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# Academically Gifted Adolescents Transferring to an Independent Gifted School: Effects on Academic Identity

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Academically Gifted Adolescents Transferring to an  
Independent Gifted School: Effects on Academic Identity

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Teacher Education

Eastern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Educational Psychology: Developing Learner

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Ypsilanti, Michigan

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my amazing and brilliant grandparents, Cliff and Maryann, my equally brilliant husband, Bryan, and my two inspirational sons, Mac and Cary. You all provide me with guidance and support throughout everything I do in life. You have always given me unconditional love and support each and every day. You have pushed me to always do my best with anything and believe in myself. For all of this and so much more, I thank you and love you all very much!

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## **Abstract**

Four gifted adolescents (2 males and 2 females) explore experiences transferring from multilevel schools to an independent gifted school from low- and high-income school districts in this phenomenological study. Semi-structured interviews inform this study demonstrating how changes in school context shape academic identity. Adolescent students discuss prior school perceptions of academic ability, how transferring schools affected academic ability, and challenges they overcame transitioning to an independent gifted school. Although participants all believed that prior schools did not meet academic and social needs, their academic self-concepts were strong. Three participants felt academic ability was stronger since transferring to an independent gifted school. One felt less capable to achieve as highly as she could in her prior school, but felt her academic ability had not changed. Implications of transfer student experiences to a gifted school will be discussed, as well as exploration of affects on academic identity.

## **Keywords**

Adolescence, context effect, gifted, transitional programs, self-concept

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“However gifted an individual is at the outset, if his or her talents cannot be developed, because of the surrounding circumstances, these talents will be still-born.”*

*Simone de Beauvoir [1908-1986].*

Simone de Beauvoir (as cited by Johnson-Lewis, 2011) articulates why gifted students often require specific learning environments. The National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) states that gifted and talented students need a challenging curriculum and a well-trained teacher who can inspire and motivate, as well as challenge them to excel (n.d.). Unfortunately, public schools restrained by sagging budgets, large class sizes, an obligation to cover broad ranging curriculum, and meeting standards set forth by No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) are challenged to meet gifted student needs (Larson, 2000). As an alternative, gifted pullout programs, specialized classes, and specialized gifted schools effectively meet the learning needs of gifted students while allowing them to spend all or part of the day in homogeneous groups (“Pullout Programs,” 2008).

However, when gifted students move from the regular classroom into specialized programs or schools, the new context is likely to influence their perceived academic ability. A confident academic identity is developed when a student perceives him- or herself to be capable of doing academic tasks, perceives him- or herself capable of getting good grades, feels valued, and has a sense of belonging by peers and significant others (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Academic identity differs from academic achievement, in that a student performing well academically doesn’t necessarily “perceive” him- or herself to be capable of doing so. Marsh (1991) contends that high-ability students placed in homogeneous contexts



with other higher-ability students experience lower academic self-concepts. There is little research on how academic identity is affected by past experience. Students transferring from low socioeconomic status (SES) schools to independent gifted schools may experience even more academic identity challenges. There is little research exploring whether academic identity constructed in the culture and context of a prior school is maintained in a new school. This study attempts to explore the question: What are the effects on academic identity when academically gifted adolescents from multi-level classrooms transfer to an independent gifted school?

### **Purpose of Study**

The goal of this study is to identify gifted independent school transfer student experiences in order to ascertain affects on academic identity. The study's overall purpose is to expand the knowledge base of the field of gifted education. Available research discusses students transferring to gifted programs within student's own school district, yet little attention is given to adolescent transfer experiences to independent gifted schools. This project will advance frontiers of knowledge in gifted education by exploring the impact that transferring to an independent gifted school has on academic identity of adolescents from low-, middle-, and high-income schools. This research is important in order for gifted schools to develop program plans that will best reach adolescent transfer students from various backgrounds.

### **Significance of Study**

This project aims to advance frontiers of knowledge in gifted education by comparing experiences and effects that transferring to an independent gifted school have on academic identity of adolescents from low-, middle-, and high-income school districts. This research is

important in order for gifted schools to develop program plans that will best reach adolescent transfer students from various backgrounds.

## Chapter II: Review of Related Literature

### Adolescent Development

Experiences within the school context have implications in adolescent intellectual development and shaping of identity (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). School experiences also contribute to how students feel about academic ability and are instrumental in shaping academic identity. All adolescents develop identity in a constant state of flux, attempting to define who they are and who they will become (Glaeser, 2003). As Erikson (1968) detailed in *Identity Youth and Crisis*, adolescents are experiencing the stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion whereby they “attempt to find the real me by playing many roles, experimenting with possible selves, and shifting back and forth between potential identities in different contexts” (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 20).

This relates to Kegan’s (1994) Intrapersonal-Affective Domain whereby adolescents fluctuating between potential identities internalize another’s point of view of what becomes the co-construction of personal experience but cannot organize states of inner parts of self into a complete interconnected whole. Meeting an increased need to belong while shifting potential ways of being causes a struggle for adolescents to establish a cohesive sense of self that over time may undermine their ability to realize their potential (Kegan, 1994; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Neihart, 2006). Adolescents explore their roles by asking theoretical questions in search of empirical data, such as, “How should I be in school relative to how I should be at home?” “How do these different ways in which I am go together to create the complete me?” (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

Although adolescents search for these answers and develop ego similarly (Erikson, 1968), gifted adolescents take on additional tasks of fitting in with peers and fulfilling deep

intellectual demands. Intellectual development may be advanced; however, ego development for gifted students is asynchronous (Bailey, 2011). Advanced intellectual ability does not dictate that a child will behave any differently or in a more mature fashion from another child his or her age. In a convenience sample of 70 adolescent students in grades 9-12 attending regional academic-year schools for the gifted, Bailey (2011) found that range and distribution of gifted adolescents' levels of ego development differed significantly from established adolescent norms. Because gifted adolescents' development is asynchronous, they require support and guidance for the most advantageous development to transpire (Bailey, 2011). The more opportunities to experience healthy and exciting challenges, the more likely they are to experience competence (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). The more adolescent students experience competence, the more securely they believe in possibilities of what they can accomplish.

**Academic identity.** Secure beliefs in what students can accomplish are paramount in developing confident academic identity. Students use their impression of academic ability as one basis of forming academic self-concept (Marsh, 1991). Academic identity construction entails collective negotiations on the meaning of the personal and collective experiences of the past, interpretations of day-to-day events in one's life, and hopes and plans for the future (Oikonomidou 2009). Academic identity can also be influenced by expectations of significant others (i.e. parents want student to attend college so student wants the same) (Was, Al-Harthy, Stack-Oden, & Isaacson, 2011). Spencer and Tinsley (2008) pointed out that students creating identity within a supportive system of tradition and possibilities maintain a persistence to ambitiously succeed. Research also suggests that belongingness and maintaining high motivation strongly influence adolescent academic identity (Anderman,

2002; Anderman, 2003; Barber & Mueller, 2011; Gilman & Anderman, 2006; Glaeser, 2006; Kumar and Jagacinski, 2011).

Analyzing data from over 90,000 adolescents, Anderman (2002) found perceived belonging was related positively and significantly to optimism, self-concept, and GPA, and negatively to depression, social rejection, school problems, and absenteeism. Additionally, Anderman (2003) found that adolescents felt less alienated in educational settings that emphasized personal effort, improvement, and mastery. In a cluster analysis of 654 high school students placed into distinct adaptive motivation groups (high, average, and low), Gilman and Anderman (2006) studied the variables of motivation, self-adequacy, and internal locus of control. Calling the variables *adaptive motivation*, they found that 179 students in the high adaptive motivation group “reported higher scores on measures of self-esteem, global satisfaction, family satisfaction, school belongingness, and GPA, and significantly lower scores on measures of depression, anxiety, and social stress relative to students in the average motivation group” (p. 375). Schools that encourage students to speak openly about curriculum, teach by example, teach to interests of students, and offer support to cope with day-to-day environmental stressors motivate students with varying abilities and backgrounds to learn and enjoy school (Brophy, 2010; Diemer, Wang, Smith, 2010; Ferguson, 2000; Garbarino, 1999). Spencer and Tinsley (2008) insist accessible and recognizable supports in the school context are necessary to facilitate adaptive coping in order to assist in confident identity formation.

### **Gifted Needs**

Gifted students developing identity within schools that neglect their academic, social, and emotional needs do not have opportunities to experience their full potential and may

never discover full possibilities of what they can accomplish academically. Examining gifted students struggling to find recognizable support and belonging, Fredricks, Alfeld, and Eccles (2010) followed three cohorts of children in kindergarten, first, and third grades in four public elementary school districts over eight waves of data collection through their high school years. Gifted adolescents reported lack of challenge, boredom, and lack of support of academic interests by peers in many of their regular classes (Fredricks et al., 2010). Fredricks et al. (2010) found that gifted students in regular classrooms felt their academic interests were not supported by peers. It was not “cool” to be thought of as smart. For example, one new student was teased for reading a book for pleasure. To avoid teasing and to fit in, the student claimed to never bring a book for pleasure to school again until her senior year.

Reis, Gubbins, Briggs, Schreiber, Richards, Jacobs, Eckert, and Renzulli (2004) conducted research in 12 different third- and seventh-grade reading classrooms in both urban and suburban school districts. They found that above-grade level books were seldom available in students’ classrooms. Students were not often encouraged to select more challenging books from the school library. Talented readers seldom encountered challenging reading material during regular classroom instruction (Reis et al., 2004).

Additionally, gifted middle school youth reported low intrinsic motivation, difficulty concentrating, and high rates of boredom in school (Larson & Richards, 1991; Larson, 2000). Adolescent students who report that their needs are not met also experience a sharp decrease in academic identity (Anderman, 2003). Renzulli & Park (2000) found approximately 5% of a large national sample of gifted students dropped out of high school because they were failing or didn’t like school.

Public schools attempting to leave no child behind are alienating gifted students while

meeting standards set forth by NCLB (2001). These one-size-fits-all standards set forth by NCLB (2001) have marginalizing effects on education of gifted children who become lost in environments that do not enhance achievement of high-potential students (Cortese, 2007; Gentry, 2006; Moon, 2008; Xiang, Dahlin, Cronin, Theaker, Durant, 2011). Robinson, Shore, and Enerson (2007) found that fewer than 3% of 12th grade students participating in the science portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2005 scored at the “Advanced” level and that the number of students scoring at the “Advanced” level has been decreasing since 1996. A six-year longitudinal study of 174,974 middle and high school cohorts found that 30 to 50 percent of initially high-achieving students proved unstable, losing that status over time (Xiang et al., 2011).

Academically gifted adolescent students have, however, reported liking both gifted programs and advanced placement classes more than regular courses because they offered more challenging work, curriculum choice, and generally had more innovative curriculum (Fredricks et al., 2010). Gifted students show an increase in achievement as a benefit from enrichment, differentiation, acceleration, and enriched programs (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Field, 2009; Gavin, Adelson, Carroll, Sheffield, & Spinelli 2007; Gubbins, Housand, Oliver, Schader, & De Wet, 2007; Reis, McCoach, Coyne, Schreiber, Eckert, & Gubbins, 2007; Tieso, 2002).

However, specialized programs are limited, and those that exist are at risk of being eliminated. Ann Sheldon, executive director of Ohio’s Association for Gifted Education, reported that due to budget constraints more than half of the state’s 614 school districts have cut gifted programs over the past three years (Boss, 2011). Gallagher (2008) reported that only 15 states have public, statewide math-science high schools for advanced learners. The

NAGC and the Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted (2009) found that 13 states did not allocate any funds for gifted student services for the 2008-2009 school year. Additionally, the fiscal year 2013 U.S. federal budget does not include funding for the Javits Gifted and Talented Students Programs, designed to meet special education needs of gifted and talented students (NAGC, 2012). With limited program availability, fear of unstable achievement, and lack of specialized programming, it is hard to find challenging academic settings in which gifted students feel they belong and are able to develop confident academic identities.

