

The Gift of Giftedness?

A Closer Look at How Labeling Influences Social and Academic Self-Concept in Highly Capable Learners

Megan Ryan

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Nancy Hertzog
Susan Nolen

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Megan Ryan

University of Washington

Abstract

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Megan Ryan

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Nancy Hertzog
Educational Psychology

This literature review examines the research related to the influence of the gifted label on the lives of highly capable learners. Using labeling theory, stereotype threat, and identity development as a theoretical framework for understanding the literature, this paper looks specifically at both social and academic self-concept development in identified gifted students. Having established how each of those facets of identity are influenced by the label itself, the paper concludes with an examination of how labeling influences achievement motivation in highly capable learners. Overall, labeling students as gifted has both positive and negative influences on self-concept development, depending on whether or not their learning environment is supportive. This review will conclude by providing suggestions for future research.

Keywords: labeling theory, stereotype threat, identity development, social self-concept, academic self-concept, motivation, gifted

INTRODUCTION

The gifted label has more complex implications for students than most people realize. Generally, we consider giftedness a positive distinction; these are the most distinguished academic students and the ones to whom we look as the standard of excellence in student work. We delight in their ability to grasp concepts and their passion for learning. We wonder at what career paths they will pursue and look forward to seeing their contributions to their fields. Because of our high hopes for these students and our confidence in their abilities to realize those goals, we are at risk of assuming that they neither desire nor require additional supports. These students are confident in their abilities and their identification as gifted. They have an intellectual gift, and our praise and recognition of it would reinforce their opinions of themselves as highly capable, would it not?

Such assumptions are naïve to the realities of labeling and stereotype threat (Steele, 2010; Rist, 2011). As with all other academic labels, the gifted label carries with it an entirely new set of burdens and dilemmas that students without that label do not wrestle with in their academic endeavors or classrooms. Not all the effects of this label are positive, and indeed, for many students, the costs may outweigh the benefits. Many gifted students feel encumbered, isolated, and pressured by the expectations associated with being gifted. Such sentiments, especially if not addressed by parents, teachers, friends, or counselors, pose serious barriers to their social and academic self-concept development. The differences between what makes students see their labeling as either empowering or limiting is very nuanced, and a close examination of the existing research is necessary to understand how the same label influences students so differently.

Labeling is a socially prescribed system of categorizing individuals based on various traits or characteristics they exhibit. Either implicit or explicitly assigned, they have powerful influences over how individuals interact with those around them (Rist, 2011). For the gifted label, identification and assessment varies considerably between programs. Depending on the focus of the program, some identification processes might rely upon comprehensive measures, such as portfolios of student work, whereas others might use rating scales and checklists to gauge student ability (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Piirto, 1999). Students identified for specific programs might be categorized as having domain specific giftedness, such as being broadly academically gifted, verbally gifted, mathematically gifted, musically gifted, or athletically gifted, to name a few (Piirto, 1999). The use of both portfolios and rating scales are controversial, as these evaluations are dependent upon the assessor, and thus, different raters might gauge students differently (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

More frequently, though, schools and districts rely upon high stakes intelligence tests. Although many types of intelligence tests exist, the most common individual tests are the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (Coleman & Cross, 2005). When using standardized testing, students who perform two standard deviations above the median are identified as gifted. One of the arguments against this type of identification is the seemingly inconsequential distinction between students who score only a few points either above or below that mark—is their work so different that some are gifted and others are not? Some other issues with standardized tests include the fact that different intelligence tests measure different abilities, they are culturally biased, do not identify students who might also have learning disabilities, and do not always account for very capable students who also have high test anxiety (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Gallagher, 2000; Sapon-Shevin, 2003; Borland,

2003). Because there are such an array of selection processes and definitions of giftedness, a student might be geographically gifted, meaning that they were considered a gifted student in one program, but are no longer considered gifted in another (Borland, 2003). Clearly, the identification process is highly varied, and makes a students' status as gifted subject to change between programs or districts. These issues demonstrate that giftedness is largely arbitrarily assigned, and they raise serious questions about the accuracy and efficacy of labeling students at all. Regardless of the selection process or the controversy surrounding identification, though, the fact remains that once students are designated as gifted, they are subject to the ramifications of labeling, and their identification will likely impact the remainder of their K-12 schooling.

Informal labeling refers to how peers might refer to or stigmatize students based on their academic interests and performance in class. Part of what makes both types of labels so invasive are the behavioral expectations associated with them, otherwise known as stereotype threat. Stereotype threats are most prevalent when individuals perceive that their label places them at some sort of disadvantage. When people believe that their performance is subject to judgment and that that performance may confirm a negative expectation associated with their label, their work is impacted by the threat of that stereotype (Steele, 2010).

Whereas a stereotype might denote more of an expectation of either behavior or performance, the stigma associated with it is whether or not the larger group views the stereotype positively or negatively. These influences are prevalent enough to impact people's identities, specifically with regard to self-concept (Coleman, 1985). Academic and social self-concept are both greatly influenced by labeling. How students consider their academic self-concept also has direct consequences on their achievement. They are more likely to retain intrinsic motivation when they believe that they are capable and that they share the values of their peers (Ryan &

Deci, 2000). Labeling directly impacts academic and social self-concept development, but supportive learning and social environments mediate the severity of the label's impact. Labeling pervades classrooms and has powerful implications for students. As such, educators, parents, and researchers have an imperative to understand the consequences of labeling.

Typically, we focus on the influence of stereotype threat and labeling on struggling students, and investigate how those impede student participation within their classrooms. However, both theories are applicable to understanding high achieving students as well. Although they face a different set of stereotypes, the expectations associated with the gifted label also limit students' understandings of their intelligence. Rather than teaching students that they are not academically capable, gifted students understand that they are incredibly capable—but they also understand that their capabilities are constantly subject to measurement, and could be found wanting. Additionally, students often perceive social stigmas against their label as well, which influences how they interact with their peers. Academic and social elements associated with giftedness greatly influence these students' self-concepts, and in many instances, the expectations associated with giftedness are more harmful than helpful. As such, this topic is deserving of greater investigation.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how the gifted label influences the academic performance and self-concept of identified students. First, I critically review current research on the gifted label, and examine how students' social and academic self-concepts are influenced by their being labeled gifted. Because social and academic self-concepts are so closely related in classroom settings, a thorough exploration of both is important. As the gifted label is most prevalent throughout K-12 education, I only examined research related to students

within that age range. Such analysis will hopefully provide further insight into gaps in the literature and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Labeling Theory

Rist's labeling theory explains that labeling is a "social judgment imposed by a social audience" (Rist, 2011, p. 72) that influences the ways in which we interact with and participate in our social environments. The theory is centered around the understanding that learning and development occur in social settings. As such, both the group and the individual are shaped by one another in a bidirectional relationship. The expectations and values of the group influence the actions of the individual persons within it, and in turn, those individuals together create the collective atmosphere. Adopting a particular label is part of this ongoing social relationship between the people and their social setting, in which "individuals are negotiating, rejecting, accepting, modifying, and reinterpreting" (Rist, 2011, p. 78) their position within the larger group.

