harter Self-Perception Profile results according to the instrument's instructions.

## **Analysis**

Using a deductive approach to analysis, the researcher coded data according to self-concept theory with emphasis on academic and social competence domains of self-concept. Deductive qualitative analysis (DQA) allows the researcher to approach her data with predetermined codes (Gilgun, 2009). Within this study, the researcher analyzed participant interviews and journal entries for references to students' academic and social competence. Next, negative case analysis was applied in order to find open codes that did not fit within self-concept theory (Gilgun, 2009) and to explore the data more so in its entirety. Once additional codes were established, they were examined for convergence, and axial codes were established in addition to academic competence and social competence (Patton, 2002). Divergence was also evaluated to determine where remaining codes should be categorized into axial codes, or if additional axial codes should be established.

The first author calculated Harter Self-Perception Profile results according to instrument manual instructions. The mean score for each domain was calculated for each participant and documented. For each domain, the mean score of all participants for that domain was then calculated for an overall self-concept score for all participants. The scores were then divided into

subgroups so that data could be analyzed based on gender, grade level, and the intersectionality of both gender and grade level (see Appendix B).

### **Researcher Bias**

Qualitative researchers are expected to bring their own experiences, perspectives, and beliefs to their studies, and it is acknowledged that they will inform the research process and the interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2007). As a gifted education facilitator and the participants' own teacher, the first researcher has prior knowledge and established relationships with the participants. Her understandings of their backgrounds and strengths and weaknesses informed the way the community activism curriculum was implemented and how the data was collected. Additionally, she is a former gifted student of public schools and a female. She experienced her own gifted programming in school and also lived the experience of being a gifted female in a public school setting. Her memories and insights into this experience likely informed her interpretation of participants' experiences and feedback. In order to combat this bias, the second researcher analyzed the qualitative data as well, and the researchers sought agreement in the coding process. Additionally, the researchers shared their potential biases with one another in order to prevent significant influence of such bias on the study's findings.

### **Findings**

As the literature consistently reflects, gifted students' self-concepts tend to be stronger and less variable than those of the general population (Rudasill, Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009), and the findings of this study suggest the same. However, gifted students are not a homogeneous group, and their self-concepts tend to reflect such variability (Harter, 1985; Harter, 1988; Rudasill, et al., 2009), especially in specific domains. Researchers developed main themes after a deductive approach using self-concept's *academic* and *social competence*

domains, followed by negative case analysis which identified open codes that could be further converged into axial codes related to Renzulli's (2002) co-cognitive components of giftedness. These axial codes were: *courage*, *sensitivity to human concerns*, and *sense of destiny* (see Table 2).

### **Academic Competence**

**Academic challenge.** All students were asked about their experiences being challenged in school settings, as well as their experiences not being adequately challenged. All participants could relate to both experiences, and one student described the engagement of being challenged academically but also the frustrating ways that teachers attempt to challenge him academically:

It's both fun and frustrating because when you're challenged, you're given more opportunities to work your brain, but it's also frustrating because you're typically given a bigger project in a shorter amount of time than other people. You have to put a lot of work in. You get down to the final day, and you realize you still have work to do. (Devonte, personal communication, April 22, 2016)

His experience was not uncommon, as many of the participants described the excitement of being challenged and also the unfair treatment they receive when they are assigned extra work in an attempt to keep them challenged.

Table 2

*Organization of Open Codes into Main Themes*

Main Themes				
<u>Academic/Scholastic Competence</u>	<u>Social Competence</u>	<u>Courage</u>	<u>Sensitivity to Human Concerns</u>	<u>Sense of Destiny</u>
Academic challenge	Building relationships/Teamwork	Growth mindset	Empathy/ Emotional competence	Ability to change
Lack of academic challenge	Social skills	Pride	Competence for helping others	Grit, Effort, Not giving up
Understanding of own giftedness	Ability to communicate	Evolving ideas of success	Real world	



Just as all of the participants had been academically challenged at one point or another, they had also experienced the frustration and boredom that comes with a lack of academic challenge in the school setting. Andrew explained, “If it’s too easy, it’s just like, I already understand all this and it’s boring and easy” (Andrew, personal communication, April 22, 2016). While some students enjoyed easy work in their regular education classes so that they could use remaining time in ways that they wanted to, such as reading or drawing, many students expressed irritation at how bored they were in many of their classes.

**Understanding of giftedness.** Students were asked to describe their understandings of their own giftedness and the expectations others may possess of them because of their being identified as gifted. The participants’ understandings of giftedness provided insight into their understanding of their own intellectual and academic capacities. One student, Preston, responded, “To me it means that you put more effort into your school work and you sort of care more. You want to learn and you need more challenge than your regular classes provide” (Preston, personal communication, April 22, 2016). Other students described themselves as being “more productive,” “doing more advanced level things,” “getting information faster,” and “learning quickly and more easily.” They all expressed an understanding of advanced cognitive ability and the capacity to excel in school and other educational endeavors.

### **Social Competence**

**Building relationships and collaboration.** Participants described the lessons and skills they took away from their new experiences as community activists and many emphasized their ability to build relationships and the importance of collaboration throughout their projects. Contrary to the negative experiences many of the participants had communicated in regards to group work of the past, many students found their community activism teams to be functional

collaborations. One student, Henry, described an important new experience he had as “being part of a community and working with other people. It was good to work together” (Henry, personal communication, April 26, 2016). In addition to having opportunities for building relationships in the community with business partners and community organizations, the students also got to know one another on deeper, more intimate levels as they worked closely together toward important goals. Haley said, “We should continue to do stuff where we help people as a group of friends” (Haley, personal communication, April 26, 2016). Several students explained that they had gotten to “know each other better” and had greater “appreciation for one another.” These new connections suggest a building of social competence and an increased awareness of their social interactions and abilities.

**Social skills.** In addition to connecting with one another, many of the students noted new social skills, ability to communicate with people they did not previously know, and a willingness to communicate with community members as new skills and experiences that they felt were valuable as a result of their community activism projects. One student explained:

[I feel] more comfortable with reaching out to professional adults. Just, like, anybody. We had to talk to a lot of people [we didn't know], and sometimes getting told no or just like, you need to learn that. (Haley, personal communication, April 26, 2016)

Another student, Cora, declared:

I feel a lot better about speaking. Over the weekend I called some places looking for jobs, and I knew exactly what I was going to say. Before I would've been nervous. (Cora, personal communication, April 26, 2016)

Their new and challenging roles as activists challenged students to exit their comfort zones and exercise their ability to express ideas, solicit assistance and support, and communicate effectively with adults in the community. Most participants were able to identify these experiences as new learning.

**Ability to communicate.** Because of the issues the participants faced throughout the projects, students expressed their new understandings of the importance of communication. Participants ran into roadblocks and many obstacles because of insufficient or altogether ineffective communication. Many frustrations emerged through interviews and student journal entries surrounding errors in communication and the troubles and inefficiencies they caused. “One of the major problems [with my team’s project] was communication,” Liam reported (Liam, personal communication, April 25, 2016). Students reflected on the ways in which they would change any future community activism projects they might engage with, and leading their list of changes was communication strategy. They viewed the activism experience as stretching their ability to communicate.

### **Courage**

**Growth mindset.** Schools often declare an intent to instill in their students a growth mindset. They work to encourage learning from mistakes and attempt to instill in their students the idea that students have the capacity to learn and accomplish through effort and dedication. Participants noted their own growth mindsets throughout their activism projects. The researcher noted statements concerning students’ lack of power during planning phases of their projects. Many students initially questioned whether adults with power or community businesses would actually place their faith in a group of kids and their ability to create change. During final interviews, though, Tabitha declared, “Little people can do big things” (Tabitha, personal communication, April 29, 2016). And Cora stated, “I feel like it was a perfect project for what we were trying to do. And we wanted to see an end result and be there and see change happen. And we did” (Cora, personal communication, April 29, 2016). The students’ growth throughout the project was recognizable by the researcher but also by the participants themselves.

**Pride.** In reflecting on their activism projects, many students suggested a sense of pride in their efforts and accomplishments. They indicated similar feelings any time they take on academic challenge and feel successful. Andrew said, “When I finish it, it makes me feel good about myself” (Andrew, personal communication, April 25, 2016). And Cole continued, “Yeah, it does make me feel good about myself too” (Cole, personal communication, April 25, 2016).

Students’ commitment to the project throughout seemed to contribute to their level of pride in their work. Cora, the project manager of one of the 8th-grade activism projects and the students who conceptualized the community problem they would address, agreed that she may have felt more pride in the outcome of her team’s activism project because of her specific role in the effort. While other students claimed to feel pride in their work, Cora said, “I was going to make it a success even if no one else did” (Cora, personal communication, April 26, 2016). When asked, “Do you think you feel more pride in its success than others?” she replied, “Probably” (Cora, personal communication, April 26, 2016).

**Evolving ideas of success.** Throughout implementation of the students’ activism projects, the first author periodically asked about their ideas of success within the project. Interviews and student journal entries revealed an evolution of student conception of success. Rather than success meaning total implementation of the students’ action plans and seeing positive results of their efforts, as students defined success early on in the process, students began to see the successes they experienced along the way, such as learning experiences, small, early changes they were making, and bringing awareness to others of the community’s problems.

One student suggests that school tends to play a role in the ways students define success or don’t define success. Liam said, “That’s the way we are taught in school. We are taught to view the world in a more black and white manner than a bunch of gray area. There is no *degree*

of success. [emphasis in the original]" (Liam, personal communication, April 25, 2016). Fortunately, through their activism projects, students began to see the gray areas of success. Tabitha said, "I feel like we were successful with actually telling people there was a problem" (Tabitha, personal communication, April 22, 2016). Her teammate, Preston, said, "I think [we have] been successful at spreading awareness" (Preston, personal communication, April 22, 2016). Their definitions of success began to evolve as they felt they were making progress throughout their projects, and success began to also mean educating others, spreading awareness, taking small steps toward their end goals, and learning how to advocate for an issue.

### **Sensitivity to Human Concerns**

**Empathy.** Most of the participants were able to define *empathy* during interviews and were able to give examples of times they have felt empathy toward someone else. Some participants were even able to identify periods in their lives when they felt they had really grown as empathetic people. The researcher asked:

"Would each of you tell me about a specific time when you felt empathy toward someone else? What stands out in your minds?"

Vivian: "I know that in fifth grade, it was a hard year for me, but I think that's when I got a lot more empathy, kind of, from that. Being able to understand. I grew up, I've grown up pretty lucky. I don't think I had much empathy before that, honestly." (Vivian, personal communication, April 25, 2016)

Researcher: "And you don't have to, but if you want to go into why you think that grew inside of you, that might be helpful."

Vivian: "Like, I understood more that everybody has...they're complex. And I never had very complex feelings before." (Vivan, personal communication, April 25, 2016)

Researcher: "What was it about fifth grade?"

Vivian: "Uh, my parents were going through a divorce and it was hard. So...And when I saw my friends who had problems like that and before I was like, Problems...? Problems happen. But now I understand and I'm like, Let me hug you." (Vivian, personal communication, April 25, 2016)

Students opened up about their own personal struggles and the times when they've been challenged to understand others' feelings, the feelings of people they are close to, especially. Participants noted on several occasions the ways that their community activism projects forced them to think about others and to attempt to take on other perspectives.

Shoshanna: "I've been working on empathizing with [other people] and really understanding their problems and situations and trying not to have a biased opinion about it. I'm really working on it and really trying to help people as much as I can." (Shoshanna, personal communication, April 25, 2016)

She later explained,

"It's like that saying that I don't remember where I heard it. It goes: Heroes aren't born heroes, they have heroic traits thrust upon them. It's the same with empathy. Based on our [experiences], you can't just wake up and feel empathetic. You've got to go through something that makes you feel that." (Shoshanna, personal communication, April 25, 2016)

And for some students, their effort as student activists was an experience that aided in that development of empathy.

**Competence for Helping Others.** The researcher hoped to understand the participants' feelings in regard to their desire and ability to help other people in different circumstances than their own. All participants were asked about their feelings regarding helping others and the ways that their activism projects influenced their perceptions of their ability to extend assistance and make a difference. The researcher asked,

"Can you help people on a big scale?"

Andrew: "What we're doing right now [activism project]. We're helping people. We're going to save lives and hopefully people won't distracted drive and they won't kill people. People won't have relatives that died and they won't feel sad." (Andrew, personal communication, April 26, 2016)

Researcher: "Before this project, did you ever think about that you as a seventh-grader might be able to save lives?"

Quinn and Andrew in unison: "No." (Quinn and Andrew, personal communication, April 26, 2016)

While the participants may not have been able to determine the impact they had or could have at that point in time, their beliefs had begun to shift in terms of what they could accomplish and the power of those accomplishments.

Researcher: “Do you feel motivated to help people on a big scale?”

Tabitha: “Yeah.”

Preston: “I feel motivated.”

Tabitha: “I feel like I can help people and I do have the ability to do it, and I’m needed.” (Tabitha and Preston, personal communication, April 26, 2016)

Their faith in their own capacity to help likely influenced their self-concepts positively, and their desire to help others demonstrates their sensitivity to human concerns, as Renzulli (2002) suggested.

**Engagement with the Real World.** The participants’ various community activism projects required that they take on real-world issues and develop and apply real-world solutions. Several of the participants recognized the significance of such experiences and why they might be valuable to the participants in the future. One participant, Haley said:

“It was about event planning, but it was more than that.”

Researcher: “How so?”

Haley: “It wasn’t just for planning an event. We actually have a good cause and stuff.”

Cora: “It was teamwork, too.”

Lauren: “It depends what your definition of learning is; it’s not just information.”

Researcher: “What else is it?”

Lauren: “It’s learning how to do things in life. It’s helpful.” (Haley, Cora, and Lauren, personal communication, April 26, 2016)

Students' acknowledgement of the value of their experiences as activists contributed to their belief in their ability to engage in real life outside of school and to be successful. They came to understand authentic learning experiences that provide access to the real world and skills that have real-world application are engaging and educational. One student even expressed, "I learned that this is a good way to learn" (Liam, personal communication, April 26, 2016).

### **Sense of Destiny**

**Ability to create change.** While many of the participants indicated that they had spent time volunteering on previous occasions, none had engaged with a similar activism project in the past. For many, this project appeared to have been the first time students were given the opportunity to create change themselves, and this particular experience—at least for many of the participants—led to a new belief that they *could* make a difference. During an interview, Haley admitted, "I thought for a while that the event was going to be a complete and total disaster, but then it turned out well. When we were planning it all, we weren't completely connected to it quite yet. It was kind of like, Are we going to make a difference at all?" (Haley, personal communication, May 17, 2016). Her recollection of concern during the problem-solving process was mirrored in several students' journal entries as they discussed their fears of failure, the ways they thought they might be perceived as kids, and their doubts that they could pull off their solutions with success. Students described being able to "see change happen," experiencing the success of "end results," their ability to make a difference, and expressed an interest in pursuing similar projects again in the future. One student, Henry, declared, "In the future, I'll be more active in the community if I see problems" (Henry, personal communication, May 16, 2016). Some students' concerns about their inability as kids to create change were put to rest, and they established a newfound belief in their competence as change-makers. Cora explained, "I feel like



[creating change] is doable. We did it! We're a group of 8th-graders, and we did it!" (Cora, personal communication, May 16, 2016). Her enthusiasm surrounding her team's successes was not isolated. Many students found that, even as kids, they could accomplish a lot in and for their communities and be recognized as credible activists. These realizations altered their understandings of themselves.

**Grit, effort, determination.** Angela Duckworth's research on a student trait called "grit" has gained a lot of attention in recent years, as she has attempted to define the quality that some students possess that keeps them moving forward, even after defeat. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) define grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087), and their research suggests that grit may be predictive of measures of success more so even than IQ. Throughout this study's participant interviews and student journal entries, the researcher finds references to students' determination, unwillingness to give up, and passion for their activism projects. Participants indicate their desire to succeed but also the learning that took place when they failed. Their projects became vehicles for learning beyond the actual problem they were working to solve and provided students with opportunities to continue on even when they hit obstacles. One student admitted to his own doubts early on in the project, but students also reflected on their desire to persevere.

Tucker: "There was kind of a low point. I want to be honest. There was a really low point when I was questioning everything."

Researcher: "When was that? Tell me about it."

Tucker: "Probably a month before. We were in a slump."

Researcher: "What did that feel like? What were you thinking?"

Tucker: "I was thinking we should have chosen something easier and not had to work as hard... But it wouldn't have had a good end result." (Tucker, personal communication, May 16, 2016)

Cora: “I remember feeling a little...as our event neared, feeling worried and prepared to pull all the weight because it was my brain child, and I was really looking forward to it being a success.”

Researcher: “So, did you feel like since it was your idea that if it flopped, it would be a lot of pressure on you?”

Cora: “Yeah. I was going to make it a success even if no one else did.” (Cora, personal communication, May 16, 2016)

Several participants repeatedly expressed an interest in continuing their activism projects during the following school year, and many outgoing 8th-graders even suggested that they continue to work as activists by putting on a second annual event when in their freshman year of high school. The commitment many of the students felt to their teams, their projects, and their communities influenced the success of their problem-solving. They encouraged one another to keep working and moving forward when doubts crept in, and revealed their “grit” to researchers, to one another, and to themselves. This continued passion and perseverance demonstrates their sense of destiny (Renzulli, 2002).

### **Self-Concept Growth According to Harter Scale**

Participants completed the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (2012) prior to beginning their community activism projects and again at the conclusion of the semester, when their projects came to a close prior to summer vacation. Harter’s profile measures global self-concept and a variety of self-concept domains, including scholastic competence, social competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. Harter was careful to design her self-concept instrument to measure global self-concept as a separate construct from the domain-specific self-concepts. She views global self-concept as requiring “its own judgment, rated by its own set of items, and scored separately” (Harter, 2012, p. 2) and not a sum of domain-specific self-concept measures. Harter relies on Cronbach’s alpha and claims high levels of reliability. According to factorial validity indices, there was “very clear

discrimination between the designated factors, with high loadings and virtually no cross-loadings” (Harter, 2012, p. 13). When compared to correlating subscales from Marsh’s Self-Description Questionnaire II, Harter found that each subscale correlated at .60 or above, suggesting evidence of convergent validity (Harter, 2012).

Examination of all mean self-concept scores across participants shows growth in the self-concept domains of social competence and behavioral conduct (see Table 3). When comparing self-concept mean scores from pre-test to post-test, descriptive statistics show growth for 6th-graders’ self-concepts in the scholastic competence, social competence, and athletic competence domains. Mean scores for 7th-grade participants’ self-concepts grew in the social competence and behavioral conduct domains, and the 8th-graders’ self-concept mean scores grew in the social competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct domains, as well as global self-concept (see Appendix B). Differences in self-concept growth can be seen when scores are compared based on gender. Descriptive statistics reveal mean self-concept score growth for female participants in the domains of scholastic competence and social competence. For the males, mean scores increased for social competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct domains. While descriptive statistics do show self-concept growth, according to both parametric and non-parametric significance tests, none of the pre-post differences in self-concept are statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ) (see Table 3).

### **Discussion**

This study addresses gaps in the literature regarding gifted education and student self-concepts. While much research on gifted students’ academic self-concepts is available, information is not as robust regarding Renzulli’s (2002) co-cognitive traits of giftedness and the ways that these traits can be nurtured in school, in turn influencing student self-concepts

Table 3

*Results of Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children*

Self-Concept Domains												
	<u>Scholastic Competence</u>		<u>Social Competence</u>		<u>Athletic Competence</u>		<u>Physical Appearance</u>		<u>Behavioral Conduct</u>		<u>Global Self-Worth</u>	
	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>
Mean	3.493	3.488	3.123	3.269	2.841	2.833	3.086	3.00	3.253	3.258	3.530	3.373
SD	.432	.515	.6343	.550	.578	.605	.670	.639	.482	.554	.433	.51030
Sig. Levels	.883		.090		.559		.265		.897		.115	

positively, and encouraging high levels of achievement (Rudasill & Callahan, 2008; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). The available research on service learning suggests its positive influence on students' academic experiences, as well as its ability to provide for gifted students' affective needs (Terry, 2003; Terry, 2008; Terry, et al., 2008). This study's findings provide evidence for the power of student engagement as community activists in order to provide authentic learning experiences and opportunities for self-concept growth. The deductive approach to data analysis within this study allows for connections to be made among the participants' reflections and Renzulli's co-cognitive traits of giftedness, as well as self-concept theory. This study finds supporting evidence within student interviews, student journal entries, and the researcher's observations of participants' courage, sensitivity to human concern, and sense of destiny (Renzulli, 2002) and of students' perceived academic and social competence, as domains of self-concept.

This study's findings support the literature regarding service learning. Terry (2003; 2008) suggests that the community action level of involvement with service learning provides students with powerful educational experiences that expose students to a sense of empowerment and engage them deeply with their communities. Studies suggest that service learning teaches the responsibilities that come with being a caring and active citizen (Stewart, Webster, & Bai, 2013; Terry, et al., 2008), fosters care for others, and encourages students in meeting academic objectives (Terry, 2003; Stewart et al., 2013). The findings of this study also support that students stand to gain a healthier identity and increased confidence after engaging as activists (Stewart et al., 2013). Most of the literature on service learning suggests that involvement in such educational experiences benefits those students who participate and engage, and this study suggests the same. Such benefits might include gains in personal and social responsibility, as

communicated during participant interviews, improved self-concept, ability to problem-solve, as demonstrated throughout the participants' projects, and responsibility for learning (Terry 2003; Terry, 2008), which the participants revealed during the problem-solving process and throughout reflections.