Students transferring from low socioeconomic status (SES) schools to independent gifted schools may experience even more academic identity challenges. Students attending low-SES schools face school environments that heighten normal teenage challenges and affect life goals (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). This is related to schools that typically display unsafe conditions, teacher inconsistency, few positive interactions, physical victimization, lack of pro-social interactions, and oppositional peer culture (Dearing, 2008). Families inspired to find an educational environment that meets their gifted child's needs may opt to enroll them in an independent gifted school. Instructional strategies in an independent gifted school differ greatly from low-SES schools. They demand a well-developed prior background in academic subject material and organized study habits, and they provide daily challenge that transfer students from low-SES public schools may have never experienced. Do motivated high-achieving students in low-SES public schools, ranking top of their class, find academic rigors of an independent gifted school difficult? And how does SES of the school from which students transfer affect academic identity?



## **School Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

Adolescent students living in low-SES neighborhoods often attend low-SES schools. Such schools typically display unsafe conditions, teacher inconsistency, few positive interactions, physical victimization, lack of pro-social interactions, and oppositional peer culture (Dearing, 2008). These disparities contribute to why children attending low-SES schools lag behind in school readiness and achieve significantly lower scores on national reading and math examinations (Oberg & Aga, 2010). Children attending low-SES schools are subject to class, resource, and hidden curriculum inequalities, which breed a deeper sense of resentment and contribute to behavior problems early in childhood (Courville, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Garbarino, 1991).

Issues that arise with an individual's identity and behavior begin at an early age. Garbarino (1999) points out that misbehaviors crystallize by age 8 in reaction to various inequality and oppressive factors. Young children think in literal and concrete ways. Concrete thinking often lends to children in low-SES schools creating self-definitions that lack possibility and face futures of failure at an early age (Weinberger, Elvevag, & Giedd, 2005; Spears, 2009). Such definitions of failure and learned helplessness often continue from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood (Garbarino, 1999). Defining themselves by a future lacking possibilities, these students face depression and may attempt suicide as adolescents (Dearing 2008; Prothrow, 1991).

Students from low-SES schools often develop a reaction of behavior against emotional responses of shame and frustration by bullying, violence, poor conduct, withdrawal, depression, cutting class, disrespect, gambling, and profanity (Ferguson, 2000; Garbarino, 1999; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). These various reactions and patterns of coping

over time and place are linked to identity formation (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). Spencer and Tinsley (2008) stated it is necessary to facilitate adaptive coping in the form of accessible and recognizable supports in order to assist in confident identity formation. Yet Ferguson (2000) describes low-SES poorly staffed schools with extreme discipline, control of movement, verbal time, and playtime, which do not emulate accessible supports. Such schools do not have early intervention services put in place. In some neighborhoods early intervention programs like Head Start fight effects of poor attitude and aptitude by intervening early with health, education, and social services (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). However, Head Start assists only pre-school students. Programs that work in this way through primary school may have a deeper and long-lasting impact than shifting from Head Start to primary and secondary school environments that perpetuate adolescent development of self-definitions that lack possibility and face futures of failure (Weinberger et al., 2005; Spears, 2009).

However, not all students from low-SES schools create such bleak self-definitions. Way (1998) examined 24 adolescents living in poverty, breaking barriers and assumptions, and giving rise to resilient, hopeful, and courageous teens determined to face the future and succeed. Bailey (2011) found gifted students from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds who indicated healthy and adaptive levels of functioning and that giftedness enhances resiliency in students. Therefore, gifted students may be “particularly adept at using social coping strategies to fit expectations of their environment” (Bailey, 2011, p. 217). This is especially so when at least one supportive adult is present combined with factors of strong peer support and/or involvement in extra-curricular activities (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). Gifted adolescents in low-SES schools may perform well within a familiar school

environment to which they have adapted. This may be why Xiang et al. (2011) found school poverty rates have little relation to academic growth of high-achieving students. However, Xiang et al. (2011) do not mention how academic growth is affected if high-achieving students from low SES schools transfer to an academically rigorous independent school environment.

It is not clear how context change to a more challenging school environment may affect academic identity development. High-achieving students with high self-efficacy in low-SES schools may develop an identity that they are academically best in the class, or the “top dog.” However, when school context changes to a rigorous academic environment, inadequate academic preparation and increased task difficulty may affect how they feel about academic ability. Was et al. (2011) found that students with high self-efficacy adopted performance approach goals in order to demonstrate ability to their significant others (p. 645). However, Kumar and Jagacinski (2011) found that experiences of difficulty caused performance-approach goals to decrease and work-avoidance goals to increase. They suggested that individuals who experience much difficulty academically decide that the task in which they are engaged does not fulfill their need for achievement. As a result, students were no longer invested in the task and became motivated to seek other activities that could fulfill their needs (Kumar & Jagacinski, p. 679). Do transfer students from low-SES schools face decreased perceptions of their academic identity? It may depend on how they perceive their academic competency prior to transferring.

### **Changing School Contexts and Transition**

According to Nakkula and Toshalis (2006), the culture of a school environment contributes to an identity of self-acceptance and ego strength across changing contexts.

Therefore, a strong and confident identity shaped within a particular school context will transfer with a student to a new school context. To demonstrate, Oikonomidou (2009) conducted a qualitative study with Somali female high school students to understand newcomer students' academic identity construction. Emergent in the study were students' perceptions in the local context of the school. The newcomers maintained a strong identity with native culture and ethnic upbringings indicating that healthy construction of their academic identities took place within the context of their national (and global) identities (Oikonomidou, 2009). These healthy academic identities crossed the context to their new school in a new country. However, changing contexts to a new school during adolescence does pose a number of concerns that may affect an adolescent's academic identity. School transition compounded by puberty, social and emotional development, growing importance of peer relationships, and development of higher order cognitive skills can cause stress that leads to lower grades and decreased academic motivation (Bailey, 2011; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Kegan, 1994; Newman 1985).

Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, and Splittgerber (2000) found that students at greatest risk for transition difficulties are those who lack academic preparation. However, a 2007 study found that 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade adolescents relied primarily on overall beliefs about their academic competency, which led to more positive expectations, which predicted more positive experiences of transitioning to high school (Stein & Hussong, 2007). Stein and Hussong (2007) might argue with Anderson et al. (2000) that perceptions of healthy academic identity are more influential on transition experiences than actual performance (GPA) and academic preparation. Anderson et al. (2000) also found those at greatest risk for transition difficulties are students with prior behavior problems and minority students from

low-SES backgrounds. Garbarino (1999) suggested that transitioning adolescents from low-SES schools, whose learning needs have been neglected for years, may lock themselves away and do unto others as was done unto them by disassociating and neglecting a new school environment. Youth who cope by disassociating in this way risk developing identities as academically incapable students (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). Malecki and Demaray (2006) studied effects of social support (i.e. parents, teachers, friends, classmates) on low socioeconomic status (SES) adolescents. Their findings conclude that students with higher social support and lower SES have similar GPAs to students with high social support and higher SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). This suggests that social support buffers relationships between SES and academic performance for students of low SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Reis et al., 2005).

A shift in social support and sense of belonging may be why transferring to a new school causes anxiety and challenges coping skills of adolescents (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006), especially girls. Anderson et al. (2000) found female adolescents are at greater risk for transition challenges than boys. Girls, especially gifted girls, are more invested in social relationships as a stress release and face difficulty adjusting to disruption of friendship networks and social support (Anderson et al., 2000; Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009; Rinn, Reynolds, & McQueen, 2011). When adolescent students change school contexts, the transition challenges them to seek new peer support networks and find a place in which they belong.

Changing contexts to an independent gifted school also creates a new set of peers to which students compare themselves. Crosnoe (2009) found how students do academically is a function of how they view themselves and how others evaluate them relative to academic

skills and performance of their peers. The premise of Social Comparison Theory asserts that people learn about their own abilities by comparing themselves with people around them (Festinger, 1954). So what happens to academic identity of top dog students, once achieving at the top of multi-level schools, when they compare academic abilities to high-achieving classmates in a homogeneous gifted school? Marsh (1991) found high achievers placed in homogeneous classrooms with other high achievers leads to a lower academic ability self-concept, calling this the Big Fish Little Pond Effect (BFLPE).

Using Social Comparison Theory, Marsh and Parker (1984) found self-perceptions are based in part on comparing students' own academic abilities with ability levels of other students in the immediate school context. High-achieving students comparing academic performance with peers in a classroom context with average achieving students maintained high academic self-concepts ("I am bright, so I feel good about my academic abilities"; Marsh, 1991; Seaton, Marsh, & Craven, 2007). Fredricks et al. (2010) found maintaining an identity of being the smartest was important to many gifted adolescents studied, not just for recognition, but also for personal fulfillment. Yet, when high-achieving students moved to a classroom context of all high-achievers and compared performance with classmates, they suffered declines in academic self-concepts or BFLPE ("My classmates are really bright, so I don't feel that I'm very bright"; Marsh, 1991; Seaton et al., 2007). This suggests gifted transfer students transitioning to an independent gifted school, with a homogeneous population of high-achieving students, will display lower academic identities than experienced prior to changing school contexts.

However, many gifted students have trouble forming relationships with students their own age and often hide intellectual ability in order to make friends in multilevel school

contexts (Davidson, Davidson, & Vanderkam, 2004). Independent gifted schools offer opportunities for students to belong, through interaction with peers who share intellectual capacities and interests. Studying 618 multi-level middle school students, Anderman (2003) found that students who found academic work interesting, useful, and important reported higher levels of school belonging than did their peers. How does an independent gifted school facilitating students' sense of belonging by offering differentiated, accelerated, enriched programs, and a community of likeminded peers, influence Big Fish Little Pond Effect (Anderman, 2002; Anderman, 2003; Barber & Mueller, 2011; Colangelo et al., 2004; Field, 2009; Gavin et al., 2007; Gilman & Anderman, 2006; Glaeser, 2006; Gubbins et al., 2007; Marsh, 1991; Reis et al., 2007; Tieso, 2002)? This study investigates the effects on academic identity when academically gifted adolescents from multi-level classrooms transfer to an independent gifted school.

## **Chapter III: Research Design and Methods**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This descriptive qualitative case study is based on grounded theory methods and emergent design. I chose to use case study because as Baxter and Jack (2008, p. 545) state, case study should be used when a researcher wants to “cover contextual conditions he or she believes are relevant to the phenomena under study” or “when the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and the context.” In order to explore the phenomenon of academically gifted transfer student experiences as they affect academic identity, I used purposive sampling. This allowed me to explain the phenomena in the context and what the research meant from the perspectives of participants in the study (Mills, 2011). My goal was to develop an understanding of participants’ experiences. To achieve this goal I conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with participants. I used semi-structured interviews in order to expand questions and clarify different ideas raised by participants. Relating their experience as transfer students specifically to the context of an independent gifted school, I captured the state of mind, feelings, and emotions of these gifted student participants. Investigating these experiences and how they shaped students’ academic identity gave me a strong visual of their realities.

### **School Context and Participants**

The study was conducted at Stevenson School (all names are pseudonyms), an independent gifted middle and high school in a large midwestern U.S. suburb. The school’s classes were racially and ethnically diverse, with percentages across grade levels of 14.7% African American students, 5.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.4% Two or More Races, 0.1% Hispanic, and 74.2% White, Non-Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).



Participants came from all around the surrounding area, with ages between 11 and 15 and from differing ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Stevenson prides itself on building community. To do so Stevenson encourages grade interaction. This is promoted through clubs, partaking in courses with mixed grade levels, and regular social events incorporating all grade levels. Students are given autonomy through choice of class schedule and electives. Student differences are honored in academic competitions, various sporting events, fine arts, and on campus advocacy groups.

