THE INFLUENCE OF A SUMMER RESIDENTIAL HONORS PROGRAM EXPERIENCE ON THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTED YOUNG WOMEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Thomas P. Hébert)

ABSTRACT

While many studies have addressed gifted girls’ difficult social and emotional development and certain societal obstacles that influence that development, there is limited research regarding how summer enrichment program experiences may influence a gifted girl’s social and emotional development. To address this gap in the literature, this qualitative study examined the experiences of five gifted young women who attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program. Major findings included each participant describing an improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program’s unique learning environment, improvement in social self-concept through the establishment of a true peer group among other program participants, and the development of security in identity as a result of participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program. Implications of the findings are presented with suggestions for educators and enrichment program directors on how to develop such program environments that positively affect gifted girls’ social and emotional development.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted Girls, Social and Emotional Development, Summer Enrichment Programs
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DEDICATION

To all the summer enrichment programs that provide the opportunity to gifted girls to explore their sense of self and evolve into confident young women. Especially to the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program and all the directors, teachers, resident assistants, and students that have continued to influence my life and development as a gifted young woman.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A number of researchers and theorists have examined the difficult transformation that the time of adolescence inflicts upon the developing self-concepts of young females (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994; Hollinger, 1995; Karnes & Bean, 1993; Kerr, 1994; Kline & Short, 1991; Nelson & Smith, 2001; Noble, 1996; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003; Reis, Callahan, & Goldsmith, 1994; Rimm, 1999; Walker & Mehr, 1992). Buescher (1985) defines adolescence as a time period that is separate from the actual experience of puberty, but, however, is culturally constructed and induced; therefore, adolescence is the time period in which an individual develops his/her identity by following or rejecting cultural cues.

While the experience of adolescence is difficult for all children, it can be particularly painful for gifted children due to their exceptional abilities that make them more sensitive to their environment and certain cultural cues that do not typically embrace or encourage giftedness (Buescher, 1985; Kerr, 1994; Leroux, 1988; Pipher, 1996; Torrance, 1962). In fact, gifted adolescents usually experience a complex social and emotional developmental process in that they often feel different compared to their agemates; this feeling of difference can lead to reclusive behavior amongst a peer group that does not reflect or accept their giftedness (Buescher, 1985). Leroux’s (1988) studies have shown that the self-concept of the gifted adolescent is dramatically affected by the various experiences with peers, school, and society; these experiences can truly shape the
gifted adolescent’s understanding of his/her giftedness and can influence his/her achievement or underachievement and healthy or unhealthy acceptance of self. Though all gifted children experience a great deal of turmoil during adolescence, gifted girls, in particular, navigate a confusing path through the social and emotional developmental process. Hollinger (1995) points out that “the ‘differentness’ of being gifted is exacerbated by [gifted girls’] recognition that they are also different from the feminine stereotype. In either instance, the gifted girl cannot meet both sets of societal expectations” (p. 273). This feeling of “differentness” can lead to many gifted girls rejecting their exceptional abilities in order to gain societal approval or to rejecting such societal cues and developing severe feelings of isolation (AAUW, 1991; Bell, 1989; Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994; Eccles, 1985; Hollinger, 1996; Kerr, 1994; Noble, 1996; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003; Rimm, 1999; Roeper, 2003; Silverman, 1986, 1991; Walker & Mehr, 1992).

Throughout elementary and middle school, I was described as a bright young girl who was energetic and enthusiastic about learning. I thought I could accomplish anything and was ready to take on the world. However, once I entered eighth grade, it became “uncool” to be smart. Many girls with whom I had been friends were suddenly changing their identity; they started wearing clothes that made them look five years older and began to disguise their gifts anytime a boy entered a five yard radius of their popular clique. As more and more girls identified with such behavior in order to gain acceptance, I became more ostracized from my peer group. In fact, I felt so isolated and confused concerning my abilities in relation to femininity that I began to identify more with a masculine approach to identity development. I became an extreme tom-boy and rejected
everything feminine so I could maintain my love of learning; however, this shift to the opposite end of the spectrum only made me feel more isolated and did not represent my true self. Needless to say my self-concept suffered greatly from this experience and the once energetic and enthusiastic girl became very quiet and depressed.

My depression and feelings of isolation only continued and worsened as I entered high school – my self-concept was being destroyed with every school day. I finally decided that I needed to transfer schools and attempt a fresh start with a peer group that did not know me and could not immediately reject me. However, though the new environment and new peer group did inspire the old feelings of energy and enthusiasm about learning, I still felt out of place concerning my abilities and femininity. I decided to compromise with the societal cues and begin to identify more with a feminine approach to life. I started adapting my image in order to establish an outward identity of “the perfect little lady.” Unfortunately, while this outward makeover may have gained me acceptance amongst my peers, it did not mitigate my feelings of isolation and differentness regarding my love of learning; however, I continued the façade throughout ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade. Though my self-concept had improved, I still was compromising my true self in order to gain acceptance amongst peers.

In 1998, I was a junior in high school and was selected to participate in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program as a communicative arts major. The six week residential honors program most certainly changed my life and outlook on the relationship between giftedness and femininity. Throughout that summer, I found myself surrounded by other girls just like me. For once, I did not feel like an outsider. This experience definitely influenced my own social and emotional development and helped
me establish my true identity. Also, the establishment of an authentic peer group helped me maintain that affirmed identity and positive self-concept. When I returned to school for my senior year, I openly expressed my love of learning again and reestablished myself as the bright girl who was energetic and enthusiastic about learning. The level of confidence that I exuded also helped me maintain a certain level of resiliency in order to never feel that compromising my identity was necessary in order to gain acceptance.

A life-changing experience can change a young girl’s beliefs and improve her self-esteem and self-efficacy, which, naturally, leads to improvement in self-concept. As a Georgia Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) alumnae and a four year residential assistant for the program, I have witnessed this life-changing experience within myself and many other gifted female students. Yet this experience for many female students is an enigma; they often cannot explain the phenomenon but will always say, “It just changed me.”

Therefore, throughout this study, my goal is to answer the following questions. The overarching research question guiding this inquiry is: How does participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program influence the social and emotional development of gifted females? The secondary research questions include the following: What types of experiences occur during the Governor’s Honors Program, and how do they influence the social and emotional development of gifted females? How does the environment/culture of the Governor’s Honors Program influence the social and emotional development of gifted females? What types of relationships are established during the Governor’s Honors Program, and how do they affect the social and emotional development of gifted females?
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the present study is to explore the impact that participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program may have on gifted girls’ social and emotional development. In order to explore possible experiences that influence a gifted girl’s development, it is crucial that a clear understanding of adolescence and the development of self-concept is established. Therefore, this investigation was guided by literature that defined and examined adolescence and the social and emotional developmental process. As the experience of adolescence and the development of self-concept were clearly defined through research and theory, the next step was to identify certain factors that specifically affected gifted girls’ social and emotional development. In reviewing the literature that addressed gifted girls and their specific development experience, the major themes that emerged included current societal obstacles, the transformation from confident girl to self-conscious young woman, cultural expectations and their negative impact on academic self-concept, social factors that are detrimental to the non-academic self-concept, and possible programs that encourage a healthy acceptance of self. Finally, an integral part of this study is the understanding of various enrichment programs and their environments; therefore, the limited literature on summer enrichment programs provided framework for analyzing the possible influence that participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program may have had on five gifted girls’ social and emotional development.
Adolescence and the process of social and emotional development

“Adolescence is the time when an individual ‘recapitulates’ the savage stage of the race’s past.” Granville Stanley Hall (as cited in Brainy Quotes, 2004)

Adolescence is an interesting phase in life. It is a time in which we develop mentally, physically, and emotionally in order to establish an adult identity. In its purest sense, adolescence is a transition between childhood and adulthood. Though that may sound simple, it possesses a strange complexity that is different across various cultures but consistently produces some of the most difficult experiences for all children. The research regarding this difficult stage pointed out a variety of issues adolescence involves, as well as the social and emotional development that occurs during this time period. Buescher (1985) maintained that:

It is wise to separate the biological event of puberty from the psychosocial process of adolescence that unfolds afterwards. Human beings do need to experience the onset of puberty if they are to fully develop the biological capacity to reproduce. Adolescence, on the other hand, is a culturally induced and supported psychosocial process. It serves an important social function, but it is very much a product of the society in which it occurs. (p. 11)

As we develop into the shell of an adult, we must also evolve mentally into an adult. Therefore, adolescence is a process in which society encourages its young to develop a unique identity but also to appropriately “integrate” into the culture of that society (Buescher, 1985).

The young adolescent’s self-concept plays a great role in the process of developing and refining the new adult identity. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) theoretically defined self-concept as an individual’s beliefs about himself/herself in terms of
academics, social, athletic, and personal capabilities and characteristics. Shavelson’s, Hubner’s, and Stanton’s (1976) theoretical model of self-concept exhibited the hierarchical nature of the construct in that there is a general self-concept that is influenced by an academic self-concept and a non-academic self-concept, which is comprised of social, emotional, and physical self-concepts. The self-concept that is developed within each smaller tier influences the overall self-concept of the individual. Therefore, as adolescents develop their identity within each area, academic and non-academic, they continually look for guiding cues from internal and external forces to mold their self-concept and solidify the identity. The emotional reactions that occur after the assessment of such cues create the individual’s self-esteem; the self-esteem influences the development of each self-concept, which in turn affects the self-esteem and identity (Pintrich and Schunk, 2002). This continuous cycle is the fundamental basis of the social and emotional development that takes place during adolescence and encourages the development of a unique identity. In fact, “self conceptions and self esteem are probably the major influences which impel an individual to work, to investigate, to learn, to solve problems, to strive to achieve, to compete…” (Feldhusen, 1986b, p. 34).

Though adolescence is usually a difficult transition for all children, it can be particularly painful for certain factions of adolescents. Gifted adolescents make up a small percentage of our society’s children, but they are definitely a significant one that society should encourage. Just as their extraordinary gifts make them experience things differently from their agemates, the same is true for their experience in adolescence. Schneider (1987) pointed out that the “separation of the academic dimension from the social, physical, and emotional is essential for a meaningful picture of the psychosocial
adjustment of the gifted” (p. 72). In order for gifted children to truly reach their full potential, they must develop a positive general self-concept that enables them to utilize their unique abilities, as well as feel validated by society. In fact, based on their research, VanBoxtel and Monks (1991) explained that a positive self-concept is considered a dynamic and driving force in the actualization of giftedness. The fundamental ingredients that lead to such a self-concept in gifted children are the firm belief in one’s abilities and talents, as well as the perception of being highly capable of a creative or innovative endeavor. However, Shavelson’s, Hubner’s, and Stanton’s (1976) hierarchical model displayed the possibility that a gifted child could possess a rather positive self-concept in academic areas but a low self-concept in non-academic areas, therefore, negatively affecting the general self-concept. So one must ask, in our society does this “actualization” happen for our gifted children during their social and emotional development?

Issues facing gifted adolescents throughout the social and emotional development process

“How unhappy are they who have a gift that’s left to germinate in darkness. The pale plant will sink invisible roots and live whitely off their blood” (AnnMarie MacDonald, 1996)

Being gifted adds a new level of complexity to the transitional stage of adolescence that already possesses many intricacies. Buescher (1985) asserted that “In many ways being both gifted and adolescent means learning to understand and cope with a unique set of developmental circumstances that can reach beyond the normal dimensions of adolescence” (p. 11). Because these gifted young people possess abilities that make them more sensitive to their environment, they often are more cognizant of the
realities within their society. Therefore, experiences in school and with peers can create a considerable impact on their achievement/underachievement and healthy/unhealthy acceptance of self (Leroux, 1988). This keen insight into one’s surroundings makes the social developmental process much more complex and more difficult to navigate, therefore, greatly affecting one’s emotional development. Any self doubt about ability or its acceptability among peers is amplified during this developmental process and makes the path that much more difficult and challenging (Buescher, 1985).

Various researchers have pointed out that during adolescence the value of the peer group increases a great deal, and it is that group that becomes the pivotal influence on decision making and support for the adolescent (Buescher, 1985; Delisle, 1990; Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994). However, a peer group should be made up of individuals that are similar in mind and emotion. Because gifted children possess certain unique gifts that cause them to operate with advanced cognitive processes, many gifted adolescents may have social peers that are similar in age but have very few emotional peers (Delisle, 1992). This lack of a true peer group usually results in the gifted child not fully understanding his/her giftedness and feeling isolated from his/her agemates. Based on their research, VanBoxtel and Monks (1992) maintained that:

For the highly gifted, the discrepancy between the child’s abilities and the ordinary school environment, with its peer groups of same-age students, is so strong that maladjustment is very likely. With peer relations becoming increasingly important, and peer interactions contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of self-esteem, adolescence is likely to be a vulnerable period for these gifted students. (p. 173)
In fact, due to the absence of a true peer group and crescendoing feelings of isolation, many researchers have found that gifted children will often mask or abandon such gifts in order to fit in to the peer group available within the regular school environment (Buescher, 1985; Delisle, 1992; Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Rimm, 1995).

By conforming to the common peer group, gifted children attempt to shed an essential part of their identity; this abandonment of self can lead to a great deal of inner turmoil (Delisle, 1992). Janos’, Fung’s, and Robinson’s (1985) research indicated that while the gifted adolescent may try and minimize his/her differences, the regular peer group may still view the gifted adolescent as an outsider due to past experience with the individual. Such experiences may generate “a feeling of difference [that] foster[s] a sense of loneliness and isolation, with the suspicion, therefore, that ‘something must be wrong with me.’” (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985, p. 78). Therefore, self-concept and peer relations have been observed to be negatively affected as gifted children continue on the social and emotional voyage that is adolescence.

Though many of the researchers mentioned thus far have indicated that the social and emotional developmental process of adolescence can be a very different experience for gifted children compared to their agemates, they fail to acknowledge a possible difference between the experience of gifted boys and gifted girls. In fact, much of the research assumed that the effects of adolescence on gifted children are the same for both gifted boys and gifted girls. This may not be true. In Terman’s and Oden’s (1947) vast longitudinal study, which examined the livelihood and success of gifted children across adolescence and adulthood, they found that both boys’ and girls’ IQ scores dropped
significantly during the difficult period of adolescence; however, girls’ scores dropped approximately thirteen points, while boys only experienced a drop of approximately three points. This study exhibited that some differences occur during a gifted female’s journey through social and emotional development that greatly inhibits her from reaching her full potential. Though Terman’s and Oden’s study was conducted in the mid 1900s, it does raise issues regarding our current society and the present obstacles that may exist for gifted girls.

Issues facing gifted girls throughout the social and emotional development process

“One could say that in our society boys are given wings and girls are given roots.” (Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991)

Obstacles in our current society that affect gifted girls’ development.

Terman and Oden (1947) found through their longitudinal study of gifted males and females that females were more likely than males to not live up to their potential in relation to their IQ scores. However, since then a great deal has changed in our society; more opportunities that were considered improper fifty years ago are now available to women, and government now has taken a more active role in leveling the playing field between men and women in passing and supporting legislation such as Title VII and Title IX. In fact, Rimm (1999) found in her study of one thousand successful women that gifted women today are better off than their “Termite” ancestors. The study revealed that the majority of the gifted women had surpassed their mothers in regards to education and career.

Despite the improvements in our society concerning women’s rights and opportunities, there are still culturally constructed barriers that negatively affect women in education, occupation, and society. Eccles’s (1985) noted:
Most importantly, [women] are, in fact, underrepresented in almost all advanced educational programs and in the vast majority of high-status occupations. Gifted women are less likely to have a professional career than their male peers, and even those who choose to have a profession tend to select occupations that have lower-status, require less education, are more compatible with family time schedules, and make fewer demands on one’s off-the-job time and one’s family. (p. 261)

Eccles’ findings are alarming, but Kerr (1994) and Reis (1995) pointed out that women are more likely to feel drawn towards human service occupations that typically do not make up the upper echelon of professions. However, through their research on gifted women throughout the decades, Walker and Mehr (1992) maintained:

Career and personal choices made with self-awareness and freedom are “successful.” Those made to satisfy someone else’s needs or expectations are not, although they may outwardly appear to be. A woman who aims for the top ranks of the most competitive, male-dominated profession and the woman who teaches elementary school or stays home to raise kids are equally successful – or equally unsuccessful – depending on the way she makes the choice, whether her own ambitions and dreams are an integral part of the process or she has acquiesced to another’s wishes. (p. 47-48)

For example, in the study of gifted women graduates of the New York City Hunter School throughout the 20th century, Walker and Mehr (1992) found a common theme that continued to be the explanation for many of the choices that had been made by these women – they had been ill prepared for society. Though the Hunter School supported the
development of talent and giftedness among women through a rigorous curriculum, many of these women still believed that they had traveled a path that society had made for them; they felt that their sense of self had been silenced during major decisions concerning education and career. Each woman pointed out that though the graduates of the early 1900s had very few choices to make, the graduates of the late 1900s had too many choices to make and a society that still did not approve of such freedom. Though there may be more laws in place that protect a woman’s equality, each woman is still a product of the social development that is culturally induced during adolescence. Walker and Mehr (1992) found that, in fact, each woman in their study, regardless of matriculation year within the 20th century, was seldom prepared in childhood or encouraged throughout adulthood to make independent choices.

This same explanation has been echoed in a variety of research that attempted to explain why so many gifted girls begin to feel helpless and depressed during adolescence (Eccles, 1985; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Klein & Zehms, 1996; McCormick & Wolf, 1993; Noble, 1996; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001; Silverman, 1986). Evans’ (1996) research has also shown that gifted females of color not only have to deal with the same structured constraints that their “White sisters” do, but also “are socialized to the consequences of not being White in the United States,” (p. 372) therefore making it even more difficult to reach their full potential due the sexism and racism that is rooted within the social context of their environment.
Adolescence: The transformation from confident girl to self-conscious young woman.

At a young age, gifted girls seem to be in “their most colorful phase” (Kerr, 1994, p. 112) and possess a great amount of confidence and ambition (Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001). These young gifted girls benefit from an androgynous approach to life and explore their interests without any regard to societal gender stereotyping. Kerr (1994) reiterated this observation and explained “for this brief time of childhood, gifted girls are enthusiasts, scholars, clowns, and dreamers,” they can accomplish anything (p. 112). However, as these gifted girls grow, they begin to lose this intriguing attitude driven by capriciousness and endless possibilities. Unfortunately, adolescence begins and the identity that once thrived independently now must be sculpted and revised according to others’ assessments. Based on her experience as a therapist and her interactions with young female patients, Pipher (1994) maintained:

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that girls’ IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic, and ‘tomboyish’ personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. (p. 19)

While it is a very dramatic metaphor, Pipher accurately described what so many other researchers have observed. In one of the most recent studies of gifted girls, the
American Association for University Women (1991) revealed that the self-esteem of adolescent girls plunged downward between the ages eleven and seventeen; through their research, they found that 60% of girls in elementary school defined themselves as happy with their selves; out of the same sample of girls, the number decreased to 37% in middle school and only 29% in high school. The study also revealed that the diminishing self-esteem corresponded with the tremendous decline in the confidence with which girls asserted their opinions in class. McCormick and Wolf (1993) also found that with the onset of adolescence, girls exhibit a dramatic decrease in self-esteem, which the researchers believed to be related to the conflicting expectations of achievement verses traditional feminine roles. Silverman (1986) addressed these conflicting expectations and indicated that “The effects of sex biases are far-reaching, with restrictions on independence playing the heaviest role” (p. 67). Though many might believe that gifted girls would use their intelligence to ignore such societal influences, Pipher (1994) suggested:

Ironically, bright and sensitive girls are most at risk for problems. They are likely to understand the implications of the media around them and be alarmed. They have the mental equipment to pick up on our cultural ambivalence about women, and yet they don’t have the cognitive, emotional, and social skills to handle this information. (p. 43)

This outside world that is continuously broadcasting images of what young girls should look like and act like becomes each of these gifted girls’ reality, and, unfortunately, they tend to deny their gifts in order to adjust to such a reality that does not include specific gifted models for them to emulate (Hollinger, 1995; Kerr, 1994; Reis, 2001). Therefore,
gifted girls’ self-concepts continue to erode throughout adolescence as they restructure their personalities more so than other girls in order to meet society’s expectations (Klein & Zehms, 1996). Kline and Short (1991) found in their research that, unfortunately, because gifted girls’ possess increased levels of awareness, sensitivity, and potential, their inner conflict and loss is magnified compared to their non-gifted peers.