Data analysis revealed some differences in experience and results according to both gender and grade. Though self-concept growth as measured by Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children was not statistically significant across the sample or by gender or grade level, qualitative interviews and student journal entries suggest that some students experienced more self-concept growth than others. Expression of feelings of success seemed to occur most often with 8th-grade participants and less often with 6th-grade and 7th-grade participants. The 8th-grade participants more often expressed interest in continuing their work as activists in the future and were interested in completing another project with the first researcher even after they had moved on to high school. Possible reasons for these grade-level differences may be the point in their projects at which the school year ended. Projects were forced to conclude for summer vacation whether or not students had achieved their ultimate activism goals and answered their essential questions. Both 8th-grade activism teams reached fairly natural points of conclusion when their event had successfully taken place and official presentations had been made to the district's school board. The 6th-grade and 7th-grade activism teams had to halt their projects before seeing the results they had hoped to, perhaps leaving them feeling a lesser sense of success and less engaged with their projects. This sense of defeat was revealed at times during final participant interviews at the conclusion of the study.

This study did not solely find differences among participants across grade levels, though. Female participants seemed to have a more flexible definition of success when reflecting on their

projects and a greater sense of empowerment as a result of their activism work. The female students communicated in a more positive manner about their efforts and results and seemed more willing and interested in pursuing activism in the future. The students who expressed pleasure at their success and their newfound ability to create change were more frequently female. It is possible that because the female participants tended to take on leadership roles in all four projects, they felt a greater sense of pride in their work. Additionally, on several occasions, the female participants shared instances in school settings where they felt they were treated unjustly or kept from certain opportunities because they were female. If this is an experience that they are accustomed to, it would be natural that a student-led activism project provided a new feeling of empowerment for these female participants.

### **Implications for Educators**

As the literature has demonstrated, students who possess positive self-concepts will generally engage in challenging pursuits and put forth effort toward successes in activities in which they choose to participate (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). The ways in which students feel about their abilities helps to determine the activities they choose to engage with, the level of challenge they seek, and the effort they put in toward success (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Society should hope that its most gifted and talented possess self-concepts that enable them to engage with important work, to persevere in the face of challenge, and to create lasting, positive change in their communities. More importantly, society should *work* to build up youth's self-concepts so that they engage in these ways and rise to contribute when they are needed.

While it has been documented in the literature that gifted students' self-concepts are generally more positive than the self-concepts of the general student population, it is important that educators recognize the value in encouraging self-concept growth and designing and

implementing curriculum that not only challenges students academically, but that engages them emotionally and challenges them to make contributions for the good of the world around them. Students' self-concept domains of academic and social competence influence their inclination to engage with their communities and to use their gifts in beneficial ways. When educators can foster growth in these domains, they foster growth for society. Parents, teachers, counselors, and school psychologists may want to take into consideration the value of service learning, particularly the community action level of service learning that asks students to engage with their communities in meaningful ways, to learn about and provide for their communities, and to create lasting change that remains after the students conclude their work. Design and implementation of such powerful activism-oriented projects provide students with opportunities to grow academically, socially, emotionally, and morally. Students create lasting memories during these authentic learning experiences and are more likely to engage as active citizens in adulthood when they have had powerful civic experiences in their youth (Levinson, 2002). Educators of the gifted understand that gifted students' moral and emotional development is often quite mature, and the careful design and implementation of community activism projects helps to foster that development.

It should be educators' primary goal to prepare students for futures as civic-minded, active, caring citizens. Such preparation, especially for gifted students, should include providing students with classroom experiences that allow them to function in a micro-society built on engagement and problem-solving. Students' early experiences with activism are likely to grow within them a sense of duty to create change when change is needed and to persevere when obstacles get in the way. Tough, real-world situations where students can lead their own learning



are powerful educational tools, and students will benefit when educators are willing to challenge them to act as the citizens that they are before they are expected to be.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

A small sample was used in this qualitative study, and the findings reflect only the experiences of the participating students. Participants in this study were gifted education students as identified according to protocol and criteria set by the school district. Another school district that may apply a different set of criteria to its standards for gifted education evaluation may work to educate a very different population of gifted students. While this study is helpful in understanding the experiences of these gifted students who engaged with community activism projects in their particular gifted program, other students may have lived a very different experience engaging with the same projects. If the activism projects implemented in this study had been allowed to continue on for a greater length of time, results may have been different and students' feelings about their projects may have been different. While the researcher did examine grade-level and gender differences among participants, there was an imbalance in numbers of female and males who participated in the study. This imbalance is due to a general gender imbalance in the school's gifted student population. Gender balance may have also altered findings. Self-concept is considered a malleable construct of self, especially in childhood (Lewis & Knight, 2000), but it is not as fluid or volatile as other constructs such as self-image or self-esteem. For this reason, self-concept growth may have been more accurately measured over the course of a longer period of time.

Future research regarding gifted students' self-concept and service learning could be examined from a variety of perspectives, including educator perspective and community member perspective. Teacher perception of student self-concept could reveal new insights. Additionally,

the experience of teachers implementing community activism projects with their students and leading students in self-concept education may be an important area of study as the field of gifted education continues to encourage community action and the growth of social capital for its students.

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## Appendix A

### Small-group Student Interview Protocol

#### 1. Description of self

Tell me about yourself.

What do you consider to be your best qualities?

What do you like least about yourself?

What do you look like?

#### 2. External influences on self-concept

Do you think others admire you? Why?

Whose opinions of you are most important? Why do you feel that way?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of intelligence?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of leadership?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of popularity?

#### 3. Internal influences on self-concept

What are your expectations for yourself?

What do you find to be most motivating?

When do you feel proud of yourself?

#### 4. Empowerment

Have you ever felt powerful? Explain.

Tell me about a time that you contributed to a positive change.

Tell me about a time that you helped someone else.

### 5. Academic rigor/challenge

When are you most challenged academically at school?

Describe what it feels like when you are not challenged at school.

Describe what it feels like to be challenged.

How do you apply what you learn at school to your own life?

### 6. Gifted education

To you, what does it mean to be gifted?

In what ways has being in the gifted program challenged you?

What kinds of things do you want to be able to learn about in gifted guided studies?

Tell me about a time when you learned a lot in your gifted program.

### 7. Empathy

How do you generally respond to people you care about when they're having a hard time?

*Explain concept of empathy if needed.* Tell me about a time when you felt empathy for someone else.

Do you believe you are able to help others? How so?

### 8. Community

How would you explain community to someone who doesn't understand it?

Tell me about a time when you've been a part of a community.

Do you feel a sense of community at our school? Tell me about it.

Are your opinions and ideas valued by others? How do you know?



## Appendix B

Figures 1-6: Comparisons of Self-Concept Scores by Gender and Grade Level

Pre and Post

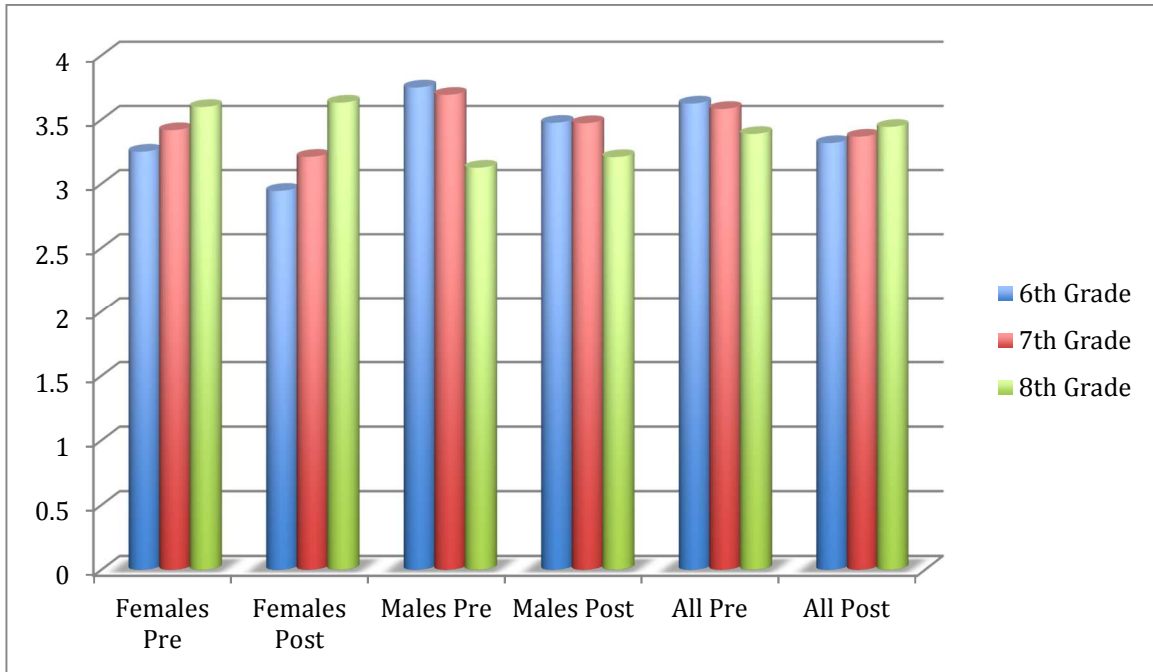


Figure 1. Global self-concept comparisons by gender and grade level.

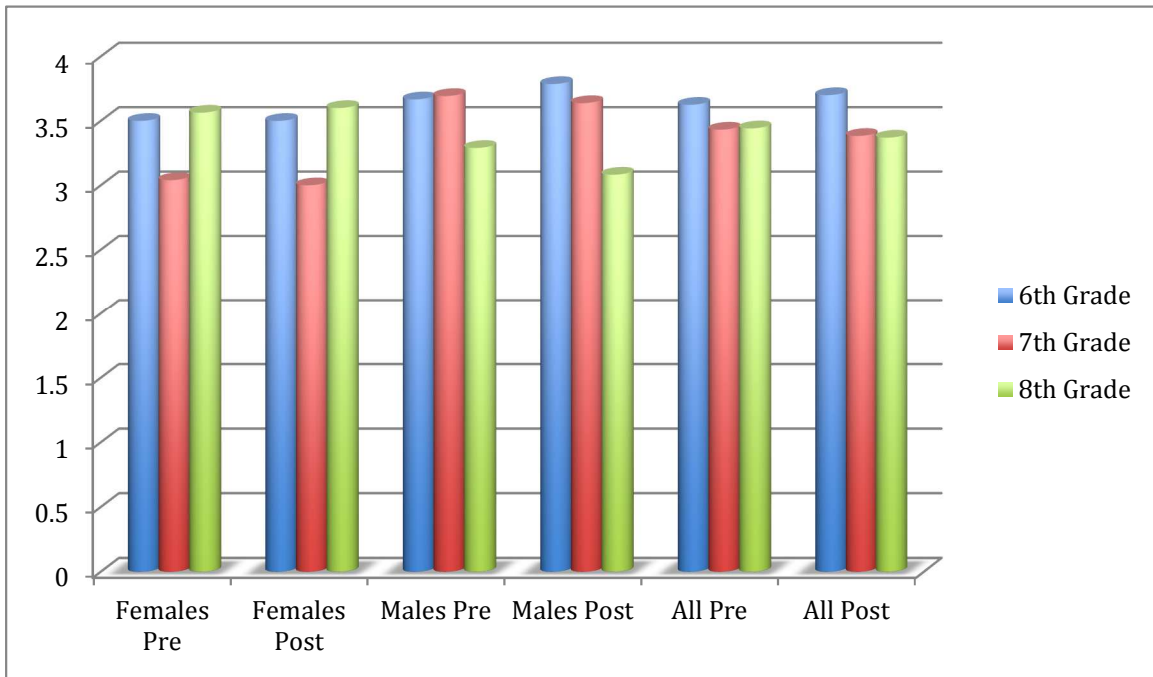


Figure 2. Scholastic competence self-concept comparisons by gender and grade level.

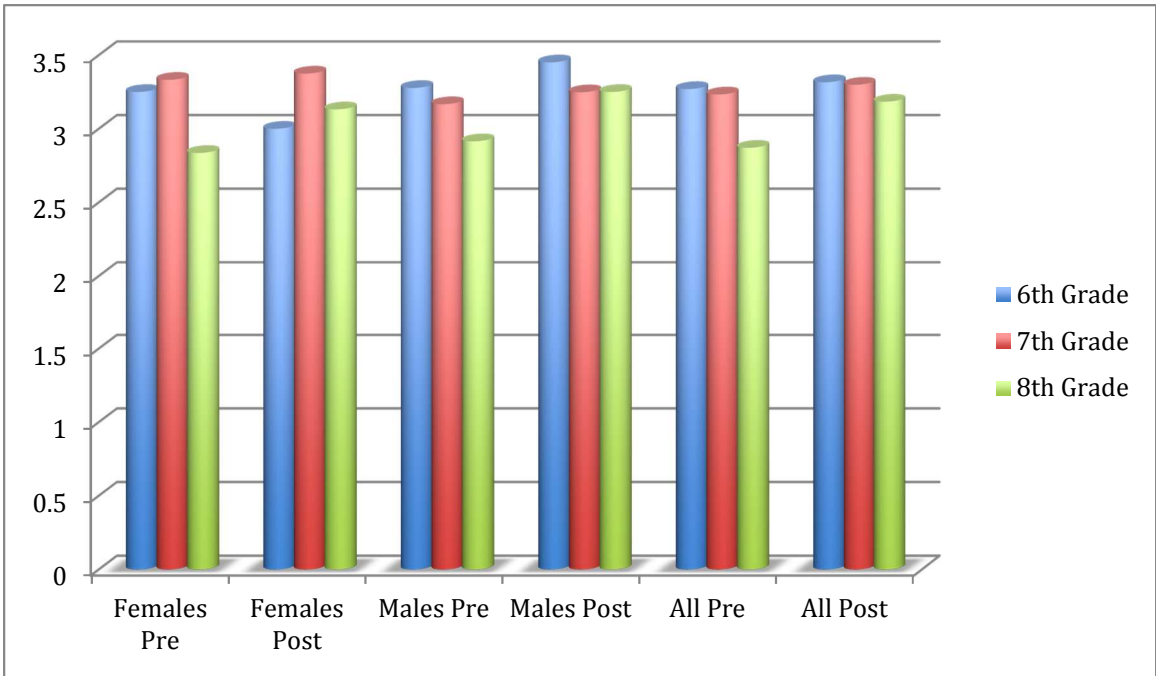


Figure 3. Social competence self-concept comparisons by gender and grade level.

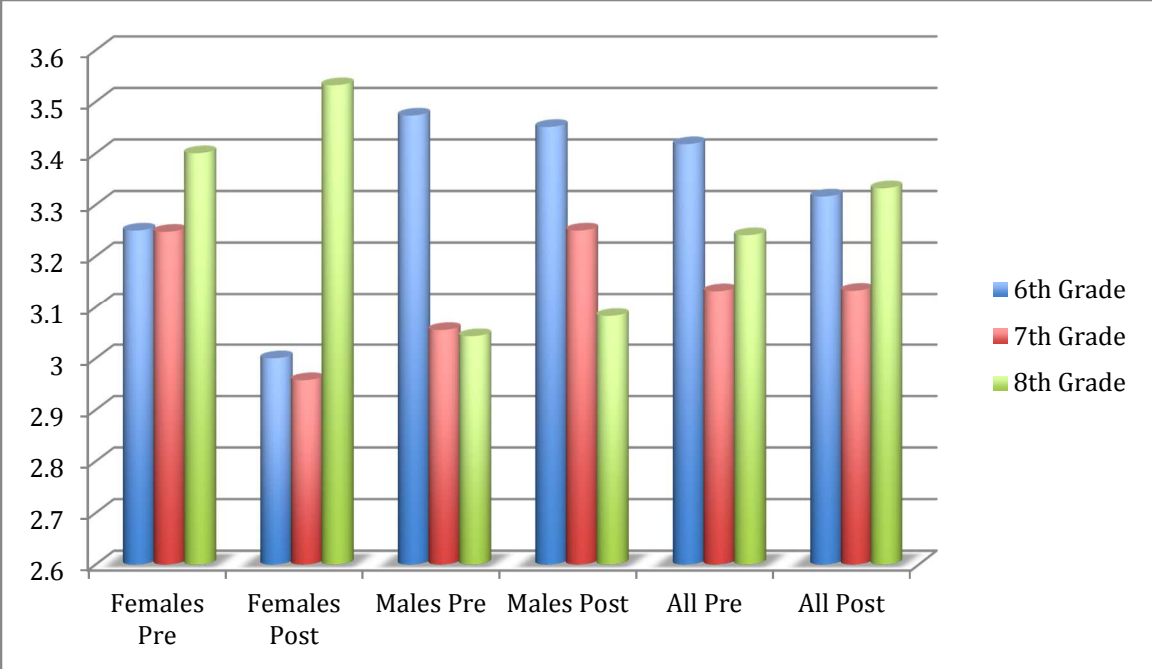


Figure 4. Behavioral conduct self-concept comparisons by gender and grade level.

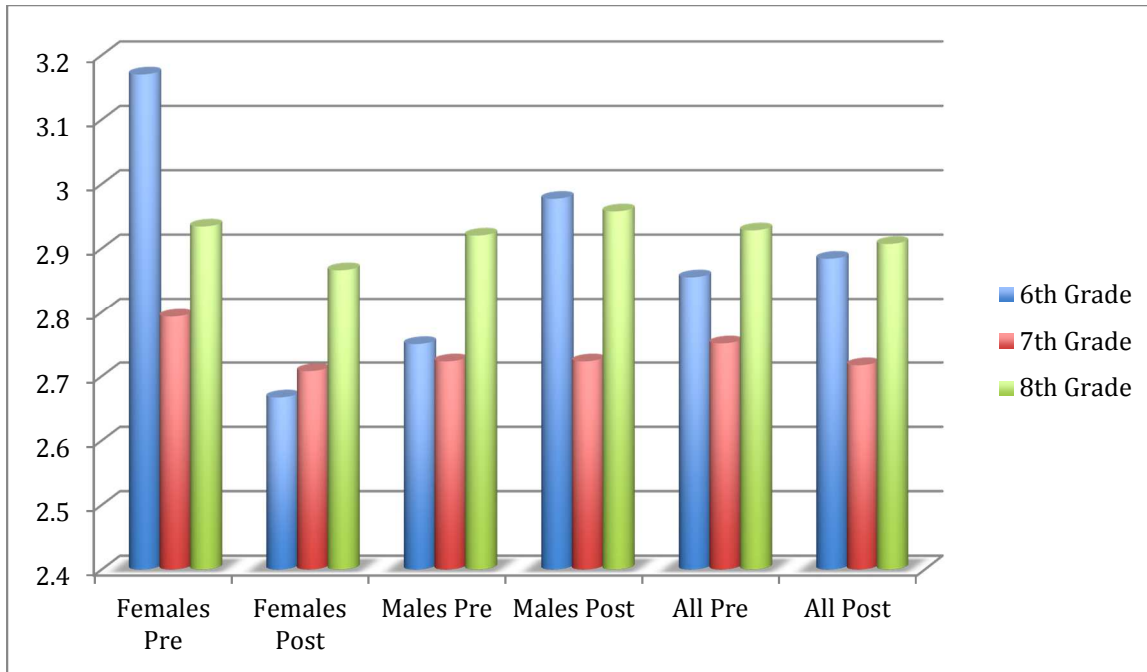


Figure 5. Athletic competence self-concept comparisons by gender and grade level.

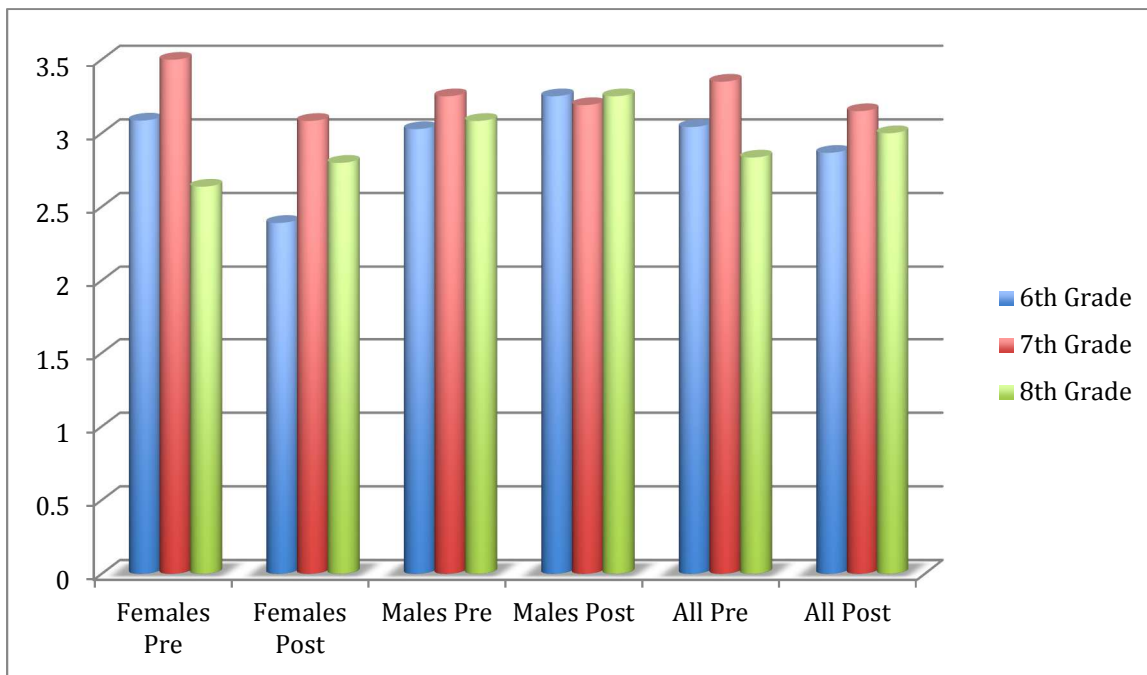


Figure 6. Physical appearance self-concept comparisons by gender and grade level.