Labeling is the catalyst for designating social roles, and often results in a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rist, 2011). The expectations of the social environment largely govern the actions and opportunities of its members, and when we repeatedly expect a certain behavior from people, they gradually come to meet those expectations. When they alter their behavior to comply with those expectations, it changes the ways in which they interact with the larger group as well as the social—and in our case, academic—options available to them. Rist (2011) used the example of social deviance to explain labeling theory—when we expect children to act out in class and have lower academic performance, they gradually become aware of those low expectations, and

eventually begin to exhibit that behavior we expect of them, even though they might not have otherwise. By doing so, they effectively adopt the label, thereby confirming the initial supposition that they are the kind of student who acts out in class. They have fulfilled the prophecy about their projected behavior and solidified their belonging to that label. If the expectations are socially imposed long enough, they usually usurp the individual's expectations for themselves, even if the two sets of expectations are at odds (Vadebonceour & Portes, 2002).

Such expectations do not have to be either severe or explicit—whether or not others noticeably or consciously treat individuals differently because of their label, it is the individual's perception of their treatment and expectations that matter. As long as people believe that their label influences the way that others perceive them, they will act as though it does (Vadebonceour & Portes, 2002). For students, this issue is of special importance because in classrooms, we label students both implicitly and explicitly. Explicit academic labels can influence students' implicit social label. A social label can also influence an implicit academic one. Both may impact behavior in the classroom. Students usually come to understand their place in the classroom through both social and academic labels since the two domains overlap so heavily within that environment. Because “evaluative [tags] influence the options available to students within a school” (Rist, 2011, p. 71), even when we categorize students unintentionally, we narrow the opportunities available to them, and inadvertently put some students at an advantage over others.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat expands the discussion of labeling theory. If labels are the names that we attach to people, stereotypes are the social expectations attached to that label. Steele (2010) argues that stereotype threat impacts peoples' performances on a very broad scale, and, as long as they are invested in either upholding a positive stereotype or afraid of confirming a negative

one, is invasive to any area of their life that is subject to social judgment and expectation about their ability. When operating under the pressures of stereotypes, the fear of confirming a negative stereotype impedes peoples work, and detracts from their ability to perform to their highest level.

Through a series of studies, Steele (2010) demonstrated that regardless of the domain, if students were aware that their performance was being judged in an area where their social group typically had lower performance, their work reflected their group's negative expectations. Studies ranged between looking at differences in athletic performances between white and black students, mathematics performances among men and women, and strategic thinking in sports between white and black individuals, and have been replicated in hundreds of different circumstances. In each instance, when research subjects were aware that they were being tested in an area that their group historically has lower ability, their performance was directly reflective of that negative stereotype, even if they were some of the highest ranking performers within that field. "Research has found but one prerequisite: the person must care about the performance in question" (Steele, 2010, p. 98), which often makes the individuals most invested in their work the most susceptible to stereotype threat. Importantly, individuals need to feel somehow threatened by the stereotypes associated with their label. Usually, this occurs when their label makes them a minority. Steele (2010) explains that if enough individuals within a social or academic group share a label, they reach a critical mass, in which case the effect of stereotype threat is reduced.

Just as in Rist's (2011) explanation that social cues related to labeling do not need to be explicit in order for the label to limit a person's actions or development, Steele (2010) emphasizes that most of the effects of stereotype threat are implicit social expectations.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a helpful framework in conceptualizing the different sources of stereotype threat. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that all human development occurs within different layers of influence, and in order to understand development, influences from spheres of environmental systems must be taken into account. At the center of the systems is the individual's biological makeup. The microsystem describes interactions and relationships that have direct contact with students, such as their parents, peers, or teachers. The mesosystem describes the relationships between the various aspects of the microsystem. Programs, services, or people who influence aspects of the microsystem but have no direct contact with students are a part of the exosystem. The macrosystem describes the larger cultural, political, historical, or institutions which inform the society in which the individual lives. Finally, the chronosystem takes into account the time period in which people live.

The effects of stereotypes are heavily dependent on broad social assumptions, such as those generated even by things as large as a country or region's history. It is a phenomenon perpetuated and imposed by the macrosystem and chronosystem as much as it is one necessarily created by the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Our perceptions of giftedness are embedded in historical trends and events. Measuring intelligence via standardized testing did not appear on a large scale in the United States until the development of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Quotient and Terman's longitudinal study in 1925 (Colangelo, 1997). Considering that we have only been emphasizing and quantifying this type of intelligence in the last hundred years, our current definition of gifted is a recent phenomenon, and a reflection of our current social values. However, in that short time, it has developed powerful and varied sets of assumptions that accompany it, and consequently direct how students understand what it means

to be gifted. Microsystems—such as home environments and classrooms—do have immediate influences on how students perceive the threat of their stereotypes, but those are only a part of a much larger system.

Because of its social dependence, the impact of stereotype threat can change either over time or between locations (Berlin, 2004). Whereas one social group might have very strong, negative affiliations with a stereotype, another group might not. It also stands that if somehow one social group comes to understand a stereotype differently, or less negatively, anyone under that label would be more free from the limitations of that stereotype. Their “whole identity could fall to irrelevance” (Steele, 2010, p. 83) if the group values change enough to allow it.

Stereotype threat and labeling theory also share an emphasis on the importance of personal interpretations of social situations. Even if there is no direct or intended discrimination, the influence of stereotype threat is present when the individuals to whom it applies believe it is. If people’s actions are dependent upon their interpretation of a situation, and their interpretation of their social setting is dependent largely upon their label, then we can also understand that people’s experiences of the same situation will vary remarkably. “Depending on their group identity, different people would simply have different things to contend with...different stereotype threats, different ambiguities about how to interpret their experience, different goals and preoccupations” (Steele, 2010, p. 60), all of which have clear and immediate consequences for academics specifically. The same classroom can have a different influence on the performance and participation of each student, since the experience is individualized for each of them. Even though teachers might attempt to ameliorate pressures within their classrooms, students are still working under broader societal and historical expectations as well as the expectations imposed by their peers. Their success within that domain might still be more

heavily influenced by general associations tied to their labels than the teacher—and even the student—is aware of. Any number of factors together influence performance, and it is under the weight of those influences that stereotype has both its strength and prevalence (Weinstein, 2002).

Steele's (2010) exploration of stereotype threat primarily focused on the negative influences of stereotype threat had on student performance; but stereotype threat is more broadly applicable to other effects as well. Student performance is also susceptible to influence when we hold the academic bar too high, as is the case with gifted individuals. We know that students have a tendency to meet the expectations we set for them. For gifted students, this can be an added benefit to their learning, for their label itself implies that we know they are capable of high quality work. Simultaneously, though, students might also interpret this to mean that their performance must be consistently high (Coleman & Cross, 2001, cited in Hebert, 2011, p. 161). If students fail to produce high quality academic work, it can have undermining effects on their recognition of their abilities.

Identity Development

Stereotype threat and labeling influence actions and students' perceptions of their limitations and role within a group. Over time, they can also shape their identity development, which, although informed by different social situations (Vadebonceour & Portes, 2002), permeates virtually all social aspects of their lives. If an academic label is reinforced enough for students to derive their identity from that label and stereotype, they can be confined to the limitations of that label beyond the classroom setting, and it can impact their interactions even outside the schools.

Erikson (1968) described the importance of identity crises, both in terms of their benefits and consequences. Crises can considerably help establish people's understandings of

themselves, but only if they are able to navigate the crisis successfully (Erikson, 1968; Hebert, 2011). Without sufficient emotional supports, identity crises can be very confusing and problematic, and be a source of emotional disruption. Part of successfully and stably establishing identity comes from the presence of both a sense of belonging within a larger social setting and continuity over time (Erikson, 1968).