Table 1

*Purposeful Sample and Sample Frame*

<b>Current Stevenson Independent Gifted School Students Who Transferred Between 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Grade</b>					
91 Students Met Criteria			4 Agreed to Participate		
<i>State demographics determined SES of school district from which students transferred</i>					
Pseudonym	Age	Current Grade Level	Grade Level at time of Transfer	Gender	Prior School District SES
Allan	11	6	6	Male	Low
Gary	12	7	6	Male	High
Rita	12	7	7	Female	High
Jean	15	10	7	Female	High

Current students who had transferred to Stevenson between grades 6 and 12 were invited to participate, as they were likely to have most relevant insight. A total of 4 students, two males and two females, agreed to participate. One participant transferred from a lower SES school district and three from middle/higher SES school districts. Student pseudonyms were generated using kleimo.com, an online random name generator. I recorded the pseudonym and real name on a list kept in a locked fire safe. I used state demographics to

determine SES of districts from which each student came, and created two lists. One list contained pseudonyms of students who transferred from lower-SES districts, and one contained transferees from middle/higher-SES districts. The purposeful selection approach allowed me to examine academic identity differences based on students' original school district SES. Table 1 shows the sample frame and Table 2 describes participants.

Table 2

*Stevenson School Middle and High School Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Description
Allan	11-year-old male. Transferred in 6 <sup>th</sup> grade, 6 months prior, from charter school in low SES school district. His goal was to attend prestigious veterinary medicine college. His main source of academic support came from his mother and father.
Gary	12-year-old male. Transferred to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade, 1 year and 6 months prior, from private school in high SES district. His goal was to attend prestigious university on east coast. Main source of academic support came from Stevenson friends and teachers.
Rita	12-year-old female. Transferred to 7 <sup>th</sup> grade, 6 months prior, from public school in high SES district. Her goal was to move to New York, go to fine arts college, double major in cooking and musical theater, and minor in teaching and business. Wants to open a bakery and be on Broadway. Her main source of academic and emotional support was her older sister.
Jean	15-year-old female. Transferred middle of 7 <sup>th</sup> grade, 3 years prior, from public school in a high SES district. Her goal was to attend a competitive performing arts college. Her main sources of academic support were her mother, friends, and teachers.

## **Design and Procedure**

Comparison of commonalities and differences of four audio-recorded semi-structured one-on-one interviews informed data. A verbatim text was transcribed for each interview. To ensure accuracy I member checked, asking participants to review text from the one-on-one interviews to verify if transcripts were accurate representations of their experiences. All field journal entries for a given day were typed the same day to preserve my feelings and personal experiences; they were dated and labeled according to location. Finally, I individually met with students to review the description I developed to assess whether it was an adequate representation of each participant's roles and actions. All one-on-one and member check interviews were audio recorded. The few informal conversations that took place within the school and at home were not but were documented in field notes.

**Data Collection.** Qualitative data were collected over the course of three weeks from both males and females across grade levels. To begin, I conducted an audio-recorded 45-minute one-on-one interview with each participant. Interviews were scheduled at students' convenience and held in a comfortable setting. Participants were provided no incentives other than light refreshments. At the start of each interview the participant was reminded that the interview was being recorded and recordings would be destroyed at the end of the project. I initially defined the term "academic identity" to participants so they understood the interview focus.

Following this introduction of academic identity, participants filled out the "Admiration Ladder" (see Appendix A). The "admiration ladder" was originally designed to ask students to list the names of others they most and least wanted to be like to understand achievement motive (Alschuler, Tabor, & McIntyre, 1971). The completed "admiration

ladder” was then used to spark discussions relating to the attributes of those the students most valued and admired (Alschuler et al., 1971). Using a modified version of the “admiration ladder,” I asked students to list three classmates they admired, three they respected, and three they wanted to be like (Graham & Taylor, 2001; Graham & Anderson, 2008). Combined with discussion of these answers I could determine characteristics of classmates that shed light on qualities the participants valued (Graham & Taylor, 2001). This provided insight to peers whom participants respected and valued, allowing me to relate the influence those individuals had on the student’s academic identity (Graham & Anderson, 2008).

In addition, qualities of classmates were examined for connections to values of gender, achievement, self-concept, and social support. I also learned the influence that expectations of significant others had on perceived academic identity (Was et al., 2011). I could also find relationships between names of those participants nominated as admired, respected, and wanted to be like. Finally my goal was to investigate if SES of prior school district was a relevant factor to transfer student values and perceived academic identity. Understanding values participants had of others was useful in determining participants’ own values and perceived academic identity, discussed further in the results section.

To stimulate discussion of the “admiration ladder,” I used an adapted version of Graham and Anderson’s (2008) academic identity interview protocols (see Appendix B). I kept the first set of questions the same as Graham and Anderson (2008), but created and added a set of “Academic Identity at Prior School” questions relevant to this study.

Participants were asked to talk about feelings regarding experiences in previous schools compared with experiences in the independent gifted school. Participants delved in deeply, responding with data that broadened my appreciation of their academic identities and how

transferring schools affected them. I then used “Experiences as Transfer Student” questions (see Appendix C) to stimulate discussion about feelings regarding experiences in previous schools compared with experiences in the independent gifted school and the overall transfer school experience. I recognized participants’ sense of belonging at their prior and current school and how belonging related to their academic identities before and after transferring schools (Anderman, 2003). Data helped familiarize me with participants and develop a rich understanding of their feelings toward their experience as transfer students. Even more, the data provided deep insight to the feelings participants had toward themselves and their academic abilities.

Last to member check I conducted a final interview with each participant individually to go over collected data and fill in any blanks. I compared interview data to gain a deeper understanding of the participants and the similarities and differences in their perceptions of school (past and current experiences), how they interpreted the major life event of transferring schools, and what their hopes and plans for their future entailed (Oikonomidou, 2009, p. 26).

My role as researcher was that of moderate participation (Spradley, 1980) throughout one-on-one interviews. My primary background as researcher in this study was oriented toward the study of the phenomena related to the beliefs and perceptions of gifted students who transferred as adolescents to an independent gifted school regarding academic identity in relation to perceptions of self-efficacy, motivation, and academic achievement. It is important to note my background to shed light on any potential biases. Within my Master’s program I studied successfully educating gifted underachieving students in multi-level classrooms that lack adequate gifted education support. I moved often as a child, changing

schools four times in elementary school and once in middle school. I attended a Montessori school as my first schooling experience. Working at my own pace, I worked through the 1<sup>st</sup> grade curriculum while in Kindergarten. I skipped attending 1<sup>st</sup> grade, entering public school in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Most of my educational experiences after Montessori were not what I felt to be meaningful or challenging. My primary challenge was dealing with a feeling of frustration related to slow curriculum pace and low teacher expectations. By high school I gave up on performing academically. Because I developed a low academic self-concept, my subsequent formal schooling endeavors were negatively affected. My academic accomplishments can be attributed to my family members, particular college professors, and my own resolute endurance.

### **Data Analysis**

For analysis, transcribed interviews and the “admiration ladder” answers were coded using dedoose.com online software (Dedoose, 2012). Dedoose.com is a secure web-based software program designed specifically to analyze qualitative and mixed methods research. I uploaded and coded transcripts directly into dedoose.com. Dedoose.com let me highlight and cut excerpts and match them to codes, kept a running total of codes used, and allowed me to analyze and create categories and themes per qualitative techniques.

Analysis of interviews, admiration ladder surveys, and qualitative data were carried out in stages consistent with principles of iterative analysis (Dey, 2005). In the first stage, I entered field note and interview data into a table by individual respondent, along with current grade level, grade level at time of transfer, age, gender, and prior school district SES using the coded identifiers to protect privacy (Dey, 2005; Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). At this stage I member checked, meeting with each participant to go over

transcripts to ensure they felt accurately represented in the study. Once members were confident with transcript accuracy, I began analysis of data. I used inductive content analysis, constantly comparing themes and codes that emerged from the transcribed text (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). I read through the data in its entirety, and within dedoose.com I highlighted and coded units of information (e.g. specific sentences from field notes or an interview quote) that appeared to be evidence of quality, concept, or phenomenon.

Next, dedoose.com automatically organized coded data into categories and groups that linked using matrices and mapping (Dey, 2005; Mack et al., 2005). This allowed me to examine regularities, develop a conceptual framework, and reach thematic conclusions (Dey, 2005). I connected variations and singularities in the data to find logical relationships between different categories, and identified patterns in frequencies with which characteristics occurred and cross-tabulated different characteristics (Dey, 2005; Mack et al., 2005).

In the second stage, I reread notes and transcriptions with particular attention paid to already highlighted and coded passages. In combing through transcripts, I added tentative code names for themes identifying major and minor topics. To ensure dependability of the data, I implemented a process of double coding, coding a set of data, then after a week returning and coding the same data to compare the results (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I used dedoose.com's double-coding feature to compare prior codes and excerpts. In the third stage, after identifying codes that met patterns across data sources, I labeled the codes as a pattern. I then created broad categories for the emergent patterns and renamed those categories as major themes in the study. Table 2 shows broad categories and groups to which coded data were organized.

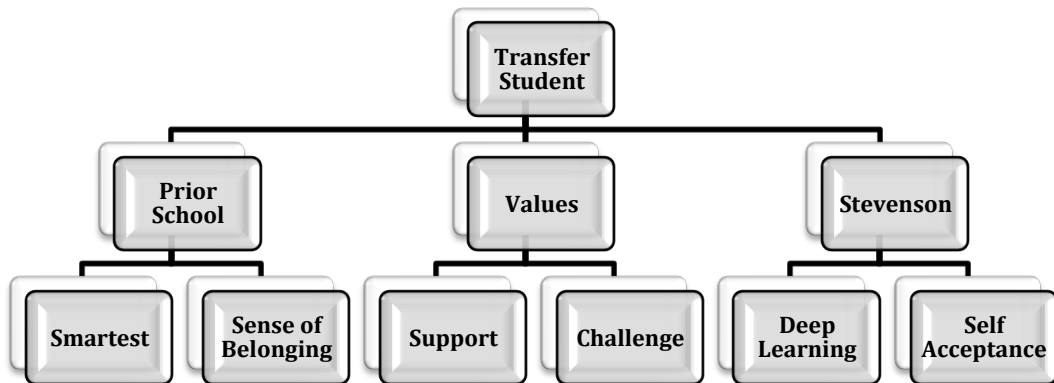
The four major themes that emerged were:

1. Shared Goals: “If I’m Around People Who Do Well, I’m More Likely to Succeed”
2. Isolation and Belongingness: “Prior School Emitted Poisonous Miasma”
3. Academic Self-Concept: “Very Few Are Amazing at Everything They Do”
4. Challenge and Depth of Learning: “I Know I Can Get There, It’s Just a Matter of How I Get There”

These themes are discussed in the results section. Finally in the fourth stage, I used educational theories to contribute direction and order to my analysis and created a written account in scholarly article format (Dey, 2005; Mack et al., 2005).

Table 3

*Broad Categories of Coded Data*



**Confidentiality**

Informed consent was attached to invitation letters that were emailed to parents of all students who had ever transferred to Stevenson (see Appendix D). Signed informed consent was returned to me in a mailbox established for me in Stevenson’s school office. I collected invitations daily and transported them in a sealed envelope to a locked fire safe in my home to which I was the only person with a key.



I created two master code keys. First, a master key of pseudonyms was assigned to each student using kleimo.com, an online random name generator. I recorded students' names and randomly generated pseudonyms on my primary master list. I also used corresponding participant pseudonyms on the Admiration Ladder Survey administered in one-on-one interviews. I created a secondary key containing only pseudonym, age, current grade level, grade-level at time of transfer, gender, and SES of prior school attended. This key was used solely to compare data. All keys were kept locked away in a fire safe when not in use. Pseudonyms were also designated to nominated students in each admiration ladder. Classmate pseudonyms were used in typed transcripts when students referred to those they admired, respected, and wanted to be like. Additionally, teachers, administrators, other students, and current and prior school names referred to by participants were given pseudonyms in typed transcripts.