## Chapter 3

### “I feel like I can change things”: A Single Case Study of Female Gifted Middle School Students Engaged in Community Action Projects

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the experiences of female, gifted middle school students who engaged as activists in their school, neighborhood, and larger community during gifted programming that challenged them to take part in community action projects. The single case study relies on qualitative methods and an inductive approach to participant interviews. Data analysis reveal four main themes: academic experiences, affective self, self-concept, and barriers to self-concept growth. Important to the understanding of this particular study is the unique female perspective. A feminist lens was applied during analysis of data, and participants shared perceptions of their gendered experiences, especially as gifted females and when operating as activists. This study provides special insight into the intersection of giftedness, gender, and self-concept.

*Keywords:* gifted education, gender, self-concept, service learning, activism

“I feel like I can change things”: A Single Case Study  
of Female Gifted Middle School Students  
Engaged in Community Action Projects

The present study examines female gifted middle school students’ experiences while engaging in community action projects designed and implemented by the first researcher, their gifted facilitator. Students examined their communities in a variety of contexts, including their school community, their neighborhood community, their school district community, and their city community. Students selected community issues or problems to address through their community action projects and developed essential questions that would guide their problem-solving processes. Students formed community action teams according to grade level and areas of interest, and students worked together to examine their communities, select an issue, and engage with the creative problem-solving process in order to properly address the issue and determine an action plan. Students collaborated in research regarding their chosen problem, research regarding previous attempts to address the issue, making connections with community members and leaders, brainstorming various possible solutions, implementing a chosen plan of action, and reflecting and revising as needed. Students took on various roles within their teams in order to ensure the team would function efficiently and every individual would have specific responsibilities.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of the female students who participated in community action projects, including the ways in which the students’ self-concepts may have shifted over the course of the projects. The researchers hope that this study will contribute to the literature that addresses the implementation of service learning with gifted education students and the ways such authentic learning experiences address gifted students’



affective needs and challenge them to acquire social capital. Perhaps through positive experiences engaging with their communities and creating change, students will gain a desire to use their gifts and talents for the betterment of society.

### **Background**

While it is widely accepted that gifted programming must provide for gifted students' academic needs in order to support them in reaching their full cognitive potential, many would argue that gifted programming should also provide for students' affective development, including their social skills, ability to identify, process, and cope with their emotions, and their capacity for empathizing with others. We must strive to place emphasis on the affective domain in schools' gifted education programs if society hopes to benefit from the good that the most highly-capable students can accomplish (Rinn, Plucker, & Stocking, 2010). Gifted educators must understand their responsibility to educate the whole child, not just the intellect of a child; they must embrace their influence on students' understandings of their gifts and talents but also their understanding of how to best develop and utilize them (Ferguson, 2006).

When students' gifts are supported and their needs are met, they are more likely to develop abilities to overcome adversity and ultimately feel fulfilled (Hébert, 2011). Educators must take steps to ensure that students learn how to channel some of their struggles in ways that actually enable their successes; such approaches to accommodating affective needs and challenging gifted students socially and emotionally will ultimately aid in their advanced development throughout adulthood (Hébert, 2011). Gifted students who possess high levels of sensitivity, empathy, moral maturity, and expectation are likely to benefit from participation in and engagement with various educational opportunities that get them involved in their communities and empower them to make a difference for others. While many American youth

feel bored in the classroom and disengaged from their school communities, Renzulli (2002) suggests that participation in civic action and social justice learning opportunities may be the key to overcoming student apathy and disengagement. Gifted children should be provided such opportunities from an early age because continuous involvement in social justice and civic action is likely to influence students' contributions to collective social capital (Renzulli, 2002). Involvement with organizations that serve others and participation in developing opportunities for service learning provide gifted students experience in allowing their values to guide their behavior (Hébert, 2011). Gifted students who are sensitive and empathetic and are developing personally at advanced levels need such an outlet as engaging with causes about which they feel passionate (Hébert, 2011).

One such outlet takes the form of service learning, a type of activism often used in schools, that connects schools to community service (Terry, 2003; Terry, 2008). It is “a method by which students learn and develop through curricular integration and active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address actual needs in their community” (Terry, 2003, p. 296). Advocates of service learning implementation claim that it combines both community service and academic study to allow for enriched learning that strengthens students' communities and even teaches the responsibilities that come with being a caring and active citizen (Stewart, Webster, & Bai, 2013; Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, & Sisk, 2008). While instructors should carefully and thoughtfully organize community service for students, students must also be given time to think, discuss, and write about their experiences so that they might engage in the important process of self-reflection (Terry, 2003; Stewart et al., 2013). This process of service learning helps students to meet academic objectives while also fostering care for their communities and a desire to help others (Terry, 2003). Additionally, research suggests

that these experiences often change the behaviors and attitudes of the learner, as well as the recipient of the service (Levinson, 2012; Stewart et al., 2013).

According to the literature, there are three levels of involvement when it comes to service learning (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). The first level, *community service*, encompasses students volunteering their time and efforts in their communities (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). In addition to serving their communities, students engaged in this level of service learning are likely to learn more about their communities and gain awareness of their communities' needs. The second level of service learning is referred to as *community exploration*. Community exploration involves students, not only volunteering, but engaging with their communities through longer commitments while exploring their communities and investing more in their relationships with their communities (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). The third level of service learning—*community action*—is also the deepest and most involved. Community action requires that students engage with their communities in a way that makes a positive and lasting impact on both the participating students and their communities (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). Students taking part in community action are likely to explore and engage with their communities, learning a great deal about where they live and the needs of their neighbors; in addition, though, they will work toward facilitating positive change that will retain some permanence even after the students have left their work. An objective of community action is for students to build a two-way relationship with their communities, a partnership (Terry, 2003). In this sense, the students' work is not simply philanthropy or volunteer work, but the students make decisions about their efforts based on the needs of the community and the feedback they solicit and receive. Levinson (2012) posits that engagement with early phases of service learning, including community service, fails to provide students with truly powerful experiences that cause some

level of permanent change in the student and the community. Service learning is often thought of as volunteer work, but for a student to truly experience empowerment, he or she must face the struggles and failures of working to create political and social change (Levinson, 2012).

While school is often thought of and implemented in very traditional terms, the use of community action as learning experience breaks from convention but also frequently sees results. The current culture of standardized teaching, learning, and performance does not necessarily encourage opportunities for educational activism (North, 2008). In fact, according to North (2008), research in recent years has suggested that students who learn in “democratic education programs” (much like the traditional institution of education which we see across the U.S.) learn to engage with their communities in uncritical ways, or they understand social issues within their communities but lack any understanding of how to solve such problems. In order for gifted students to contribute to Renzulli’s (2002) notion of social capital, students must be afforded the opportunities to learn in critical ways that foster student growth and development in permanent and powerful ways.

As individuals progress developmentally, perception of self develops, as well. Children have very different and less complex self-concepts as compared to adults. By adolescence, researchers suggest individuals possess self-concepts that are domain-specific (Rudasill & Callahan, 2008) and are likely influenced by a variety of both internal and external factors. According to Lewis and Knight (2000), self-concept not only develops throughout childhood, it also provides motivation. As children grow and mature, specific instances are less likely to have such a great impact on their self-concepts because the self-concept has evolved into a more stable and mature perception (Lewis & Knight, 2000). While self-concept according to domain may change due to specific external influences or a variety of other factors, one’s global self-

concept is not likely to change abruptly (Lewis & Knight, 2000). Though it generally becomes more stable throughout the lifetime, self-concept is not a fixed construct; it is malleable and continually influenced by experience, values, and interactions with one's environment (Cross et al., 2015; Huitt, 2011). Though self-concept is considered malleable, it is a broader construct that takes time to change and becomes more complex, and likely more fixed, as the individual develops and matures (Lewis & Knight, 2000).

The female adolescent experience is well-documented in the literature. Several studies have examined gender differences across the lifetime relative to self-concept and have found that females' self-concept tends to suffer as compared to males'. Physical self-concept has been correlated to body dissatisfaction and issues with body image in young women, and fear of failure is likewise disproportionately experienced by female students (Rinn et al., 2010). The literature even suggests that measures of self-concept can be viewed as indicators of mental health and ability to adjust, especially in females (Rinn et al., 2010). Though global self-concept is generally constant, girls experience dips in global self-concept and great declines in domain-specific self-concepts during late childhood and adolescence (Lewis & Knight, 2000). A study by Villatte, Hugon, and de Leonardis (2011) investigated the self-concepts of 84 French gifted students enrolled in heterogeneous courses. It revealed a great number of gender differences in regards to gifted students' self-concepts, including that the female participants place great importance on how others perceive them, and their satisfaction with themselves is largely connected to their social relationships. The male participants in the study considered themselves to be weaker students than the female participants but claimed to be more intelligent and agreed that they were deserving of the gifted label. These results and the discussion that follows are not unique to this particular study. Bain and Bell (2004) note that evidence exists suggesting that

gifted females have lower domain-specific self-concepts than their male counterparts and that gifted females tend to experience diminished self-confidence as they approach adolescence. Kerr's (1994) research agrees, as she found that gifted girls' confidence tends to decrease from elementary to secondary school and beyond. Though gender differences do exist among domain-specific self-concepts, they may not be great enough to largely influence measures of global self-concept when comparing males and females (Lewis & Knight, 2000).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The implications of the information above, then, should prompt gifted educators to be aware of their students' self-concepts and the ways in which they can influence positive shifts in their students' self-perceptions while also fostering in them a desire to contribute to society in powerful and positive ways. Renzulli (2002) suggests that an investment in social capital—"a set of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of other individuals and of our communities at large" (p. 34)—benefits society as a whole. Gifted children are that investment if we adequately meet their social and emotional needs. In order for society to rely on its gifted youth to contribute to collective social capital and ability to care for those who need caring, these students' affective needs also need caring for, especially in educational settings (Renzulli, 2002). According to Renzulli et al. (2006), it is up to schools to provide the necessary opportunities for students to engage socially in meaningful ways that foster the development of action and social capital. Educational activism, social justice learning, and service learning—no matter the name for it—provide students with the tools and opportunities to collaborate, problem solve, and grow social capital. When students are provided such tools and opportunities, they may be more likely to use their gifts and talents in ways that work to benefit their society.

The application of feminist theory to this particular study serves as a lens through which we can take into account gender and work to uncover the unique school experiences and concerns of adolescent gifted females within their experiences as young community activists. A focus on these females' lives and experiences as gifted students provides unique insight necessary in most accurately understanding the data collected (Hesse-Biber, 2010). We posit that through the application of feminist theory, we could potentially gain broader, deeper understandings of the phenomena experienced by these female students who develop outside of but alongside the dominant, male culture (Hesse-Biber, 2010). By analyzing this study's data through a feminist lens, we also acknowledge that such a lens is "connected in principle to feminist struggle" (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993, p. 266) and that it is important to allow for research to work toward the change of basic structures of oppression (Hesse-Biber, 2010). A feminist approach to this particular research may indeed further foster the development of social capital within the study's participants by acknowledging the different school experiences students have because of gender and other aspects of identity. Our study, in asking its participants to work toward social justice through community action projects, also works toward a more just school experience and society for its female participants. According to Patti Lather (1991), the practice of feminist approach to research means that we are "consciously [using] our research to help participants understand and change their situations" (p. 226).

This study attempts to provide students with an opportunity to engage with their communities in new ways, focusing on the experiences of female participants and the ways that their work as young activists influences their self-concepts. As we explore our female students' reflections on these experiences, we apply feminist theory in order to consider and understand

their unique perspectives and perceptions and explore their progress toward acquiring social capital. We used the following research questions to guide the study:

**Research Question 1:** In what ways were the adolescent female participants' self-concepts changed after engaging with their communities as activists?

**Research Question 2:** How did the female participants make sense of their experiences as students and community activists?

### **Method and Procedures**

The researchers employ a single case study design in order to better understand the experiences of the participating gifted middle school students as they engaged as community activists. The case study approach allows for this study to explore the how and why of this particular phenomenon and does so within a real-world context (Leko, 2002; Yin, 2011). This particular study requires qualitative research methods in analysis of real-world experiences by real, living people. Their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes are best communicated through conversations and observations, and thus a qualitative approach is most appropriate (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Because we could not entirely anticipate the experiences of participants, it was important that we approached this study through an open-ended investigation that would allow for participants' organic and true perceptions and experiences to be revealed (Leko, 2002; Matheson, 1983).

While there is a general consensus in recent research as to the best ways of defining self-concept, variation still exists. Most scholars view self-concept as a constructed, cognitive view of oneself which takes into consideration one's interaction with her or his environment, her or his expectations of self and the expectations of others, internal and external comparisons, relationships, abilities, and personal beliefs (Gore & Cross, 2014; Huitt, 2011; McCoach &



Siegle, 2003). Additionally, researchers have developed hierarchical models of self-concept which illustrate a variety of domain-specific self-concepts enveloped by a larger, overarching global self-concept (Cross, O'Reilly, Mihyeon, Mammadov, & Cross, 2015; Rinn, Mendaglio, Rudasill, & McQueen, 2010; Rudasill & Callahan, 2008; Vogl & Preckel, 2013). Such a global self-concept can be defined as the way one views oneself (Pajares & Schunk, 2001) and may be the most common understanding of self-concept in contemporary literature.

### **Setting**

The research took place in a public middle school in Grades 6 through 8 with class sizes limited to no more than 7 students. Gifted education programming takes place in a classroom designated for that purpose alone and is equipped with technology such as laptop computers, a tablet, and a projector. Students had access to this technology and other academic materials. The school's professional staff included two administrators; five core-subject teachers per team; two counselors; a school psychologist; two social workers; various elective teachers; and a gifted facilitator, who is the first author of this study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Author A is the study's central researcher and teacher in the 6-8 classroom. Her background is in gifted and talented education as well as English education and this study was completed as part of her dissertation work. Author B is Author A's dissertation adviser and collaborator on the study, specifically contributing to the design, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. He was a high school English teacher and now works to prepare teachers and teachers of teachers. We, the authors, represent 25 years of classroom experience or work in teacher preparation. By describing our backgrounds briefly and acknowledging the fact that no

research is free from bias, we begin to account for the subjectivity of this or any qualitative study.

### **Participants in the Study**

The focus of this particular study is to understand the experiences of a cohort of female gifted students who engaged with community activism curriculum for one semester in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Twenty-nine middle school students identified as gifted participated in the study. Twelve of the participants were female and 17 were male. Participants in the 6th grade were three females and seven males; participants in the 7th grade were four females and six males; and participants in the 8th grade were five females and four males. Twelve female participants then constitute a subset of the larger study and their specific experiences are reflected in this piece. All participants were students in Author A's gifted education program that she facilitates at a public middle school, and each provided individual and parental consent. Participants ranged in age from 11 to 14 years old.

Because there is no universally accepted definition of giftedness, it is important that schools, districts, and communities carefully determine the needs of their students as individuals and tailor to those needs (NAGC, 2014). Within this particular study, the gifted participants were identified as gifted through an extensive evaluation process that involves assessment of a student's exceptionality and whether or not the child demonstrates a need for special services and interventions. This evaluation is accomplished through aptitude testing using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children Fourth Edition (WISC-IV) and the Woodcock-Johnson IV Test of Achievement, as well as observations by general and gifted education teachers, feedback from the student's parents and teachers, and assessment of student products. Participants in this study were selected for their involvement in their own educational experiences as gifted female

students and the power they hold reporting their own experiences in gifted programming and the ways in which they view themselves as learners, students, social beings, and contributors to their communities and society (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Participant Descriptions*

Participants				
<u>Participant #</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Quinn	Female	7	12
2	Gabby	Female	6	11
3	Tabitha	Female	6	12
4	Avery	Female	7	12
5	Lauren	Female	8	14
6	Cora	Female	8	14
7	Vivian	Female	7	12
8	Shoshanna	Female	7	13
9	Haley	Female	8	14
10	Alexandra	Female	8	13
11	Ari	Female	6	12
12	Olivia	Female	8	14

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of approximately 12 hours of transcribed participant interviews, observations, participant journal entries, and classroom observations. Encounters with participants occurred on an almost-daily basis throughout the period of data collection, so conversations and interviews occurred more than once with all participants, which allowed for adequate exploration of complex research questions (Chamberlain, 2011). Interviews were conducted in both small-group and one-on-one settings. The interviews allowed for the building of trust between participant and researcher and also ensured that significant topics were explored to their fullest extent possible given time constraints (Yin, 2011). The conversational interviews also allowed for two-way interactions, which was important as the researcher was also the gifted facilitator and designer of the implemented community action curriculum, and students could

expand on their experiences and perceptions as they saw fit (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2014; Yin, 2011). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions guiding student interviews can be found in Appendix A.

The first author collected observational data throughout the study and also detailed student participants and interactions in both gifted education and community settings. The author noted the setting, interactions among participants, the language used, individual attitudes and behaviors, group attitudes and behaviors, non-verbal communication such as eye contact and body language, participants' reactions and responses to one another and to various circumstances or realizations, apparent motivation, and events or behaviors that did not occur (Yin, 2011).

On a weekly basis, participants were asked to share a journal entry with the researcher. Students were often provided a prompt or discussion question (see Appendix B) relating to the week's work, student attitude, levels of motivation, perceptions of self, and beliefs about successes and failures within their community activism projects. Participants then shared their thoughts and feelings through the online classroom being utilized throughout the project, and the author and gifted facilitator was able to provide feedback when necessary but also gain insight into each participant's frame of mind and perspective at a variety of points during the curriculum implementation. Some of the information obtained through this document collection allowed the researcher access to information and perceptions that were not revealed during audio interviews (Yin, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

We elected to take an inductive approach to analyzing and interpreting the data collected and felt that the data could best lead to the emergence of specific concepts (Yin, 2011). Each type of data was examined separately in search of commonalities, patterns, and recurring ideas or

suggestions. The authors closely examined the data looking for any themes that emerged within the phenomena being explored and then further categorized those sub-themes into overarching themes. As a team, the authors reviewed data and coded systematically, looking for agreement and together selecting essential themes that stood out from the data. This collaborative process strengthened the validity of the analysis.

Once the authors established initial codes based on the interview data, we then analyzed the other data sources. We carefully discussed their individual findings and shared the themes we had established. Codes remained that could be confirmed by their presence in other data sources, and then the research team worked to more broadly categorize the open codes into axial codes. Each open code was then entered into a Microsoft Word document, followed by the participants' own words that supported the creation of that open code. This helped the authors to document the sources of the coding process and the participants' very personal and important insights. The organization of open codes into axial codes can be found in Table 2.

## **Findings**

The findings of data analysis strongly support the emergence of four primary themes: *academic experiences, affective self, self-concept, and barriers to self-concept growth.*

### **Academic Experiences**

The academic experiences of participants came up time and time again in the interviews, observations, and student journal entries. Students reflected on their thoughts and feelings regarding their work in the classroom, including authentic learning opportunities with which they have engaged, unauthentic learning activities in which they've been required to participate, experiences with mandated group work, the competitive nature of academics, and students'

Table 2  
*Organization of Open Codes into Main Themes*

Main Themes			
<u>Academic Experiences</u>	<u>Affective Self</u>	<u>Self-Concept</u>	<u>Barriers to Self-Concept</u>
Authentic learning	Empathy	Growth mindset	Boys will be boys
Unauthentic learning	Loneliness	Success	Stereotypes
Group work	Anxieties	Empowerment	Treatment by teachers
Competition	Gifted girls sisterhood		Institutional racism and sexism
Teamwork			

encounters with teamwork in the classroom. The insights they shared helped to shape the researchers' understandings of the participants' academic self-concepts.

**Subtheme 1: Authentic learning opportunities.** Participants repeatedly described and made distinctions between academic experiences that were rich, student-centered, and involved real-world application and those academic experiences that were required but provided little challenge or engagement. The authors categorized these as authentic and unauthentic learning experiences. The authentic learning opportunities that participants described were coupled with excitement, fond memories, and evidence of deeper learning. They shared instances of working in a variety of classrooms on assignments and projects that challenged them to make connections outside of school, to examine issues from a variety of angles, and to engage on more personal levels. Within this context, the participants repeatedly referred to their experiences as community activists in their gifted programming course. Students described their newly exercised and acquired knowledge and skills as *real world skills*, *diverse learning*, *higher-level learning*, and *increased levels of interest*. All names used are pseudonyms.

The level of task commitment to the students' community activism projects illustrates the significance of their projects and the pride they felt in them.

I think this project is definitely the best project we've ever done because we stuck with it for so long. Like, usually, I'll only maybe do it a month depending on when the teacher gives the project or something. It was really interesting and because we couldn't finish it really at any point because we knew we had a bunch of research to do. It was going to take a long time. And it's still going because we actually want to do something about this. (Alexandra, personal communication, May 23, 2016)

Such task commitment may stem from the students' genuine interest in their projects and their ability to have control over their own learning. The participants' repeated references to real-world learning and the value they see in that is notable, as well.

In this real world type of thing, you can learn a lot of different types of things like business, how to communicate with people, how the world works... You can also learn a

lot about science depending on what your topic is. It's sort of all together and you can learn a lot... a wide variety of things instead of just a lot of stuff about one thing. (Olivia, personal communication, May 23, 2016)

Students were able to recognize development of new skills and their ability to push themselves outside of their comfort zones when such discomfort might result in something positive for their projects. The authenticity of the experience grew their interest and passion and furthered their task commitment.

Before this project, I cared about stuff like this and I was interested in it, but now that I know more about it, I am way more interested in it and I know how serious it is. Kids can learn a bunch from being in different situations and hearing other people's opinions and being able to talk about it sometimes. (Alexandra, personal communication, May 23, 2016)

Participants perceived their own growth through engagement with an authentic learning experience that allowed them to explore, discover, and take action for themselves. While they had guidance, they had the freedom and control to take their own steps forward and accomplish what they could in favor of the selected resolution to the community issue of focus.