Marcia (1966) expanded upon Erikson's theories to designate four stages of identity development—moratorium, foreclosure, achievement, and diffusion—which are distinguished from one another by the amount of autonomy individuals have in creating their identity. Identity achievement, the most stable of the four, describes a state in which individuals have carefully evaluated what direction they want to pursue, and committed to doing so through their own volition. Moratorium, on the other hand, occurs when people actively struggle to reconcile their own wishes with those of others, and can result in going in a direction that they did not necessarily choose for themselves (Marcia, 1966). Being pressured into adopting certain behaviors or attitudes can minimize an individual's emotional stability because they are not as invested in or committed to their identity as they would be if they had had more autonomy in their development. Labeling and stereotype threat both can seriously impact the degree of autonomy that students feel they exercise in their identity development.

Dweck's (1999) theories of intelligence—entity theory and incremental theory—are important in understanding academic self-concept in highly capable learners because they explain different conceptualizations of the nature of intelligence. Entity theorists believe that intelligence is a fixed entity—something that is indisputable and unchangeable. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, understand that with effort, time, different subject domains, and different instructional or study techniques, people can influence their mental capacity. To them,

intelligence is malleable, rather than constant. Knowing which intelligence theory students adopt is a very important development in understanding their academic identity, because it informs their attitudes toward classroom learning and their own abilities.

Dweck (1999) argued that “the term ‘gifted’ conjures up an entity theory. It implies that some entity, a large amount of intelligence, has been magically bestowed upon students” (p. 122), because in order to be considered gifted and to qualify for gifted courses, someone in a position of educational authority must designate a child with that distinction. If students identify as gifted students and they hold an entity theory of intelligence, their identity and their intellect is dependent upon their ability to maintain a consistently high level of performance. Students might come to believe that their being gifted is something that must be continually proven and upheld, because they gauge intelligence on outcome. Falling anywhere below their expected performance level can be worrisome for students. If they believe that intelligence is fixed, then poor or even average performance might demonstrate to them that they do not actually have the amount of intelligence necessary to be considered gifted. If gifted students have built their identity upon their gifted label but hold an incremental view of intelligence, maintaining their identity as intelligent individuals is determined by the effort they put into it, not necessarily their results. The latter understanding is considerably less confining than the first because it greatly diminishes the pressures under which students work.

All “intelligence labels, good or bad, have undermining effects” (Dweck, 1999, p. 121) because of the influence they have on students’ attitudes toward their own abilities. Because they assume a set of expectations, labels commonly limit students’ range of thinking about their academic and social options (Rimm, 2008). Supportive learning environments are the most effective means of mediating the adverse effects of labeling and stereotype threat. Shared group

values, appropriate levels of challenge and expectations, and emphasis on understanding intelligence as something that is informed by effort and personal improvement can all guide gifted students' understanding of their label. As these factors limit the number of negative cues students receive from their environment, they help students retain intrinsic motivation in their learning.

Peers might not always be accepting of the gifted label, and the social stereotype might be negative, especially if social success is more highly valued by peers than academic success. "The stigma of giftedness doesn't have to be proven as real if it is assumed to be real by the students" (Rimm, 2002, p. 14), and if students perceive their peers treating them differently because of their label, they will act as though it is. Consequently, many of these students are caught between conflicting messages about the associations of their label, and how they respond to it is determined by which of the two group opinions they feel more strongly influenced. Many students face similar dilemmas in their identity development and negotiation, but the juxtaposition of high academic expectations and low social expectations makes the gifted label and stereotype a particularly difficult task in identity development.

Depending on the strength of their cognitive abilities, some students may face an identity crises as many as a few years before their peers (Manaster & Powell, 1983; Wright & Leroux, 1997). Because they are inclined to be more critical and analytical thinkers, they are more likely to see the discrepancies between what their parents, teachers, and peers expect of them. Furthermore, Hebert's (2011) work reviewing research on identity development in gifted student populations found that studies indicate that they tend to reach this stage earlier than their same age peers. Many of them lack the emotional maturity to cope with these crises, which can be very troubling for those students. Parents and teachers may not be actively trying to help these

students because they simply may not be aware that their students are undergoing such an internal controversy at a younger age.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF CONCEPT AND LABELING

This exploration of the literature involved searching the ERIC Proquest database, EBSCO Host, PsychINFO, the University of Washington library, and Science Direct. Searches included gifted and identity or self-concept, gifted and curricula or curriculum, gifted and label, identity development and adolescence, psychological impact of being labeled gifted, labeling and identity, and influences of labeling on being gifted. Each of these searches were limited to peer reviewed, full text, and literature whose references were available. Rather than looking at studies that focused on specific subsets of gifted student populations—such as differentiations by gender or minority status—I examined studies that investigated broader student bases, so as to find more generalizable results. I also focused my searches to studies that investigated student opinions, experiences, and outcomes, rather than those of parents or teachers working with gifted students. Even though these searches yielded hundreds of results in total, only 60 sources were directly relevant, as a result of their scope and purpose.

Parental Expectations

Students commonly cited parents as a primary source of pressure and stress (Schulz, 2005; Moulton, Moulton, Housewright, & Bailey 1998; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Cornell, 1989; Fletcher & Neumeister, 2012; Robinson, Shore, & Enersen, 2007; Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Rimm, 2008). Parents' opinions hold weight for students—gifted or otherwise. The expectations for gifted students are also often higher than others, which may amplify these

pressures. Especially when parents emphasize their children's giftedness, students feel more obligated to uphold their academic performance. Interestingly, despite the fact that most studies included the role of parental expectations in their analysis, and when it was included, it was found to be a primary source of pressure for students, it was not the main research question for any of them. Robinson et al. (2007) was one of the few that discussed parents as a source of comfort and guidance rather than a source of stress. Future studies should directly investigate parental influence on self-concept development.

The Moulton et al. (1998) study asked students to generate lists of the thirteen most positive and most negative aspects of being labeled gifted. On average, pressure and expectation of parents was the most commonly cited negative answer—on a scale of 1 to 13, with 1 being the least negative effect and 13 being the most negative, parental expectations averaged 10.5 (p. 154). At the time of the study, Moulton et al. (1998) were surprised at the finding, because most studies at that point had not included parental expectations as one of the most negative aspects of being gifted. Since that time, parenting has been included as a source of discussion and is recognized as being of extreme importance (Schulz, 2005; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Fletcher & Neumeister, 2012; Rimm, 2008).

One study (Cornell, 1989) examined how parents' use of the term "gifted" influenced their children's perception of their label and their intelligence. The study included 482 parents, whose children attended a summer enrichment program. Parental questionnaires established how frequently parents told their children they were gifted ("usually", "sometimes", or "never"). Results from the parents questionnaires were then compared to student questionnaires, which established students' levels of self-concept, anxiety, and peer status. Interestingly, students whose mothers who used the term gifted frequently had "lower self-concept regarding their

physical appearance...higher levels of anxiety...[and] were ranked lower by their peers on a peer sociogram” (Cornel, 1989, p. 63). The results for father’s use of the term were inconsistent. The study could not confirm causation between the use of the term and these trends. Even still, these results are particularly interesting because they demonstrate how the label gifted could impact students on multiple levels. By emphasizing giftedness, parents simultaneously add pressure to students’ performance and highlight students’ belonging to the label. In students’ minds, it could be that this often includes poorer social skills, which can help explain both the decrease in self-concept for physique and peer rankings.