## Chapter IV: Results and Discussion

### Themes

There were a total of four one-on-one interviews conducted. Four major themes were uncovered through analysis of interview transcripts. Each theme was labeled by an expression used by one or more participants to maintain the student's own phrasing of his or her experience. Participant quotes are used to substantiate the four themes listed below:

1. Shared Goals: "If I'm Around People Who Do Well, I'm More Likely to Succeed"
2. Isolation and Belongingness: "Prior School Emitted Poisonous Miasma"
3. Academic Self-Concept: "Very Few Are Amazing at Everything They Do"
4. Challenge and Depth of Learning: "I Know I Can Get There, It's Just a Matter of How I Get There"

### **Theme 1. Shared Goals: "If I'm Around People Who Do Well, I'm More Likely to Succeed"**

Graham and Anderson (2008) found that students believed in their abilities to do well academically, and their finding holds true for these students, too. However, sophomore student Jean was less confident than the middle school participants. Each participant named a prestigious college he or she planned to attend, indicating he or she maintained high academic future goals. Participants shared a deep desire to learn and be challenged. They agreed the purposes of school were to learn, provide life skills, prepare them to be adults, and make friends. Discussing how he felt about those who didn't finish school, Gary said:

I kind of feel sorry for them...they didn't have any accomplishments... almost required to have a high position, or just, kind of do well. In a, like... social ladder and respect. I mean, it's just harder for them, it's not impossible.

Although participants understood why some people do not finish school, they indicated they most valued those who finish school and pursue secondary education.

As discussed earlier, the “admiration ladder” was originally designed to ask students to list names of others they most and least wanted to be like to understand achievement motive (Alschuler, Tabor, & McIntyre, 1971). Utilizing a modified version of the admiration ladder in this study provided insight to characteristics of peers whom participants respected, valued, and wanted to be like (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Relating these characteristics with participants’ own values helped determine the influence these values had on participants’ academic identity (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Participants valued peers who challenged them to succeed or who could do something participants felt was an indicator of success. All participants listed at least one peer in multiple categories. For example a peer listed as admired was listed as respected and/or wanted to be like.

One participant, Allan, was the only one to choose all same sex peers. Rita chose all female and one male. Allan and Rita were both first-year transferees at Stevenson, whereas Gary and Jean, who made mixed sex choices, had been students at Stevenson for over a year. Values chosen by all of the participants were similar, except the girls added values of social and appearance characteristics. Participants explained that all nine names they nominated were considered their best friends. Therefore only perceived significant others were listed. Was et al. (2011) found that academic identity can be influenced by expectations of significant others. These participants perceived peers to have high expectations of themselves and of the participants. Participants felt this support contributed to a sense they could do better in the academically challenging environment of Stevenson and ultimately in college. Table 4 shows nominated peer pseudonyms and values with each category.

Table 4

*Admiration Ladder Results*

Participant Name	Admire	Respect	Want to be Like	Peers Chosen	Values
Allan	Mark (m)* Jeff (m) Jack (m)	Mark (m) Karl (m) Jack (m)	Mark (m) Cole (m) Isaac (m)	Mark Jeff Jack Karl Cole Isaac	<b>Admire:</b> Best Friends, athletic, topic expert, teaches me, knowledgeable  <b>Respect:</b> Friends  <b>Want to be like:</b> Really smart, challenges me
Gary	Tracy(f)** Erik (m) Lance (m)	Tracy (f) Erik (m) Nick (m)	Tracy (f) Erik (m) Lance (m)	Tracy Erik Lance Nick	<b>Admire:</b> Best friends, really smart, athletic, artistic  <b>Respect:</b> Friends, capabilities, personalities  <b>Want to be like:</b> Artistic, athletic, really smart
Rita	Joe (m) Sherry (f) Julie (f)	Carly (f) Sherry (f) Julie (f)	Hilary (f) Sherry (f) Julie (f)	Joe Sherry Julie Carly Hilary	<b>Admire:</b> Really smart, better at math than I  <b>Respect:</b> Best Friends  <b>Want to be Like:</b> Self-confident, talented, really pretty, comfortable with self
Jean	Stacy (f) Jesse (m) Cody (m)	Jane (f) Jenny (f) Lisa (f)	Stacy (f) Jenny (f) Cody (m)	Stacy Jesse Cody Jane Jenny Lisa	<b>Admire:</b> Best friends, self confident, expert on topic, teaches me new knowledge, comfortable with self  <b>Respect:</b> Hard worker, do well academically, good person  <b>Want to be like:</b> Athletic and academic capabilities

\*(m)male

\*\*(f) female

Note: All names are pseudonyms

Participants valued support felt by Stevenson peers. They also felt prior school peers failed to share these goals and values. In her prior school, Jean said she knew she could do well academically, but she chose not to because no one seemed to care and she was in a bad social situation. Participants said:

No one really cared at my old school, and that really bothered me, cause I really wanted to learn. Everyone talked. No one listened. (Rita)

My classmates didn't really encourage me that much to do well. Not just encourage, but they didn't really challenge me. (Allan)

Although they agreed that the curriculum at Stevenson was more challenging than their prior schools, participants felt that being in an environment among those who shared their goals to learn and to do well encouraged them to do well. When describing those she admired, Jean articulated:

If I'm around people who do well, I'm more likely to succeed. (Jean)

All of the participants felt Stevenson peers offered challenge and encouragement that peers in their prior schools did not. Allan, who felt his prior school peers did not challenge him, said the opposite of peers in his new school. Explaining why he wanted to be like his Stevenson friend Isaac, Allan said:

He's usually challenging me to do different things, so he kind of pushes me to give my best effort.

Allan valued friends and teachers at Stevenson who challenged him to do his best or improve upon that which he knew. He also believed that being around peers that knew something he did not provided opportunities to learn something that he could use in the future.

All of the participants said they felt challenged by peers at Stevenson who knew more than they. Since they all wanted to do academically well at Stevenson and attend prestigious colleges, they all wanted to know as much as they possibly could in order to be successful now and when they graduated. Gary valued peers who knew things he really wanted to know. He said:

I'd like to kind of be that way: smart, artistic, athletic. I know I'm smart, but athletics doesn't come naturally to me, and I don't feel I'm *that* artistic.

Admiring her best friend, Jean stated:

She knows everything about history. I really like history. Her family has graduated from [prestigious colleges]. She finds out lots of historical stuff that's cool about her family and she teaches me a lot.

Although participants chose significant others they felt were "really smart," they viewed themselves as really smart as well. Rita said:

I admire Lauren because she's a lot like me. She's really smart, travels a lot, and still gets straight As. I think I'm pretty smart too.

Participants valued peers they perceived to be successful. These peers shared common values to work hard, reach goals, and encouraged participants to reach their goals. Was et al. (2011) found that students "adopt the academic identity prescribed for them by significant others" (p. 245). Successful significant others helped these participants feel they could be successful too. For the first time they were surrounded by peers who shared their values. This may be related to why participants felt more confident in their abilities to reach current and future academic goals since transferring to Stevenson.

## **Theme 2. Isolation and Belongingness: “Prior School Emitted Poisonous Miasma”**

A confident academic identity hinges on a student feeling valued and a sense of belonging by peers and significant others (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Fredricks et al. (2010) found that gifted students in regular classrooms believed that peers did not support their academic interests. Participants in this study felt similarly isolated in prior school environments. Allan said his classmates “did not encourage or challenge” him. Rita said most of her peers were “really mean.” Jean begged her mother to spend money they didn’t have on new outfits as an attempt to fit in and be accepted. Seventh-grade Gary said:

I felt trapped by the negative and poisonous miasma my last school emitted. Gary, Jean, and Rita felt peers and teachers in prior schools did not care and did not support them. Jean mentioned how sad she was at her prior school. As a result of trying to fit in, Jean said her grades declined. Jean said:

Teachers didn’t care and kids were horrible to me at my old school. All of that took a toll on my grades.

I asked why Jean felt that took a toll on her grades. She said:

Because it was a stressful environment and I didn’t feel safe. I was naïve in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I worked during lunch because I realized I had no one to sit with. I was upset and sad about my situation, but I didn’t care about how my grades got worse because it was just a bad situation.

Girls, especially gifted girls, are more invested in social relationships as a stress release and face difficulty adjusting to disruption of friendship networks and social support (Anderson et al., 2000; Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009; Rinn et al., 2011). Rita and Jean both revealed a strong need for peer acceptance and peer connections. Compared with the boys, the bulk of

the girls' interview answers centered on past and current social experiences. They both agreed that when they experienced disruption of friendships, felt stress related to peer acceptance, and lacked a sense of belonging, they were unable to focus or care about academics. Feeling isolated, Jean yearned for acceptance:

I wanted acceptance really, really badly! I had become the clear outcast. I started changing myself more in 7<sup>th</sup> grade to be like them. I begged my mom to buy me a few outfits that cost as much as 20 outfits at another store. I saved up for these boots I'm still wearing four years later.

The stress of trying to fit in compromised her motivation to do well. Jean said she went from a straight A student in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to a failing 7<sup>th</sup> grade student.

Rita also shut down in her prior school, afraid that others would see her as "weird" if she did well academically. Fredricks et al. (2010) found that gifted students in regular classrooms felt their academic interests were not supported by peers; it was not "cool" to be thought of as smart. Many gifted students also have trouble forming relationships with students their own age and often hide intellectual ability in order to make friends in multilevel school contexts (Davidson et al., 2004). In order to fit in, Rita hid her abilities and stopped putting in the effort. Because of this, Rita was not fully aware of her potential academic abilities. Rita said:

In the beginning of the year I just felt miserable, like, "Is this how I'm gonna be, am I not smart enough for middle school?" But then, I saw some people doing well, and I realized no one else cares. No one else is trying, I just need to try, and *then* I'll shine. Instead of investing himself in being accepted socially, Gary excelled academically. He came across as superior to prior school peers saying they were "dumber than rocks." He said prior



school peers were “jealous of me for being smart,” and they “wanted to see me fail academically.” When I asked how he felt he could do academically in his prior school, Gary said:

I had straight As the year before I left. So I mean, I felt like I could do anything.

A more passive Allan showed the least amount of concern about prior school peers. Besides saying peers did not encourage or challenge him, Allan never mentioned prior school friends or social struggles. He said he got straight As and his peers didn’t pay much attention to him other than to ask him for help. Although Allan stated that peers in his old school did not challenge him, they did so indirectly. He was known in his old school to be the student one could come to for help in math. I asked how that felt. Allan said:

It felt good because it meant I could help people, and it meant I knew things that people could come to me for help with.

This may have helped Allan feel less isolated and maintain confidence in his ability to do well in that subject. At Stevenson, peers continued to ask Allan for help with math, which may have alleviated potential social stress. Jean also felt good about her ability to inspire Stevenson peers to do well academically.

My friend and I used to fool around during free blocks. Then I’d say, “Hey, I’m going to see our biology teacher for some help.” The next thing I knew that friend was tagging along or going on her own to do the same the next free block.

Allan mentioned support gained from his new friends at Stevenson many times. He said:

If I want to do well they try to help me. If I don’t want to do well they try to get me to do well.

All of these participants placed similar emphasis on the positive peer support experienced at Stevenson compared with prior schools. This support was described as a crucial aspect of Stevenson's environment and how participants perceived their academic abilities. Gilman and Anderman (2006) found that students who reported higher scores on measures of school belongingness and lower scores of social stress had higher levels of motivation, self-adequacy, and internal locus of control. Although Jean said her ability had not changed since transferring, she felt the reduction of stress played a large role in her academic performance. Rita also felt her academic ability was stronger since transferring to Stevenson due to the stress relief of not having to worry about what peers would think of her. Rita and Jean described how having friends at Stevenson made them feel successful academically:

[Having friends] helps a lot, because I don't have to worry. I don't have to worry, "Oh, what will these people think if I get a bad grade on a test?" I can just think, "Sofia doesn't care. Ariel doesn't care." They're all just my friends and they like me for who I am. (Rita)

It's a lot more support. I mean you can have support from your parents but that's different. (Jean)

Spencer and Tinsley (2008) insist accessible and recognizable supports in the school context are necessary to facilitate adaptive coping in order to assist in confident identity formation. When Jean struggled with academics in her old school, she felt no one cared. Because she did not feel supported by teachers and peers, she stopped caring about doing well. Jean talked about a teacher whom she had asked for help:

Only one teacher set up the class good for my learning and she seemed like she cared. The other teacher was young and didn't know what she was doing. She told me to come back at lunch because I didn't understand fractions. I was excited that she wanted to meet with me one-on-one! When I went there her door was locked, she had left for a lunch break. I lost a lot of respect for her and I didn't care to do well in her class, I didn't care.