**Subtheme 2: Unauthentic learning experiences.** Participants, in their efforts to provide a whole picture of their academic experiences at school, repeatedly referenced assignments in the general education classroom that required completion over engagement. Much of participants' disdain they expressed for school was rooted in the emphasis on unauthentic learning experiences and their lack of challenge and engagement in the classroom. What may be designed as an authentic learning experience is often experienced as unauthentic for the gifted participants of this study. When they are required to lead groups of their peers during collaborative work, teach peers who are struggling, and are subjected to constrictive time limits and teacher-centered methods, what may be more authentic for students in the general population becomes unauthentic, limiting, and stifling for gifted students who are ready for more and eager to engage.



Students' frustration with their teachers regarding lack of challenge and a dismissal of their requests for extensions and enrichment creates a distance in their relationships with teachers and keeps them from further seeking challenge in the future.

In the 7th grade, I had a female teacher who totally, like, she would have conversations with the boys and all we would ever do in her class was packets. At parent-teacher conferences I asked her without my parents for more challenging opportunities in her class. She said yeah, you can research female astronauts and give a presentation to the class. And I was like, I'm not interested in astronauts. And I still had to do the packets. (Cora, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The female students understood rejection of their requests for challenging, authentic academic experiences to be insulting and inequitable. They also frequently noted that "packets" and other knowledge-based learning was often assigned in their general education classrooms rather than experiential learning opportunities or student-directed activities. Repeated experiences with this kind of academic work disengaged participants from a large portion of their school day.

**Subtheme 3: Group work.** During all interviews, participants made reference to their frustrations with mandated group work in their general education classrooms. Their reasons for irritation were consistent among participants, and all shared in their disdain for their inevitable role within an academic, general education group. Students expressed their frustrations with peers who do not strive to achieve academically, teachers who place them in groups in hopes of challenging their peers to rise to the occasion, peers who expect them to do a majority of the work, and teachers who believe that the participants' presence in these groups will create a more effective learning experience for the rest of the students. The level of responsibility the participants expressed was paired with anxiety and stress and a distrust of their general education teachers. Students explained the inevitable process they endure each time they are required to engage with group work, including that while they do not want to establish an expectation that

they will carry the group, they also do not want to receive a low grade for themselves. Mandated group work has become an automatic trigger for disengagement for many of the participants.

Participants expressed their concern regarding teachers' groupings of students in such a way that participants were often used to anchor their groups and ensure success. But this method of grouping further frustrated participants, and they expressed their strong resentment for such approaches.

I think when teachers put you in those groups, they think you're going to help [the other students] and make them better. But that never happens. You end up doing all the work yourself. And if they don't care about getting bad grades, I do care. I don't want the only reason I don't get a good grade to be that I had a bad group. I feel like when [other students] know you're smart and you care about getting good grades, they expect you to do the whole project. Especially when I'm in a group with people who don't care, I'm going to do it myself. (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

For these reasons, collaborative school work tended to have a negative connotation for the study's participants. Collaboration in the gifted programming setting meant something different from the collaboration with which they were expected to engage in the general education classroom. A team made up of only females shared very positive feelings about their collaboration.

I'm actually really glad it was just us. We'd go to the library and just work the whole time. We'd talk to each other sometimes but a lot of the time it was just really jumbled fragments of words, like, Look at what I sent you. This company... And have the other person read something. (Alexandra, personal communication, May 23, 2016)

Participants reflected on their collaborative experiences in the context of their community action projects in much more positive terms than those they described in their general education classrooms.

**Subtheme 4: Competition.** Perhaps surprisingly, the female participants spoke more of competition with male counterparts than with one another. They repeatedly noted competitive interactions with their male counterparts and a lack of support from them. Some of the female

participants described discrepancies between the males' and females' contributions to their teams' efforts, perceiving the females' contributions as more extensive and powerful than the males'.

I feel like [the boys] weren't very prepared and they really didn't necessarily do anything or learn anything. They seemed sort of off-task and focused on [inconsequential aspects of the project], and I don't know if there's a direct correlation in having all females or more females and whether your project is good and you stay on task and learn stuff and are serious most of the time about your project. (Olivia, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The female participants' observations of their male counterparts' task commitment factored into how they felt about their male teammates.

Some female students described interactions with the male gifted students where they asked for feedback on, or support for, their projects and were only met by refusal. It was the girls' perception that even if the male students did support their ideas and work, they were less likely to sign petitions for their projects, provide meaningful feedback, or engage with them when they needed help than their female peers on other community action teams.

This isn't about, like, work ethic, but I think especially the boys we've talked to about our project, they're harsher on our project. They won't sign our petition even if they actually believe in what we're doing. (Haley, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Such an experience with the male students created a larger divide between the female and male participants and their individual experiences. The female students learned to rely on one another rather than on their male counterparts.

**Subtheme 5: Teamwork.** Participants seemed to make a distinction between group work and teamwork, as they communicated negative feelings for group work and positive feelings about teamwork. Those participants who were members of community action teams that felt that their projects were successful were more likely to focus on the positive impact of teamwork on their successes, while those students who expressed frustration with the progress of their projects

were more likely to identify issues within their teams that hindered their progress and successes. Those who appreciated the experience of teamwork noted that they were able to delegate work to one another, share in the efforts required for the project's success, and believed that more than one mind working on developing solutions to a problem was more effective.

Even if we had to work by ourselves, it definitely would've been a lot harder. It took so long to do the research, and we both researched different things. I know a lot of things that [she] doesn't, and [she] knows a lot of things that I don't. It was a lot easier to use two different brains. (Alexandra, personal communication, May 23, 2016)

The positive experience that this all-female team had with collaborative work strengthened their belief in collaboration toward a common goal and also, they acknowledged, helped them to be more successful.

### **Affective Self**

Participants' awareness of their own feelings became clear during interviews when students shared their fears, anxieties, and frustrations, but also demonstrated empathy and were free with their emotions. Students' moral and emotional maturities were revealed as they discussed their own empathy for others, as well as varied meaningful social experiences they have had. Their own understandings of emotional growth throughout their community activism projects were revealing, and their recognition of the power of such authentic learning experiences on their own lives and their own development illustrates their level of self-awareness and reflection.

**Subtheme 1: Empathy.** On a variety of occasions and for a variety of reasons, participants described their own feelings of empathy for others, whether those others were peers or members of their community who they do not necessarily know. Many of the female participants expressed a desire to help others, to be good listeners, and to take action when actions need to be taken.

Some things I haven't been through, so I try to understand. I want to have empathy for everyone if they're going through a rough time. Sometimes I think I'm not good enough or something. I'll get super down on myself, so I understand when people don't feel good about themselves or don't feel confident. If I can stop that from happening to someone else, it makes me feel better. (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016).

They shared stories of concern for others and the ways they have approached people who are struggling. They explicitly identified themselves as empathetic people and were able to accurately describe what that means. On several occasions, participants were able to connect others' experiences to their own or look for ways that they could understand someone else's life experiences. Many of the girls even recognized the power of opportunities such as the interviews being facilitated to connect with others who are empathetic, concerned for others, and wanting to make change for the better of their communities.

In high school and in our future, I hope we can all stick together and help each other out because I feel like we're in the same boat. And I really like all of you and I just feel like we should stick together and lean on each other. I like talking about things like this. It makes it a lot easier. (Cora, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, opinions, and values became a forum for further connection, and participants shared more and more explicitly and transparently than they had previously.

**Subtheme 2: Anxieties.** Many of the study's participants shared feelings of worry and anxiety regarding several areas of their lives, and some of the students were able to connect over their common anxieties. Their tendencies to be involved, to achieve in school, and to care for others contributed to their shared feelings of being overwhelmed, burnt out, and paralyzed by their own and others' expectations of them. The pressure that they feel to succeed, do the right thing, and reach their potential has become a burden on many of them that they avoid being in touch with.

**Subtheme 3: Loneliness.** In sharing academic and social experiences with one another, participants revealed examples of personal loneliness but also instances when they have realized that they are not alone in their experiences and understandings of the world around them. Students who described themselves as especially empathetic also seemed to feel a sense of loneliness that some other students didn't share. Their desire to listen and provide for others was not always reciprocated, even when they really needed such support.

I need validation sometimes that I'm good enough. I wonder if I'm good enough; am I doing this good enough? I wrote in this notebook I have, I wrote that sometimes you feel like when you're depressed you feel like your entire world is going to explode and you feel like you're not good enough and everything you do is wrong. I feel that pressure. And I can't even tell my friends because I don't feel comfortable, and I'm afraid they see me a certain way and we can't be friends anymore. I'm just scared. (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016).

Opportunities, such as during these interviews, to discuss feelings of anxiety and loneliness, were identified by students as helpful in processing their feelings and seeing that they are not as alone in their emotions and experiences as they originally thought.

**Subtheme 4: Gifted girls sisterhood.** While most participants addressed the idea of teamwork within their interviews, some students extended their description into the empowerment of teaming with other gifted girls and the bonds that had been formed through connecting during and working on such an intense and long-term project together. At the conclusion of the group interviews, several participants expressed gratitude to their female peers for their camaraderie and emotional support and proposed that they continue to work on their connection and support one another.

I really liked meeting in here and realizing that we do experience a lot of the same things. It's kind of sad, too, that a lot of other people experience it. I thought [our conversations] were really interesting, and I am interested in gender stuff like that. It was cool to learn that a lot of younger girls are experiencing it and saw different things. I realized a lot more things too. I remember being like, Oh my god! That's so true! So I thought that was really cool. Even though it's obviously not cool. (Alexandra, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Acknowledgement of their unique life and school experiences as gifted females fostered a shared understanding and desire for continued sisterhood moving forward.

### **Self-Concept**

While all of the primary themes identified from the data can and do influence students' self-concepts, specific references were made to experiences and feelings that impact an individual's self-concept directly or that may be used to help describe an individual's self-concept. These references were categorized under "Self-concept" and provided insights into the students' own cognitive understandings of self, as well as how their engagement as community activists may have influenced their self-concepts. Self-concept subthemes include *growth mindset*, *success*, and *empowerment*.

**Subtheme 1: Growth mindset.** Participants revealed their personal growth mindsets (Dweck, 2010) throughout interviews and student journal entries. They shared their own conceptions of their intelligence but also often admitted to the ways in which they still need to learn and grow. Many of the participants expressed an appreciation for the ways they learn from their mistakes and the successes they achieved through overcoming obstacles during the community action process. Students tended to desire opportunities to learn rather than achieve, and were proud of their successes within the community action projects, especially when they could recognize the difficulties they faced and the ways that they adjusted their plans in order to be successful. They shared their understandings of how their projects could be improved in the future and were often energized by the possibilities. References to growth mindset within the general education classroom were revealed, as well. Students shared growth within adolescence that has allowed them to move from desperation to please others to goals of learning and improving themselves.

I used to feel anxious about getting my work done, and still earlier this year, but I've sort of realized that teachers expect more of me for some reason. I want to have my own expectations for myself. I want to learn everything. Now I have not lower expectations but just different expectations. If I don't get this homework done, I don't care as long as I learn stuff. If I get an F in that class because I hate that teacher and that class is stupid, then I don't care. It's not that I deserve an F; that class deserves an F. (Olivia, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Participants shared new clarity regarding the importance of learning over traditional academic achievement and that their own expectations for themselves and their personal growth are really what matter most in their success.

**Subtheme 2: Success.** Two different references to success were frequently made during data collection. Participants tended to describe their successes within the community action projects but also referenced their personal successes now and in the future. Participants expressed that their definitions of success may have differed from their male counterparts in that they were able to recognize progress as success, while they believed their male counterparts failed to recognize success throughout the project until the project was completed.

I think [the boys] think that since we didn't finish [the project before summer break], it wasn't successful. I'm happy. I think we got a lot done and being 6th graders new to this thing, and we learned a lot. And I personally learned a lot about leadership and think we were super successful. And I think the guys kind of see it as, We didn't finish it so we weren't successful. (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Female participants admit to being fueled by competition with their male counterparts and a need to prove that they are at least as capable of success. They noticed the extent of their pride compared to their male counterparts and expressed an understanding of the correlation between the level of commitment to an endeavor and the pride felt in any successes relating to it. Their expressed successes were because of task commitment and growth of experience. The female participants frequently noted that success would be achieved even if the project did not work out as they had hoped because no matter what, they worked to spread awareness and change perceptions. Part of what they believed to be their successful accomplishments is that



they educated others about their communities and the struggles of various community members or environmental issues. Their determination comes through during interviews when the participants claim to have plans for continuing their activism and further working toward their goals regarding community activism. Additionally, several participants noted the success of their projects because they had learned from them.

**Subtheme 3: Empowerment.** Empowerment, or various terms to describe empowerment, were mentioned repeatedly throughout participant interviews. Students expressed appreciation for the ways that the community action projects provided female students with leadership roles and validated their abilities, allowing them to exercise their comfort with communicating with adults and community members, asserting their visions for the project, and leading their peers through a problem-solving process. Several participants expressed a new belief in themselves and the ways they can reach their potential in positive ways. Their growth during adolescence has manifested in a way that acknowledges their understanding of what is important in school and what is not and allows them to feel validated in their educational decision-making and the control they can exercise over their own lives.

I feel really inspired. I was talking to my mom about this two days ago in the car. I was like, Remember how you would always do things that drew attention to yourself that were a little embarrassing to do? I would always ask her how she did that and didn't worry what people think. She always said when you get older, you don't care as much. You always see those ads on TV about girls in adolescence losing their confidence, but I feel like last year I was sort of self-conscious and I was sort of quiet and nervous about everything. And this year, partially because of this activism, I feel like I have opinions and ideas and I just want to do them and I don't care what people think. I mean, I do, but I feel a lot different about it now. (Cora, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Recognizing and embracing new inspiration and seeking opportunities to take action are ways that participants described their personal growth. Additionally, female participants' references to their newfound ability to relate to their gifted female peers after engaging with them as community activists indicates a certain empowerment in the sisterhood of gifted female

teammates and the energy and power that comes with a connected group of capable, determined, bright, young women. Participants expressed a belief in themselves that they hadn't possessed before.

I think even if the actual project doesn't work out the way that we wanted it to, I think the bigger thing is, like, you can take a lot away from [this project] and when, like, I get older I will know how to do things and not be one of those people who just doesn't do things and just goes with the flow. I feel like I can change things. (Olivia, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The maturity and wisdom expressed through an understanding of the varying approaches to success and the internalization of learning opportunities illustrates the depth of engagement and learning that took place through this study's community action projects. The empowerment students felt during the process likely had an effect on participants' self-concepts.

### **Barriers to Self-Concept Growth**

Just as students made indirect references to their own understandings of self and self-concept development, they also described experiences in their personal and academic lives that have served as obstacles to their self-concept growth. These experiences may be academic, social, or emotional in nature, but they are damaging just the same. Small group interviews seemed to especially reveal students' oppressive experiences, particularly at school, and provided insights into the ways that female gifted students are being prevented from developing social capital. Subthemes that contribute to the theme of *barriers to self-concept growth*, include: *Boys will be boys*, *stereotypes*, *treatment by teachers*, and *institutional racism and sexism*.

**Subtheme 1: Boys will be boys.** A subtheme that appeared quickly during participant interviews was the notion that boys will be boys. This notion is often used as an excuse for male behavior, and participants were clear that such an excuse has been used in their presence to defend their male counterparts' shortcomings and negative behavior in a variety of settings and on a variety of occasions.

I feel like girls are the ones who are expected to pay attention and know what's going on. In group work, everyone turns to the girl. Boys are like, boys will be boys. It's okay to goof off. You don't have to do things. So, I think it's based on gender because I've had some teachers that I really respect and admire, and I think they're intelligent... But they do all this stuff we've been talking about because boys are raised that boys don't really have to try and girls work hard. (Cora, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The female participants shared the differences in teacher expectations of girls' performances in the classroom versus that of boys'. Their impression is that male students have permission to behave differently and achieve at lower levels because they are boys. When these female participants have been recipients of imbalanced responsibility during collaborative school work, they note that it has been brought to their attention that they really can't expect anything different from male groupmates. Additionally, female participants are under the impression that if they want something to get done and get done right, they must do it themselves because it has been proven to them that that is the only way.

Participants also collectively noticed a difference in the ways groups during general education collaborative learning activities are structured for smart boys versus smart girls. Their observation is that smart boys are more likely to be paired together while smart girls will be asked to bring up the collective achievement of a lower-achieving group.

I think that when guys are smart, I think they get paired with smarter people. But when girls are smart, they're paired with people who aren't achieving. Like, Mason is always paired with Carter and Lucas, but I'm never paired with my smart friends. (Tabitha, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Their resentment of collaborative class work and their gifted male counterparts stems from these biased approaches to collaboration and expectations of certain students.

**Subtheme 2: Stereotypes.** Several of the female participants were aware of gender stereotypes and the ways they play out in the school setting. It was the girls' perceptions that male students are more often given opportunities to work together and are more often trusted to do so, while gifted girls are given responsibility for teaching their peers and nurturing them

along. Additionally, it is their belief that when males are considered gifted, they are often perceived by teachers to be smarter than girls who are identified as gifted. One student expressed her fears that when teachers communicate those stereotypes, the male students in their classes also take on those stereotypes, further demeaning female students and ensuring that they are kept to a specific level of achievement.

I feel like even the stereotypes we're given, like, we're given stereotypes that either we're not as smart or we're not as—we just—we're not good enough, or if you give us work we'll do it and we won't argue about it. We won't say we won't do it, we'll just get it done. There are so many stereotypes that women are given, and I feel like that contributes to that when you are put in a group with other guys, they assume those stereotypes. And even the teachers assume those stereotypes. I just feel like I want to learn stuff, but some teachers direct it more to the boys. (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Several girls communicated observations of teachers preferring male students to females and directing their instruction toward males. Beyond their school years, though, the female participants seem very aware of the ways in which they will have to battle stereotypes as women and work harder to achieve the same successes as their male counterparts.

**Subtheme 3: Treatment by teachers.** Unfortunately, female participants were able to communicate a multitude of instances when their own general education teachers had contributed to negativity surrounding their understandings of self. For a majority of their lives, teachers have reinforced the “boys will be boys” excuse for negative behavior and sent messages of very different expectations to their female students. Students shared experiences of being asked to teach other students, being expected to get entire groups of students through their class work, instances of humiliation in front of their peers for not performing at a level expected by the teacher, and embarrassing female students when they show discomfort with a topic or the way something is being handled.

[My teacher] makes girls cry in my class when they don't want to present. And they're anxious. He makes fun of them. He uses people's names from previous classes and

downgrades them in front of everyone. It's disgusting. (Cora, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

They noted the responses lower-achieving male students received at every little moment of success but that because they were expected to always succeed, they received little recognition when they did. Some students even wondered if their own credibility during academic endeavors would have been boosted by having a male student present. Several of the female participants explained their own approaches to reminding themselves of their own expectations and that adults' expectations, especially when ridiculous, are not standards to live by.

**Subtheme 4: Institutional racism and sexism.** While the female participants in this study acknowledge that they are responsible and empathetic and hard-working, and they appreciate others' acknowledgement of those facts, they believe that the development of these character traits is not actually going to pay off in the future, either.

I don't think [our extra responsibility] will ever pay off. If we're talking about this—how women are treated in their school years—it's the same or worse when they get older. It's just kind of what is expected of you. It's not a pat on the back. (Alexandra, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

It's basically telling us that in life and in our jobs that we have to work harder to get the same effect. Which I think is true. You see that. (Haley, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Boys seem to have a free pass. Even when we get older if we are more hard-working and we do more things, we still get paid less, we still get treated less fairly. Guys just have a free pass in a way; just, they can do whatever they want. (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The students are fully cognizant of the ways in which institutional sexism extends beyond the school years and into the workplace and the home during adulthood. They expressed an understanding of the fact that they will need to work harder and for a longer time in order to achieve the same levels of success. Several participants noted the significance of taking a stand while they are young and while there is time for change in their lifetimes. Students asked

themselves why it was so difficult, especially in an educational setting, to provide students with equitable opportunities and to set aside bias. The other side of this experience is that of white privilege in which, the girls note, the male perspective, approach, and performance is the standard, and as females they have to work more tirelessly in order to achieve less. They recognize all of the barriers stacked against their future successes, and yet one student said, “I just feel like I want to learn” (Ari, personal communication, May 9, 2016), something that is more directly provided to her male peers.

### **Discussion**

Gifted students do not make up a homogeneous student population; great diversity is found within groups of students identified as gifted and talented, just as great diversity is found within the general student population. This diversity is also reflected in gifted students’ self-concepts and their reflections on and perceptions of their own experiences. This study sought to understand the experiences of gifted female middle school students who had engaged as community activists, as well as the influence of such engagement on their self-concepts. While a variety of factors influence an individual’s self-concept, the self-concepts of adolescent girls should be of particular concern to educators who may witness decreased confidence in ability and lower expectations of self in their female students (Villatte, Hugon, & de Leondaris, 2011). According to Ferguson (2006), school curriculum often focuses on the development of gifted children’s cognitive needs and fails to assist students in developing emotional and social aspects of themselves.

Engaging with curriculum designed to provide student activists opportunities to address community issues, students are provided for in ways beyond cognitive challenge. During the study, students’ affective needs were addressed on a regular basis as participants were asked to

consider the experiences of others, to reflect on their own struggles, and to engage with a problem-solving process that was purposeful and effective. Such opportunities to reflect, self-evaluate, and revise allowed students to make deeper connections with one another, their community, and their own feelings. These opportunities are important when considering the research that supports the effectiveness of addressing gifted students' affective needs (Renzulli, 2002; Hébert, 2011) and the likeliness that students will fulfill their potential and feel fulfilled as a result (Hébert, 2011). Renzulli (2002) notes that social capital growth is often an important result of student engagement in social justice and civic action, and this study reveals that such involvement impacts student self-concept, as well.