Many researchers have examined what exactly happens to gifted girls during this difficult social and emotional developmental process and have found that as a result of culturally supported gender stereotypes, gifted girls respond with continuous self-doubt, lowered expectations of success, faulty attributions, increased levels of perfectionism, negative peer groups, and loss of independent thinking and sense of self (Groth & Holbert, 1969; Hollinger & Fleming, 1985; Hollinger, 1995; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Kline & Short, 1991; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001; Silverman, 1986). These negative responses directly affect gifted girls’ academic and non-academic self-concepts, which shapes the general self-concept and identity. Gifted girls begin to morph their unique and “colorful” identity into a representation of the many cultural images that are forced upon them during adolescence. This cultural pressure comes from magazines, music, movies, television, advertisements, peers, and schools, and with such pressure, certain themes, such as concern for weight, fear of rejection, and the need for perfection begins to consume each girl’s emotions and actions (Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001). As each girl is overwhelmed with such cultural gender stereotyping, “gender intensification” occurs and “girls become more aware of themselves as females and learn to identify society’s signals to conform appropriately for their gender” (Sands & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). This social development encourages girls to look outwardly for praise
and reward; it keeps them “other-oriented and reactive,” which typically makes girls “vulnerable to depression if they happen to be in an environment where they are not validated” (Pipher, 1991, p.257). In fact, in a study of 843 gifted girls and gifted boys, Groth and Holbert (1969) found that in relation to Maslow’s self-actualization pyramid, gifted girls’ aspirations were centered on gaining love and acceptance rather than accomplishing self-actualization; therefore, making them dependent upon others for successful identity development. Callahan, Cunningham, and Plucker (1994) echoed the findings of Groth and Holbert when they pointed out:

The degree to which students exhibit independence is related to the degree which they are internally motivated. A possible reason that gifted women fail to achieve at levels commensurate with those of men is a focus on outside reinforcement as the driving force behind the behaviors of women. In doing so, they lose the independence necessary for finding their own direction, the willingness to stand up for and argue their own ideas, and the desire to follow those lines which are most intrinsically rewarding. (p. 102)

The researchers explained that as gifted women become more focused on external motivation, they begin to be more conscious of grades, pleasing teachers and peers, and usually feel unable to successfully pursue their own interests; their identities then become a product of external factors.

Cultural expectations and how they affect the gifted girl’s academic self-concept.

The need to find gratification through outside reinforcement is particularly detrimental to gifted girls concerning the development of an academic self-concept. One might assume that since these girls enjoy unusual abilities that they would easily develop
a positive academic self-concept; this assumption, unfortunately, may be untrue due to the need for validation through external forces. Kline’s and Short’s (1991) research exhibited that by high school, gifted females are significantly less willing to reveal their true selves to those around them. They begin to hide their intelligence, yet still are evaluating the extent of that intelligence through the judgment of others. This self-doubt generally causes gifted girls to set unreasonable goals of perfection; they want to become the best, but usually feel with each accomplishment that they are still falling short of their goal. In fact, through multiple case studies, Noble (1996) found that perfectionism is not only detrimental to a gifted girl’s resiliency, creativity, and self-confidence, but also to her desire to take risks or put herself in situations that call on abilities that have not yet been fully mastered.

This faulty belief system is only encouraged, however, by the majority of teacher and peer interactions within the educational setting. In fact, Reis (2001, 2002, 2003) found that teachers maintain lesser expectations for girls and tend to attribute their success to effort instead of ability. She also noted that they generally expect girls to contribute less to classroom activity, they allow girls less time in working through problems, and they expect girls to follow more stringent rules in assignment completion. Leroux’s (1988) research emphasized the point that many teachers make it more difficult for gifted girls to develop a positive academic self-concept in that “though both genders [are] sensitive to differing teachers’ styles and limitations, gifted females perceive greater concern for teachers’ reactions than the gifted males, who saw themselves as more independent risk-takers in class” (p. 11). Howard-Hamilton and Robinson (1991) also indicated that through the socialization process and the stereotypical feminine
characteristics it encourages, many gifted girls find that they are subtly trained to discard the importance of risk taking and independence. The researchers pointed out that as a result of such subtle societal cues, “gifted girls often find themselves in conflict because femininity and giftedness are often viewed as incompatible characteristics” (p. 32).

As many gifted girls attempt to appease teachers in order to work towards perfection in the eyes of others, the spirit of the gifted little girl that pursued each interest with a passion diminishes. Silverman (1991) found that this obsession with perfectionism and the importance of teacher validation led girls to only attempting questions and problems that they were absolutely certain they knew; this, of course, leads to heightened feelings of self-doubt and dwindling confidence. This need for perfectionism escalates to the point where most gifted girls will only acknowledge their intelligence if it is linked with an “A,” and the slightest mistake or criticism will convince them that their giftedness is false; Kerr (1994) found that these gifted girls will then begin to suffer from what Clance and Imes named the “imposter syndrome.” This phenomenon is particularly evident in mathematics and science in that “[t]he young woman who receives her first ‘C’ in a freshman math or science class often decides that she lacks the ability to perform in math and science” (Kerr & Robinson Kurpius, 2004, p. 86). Kerr (1994) explained that “girls learn to view their successes as caused by luck and their failures as due to lack of ability; boys learn to attribute their successes to ability and their failures to bad breaks” (p. 158). In fact, Reis’, Callahan’s, and Goldsmith’s (1994) research revealed that the majority of gifted girls in their study attributed their ability to learn faster than others not to their own skill and giftedness, but to the belief that others did not work hard enough. Therefore, because girls attribute each success to good luck or hard work and each failure
to lack of ability, every failure injures gifted girls’ confidence and academic self-concept, which can lead to the denial of their giftedness.

Gaining acceptance through perfectionism is a common theme regarding gifted girls; however, the need for acceptance and the method of gaining such acceptance is still particularly important yet a different experience for gifted girls of various ethnic backgrounds. Evans (1996) found through her research that young women from African American, Native American, and Hispanic backgrounds usually experience severe isolation due to their giftedness; they are often accused of “acting White.” In order “to confirm their legitimacy as members of their own culture, many of these gifted girls intentionally underachieve, drop out of special programs, or leave school” (Evans, 1996, p. 371). This need for acceptance, therefore, only leads to what Tatum (1997) referred to as “academic disidentification,” which, of course, leads to many gifted girls who are culturally diverse never developing their talents and reaching their full potential. This lack of validation or acceptance can lead to the development of a poor academic self-concept and can make adolescence very difficult.

Withdrawal from competition as a result of a poor academic self-concept.

Between increasing feelings of self-doubt and perfectionism, as well as the observation and belief that gifted males have been given the upper hand by society, many gifted females will also cease to compete in coeducational situations. Silverman (1986) maintained that while girls will compete freely with boys in elementary school, by seventh grade, girls begin to experience negative consequences when they succeed. These consequences cause anxiety in relation to competition, and by ninth grade many gifted girls will conform to role expectation at the expense of achievement. Roeper (2003)
explained that common comments such as, “Are you going to let a girl beat you?” or “She is an aggressive female” possess a very negative connotation within this society. Unfortunately, these loaded comments surround our young gifted girls and discourage them from participating in any type of coed competition. Nelson and Smith (2001) explained that while many gifted girls will try to avoid competition when faced with male opponents, those who do attempt such competition usually are ostracized by gifted males who wish to keep girls from experiencing such control. Other research has also shown that these negative feelings towards coed competition will even prevent gifted girls from enrolling in difficult classes (Bakken, Hershey, and Miller, 1990). Since many gifted girls, therefore, do not experience a great deal of competition, they become separated and ill prepared for the present competitive culture in the work force. Walker and Mehr (1992) found that these experiences and faulty attributions thwarted many gifted girls’ valiant efforts to truly reach their full potential; many of their participants explained that adolescence directed them to an acrid existence in which they felt “frozen in place” (p.48).

School curriculum and its impact on a gifted girl’s academic self-concept.

Not only do teachers and peers discourage the development of gifted girls’ academic self-concepts, but also the actual curriculum that is currently taught in most public schools does not accurately represent females and their importance in society, which can also hinder the development of a positive academic self-concept (Evans, 1996; Hollinger, 1996; Kerr, 1994; Kolloff, 1996; Noble, 1996; Reis & Callahan, 1989; Reis, 2001; Reis, 2002). Style (1988) asserted that “[a]ll students deserve a curriculum that mirrors their own experience back to them – thus validating it in the public world of the
school. But curriculum must also insist upon the fresh air of windows into the experience of others” (p. 111). This approach to curriculum enables all students to see images of themselves within our society while also learning about others’ contributions as well; this builds an acceptance and validation of the opposite gender and people of various backgrounds. However, Kolloff (1996) raises an important issue when she explained:

Bright girls encounter texts and materials that fail to acknowledge the existence and contributions of women in history, literature, psychology, philosophy, and the arts, as well as science and mathematics. Classroom methods are encouraging and responsive to male students while overlooking, or actively discouraging many bright girls…For girls, the curriculum is often only a window; for boys, it is often only a mirror. In these classrooms, females do not see themselves, nor do others see them and learn from them. (p. 488)

Sadly, our present curriculum, therefore, simply perpetuates the cultural stereotyping of women and becomes an additional obstacle for gifted girls to overcome in developing a positive academic self-concept and meeting their full potential.

*Social factors that influence the development of a non-academic self-concept.*

The development of a gifted girls’ non-academic self-concept also plays an integral role in the social and emotional developmental process. As explained earlier, the peer group takes on greater importance during adolescence. However, gifted individuals find that they often lack a true peer group due to their unique abilities. Unfortunately, the need to appease others seems to be particularly detrimental to gifted girls. Since adolescent girls seem to suffer from what Pipher (1994) termed “imaginary audience syndrome” (p. 60), most gifted girls will concentrate their energies on performing in a
way that appeases the audience. This performance can encompass adapting physique,
personality, and interests, which can cause the young girls to “split” into different selves
that are typically incongruent with the true identity (Pipher, 1994). Buescher (1985)
stated that:

Changes in young adolescents’ height, weight, coordination, physique, and
secondary sex traits not only alter their perceptions of how attractive or ‘grown
up’ they are, but also create varying degrees of stress about changing self images
and their acceptability by particular friends or the peer group at school. (p. 12)

This transition in physique is typically more perplexing for girls due to the many
impossible media images of beauty that bombard females. Since gifted girls possess keen
insights on such cultural influences, they tend to be more aware of exactly how many
ways they are unable to live up to the “perfect” standard (Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001).
Many of these cultural images encouraged by the media also present girls with the idea
that being dumb is cute and appreciated, particularly in the presence of males. Many
gifted girls find this standard impossible to meet, but still attempt to disguise their
intelligence in order to fit in and live up to cultural expectations (Kerr, 1994; Pipher,
1994; Reis, 2001). Hollinger and Fleming (1985) found in their research that many gifted
girls would not only disguise their intelligence in order to fit in, but also would begin to
pursue activities that produced social acceptance among peers; this approach to building a
social self-concept is typically at the cost of denying more intrinsically interesting
activities. Compounded with the many obstacles in developing an academic self-concept,
trying to create a positive non-academic self-concept with the same false peer group can
become increasingly frustrating for gifted girls and possibly lead to isolation and severe
depression, which is obviously detrimental to the true identity (Hollinger & Flemming, 1985; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994).

*Lack of role models and guidance.*

An extensive amount of literature regarding gifted girls addressed this difficult path of adolescence and attempted to explain why such obstacles continue to exist for our young women throughout their social and emotional development. Walker and Mehr (1991) asserted that “Women today are expected to do everything, but nobody tells them how” (p.41). This feeling of helplessness can most likely be attributed to the conflicting cultural expectations of women, as well as the lack of female role models that exemplify strategies of how to successfully overcome such confining cultural stereotypes (Hollinger, 1995). Reis (2002) pointed out that “[i]n a society in which the majority of our leaders, politicians, artists, musicians, and inventors are male, a young female may not develop a philosophical belief about her own creative potential” (p. 1). Kerr and Robinson Kurpius (2004) suggested that the lack of mentors and guidance from women prevents gifted girls from pursuing science and mathematics. Bakken, Hershey, and Miller (1990) maintained:

The gifted female is burdened by the importance society places on wife and mother roles. She is expected to use her intelligence to rise to the top of her profession while maintaining a successful home and family life. How to meet this double set of expectations poses a problem…Many interrupt or abandon careers because of marriage and motherhood. As a result, the next generation lacks adequate female role models for nontraditional careers. Many choose to follow
the socially acceptable roles for women and fail to achieve their potential in school and career choices. So the cycle continues. (p. 262)

This “cycle” is the reason why our own gifted girls can become their worst enemies. In their study evaluating gifted girls’ beliefs on equality in academics, relationships, and social situations, Bakken, Hershey, & Miller (1990) found that the majority of the girls agreed that there should be gender equality in education and intellectual endeavors, but there was considerable disagreement regarding gender equality in marital relationships and areas of social etiquette and dating relationships. However, the social gender stereotyping is the root of the majority of inequities experienced by gifted girls; therefore, it seems gifted girls adopt an ill founded understanding of their possible roles in society and this perpetuates the continuous cycle, as well as their lowered self-concepts. Pipher (1994) adamantly asserted:

The rules for girls are confusing and the deck is stacked against them, but they soon learn that this is the only game in town. One friend remembered that when she was in seventh grade, she wished someone would tell her what the rules were. She said, “It was so hard to play the game correctly without knowing the rules.”…While the rules for proper female behavior aren’t clearly stated, the punishment for breaking them is harsh. Girls who speak frankly are labeled bitches. Girls who are not attractive are scorned. The rules are reinforced by the visual images in soft- and hard-core pornography, by song lyrics, by casual remarks, by criticisms, by teasing and by jokes. The rules are enforced by the labeling of a woman like Hilary Rodham Clinton as a “bitch” simply because she is a competent, healthy adult. (p. 39)
Acceptance vs. true identity – gifted girls’ reactions to inner conflict.

During adolescence, Kerr (1994) explained that many of the gifted girls she had observed typically identified with one of the four stages of disability rehabilitation defined by various rehabilitation psychologists; the rehabilitation stages include denial, bargaining, anger, and acceptance. The girl who experiences denial will blindly follow the cultural expectations and deny her gifts. The girl who progresses to bargaining will realize that her inner turmoil is too great to completely deny her gifts; she will try to appease both her internal and external forces, but will still not accomplish self-actualization as it is not her full potential. The girl who realizes she cannot appease both herself and her peer group and society will become angry and isolate herself. Then, finally, the few girls who have found acceptance are the ones that are at peace and realize they can be gifted and female. Many researchers believed that in order for our gifted girls to avoid such a rehabilitation progression, it is crucial for each gifted girl to identify with an androgynous approach to life (Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2002; Rimm 1999; Silverman, 1986), be exposed to a positive true peer group (Enersen, 1993; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Reis 2001; Reis 2002; Rimm 1999; Schneider, 1987; Silverman, 1991;), and develop resiliency, self-awareness, and independent thinking (Enersen, 1993; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Noble, 1996; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001; Reis, 2002; Silverman, 1986; Walker & Mehr, 1992). These are simple, yet necessary elements in encouraging an adolescent gifted girl’s development of a positive academic and non-academic self-concept – thus, building a firm foundation for the true identity to be built upon.
A need for programs that encourage a healthy social and emotional development.

While there is an abundance of research regarding the specific issues gifted girls face during adolescence, few researchers have completely focused on possible activities and experiences that encourage gifted girls to develop the tools that will help them overcome obstacles. Though some believed that studying eminent women will help gifted girls overcome societal obstacles (Karnes & Bean, 1993; Kerr, 1994; Kolloff, 1996; Rimm, 1999), and others believed that counseling and intervention programs are more useful in building self-awareness in gifted girls (Bell, 1989; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Robinson Kurpius; McCormick & Wolf, 1993; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001; Reis, 2002; Rimm, 1999; Schneider, 1987; Silverman, 1991), very few researchers have actually pursued these possible solutions in depth. In fact, a great deal of the research regarding intervention programs as an effective approach to overcoming societal obstacles has been mostly limited to two day or week long intervention programs. The limited research regarding possible solutions has focused on observing programs and their beneficial experiences for gifted girls, yet the time period of such programs really was too short to assess any possible continuous effects on gifted girls’ social and emotional development as a result of such an experience.

How summer enrichment programs benefit gifted girls

“You were surrounded by people just like you. You didn’t have to explain yourself, you just were.” – Anna Mackowiak (as cited in Geddis & Dodd, 2005)

As mentioned earlier, Walker and Mehr (1992) pointed out that many of the women in their study did not feel that they were prepared to make self-aware decisions regarding their gifts and goals; therefore, they were ill prepared for society and were unable to reach their full potential. However, Kerr (1994) studied nine eminent women in
history and found that certain factors, such as time alone, individualized instruction, and becoming passionate about a subject encouraged them to overcome cultural barriers and achieve their full potential. Therefore, our schools should make time for activities and experiences that promote such factors; though this may seem like the perfect solution, it is not that simple. Enersen (1993) highlighted this issue as she explained that helping students achieve personal self-realization and establish challenging goals should be an integral part of a child’s educational experience; unfortunately, most schools are only able to focus on teaching basic skills and usually are unable to encourage the upper limits of children’s abilities. She continues to explain that this type of educational environment is particularly detrimental for gifted students in that it does not facilitate experiences that allow them to develop an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses within a “supportive arena” (p. 170). Since many gifted girls feel as if they do not fit in academically or socially within their regular school environment and are in need of a “supportive arena,” some outside experience is necessary and typically is the only environment that can provide such factors described by Enersen and Kerr. In fact, Rimm (1999) suggested that adolescence is a perfect time for gifted girls to seek out enrichment programs outside of their regular schools. Such summer or weekend programs provide a supportive environment with peers that share the same interests and positive attitudes towards learning. The new friendships that are made in the program environment can be very motivating and lead to the realization that the “there are many other teens who value intelligent pursuits” (p. 87).