Compared with how she felt at her previous school with Stevenson, Jean felt she could ask anyone for help and it was there. As stated earlier, being around successful peers helped these participants feel they could be successful. Jean said:

If I'm struggling with a math problem, I can call out in the library full of students, "Can someone help me with number 4? Is anyone good with geometry?" Then someone will immediately help me.

Allan also felt at Stevenson he could ask peers for help in math and other subjects, something he could not do at his prior school. Although it felt good to help others, Allan felt he too could be more successful at Stevenson where he received help from peers. A number of times Allan mentioned his success relied upon being helped by teachers, parents, and peers when he struggled with an academic subject. Surrounded by successful peers who shared common values and goals made transferring to Stevenson a relief from long-endured social stress. Rita said:

At my old school, I used to be just miserable. I would think, "Crap, I'm just really lonely." But here I feel like I'm the norm, and I really like being normal for once. I've never been normal. I've always been the crazy smart, spazzy, singer girl. And

now it's nice just being the spazzy, singer girl. And not just crazy, or not immediately thought of as crazy smart.

I asked Gary what he liked best about Stevenson. He said, "The friendly, positive atmosphere."

*How is this friendly positive atmosphere different from your last school? (Lancaster)*

It's friendly and positive! It's a place where teachers care and there are people here that are just like me. It's more interactive and more understanding, because everyone kind of has the same background here. (Gary)

Many gifted students have trouble forming relationships with students their own age and often hide intellectual ability in order to make friends in multilevel school contexts (Davidson et al., 2004). These participants felt they had adapted and made friends quickly. However, for Rita, making friends was not immediate, as she said she felt people thought she was "weird," but she soon realized that was only because she "did not make the first move." Allan said at first he felt some Stevenson people "made small little insults they expected him to be ok with," but he "knew those things weren't true so I let it go." They each mentioned that Stevenson's large building size was the first challenge they had to cope with. Yet all of the participants felt that the stress relief of transferring from the "poisonous miasma" of prior school environments overshadowed the new, unfamiliar school to which they had to adapt.

### **Theme 3. Academic Self-Concept: "Very Few Are Amazing at Everything They Do"**

Although none of my interview questions asked participants to compare academic abilities with classmates, three of them discussed being smartest in the class or school. Part of what made Rita, Gary, and Allan feel lonely in prior schools was feeling they were either smartest or among the smartest in the class or the whole school. These three participants

differed on how this made them feel ranging from liking it to feeling uncomfortable and lonely at the top.

Being smartest in the class felt uncomfortable. I felt the pressure was on me to perform. Everyone was looking to celebrate [my] failure. I had no real role model to look after and try to be like, because everyone was looking up to me. (Gary)

It felt kind of nice, but also, it felt kind of like I was above everyone. And then I felt bad about feeling above, but I also kind of didn't. (Rita)

When I was at my other school, since I was equal to the smartest people, I felt, like, good. Now that I'm here there are people smarter than me; I feel that encourages me to do things I wouldn't have usually done and to try and do better. (Allan)

Participants' feelings contradicted the findings of Fredricks et al. (2010) that gifted adolescents needed to maintain an identity of being the smartest for personal fulfillment. Gary felt smartest in his previous school; however, that did not fulfill him or make him feel successful. Gary voiced that what most helped him succeed in his prior school was

Knowing it could only get better. It ended. I knew for sure it ended at 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I knew for sure high school would be better. I knew I was probably the smartest kid in the class. I *WAS* the smartest kid in the class, not probably.

When asked if Gary felt he was the smartest at Stevenson he said:

No! No way.

All of the participants brought up that a major factor of the transfer experience was adapting to an environment where, as Rita said, "Smart people surrounded" them. Marsh and Parker

(1984) found self-perceptions are based in part on comparing students' own academic abilities with ability levels of other students in the immediate school context. Upon transfer to Stevenson, these participants immediately compared themselves with other classmates.

Rita said:

Everywhere I look, a person may or may not be smarter than me. I'm used to being—I was used to being on top.

Comparing prior school classmates with those at Stevenson, Allan said:

Here they are doing really good compared with me. But in my old school they were ok, some were really smart, but here a lot are really, really smart!

Jean was the only participant who did not claim she was the smartest student in her prior school. By 7<sup>th</sup> grade she was consumed by negative social experiences. She did not notice what other students were doing academically like she did when she transferred to Stevenson:

I was in my own world over there.

Coming to Stevenson in 7<sup>th</sup> grade she felt she had to “buckle down.” Jean said:

I transferred in the middle of my seventh-grade year. In English at Stevenson, we were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had friends outside of Stevenson that were in high school reading that! It made me feel a little out of place at first. I knew I had to work much harder than I had been. I saw people doing 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade math; I was like, “Am I stupid?”

Elaborating on those feelings further, Jean said:

Academically I didn't feel stupid because I saw what stupid kids did. But when I got here I saw there are stupid kids here but they are actually smart. They will do stupid

things and get themselves kicked out of school. They will skip class and read the textbook and get As on the tests. And I wonder, “Why can’t I have that?”

Allan, Gary, and Rita felt Stevenson’s “smarter” students challenged them to reach higher goals. Was et al. (2011) found that “students with high self-efficacy adopted performance approach goals in order to demonstrate ability to their significant others” (p. 645). Yet Marsh and Parker (1984) stated, “A positive academic self-concept that is based on a comparison with abilities in a low-ability school might not be maintainable in a different academic setting.” These participants all said they felt confident in their academic abilities prior to transferring to Stevenson and after:

Now that I’m [at Stevenson] there are people smarter than me; I feel that encourages me to do things I wouldn’t have usually done and to try and do better. (Allan)

Comparing what it felt like to be on top at their old schools with how they felt at Stevenson, participants said:

Like I have someone to look up to, someone to be like, someone to compete with. Not in a super negative competitive way, just so I can have a goal to achieve. (Gary)

It sort of felt like, you’re still on top of the kids at your old school, but you realize there are taller mountains to climb. (Rita)

Rita enthusiastically discussed how she felt when she saw that taller mountain:

I wanna climb the mountain! But like math, I’m not a number person, so I think, “Okay, I can let those people be smarter than me in math.” But in English, I’m like, “I’m on top!” Words are my forte. I’ve accepted I’m not gonna be smarter than some kids. (Rita)

Marsh and Craven (2002) surmised that decreasing highly competitive environments that accommodated the social comparison processes could lessen the “Big Fish Little Pond Effect”. They suggested that individual students encouraged to pursue their own particular interests could reduce social comparison (Marsh & Craven, 2002). Like Rita, Jean felt she could let others be great in certain subjects, because she was confident in her potential for other subjects:

There are very few that are amazing at everything they do. At Stevenson there are barely any. There are kids that get A+s in some things and Cs and Ds in others.

Gary also shared in the realization that not everyone is good at everything. He believed that although he was not smartest in the school, he felt smartest in certain subjects compared with classmates. Gary said a number of times that Stevenson peers did not take his academic ability seriously because they perceived him to have a cavalier attitude toward subjects he felt he could do with his eyes shut. However, he maintained confidence in his high math and social studies abilities. Gary said:

They know I’m doing independent study because I passed out of social studies already this year, and they know that I’m in Algebra I, which is higher than most of the kids in my grade. And not very many of them know I’m even advanced for Algebra I. I’m a few sections ahead. I have the homework done for the rest of the chapter because in my free time I already know what I’m doing.

Jean felt there were many students that were equal to her in ability. She did not feel that others who performed better academically than she made her feel less capable. Instead, she focused on that which she felt she was most capable. She said:



Even though I may want to do well in academics or do better, I know there are tons of people who want to do performing arts the way I do.

Although Jean failed her academic courses at her prior school at the beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, her perceived ability to do well academically went unchanged. Jean said:

My ability definitely hasn't changed, it's just how it was laid out is different. I feel like I wasn't challenged enough. It's just the level of expectance and level of the books that they gave us. They had lower expectations of us.

Jean had maintained confidence that she could do well academically, but that was not enough to motivate her to do well. It took time at Stevenson to realize her academic identity was centered not in academics, but in her talent within performing arts. Jean said:

For a while I thought I couldn't find my gift because it seemed like everyone around me was academically gifted. It was through extracurricular activities at school that I realized my gift. I found my gift in my talent, and I was looking for it in academics but I didn't find it there. Stevenson gave me opportunities to find out my gift. I may have never found my gift, and that scares me because I would have felt stupid. I wouldn't have felt gifted at all. Academics, yeah I would have always done well, but that doesn't seem like a gift to me. I can't like run like 40 yards in 20 seconds. To me, that's a gift.

As Jean excelled in performing arts, she began looking at prestigious colleges that demanded a strong academic and performing arts background. She confidently said she believed she had the academic ability to get into those colleges.

Crosnoe (2009) found that how students do academically is a function of how they view themselves and how others evaluate them relative to academic skills and performance

of their peers. At the transition period of transfer to Stevenson, participants said they felt very confident in their academic abilities. However, for a brief period they questioned their abilities when comparing themselves with classmates. Feeling encouraged by teachers and classmates, participants said they quickly zeroed in on their own unique abilities rather than comparing themselves with others. Rita described how she felt about peer encouragement:

I feel like we're all part of one big cheerleading squad, and there's no team we're cheering for; we're cheering for ourselves.

Participants all felt that doing well in every subject at Stevenson was unrealistic due to its advanced pace and enriched curriculum. They all developed more realistic perceptions of their individual academic abilities through encouragement and opportunities to showcase these abilities at Stevenson:

I feel a little less capable in some areas, like math, 'cause I'm surrounded by so many smart people, but I feel even more capable in English, cause words are something I'm competitive with. I do forensics and plays. Words are what I love. (Rita)

Here, I feel that I can do a lot, but not anything. 'Cause, I mean, I'm not gonna get like, I'm never gonna be in the 100 percentile for like ACT, SAT, those kind of things. Anything above like a 77 or 80 is great to me! Here at conferences you'll hear about what *he's* doing well. They don't just focus on what you're doing badly, so that your parents think "Oh, he's not doing well with anything," because that's all they talk about the whole conference. Here, they really look at what you are good at and just a little on what you could do better with. And they care about your success. They know

who you are, your personality, and how to talk to you. And that did not happen in my other school at all. That makes me feel like I can do better here. (Gary)

Being the smartest was not crucial for participants to have high academic self-concepts. As Marsh and Craven (2002) surmised, excelling and focusing in at least one academic subject or extracurricular activity could lessen the “Big Fish Little Pond Effect.” These participants, encouraged to focus on individual abilities, seemed minimally affected by the “Big Fish Little Pond Effect” (Marsh and Parker, 1984).

#### **Theme 4. Challenge and Depth of Learning: “I Know I Can Get There, It’s Just a Matter of How I Get There”**

The final theme emerging from these interviews was that of challenge and depth of learning. A subtheme that emerged within this theme was social challenge. Gifted adolescents reported boredom, lack of academic challenge, and lack of support of interests by peers in their regular classes (Fredricks et al., 2010). Regarding their prior schools, all of these participants reported the same. They said that prior school experiences lacked challenge and depth of learning, leaving them deflated, frustrated, and unsure of their true potential. Participants all indicated value for learning and obtaining new knowledge on the admiration ladder. They all stated that these values were met upon transferring to Stevenson. Their new school provided enriched learning that challenged participants to learn in ways they had never experienced. Gary and Rita emphasized this:

The last challenge I had, I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I used to throw stuff at the teacher because she didn’t understand me. I was like another squirmy kid to everybody. I was hurting because I got bored. (Imitating teacher) “Alright class, we are going to do this for the

5<sup>th</sup> time today!” I was like, “I don’t need ANY review though. At. ALL.” (Imitating teacher) “OK class...” “I don’t care! Just shut up OK!” (Gary)

I felt like I could not succeed [in my old school]. I knew I was smart, and I just felt like this curriculum is terrible. It was a lot of technology over substance, and that just really upset me, ‘cause I’m like, “OK, so I know how to make a flip chart. I don’t know about the silk route.” (Rita)

Gifted students show an increase in achievement as a benefit from enrichment, differentiation, acceleration, and enriched programs (Anderman, 2002; Anderman, 2003; Barber & Mueller, 2011; Colangelo et al., 2004; Field, 2009; Gavin et al., 2007; Gilman & Anderman, 2006; Glaeser, 2006; Gubbins et al., 2007; Reis et al., 2007; Tieso, 2002). Although these aspects of their new school proved beneficial, participants agreed that coming from learning environments that lacked academic challenge, Stevenson’s accelerated pace was one of the biggest challenges to overcome.