Rimm’s (2008) book on gifted underachievement focused heavily on parent’s role. Although the majority of her discussion involved suggestions for parenting styles, Rimm (2008) proposed an explanation of how parent’s actions may influence their children’s expectations. She argued that if parents continually emphasize their children’s intellect, students could develop unrealistic expectations for themselves in terms of their performance. By understanding their intelligence in terms of their label, students may often feel “enthroned” by their identification, and later “dethroned” if they feel that they cannot maintain that performance level (Rimm, 2008, p. 41). This process could help explain Moulton et al.’s (1998) results that mothers’ frequent use of the term gifted corresponds to higher anxiety in their children. Although neither Rimm (2008) nor Moulton et al. (1998) claim causation, the correlation between parent’s emphasis on giftedness and their high expectations for their child is worth noting. The additional parental pressure might reinforce the students’ identification with their label, and consequently enhance students’ awareness of the corresponding stereotype threats. Such research indicates that it is worthwhile for parents to carefully consider how they approach their child’s giftedness.

Assouline & Colangelo (2006) discussed the role of parents' emphasizing to their children to "not waste the gift" of giftedness (p. 75). Their theoretical article shed light on the fact that many parents will invest themselves in their children's education to ensure that they reach their full academic and, sequentially, career potential. In doing so, though, parents often impose a sense of "right" and "wrong" academic and career choices. Pressure to succeed academically often comes from the constant emphasis on meeting an established career goal, which is often not a path the students would have necessarily chosen for themselves. With such pressure, students would not necessarily meet Marcia's (1966) identity achievement stage, because their academic and career paths are rather more imposed by adults than chosen by the students themselves. Students often are left choosing an identity from the options presented to them, rather than crafting one for themselves (Vadeboncouer & Portes, 2002).

Personal Standards

Competition and perfection are both important forms of pressure associated with labeling, and may impede students from forming healthy conceptions of their identity. When students form understandings of their intelligence through social cues about giftedness, they often reach the conclusion that they must maintain perfect work and their position as top performing students. As such, students commonly set unattainable goals for their work, and when they do so, perfectionism and competition both become sources of undue stress and negatively impact their view of their own intelligence (Greenspon, 2000; Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Peterson, Duncan, & Canady, 2009).

Fletcher and Neumeister (2012) and Schuler's (2002) literature reviews on perfectionism agreed that perfectionism is disproportionately high in identified populations of gifted students, likely because of the expectations associated with giftedness. Because of their desire to uphold

their label, students often adopt perfectionist approaches to their work (Schuler, 2002). When it is used as a measure of intelligence, perfectionism becomes self-defeating. Although Siegle and Schuler's (2000) study on perfectionism in 391 middle school students found, through surveys, that it encourages students to put forward their best work, it commonly devolves into a "fear that one can never be good enough" (Greenspon, 2000, p. 180) and prevents students from understanding themselves as intellectually and academically talented (Peterson et al., 2009).

Perfectionism also inadvertently makes students consider criticism in a negative light. Instead of considering constructive feedback as an opportunity of improvement, perfectionists often interpret it a challenge to their intelligence and their work (Greenspon, 2000; Petersen et al., 2009; Fletcher & Neumeister, 2012; Siegle & Schuler, 2000). When students feel that they are unable to successfully complete an academic task to the quality they desire, or if they fear receiving negative feedback, they are likely less motivated to attempt it. Thus, in some instances, perfectionism can also lead to decreases in motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Nicholls, 1990). As such, it poses as a barrier to student work and self-concept rather than being a means of personal improvement.

Gifted students also tend to be more competitive than non-identified students (Udvari & Schneider, 2000). Like perfectionism, competition is not necessarily a trait associated with giftedness itself. However, if students are accustomed to receiving praise for their performance relative to their peers, it follows that they would be motivated to maintain that recognition, which could account for much of this inclination. Not all competition is negative, and some research revealed that competition may be very motivating as it gives students tangible goals to work towards and standards against which to examine their work (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Rimm, 2008).

When students place too much emphasis on competition relative to others rather than personal improvement, students usually develop lower academic self-concepts depending on their peer group (Adams-Byers, Whitesell, & Moon, 2004; Rimm, 2008). This is especially problematic in self-contained classes, as most of the students within those classes are accustomed to receiving distinction for their work. Through a series of interviews and questionnaires, administered to 44 students in a summer residential enrichment program, Adams-Byers et al. (2004) found that students commonly cited high competition as one of the most negative aspects of participating in gifted classes, which indicates that this is indeed a trend among this population. Students also explained that the stress arising from competition impeded their performance because it often left them in a state of anxiety if they thought they could not keep up with their peers (Adams-Byers et al., 2004). Competition influenced self-concept most negatively when students transitioned from heterogeneous ability classes to self-contained ones (Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995; Weinstein, 2002). One of the difficulties associated with this is the fact that students need to be intellectually challenged so that they can grow as learners. The task for educators is helping students understand how to manage appropriate levels of both competition and perfectionism, so that they can use both strategies to push their effort without challenging their self-conception.

Academic Challenge

In his theoretical article, Greenspon (2000) offered a vignette about a gifted student who for the first time encountered a challenging academic scenario. In this case, the student was gifted in mathematics, but for the first time had experienced difficulty in that subject. The student explained to the counselor that up until this point, he had “always been able to sail through the work and make very high grades” and that because he was gifted, he was “supposed

to be able to figure things out in a flash” (Greenspon, 2000, p. 177). When he faced difficulty, though, he came to believe that he was not actually as intelligent as he believed, and was probably not deserving of the gifted label.

Although this may seem like an extreme case, such sentiments are surprisingly common among gifted students. Hoekman, McCormick, and Gross (1999) discussed the influence of academic challenge on student’s academic self-concept in their investigation of student motivation. Using a the “Feelings About School Inventory” and a sample size of 540 students, Hoekman et al. (1999) found that, as in the above vignette, difficult work challenged students’ attitudes about their own abilities and their achievement motivation when they had not encountered it before. Clinkenbeard (2012) reiterated this point in her assertion in her analytical article that gifted students are prone to interpreting academic difficulties as an indication of lack of ability. This is particularly prevalent when students are entity theorists (Dweck, 1999). With the belief that their intelligence is fixed, gifted students can believe that academic challenge is failure in and of itself. Such a mentality is defeating in terms of their academic self-concept, and leaves students with negative beliefs regarding their intelligence and whether or not they deserve their label.

When consistently high achieving students eventually encounter experiences that presented academic or intellectual difficulty, they often feel as though their competence and label are called into question (Gates, 2010; Greenspon, 2000). That decrease in academic self-concept can lead to decreased motivation as well; students are less inclined to attempt assignments if they do not believe they can reasonably complete them, or complete them to the quality they desire. This can be interpreted either as a protection mechanism—an attempt to preserve their previous idea of their intelligence—or as an action of defeat. When they were in specialized classes,

students in the Zeidner & Schleyer (1999) and Adams-Byers et al. (2004) study both reported their discomfort with losing their class rank and being intimidated by the academic abilities of their peers. In both instances, the rise in the caliber and expectation of the work and student group led to decreased academic self-concept and their perception of their own abilities. One of the limitations of the study was that it did not investigate how that shift in self-concept influenced student motivation, although decreases in academic self-concept can correspond with decreased motivation within that context.