Enrichment summer programs offer gifted girls a safe haven to exist freely and explore their true identities. Researchers have found that such programs offer true peer
groups, a unique learning environment, and an experience that will promote self-confidence and a positive self-concept (Enersen, 1993; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Robinson Kurpius, 2004; Kolloff, 1996; Pipher, 1994; Rimm, 1999; Schneider, 1987; Silverman, 1991). Enersen’s (1993) research indicated that due to enrichment program environment and its fast-paced curriculum, faculty who are specialists, and the chance to interact with others of similar ability, for some students, these summer enrichment programs were necessary in order to develop academic abilities and establish a positive self-concept. She explained that just being in the presence of a true peer group, which she defines as other adolescents that share the same gifted abilities and emotions, finally provides some validation and a boost to self-confidence. Enersen (1993) noted that all of the gifted girls that attended the Purdue University gifted programs and that participated in her study used common phrases, such as “People who are like me,” “People I can share myself with,” and “A place where I fit in” (p. 173). These gifted girls experienced an intense social experience with this new true peer group, and they believed it had a “cathartic effect” on their injured self-confidence and self-concepts.

As gifted girls enjoy a new true peer group, they are much more inclined to explore their talents and interests; summer enrichment programs, therefore, provide advanced classes in a variety of areas that go far beyond the subjects taught in regular schools. These classes are also not confined to a classroom; typically students will enjoy field trips, lectures, concerts, and seminars that broaden the minds of gifted adolescents regarding their specific subject and educational environments. Kerr (1994) posited that “[f]alling in love with an idea is more than being able to identify an idea or subject that is
personally exciting. It is a lasting, often intense, absorbing, life-long interest that ultimately leads to an expansion of that idea or subject” (p. 90). It is the unique learning environment of many enrichment programs that not only helps students learn more about their interest areas, but also provides opportunities for them to find specific ways to apply their talents to those areas; this enlightenment can often reveal to girls a number of professions they might have never considered due to cultural expectations, or limitations. Hopefully, it is this experience of enlightenment that will lead gifted girls to “falling in love with an idea.”

Summer programs, therefore, provide participants with a unique social and academic experience that truly is needed for all gifted students; however, such programs can be particularly beneficial for girls in that the increased confidence in academia and social situations encourages the development of a positive general self-concept that is so necessary in reaching their full potential (Rimm, 1999). Enersen (1993) found that the gifted students that participated in the Purdue Enrichment Programs benefited from “[s]ocial experiences and interactions [that] affected how these students built their personal self-image and self-concept…The students spoke of gaining confidence and of understanding oneself” (p. 174). Kerr and Robinson Kurpius (2004) also found that gifted girls who participated in TARGETS, a day program funded by the National Science Foundation that encourages at-risk gifted girls to pursue career exploration within science and math, experienced an increase in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and future self-efficacy, which directly affected their general self-concept. Finally, Silverman (1991) asserted that by participating in enrichment programs –
Girls learn to display their abilities rather than disguising them to fit in socially with less developed peers. They take on real challenges in learning rather than performing perfectly what they already know. They come to value themselves and develop higher aspirations. Gifted girls’ academic, social, emotional, and ethical development are fostered in these special gifted/talented programs. (p. 122)

This newly discovered personal power, therefore, enables gifted girls to live their lives according to their own agendas, thoughts, and feelings; this experience creates an armor, so to speak, that protects them from the manipulative influence of peers, media, and schools.

While there are a variety of summer enrichment camps available to gifted girls, a unique model that has become very popular is the Governor’s School. A Governor’s School program is usually a residential summer program for gifted and talented high school students from all over the state. The program is usually held on a college campus and is typically funded to some extent by the state budget. Governor’s School participants enjoy a college like experience that offers a wide variety of challenging courses and a chance to be surrounded by other talented and intelligent peers. Bean (1991) explains that “[t]he Governor’s School model, though nontraditional in nature, represents a kind of educational utopia that blends cultural, academic, social, and recreational components into a rich natural learning environment. This community of interaction inspires the love of learning, discovery of self, and the desire to improve society” (p. 2).

There are approximately thirty different residential governor’s honors programs throughout the nation. Georgia happens to possess one of the longest running and most successful programs. The program was established by law in 1963 as a six week summer
enrichment camp that would provide a completely unique academic experience for Georgia’s brightest; this experience would also remain free of cost to its participants. The program has been growing since its beginning, and, currently, it is the most accommodating program in the nation in that it invites approximately 750 participants each year. However, though the program is extremely successful, no research has been formally pursued to truly assess its benefits. In addition to this absence of research, the overall research of the effects of such residential enrichment programs on gifted girls’ attitudes towards society and their own gifts is rather limited, and with the exception of Enersen’s (1993) study, most of the research has been quantitative does not include the actual “voice” of such participants. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of gifted girls who have participated in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program and examine the influence of the experience on their social and emotional development.
CHAPTER 3
METHODS

Design

In order to gain a better understanding of the experiences of adolescent gifted girls enrolled in a summer residential program for gifted students, I chose a qualitative research design as described by Boyatzis (1998), Creswell (2005), and Strauss & Corbin (1990). Such a design enabled me to explore the opinions and “voice” of a few participants and their unique experiences at the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program. By collecting extensive amounts of data from a small group of girls and analyzing the common themes found throughout the different qualitative data sets, I was able to investigate the phenomenon of possible influences such summer programs can have on the social and emotional development of gifted girls.

My participants were five collegiate females who had attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) within the last six years and represented a variety of academic and fine arts backgrounds. By using GHP alumni as my participants, I was able to explore the aspects of social and emotional development that participation in GHP may have influenced since the girls were able to reflect on the whole program experience as well as their following senior year and early collegiate experience. A semi-structured interview format was used with each participant in order to allow the girls to freely reflect and present information on topics such as unique experiences, relationships, program environment, program work, and experiences following their participation in the
Georgia Governor’s Honors Program. I also contacted each girl’s parents or legal guardians in order to gain more perspective concerning the participant’s GHP experience and how that experience may have influenced her social and emotional development.

**Participant Selection**

My group of participants consisted of five collegiate females who had attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program within the last six years and were currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at the University of Georgia. Each participant’s parents or legal guardians were also asked to contribute to the study by providing a different perspective on the same phenomenon; therefore, since each girl’s parents or legal guardians contributed to the progress of the study, they were considered participants but not my focal group.

The participants were selected through homogenous sampling and purposeful sampling. Homogenous sampling is used when the researcher wishes to select individuals that possess similar membership to a subgroup with specific, defining characteristics (Creswell, 2005). Since this study focuses on gifted adolescent females and their participation in GHP, I utilized homogenous sampling in order to develop a pool of girls that possessed these characteristics in order to choose my final participants. Given that I have a great deal of contact with GHP alumni through my participation with the program as a Resident Assistant, as well as my involvement with the UGA Redcoat Band, which includes many GHP alumni, I simply collected a list of girls who had attended the program and their email addresses. I then emailed each girl an information sheet to be filled out and sent back to me. This information sheet revealed personal information regarding GHP major, GHP minor, high school attended, and current undergraduate
major. I sent out approximately twenty information sheets via email and received eleven responses. After I had collected and reviewed the eleven information sheets, I then employed purposeful sampling procedures. Purposeful sampling is a qualitative research strategy used by the researcher in order to select participants that are able to reveal information on the research topic; therefore, it is not important as to how many participants are selected, but rather how the selection of certain participants can lead to a vast amount of information that reveals the nature and effect of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once I had thoroughly reviewed each information sheet, I then selected five girls who would not only represent various academic and fine arts GHP majors and minors, but also would represent various regions of the state of Georgia. I was also confident in the ability of these five girls to reflect upon their GHP experience and share useful information that would explain the possible influence an honors residential program can have on a gifted female’s social and emotional development.

The five girls were given a consent/assent form that thoroughly explained the research study and process, as well as what role they would play within that process. The form also clearly explained that the identity of each girl would be protected through the use of a pseudonym and that their hometowns would also be disguised through a false name. All five girls agreed to participate and signed and returned their consent/assent forms. The parents or legal guardians of each girl were also notified of the study and were asked to review a consent cover letter via email. The parents or legal guardians acknowledged their consent to participate in the study by answering the following open
ended question: Did you notice any differences in your daughter as a result of her participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program?

Data Collection

The data collection process of this study primarily involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are designed to allow the participant to openly discuss each topic and provide information that explores the complexities of the central phenomenon through comments, narratives, and personal reflections. Through the use of an interview protocol, I had a list of various open-ended questions that covered various topics to be addressed during the semi-structured interview. My interview protocol, however, was used as a map during the actual interview; the participant was truly the guide who controlled the pace, depth, and evolution of the interview/conversation, and as the researcher, I acted primarily as an active listener.

Each interview was scheduled at the participant’s convenience and took place at her preferred location. Once the date, time, and location were selected for the interview, each participant received a “probe” form to reflect upon and fill out before the actual interview took place. Creswell (2005) defines a probe as a subquestion that the researcher asks in order to elicit more information, explanation, or elaboration from the interviewee. I, however, adapted the idea of a probe into a type of form that would initiate thoughtful reflection about participation in GHP, therefore, preparing each participant for the future interview. The probe form consisted of open-ended questions that inspired the participant to recollect and reflect upon friendships, environments, and events that contributed to her overall experience as a GHP student. The probe form also suggested that each participant look over photographs or journals that may have been written during and after her
participation in the program. After reminiscing and personal reflection, the probe form’s final question involved advice that each participant would give to future female participants of the program. The probe form helped the participants consciously think about the program and the various events and experiences during the program that may have influenced their lives; with this information and personal reflection at the forefront of their thoughts, each participant was able to provide rich information regarding her experience as a GHP student and how that experience may have affected her social and emotional development.

One in-depth, semi-structured interview, approximately one to two hours long in duration, was completed with each participant. As mentioned previously, each interview took place at the participant’s convenience and in her preferred location. The interviews were conducted in person and were tape recorded. The interview protocol consisted of many open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to explain their experiences before, during, and after the program, the relationships made during the program, and their overall feelings about their participation in the program. These questions helped the researcher explore the various aspects of the program that seemed most influential in each girl’s social and emotional development. After each interview was conducted, in order to gain saturation, the participant’s parents or legal guardians were sent one open-ended question regarding their daughter’s participation in GHP and the possible changes they may have observed in their daughter’s attitude and confidence following the summer experience. This open-ended question was sent via email, which allowed the parents or legal guardians to recall and discuss the question before forming a response; the typed responses were then sent back to the researcher via email.
After all the interviews had been transcribed verbatim, and the parents’ or legal guardians’ responses had been collected, I began the first stage of coding the data, open coding, as described by Strauss & Corbin (1990). Once the open coding process was complete, each participant received a copy of the coded transcript to review. After each participant had plenty of time to review her coded transcript, I met with each participant for a member check. We reviewed the transcripts and codes together and simultaneously edited or elaborated the data in order to present the most accurate and thorough information.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and data collected from the parents were analyzed using Strauss’ & Corbins’ (1990) three stage coding paradigm, as well as Boyatzis’ (1998) description of how to transform qualitative information into meaningful data. Strauss’ and Corbin’s (1990) model for coding suggested that data collection and data analysis occur concurrently, therefore, allowing the analysis process to influence further data collection. The data analysis process consisted of three types of coding: open, axial, and selective.

The first stage of data analysis is open coding. This stage allows the researcher to thoroughly analyze all the possible themes within the data through unrestricted coding; therefore, this process leads to the observation of a wide variety of themes and possible categories. Through the open coding process, many different themes emerged from the data and provided plenty of possibilities for analyzing various relationships among the categories.
The second stage of analysis, axial coding, involves studying the many different categories that emerge through the open coding process and analyzing possible relationships that may exist among them. The observed relationships between the open categories represent a more inclusive category, which is defined as an axial category. Boyatzis (1998) also suggests that the review of the literature “provides insight into the possible development of a thematic code…and lends itself to ‘axial coding’ in clustering or reconfiguring categories identified or developed by others” (p. 37). Therefore, through the close analysis of themes found in previous research, I was able to analyze the different relationships that had emerged from the data and group the open categories more effectively into axial categories. The axial categories found within this present study included the improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to a unique learning environment, improvement in social self-concept through the establishment of a true peer group, and the development of security in identity.

Finally, selective coding is the third stage of data analysis and involves the identification of a core category. Strauss and Corbin (1990) point out that the core category should represent an overarching theme that encompasses the different axial categories. The three axial categories within this study supported the core category of improvement in general self-concept as a result of participation within the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program.

Statement of Subjectivity and Control of Bias

Qualitative research is guided by the researcher’s desire to truly reveal certain aspects of a central phenomenon and its overall effects on different individuals. The researcher must have a solid understanding of the core issues concerning the central
phenomenon in order to develop a strong rapport with her participants, as well as be more able to identify certain cultural cues and interpret them appropriately. My passion concerning the subject of the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program and how it influences gifted girls’ social and emotional development is a result of my own participation in the program. As a student of the program, I experienced the metamorphosis from apprehensive female confused about my identity as a gifted girl to a confident gifted female strengthened with new determination and feelings of belongingness. As a Resident Assistant for the program, I have witnessed this same metamorphosis in many young girls. This familiarity with the program and its possible influences on gifted females’ social and emotional development made it easier for me to understand and interpret each participant’s responses to the open-ended questions.

My participants and I share group identity as GHP students and, therefore, share common experiences and reactions regarding our participation in the program. I also share group identity with my participants as a fellow student of the University of Georgia and, for some, a member of the UGA Redcoat Marching Band. These commonalities in identity and experience helped establish a level of comfort during the interviews that enhanced each participant’s willingness to reflect upon her experiences and contribute information. Creswell (2005) maintains that this strong rapport is crucial in gaining the trust of each participant, which encourages his/her full cooperation during one-on-one interviews. It should also be noted that though my participants and I share group identity, due to the large population within each group, I felt that there were no significant levels of familiarity that might have affected each participant’s contribution to the study.
Though I believe my familiarity with the program and my shared group identity with each participant enhanced the data collection and data analysis process of the study, I understand such commonalities can cause researcher bias. Such researcher bias can possibly lead to the researcher infusing her own perceptions, thoughts, and opinions concerning the central phenomenon. In order to control the potential bias, I employed the strategy of member checks. Member checks allow each participant to review the interview transcripts, analysis, and interpretations of her semi-structured interview. Each member check was completed shortly after the interview. The participant and I reviewed the transcripts and interpretations and edited the information to accurately reflect the participant’s feelings, perceptions, and opinions concerning her participation in GHP and the possible influences that experience may have had on her social and emotional development.
CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The Establishment of the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program

The Georgia’s Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) is a six-week residential program for gifted and talented rising juniors and seniors. The program was created by law in 1963 during Governor Carl Sanders’ term. Though the law has been revised since the original 1963 legislation, the purpose has primarily remained unchanged. In the Georgia legislation (2000), lawmakers have determined that the fundamental purpose of the program is to “provide differentiated instructional experiences designed to encourage selected students to meet their full academic and artistic potential” (§160-4-2-.09). The law also mandates that GHP instruction should reflect “differentiated educational opportunities not usually available during the regular school year” (§160-4-2-.09).

Under these guidelines, the first GHP session was held in the summer of 1964 on the campus of Wesleyan College. Since then, these instructional goals have shaped the GHP experience for over forty years. Throughout this time period, the program has developed its prestigious reputation for three main reasons: 1) Georgia is one of twenty states to have such a summer honors program; 2) the program is the longest continuously running program of its kind, as well as the largest program, accommodating approximately 700 students each summer; and finally, 3) the program is absolutely free of cost for all of its participants and is completely funded by the state education budget.
With these unique characteristics, the Georgia’s Governor’s Honors Program exhibits an enriching environment that has helped approximately 25,000 rising juniors and seniors develop intellectually and emotionally.

Program Profile

Currently, the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program is held each summer during the months of June and July on the campus of Valdosta State University. Every summer approximately 700 gifted and talented rising juniors and seniors leave their homes for six weeks to enjoy cramped dorm rooms, humid days, and long classes. While this may not seem like the typical summer vacation for a high school student, most GHP students will tell you that the experience is an unforgettable, life changing experience.

While at GHP, gifted and talented students will pursue their major area, which is the interest area in which they were nominated and selected in, in unique and creative ways. The courses offered within each major area resemble classes that can be typically found in a college handbook, and each course presents the students with a complex curriculum that truly explores the depth of each subject area. The students are encouraged to completely explore all their curiosities and exercise creative thinking in each class; this element of freedom in the curriculum is only accentuated by the absence of grades. The major areas offered by the program include communicative arts, social studies, mathematics, science (Physics, Biology, Chemistry), foreign language (French, German, Spanish, Latin), agriscience and biotechnology, architectural design, executive management, technology, dance, theatre, visual arts, music (instrumental, vocal), and jazz. The task of the teachers within each major area is to establish a learning environment that encourages each student to pursue his/her passions and curiosities; this
is done through a variety of ways, but most significantly through the menu of class offerings for each student to choose from. The menu of different classes within each major area allows each student to customize his/her curriculum throughout the summer; therefore, allowing each student to either explore new and different interests or investigate familiar ideas and concepts in a new complex way.

Not only do GHP students enjoy developing their talents within their major areas through challenging and intriguing classes, but also are offered the same chance to develop a talent or interest in a minor area, which is selected once the students begin the program. Minor areas offered include all of the possible major areas as well as fitness, counseling, computers, Greek, education, theatre technology, and script writing. Once the program begins, each student attends information sessions about various minors and then lists three different choices for a minor area. Then the assistant director of faculty and academics reviews each student’s requests and places him/her into one of the listed three minor area choices. On the fourth day of the program, the GHP students begin to enjoy a full day of exploration complete with four hours of instruction in their major areas and two and a half hours of instruction in their minor areas.

The enriching learning environment of GHP is not confined to the classroom. In fact, learning experiences at GHP can happen anywhere: in a dorm room with roommates and new friends, at a seminar run by a resident assistant, within the concert hall enjoying a performance, on the campus lawn talking with other GHP students, or in the cafeteria discussing current events with GHP teachers. Virtually every minute of a student’s GHP experience can be filled with unique learning opportunities that not only support and encourage his/her talent development, but also his/her development as a young adult.
Also the environment and culture of GHP is very diverse and accepting of everyone’s differences and talents; therefore, the environment is conducive to exploring different interest areas and taking risks socially and academically. GHP students enjoy a summer of being surrounded by peers that possess similar levels of maturity and intellect. This experience provides many GHP students with a feeling of acceptance that has not been accomplished within their regular high schools.