When students transfer to Stevenson, they need to step up their game. I had gone from not doing anything to having to do much more. (Jean)

My old school was pretty easy, but this school it’s much more challenging. So I’ve had to switch from an easy lifestyle to something that’s harder. (Allan)

When I first got here I was like, WOW! This is not going to be simple. It’s not simple. I mean I had some experiences with challenges at my old school. But this was really new to me. Especially the social studies class. Randy, the social studies teacher,

was my biggest challenge. [Prestigious college] grad, he's super strict. He's brilliant! He could probably pick up this room and throw it out the window. It felt good to be challenged. It felt really good actually having to work for something, because I never experienced that before. I looked forward to it, just to see what it would be like.

(Gary)

Stevenson is way more challenging. You have to concentrate more. I'm used to not working and just doing what I need to do. 'Cause at my old school the work was so easy, I could just, like, not pay attention and then just do it. (Rita)

Accelerated students in enriched classes feel academically challenged and socially accepted (Colangelo et al., 2004). These participants who felt the stress of being social outcasts among peers who did not support their interests, felt that the challenges of Stevenson's accelerated pace and enriched learning were easily surmountable in comparison. They elaborated:

I've had to get more help from [teachers] because I've had to have them like, slow down. But, I've also had to—especially in social studies last year, just the ancient aspects of the world: Greek, Roman, and Chinese. And that became difficult for me because we covered so much information in such a short period of time, and it's so deep. At my old school, I'd never experienced it before. That was my first year here, so I didn't know that you could go that deep, because a lot of teachers brush the surface. Like, we'd spend 2 weeks on what we would spend a trimester on in my old school. (Gary)

I think the teachers at my old school were just like, “Here. Do it.” And you didn’t learn anything. But here they explain; they get, like... there are really in depth science experiments, and English assignments, and debates in social studies, and it’s really cool. (Rita)

I thought I would do OK [academically at my old school], but not as good as I do now, because I wasn’t learning as well as I am here. Here, they cover more topics than they did there. Like in social studies, we only went over our country; it wasn’t much detail. Here, [the social studies teacher] goes over Greece, Rome, and China. There’s a lot more to it. (Allan)

Facing the challenge of comparing academic abilities to high-achieving classmates in a homogeneous gifted school (Marsh & Parker, 1984), participants discussed how they felt about their ability to succeed academically since transferring to Stevenson:

I don’t know how well I can actually do, because I don’t where the top is. [At my old school] I knew where the top was because I’d met it. Now, I have no idea how high I can actually go. I have no doubt I can reach [the top]. It’s a matter of just going through each of the stages and getting there. (Gary)

Whenever I’m concerned about [my ability to succeed academically], I turn the clock back to last year and I think, “What was I doing this time last year?” Probably crying my eyes out about something. And then I think, “What am I doing this year?” I’m being really successful. The harder it is the more able I feel I am. (Rita)

Consistent with Marsh and Parker (1984), during the transition period to Stevenson, academic self-concept was affected negatively by comparing abilities to high ability of peers. However, quickly after the transition period, participants said they felt *more* confident in their academic abilities and reaching future goals than they felt in their prior schools:

My confidence gives me something to look back on and say, “Hey I did this, so I know I can do whatever this is.” (Gary)

If I can make it at Stevenson, I can make it pretty much anywhere, in my opinion. If I got an A on a social studies or an English test, why can’t I get an A on a math test? If I got a really good part in a school play, who says I can’t get the lead in the next community theater production? (Rita)

As far as doing well academically now, my head is learning as much as it can. In the future, not necessarily to impress someone in conversation, but to know what I need to know. I feel like if you if you aren’t going to college, at least Stevenson will teach you to know things for your life. It gives you the fundamentals for life. (Jean)

If I can do one of the hardest things that I’ll ever do—school—then I can pretty much do anything. (Gary)

Allan’s main challenge at his prior school was enduring its inability to challenge him academically and help him reach future goals:

If I hadn’t come here I would have gone to another school that I would float easily through. When I got to college, everyone would be advanced and I would be behind. I

feel like I'm learning a lot more, so that makes me feel good. It kind of makes me feel like my future is going to be better. Like, if I do well on a test, now that I know these problems I can use them in life. If those problems ever come up again I will know how to answer them. (Allan)

Allan said that in comparison, he felt the challenge depth of learning at Stevenson made him feel he was building skills. He indicated that this challenge made him feel more confident in his ability to succeed in future academic endeavors:

At my old school we didn't have to take notes. But here we have to take notes in social studies every single day. I think that's a good thing to learn because if I take notes I have a record of everything I did and I learn different things I wrote down. So I think it's a good habit to learn. It makes me feel good, but it's also hard, because I have to think about putting the notes into my own words. But it makes me feel good because I'm thinking I'll have the skill down and when I really need to use it I'll already know how to do it well. (Allan)

Comparing challenges that participants experienced in regard to SES from which school district participants transferred, the main difference among them was attitude. All three high-SES transferees were more academically and socially challenged by negative prior school experiences. Allan spoke little of prior-school social challenges compared with the other three participants.

A subtheme that emerged in challenge and depth of learning was social challenge. A shift in social support and searching for a sense of belonging may be why transferring to a new school causes anxiety and challenges the coping skills of adolescents (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). All of these participants faced the uncomfortable social challenges of



feeling out of place when first arriving at Stevenson. They said that they made friends and felt that they became a part of the Stevenson community quickly. However, comments made by the three most recent transfer students, Rita, Gary, and Allan, reflected the social challenges that they continued to adapt to as a result of changing school contexts.

Gary said that he was used to being viewed as smartest by students at his prior school. However, he defended himself when describing feeling academically misunderstood by Stevenson classmates:

There's a lot of, "Oh, he can do great because he's natural," and there's a lot of, "He doesn't take anything seriously enough, so he won't succeed." And I feel like they're wrong because, the stuff... I do take stuff seriously if I need to take it seriously, but I see no reason to for the kind of things that are like, just, classes that I could pass with my eyes shut. Not a lot of kids in my grade view me as being smart. They view me as being creative, and a good like... just kind of... people person. But not as being super smart, or I don't know if they—they don't look up to me for that aspect.

Allan did not feel that he had to defend himself when dealing with how he was perceived by some of his Stevenson peers:

They are welcoming and nice. But sometimes they say things they expect you to be OK with even though you may not be. Like small little insults. But I can deal with that. It doesn't bother me because I know it's not true, so I just let it go.

All of the participants except Allan mentioned that Stevenson students who had attended since preschool were known as "lifers." This term related to how these students had attended Stevenson their entire lives. Developing an understanding of Stevenson's culture, Rita rationalized perceived negative behavior of lifers:

They're really, really nice. Like in the beginning of the year no one really talked to me and I was really scared. But now I realize they thought I was weird cause I didn't make the first move. And so they kind of... they're really nice to each other, and they really, really... it's like a big family. But then there's also some gossip; some little underlying hate. They've been together a long time, so they may not have been able to let go of things that happened in the past. Like I'm still mad at the people who were mean to me in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Cause, I'm just like, "You seriously did that? I do not like you." So they may not be able to let go of that. And since there's only like 35 of us, you can't just go and hang out with other friends, and just not consciously hate that person. You can't, cause those are... that's... you can't. But generally, people are polite to each other, which I really enjoy.

Participants felt a sense of community amongst Stevenson students, most of whom came from similar negative prior school experiences. However, Gary, Jean, and Rita agreed that lifers did not know "how good they had it." This challenged the four participants to relate to longtime students who complained about Stevenson or who exhibited perceived superior behavior:

Kids who are looking at other schools, the way I feel is they don't know how good they've got it, because those are the kids who have been at Stevenson their whole lives. They have a different perspective, because they have no idea how good they have it. And they especially feel like they're at the top of the world. They know everybody. They act like, "Oh, I know, I know. I've been here more than you. I know what I'm doing more than you." (Gary)

There are social issues here where I see people freak out. But they don't recognize how little it is. Like people who have gone here their whole lives since kindergarten, they freak out about nothing. I have no stress, I used to find like gray hairs from the stress I was under. (Jean)

## **Discussion**

Hearing the voices of gifted transfer students at Stevenson gave a glimpse into their worlds. They discussed how perceived academic abilities were affected by transitioning from heterogeneous classrooms to a homogeneous school. Participants also shared what it was like to adapt to a gifted school environment. This understanding allows us to recognize the challenges gifted adolescents feel in various school contexts. It also demonstrates how perceived academic ability is affected during the period in which a student transitions to a homogeneous school context. The substance of the participants' experiences, analyzed through transcripts, could be summarized by the words of the researcher in this study:

I feel I can do well academically no matter what kind of school I attend. However, in order for me to *want* to do well and maintain a healthy academic identity, I must be in an environment that matches my values, is supportive, is challenging, and is filled with likeminded peers and teachers. I value those who are smart, can teach me something new, and are accepting of me. I recognize that others may be smarter than me in a gifted school environment; however, that only challenges me to reach higher. The higher I reach, the higher that I feel I am able to reach. I am not the smartest kid in this school, like I was at my old school. That's why I must find that which I am really good; that "something" that sets me apart from everyone else. In a gifted school environment, I am able to discover and appreciate individual gifts and talents that set

me apart. Instead of thinking that I'm good at everything, I have a more realistic view of what my abilities truly are, and what I need to work on and improve. Feeling at Stevenson I can reach high, feeling I'm good at something that sets me apart, and feeling accepted by peers gives me a strong and healthy academic identity.

In general, these transfer students found that their experiences in previous schools tended to be negative or did not fit their needs. Upon arriving at Stevenson they reported that connecting with other students was not difficult. It was a pleasure for these students to leave a sense of alienation behind. Participants felt that Stevenson facilitated a sense of belonging by offering differentiated, accelerated, enriched programs, and a community of likeminded peers (Anderman, 2002; Anderman, 2003; Barber & Mueller, 2011; Colangelo et al., 2004; Field, 2009; Gavin et al., 2007; Gilman & Anderman, 2006; Glaeser, 2006; Gubbins et al., 2007; Reis et al., 2007; Tieso, 2002).

Participants all said that they were not prepared for the challenge of accelerated and enriched learning that Stevenson provided. Yet adjusting to the transfer experience was relatively seamless for all of them. As Stein and Hussong (2007) found, having high academic self-concepts prior to transferring may have led to more positive expectations and more positive experiences when transitioning. Overall, participants perceived a better fit and improved academic self-concept at Stevenson. This suggested that transferring to an independent gifted school was beneficial to these participants' academic identity.

Through their experiences, the participants provided an understanding of their values. They valued peer support and challenge in order to do well academically and succeed in the future. This was felt at Stevenson, but not in regular classrooms at prior schools. In a relevant study, Fredricks et al. (2010) also found that gifted students in regular classrooms felt that

peers did not support academic interests. As found in the Admiration Ladder Survey, all the participants valued being smart. They generally identified with being the smartest in previous schools. Marsh and Parker's (1984) "Big Fish Little Pond Effect" found that high achievers placed in homogeneous classrooms with other high achievers led to lower academic ability self-concept. These participants felt somewhat differently than Marsh and Parker's (1984) findings. This may be related to the perspectives formed while comparing Stevenson with the negative experiences at their prior schools. It may also be related to the sample itself. Students unhappy with Stevenson who did not agree to be interviewed may have felt less safe volunteering to discuss negative feelings. The participants of this study, as long as they did not have to relive negative prior-school-type social experiences, maintained positive academic self-concept perspectives when encountering challenges at Stevenson.