Who we are as individuals, our behavior, the ways in which we perform, our levels of achievement, and our motivations are all affected by our personal self-concepts and self-esteem. While self-concept and self-esteem are constructed within each of us, they are influenced by both internal and external factors which can have powerful sway over the ways each of us feels about ourselves and the beliefs we hold about ourselves and our abilities (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rinn et al., 2010; Rudasill & Callahan, 2013). Students' references to their newfound empowerment, access to leadership, feelings of accomplishment and success, empathy for others, and understandings of their communities reflect individual growth and increased confidence. Their indication of desire to help others in the future and to even engage with additional intensive community action projects in the future suggest that personal change occurred for them and that they felt pride in their work and their ability to create lasting change.

Renzulli's (2002) co-cognitive traits must be developed in some way through gifted programming. One way that these traits can be addressed and developed is through activism, which should be acknowledged as different from volunteerism. Volunteerism is categorized

under Renzulli's Direct Involvement I experience because it encompasses students' engagement in service (Sands & Heilbronner, 2014). Activism should be a Direct Involvement II experience, where students initiate, design, and carry out their own social action projects (Renzulli et al., 2006). Providing these Direct Involvement II experiences, according to Renzulli et al. (2006), is a helpful way of assisting students in internalizing non-cognitive characteristics, further developing their co-cognitive traits, and contributing to the production of social capital. While many of the students who commit to participating in and engaging with socially-oriented causes and learning opportunities likely possess advanced moral development, positive attitudes, and strong values, their involvement and ownership over their action helps to further develop their beliefs and convictions (Renzulli et al., 2006). This involvement will also have a lasting impact as compared with quick and superficial Direct Involvement I experiences (Renzulli et al., 2006). Hébert (2011) calls on educators and parents to consider the ways in which they can facilitate these kinds of learning experiences for their gifted children in order to encourage a generation of bright, capable students who are committed to using their gifts for the good of others, for the betterment of society. Community action, or activism, is just that encouragement.

According to Renzulli (1984), gifted education programming should serve two essential purposes, including that young people are provided the best and most effective opportunities for self-fulfillment through the development of their gifts and talents and that gifted students' problem-solving skills and creativity be developed and fostered in order that society can rely on a great number of capable, talented leaders who can produce knowledge rather than simply consume it. Social capital contributes to the development of the greater good of society through establishing the values and norms and social trust of a culture (Renzulli, 1984). In recent history, it has been determined that American social capital has declined as fewer people are invested in



and engaged with community activities (Renzulli, 1984; Renzulli, 2002). In order to renew social capital, individuals must lead efforts for the betterment of society, and it stands to reason that as a society, we would hope that our brightest, most capable individuals would be willing to lead the way. In order to assert such leadership, though, an individual must believe in her- or himself and feel empowered to do so. Renzulli (1984) calls on educators who are passionate about fostering the growth of future leaders in our gifted students to challenge “our conception of giftedness and the services we provide [and] place some emphasis on leaders who are committed to making the world a better place” (p. 26).

While many American youth feel bored in the classroom and disengaged from their school communities, Renzulli (2002) suggests that participation in civic action and social justice learning opportunities may be the key to overcoming such important issues. Participants’ contributions to this study during interviews and journal entries support a need for developing social capital and also the power in providing students the opportunity to build it for themselves. In far too many ways, young people are encouraged to seek the betterment of themselves over the betterment of all, and American culture tends to foster emphasis on entitlement, materialism, and financial bottom lines. Rather than our most capable young people working toward individual success, their gifts should be encouraged toward the greater good of their communities and how they can best work to solve important societal problems. Applying a social capital framework to this study’s findings encourages a more urgent call for educators to empower their gifted students with real-world skills in helping others and creating change. Without opportunities for growth and empowerment, gifted students may not learn to contribute their gifts and talents in the most powerful, beneficial ways.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Although the findings of this study suggest a correlation between engagement with community action in adolescence and improved self-concept related to adolescent females, it is important to note other factors that may have also contributed to self-concept growth. The study took place over the course of approximately four months, a time span that may have encouraged a natural maturing of participants and other opportunities for personal growth. The study took place in a small classroom setting with few students in a classroom. This ensured that community action projects were manageable and lines of communication were open. Participants were familiar with Author A as their teacher prior to beginning work within this study, and Author A knew her students well prior to collecting data. Replication studies in other school settings and with larger numbers of students will be beneficial to further understanding the effect of engagement with community action on gifted female adolescents' self-concepts. The educational experiences of gifted female adolescents should continue to inform educators' practices and challenge gifted programming to address these students' specific affective needs, as well as combat barriers to self-concept growth.

### **Conclusions**

All children deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential, and society stands to benefit if our most gifted and talented students receive the best educational opportunities available in order to maximize their potential and lead them into work that better life for all. The findings of this study suggest that this community action project has helped the gifted female participants to establish social capital, perhaps combatting the antithesis as a result of the more traditional, biased interactions they are accustomed to experiencing at school. While they can certainly share a variety of instances and experiences where they have been torn down, where they have felt discouraged from making positive connections, just giving them the space to share

those experiences and connect with each other works to allow social capital to triumph. Additionally, during interviews, they shared the empowerment they felt by working for the greater good of their communities, but also the empowerment they felt in working as a team and leading a team. These are the types of social connections all students need to experience at school—but maybe especially adolescent girls.

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## Appendix A

### Small-group Student Interview Protocol

#### 1. Description of self

Tell me about yourself.

What do you consider to be your best qualities?

What do you like least about yourself?

What do you look like?

#### 2. External influences on self-concept

Do you think others admire you? Why?

Whose opinions of you are most important? Why do you feel that way?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of intelligence?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of leadership?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of popularity?

#### 3. Internal influences on self-concept

What are your expectations for yourself?

What do you find to be most motivating?

When do you feel proud of yourself?

#### 4. Empowerment

Have you ever felt powerful? Explain.

Tell me about a time that you contributed to a positive change.

Tell me about a time that you helped someone else.

### 5. Academic rigor/challenge

When are you most challenged academically at school?

Describe what it feels like when you are not challenged at school.

Describe what it feels like to be challenged.

How do you apply what you learn at school to your own life?

### 6. Gifted education

To you, what does it mean to be gifted?

In what ways has being in the gifted program challenged you?

What kinds of things do you want to be able to learn about in gifted guided studies?

Tell me about a time when you learned a lot in your gifted program.

### 7. Empathy

How do you generally respond to people you care about when they're having a hard time?

*Explain concept of empathy if needed.* Tell me about a time when you felt empathy for someone else.

Do you believe you are able to help others? How so?

### 8. Community

How would you explain community to someone who doesn't understand it?

Tell me about a time when you've been a part of a community.



Do you feel a sense of community at our school? Tell me about it.

Are your opinions and ideas valued by others? How do you know?

## Appendix B

### Student Journal Entry Prompts

#### Prompt #1

In your journal entry response, please consider the following questions:

- Do you feel interested in and/or engaged with the problem your team is tackling?
- Do you feel this problem is important to solve? Why or why not?
- What challenges have you faced as we have begun the activism project?
- What are your hopes and vision as we work on this particular project?

#### Prompt #2

Please consider the following questions when composing your journal entry this week. Shoot for a 200-300 word response.

- How has the process of researching the problem been for you? What have you learned?
- Is focusing on understanding the problem instead of jumping to solutions difficult for you? Why, or why not?
- Do you feel like we have enough information to understand the problem and move forward with the process? Are we ready to establish a solution? How do you know?
- What successes and failures have you experienced in the last week or so? Describe.

#### Prompt #3

- In your own words, describe your personal understanding of empathy.
- Do you consider yourself to be an empathetic person? How do you know if you are or you aren't?
- Do you think it's important to possess empathy? Why or why not?

Please answer each of the above questions in your response. Provide thorough responses so that I understand your thoughts and feelings.

Prompt #4

Tell me about what you think will be our struggles when attempting to establish our solution and action plan.

-What are your concerns?

-In what ways do you anticipate we will be successful?

-How can we improve our chances of success?

Prompt #5

In general, is it important to you to be able help other people?

When you do help other people, what do you get out of it?

To you, what is the biggest goal of this activism project? How will you know if you've achieved it?

Prompt #6

Write a descriptive response to the following questions. Please include as much detail as possible.

-How do you see yourself? Describe yourself.

-How do you think others see you?

-Tell me about your strengths.

-Tell me about your weaknesses.

### Prompt #7

We are now in the final quarter of the school year and have just weeks left until our TED Talk-style presentations. Time is flying by! Please describe the following...

- 1.) What you would like for your team to have accomplished before May 10th, the night of the presentations.
- 2.) How you think we can best share our projects with our audience.
- 3.) How you will know that this project was a success.

### Prompt #8

Tell me about some possible scenarios that might play out with this project. If we are successful, what will that look like? How will you feel? If we fail, what will that look like? How will you feel?

We are down to our final six or seven weeks of the school year, and it's going to go by fast. What do you think our best plan of action is from this point forward?

### Post-Presentation Prompt #1

Tell me about the ways you feel like this project was successful. Please be as detailed as possible in your response, including how you feel, what you think, and how you observe others to have responded.

### Post-Presentation Prompt #2

If you were to start this project over entirely, what would you do differently? What would you keep the same? Why?

### Post-Presentation Prompt #3

Describe yourself in the following areas:

-Intelligence

-Empathy

-Appearance

-Social life

-Successes

-Personality

## Chapter 4

“It could be that one step that changes everything”:  
Exercising Co-Cognitive Components of Giftedness  
While Participating in Community Action

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the individual and group experiences of three female, gifted adolescents as they engaged as activists with student-led, student-centered community action projects. The participants were selected from a central study because of their insightful reflections, demonstrated and expressed growth throughout their experiences, and their explicit interest in continuing to work as activists in the future. An inductive approach was applied to the data analysis, which revealed main themes of disappointment, personal growth, determination, passion, and motivation. The participants explored their self-concepts, their views of society and the world around them, their successes and failures within their community action projects, their approaches to coping with disappointment, and their determination to work past obstacles. The study also explores the ways in which gifted students may acquire social capital through authentic learning experiences such as community action.

*Keywords:* gifted education, authentic learning, social capital, community action, service learning, activism, self-concept, co-cognitive components of giftedness

“It could be that one step that changes everything”:

## Exercising Co-Cognitive Components of Giftedness

### While Participating in Community Action

Academic needs of the gifted and talented receive a majority of the attention in our schools, likely because of societal attitudes and education mandates that draw attention away from social and emotional concerns (NAGC, 2009). Though character development and affective growth are always concerns of good educators (Renzulli, 2002), it is possible for teachers and counselors to let the affective needs of gifted students go unrecognized because they apply positive stereotypes to the students, such as that they are highly capable of meeting their own needs (NAGC, 2009). According to Ferguson (2006), research shows that there is a connection between affective and cognitive functioning, and how social and emotional issues can both positively and negatively influence school performance. When their social and emotional needs are met, gifted students are likely to face academic challenges, as well as challenges in other areas of life, with appropriate coping mechanisms (Ferguson, 2006). For many decades, the literature has recognized the need for emphasis on creativity within education (Bull, 1985) in order to respond to society’s problems, and the call still stands. Renzulli (2002) suggests that an investment in social capital—“a set of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of other individuals and of our communities at large” (p. 34)—benefits society as a whole. Gifted children are that investment if we adequately meet their social and emotional needs. Emphasis must be placed on the affective domain in schools’ gifted education programs if society hopes to benefit from the good the most highly-capable students can do. According to Renzulli (1984), our society needs leaders who are capable of producing knowledge and not just consuming it. Gifted education programming should serve two essential purposes, including that



young people are provided the best and most effective opportunities for self-fulfillment through the development of their gifts and talents (Renzulli, 1984). Perhaps we should expect such programming to “reliably stimulate the development of culturally eminent individuals, those capable of revolutionizing our patterns of thought and action” (Bull, 1985, p. 2). Renzulli (2002) suggests an expanded conception of giftedness that is more inclusive and open to discovering greater sources of high potential. He argues that by broadening the scope of gifted education, society will find gifts and talents in a diverse population of young people who are capable of great things.

In 1984, Renzulli introduced the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness, a model of giftedness that emphasizes creative productivity. It is a theory that illustrates the three essential dimensions necessary for creative productivity (Renzulli, 1984). Renzulli explained that “gifted behavior consists of thought and action resulting from an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—these clusters being above average general and specific abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity” (1984, p. 22). Students who possess and exercise creativity, innovation, and imagination may successfully experience agency that leads to powerful, transformative learning (Bajaj, 2015). It is important to acknowledge that those whose potential includes interactions among the three rings of giftedness require special resources, educational opportunities, and encouragement and support in order to maximize their potential as highly capable individuals (Renzulli, 1984).

Many gifted students possess important potential beyond their cognitive abilities. Gifted children and adolescents who are sensitive and possess high expectations of themselves and others also often possess advanced moral maturity. Gifted education and psychology literature has followed the development of moral maturity in gifted students for many years, and evidence

of advanced maturity is well-documented (Hébert, 2011). Such research continues to reveal high levels of moral thought and consideration in gifted populations of students, especially in adolescence (Hébert, 2011). Students who possess advanced moral maturity are likely to do what they know to be right, not because society says so and threatens consequences but because they have internalized their own moral principles that guide their behaviors and thinking (Hébert, 2011). Moral maturity is often accompanied by compassion and empathy and the ability to reflect on experiences outside of their own (Hébert, 2011). When faced with difficult dilemmas that may put most students in challenging positions, gifted children who are morally mature likely evaluate their behaviors, determine what is ethical and what is not, and use reflective judgment to assist in making ethical decisions (Dixon, 2014). According to Dixon (2014), one of the most significant responsibilities of gifted educators is to facilitate their students' learning in regards to making defensible judgments about very difficult problems. There are gaps in understandings of how to facilitate such learning within gifted education programming; hence, an investigation into the experiences of gifted adolescents whose gifted programming sought to engage them as activists in their communities holds potential for deeper understandings of the ways in which gifted students may exercise and further develop their co-cognitive traits, in turn desiring to acquire social capital.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate three gifted female adolescents' experiences engaging as community activists as part of their gifted programming. Special focus was placed on how the experience may have influenced the students' desire to acquire social capital, while also seeking to understand the students' application of co-cognitive traits as expressed through interviews. The following questions guided the research:

- How does the act of engaging in extended community action influence the self-concepts and social capital of three gifted adolescent females?
  - How are co-cognitive skills utilized in community action?
  - How is social capital acquired in the context of community action?

### **The Development of Social Capital**

For the good of society, we should be able to rely on our gifted youth for their contributions to society's social capital and the ways in which they are able to care for those who need caring. In order to do so, though, we must care for our gifted students' affective needs (Renzulli, 2002). Hébert (2011) suggests that gifted students are more likely to develop the ability to overcome adversity and also feel fulfilled in their lives when their gifts and talents are supported and their educational needs are met. Along with the successes we hope our gifted students experience, it is also important that our students experience failure and channel those challenges in ways that enable their successes; such investments in gifted students' affective needs and efforts made toward adequately challenging them socially and emotionally ultimately aids in their continued development throughout adulthood (Hébert, 2011). Schools have the influence and perhaps obligation to provide the necessary opportunities for gifted students to engage intellectually, emotionally, and socially in meaningful ways that foster the development of social capital (Renzulli, Koehler, & Fogarty, 2006).

The importance of providing gifted children opportunities for social engagement and involvement in activism-oriented learning experiences has potential to influence students' understandings of themselves and the world around them and impact their contributions to social capital (Renzulli, 2002). In order to allow students' values to guide their behavior, they should be given opportunities to develop service-learning experiences and engage with organizations that

serve people in different situations than their own (Hébert, 2011). Many gifted students, who may be especially sensitive and empathetic, develop at advanced levels and can benefit from engaging outlets, such as working toward causes about which they feel passionate (Hébert, 2011).

### **Renzulli's Co-Cognitive Components of Giftedness**

The current definitions of giftedness tend to focus on cognitive ability and academic potential, neglecting to place any emphasis on Renzulli's (2002) co-cognitive components of giftedness. The co-cognitive components of giftedness are optimism, courage, romance with a topic, sensitivity to human concerns, physical and mental energy, and vision or a sense of destiny (Renzulli, 2002; Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, & Sisk, 2008). The belief in the future and that it holds positive outcomes when considered cognitively, emotionally, and motivationally is considered to be optimism (Renzulli, 2002). Courage is the desire and perseverance to struggle through difficulty and challenges when one is facing obstacles of fear (Renzulli, 2002). Passion about—maybe even obsession with—a discipline is characterized as romance with a topic (Renzulli, 2002). Those who possess this co-cognitive trait may feel powerful emotion toward an area of study and be especially dedicated to their pursuit of the topic (Renzulli, 2002). One's ability to empathize with others living different lives is considered to be sensitivity to human concerns, as defined by Renzulli's (2002) co-cognitive components of giftedness. Everyone possesses some level of physical and mental energy, but those whose commitment to accomplishment is intense likely possess physical and mental energy as a co-cognitive trait of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002). A difficult co-cognitive component to define is sense of destiny. According to Renzulli (2002), it may be explained as internal locus of control,

self-efficacy, and motivation. It tends to influence behavior, organization, and planning for the future (Renzulli, 2002).

Renzulli (2002) suggests that gifted programming should work to address his proposed co-cognitive traits of giftedness. Student activism may be one way that programming can work to address these traits. Activism, which should be distinguished from volunteerism, is categorized as a Direct Involvement II (Renzulli et al., 2006) experience because of the ways students should initiate, design, and implement their own social action projects, while volunteerism is categorized as a Direct Involvement I experience (Renzulli et al., 2006; Sands & Heilbronner, 2014) because it is a more passive student experience. According to Renzulli et al. (2006), providing gifted students with Direct Involvement II experiences helps students to internalize non-cognitive characteristics, further developing their co-cognitive traits, and influencing their contribution to the production of social capital. Many gifted students possess an advanced moral maturity in conjunction with their advanced cognitive abilities, and those who commit to engaging with socially-oriented causes and activism-related learning opportunities likely especially possess advanced moral maturity, positive attitudes, and strong values (Renzulli et al., 2006). Within these activism-oriented learning experiences, students' beliefs and convictions may be further developed as they gain new perspectives and see the beneficial outcomes of their planning and action (Renzulli et al., 2006). Direct Involvement II learning experiences have a lasting impact on students as compared with Direct Involvement I experiences (Renzulli et al., 2006), and Hébert (2011) asks educators and parents to find ways of facilitating such experiences for their gifted children so that our society may benefit from a generation of committed students who strive to use their gifts and talents for the good of others. Perhaps activism is the answer to Hébert's call.

## **Service Learning and Community Action**

The term *service learning* describes a type of activism specifically employed in schools for educational purposes. It explicitly connects schools to their communities and provides important service within those communities (Terry, 2003; Terry, 2008). Terry (2003) describes service learning as “a method by which students learn and develop through curricular integration and active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address actual needs in their community” (p. 296). Advocates of implementing service learning in classrooms claim that its value stems from it being a combination of student community service and academic study that allows for enriching educational experiences that benefit communities and teach responsibilities important to roles as active, caring citizens (Stewart, Webster, & Bai, 2013; Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, & Sisk, 2008).

Service learning tends to encompass three levels of learning and engagement. The first level is called *community service*. It describes the volunteering of time and services in students' communities and is what many would think of as volunteer work (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). Students who participate in this first level of service learning are likely to learn from the act of volunteering itself, but they will also learn about their communities and its needs, which they might not have been previously aware. *Community exploration* is the second level of service learning. Engagement with community exploration is deeper than at the first level of service learning. During community exploration, students volunteer but also engage with their communities during longer time commitments, explore their communities in ways they may not have had the opportunity to in the past, and invest in establishing relationships with their communities and organizations within their communities (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). The deepest and most impactful level of service learning is called *community action*. This level

requires engaged students to make a lasting impact on their communities through student-led problem-solving, design, and action implementation (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). Because of students' deep engagement and commitment during this level of service learning, they are likely to be powerfully impacted by their experiences, as well (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008).

Community action participants will explore their communities, becoming more familiar than they might otherwise, will learn about where they live and the needs of their neighbors, and will have opportunities to reflect upon their own roles within their communities (Terry, 2003). They will also have opportunities to work toward change that will benefit their communities long after their initial work is done.

Community action's essential objective is to allow students the opportunity to build a two-way relationship with their communities and neighbors, a collaboration in working toward the greater good (Terry, 2003). This deeper engagement is beneficial because it is not simply philanthropy or volunteer work; instead, the students lead their own learning by making important decisions about the direction of their efforts based on the needs of their neighbors and feedback from the community. Successful participation in community action requires collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, patience, and dedication. Students see their influence and gain a greater sense of empowerment from their experiences engaging in community action. Such a partnership allows for the greatest community impact and the most powerful learning experiences (Terry, 2003). According to Terry (2003), community action that takes more time and lasts longer will have greater impact than shorter community partnerships.

Schools play a significant role in the privilege and oppression of their students. They shape youth's "civic experiences" and create spaces for both students and adults to learn what is expected of them as citizens and where they belong in society (Levinson, 2012, p. 174). Schools

are a reflection of society, and they provide a space where students observe and participate to the extent that they will be expected to observe and participate in the greater public sphere (Levinson, 2012). It has been suggested that schools play an even more integral role in students' civic experiences today than they have in the past because the definition of family and the structures of what constitutes family have evolved and transformed, and a great deal of life is spent in school (Renzulli, 2002). Americans should expect that schools model civic responsibility to their students (Levinson, 2012). Schools should exemplify an ideal civic climate that allows students to practice empowerment and civic engagement, to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to take civic action and persevere through the challenges in order to find success (Levinson, 2012). Participation in activism as youth promotes a healthy identity and greater confidence in oneself (Stewart et al., 2013). When students are given opportunities to participate in and engage with experiences that develop in them self-confidence, positive self-concept, and self-reliance, they are more likely to take positive risks toward achieving a greater good for society (Stewart et al., 2013). It is important, also, to engage students by addressing their unique needs, including their interests and learning styles (Berv, 1998).