Selection Process

The Georgia’s Governor’s Honors Program population is made up of the very best students from among the candidates nominated around the state. A candidate’s ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, school, and hometown are not determining factors. However, in attempting to create a program population that represents all 181 Georgia counties fairly, the program does mandate nomination quotas for each school. Nomination quotas are the number of students who may be recommended for GHP from each high school. These quotas are determined by observing the school’s or school system’s population; therefore, each school system and private school receive one nomination for every one hundred students enrolled in the tenth and eleventh grades during the previous academic year. The nomination quota is then assigned by the Georgia Department of Education and then separated into three categories: academic, fine arts, agriscience and biotechnology, and technology/career preparatory. There are also ways to increase the district’s nomination quota; for example, if the total number of enrolled tenth and eleventh graders increases to one thousand full time students in a certain school system, then that school system’s nomination quota in fine arts doubles.
With all of this in mind, the selection process is three fold. Complexity within the first two levels of the selection process can vary depending on the number of schools within each county. The first stage of selection is the nomination process. A student is nominated by his or her high school teacher in a specific subject area. It is important to remember that a student does not have to be officially identified as gifted under Georgia’s multiple criteria in order to be nominated or selected for the program. Also, while grades are considered in the nomination process, they are not the most crucial element in making a decision to nominate a student; in fact, the most important element to consider during the nomination process is the student’s passion in a subject area. Once all nominations have been made, the student will then evaluate all the subjects he or she has been nominated in and select only one to pursue during the selection process. Depending on how large the high school is, a student might have to go through some sort of school screening (objective test, writing test, interview, etc) before advancing to the next level. The high school then turns in the final student nominations to the county.

The second stage of selection is the county level. After the local schools send their nominations to the county coordinator, a decision must be made concerning the official nominations that will advance certain students to the state level of the selection process. These official nominations must follow the nomination quotas specified by the Georgia Department of Education. Depending on the size of the county and the number of schools, a very intricate screening system could be utilized to determine who will be officially nominated within the guidelines of the nomination quotas. Typically, students within highly populated counties who do proceed to a county level screening process will complete an application, some sort of test within their subject, and an interview based on
a packet of reading material. The student must also be able to display to some extent what he or she could contribute to the GHP community. After all interviews and tests have been completed, a county panel will then evaluate each candidate and select the top candidates to be officially nominated based on the nomination quotas specified by the Georgia Department of Education.

The third and final stage of the selection process is the state level. Nominated candidates who make it to this third stage compete against the brightest students of Georgia in order to gain the chance to participate in GHP. There are two dates of interviews and auditions: one date for the academic and career/technology areas and one separate date for the fine arts areas. These interview dates are usually at the end of January or the beginning of February. Depending on which subject area the student is competing in, the student will go through some assessment process that will give the student the chance to thoroughly display his or her talents within the specific subject area. For example, if a student is competing in Communicative Arts, he or she will complete a short subjective essay and an interview based on reading material. The student’s interest, motivation, and possible GHP contribution will all be assessed during the interview as well. If a student is competing in a Fine Arts field, an audition or portfolio usually will replace the essay or test component of the screening process; however, the interview will still be a crucial part of the assessment process.

Once the state auditions and interviews have been completed, each subject area will then select the top candidates within each field. Hometown, ethnicity, sex, religion, and socioeconomic status are not determining factors in selecting the participants. After the candidates are selected to fill the allotted number of spots for each subject area within the
program, a small number of alternates are selected if any accepted participant cannot attend the program. The selected participants and alternates receive their letters of invitation, typically, within the first week of April. If a selected participant is unable to attend the program, the first alternate will receive notice as soon as possible; this process continues up until the beginning of the program.
CHAPTER 5
DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Ashley

With beautiful reddish brown hair and blue-green eyes, Ashley’s intensity regarding academics and future goals is only accentuated by her striking features. Only a freshman in college, she is already determined to accomplish a degree in biochemistry and molecular biology and then move on to medical school. Ashley firmly believes that if you have a gift, it should never be wasted but exercised and improved so that you can make large contributions to society and the world. She declares that “I have always wanted to change the world…find a cure for cancer or invent something and put myself out there like that.”

In college, Ashley is very active in the Redcoat Marching Band as a member of the saxophone section. She also volunteers as an Athens-Clarke County mentor for local Kindergartners and even participates in the Make-a-Wish Foundation. During her free time, Ashley enjoys reading and riding horses; however, she finds that she rarely experiences such free time in college. It is surprising that such a quiet person is so active and ambitious, but Ashley is absolutely determined to make contributions that are felt and appreciated by society.

Ashley grew up on a farm with her father, mother, and little sister in a growing suburban area in Hollings County Georgia. Her father is an engineer and works as a contractor for the local air force base, and her mother is a high school chemistry teacher.
Her community is typically conservative, but Ashley’s family “[is] very scientific-based, so very rational about everything, and they are very open-minded.” She explains that “where the rest of the town was very conservative with their Southern values, my parents encouraged me to explore other things.” Ashley definitely explored many things growing up; by the time she graduated from high school, Ashley had seen a calf being born, dissected a dead cow, participated in Odyssey of the Mind, and competed in multiple science fairs. Ashley also was involved with marching band, National Honor Society, Beta Club, Partner’s Club, and student government throughout high school, and she held many leadership positions in many of those organizations. Her outgoing behavior was not confined to extracurricular activities but was also exhibited in the classroom; though Ashley did not speak up a lot in class, she applied herself in all the academic areas but mostly enjoyed science and English.

As a rising senior, Ashley participated in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) as a science major and music minor. Ashley believes that GHP was a very beneficial experience in retrospect, but, unfortunately, she did not thoroughly enjoy her experience during the program due to an inexperienced teacher. While at GHP, Ashley became very close with two or three friends from high school and also enjoyed hanging out with students in the communicative arts major area. Looking back, Ashley believes that her GHP experience helped her gain more self-confidence, become more independent, and prepared her for college and her future; however, she wished she had branched out more and met more people while attending the program.
Elizabeth stands approximately five feet, two inches tall with delicate features, brown eyes, and brown hair. For such a petite young woman, it is amazing how much personality is displayed in every action: speech, laughter, and smiles. Elizabeth is truly charismatic but in an elegant way that exhibits a certain level of maturity and calmness not typical of women her age. She loves to discuss politics, social responsibility, and current events, and during such discussions she will act as a respectful listener, as well as an impassioned debater. Elizabeth is truly caring and well-rounded.

As a sophomore in college, Elizabeth is currently pursuing a degree in music education with the intentions of becoming a middle school band director. Though Elizabeth thoroughly enjoys improving her talents as an oboist and expanding her knowledge about music, she also has a gift in language acquisition, specifically German. When she began college, Elizabeth had intended on earning a dual degree in music education and German, but she found the logistics of such a pursuit to be nearly impossible. Even though Elizabeth will not be able to pursue a degree in German, she still takes German classes whenever possible. Whenever Elizabeth is not practicing or studying, she is typically working with the various organizations she is involved in; she marches mellophone in the Redcoat Marching Band, she is a member of Kappa Kappa Psi, a coed band service fraternity, as well as a participant in the German student organization. Though Elizabeth does not have a lot of free time, she does try and find time to hang out with friends, watch movies, and relax.

Growing up, Elizabeth lived with her father, mother, and little sister in Northview, Georgia, a suburban city in the metro Atlanta area. Her father is an accountant, and her
mother is an elementary school teacher. Elizabeth’s parents were always very supportive of her development; she stated that “it wasn’t necessarily that they pushed me towards any certain direction, but they sort of let me develop on my own.” This liberal style of parenting truly encouraged Elizabeth to become a mature and independent female. Elizabeth’s parents also provided her with every possible opportunity to explore her giftedness; she was enrolled in the school’s gifted program as a Kindergartener and attended the Georgia State University Saturday School for gifted students. Elizabeth always sought out challenge in high school as well. She took Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, would always ask for more work if she felt like she was not being challenged, and still was involved in extracurricular activities such as marching band, symphonic band, National Honors Society, Senior Beta, Junior Civitan, and German Club.

Though she was nominated in many areas, Elizabeth decided to attempt the selection process as a candidate in German. As a rising junior, she was selected and attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program as a German major and music minor. Despite a poor German teacher, Elizabeth absolutely adored her experience at GHP – this was obvious since her eyes would light up and a wide smile would cover her face even when the three letters were mentioned. Elizabeth explained that “[the GHP environment] was what I expected, and I loved it. I liked the freedom of it and sort of being able to grow up and be independent…and being at GHP, I was able to do whatever I wanted and make friends I wanted to make not just through circumstance, but with people I actually belonged with.” The GHP experience gave Elizabeth a chance to be surrounded by like-minded, mature peers, and this environment provided Elizabeth with a chance to
experience an intense feeling of belonging that she had not found in her regular high school’s halls.

*Katie*

With a big smile, dimples, curly black hair, brown eyes, and a joyful laugh, everything about Katie exudes happiness. She has a cheerful personality that is inviting and instantly comforting. Katie tries to find the good in everything and is open-minded about all types of new experiences, unless they involve math. She also possesses intense levels of curiosity about a variety of things and enjoys meeting new people from different places.

Currently a freshman in college, Katie is a pre-business major and hopes to earn a degree in marketing. She is intrigued by commercials and all types of advertising and loves to study and analyze such marketing strategies. Whenever she is not working on school work, Katie reads voraciously and also loves to write poetry and essays. No matter what she is doing, one will always hear an eclectic collection of music coming from Katie’s room; she listens to music constantly and loves discovering new songs, artists, and bands. Katie also enjoys just walking around campus, hanging out with friends, and going to the dining halls to be surrounded by people. She is also active in the Redcoat Marching Band as a member of the drumline. Katie approaches college like she does everything else – hungry for life and curious about everything.

Katie comes from Jacobson, a small town in south Georgia, and lives on six acres of land with her father, mother, little sister, and littler brother. Family is very important to Katie, and she enjoys being close to each member of that family; in fact, her next door neighbors are her grandparents. Though Katie’s hometown is rather quiet and
Katie attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program as a rising senior and was a communicative arts major and percussion minor. She described her GHP experience as truly amazing; she loved her classes, her teachers, her new friends – everything about the experience left a lasting impression on Katie. Katie described GHP as “really conducive to learning and being curious. It was definitely a great experience, and I have never really experienced anything else like it.” GHP encouraged Katie to become more open-minded about meeting new people, different types of cultures, different genres of literature, and new methods of creative writing. Katie believes that her GHP experience helped her become more independent and self-confident, which empowered her and made her more able to break away from the constricting belief system of her small hometown.

Sara

Sara is tall, blonde, and blue eyed; though that may describe the image of a model, Sara is more concerned about her music and education than her looks and appeal. She always dresses nicely but not provocatively, and she wears very little make-up. Sara
has a keen sense of humor and a dry wit that makes every comment she says crafty and entertaining. She is extremely self-motivated and determined to accomplish success in all of her pursuits.

As a junior in college, Sara is working on her degree in music education. Sara plays the euphonium, a low brass instrument that resembles a small tuba. She is one of three girls in the euphonium studio, and though the absence of girls can sometimes be intimidating, Sara has grown up with this challenge all her life and believes it to be fuel for her motivation to succeed. Her amazing work ethic and intense levels of self-determination only make her more confident and able to compete in such a male dominated field. Whenever she is not practicing her euphonium or studying music, Sara is usually working with different student organizations. She is a section leader of the euphonium section in the Redcoat Marching Band and is also Vice President of Service in Kappa Kappa Psi, a coed band service fraternity. She also is involved with Sigma Alpha Iota, an honor music fraternity for women, as well as College Music Educators National Conference. Sara is always busy, but she approaches everything she does with a cool, collected mindset. Though Sara is extremely self-motivated and appears to be outgoing with all her activities and obligations, she is very easy going and often comes across as quiet and reserved.

Sara grew up in Austin, Georgia, a tiny suburban area, but moved to Marshall, Georgia, a bustling suburban city in metro Atlanta, at the end of her freshman year in high school. Sara’s mother and father divorced when she was three. Her mother worked a full time job in downtown Atlanta, so Sara usually spent most of the afternoon with her grandmother and little sister until the mother was able to pick them up. Her father
remarried a couple of times, which added two step brothers to Sara’s family. Her mother also remarried when Sara was twelve to a man that became quite influential in Sara’s development. Sara’s step father is a middle school band director and played a big role in introducing Sara to music. In high school, this love for music became more apparent, as well as her natural gift for euphonium and musical leadership. By the end of her freshman year, she became a drum major, which was not a typical position for someone so young within her very competitive high school band. She also was first chair euphonium, an instrument she had just recently switched to when she decided the trumpet was not her area of strength. Sara not only worked hard in music, but also in her academics; she continuously sought out challenge in all her classes and only enrolled in honors and Advanced Placement level courses. Sara was also very active in Beta Club, a church brass ensemble, and Atlanta Youth Wind Symphony.

Sara was selected as the only euphonium brass major her year at the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program. While attending the program, she also was a science minor. The GHP experience was invaluable to Sara and her development in music. Being surrounded by many talented musicians helped her develop an intense level of self-motivation, which continues to affect her musical endeavors today. Sara explained that “after GHP, I guess you could say I was a lot more focused. I knew my goals, and I knew how to achieve them after GHP; and I also had a better work ethic on the horn.” Though her brass teacher specialized on trumpet, Sara was still able to learn so much about musicality through exposure to different types of ensembles and more challenging music. Sara also believes her GHP experience made her more self-confident and able to meet new friends, as well as helped her shape her future goals as a musician.
Sasha

With black hair, brown eyes, and simple glasses, Sasha is an energetic girl with beautiful unique features that display her multiracial background. She speaks quickly and laughs often; her exuberant personality makes being around her exciting and enjoyable. Though she is extremely entertaining and outgoing, Sasha also is very serious about her education and curious about all kinds of different cultures.

As a sophomore in college and a pre-med student, Sasha is determined to earn her degree in biology no matter how challenging some of the classes become. Sasha loves a challenge in science and math, and she always strives to earn top marks. She sadly explained that “I had a 3.9 GPA last year, but it has fallen since last semester – it’s a 3.67 now…Organic chemistry kicked my butt.” Though many pre-med students long for a 3.67 GPA, which is highly admirable in a pre-med student, Sasha always is looking for more challenge and improvement within herself. Sasha also is very curious about different cultures, specifically their languages; she is constantly attending different cultural celebrations and language classes, and she loves learning about new people and places. In order to encourage such a diverse community for her to learn from, Sasha is a minority counselor for the Georgia Daze program, an annual event that encourages minority students to enroll at the University of Georgia, as well as BEST, which stands for Black Educational Support Team.

Sasha grew up around St. Charles, an urban setting in west Georgia, and lived with her father, mother, and two little sisters in a small house for most of her life. She was a participant in the small magnet section of Carver High School, a math, science, and technology school, which also happened to be the school where her father taught. Sasha
was considered very intelligent by all her peers who, as Sasha explained, “were not focused on their education.” Despite her friends’ lack of focus, Sasha was constantly studying. She even sacrificed her social life for her education; she explained that she rarely went out with friends or stayed over at their houses – she was academically focused. Though she loved her high school, she always felt a little different and stood out amongst her peers. This feeling of difference was not only because of her giftedness, but also because “Carver High School was 99% Black, so [she] was the minority at [her] school – [she] was half White, so that made [her] different.” Sasha’s father is Black, and her mother is White; this experience of a multiracial family encouraged Sasha and her two little sisters to be more open-minded and accepting of different cultures. However, Sasha pointed out that since her town was either Black or White, she really was not exposed to different cultures until she attended GHP. Though Sasha may not have spent a lot of time with friends outside of school, she was definitely outgoing and considered one of those “nice girls you could always go talk to” in school. Sasha became very involved with her school during her junior and senior year and was elected class president.

Sasha attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program as a math major and counseling minor. Though the math concepts taught at GHP were extremely difficult and much more complex than anything she had experienced in her high school courses, Sasha loved the new and creative ways of approaching and teaching math that she found at GHP. Sasha declared that “GHP teaches you to think outside the box, and I just loved that.” Her experience as a GHP student encouraged her to be more creative in academics and everyday life. Sasha also valued all the different people she met at GHP; she embraced every culture she was exposed to and even tried to learn little sayings in each
language. Sasha found that her participation in GHP helped her become more self-confident, socially and academically, and also made her a more independent person and curious learner.
CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

Introduction

All five of the gifted young women in the study considered their participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) to be a beneficial experience that definitely influenced their future goals and general self-concept. In analyzing the data, three major themes emerged regarding the gifted girls’ social and emotional development and the possible influences participation in the residential honors program may have inspired. One prominent theme within the data was the improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to unique learning environment. Another theme that emerged was the improvement in social self-concept through the establishment of a true peer group. Finally, as the participants described improvement in academic/talent self-concept and social self-concept, another pertinent theme materialized – the development of security in identity. Each one of these themes is broken down into sub-categories that represent the actual GHP experiences the girls believe to be most influential within each category and help clearly explain the phenomenon. The theme of improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to unique learning environment is broken down into four sub-categories. The four sub-categories include the importance of the challenging and unique curriculum, the significant experience of being surrounded by other talented peers, the development of appreciation for talent and self-motivation, and the encouragement of curiosity and creativity. The phenomenon of the improvement in social self-concept through
establishment of a true peer group seems to occur due to four specific sub-categories as well. The sub-categories consist of the significance of being surrounded by students with high levels of maturity, a more accepting environment, exposure to a diverse group of people, and, finally, the development of strong relationships with GHP peers. The final theme of security in identity can also be explained through the separation of four sub-categories. The sub-categories within the theme are the development of independence, the establishment of sense of self and future goals, exposure to different possibilities in talent area, and feeling more prepared for college. Each participant’s parents also contributed to the study in providing their perspective on their daughter’s social and emotional development as a result of participation in GHP. The data collected from the parents compliments the participants’ data and improves the validity of each theme.

**Improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to unique learning environment**

Each participant expressed some level of frustration with their regular high school’s academic environment. This frustration was typically in response to not being challenged within their talent area and constantly experiencing boredom. Since each female was gifted within her area, each participant explained that she was always ahead of the rest of the class and was not receiving any challenge within the regular school day. Sasha, whose talent area is math, explained, “In class, I would get ahead and get bored easily. I would learn real quick, but the teacher would have to go over it ten more times for everybody else… I would just end up reading in class.” This experience was particularly upsetting for Sasha since she was in fact enrolled in the science and math magnet program of her high school. Sasha pointed out:
The magnet program was stressful sometimes. Like my calculus class, the material they taught was challenging, but it was repetition a lot too. After the first few times the teacher taught it, I got it, but everyone else didn’t get it. We would spend a lot of time on material that I thought we could have covered in five minutes, but it would take the rest of the class thirty minutes.

Sasha’s frustration with the academic environment of her school only increased when discussing classes that were taken outside of the magnet program; enrollment in such non-magnet classes like history and English brought on negative feelings of, as she put it, “Why am I even here?!” Ashley also expressed similar frustrations about her high school science classes. She stated “I wasn’t challenged until I got to AP level courses. In those beginning courses like biology, I excelled, but it really wasn’t fascinating.” Though Sara’s talent area was music and not necessarily an academic subject, her description of her experience in band class echoed both Sasha’s and Ashley’s feelings of frustration. Sara described that “a lot of it was just going through the motions…as a beginning band program, we weren’t playing hard stuff.” Katie also experienced boredom in her talent area, English; her high school English courses were dull, and she emphatically pointed out “I always hated it when we would read something and just answer summary questions – when it was just the bare, skimming the top of what was there.” Elizabeth also expressed such feelings of boredom but was determined to create challenge for herself; she explained that “I was the type of person who would want extra work. And if something was too easy, I was the type of person who would go to the teacher and say, you know, ‘give me more.’ In German, in particular, I used to go into school early and do
work with my teacher. She and I would read fairy tales together, and she would teach me advanced grammar and stuff.”