Peterson et al. (2009) investigated which types of life events caused the most stress in gifted students perceptions. Their mixed methods longitudinal study followed 150 identified students beginning grades 2-5, and followed them for 11 years. Interestingly, gifted students overwhelmingly reported school related issues as the most stressful, rather than other familial or personal life events. In discussing academic challenges particularly, some students cited getting their first B as a major academic setback. Even though B's are generally not considered bad grades, for highly capable learners, it is often outside of their academic comfort zone. Interestingly, the students who did make such reports also explained that while it was difficult at first to accept that change in their performance, with the help of supportive family and friends, they came to understand that it was not a negative reflection of their intelligence. This could indicate either that these students adopted incremental theories—and therefore are accepting of B's because they recognize their effort—or it could mean that they retain entity theories, but merely learn to also recognize B's as acceptable levels of intelligence. While the findings in these studies disagree on the role of challenge, they do agree that how students process the shift is dependent on whether or not they feel emotionally and academically supported.

If students were in supportive learning environments that encouraged them to consider challenge as an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth, students adopted a much different approach to facing academic challenges. Moon, Swift, and Shallenberger (2002) examined 24 highly capable 4th and 5th grade students in their transition year into self-contained classes. The study investigated the emotional, educational, and social environment of the classroom, as evidenced by student essays. Students reported that at first, many of them were discouraged by the challenge that their new learning environment provided. Teachers and parents also noted the high levels of stress their students experienced at the beginning of the year. However, students also reported that with time, they began to re-conceptualize their intelligence, and began to consider the challenge inviting and a measure of how far they could grow intellectually.

Achievement Motivation

The way that students understand their competence, challenge, and criticism all have direct implications for achievement motivation. Fluctuations in achievement motivation can derive from any number of factors, especially those associated with labeling and stereotype threat. Goal Theory (Nicholls, 1990) and Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) both provide useful frameworks for understanding gifted student motivation, because both theories help illuminate how the label and stereotype attached with it would influence achievement motivation. Goal Theory (Nicholls, 1990) argues that people are motivated by differing sets of goals. Performance approach and performance avoidance orientations refer to motivation to either outperform others or avoid underperforming others, respectively. Mastery approach and mastery avoidance, on the other hand, describe people who are motivated by measures of personal improvement (Zusho & Njoku, 2007). SDT approaches motivation from a

psychological perspective, and argues that people are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when they feel supported in terms of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence refers to an individual's perception of their ability to complete a task successfully; autonomy denotes whether or not a person felt they had genuine choice in completing or participating in an activity; relatedness describes how the perceived connections between the individual and those immediately surrounding them is either motivating or not (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both theories argue that the environment is indispensable in maintaining or deterring motivation. The preponderance of the literature on motivation in gifted student populations does not look directly at how the label itself influences students, but many of the findings as to why these students either retain or lose motivation can be explained through the influences of their label and corresponding stereotype threat.

The majority of the literature on achievement motivation in gifted student populations agreed that highly capable learners might be naturally predisposed to mastery orientations (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006; Hertzog, 2003; Moulton et al., 1998; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Little, 2012). However, even though students might naturally gravitate toward mastery orientations, their learning environments often direct them toward performance ones. This can be explained in part by the fact that when they are identified as gifted, the expectations associated with the label may lead students to conceptualize their distinction as something that must be continually judged and upheld. When students reach such an understanding, studies indicated that performance orientations commonly overtake their inclinations toward mastery orientations (Gates, 2010; Cross & Frazier, 2009; Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Moulton et al., 1998; Hoekman et al., 2005; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Schapiro et al., 2009; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006).

Self-contained classrooms commonly foster performance orientations. Although they provide opportunities for deeper learning, they do frequently emphasize test scores and performance, even by the very nature of selection for the programs. Being surrounded by equally capable peers especially in those contexts can often direct students' attention to their performance relative to one another rather than their own improvement (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Schapiro et al., 2009; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). If students use other highly capable learners as a gauge of their intelligence, they either become motivated to outperform them, or become so discouraged by their own work, they attempt to preserve their idea of their intelligence by avoiding performance (Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999). They cannot receive negative feedback if they do not produce any work. These trends are supported by the literature on both competition and perfectionism, as well as the literature explaining that self-contained classes often cause a drop in students' academic self-concept.

Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) explains how decreases in both social and academic self-concept also cause decreases in motivation. As with Goal Theory (Nicholls, 1990), gifted students may be more naturally inclined toward intrinsic motivation because of their aptitude for learning, but their environments can easily promote extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004; Katz & Assor, 2006). In terms of relatedness, if students feel disconnected from either their peers, they are likely to feel less intrinsically motivated in their work. If students believe that their label causes a disconnect between them and their peers, students might pursue social goals in place of academic ones (Gross, 1998; Mahoney, 1998; Greenspon, 2000). Decreases in academic self-concept also cause decreases in motivation, because students are less likely to pursue tasks that they do not feel they can successfully complete. On the other hand, when students do feel competent, they might

become more focused on external rewards that reinforce their label than improving their own base of knowledge (Gates, 2010; Greenspon, 2000; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Adams-Byers et al., 2004). External motivators can shift student motivation away from intrinsic motivation, because students become accustomed to the rewards associated with extrinsic goals. Finally, the amount of attention parents and educators give to the label may limit students in terms of their academic and their career choices. Because parents and teachers invest themselves so heavily in gifted students' work and academic choices, many students reported that their parents and teachers largely directed their academic paths (Gates, 2010; Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Moulton et al., 1998; Greenspon, 2000). Focusing on the label encourages students to understand their intelligence in terms of their performance within these chosen domains, and in turn, students construct their academic self-concept and their achievement motivation upon their ability to meet those standards.

The Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm

Labels influence more than academic self-concept, though. They heavily impact social self-concept as well. Coleman (1985) argued that students to whom we assign the gifted label are subject to the "Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm." Very much reflective of stereotype threat and labeling theory, this paradigm argues that gifted students desire regular social interactions as much as other students, but that they perceive that others treat them differently as a result of their label, and consequently, control the information that others know about them because they felt that whether or not people knew about their gifted label mattered in their social interactions (Coleman, 1985).

This paradigm was supported by other research studies within the field. Exploring student perceptions, the Kerr, Colangelo, and Gaeth (1988) study examined how 184 gifted

students between 15 and 17 years old at a self-contained enrichment program at the University of Nebraska saw the impact of their label as it pertained to “personal, academic, and social concerns” (p. 245). Through the use of the Attitudes Toward Giftedness questionnaire, when asked about what disadvantages were a consequence of being labeled gifted, 90% of the students in the study said that social disadvantages were most prevalent. As the study was conducted in the form of a questionnaire, students did not have the opportunity to expand their reasoning for their responses; however, the fact that such an overwhelming majority of participants attributed social limitations to their gifted label is a very significant finding.

Building upon the Kerr et al. (1988) study, Manaster, Chan, Watt, and Wiehe (1994) also investigated student’s perceptions of their label, but tailored the questions of the survey to explicitly about student’s personal experiences. The studies differed in their assessments of whether or not students recognized their differences as a positive or negative trait; Kerr et al. (1988) found that students saw the gifted label as primarily a social disadvantage, but Manaster et al. (1994) found that students recognized that their label set them apart socially, and not necessarily in negative ways. Students saw advantages and disadvantages both in social and academic terms. Interestingly, though, 87% of students in the study included stereotypes as a negative effect of the gifted label. Associations with being considered either a “nerd” or “snob” commonly appeared in student responses (Manaster et al., 1994, p. 177), which indicates that even though not all of the associations with the gifted label were negative (some students also reported that because of their label, other students regarded them with respect and admiration), the prevalence of negative stereotyping is significant throughout gifted populations. Whether or not they considered the label a positive or negative influence on their social interactions, students

overwhelmingly recognized it as an important influence on their relationships, reporting that because of the label, they felt more different than similar to their peers.