The success of educational activism experiences often relies on the community, as well. While the design and implementation of learning opportunities traditionally take place in the classroom, it is also important that educators identify learning opportunities in the community and the available resources that might support such learning (Terry, 2003; Terry et al., 2008). Students and the community will likely benefit from a more fluid relationship between the classroom and the community. When activism is made an important objective of the educational experience, experiential education and traditional learning experiences are bridged to form a more powerful and promising opportunity for transformative learning (Berv, 1998). Involvement



in the community and from the community brings into focus a new emphasis on society for the participating students (Berv, 1998). In order for students to be appreciated and fully integrated into their communities as engaged citizens who have a voice, there must be cooperation between the educational process and the expectations of society (Terry, 2008).

The community action level of service learning provides students with much-needed opportunities for further developing their co-cognitive traits as community action sensitizes students to their communities and their neighbors' needs while also contributing to students' further understanding of their curricular areas of study (Terry et al., 2008). Community action service learning provides transformative experiences for students as they gain understandings of those who are different from themselves and various areas of their communities they may not yet be familiar with (Stewart et al., 2013). Much of service learning's value stems from the likelihood that engaged students will increase their awareness of their surroundings and the inequities and oppression ever-present in their communities, perhaps increasing students' concern for their neighbors and in turn increasing their moral maturity, compassion, empathy, and drive to commit their talents toward the greater good (Stewart et al., 2013).

The literature on service learning touts many benefits to participating students in addition to those benefits recipient communities experience. According to Terry (2003), the research has shown that students involved in service learning projects tend to improve their social competence, communication skills, leadership skills, confidence, organizational skills, and creativity. Additionally, participating students may also possess more favorable attitudes toward adults and develop personally and intellectually (Terry, 2003). Often times teachers find that participation in service learning projects provides students with meaningful learning experiences that are both appealing and engaging (Terry, 2003). According to Berv (1998), service learning

provides the experiential learning opportunities that teach appropriate skills for becoming a good citizen of a democratic society, skills that all schools intend to impart to their students.

Part of facilitating students' learning through service learning and civic action experiences is first helping students to acknowledge and build upon their strengths and talents. According to Terry et al. (2008), it is important that teachers create opportunities and approaches for students to examine their abilities, strengths, learning styles, intelligences, and interests as individuals. In order to most powerfully engage with service learning and action-oriented attempts at change within their communities, students need the opportunity to determine their involvement and passion for an issue based on their developing interests and what they feel they can best contribute (Terry et al., 2008). This opportunity for student inquiry and student-led learning experiences is powerful. If teachers can develop learning opportunities that center around authentic learning experiences ignited by the students, their exploration and creative problem-solving will be that much more empowering and engaging for the students (Terry et al., 2008). It is important that the student identify the problems or issues they hope to address in their communities or in broader society and that they also be given the freedom and authority to implement their action plans (Terry et al., 2008).

A great deal of the power that lies with service learning and other related educational opportunities for youth activism is that students are able to learn in ways that have consequences for themselves, for others, and for their communities (Terry et al., 2008). Such experiences hold the potential to facilitate cognitive development, moral development, reasoning, development of social responsibility, and a sense of individual and group empowerment that encourages students to lead creative and productive lives as citizens of their communities (Terry et al., 2008). Teachers can guide such development and accomplishment through scaffolding, modeling,

coaching, and fading, as described by the cognitive apprenticeship model (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Such a model helps students grow from a learning dependence on their teacher to guiding their own learning based on their interests, their inquiry, and their problem solving (Terry et al., 2008). Teachers who embrace service learning and youth activism as models for learning in their classrooms must set aside the traditional ideas of what a classroom teacher does on a daily basis. The teacher must leave behind the “sage on the stage” entity and instead become a “guide on the side” (Renzulli, 2002). In these situations, teachers foster the further development of students’ strengths, assist in delegating tasks and duties, and lead the community of students in establishing and maintaining an environment and culture of collaboration, respect, and trust (Renzulli, 2002), all very important responsibilities in the success of such learning experiences.

### **Gifted Students and Self-Concept**

Students’ educational experiences stand to influence the ways in which they view and come to understand themselves. Self-concept, a construct of self, is defined as a dynamic cognitive system of beliefs, understandings, and attitudes that an individual sees as truth about his or her abilities, who they are, and what they are capable of (Purkey, 1988). Studies have been conducted which examine gifted students’ self-concepts and the ways in which giftedness and the gifted label influence students’ self-concepts. Generally, the conclusion is that gifted students, both those who are high-achievers and underachievers, possess higher academic self-concepts than students from the general population (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). As with all individuals, gifted students’ self-concepts are constructed individually based on internal and external comparison processes where students evaluate their own abilities in one domain compared to another and compared to their peers’ abilities (Wang & Neihart, 2015). The label of

gifted or gifted and talented likely affects those students' self-concepts in many ways and not just academically; however, gifted students' self-concepts are consistently measured to be higher overall than those of the general population (Rudasill, Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009). Research has shown that children experience declines in self-concept measures at certain times during childhood, especially during middle to late-childhood (ages 8 to 11) and during early adolescence (ages 11 to 13) (Harter, 2006). Additionally, while many adolescents experience some sort of decline in self-concept during grades 7 through 12, the dip that female adolescents experience is more rapid than their male counterparts (DeFraine, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2007).

Correlations exist among self-concept and a great number of academic and social factors, including academic achievement, participation in activities, effort and engagement in school, and decisions regarding future educational and career paths. Self-concept is influenced by students' minority statuses, whether or not students are high-achievers, underachievers, or average achievers, and students' age and level of development and maturity. It is well documented that confident individuals will be more likely to participate and engage in activities. Students who possess positive self-concepts will generally engage in challenging pursuits and put forth effort toward successes in activities in which they choose to participate (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Self-concept informs students' extracurricular activities while in school, as well as their future aspirations academically and vocationally (Wilson, Siegle, McCoach, Little, & Reis, 2014). Those who possess potential for high academic achievement likely possess strong academic self-concept and potential for successes in future education endeavors, careers, adult productivity, and general satisfaction and happiness (Rudasill & Callahan, 2008; Wilson et al., 2014). For

those who possess lower self-concepts, the opposite is true. They are likely to lower their future expectations, which influences their achievements across their lifetimes (Wilson et al., 2014).

Beyond participation, students' academic self-concepts influence intrinsic factors, as well. Effort, engagement, and determination regarding classroom work can be affected by self-concept (Wang & Neihart, 2015).

### **Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative, multiple case-study approach. The exploratory nature of this particular study, best investigated through conversations and participants' own expressions, lends itself to qualitative research methods (Leko, 2002; Matheson, 1983; Patton & Cochran, 2002). The multiple cases studied within this research allowed for comparison of similar academic experiences and the way these experiences influenced the participants (Yin, 2011). The authors, after analysis of data, were able to draw more thorough, robust conclusions because of access to multiple cases (Yin, 2011).

### **Selection of Participants**

This study stems from a central study, which was conducted in a public middle school that serves students in the 6th through 8th grades in the mid-western United States. The first author is the gifted education facilitator at the school and contacted all gifted students and their parents for consent to participate in the study. The second author participated in study design, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. Twenty-nine students ranging in age from 11 to 14 participated in the central study, and the three participants of this multiple-case study were selected for further investigation because of their roles in the larger study, including the ways they showed leadership to other students and their expression of interest in furthering their activism in the future. Additionally, as gender emerged as an interesting variable in the original

study, these three female participants were able to articulate their perceptions, concerns, and female perspectives thoroughly and eloquently. The participants of this study took part in open and semi-structured interviews using interview protocols that included questions regarding their specific community activism projects, their roles within their activism teams, and the ways in which they were influenced by engagement as community activists.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

Multiple interviews were conducted over the span of approximately 7 months, beginning in the students' 8th-grade year and extending into the first semester of their freshman year of high school. As mentioned, open and semi-structured interviews were conducted in both small-group and one-on-one settings, and all interview audio was recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis. Because the purpose of interviewing within qualitative research is to both obtain factual information and delve into deeper meaning and perceptions, it was important to employ open interviews (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2014) in combination with semi-structured interviews. This article's first author conducted all of the interviews with the participants, and each interview lasted between 20 and 95 minutes, for a total of approximately 17 hours of interview data. Most of the interviews took place in the first author's gifted education classroom, but some also took place at the city's public library, especially once the participants were no longer the first author's students.

The first data source was made up of semi-structured interviews conducted with all 29 participating gifted students split into 9 different small groups. These interviews followed an interview protocol that guided the conversation (see Appendix A). Participants provided information regarding their experiences in gifted education programming, the challenge and lack of challenge they receive in their general education classrooms, their understandings of and

experiences with empathy, and the importance of helping others. The participants' responses informed the content of second interviews with the same students, as the first author reviewed the data collected and made decisions regarding directions to take and follow-up questions needed in future interviews.

The second data source was made up of open interviews conducted with all 29 participating gifted students, once again split into 9 different small groups. The open interviews sought to explore participants' experiences as engaged community activists, the ways in which they had succeeded, their perceptions of collaboration, and their understandings of activism. A third data set, an open interview, was also collected, which targeted female participants only and asked them to reflect on the ways in which gender had influenced their educational experiences and their personal and group experiences engaging with the community activism projects of this study.

Based on the responses found in these three data sets, it was determined that three specific participants could provide rich information regarding their experiences as community activists and the ways their engagement had influenced their own personal growth and self-concepts if given further opportunity for exploration and reflection. The three participants and their parents consented to their involvement in a deeper study, and each student participated in two additional interviews—one small-group interview and one interview in a one-on-one setting. Both interviews were semi-structured, following interview protocols created by the first author (see Appendix B). Follow-up questions were developed in response to previous interviews, and constant comparisons were made during the interviews to help inform next questions (Yin, 2011).

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis began with an inductive approach to coding the small-group and one-on-one interviews with the three participants. The within-case analysis allowed us to gain familiarity with each case individually, and cross-case analysis forced us to analyze the entire data set with intent to find both similarities and differences across the cases. The first and second readings of the transcribed interview data revealed approximately three dozen open codes, as found in Table 1. The open codes established during these readings were compared to the open codes established during analysis of the data obtained during interviews with all 29 participants of the central study (Beason-Manes, Goering, & Imbeau, under review). Constant comparison (Yin, 2011) revealed that approximately half of the open codes established during inductive analysis of the three participants' interviews were also open codes applied to the central study. Similarities began to reveal themselves, and axial codes were established that revealed new perspectives. The first main theme, *disappointment*, was established, followed by: *personal growth*, *determination*, *passion*, and *motivation*. Table 2 presents these main themes and the in vivo codes that make up their meaning. The data analysis was completed by both authors separately, and final decisions regarding theme application were discussed at great length between both authors. Any disagreements were discussed between authors until consensus was reached.

### **Trustworthiness**

The first author, as their gifted facilitator, had already built rapport and trusting relationships with all participants in the study, which allowed her to best understand their perspectives and to learn the most from their interactions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In order to build that trust, the first author remained engaged in the study on a regular basis over the course of approximately seven months and continued working with all of the participants on a daily



basis as their gifted facilitator. This aided the first author in knowing each participant on a professional and more personal level, and the participants felt at ease in their interactions with her. This allowed the participants to be open and honest in their responses and to share information in a candid and realistic way. Through repeated conversations, observations, and interviews, as well as daily through teacher-student interactions, the first author became familiar and trusted (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The prolonged engagement allowed her the opportunity to engage in constant comparison among a variety of sources and through a variety of formats (Creswell & Miller, 2000), which contributed to triangulation.

### **Findings**

The participants' individual narratives of experience illustrate the ways that their community action projects shed light on their educations and helped to inform their own understandings of themselves as individuals, as females, and as gifted students. This section presents our detailed case study descriptions of the three participants and their community action projects, including essential questions, problem-solving process, progress toward action, and their evolving challenges and successes. The themes that emerged from the data analysis are explored following the case study descriptions, and focus has been placed on participants' evolving sense of self-concept and exercise of co-cognitive traits of giftedness as they have informed the participants' identities as activists and altered their expectations of learning experiences.

### **Case Vignettes**

**Community action projects.** Middle school gifted students were challenged to identify an issue in their school, neighborhood, or larger community during the implementation of a curriculum developed by the first author to engage her students in community action projects.

Students established activism teams by grade level, determined an issue of concern within their community, developed essential questions, and followed a creative problem-solving process adapted by the first author that included the following steps:

1. Identify the problem
2. Research the problem
3. Formulate challenges
4. Generate ideas
5. Combine and evaluate ideas
6. Draw up an action plan
7. Implement the action plan
8. Reflect, evaluate, adjust
9. Share results and experience with others

Students engaged with intensive research, went through a formal job application process in order to take on specific roles and responsibilities within their teams, were responsible for making contact with community organizations and other helpful entities, and collaboratively made decisions about moving forward with their efforts. They solicited the help and financial assistance of area businesses, developed and delivered presentations for important groups within their community, and reflected on their action implementation in order to make changes when necessary. Because all students on one activism team did not necessarily share class time, the students engaged with one another through an online classroom that allowed them to post questions, chat online, develop polls, share photos, and collaborate one-on-one and in groups. The first author, as the students' gifted facilitator, was able to manage the online classroom and help facilitate project managers in timeline management with the classroom calendar. She also tracked teams' progress through the problem-solving process using the online classroom format. Students made goals for themselves on a daily basis and reported their accomplishments on a weekly basis. Students, as a team, set short-term deadlines that ensured they could make significant progress within the timeframe they had.

**Cora, age 14.** Cora is a freshman at a public high school where she receives services from the district's gifted education program. She is active in community ballet lessons, plays the cello, and excels academically. She possesses wonderful strengths in many academic areas, including math, science, and writing. Cora is especially adept at expressing her thoughts and feelings articulately and approaches her school work with great dedication and awareness of education's value.

Cora considers herself to be an introvert and places high value on deep relationships, emphasizing quality over quantity. She values her alone time and is aware of her own needs and wants and is making progress toward feeling good about advocating for them when necessary. Her family remains an important support system to her as she makes her way through school, social experiences, and general development in adolescence, and she values the way she has been raised.

Cora possesses a great deal of moral maturity and empathy for others, as she often discusses her observations of the world around her, the injustices she witnesses for those less fortunate than herself, and her ideas for creating simple but powerful change. She is very socially aware of society's flaws and the missteps of the institutions of society, such as the education system. She is in touch with her own feelings and perceptions of her surroundings, and she is willing to shoulder great responsibility in many of her endeavors. Cora's approach to difficulty is to persevere and present her best effort on all occasions. While she is sometimes tough on herself, she possesses very wise insights into the importance of balance and self-care with which most young people are not yet in touch.

**Community action project no. 1: Accessible financial advice.** During her 8th-grade year, the year when students designed and implemented their community action projects, Cora

had communicated her idea of the community putting on a free event that would provide sound financial advice to those who need it most. When she and her 8th-grade gifted peers were given the opportunity to solve any problem they had noticed in their community, Cora shared that she had considered the fact that those in financial trouble would benefit from professional financial advice, something not easily accessible to those who are not already wealthy. She had the idea to establish a group of professional, licensed financial advisors, who would be willing to lend their time and services for no charge, and put on an event open to the public in hopes of helping those having financial trouble. Other ideas from her peers also surfaced, but after engaging in a creative problem-solving process of elimination, Cora's idea was ultimately selected as the group's community action project. Cora explained:

My idea for our [community action] project began with a conversation with my mom about some law our legislature passed about people dependent on government checks for food and the like. The law made it illegal to spend more than \$80 of this money at once. We were talking about how difficult this would make it for, say, a single parent with limited transportation that could only grocery shop once a week. In my head I was just thinking, 'What the heck?' because this seemed so burdening and like it brought more challenges than benefits. Then my mom started talking about how many poverty-stricken families haven't known anything other than grinding poverty for generations, and how the only way to stop the trend was education about finances and many young adults were never taught how to balance a budget or basic financial abilities like that. We also talked about financial education and how it generally caters to wealthy folks. I think a tiny seed of an idea was born—free financial help for everybody!—but it was just a couple of sentences and the conversation ended. (Cora, personal communication, September 14, 2016)

She continued,

For a while after that, I just kept thinking of what a concept that was, free financial help. It could revolutionize so many people and families. And I started to think about venues and advisors. I had really thought about the idea for a long time before we got started [on our project]. Without knowing about our upcoming opportunity for community activism, too! (Cora, personal communication, September 14, 2016)

Her activism team first established an essential question that would guide their work moving forward: *How can we provide financial education services to those who can't afford them?*

**Alexandra, age 14.** Like Cora, Alexandra was an 8th-grader when the bulk of her community activism project was established and implemented, and she continued to share her thoughts and reflections into her 9th-grade year. Alexandra is a strong student academically and is involved musically, as she plays in the school's orchestra. She is also a member of the stage crew for student performances at her high school. While she admittedly has been prone to procrastination in her academic endeavors, Alexandra gauges the value of her studies based on their usefulness and application to other areas of life. While she may not engage fully or put forth her best effort when she senses inaccuracies, prejudice, or little value in assigned work, she will dedicate herself with intensity to work that she believes truly contributes to her education and understanding of the world around her.

Alexandra is an especially aware student when it comes to social justice and environmental issues. She possesses strong political opinions and is well-informed. She has a keen understanding of nuance and remains true to her beliefs. Her progressive ideas are encouraged in her home environment, and it is not infrequent that Alexandra is found to be challenging the status quo, asking probing questions, and demanding just a little bit more from mankind. Her moral maturity and understanding of her environment certainly set her apart from her age peers, and her ability to engage intensely with topics for which she feels passionately makes her a force inside and outside of the school setting.

**Olivia, age 14.** Olivia, currently a freshman in high school, was an 8th-grader during the majority of this research. She is a hard worker and commits to all tasks before her with determination and dedication. Though she did not describe herself as a perfectionist, she is often unrelenting until her work is as close to perfect as possible. She is not easily or quickly satisfied and is unlikely to give up. She possesses a unique drive to learn completely out of curiosity and

will devote a great deal of her own time to learning about topics of interest, simply for her own new knowledge. While she admits to persevering and holding herself to high expectations, she has recently begun describing her need for balance and her new desire to work toward a more balanced lifestyle that puts equal emphasis on her academic studies and her physical and emotional well-being. Olivia speaks of studying the sports she engages with, learning as much as possible about training in these areas, and then implements her approaches to bettering herself as an athlete. When she is curious about a topic, she will check out books from the public library, scour the internet for information, and talk to others who may possess expertise on the subject.

Olivia plays the violin in her school orchestra and in her city's youth symphony. She plays tennis on her school's team and has become a self-taught swimmer. Olivia is considering going out for her high school's swim team, but she has some hesitation due to the fact that she has not been swimming competitively like many of her peers. She enjoys creative activities where she can be artistic, such as drawing, typography, and design. Her interests and talents are varied, and her descriptions of such interests and potential for future careers suggest a struggle with multipotentiality.

**Community action project no. 2: Reducing the use of disposable plastics in school cafeterias.** When given the opportunity in their 8th-grade years to address any community problem they felt compelled to work on, Alexandra and Olivia began to form a natural team based on an interest in environmental issues over social issues. Since the beginning of the school year, Alexandra had been discussing the idea of plastic waste and the dangerous levels of plastics use in the United States, in particular. She possessed a strong passion for the topic early on without having established any kind of solution to the problem. When the opportunity for community activism projects presented itself, she felt engaged in pursuing the abuse of plastics

in her community, specifically that her school cafeteria was unnecessarily using far too many disposable plastics. When Olivia learned of the option of working toward solving a social problem or an environmental problem in her community, she felt more passionately about working toward environmental solutions than social ones, and her partnership with Alexandra began. Alexandra explained:

My mom showed me this documentary [about plastics]. It talked about all the plastic in the ocean and plastic pollution in general. It was really interesting. It talked to big corporations that worked with plastics and just how corrupt they are and interviews with them. And I used to eat lunch in the cafeteria, and I thought it was weird that everything was wrapped in different kinds of plastic that we just threw away. And so I had the idea of the project many months beforehand when we actually did the project, and so it was just festering in my mind. I really wanted to do it, but I didn't know how or when I would do it. (Alexandra, personal communication, September 18, 2016)

She continued,

So, the plan pretty much was just to limit the amount of disposable plastics used in the cafeteria. Me and Olivia did that by doing a ton of research on what plastic is, and should we even do the project? Is it useful? We researched a bunch of alternatives to plastic, and not a lot really came up. We also started talking to a bunch of district employees for the school district on how to do our project exactly and details and whether it's possible and what's not. What they can help us with and what they can't. (Alexandra, personal communication, September 18, 2016)

Alexandra and Olivia then established an essential question that would guide their work toward a solution: *How can we reduce the use of plastics in local school cafeterias?*

### **Main Themes**

While self-concept is considered to be a variable, evolving construct of self, gifted populations tend to maintain stronger and less variable self-concepts than the general population (Rudasill et al., 2009), and the participants of this study appear to be no different. Self-concept, determined through a process of internal and external comparisons, can be influenced by a variety of factors and experiences (Gore & Cross, 2014; Huitt, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003;

Table 1

*Open Codes Organized into In Vivo Codes*

<u>Open Codes</u>	<u>In Vivo Codes</u>
Frustration with group work	“Oh darn... I have to work alone...”
Reality, cynicism	“It helped to understand how things actually work”
Disappointment, obstacles	“We were thinking, ‘Who would object to that?’”
Stretching self, discomfort, independence, success, growth, making change	“I feel like I can change things”
Empowerment, agency	“I felt empowered”
Self-awareness, confidence, self-perception	“I feel like I’m me”
Balance, self-care	“I realize that having balance is really important...”
Teamwork, collaboration	“I didn’t do all of the work; we all did”
Leadership, communication, organization Determination, best effort, doing it all, persistence	“Yeah, I deserved it. I was a good leader” “I have a lot of drive to do stuff, and that pushes me on”
Learning from environment, authentic learning experiences, importance of education, potential	“It’s not something I’m making It’s something I’m getting done”
Empathy, wisdom, moral maturity	“It’s really, really important to have empathy”
Greater good, hierarchy of needs, expectations of self	“Use your powers for good, not evil”
Process of change, seeking results	“It could be that one step that changes everything”

Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). The authors of this study sought to examine the influence of the experience of engagement as community activists on female, gifted adolescents’ self-concepts and their ability to acquire social capital. Through their analysis of qualitative data, they developed a series of main themes that addressed students’ growth. Open codes were established



as the authors took an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis. The authors then selected participants' own words in an in vivo coding process to represent the open codes. In vivo codes were converged into axial codes: disappointment, personal growth, determination, passion, and motivation (see Tables 1 and 2). Ultimately, they found that the participants' experiences with community action contributed to their understanding of self, a self that had grown and that they could identify as activist. In the face of much disappointment and many challenges, the participants persevered and strived for success, ultimately acquiring social capital.