The academic environment of each girl’s regular high school was also tarnished by her peers’ lack of appreciation or interest in giftedness. Sasha explained, “I know my class started out with 900, and we only had 210 graduate; so the focus was not on education for most of the kids in my school.” Katie also experienced feelings of exclusion due to her giftedness and recalled:

People a lot of times gave the impression that they thought we set ourselves above everyone, and we were so high and mighty…It wasn’t a nice feeling. We kind of got used to it and dealt with it, I guess. It never really discouraged me from getting good grades, but sometimes it would make me feel really underappreciated.

While Katie did explain that she was never picked on for being gifted, Ashley did not experience the same luck. Ashley commented, “I’ve never tried to play dumb, and I had friends who did, and it drove me crazy…I didn’t make a lot of friends that way, and all through school, I was the weird girl because I was smart.” Ashley even revealed that her nickname was “Queen of the nerds.” Sara also experienced the same lack of appreciation and encouragement in her high school; she explained that the band program was not accepted by her high school peers, and that even some of the coaches would not acknowledge the importance of the program. In general, each participant was desperately searching for challenge and acceptance.
Challenging and unique curriculum.

Each of the five participants expressed some sort of appreciation for the challenging and unique curriculum found in each talent area at GHP. They felt that the classes were much different from their experience at home and much more enriching; specifically, the classes were taught in unique ways, such as unusual activities and field trips, and were more challenging. For example, unlike the typical language class in high school, the language classes at GHP were more complex and emphasized speaking and communication abilities. Elizabeth explained, “With language it wasn’t so much like concrete learning, but total immersion in language, getting fluency and learning by being surrounded by the language all the time.” Like Elizabeth, Katie also enjoyed the new learning emphasis in her communicative arts classes. Where in high school she usually read a book, answered questions, and then took a test, at GHP Katie was exposed to more challenging books and actually was encouraged to research background information that would enhance each story. Katie enjoyed this new curriculum so much that her eyes sparkled when she reminisced about a particular GHP class she had taken:

That Norse literature class was so cool because we just dove right in and talked about it…we got all this cultural and religious background before we started reading anything, which is something I had never thought about, you know, because a high school teacher would just hand you the book, you would read it, and then answer questions. So, having all that background was really cool, and it made it more meaningful for me.

Katie went on to explain the many different classes she took at GHP and how interesting each one was. She particularly enjoyed the analytic nature of each communicative arts
class; this point was emphasized as she commented on a Legend of Robin Hood class that encouraged the students to analyze the differences found within each film depicting the legend. Much like Katie in communicative arts, Sasha appreciated the new approach to teaching math. She demonstrated a pencil and numbers trick that one of her teachers included within his class instruction at GHP in order to encourage the kids to analyze problems and not just plug numbers into a formula; the trick was truly baffling, but Sasha thoroughly enjoyed such tricks even though they took a while to figure out. She stated:

At GHP, they did things you would never do in class, like the whole pencil thing. A lot of people wouldn’t think that that is educational, but it is because it teaches you to think outside the box, analyze from different aspects, don’t automatically discount anything. It teaches you to look at things in many different ways, which is good because just because you read this, it may not mean that. It teaches you to analyze things in different ways.

Like the other girls, Sara enjoyed her music classes due to their more challenging structure, but it was not necessarily due to the different curriculum. Sara believed that each music class was constructed in order to encourage professional behavior that would be found in any esteemed musical group. She explained, “A lot more was expected of us, which was very good. I mean the stupid things you see in high school where people keep playing after the conductor cuts off, just things that specific, you don’t tolerate that in a good ensemble – that just doesn’t happen. The expectations were a lot higher from the big ensemble directors.” Sara enjoyed this professional atmosphere and also benefited from the exposure to a variety of music ensembles:
I got a broad view of everything that goes on in the music area. For example, orchestra, I had never sat in an orchestra before; being a euphonium player, they don’t have euphoniums in orchestras. So through that experience, I was able to play really good literature [music] in orchestra with a really good orchestra. Then for the brass quintet setting, well, usually if there is a euphonium in a brass quintet, they’re playing the trombone part – well this was the tuba part. Although it was the low stuff, it was still challenging in the fact that that’s not usually where I play so I really had to stretch that area of my low range; again, it was good literature [music] to play because euphonium players never get to play classical stuff. You know the instrument wasn’t invented back then so there’s nothing like that really written for us. So, it was a really good experience in that. And the brass choir stuff was fun.

Sara’s experience at GHP helped her not only to develop her talent, but also to see how that talent existed outside of the realm of band. She continued to express how grateful she was for that experience because it helped her see how much more she could do besides band and marching band, two ensembles that typically exhibit boring music for the euphonium. Sara emphatically asserted:

Band people, I feel like, get into this little bubble of “This is the band world and there’s only band music,” which is not always the best written music out there. And then there’s marching band, which is, again, not the most musically inclined thing; I mean you play loud and you move really is what you do. When you get to GHP you see the wide variety of music majors: choral people, orchestral people, jazz, you know classical… everything. You see people making music, and it’s
well written – it’s by talented performers. You know, classic literature not just
James Swearingen’s new band music – they’re playing Mozart – good stuff.

Ashley, who was a music minor at GHP, was in agreement with Sara regarding the music
department and their emphasis on professionalism and a wide variety of music. However,
she also added that the individual time spent with the teachers was very helpful in
developing your musical ability.

In addition to the challenging curriculum and creative teaching strategies, Ashley
and Sasha also benefited a great deal from the different academic environment at GHP,
specifically the absence of grades and the encouragement of risk-taking. Sasha recalled
how difficult the GHP math courses were and explained, “At first, I was really stressed
out about it, but then I realized, ‘this is not actually a class with grades. Even if I don’t
know what’s going on, I am not going to fail.’ The stress issue left then.” Sasha believed
that such a transformation experience of “big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big
pond” truly humbled her and taught her that it was okay to exhibit weaknesses in order to
fix them; before her GHP experience, Sasha suffered from perfectionism and felt like she
was just expected to know everything. Sasha pointed out:

I guess before GHP I was always like, “Oh I can’t do this,” and I would stress out
about that stuff. But when I got to GHP and had that moment where I was the
dumbest one in the classroom and didn’t know what to do, it was okay. When I
got back to high school and found something I didn’t understand, I didn’t stress
out about it so much, I just thought, “Well I can always ask for help.” Before I
guess I kind of felt like I had to keep this image that I was the smart one, and I
could always do the problems. If I asked questions in class, I thought people
wouldn’t think I was as smart, you know, “If she is so smart, why is she asking questions in class?” After GHP, though, if I had a question, I was going to ask it! I started raising my hand more, stuff like that.

Ashley exhibited similar feelings and explained that “[j]ust the fact that it was okay to speak out and be wrong, which I had never handled very well, it really helped me trust in myself a little bit more.” Ashley continued to explain that such a development of confidence in academics whether you were right or wrong truly made her more willing to exercise her talent without fear of not getting it right. She pointed out:

You have to put yourself out there. You have to be able to say, “Here I am to take on the world.” And if you’re always in your comfort zone, you’re not going to take on much of anything. You have to be wrong, and you have to make relationships that aren’t always the best. You have to make mistakes, but, so you know—you take the good with the bad. And you take that experience, and I think it makes you a better person. And, I think it makes you, not more gifted, but more attuned to your gift.

Both Ashley and Sasha felt that their GHP experience helped them overcome their fear of being wrong or asking for help, which definitely prepared them for the rigors of a pre-med schedule in college.

While the experience of a challenging and unique curriculum helped each girl develop within her talent area, the experience did not improve their feelings towards the academic environment in high school. The participants explained that while their frustration with their high school academic environment before GHP was upsetting, there were no words for how upsetting it became after being exposed to GHP classes. When
asked to describe her return back to high school, Sasha immediately yelled out, “Boring!” and continued, “It was kind of a relief because I was back into stuff I could do and understand easily, but at the same time I kept thinking, ‘Why can’t we do stuff like we did at GHP?’” Elizabeth also felt the same feelings of boredom in high school classes and believed it was due to the fact that she had matured in learning and analytical capabilities over the summer – she enjoyed the challenge of GHP and was ready for more. Unfortunately, Elizabeth had gone to GHP as a rising junior, so she had to endure two years of high school after her GHP experience. She described her return to high school as “Awful! To the point of in my senior year of high school I almost decided to do a year of joint enrollment and not even return to high school.” Each participant found solace in her Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses but still was hungry for more and ready to recreate the GHP experience in college. Katie put it best when she stated, “I think I was a better student, but I think I also had the feeling that I really should get out, get away from the structure of high school.”

*Surrounded by other talented peers.*

The challenging and unique curriculum of GHP was only enhanced by the talented peers that surrounded each participant while involved in the program. The participants found it refreshing to be immersed in a culture where learning was not only emphasized, but also “cool” and enjoyed by everyone around them. Sasha found the experience particularly novel and commented, “I know it’s stereotypical, but the cool kids in high school are never really the intelligent ones, at least at my high school, and I believe that that is because their focus on life is not about education. You’re not going to find someone at GHP that is not focused on their education.”
Elizabeth also enjoyed not only being around students that enjoyed learning and their education, but also being surrounded by others with her same level of talent, and even peers that were more advanced in German than her. She reflected:

German wise, I guess I probably was one of the ones towards the bottom of the class as far as language goes because there were people there that had lived in Germany for two years… I thought I had studied it for a long time, but there were people that started in elementary school. So that was weird as far as coming from the best of the bunch to the bottom. But it was kind of cool because I learned a lot being around people that knew more than I did. I mean some were practically native speakers.

Elizabeth not only found that she learned more from her talented peers in her major area, but also in her minor area, music. Many of the talented musicians in the woodwind minor decided to put together a quintet, and they would stay after class and rehearse various pieces. Elizabeth valued that experience and the peers that participated in it; they all went on to play in All-State band and other competitive musical ensembles.

Sara expressed similar feelings towards the music department; she pointed out that “expectations were a lot higher from the big ensemble directors, but more so from your peers because everyone there is just so talented.” She continued to explain, “You felt pressure to keep up with the people next to you. Everyone the whole summer was just constantly bettering themselves.” Sara valued her exposure to other talented musicians and also to their wealth of knowledge concerning other possible musical challenges outside of the typical high school experience. Sara explained:
Before, I had a very narrow view of what all was out there. All I really knew was the band program, and All-State, and district, and just that kind of stuff. But then, going to GHP, you see all these talented, talented musicians and everything they participate in. After I got back from GHP, I went and tried out for Atlanta Youth Wind Symphony and other things like that, so I got involved in more groups. But before, I didn’t know a whole lot about the extra-curricular music things you could do other than with your school. I didn’t know much about music other than band. You know, Choral, Orchestral anything, it was just band.

Sara’s peers at GHP helped her develop her talent, but they helped her realize possible activities that would continue that growth outside of GHP and high school.

Each participant believed that being surrounded by other talented peers only encouraged her talent development. Sara realized, “At GHP there wasn’t such a competition to stand out. I mean, everyone stood out in their own way...everyone was just supportive. I guess that was a big thing that wasn’t there in high school – being supportive of your peers.” Katie also felt that such exposure to all those talented people just left her in awe of everyone; when she realized at the end of her GHP experience that she was also one of those people that inspired awe in others, it was a large confidence boost regarding her academic/talent self-concept. She stated “that was a really big deal for me to think that people were looking at me in the same way.”

Developing appreciation for talent and self-motivation.

Being surrounded by other talented peers helped each participant further her development in a given talent area; however, that unique experience also encouraged each participant to develop an appreciation for talent outside of competition. This
experience was particularly pertinent for Katie. She enthusiastically described, “I was always shocked by the achievements of everyone else – the music majors, the dance majors, the art majors – all the stuff everyone did, I was just in awe of it.” That feeling of awe led to an intense appreciation for all kinds of talent that Katie believed was a result of the unique environment GHP exhibited. She pointed out that “maybe just because at GHP there is not competition, instead of competing with everyone, you embrace everyone’s talent. You just enjoy everyone’s differences instead of always competing to be the best.”

Many of the participants revealed that through appreciating and embracing everyone’s talent area, GHP peers and their successes ended up inspiring each participant to improve her own level of self-motivation. In discussing the coffee house presentations that many of the communicative arts majors participated in, Katie commented, “I never actually got up and spoke because I was too shy, but watching people brave enough to share their work – I was amazed that people could do that. That made me try to form more confidence about my own work.” Sara experienced a similar situation with her peers in the music department:

The social side of it led to my self-motivation. After you’re done with your minor you go chill for a little bit and you go practice. And you go practice to hang out with people over there when you’re taking a chop break or whatever. But, if you hear someone in the next room going at it for three hours, then you’re inspired and feel like, “Alright, I’ll stay in here, and I’ll go too.” So, I mean the social part of it was great, but I guess the self-motivating aspect of it was just so beneficial to me.
While both Katie and Sara found self-motivation through exposure to the talents of their GHP peers, Elizabeth experienced a similar development of self-motivation; however, for Elizabeth, this development occurred for different reasons. Elizabeth found that the GHP environment was extremely supportive due to her GHP peers’ positive attitude and desire to learn. Elizabeth pointed out that “there wasn’t any homework, so there wasn’t anything you were held accountable for. You could learn what you wanted, when you wanted, and at your own pace; because everybody wanted to learn, you could, essentially, learn a lot more.” In a typical high school setting, this environment would not lead to appreciation for talent but to slacking off and easy days; however, Elizabeth’s peers at GHP did enjoy learning and talent development, and they were all very self-motivated. Elizabeth’s attitude towards education was finally appreciated, and that feeling helped her become more comfortable with her gift as well as more self-motivated. Elizabeth thoughtfully explained:

I was more interested in things – I got more of a sample of what things could be not only from being in those classes, but also talking to those people and other students and realizing that it’s okay to be the smart one and sort of break out of everything, you know, be the one that stays after school and do stuff with the teacher, and be the one that answers questions in class, and not necessarily be afraid to speak up and be more of an energetic learner. I guess that’s what it has made me overall is an energetic learner, more engaged.

That experience helped Elizabeth develop a more positive academic/talent self-concept, which inspired an improvement in her self-motivation to learn anything and everything. She believed that this self-motivation made her a better student and a more “energetic
learner” in her Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes, as well as her college courses.

Sasha also developed an appreciation for talent and became more self-motivated; however, she believes this development was initiated not just by exposure to her peers’ talents and feelings of acceptance, but exposure to the rigors of challenging classes and projects. Sasha stated, “High school was just routine: you get up, you do this, this, this, and this, and you go home. They kind of baby you, where GHP was just like, ‘Go to work!’” Sasha appreciated that challenge and believed it helped her develop the self-motivation necessary to survive in a good university and, eventually, a medical school. In recalling some of the struggles she has had thus far in college, Sasha pointed out that she has definitely wanted to take the easier route sometimes and go back home and attend Columbus State so she can make those straight A’s that she is used to; however, she then smiled and confidently reassured herself that she can handle the challenge and will be better off because of it. Sara shared similar feelings with Sasha in that her development of self-motivation truly prepared her for the rigors of a musical career. She declared that “before I attended GHP, I didn’t have the effective practice habits – I was not as focused in what I wanted to do. Afterwards, I was driven with what I wanted to do…after GHP is when everything really picked up.” For both Sasha and Sara, being surrounded by challenging opportunities and high expectations helped them establish a more positive academic/talent self-concept, which empowered them with the self-motivation necessary in accomplishing their future goals.
Encouraging curiosity and creativity.

All of the participants believed that the many different classes, seminars, and activities truly encouraged improvement in their levels of curiosity and creativity. Elizabeth expressed that within the classes alone “it was an enriching environment, you were encouraged to learn instead of ‘here’s a test, here’s homework, this is what you have to learn, and this is the time frame in which you have to learn it.’” Elizabeth found that the GHP environment actually allowed endless pursuits of curiosities and explained, “You could explore stuff yourself.” Elizabeth particularly enjoyed a creative activity in German where the students had to put together a play completely in German for the rest of the GHP students; the German majors decided to do a Jerry Springer meets fairy tale characters concept. Elizabeth found that the experience of exploring those fairy tales and working together with her peers to put it together was really enjoyable:

We were able to work together to make this product. People who were really good creatively came up with the idea, people who were good grammatically were able to write the script, people who were really crafty were able to make the costumes, and we would all get together and rehearse. So I guess it was a lot of team building within the class, and it gave everyone an opportunity to find something they were good at. We were able to use language and learn a lot of language through writing and also find ways to communicate to people who don’t speak the language what we were trying to do.

Elizabeth believed that specific experience of putting together a play really helped her and a lot of her peers develop creativity in their language skills and communication skills. Ashley also experienced a similar creative activity within her major area, science. She
explained that each Saturday at GHP the science majors would get together for creative problem solving; for example, one Saturday, the science majors were broken up into groups and given the task to make a boat out of cardboard and trash bags that would actually carry people across the pool. Ashley remembered expressing disbelief when some actually worked, and stated, “that was pretty cool – solving all those types of problems and things I hadn’t been used to.” Sasha also experienced activities within the math department that inspired creativity and curiosity. For example, the math majors had to use nothing but their bodies and a camera to define various math concepts such as parabolas and functions. Sasha believed the activity’s purpose was to encourage the students to think creatively about math. This objective also was accomplished when Sasha and her peers were expected to compose poetry using nothing but mathematic equations. She declared, “It was that type of thing that was so different and made you think outside the box.”

Sara and Katie also found that their major classes inspired creativity and curiosity, but more so in establishing confidence in your creative ability. Katie described an activity in her creative writing class that was entitled “Killing Your Editor.” Katie and her peers were given a blank piece of paper in which they were to write and draw things that represented the many reasons they often felt self-censored in their writing. Each student then had to share all the many things that caused self-censorship and stab the “editor” with a pencil. This metaphoric destruction of your “inner editor” was only complete when the teacher had them meet early one morning with their papers in order to throw them into a fire and watch all of their reservations destroyed. Katie thoroughly appreciated this activity and walked away form the experience feeling empowered; she reflected, “It was
really very symbolic, and I remember walking away and feeling like, ‘Wow, maybe I can write what I want to write now.’” Like Katie, Sara also felt empowered due to many of the activities the music faculty encouraged. She explained:

Well a lot times they encouraged you to do student recitals and let you pick your own music. I mean sometimes they would steer you in a direction they wanted you to go, but for the most part, it was you bring them a good idea, and they’d say, “Great, let me help you out with that, let’s tweak a couple of things,” and then you’d go perform. So, performing was a huge thing there. I had never performed a solo before that just because I had never taken lessons – I never had to. It was a very encouraging environment in the music department.

Sara believed that such an experience helped her develop confidence in her ability to creatively interpret and perform music.

The encouragement of creativity and curiosity did not end once each girl was out of major and minor classes; in fact, each participant noted how there was always something to do, some seminar to be interested in. The whole environment of GHP is structured to constantly encourage learning, curiosity, and creativity. The program never wants a student to be bored; therefore, once the students are out of major and minor classes, the resident assistants provide a wide variety of activities called seminars for the students to participate in and possibly find a new hobby or interest area. Elizabeth smiled wide when discussing this subject and declared, “All the seminars were great. I did so many things from going to watch movies, to listening to concerts – of course I never missed any of the concerts – to current event discussions and all kinds of things like that.” She continued to explain the importance of the seminars:
I think that because GHP was not only about classroom education, but educating yourself as a person, it [participation in seminars] made you more well-rounded. You know, it taught me how to throw a Frisbee, it gave me perspective on homosexuality, it made me appreciate improv comedy for what it is because it is really hard, I learned how to swing dance…It just teaches you a lot of things and how to become a more well-rounded person. You’re learning, but it doesn’t really feel like you’re learning – you’re having fun and you’re enriching yourself.