Cross, Coleman, and Stewart (1993) also investigated how highly capable students consider the impact of the gifted label on their personal understandings of themselves, how others see them, and how those together influence their behavior. Using the Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm as a framework, Cross et al. (1993) found that, in alignment with Manaster et al. (1994) and Kerr et al. (1988), gifted students overwhelmingly thought that their label informed how others responded to them socially. In their study, 60% of students reported that they felt that their school environment was not socially supportive or accepting of their distinction as a gifted student, and consequently, they found the label to be limiting. This finding reinforces the both labeling theory and stereotype threat—when we ascribe labels to individuals, the additional awareness of that social descriptor and the social stigmas associated with it influence the ways in which people interpret their social standing (Rist, 2011; Steele, 2010).

Intellectual Communities

Although students struggled significantly with social self-concept when they felt disconnected from their peers, there was a significantly different response when students felt more related to their peers. Typically, this was most prevalent when students were surrounded by peers of similar academic ability, either in the form of self-contained classes (Gross, 2002; Wright & Leroux, 1997; Moulton et al., 1998; Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Hertzog, 2003) or acceleration (Gross, 2002; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997).

The Wright & Leroux (1997) study focused on the development in self-concept for high ability students throughout their first year in a self-contained program. Students reported that overall, they felt more accepted by their peer group, and as a result, more open about and

accepting of their own distinction as a gifted student. One student in particular stated “When you get high tests and things, everyone goes “Oh, nerd” and everything, and instead of bothering me, I feel proud ‘cause I think, oh, cool” (Wright & Leroux, 1997, p. 92). For this student particularly, the transition between two school environments was monumental. Rather than feeling stigmatized as a result of her academic success, this student was able to take pride and ownership of her ability because she no longer felt as though being intelligent and being socially accepted were incompatible.

The Adams-Byers et al. (2004) and Cross and Swiatek (2009) studies echoed these same results. The Adams-Byers et al. (2004) study found that while students participated in heterogeneous ability classes, they often felt self-conscious about their class participation. When they were in environments where the majority of students valued intellect and academic contributions, though, students found it “easier to talk” because “[you] aren’t made fun of or teased about being smart” (Adams-Byers et al., 2004, p. 12). The Cross & Swiatek (2009) study found that after one year of being in self-contained classes, students had a lower frequency of being involved in extracurricular activities than they did before. Although this could be a result of many factors, the authors speculated that this might be that because students felt more connected to their classmates, they were less inclined to look elsewhere for either involvements or acceptance (Cross & Swiatek, 2009). If they did not feel the need to break away from a stereotype they would have less incentive to partake in activities that would actively counter a stereotype of gifted students.

Feeling understood and connected to gifted classmates was one of the most frequently noted benefits of participating in self-contained classes (Moulton et al., 1998; Wright & Leroux, 1997; Hertzog, 2003), but students still felt limited by their intellect outside of their contained

classes, providing further evidence of the importance of the values of the group. When comparing experiences within and outside of contained classes, students in the Wright and Leroux (1997) study explained that even though they felt more connected with their classmates and more comfortable within their classes, they felt disconnected when they tried to move outside of their programs. Students who were interviewed in Hertzog's (2003) study echoed those same results, disclosing that they were "ostracized as the 'nerd' and... 'picked on'" (p. 138) when they were outside of their self-contained classes. By agreeing to partake in specialized courses, students were distinguished in a very tangible manner, which made their separation more apparent when they were outside the realm of their classes. Students attributed this to their identification as gifted particularly, and claimed that although they enjoyed their gifted classes, they did not appreciate the label itself because of how they interpreted the negative associations that accompanied it.

Student Interpretations of Their Social Situations

One of the more significant questions raised by research on social self-concept was whether or not gifted students accurately perceive how others consider their giftedness. Generally, gifted students believe others negatively perceive their label (Kerr et al., 1988; Manaster et al., 1994). This question is of particular importance considering that how an individual interprets their surroundings become their reality (Dweck, 1999; Steele, 2010), regardless of the accuracy of their interpretation. Thus, even if their classmates do not actually treat gifted students differently or think of their label in a negative manner, so long as gifted students believe that they are distinguished because of their label, their social self-concept will be affected accordingly. More research needs to directly investigate whether or not students' perceptions are accurate.

Students overwhelmingly believed that the “perceived impact (of the gifted label) on others is negative or ambiguous” (Kerr et al., 1988), regardless of how positively they themselves consider the label. Such an interpretation influences how students interact with their peers, and results in a lower social self-concept if they believe that their peers do not accept them. Even when gifted students themselves thought the label was positive in their own lives, they reported having a difficult time adjusting socially because of their belief that other students who were not labeled were not accepting of them (Wright & Leroux, 1997). Students believed that their label and the expectations associated with it were what caused them to feel separated from other students (Robinson, 2002).

The Kerr et al. (1988) and Manaster et al. (1994) studies both found that students considered other’s perceptions of them were negative. Although Kerr et al. (1988) speculates that students’ perceptions do not necessarily accurately reflect the social realities, the study did not investigate that point. Of the students in their study, 79% reported that they positively viewed their own label. The same students were also asked how they thought the gifted label impacted others who were not labeled. Interestingly, 43% of the same students thought the impact was negative, 52% considered it neutral, and only 5% of students reported the impact to be positive (Kerr et al., 1988, p. 246). Although Manaster et al. (1994) found that students had mixed feelings about how others in general saw them, when asked about their classmates specifically, more than half of the students who reported a difference in their treatment said that their distinction was negative.

If people react to the social situation they perceive to be true, such an interpretation can influence the way that gifted students respond to those around them (Kerr et al., 1988). When people believe that they are discriminated against, they can have a more difficult time adjusting

socially, but it is primarily because their understanding of their social situation negatively influences how they interact with others. Interestingly, when asked about from where negative social stigma arose most clearly, students reported that it primarily stemmed from people who did not know them well, rather than close relationships (Berlin, 2009; Manaster et al., 1994).

Negative Consequences of Labeling

Studies found that when students thought that their label influenced how others interacted with them, they adjusted their behavior to minimize the influence of the label. The most common behavioral changes included underachievement (Rimm, 2002; Greenspon, 2000; Gross, 1998), limiting personal information in new social situations (Cross et al., 1993), and their emphasis on other, non-academic strengths (Wright & Leroux, 1997; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). These patterns arose repeatedly in the literature, which provides further evidence that gifted students do consider their label a social distinction—otherwise they would not feel the need to compensate for their academic abilities through other social means.