**Disappointment.** The participants, on a variety of occasions, explored their feelings of disappointment and frustration experienced inside and outside of the classroom as they navigated their community action projects. They reflected on the difficulties of collaboration and compromise and the frustrations they have felt working with peers, especially age peers. The opportunity to address real problems in society through student-led action and solicitation of adult support revealed to the participants a perspective on reality and society and adulthood that they had not previously possessed. They encountered the dysfunction of bureaucracy and power and struggled against a variety of difficult obstacles in order to accomplish what they believed in.

*“Oh darn...I have to work alone...”* Not an uncommon complaint, the idea of group work often brings up negative feelings in gifted populations. The participants of this study, in particular, frequently discussed the ways in which group work has interfered with their learning in the past and their frustrations with being brought down by peers who rely on them to carry entire projects rather than truly collaborating. They recounted instances in the classroom when they have volunteered to work alone in order to avoid the obstacles that group work poses. While all three participants expressed irritation with group work, they also acknowledged how effective

Table 2

*Organization of In Vivo Codes into Main Themes*

Main Themes				
<u>Disappointment</u>	<u>Personal Growth</u>	<u>Determination</u>	<u>Passion</u>	<u>Motivation</u>
“Oh darn...I have to work alone...”	“I feel like I can change things”	“I didn’t do all of the work; we all did”	“It’s not something I’m making. It’s something I’m getting done”	“It’s really, really important to have empathy”
“It helped to understand how things actually work”	“I felt empowered”	“Yeah, I deserved it. I was a good leader”		“Use your powers for good, not evil”
“We were thinking, ‘Who would object to that?’”	“I feel like I’m me”	“I have a lot of drive to do stuff, and that pushes me on”		“It could be that one step that changes everything”
	“I realize that having a balance is really important”			

true collaboration can be, as they learned through working together during their community action projects.

***“It helped to understand how things actually work.”*** Open codes that appeared during analysis of interviews revealed students’ new understandings of the world around them—the way things work. This recurring idea became an open code. These expressions of understanding were often followed by mentions of the way reality fueled their work further, a certain kind of perseverance. Among the realizations the participants had about how the world works, how bureaucracy slows progress, and how to cope with coming up against such challenges, was the realization that even though those in power may say that they support movement for change, it does not always mean the change will happen. In reference to the school district’s school board and the girls’ petitioning of their efforts to help reduce the use of disposable plastics in cafeterias, the first author shared a development with Alexandra and Olivia during an interview. She explained that she had spoken with a district official and was told that the school board intended to adopt the students’ plan for reducing plastic use as part of their green initiative for the upcoming school year. Alexandra responded with cynicism, a reflection of her new understanding of the world within which she was operating. She said:

Just because it’s on their list doesn’t mean it’s actually going to happen. [The school board president] said they have a green goal or something like that and they didn’t accomplish anything during the whole [previous] school year. (Alexandra, personal communication, September 7, 2016)

The first author suggested, “So maybe we want to make it our priority to push them on it? If they’re going to make it a goal, we want to see some progress,” and Alexandra agreed, “[Yeah], that’s empowering!” (Alexandra, personal communication, September 7, 2016).

The disposable plastics community action project was one that received special attention through coverage in the local newspaper. Both Olivia and Alexandra, on a variety of

occasions, expressed their frustrations with the reality of attempting to communicate their learning and passion for such a cause. While they learned a great deal about the science of their project, the environmental factors that made it a worthwhile project, and the creative problem-solving process that guided their work, they also learned about the reality that surrounds action for lasting change. They know, now, to anticipate pushback, to wrestle against restrictive bureaucracy, and to recognize their own abilities in the face of obstacles. While this reality isn't charming, its understanding is valuable.

*“We were thinking, ‘Who would object to that?’”* In reflecting upon their experiences as activists, the participants described many instances of feeling great disappointment in others, in circumstances outside of their control, and especially in the establishment of adults who truly had the power to consider their pleas for change. These disappointments, which were true obstacles to their progress, also provided important learning experiences to each of the participants as they persisted toward their end goals. Alexandra explained, “It’s empowering. When stuff happens but when stuff doesn’t happen, too. Like, if I don’t ever get an e-mail [response] or something, I think, ‘Man, I’m better than these horrible adults who don’t want to do anything’” (Alexandra, personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Although this recurring theme of disappointment appeared during interviews with the participants, it was always encompassed by an overwhelming sense of perseverance and determination, a grit in response to disappointment. It is as though the girls’ courage and optimism and belief in their work prevailed over all negativity.

**Personal growth.** Obvious to the first author, the participants experienced a great deal of growth throughout their first experiences as community activists, but they also shared their own understandings of their growth as a result of the experience. Concepts of varying and evolving

understandings of success, personal empowerment, and individual confidence were expressed in participant interviews. These open codes were categorized as *personal growth*.

***“I feel like I can change things.”*** All three of the participating students described, at one point or another, their views of the success of their community action projects, and they individually had developed their own senses of what success meant in the context of their project and its greater meaning.

The participants’ understanding of their own learning process and the value of that learning evolved over time. While they had originally set out toward the goal of reducing or even eliminating much of the use of disposable plastics in their school cafeteria, Alexandra and Olivia began to see purpose in their efforts that went even deeper than whether or not their original intended goals were reached. They saw that their own exposure to new information for which they felt passionately became a lifelong lesson, and they saw the success in gaining new understandings of how the world around them and society’s institutions work, whether flawed or not. Much of their success ultimately stemmed from feelings similar to ones Olivia expressed in an interview when she declared, “I feel like I can change things” (Olivia, personal communication, September 7, 2016).

***“I felt empowered.”*** During interviews, each of the three participants spent time recounting their feelings of empowerment—belief in themselves and a new understanding of what they were capable of accomplishing. Because student activism projects were student-led, the participants had to make many decisions based on their own understandings of the problem at hand, determine their own course of action, and navigate a variety of interactions with people whom they didn’t know, including adults in their community. As a team, Olivia and Alexandra decided that an appropriate way to introduce their plan of action to their school district was to

present their concern and their recommendations to the district's school board. Alexandra explained her feelings of empowerment as a result of the various steps they took to educate others and increase awareness of need for change regarding the use of disposable plastics in their cafeteria. "When we went to the [school] board meeting, I felt like, Wow, I'm all that. When we set up the table at lunch and were talking to people about [the overuse of disposable plastics in our school cafeteria], that was cool. I felt empowered," she said (Alexandra, personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Through this experience, Alexandra understood more deeply her ability to advocate for issues she feels passionately about and also realized that others viewed her as worth listening to, lessons she may not have been exposed to without stepping out and engaging with her community in an activist role. The students' exposure to the success of their own ideas and their hard work transformed their own perceptions of what they were capable of, who would take them seriously, and how they might draw on these feelings of empowerment in the future. Their ideas of what was important and how they could best influence the world around them seemed to have shifted through these experiences, as well.

*"I feel like I'm me."* Participants described their new-found confidence in a variety of ways, whether it was confidence in their school work or in social interactions, or the ways in which they might go about responding to their own mistakes and missteps. A sense of real wisdom came through during the interviews, wisdom that often belongs to individuals much older and more experienced. Cora shared:

Especially after surviving middle school, I feel like I'm me and if I make a mistake or something, nobody should be worried about that because it's my mistake and I can keep going because it doesn't bother me. And it's really great. I'm more consciously thinking about stuff like that, too. (Cora, personal communication, September 14, 2016)

A coming to terms with mistakes and ability to overcome mistakes suggests that participants of this study learned the good that comes from persevering and the confidence they earned through this project as they naturally matured.

***“I realize that having balance is really important...”*** During interviews, two of the three participants—unprompted and individually—brought up ideas of the importance of balance and self-care in their own lives and the ways that these efforts contribute to their ideas of what they can accomplish moving forward in their lives and the attitude they feel is healthiest to take in all endeavors. Olivia explained:

I think [instilling will to do good] would be very beneficial to society, yet I realize that having balance is really important for a person themselves and for society and for survival, for a whole bunch of people on a rock in space. ... I think the [community action] project was really beneficial, and I do think a balance of teaching students that they should do things for the greater good and also we should also balance that with, What is best for you? What do you want for yourself? Having a good balance should be taught to everyone. (Olivia, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

This vision that both girls possessed suggested an understanding of the importance of balance in order to sustain efforts toward solving problems and benefitting their world. Even as young women, they have internalized the significance of caring for themselves, for seeking out their own desires and interests, in conjunction with using their gifts in powerful ways and to the benefit of others who need their efforts. Perhaps they recognize the difficulty that would occur in sustaining persistence and determination in the face of disappointment if they fail to care for their own individual needs, if they fail to lead balanced lives.

**Determination.** Several open codes were established that contribute to the main theme of *determination*. Determination was exhibited through students’ special abilities to overcome the challenges made obvious during their progress toward change. Obstacles described earlier, such

as dysfunctional group work and disappointment in others, were largely tolerable because students possessed leadership skills, strong collaborative efforts, and persistence.

***“I didn’t do all of the work; we all did.”*** For Alexandra and Olivia, especially, their collaboration was intense in that they were the only two students working to solve their chosen community problem of reducing use of disposable plastics in their school cafeteria. They had to rely on one another to truly contribute in fair and equal ways, and for both of them, it was their first experience with true collaboration in an academic setting. They divided responsibilities based on each other’s strengths and weaknesses and relied on one another for a successful approach to problem solving. If one of them had not held up her responsibilities, the project would not have seen the success it did.

While Cora operated within a larger group collaborating toward the same goal of providing free financial advice to their community, she also noted that this experience was the first time she had engaged with true collaboration. These collaborative experiences fueled determination for success.

***“Yeah, I deserved it. I was a good leader.”*** The participants’ community action projects provided unique opportunities for the exercise of leadership skills that were transformative for the participants. The process of problem solving allowed for an evolution of leadership. Once the students had selected the community problem to address and had established an essential question to guide their work, students applied for specific positions or jobs within their teams. Students took on roles such as project manager, financial director, public relations specialist, accountant, and advertising coordinator. Cora was selected to be the project manager of her particular team because of her role in developing the idea, her ability to convince her team of its value, and subtle leadership skills she had demonstrated throughout the school year. Her passion



for the project and investment in the problem was quickly evident, and the first author believed these attributes would contribute to the success of her team's project. Additionally, perhaps putting Cora in such a leadership role would provide her an opportunity to exercise skills she hadn't very often in the past. She shared:

I thought Amir would be the leader. He rides my bus, so on the way home, we'd always talk about this project and stuff and he was like, 'What did you put down for [job preferences]?' He said he put leader and all these high positions. He seemed really confident that he was going to get this position. So, I thought he'd probably get it. When I was the leader, he was really disappointed, and he wouldn't talk to me on the bus for a couple of days. I felt sort of bad. At first I didn't think I deserved [to be the leader], but then at the end of the project I had worked so hard to do it all, so then I thought, 'Yeah, I deserved it. I was a good leader.' (Cora, personal communication, September 14, 2016)

*"I have a lot of drive to do stuff, and that pushes me on."* Through their disappointment in others, including adults, various community institutions, and the bureaucracy they had to break through, the participants communicated lessons in persistence and determination. Olivia said:

I feel like everyone has the capabilities to do anything that they want, and it's just persistence and determination that keeps people from doing it. And I think it's probably present in everyone, but it's the people that are able to uncover the doggedness that are ultimately successful in what they think success should be. (Olivia, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

In response to those adults who disappointed the participants, they persisted in order to get the results they were after. Their reflections on their own growth as a result of recurrent disappointment indicated a certain level of self-awareness. Active self-reflection revealed some of the participants' perceptions of themselves and others and demonstrated their maturity in response to a variety of disappointments they faced throughout their community action projects.

**Passion.** Passion for—almost obsession with—a topic is a trait educators sometimes notice in their gifted students. Students may feel powerful emotion regarding the subject and are often motivated by such feelings to push forward in their learning and understanding. The

participants selected for this particular study stood out among a larger pool of participants because of the depth of their dedication to their projects and the extreme care they felt for the problems they worked toward addressing. Their passion for the topics seemed to motivate them to engage in powerful ways and work in deep and meaningful ways in order to be successful.

***“It’s not something I’m making. It’s something I’m getting done.”*** The community action projects featured within this study are viewed as examples of authentic learning for the fact that they were student-led, student-centered, and required application of real-life skills in real-world situations. The participants of this study frequently discussed the value of this type of learning during interviews. Alexandra explained her history with a variety of independent projects but the ways that this particular community action project stretched her allowed for deeper learning than before.

Since 6th grade, even though we’ve had different gifted teachers each year, we’ve always done our independent study projects. They honestly weren’t great. Even though I was younger, they weren’t very good. We always had a quarter of the year to do it, but I never went as far with it like this one where it’s still going. The only reason I really liked projects before was the whole arts and crafts part of it because I really like making stuff. And that was the only part I’d do outside of school. And I wouldn’t go to board meetings or e-mail a lot of people or actually reach out to people. The projects we’ve done in the past, I never would actually talk to real people, and I’d just do research online and then make something really quickly. I think this is really interesting because it’s not really a final product; it’s not something I’m making. It’s something I’m getting done, which is new for me and really cool. (Alexandra, personal communication, September 18, 2016)

Cora also noted differences between her community action project experience and other projects she has completed in school settings in the past.

At the beginning of 8th grade, I noticed that I didn’t agree with some of my teachers, and I felt myself—instead of complaining about it—thinking more about it inside my head. I would do this differently and I wish we were doing this instead of this and things like that. And I think as we did [the community action] project more, um, well, first I was like, all the other classes paled in comparison because I just wanted to work on our project, and I thought it was really cool. But I also felt, especially at the end of the year when our project was done, that *we had done something*. (Cora, personal communication, September 14, 2016)

The community action projects seemed to have demonstrated to participants a way of learning that they had not yet experienced, a way of learning that stuck with them as powerful. This new introduction to learning, one that presented an authenticity only found in real-world experiences, fueled their desire to create change as student activists, to confront their disappointments and frustrations, to see *activist* as part of their identity. And the success they achieved may have meant more because of the engagement their projects required.

**Motivation.** Because many gifted students possess a special moral maturity, they often have the potential for intense empathy and concern for the world around them. Throughout the study, the three participants demonstrated the ways in which they are inspired to challenge their strengths and the purpose of their personal goals.

*“It’s really, really important to have empathy.”* Participants articulated their understanding of empathy and their own interpretations of their personal levels of empathy. They understood that their empathy for their environment and the people who occupy their world can influence their desire to create change. The persistence found behind each community action project seems to stem from an intensity, an empathy for life—whether that life is plants, animals, or human beings. Their connection to the world around them—even a world that can be frustrating and disappointing—fuels their desire to make a powerful, lasting difference that does good things for others. As demonstrated by earlier excerpts, when others lacked an understanding of their motivation and their concern regarding their community action problems, it was difficult for the participants to understand how the problems could be ignored or put on the back burner. Their perceptions of the problems they worked to address were that the problems were significant, requiring attention, and worthy of everyone’s time and concern. In

some ways, it was shocking to the participants that those feelings of urgency were not shared by adults and established institutions within our society.

*“Use your powers for good, not evil.”* Renzulli (2002; 2011; 2012) has frequently argued for the encouragement of gifted students’ social capital acquisition. He has questioned how educators might instill in their gifted students the desire and calling to use their gifts and talents for the betterment of society. He has asked the fundamental question, “Why do some people mobilize their interpersonal, political, ethical, and moral realms of being in such ways that they place human concerns and the common good above materialism, ego enhancement, and self-indulgence?” (Renzulli, 2012, p. 156). This question was explored with the participants during one-on-one interviews. While this study does not provide any sort of definitive data on the topic, the participants’ perceptions in response to Renzulli’s question are enlightening. Alexandra said:

My mom talks about this with me a lot, and I’ve had conversations with other people in my family about this. I don’t know. I think it’s sort of funny because my mom makes a big deal about it. She says, ‘Use your powers for good, not evil.’ So I take it pretty seriously. I think there’s definitely a line between, like, doing something you’re interested in and good at and doing something that also makes money, like being a doctor or something, and doing something that makes a lot of money but also does harm. I’m more motivated by helping others. Not necessarily even helping people, but the earth, animals. . . . I think knowing a lot of the negative stuff [that happens in the world] can be really helpful to want to do more positive. Because if you’re just, like, yeah, everything’s fine, then why would they want to change anything? If you know more about that stuff, even if that can be a hard thing to teach or talk about, that would be really helpful. (Alexandra, personal communication, September 18, 2016)

Alexandra explicitly communicated her disappointment in society and the way that our world functions as a motivator, a reason to persist. It was her hope that if school, rather than protecting students from reality and its disappointments, would expose students to reality and truths and difficult, real circumstances, students would be more inclined to rebel against acceptance of such circumstances. Participants suggest that a child’s environment may matter most when it comes to whether or not she or he possesses an inclination to do good in the world

with her or his gifts and talents. Perhaps young people require opportunities to develop their identities as activists inside and outside of traditional classroom settings.

*“It could be that one step that changes everything.”* In response to this new understanding of adult reality, the participants in this study often felt frustrated and defeated, but not so much so that they gave up. In fact, such realizations often seemed to motivate them as they struggled toward change—or at the very least, helped them to acknowledge the power they have in educating others about important issues. The researcher asked Alexandra, “Do you feel proud of the awareness you have created?”

In some ways. In other ways I don’t know how aware I made them because of just how much un-eagerness or something along those lines that [the school board has] had. I don’t think they really fully understand it. I feel if you knew as much as I did about stuff like that, then you would take it really seriously. It’s hard to convey all of what we know to them. People aren’t always going to be as invested or think it’s as important as you do, even though you really think it’s super serious. (Alexandra, personal communication, September 18, 2016)

The researcher pushed, “Are you willing to continue to persist?”

Alexandra replied, “Yeah. It could be that one step that changes everything” (Alexandra, personal communication, September 18, 2016).

Through the defeat these students experienced, through their realizations of harsh reality, they still managed to see the value in their work and the ways that their efforts still had potential to be fruitful. Reality did not entirely hinder their desire to persevere or their commitment to solving an important problem. They did, however, learn from their understandings of an adult reality and embrace a fortified effort to create change in spite of societal obstacles in their way.



*Figure 1. Participants' Growth as a Result of Authentic Learning*

## **Discussion**

The main purpose of this study was to examine how the act of engaging in extended community action influences the self-concepts and social capital of three gifted females in the 8th and 9th grades. Using the approach of multiple-case studies, this study allowed for an in-depth examination of three different individuals, their changing, growing self-concepts, and their beliefs and realizations about the world around them as a result of two different community action projects. The study helps us to understand the ways that the participants coped with and addressed their ultimate feelings of disappointment and frustration with society and the adults from whom they needed help. Participants' discussion of their own blossoming confidence,

newfound leadership skills, and the ability to achieve success in the face of obstacles suggests a growth in self-concept. Their determination to continue to be motivated by their desires to do good work for the world demonstrates a new understanding of and appreciation for social capital. It is important to note, also, that the participants' success experienced through the community action projects may have had a reciprocal relationship with students' self-concepts, as research tends to suggest such a relationship between the two interactive constructs of self-concept and achievement (Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

The resourcefulness of the participants and their determination in the face of challenges suggested a resilience and task commitment that not all adolescents possess. The recurring theme of disappointment pervaded much of the interview data as the participants recounted experiences of not being acknowledged, not receiving replies from adults when they had requested information or their assistance, and being given false hope and empty promises by those in positions of authority. While many of their age peers may have responded to such disappointment and frustration with a loss of desire to continue on in their efforts, the participants of this study were seemingly fueled by the challenge of persisting through the disappointment in order to achieve success. They saw the ways that they could be empowered and accomplish more than the adults who seemed to hold the power in each situation. Some of the girls' empowerment seems to have even grown as a result of having to confront those real-life, difficult obstacles with maturity and high expectations for themselves and the wake they intended to make. All of this translated into student-communicated self-concept growth and better understanding of the significance of social capital.

As a result of these discoveries, we have gained new perspective on the significance of Renzulli's (2002) co-cognitive components of giftedness and the ways they were exercised in

order to combat negative feelings and a variety of obstacles that may have discouraged other students from persevering. We are able to apply co-cognitive traits to much of the interview data and see evidence of *optimism, courage, mental energy, sensitivity to human [and environmental] concerns, and romance with a topic* as the participants describe their efforts, their motivations, their persistence, and their passion for their projects. The participants revealed their unwavering commitment to their community action projects, the importance they place on helping others and using their powers for good, and the growth they identified in themselves. The findings of this study suggest that although the participants have been identified as gifted based on cognitive measures, their successes as community activists likely had little to do with their intellect alone. The interviews revealed that students' approaches to solving community problems relied heavily on other traits of giftedness, defined by Renzulli (2002) as co-cognitive components of giftedness. These traits, in this particular study, seem to have facilitated the participants' desires and motivation to push back against stifling bureaucracy, broken societal systems, and any suggestion that their work wasn't worthwhile. Ultimately, the path participants took from feelings of disappointment in the world around them to a need for coping with such disappointment led them to exercise their co-cognitive traits and embrace a more defined, better understood identity of *activist*. This new identity and these new experiences of success and empowerment, then, seem to have led to self-concept growth. Does gifted education, then, possess a responsibility to propel all of its students on a similar journey in order to encourage social capital acquisition?