Anderman (2003) found that adolescent students who report that their needs are not met also experience a sharp decrease in academic identity. Participants in this study reported that their needs were not met in prior schools, yet felt high academic self-concepts. Three of the four participants perceived themselves smartest in prior classrooms or the entire school. This study supports Marsh's (1991) findings, in that participants initially felt a shift in self-concept when comparing themselves to Stevenson peers. However, participants quickly felt that they were among equals who were simply better at some academic topics than they. This quick adjustment could have been related to Stevenson's emphasis that the entire student population was academically gifted. As Rita said, "For the first time I'm the norm."

It also could have been related to the strong values Stevenson placed on social and emotional wellbeing. Eddles-Hirsh, Vialle, Rogers, and McCormick (2010) found that gifted schools that offered enriched learning combined with social and emotional support systems

were effective in developing social contexts that facilitated learners enjoyment of school. Eddles-Hirsh et al. (2010) found that gifted schools that facilitated peer relations, acceptance of diversity, grade interaction, and a sense of autonomy, related to participants “demonstrating academic ability without resorting to maladaptive types of social coping strategies” (p. 124). Additionally, gifted schools that encouraged student achievement through creative arts, sports, and outside academic competitions, showcased student differences, also enhancing the perceptions of wellbeing and the enjoyment of enriched programs.

Stevenson participants discussed the sense of autonomy they felt by choosing their classes and having a free period to study or socialize. They talked about frequently interacting and taking classes with different grade levels. Additionally, Rita and Jean said that competition with classmates was minimal when auditioning for school performances compared with prior schools. For this reason, they were provided opportunities to showcase ability and talent. Gary felt similarly with his involvement in competitive forensics. Any student who signed up was allowed to participate and showcase distinction at local and statewide events. Although these participants did not feel the smartest in every Stevenson classroom, they each felt smartest at “something.”

**Smartest, self-concept, and gender.** Fredricks et al. (2010) found that maintaining an identity of being the smartest was important to many gifted adolescents studied, not just for recognition, but also for personal fulfillment. Participants who described themselves as the smartest at prior schools accepted that they were not the smartest at Stevenson. As Jean pointed out, at Stevenson, “Very few are amazing at everything they do, one student may be really great with math but horrible with English.” As participants adapted to Stevenson’s

supportive and challenging environment and felt a sense of belonging, being the smartest was not singularly important. Although they gained more realistic estimations of their academic ability, perceiving themselves to stand out as smart or smartest at something was crucial (“At this, I’m not as smart as you. That’s OK because I know I’m good at something, too.”).

Jean felt that her gifts were related to performing arts abilities. She said, “I’m sure there are a lot of kids here that wish they could do what I can do, as I wish I could do academically what they can.” Rita also said the same, claiming a particular classmate can go ahead and be great at math, because she knew she was great at English. Allan often spoke of his exceptional math ability and how classmates came to him for help. Allan’s strong academic identity at his prior school and Stevenson was related to how well he did with math. Gary’s confident academic identity was related to how well he perceived himself to do in math and forensics.

Participants felt that focusing on academic or extracurricular subjects helped them maintain the high academic self-concepts that they had in their prior schools. As discussed earlier, another study pointed out that healthy academic identities crossed context to a new school (Oikonomidoy, 2009). Oikonomidoy (2009) indicated that healthy construction of study participants’ academic identities took place within the context of their national (and global) identities. Although these participants had healthy academic self-concepts in their prior schools, lowered academic expectations and lowered social self-concepts may have limited their view of true academic potential.

Silverman (2007) found that gifted children in regular classrooms are likely to experience lower social self-concepts. Feeling isolated from peers, low social self-concepts and identifying with being smartest at prior schools may have related to male participants’

need to feel successful academically. In particular, the male participants turned to math. Gary felt that he did not share common interests with peers. He felt that his prior-school classmates looked down on him for not participating in sports, or were jealous of his academic ability. At Stevenson, he fit in better, but still felt that peers were jealous of his ability, or did not take him seriously. Allan spoke little of his prior-school social life. However, he enthusiastically spoke of Stevenson friends. He mentioned that some people at Stevenson made little insults that he claimed did not bother him. Both boys experienced improved self-concepts at Stevenson, however, not as drastically improved as the girls in this study.

The girls suffering low social self-concepts in prior schools maintained confidence in academic abilities. However, they hid abilities so as not be perceived, as Rita said, “weird.” Silverman (2007) found that gifted girls tend to hide abilities in order to fit in, stating:

In elementary school [girls] direct their mental energies to developing social relationships; in junior high school they are valued for their appearance and sociability rather than for intelligence.

In Rita’s admiration ladder, she valued a female Stevenson peer whom she felt was “really, really pretty.” However, she didn’t think of herself in that way. Jean spoke at length that she wanted acceptance “really, really badly” in middle school, even begging her mom to purchase name brand clothing in an attempt to fit in. Both girls detailed how they fit in at Stevenson, calling the entire community from grades 6-12 “family.” This supports findings that social self-concept improves when children are placed with true peers in special classes, and that school enjoyment is enhanced in gifted schools that foster community (Eddles-Hirsh et al., 2010; Silverman 2007). Both girls concluded that feeling accepted alleviated stress, which allowed them to focus on facing academic challenges. As each of these participants



successfully met Stevenson's increased academic challenges to improve and master subjects, their perceived academic ability also improved.

**Prior school as frame of reference.** When comparing SES from which school district participants transferred, the main difference noted was attitude. All three high-SES transferees, Gary, Rita, and Jean, were unequivocally more outwardly academically, socially, and emotionally affected by negative prior school experiences. Allan's main concern regarding his prior school was its inability to assist him in reaching future goals. His primary intention to attend Stevenson was to learn new skills that would prepare him for college and obtain a good career. He spoke little of prior school or Stevenson social experiences. He simply said that peers at his prior school did not encourage him. At Stevenson, he lit up more while talking about friends, expressing his value for peers that could help teach him things he wanted to learn.

Allan also stated that he felt prior-school teachers would, "steer him in the right direction." The other participants unanimously felt that prior-school teachers did not care or were incapable of meeting their needs. One inconsistency was noted in Allan's response regarding how Stevenson made him feel more successful than his prior school. He said:

[Stevenson is] a good fit, the teachers are encouraging, and they should be as encouraging as possible. Because if the student feels like the teacher wants them to do well then the student will do well, too.

Allan's values were based on learning from and feeling encouraged by others. He used the word "encouraged" 8 times, while the other participants used that word a total of 4 times between them. Allan's response regarding prior-school teachers may have been inconsistent compared with how he felt about what made him feel successful at Stevenson.

However, based on the rest of his interview, how Allan felt about his academic ability in his prior school compared with Stevenson was consistent. Most notably, he said:

I thought I would do OK, but not as good as I do now. Because I wasn't learning as well as I am here.

He felt he was among, if not the, smartest in his prior school. Allan also felt incredibly supported by his parents. As Bailey (2011, p.217) found, gifted students may be “particularly adept at using social coping strategies to fit expectations of their environment.” This is especially so when at least one supportive adult is present, combined with factors of strong peer support and/or involvement in extra-curricular activities (Reis et al., 2005). Bailey (2011) also found that gifted students from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds indicated healthy and adaptive levels of functioning, and that giftedness enhanced resiliency in students.

While the high-SES participants in this study felt traumatized by negative prior school experiences, Allan did not. Compared with the high-SES transfer students who were concerned by what peers thought or said of them, Allan was not concerned. It is possible that attending a low-SES school gave Allan resiliency that contributed to a different perspective of what a negative experience may be. Like the high-SES participants who cited Stevenson “lifers” did not know how good they had it, Allan might say the same of participants who felt that they had it badly in prior high-SES schools.

Coming from a low-SES district where adolescents often face depression and typically define themselves by a future lacking possibilities (Dearing 2008; Prothrow, 1991) may have provided Allan unique perspective. This perspective may be the force behind his focus to be academically successful at Stevenson, in college, and beyond. Allan was

exceedingly aware that he was “learning better” at Stevenson and how that prepared him for college and career. Allan said that he was afraid at his prior school he would “float” through and not be prepared for future academic demands. He appreciated that he was developing a more realistic impression of his academic ability at Stevenson. He believed that encouragement by teachers to improve and do better would prepare him for higher education. Allan’s perspective may have also contributed to why he was not bothered by negative social interactions, like the “small insults” that Stevenson peers made. His eye on the prize, Allan focused on the educational opportunities Stevenson provided. A peer saying something offensive was not going to stand in his way of reaching opportunities and goals that prior school peers might never have.

Allan was the youngest participant in the study. He was also the only one experiencing his first year of middle school at the time of our interview. Additionally, Allan was the only participant to choose all same-gender peers on the admiration ladder. This may relate more to Allan’s age than the SES of the school district from which he transferred. It could also be related to the length of time Allan had attended Stevenson. Similarly, Rita, the other participant to have transferred 6 months earlier, chose eight of nine same-gender peers. The longer they attended Stevenson, the more mixed were gender choices on the Admiration Ladder Survey.

Sophomore participant Jean attended Stevenson the longest of all the participants: 3 years. She was also least concerned with excelling academically. She reported that in her 6<sup>th</sup> grade year she worked incessantly. She prided herself in being a straight A student. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, prior to transferring to Stevenson, due to a negative social experience, she had given

up on grades. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she said that she was a B student. She accepted that she was never going to pull straight As. Jean said:

In high school, currently, at Stevenson, I can learn and know everything and tell you and have a conversation with you about it. I can write a paper or do a project on it and get an A. But if you hand me an exam or test on it, which is really 50% of my grade, and the rest is broken in segments, then that will automatically bring me down to an automatic B, but I'll get As on everything else in the class.

Jean said that her teachers felt that she could do much better academically than she did. They also said that she was socially focused. Throughout our interview, it was clear that Jean was more motivated to do well socially than academically. However, her overall attitude was admiration for those who could “whip out As.” This may support Marsh’s (1991) finding that:

On average, equally able students attending higher-ability high schools were likely to have lower academic self-concepts, lower GPAs, and lower educational aspirations, in their sophomore year of school.

Jean’s lack of academic motivation may also support Kumar and Jagacinski’s (2011) findings that individuals who experience much academic difficulty decide the task in which they are engaged does not fulfill their need for achievement. Jean admitted that the challenge and pace of Stevenson curriculum was her biggest obstacle when transferring. She said that her mother assured her:

A B at Stevenson is worth any A+ at any public school because our classes are really advanced. Even our AP classes might even be higher than college courses. I remember one time I got a C on a math exam and I was freaking out. I told my mom,

“I think I should go to public school and whip out As because this is going to ruin my GPA, and I should just balance this out with As.”

As a result of not feeling fulfilled by academic achievement, Kumar and Jagacinski (2011) found that students were no longer invested in the task and became motivated to seek other activities that could fulfill their needs. Jean said that she was scared when she saw peers were academically gifted, because she felt she was not. Until she found performing arts, she did not feel as though she was achieving. Finding an activity to fulfill her need for achievement, Jean said that she was much more accepting of her academic performance. She was also driven to reach new educational goals, and developed an understanding of teachers that focused on her ability to improve her academic performance.

Anderman (2003) found that adolescents felt less alienated in educational settings that emphasized personal effort, improvement, and mastery. Allan took pride in his drive to improve until he learned a skill well. Participants stated that Stevenson teachers encouraged them, challenging them to improve on personal best. When comparing past experiences with Stevenson, these participants welcomed the higher expectations and challenges Stevenson offered. For the first month or two at Stevenson, they all questioned whether they could meet challenges of accelerated and enriched learning. However, as they successfully rose to occasions, participants generally felt more capable academically than ever before. The more they accomplished, the more they felt they could accomplish. Becoming aware of their potential and developing realistic views of academic ability made participants feel that they could do anything. As Gary said, “I have no idea how high I can actually go. I have no doubt I can reach [the top].”