Sasha also particularly enjoyed the different seminars and the fact they kept her busy; she pointed out, “I didn’t have my Nintendo to run to; I didn’t have my phone or mother to run to. You could either sit and stare at the dorm walls, or you could go find something to do.” Sara agreed with Sasha’s need for the seminars and asserted, “There was always something to do. The seminars were great.” Like Elizabeth and Sasha, Sara believed the seminars inspired creativity, but also helped her look into some of her curiosities about the future. Sara explained, “There were specific seminars that I would find interesting. Sometimes they were really focused on what you wanted to learn about: What’s it like to be an education major, How to get into UGA, stuff like that.”

Aside from seminars, GHP also offers themed dances every Saturday for the students. Even the dances inspire creativity; since all of the dances have themes like superheroes or the 80s, each student has to be creative in coming up with a costume for each Saturday night. This experience particularly affected Elizabeth’s creativity since her hall always came up with crazy group themes and costumes, such as creating outfits that represented the band KISS for the 70s dance. Katie also enjoyed the creativity required for coming up with costumes and constantly was impressed by her friends’ efforts. As
Katie displayed some of her GHP pictures, she came across one of her friends getting ready for the superhero dance. She thought it was cool that one of her friends considered Frank Sinatra to be a superhero and even managed to create a Sinatra costume. The creativity of her friend was only exaggerated when she explained that the other boy in the picture put a target bag around his neck like a cape and declared himself to be TargetMan.

This encouragement of creativity and curiosity stuck with many of these participants and even made some wish they had done more. Ashley mentioned several times during the discussion on seminars how she regretted not participating in more of them, particularly the ballroom dancing seminar. Once each participant established confidence in their ability to explore their curiosities and employ their creative ability within their talent area, an improvement was noticed in their academic/talent self-concept. Through that exposure to various activities in classes, seminars, and dances, each participant walked away more open-minded about different talents, skills, and hobbies. Katie specifically pointed out, “I try to read as many different things as I can now to expand my knowledge. I just try to stay curious about everything.”

*Improvement in social self-concept through the establishment of a true peer group*

All of the participants described a variety of experiences in dealing with an immature peer group in their high schools. These frustrating experiences included certain cliques that were very judgmental, as well as peers that were unfocused and did not care about learning. Before and after their GHP experiences, the participants felt like they were unable to truly relate to their peers in high school. Ashley recounted:
I’ve always been really quiet and really shy, and you know, in high school you know you’re going through all that stuff, and there’s so much drama. So I shied away from all that and didn’t want to get involved in that. And I had a couple friends that were so dramatic, and I’d always be the one who was hung out to dry, so I would just hang back a little bit and never really was outgoing.

Just like Ashley, Sasha was also unimpressed with the immaturity and lack of focus amongst her peers at home and ended up sacrificing a social life for her academic pursuits; she stated, “I was just studious – no parties, didn’t go anywhere, never stayed over at peoples’ houses.” Elizabeth was also disenchanted with many of her age-mates and tried to establish some type of true peer group that appreciated her maturity and talent: “I had a lot of friends who were older, and most of my friends were either in band or gifted honors classes.”

All five of the participants also expressed real frustration with their fellow female peers in high school. Even though girls tend to mature faster than boys, all of the participants felt like something happened to many of their girlfriends in middle school that made them competitive, judgmental, and incapable of supportive friendships. Ashley emphatically described the group of girls from her high school: “The girls were so concerned with ‘this person’s dating this person’ and ‘this is the best fashion’, and blah, blah, blah – It was just so backstabbing and dramatic; I couldn’t handle it!” She went on to explain how her personality did not fit the mold of the typical high school girl. She stated:

I think that stuff is stupid; it’s a waste of time. It has to do with a lot of things—I don’t have patience for that, and I also think that was due to the fact that my
parents didn’t have patience for that kind of stuff either. I was growing up not
talking about who’s in the latest movie, I was talking about the latest scientific
breakthrough, or something. So I think that has a lot to do with it. And I was
never really a girly-girl earlier. I was more mature than everyone else.

Ashley also described how many of her previous girlfriends would not only become more
congered with superficial things, but also would begin to disguise their talents in order
to fit in, something Ashley did not tolerate. Ashley declared, “I’ve never tried to play
dumb. I had friends who did, and it drove me crazy.” Ashley explained that these
experiences led her to become more comfortable around guys, a theme that echoed within
all of the participants’ comments about their high school experience. For example, though
she did have a few close girlfriends, Katie stated, “I got along better with guys. Girls
were petty and tended to argue over petty things.” Elizabeth also echoed the feelings of
Ashley and Katie and expressed:

I think it was the element of competition with girls that made me feel
uncomfortable. I felt like I had to prove myself all the time…I just feel like high
school girls were so catty and so competitive that you walk into the room and they
looked at you, and they were judging you – they were competing in appearance,
competing in intelligence, competing in everything – I have always been a fan of
if it’s comfortable, I’ll wear it, if it’s not, then sweat pants and a t-shirt is just fine.
I didn’t want to have to compete with people who cared about what I wore
everyday.

When asked why she had such an intolerance for the typical high school girl behavior,
Elizabeth continued, “I think some of that had to do with the fact that I grew up faster
than everybody else and couldn’t deal with the middle school drama of girls…I just saw through the superficiality of it all.”

*Surrounded by students with high levels of maturity.*

Each of the participants expressed to some degree how being at GHP finally gave them the opportunity to be surrounded by like-minded peers who shared similar levels of maturity, a true peer group. As she reminisced about the people of GHP and how they contributed to her experience, Katie stated, “It has to be the people; you could have GHP somewhere else on a different college campus. You’re just put in there with a bunch of people who are so diverse, and they’re all very intelligent, open-minded and creative people.” Katie could have never imagined such a rich environment of so many mature, different people before GHP. She pointed out that all the people were different, but everyone was mature enough to appreciate that and discuss the differences. When recalling the experience of meeting someone who was Catholic, a religion she had never encountered before in her small town, she explained, “I met this guy who was Catholic, and a couple of nights during the summer we just sat down in the Langdale lobby and had really deep, theological discussions, which is something I never imagined could happen.” Sara shared Katie’s feelings about the heightened level of maturity within GHP students and pointed out:

I felt like everyone for the most part was a lot more mature there. Everyone – they were self-motivated. I mean you didn’t really have to do anything other than get up and be where you were supposed to be and make your bed and stuff like that. Anyone that got better did it on their own – to be that self-motivated, you’ve got to be mature.
Many of the girls also pointed out that the heightened levels of maturity within the GHP students truly limited the existence of “typical high school petty stuff.” As Sasha described her high school and how all of her high school peers were too immature to realize the inappropriateness of judging people by their material possessions, she stated:

One thing I did notice at GHP was there wasn’t an emphasis on clothes or fashion – There was no “What do you have? And what do you have? And Oh, well I wear Gucci. I wear Prada. I wear Tommy.” That whole status thing wasn’t really there. You know, people didn’t care; they wore t-shirts and shorts and went about their business. Where in high school it was like, “What kind of shoes does she have on today, what kind of hairstyle does she have today, Are her nails done today?” At GHP, you know, we had to wash our own clothes, we couldn’t get to the hairdresser, you couldn’t get your nails done… It was like everybody had been wiped clean – this is who you are when you’re at home and by yourself. So it was nice; I liked it for that fact because I don’t have a lot of money so I couldn’t walk around with Tommy Hilfiger and heels and stuff.

Like Sasha, Elizabeth also found that the people at GHP were too mature to participate in petty competition and judgment, specifically girls. For the first time, Elizabeth found that she could enjoy close friendships with girls as long as they were mature. She asserted, “We competed to get there, and we all succeeded. After that, there was no quantitative anything to say who’s better than whom… I think we all sort of realized that [petty competition] is dumb! So we bonded over that.” Elizabeth was also impressed, like Katie, with the level of maturity amongst the GHP students concerning diversity. She particularly found this fascinating when recalling a seminar that facilitated a debate on
homosexuality in society; she participated in the debate and kept thinking “Oh my gosh, this is amazing…I could never do this at home. I don’t have friends that are mature enough to carry on a mature conversation about gay rights at sixteen years old.”

*Accepting environment.*

The participants found that since their peers possessed higher levels of maturity, the social environment of GHP was much more accepting than what they had experienced in their high schools. When discussing the environment and culture of GHP, Sara posited, “I think socially with GHP it was a really great experience because I think the environment is just very welcoming. I mean there are so many different people from different areas in one mile square area, and everyone accepts people for who they are.” Elizabeth accentuated Sara’s comment by explaining, “it was very liberal and very free – really enriching. It was very much an ‘anything goes’ environment. I mean you could do whatever you wanted to do. You could act silly, you could act stupid, you could act smart, and the people liked that…somebody thought it was cool, and somebody thought is was okay.” No matter what your personality resembled, everyone at GHP would accept you; within such an environment, you also would find that there might be someone else who shares your same style. That opportunity to be exposed to such an environment really helped all the participants become more comfortable with themselves in relation to their peers.

Being a part of such an accepting environment was liberating for many of the participants and improved their social self-concept. Sara pointed out that “when you’re there you don’t really have to put up a front or anything; you can just be who you are. Yeah, I am kind of a band nerd – that’s who I am, and that was accepted there.” Finally
feeling acceptance amongst a true peer group, people who reflect similar feelings and attitudes towards talent development, particularly affected Sasha’s social self-concept. She explained:

I guess I finally became comfortable in my own skin. If people at GHP could accept me for who I am and not what I wore or how I looked, then why couldn’t people back home. So I decided I wasn’t going to walk around high school with, honestly, I was wearing XXL men’s t-shirts before and pants that were just huge everyday! I was just slouchy looking because I didn’t want anybody to see how I looked. Then after GHP, I just felt better about myself. So I started dressing a lot better, I got better clothes. Just in general, my self-confidence was better and people noticed.

Even though Ashley explained that she did not branch out as much as she would have liked to at GHP, like Sasha, she also felt like the experience of being a part of that accepting environment improved her social self-concept. Ashley stated that after her GHP experience “it was easier making friends, especially because there are a ton of people here [UGA] who I greet with, ‘I knew you from GHP!’” So it’s easier because you feel like, ‘okay, people aren’t going to think I am weird.’” Each participant benefited from the accepting environment at GHP; the experience exposed them to what a group of true peers could be, and each girl pointed out that experiencing that feeling of finally being able to reveal your true self without experiencing negative consequences inspired the development of a positive social self-concept.
Exposure to a diverse group of people

Many of the participants also felt that the accepting environment of GHP was so impressive since there were so many different people from different places, religions, cultures, races, and sexuality identifications. This exposure to a diverse group of people helped many of the participants develop their own accepting element of a positive social self-concept. Sara described:

At GHP there are so many different types of people—like race, sexuality, personality, everything; in Marshall, land of suburbia, there’s just really not a whole lot of difference from one person to the next. Our school is predominantly White. While my parents are very liberal, and I was exposed to homosexual people and people of different races outside of school, in school I wasn’t, and that’s where you spend the majority of your time. At GHP it was just like, anything goes, pretty much. It was really interesting to get to know the different types of people, and like I said everyone was very accepting. I don’t remember anyone getting made fun of for being gay or any racial slurs thrown out or anything like that because that’s just not what you do. It helped me to identify with different types of people and I guess open my mind a little bit more.

Similar to Sara’s summary of GHP, Elizabeth also recalled different experiences that caused her to grow and become more open-minded. She particularly remembered attending a discussion on gay rights with a good friend of hers whose mother was a lesbian. Elizabeth had initially attended the seminar just to support her friend, but left a changed person; she reflected:
Right now I am a very staunch gay rights activist, and that is something that is really really important to me. I think that might have been something that just started there [GHP]…There were lots of gay people at GHP, and you were surrounded by all that, and I guess I had never had exposure to that before.

Katie’s description of her experience in the social atmosphere of GHP echoed that of Sara’s and Elizabeth’s stories regarding exposure and acceptance of homosexuality. In fact, it was particularly eye-opening for Katie because she came from a town that did not allow exposure to homosexuality. She explained:

Where I’m from it is a big deal for someone to say, “I’m gay.”…That’s just the kind of mindset that’s in my town. I never really adopted that mindset, and I always had a feeling it was wrong; then at GHP, meeting all these people that were like “it’s okay for anyone to be who they are,” it was just awesome and so mind-opening.

These girls embraced the differences in people and felt that it was more important to always encourage peers to express their true selves. The girls became more open-minded and accepting, which improved their own contribution to developing a positive social self-concept.

Many of the participants also enjoyed being exposed to the many different cultures represented at GHP. This was particularly true for Sasha and Elizabeth. Sasha jokingly pointed out:

Carver High School and GHP equaled two different places. Carver High School is 99% Black; I was a minority at Carver High School – I was half White, so that made me different. I had never gone to school with Asians; I had never gone to
school with Indians; there were maybe two White kids at my school. I remember going to GHP and thinking, “Where are the Black people?”

Sasha went on to explain how the culture shock, at first, made her very uncomfortable and homesick; however, within two weeks, she had embraced everything about different cultures and was curious about everything. When reminiscing about her experience of learning a song in Chinese and singing it the entire night, she commented:

I just felt so ignorant when I got there because there were all these different cultures I had never even attempted to gain knowledge about or learn about. So I always was asking, “How do you say this,” “How do you say this?” you know, in Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, French, I just wanted to learn as much as I could, especially the languages. I just felt like I could learn so much more about different cultures than back at home because at home we don’t have all these people. At home, my whole area is just White, Black, that’s it. If you’re lucky, you might find some Spanish people, but that’s it.

Sasha’s love for different cultures and their traditions and languages remains to this day to be a huge interest area of hers. Much like Sasha, Elizabeth also enjoyed being exposed to different types of religions. She explained:

Something else that was really cool about GHP was being able to go to church services on Sunday. I am Jewish, I was raised Jewish and never really had a lot of experience going to something else. My roommate was Catholic, so she took me to church with her one day, and I took her to synagogue with me one day. I also went to a Presbyterian church…And I would go to synagogue, and I would take
my friends with me; it was just a learning experience for everybody, you know, “This is what I do – now introduce me to what you do.” Elizabeth thoroughly enjoyed being exposed to a variety of different religions and felt that such exposure helped her understand and appreciate some of her friends more so than before. Overall, each participant believed exposure to a diverse group of people in an accepting environment helped them build not only tolerance, but acceptance of different types of people. This experience was important since it made each girl develop a more positive social-self concept in regards to her own responsibility to society. Katie, in particular, believed the experience was so beneficial that in composing advice to give to new GHP participants, she emphatically stated, “Try and meet five new people every day… The more people you meet, the more diverse you become in thinking.”

Development of strong friendships

The participants believed that the GHP social environment was conducive to building stronger bonds and friendships, much more so than what each girl was used to in high school. Elizabeth found that the relationships were much more mature due to the fact she was actually living with these people; she also believed that it made her more capable of assessing the value and sincerity of a friendship: “I think you grow up and realize that there is a world outside of high school. You realize that maybe the relationship that I have with whoever is not as mature as a relationship that I am capable of having.” Like Elizabeth, Sasha also was amazed at how close and strong each relationship became while at GHP. While discussing her three very close friendships she made at GHP, Sasha explained:
I guess because my friends from high school, you were only around each other from 8am to 4pm, and you couldn’t really talk that much…However, at GHP, I was up in the morning, go to class, and then you were done by 4pm, so from 4 till 10pm that was your free time, and I was always with them. There was no, “Call you on the phone.” I was there in person and we were eating lunch together, eating dinner together, you know. You had more time to bond, so the bonds happened faster.

Like Sasha, each participant expressed the importance of living amongst their peers and how that continuous, one-on-one exposure really improved the level of the friendships; however, many also pointed out that the level of maturity and intelligence played an integral role in the development of such strong bonds. Both Katie and Elizabeth continued to stress the point that they could just talk for hours about anything and everything with their new friends, and as Elizabeth put it, “the conversations we would have were just above and beyond and on such a deeper level than anything I ever experienced at home.”

Each participant believed the development of stronger, deeper friendships really helped them when they returned home. Many of the girls kept in touch with the many new friends and would spend hours on the phone reminiscing about GHP and discussing the latest current event. These stronger bonds revealed to each girl what true friendships with true peer groups could be like; many of them left for home with a new idea of what they needed in a friendship in order to support their own identity, which was an invaluable lesson to learn while developing a social self-concept. This particular element of a positive social self-concept continued to influence the girls, and many of them
expressed the joy of coming to college and being reunited with so many friends from GHP and even making new ones based on similar membership to that GHP group. In fact, with a big smile on her face inspired by the memories of such friendships, Katie expressed, “It was a lot of fun to connect with all the people there, but I also think it is really useful in meeting new people… anyone you meet that has gone to GHP, it is like an automatic friendship.” She continued to explain, “GHP taught me how to meet people and trust that you can just walk up to someone and have an interesting conversation.”

Security in identity

Due to the lack of academic support and social acceptance from their high school peers, the participants expressed feelings of low self-confidence before they attended GHP. Each girl felt like she was not able to truly express her true self in her high school atmosphere, therefore, was unable to mold her actual identity. Katie sadly recalled, “I was pretty self-conscious, especially in early high school, about things I wrote, the way I looked – just all around self-conscious.” She continued to explain that “I felt like I had to be a certain person just because I’m in Jacobson, which is a small town… You had to stay away from anything out of the box or out of the ordinary.” Katie did not feel like she could truly be herself and explore her many different curiosities; instead, she spent a great deal of time forming her identity to represent the thoughts and ideals of her peers and town.

Sasha also experienced a very difficult time expressing her true self; this was mainly because her peers judged her based on her looks. She solemnly stated, “My self-esteem was pretty low because I was pretty overweight… I actually quit wearing shorts back in middle school, and I didn’t wear shorts again until after GHP. I just wasn’t
comfortable with the way I looked.” Sasha believed that the majority of her high school peers were very materialistic and immature; she became very somber when describing how she would constantly wish they could see the “inside” of her and not judge her based on her looks, clothes, and style. When describing her overall self-concept before GHP, Sasha stated, “I was outgoing to a certain extent, but I always had reservations. I always felt like I didn’t want to step too far out of my boundaries because I didn’t want people to react the wrong way, or embarrass myself.” Like Katie, Sasha felt like she could not reveal her true self to her high school peers, and even if she did, they would not completely accept her.

Like the other girls, Ashley also had a difficult time in high school expressing her true identity, specifically in academics. Even though Ashley was very talented in most subjects, she described how she would sit towards the back and always avoid being called on. Ashley commented, “I wasn’t very confident. I was never one of those kids who would answer questions in class, unless it was English…I was just very quiet.” While Katie, Sasha, and Ashley described difficult experiences that affected their self-concept in high school, Sara and Elizabeth also felt awkward in their high school groups but found solace amongst their band peers. However, all five of the girls were trying to find their niche in high school where they could express their true selves and develop and affirm their identities.