Although many other rationales lead to underachievement—such as lack of challenge or motivation (Rimm, 2002; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Clinkenbeard, 2012) and uncomfortably high competition and fear of failure (Rimm, 2002; Udvari & Schneider, 2000)—underachievement is a primary venue through which students tried to limit their differentiation from other students (Rimm, 2002; Gross, 1998; Greenspon, 2000; Cross et al., 1993). With the understanding that their gifted label and their academic performance associated with it are the leading causes of separation between gifted students and their peers, students might consider diminishing the academic divide between them might seem a possible solution in ameliorating the disconnect that gifted students feel. Studies agreed that students significantly downplay their intelligence if they consider being “liked by others...incompatible...with seeing oneself as

openly smart” (Greenspon, 2000, p. 179). When students have this mentality, underachievement becomes increasingly desirable if their peer group values social success above academic success. These findings reinforce that the values of the group influence the values of the individuals, and the understanding that if the threat of stereotype is large enough, students will alter their behavior to try to hide from or work actively against that threat (Rist, 2011).

Although students often underachieve in order to feel more cohesive with their existing social group, Cross et al. (1993) found that students also masked their intelligence in their conversations with peers or avoided the subject entirely when entering new social domains. Through questionnaires, their study assessed how 1,465 students between ages 14 and 18 at the Tennessee Governor’s Summer Program interpreted how others saw them, and in turn, how that influenced their behavior. Interestingly, students reported that when they discussed academics, they were conscious of monitoring their conversations so as to not alienate classmates. Typically, research tends to discuss how giftedness alienates the labeled individual, but in this study, Cross et al. (1993) found that these students’ rationale was opposite—their classmates did not necessarily alienate them. Rather, they believed that their intelligence might make them unreachable or un-relatable to others. Both aspects of this dilemma are significant, because they offer two explanations about how students might consider their gifted label and its corresponding stereotype on their social interactions.

As many as half of the participants in the same study also reported that when they were in a situation with someone who was not already familiar with their academic abilities, students deliberately monitored how much the newcomer learned about their intellect. If students find it important for them to censor their being gifted from new social situations, it indicates that they

consider their label to be a social distinction—“gifted adolescents would not try to blend-in with others unless they believed that standing-out...would preclude their ability to maintain normal relationships” (Cross et al., 1993, p. 39). Although the data did not expand upon what rationale led the students to make such decisions, the fact that 60% of students reported that their label limited their actions indicates that it is a mechanism for making students feel more connected to their peers, and that they do find the gifted label to be socially limiting.

Another significant mechanism that students employed in their attempts to break away from their label was their emphasis of other strengths outside of STEM fields. One study (Wright & Leroux, 1997) found through interviews that students actively tried to avoid the “nerd” stereotype by emphasizing their creativity and strengths outside math and science fields. Students also had a tendency to draw attention to their extra curricular activities, emphasizing their strengths outside of school altogether (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). By highlighting other areas that are not stereotypically linked to giftedness, students actively tried to separate themselves from their label, again indicating that students find their label constricting.

These strategies—underachievement, limiting information, and emphasis of other strengths—indicate that if they perceive a disconnect between themselves and their classmates, students often attribute the negative social response to the label and the stereotype associated with it specifically. Especially considering the censoring of information in new situations, if students did not see their label as gifted limiting, they would feel no need to keep that information specifically private, nor would they necessarily see the urgency in emphasizing talents that are generally outside of the domain of academics. Their actions move them away from things that they consider to separate them from their peers and toward things that would make them more cohesive, such as struggling on assignments or being more involved in

extracurricular activities than their school work. In these instances, students seemed to feel the constraints of their identification, which was gathered from their interactions with their peer groups. When academic prowess did not seem as highly valued as other social values, or when giftedness was perceived as incompatible with social continuity, giftedness became something students tried to actively distinguish from themselves, thereby reinforcing that these students do indeed feel the impact of labeling and stereotype threat.

Influences of Age and Gender

Whereas most students in these studies indicated that they were conscious of their gifted label depending on their peer group, some studies examined the differences in the severity of the results between age (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997; Gross, 2002; Norman, Ramsay, Roberts, & Martray, 2000; Hoogeveen, Van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2009) and gender (Wright & Leroux, 1997; Norman et al., 2000; Schapiro, Schneider, Shore, Margison, & Udvari, 2009; Preckel, Zeidner, Goetz, & Schleyer, 2008; Kerr, 1988; Rimm, 2002; Manaster et al., 1994). Studies that deliberately addressed age tended to agree that the influence and importance of social groups on self-concept was not consistent between these demographics of students, but there were disagreements in the literature regarding which age group of students seemed most heavily influenced. The fact that the majority of studies focused on students in adolescence and high school indicates that this age group raises the most concerns, as adolescence is typically the age at which students (gifted or otherwise) find a new significance in the importance of their peer groups. Studies did generally agree, though, that girls tended to be more conscious of their peer groups than were boys. Understanding the differences between age and gender are important to understand because of the risk of generalizing results to populations to whom it might not apply as readily.

When examining the results with respect to age, as mentioned previously, most of the research centered on students between the ages of 12 and 17 (Berlin, 2009; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006; Moulton et al., 1998; Norman et al., 2000; Wright & Leroux, 1997; Parker, 1996; Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Kerr et al., 1988; Manaster et al., 1994; Cross et al., 1993). The scale of that research alone indicates that understanding the influence of the gifted label on social self-concept for that age group is of particular interest for researchers, likely because of the general rise in the importance of peers' opinions for students in this age range. The Feldhusen & Dai (1997) study was one of the only studies to examine a large enough age range (9-17 years old) to look for specific differences in age. Examining 305 students' opinions about their label through a 16-item questionnaire, they found that "students 15-17 are less accepting of the gifted label than those at ages 9-11, and the older students see fewer links to non-gifted peers than younger students." This reaction for this age group could likely stem from the higher levels of emotional and social intelligence—even though gifted students might be more analytical and perceptive of differences at earlier ages than non-gifted peer, by adolescents, many of them have gained the emotional and social maturity that would heighten the importance of social cohesion. It could also be because students collectively value social success more as they reach adolescence. If social values become more heavily emphasized in adolescence, students who did not share those values could become more aware of the disconnect between them and their peers. The Phillips & Lindsay (2006) study emphasized the rising importance of peer acceptance once students reach adolescence as a justification for conducting their study on students between age 14 and 15, which lends further evidence to the importance of social groups in this age.

Two studies differed from the primary body of research regarding age. In their study of the difference in social and academic self-concept between self-contained and academic classes,

Marsh et al. (1995) did not find any significant differences for age. Additionally, Gross' (2002) theoretical paper analyzing self-concept in gifted students emphasized that children under the age of 10 seem to feel the most socially isolated because of their increased desire for deeper friendships and the lack of understanding they have between themselves and their peers. More research is needed in these areas, comparing the effect of age specifically on social self-concept, as most studies included it in their data analysis but not necessarily as their primary line of inquiry.

Studies also addressed the differences in social self-concept between genders (Wright & Leroux, 1997; Norman et al., 2000; Schapiro et al., 2009; Preckel et al., 2008; Kerr et al., 1988; Rimm, 2002). Although this was not the primary focus of any of the research, each of these studies acknowledged that there were differences in how girls and boys responded to social pressures associated with labeling. Most studies agreed that gifted girls responded more sensitively to peer pressures about giftedness, and were more conscious of their gifted identity, with only one study (Manaster et al., 1994) finding no differences for gender in the extent and impact of their social comparisons.