## **Limitations**

Several limitations apply to this study. There were a small number of students in this study, which was relative to the small population of the school. In addition, school climate reflected perceptions unique to the school and its community. Therefore, any generalization of findings to academically gifted adolescents in other independent gifted schools will need to be made with caution. Additionally, data were collected over a short period of three weeks during one single school semester. It is not clear if similar or different results may occur if the timeline was extended. Whether similar or different results would occur if same or different sets of students were sampled is unclear. I initially intended to look at transfer students from lower, middle, and high- SES school districts. This study comprised mostly of students from high-SES districts may have limited the results. Dynamics of social and academic experiences are more varied and complex than behaviors and perceptions that were measured here. Future research should compare the results of achievement data (such as GPA) with self-perceptions.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to investigate the experiences of adolescent transfer students to an independent gifted school using a phenomenological qualitative modeling technique. The sample demonstrated perceptions of high academic ability prior to attending an independent gifted school. Although upon initial transfer students were affected by comparing abilities to high ability of peers, academic identity flourished in the context of a gifted school. Confident academic identity prior to transferring, negative prior school experiences, and the academic and social context of Stevenson seemed to be strongly related to the development of healthy academic identities. Further research may help to support or reject these relationships.

Negative social concept seemed less related to transferring from a low-SES school district than high-SES school districts. SES of school district did not relate to perceived academic ability, as all participants felt highly about their abilities prior to and after transferring.

Serving the needs of gifted transfer students suggests that schools that facilitate students recognizing and showcasing distinction is crucial to healthy academic identity. If students are negatively affected by social comparison, schools should facilitate student involvement in extracurricular school activities that match student interests. Additionally, teaming new students with a classmate the first week or two of school may help students feel connected with a peer and alleviate the stress of navigating around an unfamiliar building. Providing students with a realistic view of what the expectations will be in a gifted school environment may also help students through the transition. For example, developing an orientation program that offers role playing activities commonly experienced by gifted school students could help prepare transfer students for possible academic self-concept pitfalls. These programs could include a scavenger hunt through the building to help familiarize new students with the space.

Gifted school counselors could work with transfer students to determine academic self-concept prior to transferring, in an attempt to understand student potential to struggle with social comparisons. Gifted schools that offer K-12 or K-8 programming could incorporate perspective activities for “lifers” and transfer students within diversity programs. This could further connect and build school community and appreciation for individual differences.

Future studies could compare pullout student experiences of going back and forth from heterogeneous and homogeneous classrooms each day with experiences of students that

attend only homogeneous classrooms. This study opens doors for future studies comparing the academic identity of adolescent transfer students with those who attended gifted schools since kindergarten. Additionally, future comparison studies can be made with that of students who attended gifted schools from primary through middle and high school to determine grade level transition effects on academic identity.



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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Admiration Ladder Survey

**Directions: For each of the following questions, nominate three (3) students in your current academic class at your current school who you feel best fits the description.**

Objective: To list names of individuals whom students most want to be like, to spark discussion regarding the qualities in students they value and most admire and examine those nominated are high or low achievement as defined by the interviewees.

- 1. Nominate three (3) students in your current academic class whom you admire.**

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- 2. Nominate three (3) students in your current academic class whom you respect.**

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- 3. Nominate three (3) students in your current academic class whom you want to be like.**

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*Admiration Ladder from:*

Graham, A. & Anderson, K. Admiration ladder(2008). Admiration ladder. Available from "I have to be three steps ahead": Academically gifted African American male students in an urban high school on the tension between an ethnic and academic identity. *Urban Rev*, 40(4), 472-499.  
doi:10.1007/s11256-008-00888.

## Appendix B: One-on-One Interview Questions

### One on-One Interview #1 Protocol: Academic Identity at Independent Gifted School

1. (a) Why do you admire the 3 students you identified on your Admiration Ladder?  
(b) Why do you respect the 3 students you identified on your Admiration Ladder?  
(c) Why do you want to be like the 3 students you identified on your Admiration Ladder?
2. When I say the word “school” what comes to mind?
3. In your opinion, what is the purpose of school? How do you feel about it?
4. How do you feel about people who do not finish school?
5. How do you feel about your ability to succeed in school?
6. When you’ve struggled academically to whom have you turned for help throughout your life?
7. Explain things that these people did or said to help you?
8. How do you think other students feel about you?
9. If I got all your current teachers together in one room and asked them to give me one word that describes your academic ability, what word would they give me? Explain.
10. How do students at Stevenson act?
11. How do friends and classmates at Stevenson respond to your desire to do well academically?
12. How do you think peers at Stevenson observe you to see how you respond to academic challenges?
13. What have you had to overcome to be successful at Stevenson?
14. You have “X.0” grade point average and {SAT Score}. What do these numbers mean to you? What do you think they mean to your peers?

### One-On-One Interview Protocol #2: Prior School Academic Identity

1. What school did you attend prior to Stevenson?
2. How were you treated by peers at your prior school?
3. How do you think peers in your prior school observed you to see how you responded to academic challenges?
4. How did friends and classmates in your prior school respond to your desire to do well academically?
5. How did you feel about your ability to succeed in your prior school?
6. What kind of college do your parents want you to attend? Why?
7. What kind of college do your friends want you to attend? Why?
8. What kind of college do your teachers/guidance counselors want you to attend? Why?

*Interview protocol adapted from:*

Graham, A. & Anderson, K. (2008). “I have to be three steps ahead”: Academically gifted African American male students in an urban high school on the tension between an ethnic and academic identity. *Urban Rev*, 40(4), 472-499. doi:10.1007/s11256-008-00888.

## Appendix C: Experience as Transfer Student Questions

### Questions

Objectives: To explore their lives as transfer students, identify how they perceive their academic abilities, future goals, and how they perceive preparation for an independent gifted school has impacted their academic identities (Anderson et al., 2000).

1. What do you think is the biggest challenge to adapt to when transferring to Stevenson?
2. Where do you get support that helps you succeed at Stevenson?
3. Thinking back on your overall experience since transferring to Stevenson, what has made you feel successful?
4. What do you like best about Stevenson? How is that different from your prior school?
5. Think back to your prior school, what do you think most helped you succeed?
6. What are the differences between how capable you felt academically at your prior school compared with how capable academically you feel at Stevenson?
7. Suppose you had one minute to talk to an administrator at your prior school regarding how you were academically prepared for Stevenson, what would you say?
8. How do you feel preparation in your prior school affects how well you feel you can accomplish academic tasks at Stevenson?
9. If you invited a friend from your prior school to attend Stevenson, what would you say in the invitation?
10. Suppose you could make one change that would make transferring to a gifted school better. What would you do?
11. How does feeling successful academically now, make you feel about your ability to reach goals you have for your future?
12. Of all things we discussed, what is the most important to you?

## **Appendix D: Statement of Informed Consent**

**Project Title:** Academically Gifted Adolescents Transferring to an Independent Gifted School: Effects on Academic Identity

**Investigator:** Vanessa Lancaster, Eastern Michigan University

**Co-Investigator:** Alane Starko, Ph.D., Department of Teacher Education

### **What is the Purpose of the Study?**

The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of gifted transfer student experiences in order to ascertain what affects academic identity, self-confidence, motivation, and academic achievement.

### **What is the focus group procedure?**

A focus group is a group discussion - an interviewer asks a series of questions and the group answers the questions and discusses their thoughts. You are invited to participate in a focus group on a date to be determined (snacks will be provided) at: The Stevenson School. You will be with 6-8 other Stevenson School transfer students, and the focus group will last for 1 1/2 hours. Vanessa Lancaster will facilitate the conversation, asking questions and ensuring everyone has a chance to speak.

### **What is the one-on-one interview procedure?**

You will arrange a convenient time with Vanessa Lancaster to partake in a one-on-one interview where she will ask a series of questions and you may discuss your thoughts regarding your experience as a transfer student. The interview will last about one (1) hour.

### **Will information about you be kept confidential?**

If you participate, we will take every precaution to assure everything will be kept private. Researchers will not discuss what you say to anyone, including other students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. You will not be in trouble or face any bad consequences for anything you say. Your grades will not be affected. Everyone who participates in focus group interviews will be asked to take a confidentiality pledge to keep information shared during the groups private. While we cannot guarantee that all participants will abide by this pledge, we will discuss the importance of confidentiality in-depth. There is a risk that, in spite of these precautions, another focus group participant will repeat something you say outside of the room. Although maintaining confidentiality is not entirely under the control of the researchers, we want you to be honest and open as you can, but remain mindful of the limits on our ability to protect confidentiality. The conversation will be tape recorded and transcribed. Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed at the end of the study. *Your name or any identifying information will never be used in any report and all quotes will be anonymous.*

### **What compensation will you get for participating?**

If you participate in the focus group, you will receive refreshments. More importantly, by participating in this study, you will help make a difference in lives of transfer students.

### **Are there any risks associated with your participation in this study?**

If you decide to participate, nothing bad can happen to you or your grades. It is simply to help us

understand your very important point of view. However, as stated above, there is a risk that focus group participants could repeat what you said during interviews to people outside of the focus group.

**What is the benefit of your participation?**

Even though you can't help your grades by participating, you can improve your school by sharing your feelings. We are interested to know how you feel and what you think so schools can develop programs that will help transfer students feel confident and successful.

**What will we talk about during the focus group and one-on-one interview?**

We will ask your perceptions of academic success; how you feel transferring schools has affected academic success; how you feel prior school(s) prepared you academically for The Stevenson School and how you feel that preparation affects your overall experience at The Stevenson School; and challenges you've overcome as a transfer student.

**Do you have to take part in this study?**

No. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may stop participating in the discussion(s) at any time and you can refuse to answer any question asked.

**If you hand in this form, will you definitely be in the focus group?**

NO. By handing in this signed form, you are letting us know that you are interested. Vanessa Lancaster will contact you if you are selected, to confirm that you will take part in the focus group study on a date to be determined and one additional one-on-one interview time to be arranged with Vanessa Lancaster

**How will the researcher use the research results?**

Results will be presented in group-form only. No names or student numbers will be revealed. Results may be presented at meetings, conferences, or in scientific publications and as part of a culminating thesis project being conducted by Vanessa Lancaster.

**Future Questions:** If you have any questions concerning your participation in this study now or in the future, you can contact the Vanessa Lancaster at (248) 731-7564 or via e-mail [vlancast@emich.edu](mailto:vlancast@emich.edu). This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from November, 2012 to April, 2012 (date). If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb de Laski-Smith (734) 487-0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-Chair of UHSCR, <mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu>.

**Consent to Participate:** I have read or had read to me all of the above information about this research study, including the research procedures, possible risks, side effects, and the likelihood of any benefit to me. The content and meaning of this information has been explained and I understand. All my questions, at this time, have been answered. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements and take part in the study.

**What should you do to participate?**

Fill out the attached form and return it in the attached envelope to my mailbox in the front office by January 25. If you are under 18, you MUST also return a signed copy of the attached parent/guardian consent form.

## Participant's Focus Group and One-on-One Consent Statement

I agree to participate in the Transfer Student focus group and One-on-One interview. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I understand that fellow students from my school will be involved in the focus group, and I am comfortable working with other students from my school. I understand that while the importance of confidentiality will be discussed, there is no guarantee what I say will be kept in confidence by other focus group participants. I understand if I am not 18 years of age, I will need to obtain parent/guardian permission to participate. I understand that by signing this form I grant permission to the researcher to contact me if I am selected to partake in the Transfer Student study.

PLEASE FILL IN USING A PEN:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level When You Transferred to Stevenson \_\_\_\_\_

School From Which You Transferred: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ MALE \_\_\_\_\_ FEMALE Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

I am available on [date and time of focus group] \_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I will have transportation home arranged for after the focus group on [date and time of focus group] \_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ No

I am available for a one (1) hour one-on-one interview \_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

*If so, write or mark dates and times between 3:30pm and 7pm that are most convenient.*

JANUARY 2012						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	No School	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	No School	No School	No School	26	27
28	29	30	31			

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