While some students' home environments encourage thinking about the ways in which they might contribute to the world around them and instill that obligation, others' don't. And perhaps it should fall on the education system, instead, to instill in its students a desire and drive



to strike the balance between personal achievement and contribution to society. Though society often proves to be disappointing when reality is exposed, the students who possess strong self-concepts and co-cognitive traits are those who will be there to solve society's most significant problems—even through their disappointment. They are the individuals who will break down the walls that may have stopped others. Authentic learning experiences, such as opportunities for deep community action, have the potential to be transformative for students who engage with such efforts. Progress toward formation of a new identity, an identity as activist, could be one of the most powerful learning experiences a student has, especially in a school setting. Our world needs its activists to find themselves so they might step forward and create lasting change.

### **Conclusion**

While a number of students beyond the three participants of this study participated in the first author's community action projects, not all demonstrated the kind of learning and understandings and insights that these participants did. While these three girls experienced evolving success and grew a belief in their power to create change, some students did not. It is difficult to know why, in this particular implementation of community action, some students benefitted greatly and others seemed to remain unchanged, but it is important to examine the value of the learning experience overall. It was a participant in this study who may have explained that value best. Olivia shared final, encouraging thoughts with the first author:

I do think the community activism was really great for our community and for myself, and it was a good balance. Even though the idea of having that sort of project may not have been a success for all of the [community action teams], it would be good to continue doing it because it helps the people that sort of have that desire to [contribute] to the [greater good], and if they never got the opportunity to do that, then they may not, you know...Something may not happen in the future that would have happened if they had done the project. ... It may not directly show itself in the successes of a person on society or for themselves, but even if they never realize that it helped them, it just might. (Olivia, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

These community action projects—these authentic learning experiences—have provided gifted students opportunity to see behind the curtain, to witness glimpses of the dysfunction of society, of adulthood, of the ways in which things tend to work. While such glimpses could have been discouraging—even devastating—to young, hopeful, bright students, these particular students were able to see beyond the brick wall. They were empowered by their self-awareness and their bold responses to society’s flaws. The co-cognitive traits they possess as gifted students emboldened, encouraged, and fueled them. They learned how to challenge the status quo and how to push for change in the face of overwhelming bureaucracy. They looked straight-on at the obstacles in their paths, largely unafraid, and pushed. They continue to push. Their success was not because they tackled simple problems. It was achieved because they tackled complex problems worth fighting for, worth romancing—they were problems that require the patience, ingenuity, grace, and determination of our brightest and most self-aware youth. It was because they acknowledged the power of their co-cognitive traits and unleashed them in full-force for the good of our world. Such a response led them to self-concept growth, an acquisition of social capital, and the ultimate identity of activist. These students were not told they could be activists. They were not asked to become activists. They demonstrated for themselves that they *are* activists and that their perseverance in the face of obstacles for the betterment of society is what defines that part of their identity. They embraced the opportunity and exercised their giftedness in powerful ways. They *became* activists, and it is our hope that they will continue to embrace that aspect of their evolving identities into adulthood.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

We see value in further research regarding opportunities for gifted students to engage as activists in their communities and to truly exercise their co-cognitive components of giftedness

in real-world settings that challenge and empower them. As suggested by each of the three participants in this study, independently, *all* students should be given the opportunity, in a school setting, to engage with their communities and learn in authentic ways from real-world problems and real-life application of their knowledge and skills. It is important to note that this particular study examines the experiences of three female, gifted adolescents engaged in community action projects, and the results of this study are bound within the context of this particular learning opportunity.

Additional research into the experiences and perspectives of additional students in similar educational situations will shed light on the best ways for educators to facilitate students' further development and exercise of their co-cognitive traits in valuable ways. While questions remain regarding the motivation behind using one's gifts and talents for the greater good of the community or society as a whole, we cannot answer such questions without understanding the how and why of students' responses to authentic learning experiences that expose them to their communities, to society. We need to further understand the relationship among the possession and exercise of co-cognitive traits, self-concept growth, enriched learning experiences, and desire to do powerful work. Perhaps without early introduction to the concept of activism and obligation to one's community, and perhaps without early understanding of how the world often works, our most capable students may find themselves on simpler paths to self-interest. Future research should consider whether early fostering of an activist identity leads to life's work that is informed by those activist experiences. Longitudinal studies of gifted adolescents who engage as activists would shed light on the ways we can encourage work for the good of others, their evolving identities and self-concepts, and the ways that early awareness of their co-cognitive traits informs decision-making and facilitates feelings of empowerment.

Gifted education programming is obligated to provide for gifted students' needs. Too often, schools fail to see gifted children for the complexity they possess—beyond intellect. Gifted students have academic needs, yes, and they have social and emotional needs. They also possess co-cognitive traits, which when exercised, may function as important coping mechanisms as they encounter complex problems, difficult emotions, challenging content, and obstacles to success. Our recommendation for educators is two-fold. First, we challenge educators to create learning experiences for gifted students that give them glimpses at reality and the room and ownership to stretch their co-cognitive components and experience feelings of empowerment, confidence, and leadership that they might not have otherwise by facing challenges head-on, overcoming obstacles, and finding success and feelings of pride and accomplishment. Second, we implore educators and parents of gifted students to help their children to find their identities as activists through safe means that provide authentic experiences and instill in them a desire to use their strengths and talents for the betterment of a world that will continue to desperately need their help. Establishing that identity, as suggested by this study, may also foster a sense of empowerment and confidence in students for the first time. As a society, we expect our most capable young people to eventually be the ones who will work hardest and extend themselves furthest to combat our most difficult problems. If, as a society, we are not willing to instill in our brightest students the drive to do so, through positive, authentic learning experiences, then we should put that expectation to rest.

It seems critical moving forward that educators, scholars, and parents, place great importance and emphasis on the opportunities we provide our gifted students. Heath (2016) notes that many of society's most eminent individuals weren't especially formally educated, but we do recognize "their self-directed learning, diligence in pursuit of imagined goals, and ability to find

local experts and fellow dreamers also willing to experiment and learn through trial and error” (p. 494). We already know that our gifted population of students is capable of much, but how they use those capabilities will be what ultimately matters. Gifts and talents used for self-interest, especially at the detriment of others, may mean a failing has occurred. How does a capable individual get to that point? Why does she choose that path? Early introduction to important, community-focused learning experiences, opportunity to come up against the disappointments of the real world, the chance to exercise co-cognitive traits, and resulting self-concept growth, empowerment, and social capital acquisition in spite of obstacles may be the answers. If we focused as much attention on our students’ co-cognitive needs and abilities as we do their academics, we may just see the kind of shift that would change everything.

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## Appendix A

### Small-group Student Interview Protocol

#### 1. Description of self

Tell me about yourself.

What do you consider to be your best qualities?

What do you like least about yourself?

What do you look like?

#### 2. External influences on self-concept

Do you think others admire you? Why?

Whose opinions of you are most important? Why do you feel that way?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of intelligence?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of leadership?

How do you think you compare to your peers in terms of popularity?

#### 3. Internal influences on self-concept

What are your expectations for yourself?

What do you find to be most motivating?

When do you feel proud of yourself?

#### 4. Empowerment

Have you ever felt powerful? Explain.

Tell me about a time that you contributed to a positive change.

Tell me about a time that you helped someone else.

### 5. Academic rigor/challenge

When are you most challenged academically at school?

Describe what it feels like when you are not challenged at school.

Describe what it feels like to be challenged.

How do you apply what you learn at school to your own life?

### 6. Gifted education

To you, what does it mean to be gifted?

In what ways has being in the gifted program challenged you?

What kinds of things do you want to be able to learn about in gifted guided studies?

Tell me about a time when you learned a lot in your gifted program.

### 7. Empathy

How do you generally respond to people you care about when they're having a hard time?

*Explain concept of empathy if needed.* Tell me about a time when you felt empathy for someone else.

Do you believe you are able to help others? How so?

### 8. Community

How would you explain community to someone who doesn't understand it?

Tell me about a time when you've been a part of a community.

Do you feel a sense of community at our school? Tell me about it.

Are your opinions and ideas valued by others? How do you know?

## Appendix B

### One-on-one Student Interview Protocol

#### 1. Expectations of self

Previously, you spoke about not worrying so much about what your teachers think and instead forming expectations for yourself. Did your activism project have anything to do with that?

#### 2. Self-Concept

Tell me about how you think of yourself?

Self-concept is formed based on comparisons—both internal and external. Who or what do you compare yourself to?

Who or what do you compare yourself to?

Did you grow because of this project? How so?

#### 3. Teamwork and Collaboration

Tell me about your perception of collaboration during this project?

#### 4. Gender issues

Did gender influence your project? How so?

#### 5. Working through Challenges

When did you feel defeated within the context of your project, and what did you do about it?

## 6. Social capital

Why do you think some bright people use their talents for the good of society and some don't?

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This dissertation is an examination of the influence of authentic learning experiences—specifically implementation of a community action curriculum—on gifted middle school students’ self-concepts, understandings of the world around them, and interest in acquiring social capital now and in their futures. It is comprised of three manuscripts that stem from one central study, in which I designed and implemented a community action-based curriculum that would ask my gifted middle school students to stretch into activists in their school, neighborhood, and larger community. These projects exposed students to authentic learning experiences that required them to use real-life skills in real-world environments as they worked toward impactful solutions to complex community problems. Beginning with the first manuscript, which explores the central study involving 29 gifted students, the study narrows focus through each of the two subsequent manuscripts, as we examine and learn from the female participants’ experiences, and then the experiences and insights of three particular female participants who demonstrated growth and desire to continue their activism throughout the process.

The idea that authentic learning experiences engaging with community have the potential to meet gifted students’ needs in a variety of powerful ways is the central focus of this study. The study also suggests that such authentic learning has the potential to challenge gifted students further than they are by traditional programming. Such growth can be seen in the exercise of new academic skills, social skills, and navigation of emotional issues, as well as growth in self-concept and ability to exercise co-cognitive components of giftedness, especially in response to challenge and frustration. Current research explores gifted students’ academic and affective needs (Borland, 2009; Hébert, 2011; Kanevsky, 2011; NAGC, 1990; 2009; 2013; 2014a; 2014c;

Neihart, 2007; Netz, 2014; Parker, 1989; Reis, Westberg, Kulikowich, & Purcell, 1998; Renzulli, 1984; Rogers, 2007; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010; Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007), their self-concepts (Bais & Bell, 2004; Barber & Mueller, 2011; Berlin, 2009; Byrne, 1996; Cross, O'Reilly, Mihyeon, Mammadov, & Cross, 2015; Dai, Rinn, & Tan, 2012; Gore & Cross, 2014; Harter, 2012; Lewis & Knight, 2000; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Baumert, & Köller, 2007; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Moller & Pohlman, 2010; Preckel, Götz, & Frenzel, 2010; Rinn & Cunningham, 2008; Villatte, Hugon, & de Leondardis, 2011; Vogl & Preckel, 2013; Wang & Neihart, 2015; Wilson, Siegle, McCoach, Little, & Reis, 2014; Rudasill, Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009), gender issues in gifted education (Bianco, Harris, Garrison-Wade, & Leech, 2011; Callahan & Hébert, 2014; Fiebig, 2008; Hébert, 2011; Kerr, 1994, Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2013; Preckel, Goetz, Pekrun, & Kleine, 2008; Reis, ----; Rudasill et al., 2009), the use of service learning with gifted populations (Berv, 1998; Stewart, Webster, & Bai, 2013; Terry, 2003; Terry, 2008; Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, & Sisk, 2008), and exercise of co-cognitive traits of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002; 2011; 2012). What is missing from the literature, however, is research on the intersection of these concepts. This study aims to explore and fill those gaps. Furthermore, I sought to develop personally-enriching learning experiences for my particular students who I truly believed would benefit from new perceptions of their community and their roles within it. I hoped that their learning would be powerful and lasting, and I have been rewarded by their unwavering efforts, mature insights, and questioning of traditional curriculum and traditional instruction.

Each manuscript individually, and together as a broader work, adds to the body of work studying gifted students and the programming that best serves their needs by suggesting a path from authentic learning experiences to a new and powerful student expectation of learning.

Beginning with the central study explored in the first manuscript, we see evidence of gifted students' frustration and disappointment with traditional schooling and traditional instruction. The participant interviews revealed academic and social-domain self-concept growth that suggests a certain power behind the authentic learning experiences implemented through the community action project. The second manuscript narrows its focus as the perceptions of female participants are examined. Analysis reveals even more pointed disappointment as the participants provided detailed descriptions of their frustrations with the way the school system serves them and their unique needs, their teachers, collaboration with age peers, and the lack of challenge they receive on a daily basis. Main themes emerged that supported self-concept domains and the exercise of specific co-cognitive components of giftedness (Renzulli, 2002). The third and most narrowly-focused manuscript provides three female participants with a forum for exploring their individual and small-group experiences as activists. Again, the participants explore their frustrations and disappointments, but these particular students demonstrate the ways in which they were able to cope with their disappointments and persevere in order to be successful in spite of obstacles and challenges. Their approaches to coping with disappointment align with their co-cognitive traits of optimism, courage, mental energy, romance with a topic, and sensitivity to human concerns (Renzulli, 2002).

The first manuscript addressed the following research questions: 1) How did gifted students' experiences as community activists influence their self-concepts? and 2) How did participants perceive their growth throughout engagement with a community action-oriented authentic learning experience?

The findings illustrate that, as the literature consistently reflects, gifted students' self-concepts tend to be stronger and less variable than those of the general population (Rudasill,



Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009). Statistically significant growth in self-concept was not found across the sample or according to gender or grade level; however, it is important to consider the participants' reflections on their experiences and the main themes that were uncovered through a deductive approach to data analysis. Self-concept theory (according to domains used by Harter, 2012) and Renzulli's (2002) co-cognitive components of giftedness were applied to the interview data, which revealed main themes of academic/scholastic competence, social competence, courage, sensitivity to human concerns, and sense of destiny. These themes do suggest growth in the academic and social competence domains of self-concept and students' reliance on some of their co-cognitive traits. The power that lies within these themes is that students who engage as activists in their communities stand to gain confidence, a sense of empowerment, and positive growth in their cognitive views of self (Stewart et al., 2013). Expression of feelings of success and indications of interest in continuing their work as activists into the future occurred most often within the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade group of activists. Possible reasons for this include that the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade teams were most definitively successful in their work. The timeline for the curriculum implementation worked in their favor, and they were able to largely conclude their work before the end of the school year. The 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>-grade teams did not get to reach a point of closure or definitive results as they would have liked, and this may have hampered their feelings of success and interest in continuing their work.

The following research questions were used to guide the second manuscript's study: 1) In what ways were the adolescent female participants' self-concepts changed after engaging with their communities as activists? and 2) How did the female participants make sense of their experiences as students and community activists?

The second manuscript's focus on the female participants' experiences within the central study narrowed the focus of the study so that gender was a consideration in all aspects of analysis. The findings suggest the authentic learning experience implemented in this study may have been especially unique for female students, as they were exposed to a way of learning that allowed for and encouraged their empowerment, direction, and leadership. An inductive approach to analysis was employed, which led to the uncovering of the following main themes: academic experience, affective self, self-concept, and barriers to self-concept growth. We were able to see evidence of the students' self-concept growth in spite of the barriers that exist to challenge such growth. The girls' insights suggest that some of their unique experiences, unfortunately, are those experiences that are most discouraging to them and their growth. For this reason, the self-concepts of our female adolescent students should be of particular concern to educators and other invested parties who are likely to witness decreased confidence and decreased self-concept (Villatte, Hugon, & de Leondaris, 2011). Powerful authentic learning experiences such as the community action project that was implemented in this particular study may work to combat those ever-present barriers to females' self-concept growth.

Within the third manuscript, the following questions guided the research: 1) How does the act of engaging in extended community action influence the self-concepts and social capital of three gifted adolescent females? 2) How are co-cognitive skills utilized in community action? and 3) How is social capital acquired in the context of community action?

Ultimately, the findings of this third study uncover a fundamental feeling of disappointment as the implemented community action project provides an authentic learning experience that reveals to its participants a flawed and dysfunctional society made up of ridiculous bureaucracy, unresponsive adults, and imperfect institutions and systems as they truly

function in the real world. What is most powerful, though, is the participants' responses to such disappointment. While many of the challenges and obstacles that these girls faced as they navigated their community issues and action plans would have led to a sense of defeat and ultimate forfeit for many children their age, these girls were able to persevere through their disappointment, to see their own capabilities, and feel a sense of empowerment they might not have otherwise. Through exercise of their co-cognitive traits, the participants persisted with courage, optimism, and mental energy to work in favor of their sensitivity to human and environmental concern. This exercise of these skills seems to have led the girls to a perceived increase in self-concept as they gained confidence, began to see themselves as leaders, felt empowered to do more, and broke down the barriers that stood in their way of success. As they achieved success in making a difference for their communities, they acquired powerful social capital that demonstrated to them the importance of using their powers for good and instilled in them a sense of duty to work toward the greater good moving forward. The girls began to see themselves as activists, and each participant expressed at one point or another a new expectation of what learning can and should be.

### **Implications for Practice**

The three manuscripts making up the broader work of this study build from one another, ultimately offering collective implications for educators, scholars, and parents of gifted children. It is important for all invested parties to acknowledge the significance of positive self-concepts and the correlation between self-concept and achievement as a positive one (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). To dismiss any efforts toward improving gifted students' self-concepts as unfruitful because of their tendency toward already-strong self-concepts would be irresponsible. Instead, we should hope that our youth possess self-concepts that encourage their engagement with a

variety of interests and activities and their achievement in important work. Perhaps instead of standing idly by as we might be inclined to do, assuming that our gifted population of students will be productive and successful whether we work toward fostering their potential or not, we should make effort toward encouraging self-concept growth in order to ensure that these bright individuals invest their talents and energy into the betterment of society.

As a result of this study, I hope that educators are challenged to consider their roles and influence as they have opportunities to foster self-concept development by carefully designing and implementing curriculum within gifted programming that not only provides for students' academic and affective needs but also encourages their efforts toward the betterment of the world around them. These efforts, after all, are not just for the benefit of the student. We must challenge one another to encourage our students to engage with their communities in meaningful ways that are transformative for the community but also for the child. Long-term projects that ask students to problem-solve, collaborate, and contribute to lasting change in their communities work to address gifted students' academic, social, and emotional needs, while also fostering moral maturity. Powerful civic opportunities during youth often translate into engagement as active citizens in adulthood (Levinson, 2002), and we certainly want our brightest, most innovative students to feel empowered to be active, empowered citizens.

I charge educators with the responsibility of carefully designing and implementing long-term, authentic learning experiences that engage their students, challenging those gifted students who may not be accustomed to being adequately challenged academically and affectively, creating educational opportunities that expose students to reality and all of its frustrations and disappointments, and stretching gifted students' co-cognitive traits in order that they may learn how to cope with life's obstacles and disappointments. I also implore both educators and parents

to provide their children with safe opportunities to exercise their abilities as activists, engaging with their communities and working toward lasting change that continues after their work is done. Such experiences will show students what it means to do good work for the world around them and will most likely show them success to some extent that is powerful and engaging. It is my hope that if students can conceptualize an identity as activist in their youth, they will continue on that path of giving, participation, and empowerment for the rest of their lives. Society will certainly count on these students for their creativity, innovation, and care.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A relatively small sample of participants were involved in this study, and the results of this study can only reflect the lived experiences of those who participated in the study. All of the participants in this study were identified as gifted according to state and school district evaluation criteria; however, students in a different state or different school district may be identified by different criteria. If the same community activism-based curriculum were to be implemented in another school district, participants may have been made up of a very different student population. If other students were to engage with the same projects, they may be expected to communicate very different experiences and feelings about their engagement. The results of this study must be closely tied to the context of the study.

While gender was taken into consideration during analysis of data, especially in the second manuscript, gender is imbalanced in this particular sample of participants. More males than females participated, and this imbalance may influence results of the study. Additionally, self-concept is considered to be a fairly stable construct when contrasted with self-esteem and self-image, although it is especially malleable in childhood (Lewis & Knight, 2000). Self-concept changes, as measured in this study, would likely be more accurate if the study took place

over a greater amount of time. Ideally, replication studies in other school settings, with greater numbers of students, and perhaps over greater amount of time, would ultimately shed more light on the influence of engagement with community action-based authentic learning experiences on gifted adolescents' self-concepts.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Value may be found in examining gifted students' experiences with service learning and its influence on their self-concepts from a variety of perspectives, especially an educator perspective. Educators' perceptions of student self-concept growth may shed new light on the subject, and educators' own perceptions of the effectiveness of implementation of community action-oriented authentic learning experiences may be valuable, as well. As the field of gifted education continues to further encourage the fostering of social capital acquisition, it may be especially important that additional research is done involving those educators who implement community action projects and spend time with their students focusing on self-concept education. Because the field needs to further understand the motivation behind the desire to do powerful work for the betterment of society, research must be done that helps us to understand the relationships among the possession and exercise of co-cognitive components of giftedness, self-concept development and growth, and authentic learning experiences. We will benefit from longitudinal studies that reveal whether early exposure to an obligation of contributing to society and identifying as activist influences a gifted adolescent to continue on that path into adulthood—whether she or he dedicates time and energy to using her or his powers for good. Further investigation of the proposed cycle of participants' growth as a result of authentic learning (as depicted in Figure 1 of the first manuscript) may be valuable in understanding gifted

students' journeys toward social capital acquisition, an identity of activist, and higher expectations of their own educations.

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