*Development of independence.*

In the midst of the confusing time of high school, each participant believed that she was on a path not leading to her own identity but to the development of an identity acceptable amongst her peers. However, the participants found that the experience of
GHP encouraged them to become more independent and not rely so much on peer approval, a necessary realization for the establishment of a true identity. When discussing the overall environment of GHP, Elizabeth pointed out:

> It was what I expected, and I loved it. I liked the freedom of it and sort of being able to grow up and be independent. My feeling from being at home was very rigid. I had the same group of friends from when we were in middle school until I graduated from high school. And, yeah, that comfort was nice, but I felt like I had my niche, and I was what I was and couldn’t be anymore or any less.

Elizabeth went on to describe how the GHP experience helped her realize she was capable of so much more; she stated, “It turned me very independent, and I think even now because I got a taste of that independence so early… I don’t feel like I need companionship to do things.” She continued with the assertion, “I am secure and comfortable enough in myself that I don’t need somebody to keep me company.” This establishment of independence has guided Elizabeth through the remaining years in high school and, now, the first few years in college, and she has found that it has helped her continue to maintain the creative and self-assured identity that was affirmed through her experience at GHP. Elizabeth also pointed out, “I think that living on a college campus with an RA and doing the college thing, you know, that really makes you grow up a little more, and it [independence] had a lot to do with that feeling of maturity and growing up.”

Like Elizabeth, Ashley and Sasha also appreciated the opportunity to become more independent young women; however, their experience in the development of independence was instigated by severe homesickness during the first few weeks of GHP. Ashley explained, “Because I was able to deal with homesickness, I realized I got
homesick when I got bored, so I needed to go do something. I also realized that it was okay to be away from home.” She continued her explanation by stating, “Home is still there, I can still call mom and talk – it’s not that big a deal.” Sasha had a similar realization and described how at first she hated GHP just because it was not home and did not present or encourage the same activities to fight boredom, such as Nintendo. However, once Sasha realized that she could also have fun in various seminars, her attitude towards GHP improved, and she decided she enjoyed being away from home and could handle the challenge. Sasha asserted, “When you find other things to rely on than what you’re used to, you feel like, ‘Okay, I can do this.’ I didn’t want to go home anymore, and by the end I was crying and didn’t want to go home at all.” She even continued to describe how the experience of living on her own was very beneficial and quite different from home:

I liked GHP because it gave me a chance to be on my own. Before GHP, I had always been in my – like my mother can see me, my mother can call me. But you get to GHP and your mother’s not there; so you can do what you want, but these are your time limits, don’t leave the magic square, eat when you want, you can do anything during these times, you have certain responsibilities and restrictions, and you will be checked – It was like being an adult, not a real adult, but it was the first time being on my own and having my own responsibilities.

Sasha appreciated the chance to become more like an adult; she believed that the experience made her more responsible and more capable of taking care of herself physically and emotionally. She stated, “You had to keep reminding yourself to take care of yourself – no one else was going to help you do it.” The development of independence
within both Sasha and Ashley helped them become more comfortable with being alone and not relying on friends and family to create comfort zones; they found that this experience was invaluable and prevented them from experiencing severe separation anxiety once they attended college.

*Establishment of sense of self and future goals.*

Each participant found that living on her own on a college campus and being surrounded by a true peer group day and night really encouraged her to intensely assess her true self. All of the participants believed their participation in GHP helped them establish a sense of self, which enabled them to develop a strong identity. Elizabeth posited that the relationships she made at GHP and the many hours of deep conversations helped her establish a sense of self; she explained, “it really gave me the opportunity to figure out where I stood on things and who I was, and what I thought about things.” Elizabeth returned to her high school a changed person – her true self; she described how her friends noticed the change and had a hard time adjusting to it, but she refused to adjust to them and was armed against the typical peer pressure with an established identity and positive self-concept. Much like Elizabeth, Katie also found that the experience of GHP helped her explore and establish her sense of self, as well as learn how to express her true self amongst others:

I was just more willing to say what I thought because a lot of times if I ever thought something, I would think well maybe it is not the most acceptable thing to say, so I wouldn’t say it. I had a lot of talks with my mom about how I wish I could say this, but coming back from GHP, I felt like I can say this because these people in this town are not the only thing in the world.
Sara also felt like her experience at GHP made her more capable in expressing herself: “I was a lot more open and outgoing afterwards because before I was very quiet…I just came back a lot more open and outgoing. I spoke my mind a lot more freely then before. I felt like they were all good changes for me, and I was happier after I came back.” Each girl believed that the environment of GHP encouraged you not only to be yourself, but also to establish a firm sense of self, which made you more able to express that true self once outside the accepting environment of GHP. Elizabeth put it best when she explained, “I think the majority of the people are in their little world in high school realizing that there may be more out there. Once they get into in an environment where they can break free of the mold, they do.” Each girl truly did break free of the mold imposed by her high school peers and developed a firm sense of self, which made her capable in taking on the future with a unique identity.

The establishment of a sense of self was particularly pertinent to Sasha’s social and emotional development. Before GHP, Sasha described how quiet and reclusive she was, not even involved in any high school clubs. However, once Sasha returned from GHP with a new confidence and an established sense of self, she finally was able to express the very outgoing person she was. Sasha exclaimed:

After GHP, I was class president for junior and senior year. Like I said, I ended up being valedictorian. I did everything! When I got back from GHP I didn’t want to just focus on school work, I wanted to get involved. I just started getting into everything. I wanted to do things – I was tired of being the smart kid that didn’t do anything… I was more out of my shell, and I had gained a lot of self-confidence.
Sasha continued to go on and explain the actual evolution she experienced in developing her sense of self at GHP:

   My focus came off of what I looked like and what clothes I had, off of stuff like that. I became more focused on “who are you on the inside.” You know, “Are you happy with yourself?” GHP brought me to my self, almost like a religious experience. I was focused on who I was on the inside, the outside didn’t matter anymore. I guess I just cleaned my self up a bit.

Sasha’s self-confidence and sense of self improved dramatically over the time of GHP, and she was able to continue that improvement at home and in college. She found that being removed from the outside world with continuous exposure to television and its unrealistic ads helped her establish what was real and what really mattered; that realization also made her become weary of media and discover that she was not that different from everyone else in reality.

   Ashley believed that her GHP experience helped her establish a sense of self that encouraged her identity within academics. She explained that being isolated from the outside world made her “get down to the core of everything and focus on what [she] needed to do for [her] future, without all that junk.” She elaborated:

   The distractions are removed. I mean there were a few close friends there, but the boyfriend wasn’t there, the best friends weren’t, and like all the movies, and the world and the fashion, and the superficial cultural stuff wasn’t there. So I was able to say “I like this a lot; this is what I want to do, and this is what I need to do to set myself apart to get there.” So that’s why it was motivational, because it helped me focus on what I wanted to do for my future.
Ashley’s firm development of a sense of self, or as she put it, “the core of things,” immediately led to her looking to the future and establishing goals for herself.

Much like Ashley, Sara and Elizabeth experienced the same development of a future identity through an established sense of self. Elizabeth finally had the necessary independence to realize she did want to be a teacher despite her mother’s and peers’ initial negative reactions. Sara had always wanted to pursue a career in music, and her GHP experience helped her realize she was definitely capable of accomplishing that goal; she also realized she needed to attempt the necessary steps of becoming more involved with music outside of band in order to accomplish that goal. Sara declared:

As a music student, I know I was a lot more motivated. I knew what I wanted to do, and I had my goals. I wanted to make All-State, and I wanted to be in the honor band. I wanted to get into this studio, and I wanted to get a scholarship. I started taking lessons my senior year; from then on, I had my regular practice schedule, which before I went to GHP I didn’t have a regular practice schedule at all. I had no week-to-week homework assignment with lessons...So after GHP, I guess you could say I was a lot more focused. I knew my goals, and I knew how to achieve them after that; I had a better work ethic on the horn.

All of the participants are currently pursuing their future goals at the University of Georgia, and each one of them believes the experience of establishing a firm sense of self at GHP made them more able to develop future goals and abide by them no matter how challenging.
Exposure to different possibilities in professional fields.

One experience that was particularly influential for Sara and Katie in developing future goals was the exposure to the many different possibilities within their talent area. The GHP classes within each respective area exposed both girls to a variety of opportunities, as well as possible paths that would help them experience these opportunities. For example, Sara explained:

After GHP, it was more than just band, it was music - I loved music. Everything about it, every aspect about it just fascinated me. I was interested in all of it, I appreciated all of it. So, I knew that’s what I wanted to do in some capacity…That also opened my options a little bit more. I knew there was more out there than just band. I could teach general music in high school; I could try to be a performer; I could be a string teacher. There were a lot more options than I initially thought when I first started to pursue music, and GHP showed me a lot about that.

Sara realized the variety of career possibilities that would allow her to pursue music, not just band; however, she also became more aware of the challenges a female would have to face within a music career. Sara always knew that the musical field of teaching and performance was a predominantly male profession, yet her experience at GHP made her more able to deal with that element of intimidation. Sara dealt with performing amongst a predominantly male group of students at GHP, and she is now in a college studio that presents the same demographics. She explained that that experience can be intimidating at times, but it is nothing new, and she knows she is just as capable as her male peers. Sara asserted:
It doesn’t end in the studio, and it won’t end when I become a band director.

Again, being one of the few females in a predominantly male area, that is going to get me used to being a female band director, and especially if I choose to pursue high school because how many high school female band directors can you think of – not very many, they usually do middle school or elementary.

Though she never expressed feelings of intimidation due to gender, Katie also appreciated being exposed to the variety of possibilities within her area, communicative arts. GHP provided Katie with the chance to take an advertising class, a possibility she had been interested in. After experiencing that class and analyzing all the different strategies used in advertising, Katie was, as she put it, “pretty fired up on the idea that [she] wanted to pursue marketing in college.” Katie continued to explore her interest area and is currently pursuing marketing at the University of Georgia.

*Preparation for college.*

All five of the participants emphatically pointed out that their GHP experience encouraged their identity development, which made them more prepared for the rigors, independence, and culture of college. The six week exposure to college life was particularly important to Katie in that it gave her the confidence to actually succeed in leaving her tiny hometown, a task many before her had failed in accomplishing. Katie commented:

I knew I was always going to leave Jacobson. I wanted to come to UGA just because I grew up watching the football games. However, everyone who had gone to UGA from my high school, usually about three people every year, if we were lucky, only one person out of the three would end up staying. When I told people
before I went to GHP that I wanted to go to UGA, they would always say, “Okay, right. Sure you’re going to make it up there at UGA.” After Governor’s Honors, I felt like there was no reason I couldn’t go to UGA; my raised confidence level and what I could do was enough to outweigh what other people thought.

Academically, Sara and Sasha found they were more prepared for the challenge of college. Both girls believed their experience at GHP not only improved their work ethic, but also their ability to adjust to collegiate academics. Sara explained that “the schedule aspect of [GHP] geared me up for college really well. It was good… it was very comparable, I guess. I just felt like I got so much out of GHP as far as my own personal work ethic.” Sasha also believed she developed a stronger work ethic, but her GHP experience also made her more comfortable with taking risks and asking for help. That experience proved to be invaluable for Sasha as she is now enrolled in difficult organic chemistry and physics classes that require her to seek out study groups. In addition to her work ethic and ability to take risks, Sasha also found that the teachers at GHP made her adjustment to college professors much smoother; she believed that at GHP there were only two types of teachers: liberal, creative types and conservative, lecture types. She went on to declare, “I was better prepared for college after experiencing both types of teachers at GHP.”

After overcoming homesickness and actually figuring out how to combat the emotional sickness, Ashley felt more confident in her future at college. She pointed out that even though she was terrified of leaving home before GHP, “[she] enjoyed the independence of GHP, and [she] felt more prepared for college – [she] wasn’t nervous about going away.” Ashley went on to explain that her early development of
independence also prevented her from immaturely exercising that independence like so many of her college peers. She commented:

I experienced independence, which, I think, made it easier to come to college. I didn’t have to go out and say, “I’m away from my family, so I have to go out and prove my independence” that I see in so many of my friends…I can’t tell you how many of my friends have gone out, and they’re like “Man! I’m not at home any more; I can go get plastered!” I always think, “Why do you go do that to yourself? Why can’t you be more mature?” I never experienced that need to rebel because I’m not new to being away from home any more.

Like Ashley, Sasha also found herself more prepared for the culture of college, but not necessarily in the same way, perhaps, instead by the same path. Sasha also experienced homesickness at GHP due to culture shock, but once she was able to embrace the many different cultures, she was absolutely fascinated in a variety of cultures and their traditions. Sasha pointed out:

It [GHP experience] definitely still influences me as far as different cultures and wanting to gain knowledge about different cultures – especially up here because you are surrounded by so many different people. GHP prepared me for college; when I got here it wasn’t like culture shock all over again.

Both Ashley and Sasha found ways to overcome their homesickness at GHP and that experience helped them develop the independence necessary to succeed within college culture.
Perceptions of parents regarding their daughter’s social and emotional development as a result of participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program

In order to provide more perspective on the possible influences GHP can have on a gifted female’s social and emotional developmental process, each participant’s parents responded to the following question: What changes did you notice in your daughter after her experience as a student at GHP? Their contributions reinforced the different themes recovered in the data.

Regarding the improvement in academic/talent self-concept, all of the parents enthusiastically pointed out how valuable the GHP experience had been in encouraging their daughter’s curiosity, creativity, and knowledge within her talent area. Ashley’s mother explained:

She came back more mature, more well read on science issues, and more independent. By letting her explore music and the other arts, she further developed that side of her personality. She is much more interested in jazz, going to concerts, and surrounding herself with artistic things.

Like Ashley’s parents, Sara’s parents also found that Sara had improved in music and was more confident in her ability to pursue it as a future career: “Her self-confidence soared, and that enabled her to go on to many other honors, including the AYWSO at Emory and earning band and academic scholarships to UGA.”

Many of the parents also expressed how the noticeable improvement in academic/talent self-concept also prepared each girl for her experience in college. Katie’s mother explained:
Being at Valdosta for six weeks gave her a taste of what she could expect at college. She returned to Jacobson ready for the challenge. I am not sure if Katie’s transition from a small town to college life at UGA would have been as successful without the GHP experience.

Much like Katie’s parents, Sasha’s parents also appreciated the fact that GHP made their daughter more excited and prepared for college: “She learned better study skills and was more involved in the community, which allowed her to participate in and meet influential people…Sasha’s six weeks of living away from home in a dorm prepared her for going away to college.”

Some of the parents also directly addressed their daughter’s development of a positive social self-concept. Katie’s parents described the many strong friendships she had made at GHP and stated that “she still stays in touch with people she met at GHP, more so than friends she has had since 4th grade.” In addition to Katie’s parents, Sara’s parents also recognized the importance of the new, strong friendships she had made at GHP. Sara’s mother commented, “She talked glowingly of the overall experience and the new friends she had made from all over the state. She remained in close contact with many of them, meeting again at All-State and in college.”

While some of the parents specifically mentioned either improvement in academic/talent self-concept or social self-concept, many of them just described the overall changes they observed within their daughter’s identity. Elizabeth’s mother sincerely explained, “The opportunity to be away from home and bond with gifted peers changed her perspective of the world. The thing that strikes me, looking back, is that I think she knew she was forever changed as we left Valdosta…We sent GHP a child, and
it returned to us a confident and assured young lady.” Elizabeth’s mother’s words were only echoed by the other parents. Sara’s step-father stated, “I noticed a more mature, more focused, more sure of herself young woman when she came back home.” And, finally, Katie’s parents declared that “she returned home happy, bubbly, full of confidence, and ready for college and her future. We have always told Katie that she would get her reward for hard work later in life, but she never realized what we were trying to explain to her until GHP.” All of the parents were extremely impressed with their daughter’s transformation over a six week period; each one of them expressed in some way how the experience of participating in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program positively influenced their daughter’s social and emotional development.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

All five of the gifted females found that participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program positively influenced their social and emotional development; this belief was also complimented by the data provided by each participant’s parents. The data provided evidence that supported Shavelson’s, Hubner’s, and Stanton’s (1976) theoretical model of self-concept and its hierarchical nature. Each girl specifically mentioned to some extent experiencing improvements in her general self-concept as a result of developing confidence in both academic/talent areas and social settings. Three major themes emerged from the data regarding each girl’s social and emotional development in relation to participation in GHP. One prominent theme was the improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to a unique learning environment. Another evident theme was the improvement in social self-concept through the establishment of a true peer group. Finally, the third apparent theme reflected the participants’ development of security in identity.

Each participant also discussed at great length the variety of experiences she had while at GHP that truly encouraged improvement within each hierarchical area of the general self-concept. The participants believed the improvement in academic/talent self-concept was a result of a challenging and unique curriculum, being surrounded by other talented peers, development of self-motivation and appreciation for talent, and encouragement of curiosity and creativity. Regarding their improvement in social self-
concept, the participants defined the beneficial experiences as being surrounded by students with high levels of maturity, a more accepting environment, exposure to a diverse group of people, and the development of strong friendships. As the participants described improvements within their academic/talent and social self-concepts, each participant pointed out that the overall experience of GHP helped them develop a positive general self-concept and security in identity; this evolution was a result of the chance to develop independence, establish a sense of self and future goals, be exposed to different possibilities within their interest area, and become more prepared for college.

All five of the participants described high school environments that imposed detrimental elements upon their giftedness and talent development, such as lack of challenge within the curriculum, encouragement of perfectionism, judgmental peer groups, and encouragement of conformity. These detrimental elements have been discussed by various researchers within the review of literature. All of the participants believed they were not being challenged to the extent they were capable of within their high school classes. Their frustration in not being able to fully exercise their gifts provided evidence that supported Enersen’s (1993) work, which revealed gifted children often need a curriculum that is more complex than that offered by the typical high school’s model. Many of the participants sought out challenge outside of class; however, this was typically looked down upon by their peers. Therefore, the participants believed their frustration regarding a need for challenge in academics was not only exacerbated by a dull curriculum, but also by unappreciative peers. This was particularly true in Sasha’s case as she pointed out, “The focus was not on education for most of the kids at my school.” Like Sasha, each participant found that due to her giftedness she was only able
to identify with a few people and was never able to establish an intellectual peer group. Echoing the work of Delisle (1992) and Torrance (1962), these findings provided evidence that gifted children often feel isolated from their agemates and are typically unable to experience relationships with true peers within their regular high school setting.

While many researchers posit that gifted girls will often disguise their gifts in order to gain acceptance and attempt to establish a peer group (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994; Hollinger, 1995; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001), the participants did not exhibit that behavior; however, some pointed out that they had witnessed some of their girlfriends attempting to disguise or abandon their giftedness in order to fit in. Ashley, in particular, became enraged when recalling such behavior from her friends and declared, “It drove me crazy!” Though all of the participants never denied their giftedness in order to fit in, many of them still expressed various experiences within high school that caused them to avoid revealing their true selves. Whether it was within academic or social settings, all of the participants felt confined to some degree. Katie specifically mentioned how she often would not express her true self because she always questioned if it would be accepted by the people of her tiny, conservative town; she went on to point out that she was often reserved and tried to “not step outside of the box or do anything outside the ordinary.” Like Katie, Sasha and Ashley also found that they were more reserved around their peers because their style or intelligence was not accepted. The girls’ sensitivity to their environment and reaction of hesitation and reservation supported the findings of Pipher (1994) and Reis (2001). As Enersen (1993) also found in her work, the findings of this study revealed that participation in a residential honors program finally provided the enriching environment the girls so desperately needed.
Improvement in academic/talent self-concept due to unique learning environment

Each participant believed that the challenging and unique curriculum found in GHP major and minor classes was exactly the challenge she needed to develop a positive academic/talent self-concept. Sasha, Ashley, Elizabeth, and Katie all discussed the many different activities that encouraged students to not only think creatively within their area, but also to apply that creativity in problem solving and analysis. The four girls found that they were much more inclined to “think outside the box” in GHP classes since, as Ashley noted, “It was okay to speak out and be wrong.” Katie also found that the emphasis on individual creativity, rather than the typical high school feeling of needing to appease the teacher, which was noted by Leroux’s (1988) research, helped her develop the confidence necessary in improving and sharing her creative writing. Like the other girls, Sara also appreciated the challenging curriculum; however, Sara found the curriculum to be beneficial for different reasons. The GHP music curriculum was challenging and encouraged professional behavior in each music student. Sara benefited from such high expectations and enjoyed the exposure to a wide variety of musical literature and musical ensembles.

Sasha and Ashley found that the learning environment of GHP was particularly conducive to learning due to the absence of competition and encouragement of risk-taking. Based on their descriptions of their high school academic experiences, not only were the girls not challenged, but also suffered to some extent from perfectionism, which Noble (1996) and Silverman (1991) point out is extremely detrimental to a gifted girl’s resiliency, creativity, and self-confidence. Sasha described that before GHP, she felt like she could never ask a question if she was confused because she had to “keep this image
that [she] was the smart one.” And Ashley rarely ever answered questions in most high school classes for fear of being wrong; she even would try to sit towards the back in order to avoid participation. The GHP experience helped Sasha realize it was okay to be confused or to ask for help, both reactions just meant you were learning challenging material; this realization encouraged Sasha to become the outgoing learner that she is today. Ashley also found that her GHP experience taught her “to put [herself] out there” in academic classes, a skill she felt was crucial if she wanted to pursue a degree in medicine. Both of these girls found that the GHP environment helped them develop the confidence necessary to establish a positive academic/talent self-concept, which enabled them to become more comfortable in taking risks in an academic setting. This evolution is so critical in a gifted girl’s development in that it enables her to trust her abilities and identify with a mastery approach to learning and exploring new interests (Kerr, 1994; Noble, 1996; Reis, 2001, 2002; Silverman, 1987; Walker & Mehr, 1992).

The participants found that the challenging and unique curriculum was only enhanced by being surrounded by other talented students who also valued learning. Rimm (1999) and Silverman (1991) both revealed in their research that environments that allow gifted girls to be surrounded by other gifted peers encourage the development of a positive academic self-concept simply because a gifted girl will not be “penalized for being a good student.” The findings of this study support Rimm’s and Silverman’s research in that each participant enjoyed being surrounded by other talented peers; they found that such immersion in an intelligent culture not only helped them feel more comfortable in expressing their desire to learn, but also increased their chances to gain more knowledge within their area. This experience was rather beneficial specifically for
Sara and Elizabeth. Sara pointed out that since her major area was full of students who had accomplished so many amazing things in music, there were higher expectations for others within ensembles, including maturity, professionalism, and motivation. Sara found this new environment of focused peers to be refreshing compared to the immaturity and apathy she found in her high school band. She believed that her GHP peers inspired her to work harder in order to meet the challenge of such professional expectations. Elizabeth also spoke highly of the people within her major and explained that some of them could have been considered native speakers; being surrounded by people who could speak so well only encouraged her own talent within German language acquisition.

All of the participants noted that the learning environment of GHP made them develop an appreciation for not only their talent, but also other talents; this appreciation, led to the development of self-motivation. Within the typical high school environment, many gifted girls attribute their success in a certain area to luck rather than ability; this observation was noted in Kerr’s (1994) and Reis’, Callahan’s, and Goldsmith’s (1994) research. While the participants within this study did not directly describe experiences that provided evidence for such findings, they did all find that the GHP experience made them more appreciative of their talent and willing to acknowledge their own accomplishments, an approach to learning they had not previously exercised; the description of their evolution seems to indirectly support the literature. Kaite, in particular, continued to express how “in awe” she was of every GHP student’s achievements; however, when she realized that she also was a GHP student that inspired awe in others, it made her truly appreciate her giftedness and become much more willing to express it. Much like Katie, the other participants also found that being surrounded by
so many talented people was truly enriching and enlightening. The experience made each girl become more self-motivated in trying to pursue her talents outside of grades and competition but, instead, for her own personal gain. Elizabeth truly illustrated this particular point when she declared that GHP “made [her] a more energetic learner, more engaged.” Each participant developed the positive self-concept that was necessary in order to identify personal talents and intelligence, as well as personal desires to improve that gift.

Kerr (1994) posits that being able to “fall in love with an idea” is a lasting passion that is intense and absorbing; she also found that nine eminent women recognized that being given the chance to “fall in love with an idea” truly directed their life ambitions. The findings of this study support Kerr’s point in that each participant thoroughly enjoyed the endless opportunities GHP presented in class and outside of class to explore curiosity and creativity. Each participant noted that there was always something different to do, and you never could get bored. Elizabeth described how between the classes, projects, and seminars, you learned so many new and different things – you really were “educating yourself as a person.” All of the participants were able to explore curiosities through their major and minor areas, as well as the many seminars offered after class. Each participant also appreciated being encouraged to use creativity in every aspect of exploring curiosities and found that this was very different from their home experience. Many of the participants believed the GHP environment helped them develop a love and appreciation for curiosity and creativity, and that love guided them through their future endeavors. Katie even pointed out “I just try to stay curious about everything because that
is what I really admired about people at GHP – I thought they were always curious about everything.”

The fact that each participant within this study, as well as each set of parents, noted an improvement in her academic/talent self-concept implies that the experience of participating in GHP or other residential honors programs is beneficial regarding the development of a positive academic/talent self-concept. In order to be comfortable in expressing their giftedness, each participant had to develop the ability to appreciate and acknowledge that giftedness; the environment of GHP, as implied by the findings, provided the participants with an academic environment that was conducive to such realizations. Other implications that can be observed through these findings are the different experiences that a residential honors program should facilitate in order to encourage the development of a positive academic/talent self-concept. Each participant found that the challenging curriculum with the absence of competition truly encouraged creativity and risk-taking, something they had not found in the typical high school setting. The establishment of a willingness to take risks and explore new things is, in fact, defined by many researchers as a critical component in developing giftedness. Therefore, the participants, through their experience as a GHP student, felt like they were more able to freely explore their interests and curiosities without having to worry about grades and appeasing teachers and peers. Each participant’s establishment of a positive academic/talent self-concept contributed to their overall social and emotional development and healthy acceptance of self.

While this study primarily presents implications for other residential honors programs, the findings also exhibit interesting implications for high school educators,
counselors, and parents. For example, in order to try and establish similar positive experiences for gifted girls within regular high school settings, this study implies that high school curriculum and high school teachers should present more opportunities for differentiated learning experiences, which would allow gifted students to explore more challenging opportunities during a regular high school day. These experiences should also encourage risk-taking and, therefore, should not present a heavy emphasis on grades. Such experiences would help gifted girls become more confident in their work and abilities, which would also lead to the adoption of a mastery approach to learning rather than the performance orientation that so many gifted girls are guided by. Though it can be difficult to add differentiated learning experiences to an already busy high school curriculum schedule, this study points out that extracurricular experiences can also accomplish this goal. Therefore, since extracurricular activities are so important in developing a positive academic/talent self-concept, high school counselors, teachers, and parents should become familiar with various extracurricular possibilities offered not only by the local school, but also by the state and nation, and they should continually encourage students to apply to and participate in such activities.

**Improvement in social self-concept through the establishment of a true peer group**

The participants’ social and emotional development was also influenced by an improvement in their social self-concept, which was inspired by the establishment of a true peer group amongst the students of GHP; the importance of a true peer group was noted in the research of a variety of scholars (Enersen, 1993; Howard-Hamilton & Robinson, 1991; Kerr, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001, 2002; Rimm, 1999; Silverman, 1991). Each participant noted the heightened levels of maturity they observed within all
of their GHP peers, a quality they had not been able to find in many students at home. Since they were surrounded by more mature and intelligent students, the participants believed the establishment of a true peer group led to the development of a very accepting environment. Many of the participants described feelings of relief in being able to finally express their true selves and, as Sara said, “not put up a front.” This accepting environment was particularly crucial in Sasha’s and Katie’s social and emotional development in that it gave them the necessary confidence to maintain that true self back at home within a more confining environment. Both girls commented on how they were a changed person when they returned home; their social self-concept had improved and was armed with confidence due to the realization, “If people at GHP could accept me for who I am and not what I wore or how I looked, then why couldn’t people back home.” Sasha and Katie returned to their hometowns as more outgoing individuals and more outspoken young women.

With the establishment of an accepting environment, the participants found that they were more comfortable in being exposed to different types of people who identified with various cultures, religions, and sexual orientations. The gifted girls enjoyed being surrounded by so many different people from all over the state and became curious about other peoples’ lives and traditions. Katie, Elizabeth, and Sara particularly pointed out that being exposed to homosexual students within the accepting and liberal environment of GHP made them become more open-minded about homosexuality in society, a social issue that had not been explored within their hometowns. The participants also noted that exposure to the many different cultures and religions that were represented within the GHP population encouraged acceptance of so many different people. Sasha and Elizabeth
in particular embraced the many differences within their GHP peers and became curious about different cultures. While Sasha explored the different cultures through learning language from her new friends, Elizabeth learned about different religions during the various church services she attended with her new GHP friends. Exposure to a diverse group of people encouraged each girl to become more open-minded and accepting of different types of people, which established their own personal responsibility in society and made them more able to contribute to that accepting environment of GHP. This experience of developing acceptance for other people regardless of race, religion, sex, or sexual preference helped each girl become more confident in her ability to comfortably exist within any social setting; therefore, this experience proved influential in improving their social self-concept.

The development of strong friendships with GHP peers also helped each girl develop a positive social self-concept. Elizabeth pointed out multiple times that the friendships she made at GHP were on a much deeper, more mature level than any of her friendships from back home. The development of such strong friendships with intellectual peers can be very influential in an individual’s exploration of personal giftedness. Such mature friendships can inspire growth through simple activities, such as intellectual conversations and impromptu debates; finding a person with whom one can relate to, in fact, is a growing experience that makes young women more comfortable with expressing their true selves (Enersen, 1993; Pipher, 1994). All of the participants experienced strong friendships at GHP, which they believed were easy to establish during such a short time due to the heightened levels of maturity, as well as close quarters. These friendships helped each girl grow and establish a positive social self-concept; Elizabeth
explained that the experience made an individual realize the “relationship[s] that [he/she was] capable of having.”

Much like Enersen’s (1993) research, the findings of this study suggest that the opportunity to be surrounded by other mature and intelligent gifted students is an invaluable experience for gifted girls in developing a positive social self-concept. Each participant found that through participation in GHP, she became more comfortable in social settings and more open-minded towards different people. They believed that the accepting environment allowed them to reveal their true selves and acted as a catalyst to the establishment of many deep, mature friendships with other GHP peers. Therefore, other residential programs should try and establish a safe environment for program participants; this environment should encourage acceptance and understanding of diversity, as well as provide a great deal of time for various events that encourage students to interact with each other. Counselors and teachers within regular high school settings can also accomplish this task by providing opportunities in class and outside of class for students to discuss and explore acceptance and diversity; however, these types of discussions and explorations must be handled carefully, and teachers and counselors should be sensitive to each student’s reaction to such discussions. Also, as the study implies, the chance to be surrounded by other gifted peers is crucial in establishing a positive social self-concept; therefore, gifted students should be allowed time within classes or extracurricular activities to be surrounded by other gifted peers. Teachers, counselors, and parents should also be aware of each student’s beliefs about the value of learning and should try and encourage the idea that being smart is not only okay, but also should be appreciated.
Security in identity

All five of the participants expressed the belief that between the unique learning environment and the accepting social atmosphere, their GHP experience provided the opportunity for them to develop and become secure in their identity as a gifted young woman. Each one of the participants believed their identity was affected by the chance to develop independence, an important factor in the encouragement of giftedness, particularly with adolescent girls (Eccles, 1985; Enersen, 1993; Kerr, 1994; Noble, 1996; Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2001; Silverman, 1986; Walker & Mehr, 1992). Establishing feelings of independence also helped each participant freely explore her true feelings regarding anything from giftedness to politics to the future. All of the participants noted that by becoming more attuned to their giftedness and beliefs, they were able to establish a true sense of self free from societal influence; the importance of such an establishment of self was also observed by Callahan, Cunningham, and Plucker (1994), as well as Pipher (1994). As Elizabeth so enthusiastically put it, the GHP experience allowed you to “break free of the mold.”

Sara and Katie also pointed out that the GHP environment allowed them to explore many different future career possibilities within their talent area. Sara found that being exposed to a variety of music, literature and ensembles, made her realize “there were a lot more options out there than [she] initially thought when [she] first started to pursue music.” Katie also benefited a great deal from an advertising class she took while at GHP and found that it made her “pretty fired up on the idea that [she] wanted to pursue marketing in college.” Exposure to the variety of possibilities within each interest area
allowed Katie and Sara to further develop their identity and develop a more inclusive “philosophical belief about [their] own creative potential” (Reis, 2002, p.1).

All of the participants found that since GHP influenced their security in identity, many of them were ready and anticipating their college experience. Through the development of independence, Ashley and Sasha no longer had any reservations about leaving home; they both had overcome their homesickness at GHP and were no longer “terrified,” as Ashley stated, about the possible separation anxiety they would experience when going away to college. Like Sasha and Ashley, the other participants found that their GHP experience prepared them for college and made them feel confident that they would be capable of succeeding within a more challenging academic atmosphere, as well as a more diverse social environment.

Each participant experienced improvements in academic/talent self-concept and social self-concept as a result of their participation in GHP. The findings also indicate that these improved self-concepts were a catalyst to the development of a positive general self-concept and the establishment of an identity. The participants all believed that the overall experience and environment of GHP affected their identity development as a gifted and talented female; however, they also found that the GHP experience helped them develop security in that newly established identity, which proved invaluable when they had to return home and eventually pursue their futures in college. All five of the participants felt like they left GHP and returned home a more confident young woman. These findings support the research of Bean (1991) in that the young women believed the experience of participating in a residential honors program that employs the governor school model is a unique experience that helps gifted adolescents develop not only their
talents, but also an appreciation and love of learning. The findings of this study also highlight that the experience is particularly important in encouraging a healthy social and emotional developmental process within young adolescent females. Through exposure to a challenging, unique learning environment and a true peer group, all of the participants evolved into gifted women who were sure of themselves and their gift. Elizabeth’s mother put it best when she declared, “We sent GHP a child, and it returned to us a confident and assured young lady.”

This study implies the importance of providing opportunities for gifted girls to act, learn, and live independently. While this can be accomplished in a number of ways, certain activities found in the GHP environment, such as the establishment of a college like experience, should be a goal of all residential honors programs. Also, high school teachers and counselors, as well as parents, should provide multiple opportunities for gifted girls to experience independence. Experiences that could encourage independence include self-structured and guided projects, more personal responsibilities, and learning through trial and error. By providing such opportunities for gifted girls to develop independence, one is also facilitating chances for a gifted girl to become more aware of her self.

Areas for future research

The findings of this study provide evidence that participation in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program can be particularly beneficial to gifted girls in that it positively affects their social and emotional developmental process and encourages a healthy general self-concept. However, this study is limited in that the participants were all Caucasian with the exception of Sasha, who came from a multi-racial background.
Also, this study only presents the “voice” of five GHP participants who have been removed from the program for at least two years; therefore, the element of nostalgia could very well have affected their descriptions of their experiences, which seemed to be primarily positive. In an attempt to remedy such limitations, in the future, it would be interesting to thoroughly explore the possible influences participation in GHP can inspire within young girls from various cultural backgrounds. Also, future studies should include not only GHP alumni, but also current GHP students; this described sample might provide a more accurate description of the program and certain experiences without such influential elements like nostalgia.

This study also presents only those activities and experiences found within Georgia’s governor school; therefore, it raises the question: do other governor schools exhibit the same qualities and possibilities for gifted girls? Future research will hopefully examine the various governor school models and the experiences that prove to be influential in gifted adolescent females’ social and emotional development. Also, since this study only addresses the social and emotional developmental process of gifted girls, research concerning the possible influences on gifted boys’ social and emotional developmental process as a result of participation within GHP and other governor schools would provide a more inclusive picture and an overall idea of what experiences seem to be particularly important to both gifted boys and girls.

Aside from influencing an adolescent’s social and emotional developmental process, participation in a summer residential honors program can also be considered life changing for many other reasons. In the future, it would be particularly interesting to explore how such programs can influence gifted adolescents’ levels of motivation.
Research on motivation in connection with summer program experiences for the gifted may also lead to research examining possible changes in gifted girls’ motivation within specific academic areas like science and math; this type of research could help identify possible experiences that would encourage more participation in math and science amongst gifted females. Also, a longitudinal study of governor school alumni may be interesting and useful in determining how participation in residential honors programs influences future goals and career development.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Information Sheet

Name:

D.O.B:

Race Identification:

Gender:

Major:

Year in School:

What high school did you attend?

In what year did you attend the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program?

What was your Major at GHP?

What was your Minor at GHP?

My thesis is based on the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program. I plan to select and interview four female participants. The time commitment would consist of one in-depth, semi-structured interview scheduled at your convenience. Would you be interested in participating in this research study about the program?

Contact Information –
School address:

Email address:

Phone number (cell or home):
 Probe Form

(Please bring this and your photos to the interview)

Name:___________________________________
Year you attended GHP:____________________

1. What experiences did you enjoy the most while attending the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program?

2. How would you describe the environment/culture of the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program?

3. While attending the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program, did you meet any people, adults or peers, that influenced you in any way?

4. What is some advice that you would give to future female GHP participants?

5. Pick out ten pictures that would ultimately represent your experience and what you valued about the program.
Interview Protocol

Participant:  
Researcher:  Katherine Dodd  
Interview Date and Time:  
Duration:  
Location:  

* Describe yourself as of now – a holistic picture.

* What do you want your pseudonym to be?

* What are your parents’ email addresses?

1. Describe yourself as a student during that time period of your life.

2. How would you summarize your academic experience in (subject area she attended GHP in) before you attended the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program (GHP)?

3. Describe your experience as a student in the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program.

4. Describe the environment of GHP.
5. Describe the relationships you developed with peers while attending the program.

6. Describe the relationships you developed with adults while attending the program.

7. Describe your return to your high school after the GHP experience.

8. Looking back, how would you describe yourself as a student after your GHP experience?

9. Did your involvement in GHP influence your identity development? How?

10. Do you believe GHP helped you plan and pursue your future goals? In what ways?

11. What would you describe as the top five most beneficial experiences you gained from GHP?

12. How do these experiences continue to influence you today?