In their study of the transition between self-contained and academic classes, Preckel et al. (2008) found that girls were more affected than boys by social comparisons in self-contained classrooms. Girls were also more likely to conceal their intellectual abilities "in order to avoid the costs incurred by being different from other students" (Kerr & Nicpon, 2003, as cited in Preckel et al., 2008). Wright & Leroux (1997) explained that girls prioritized social relationships more than boys, and were also more conscious of social implications than boys (Kerr et al., 1988). These findings would help explain their likelihood to mask their giftedness if they believed that being gifted and being popular were incompatible, and also valued popularity

above academics. Interestingly, though, for both genders, the more students felt that their peers were accepting of themselves and their gifted label, they were less concerned with meeting other social expectations (Wright & Leroux, 1997).

Part of what might account for why girls seem more influenced by the gifted label than boys is the fact that many girls might also be trying to navigate the gender stereotype of being a woman. One of Steele's (2010) findings on stereotype threat was that women perform worse than men in STEM fields particularly when they are under the impression that women are generally expected to do worse. Historically, men have a stronger formal academic tradition than women—women having access to higher education and becoming leaders in academic realms is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although that is not telling of ability, one of the consequences of giftedness might be that is more closely aligned with being a man than being a gifted woman. If that is the case, many girls might be conflicted about whether or not they belong as gifted students, or perhaps feel as though the label does not apply to them as strongly. Although there were differences in terms of age and gender throughout the data, these studies all consistently found that gifted students' social self-concepts were overwhelmingly dictated by how they interpreted their social acceptance.

DISCUSSION

Although we may be predisposed to consider the gifted label a positive distinction, it has many positive and negative impacts on student self-concept (see Appendix A). Part of what makes it such a perplexing label is the fact that the same identification has vastly different implications for students depending on their learning environment and their conceptualization of intelligence. It is not definitively beneficial or detrimental, and research demonstrates that its

influence depends upon how well students' environments mediate the influences of stereotype threat.

The literature revealed that in many instances, the expectations associated with giftedness negatively impacted student self-concept. Students might feel as though they must choose between either social acceptance or academic endeavors, and forsaking either pursuit is mentally and emotionally problematic (Greenspon, 2000). If they believe that their intelligence is fixed and gauged by only their performance, they can face a decline in their academic self-concept when they encounter academically rigorous situations (Greenspon, 2000; Hoekman et al., 1999; Clinkenbeard, 2012; Gates, 2010). Highly capable learners also commonly set unusually high goals for themselves, which reinforces their academic confidence when they reach them, but causes them to doubt their giftedness when they do not (Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Rimm, 2008; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999). If students' learning environments encourage effort over performance and incremental theory over entity theory, students are more likely to develop positive academic self-concepts even in with the gifted label.

That is not to say, though, that gifted labeling only has negative effects. Overall, gifted students still reported higher levels of academic self-concept than non-labeled peers (Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Robinson, 2002; Hoogeveen et al., 2009). Many students also reported that they enjoyed participating in self-contained programs, which is generally made possible through formal identification (Moulton et al., 1998; Hertzog, 2003; Berlin, 2009). They recognized both the social and academic benefits of being surrounded by peers, and generally considered their experiences in specialized classes very positive (Hertzog, 2003; Moulton et al., 1998). Additionally, many students also acknowledged that they enjoyed the prestige that accompanies participation in selective programs (Manaster et al., 1994; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997; Kerr et al.,

1988; Moulton et al., 1998). Because they feel more comfortable socially with other formally identified students, self-contained programs can also positively influence social self-concept; because since these students had reached a critical mass, they no longer felt that their label impeded their social interactions within their classes (Gross, 2002; Moulton et al., 1998; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Hertzog, 2003; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997).

Critically, we need to ensure that the pressure and expectations we impose do not overwhelm them. Supportive school environments remove the threat of the label, and students are presented with the opportunity to reconcile those two aspects of their identity—both as successful students and as valued parts of the social aspects of the class. In order to provide supportive school environments, though, we need to know more about what they look like.

The Big Fish Little Pond Effect

When we identify students as gifted, there are several different types of programming that may become available to them. Students usually have the option of either participating in only specialized classes, where they remain separated from non-identified students throughout the day, or they have some classes with only identified gifted students and other courses with non-identified peers. The Big Fish Little Pond Effect (BFLPE) helps illuminate how the gifted label influences students differently between academic settings. The theory stipulates that identified gifted students have a stronger academic self-concept when surrounded by non-identified peers (Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Marsh et al., 1995; Weinstein, 2002; Cross & Swiatek, 2009). Although students were generally in consensus that gifted programs offered more engaging academic material, they reported a decrease in academic self-esteem when they moved from regular classes to specialized programming (Adams-Byers et al., 2004). This results primarily from the fact that if gifted students assess their performance against their

peers, in heterogeneous ability classes, their work is often the standard of excellence. In self-contained programs, that distinction is more difficult to attain. This finding further reinforces that many gifted students define their intelligence in part by comparison to the academic performance of their peers.

These studies demonstrate the complexity of the gifted label on self-concept development. Heterogeneous classes might seem beneficial in terms of academic self-concept, but that positive effect is dependent upon students being entity theorists. Entity theory is problematic because it prevents students from valuing their own improvement. Since it makes their intelligence dependent on their peers rather than on themselves, their understanding of themselves as an intelligence individual changes between locations. It might delay negative academic self-concept, but it would ultimately leave students unprepared to face academically challenging or rigorous situations. Ideally, we want all students to understand that their intelligence and ability are self-referenced, and being a big fish in a little pond does not necessarily foster that type of understanding. Furthermore, although these types of classrooms might be beneficial for academic self-concept, we also know that heterogeneous ability classes are problematic for social self-concept. Since gifted students are the minorities in these classes, the stigma of giftedness impacts them the most heavily.

Self-contained classes that promote incremental theories of intelligence might be the most conducive learning environments for gifted students. There are two prime reasons why this type of learning environment could provide students with the most consistent and positive self-concept. First, in self-contained classes, gifted students are no longer the minority. Because there is a higher concentration of them, they are a critical mass (Steele, 2010), which alleviates the strength of stereotype threat and negative stigma surrounding giftedness. Without having to

concern themselves with being negatively stigmatized for their identification, students would have more freedom to concentrate on their learning and on forming meaningful relationships with their classmates. These could bolster both their academic and social self-concept.

Second, focusing on incremental theory by emphasizing the importance of improvement and effort would lessen the uncomfortable levels of competition and perfectionism commonly cited in gifted individuals. Promoting a culture of self-referenced improvement would help these students reach the understanding that their value is not dependent upon their ability to maintain either a class standing or a GPA. Seeing other identified students with incremental theories would reinforce for students that it is possible to be academically talented and to face academic difficulty. Rather than living with a taboo against misunderstandings or confusions, student would be afforded the opportunity to recognize that the real strength in learning comes from improvement, not perfection. These understandings would promote the fact that these students are talented and intelligent individuals, even when they face academic adversity.

A Cautionary Note to Parents and Educators

The critical question, then, is whether or not we are doing students more harm than good by labeling them. If we do not explain to students what giftedness actually means and continually reinforce the understanding that their value is in their performance, then yes, we very well could be. Perhaps the most troubling aspects of giftedness is the extent of students who misunderstand their label. This research overwhelmingly indicated that most gifted students are entity theorists, and by default, have trouble seeing the extent of their own ability. Perhaps Dweck's (1999) statement that giftedness implies entity theory is not entirely accurate. Giftedness in and of itself does not imply entity theory, but the way we approach it certainly does. Students interpret their labels from social cues. The disproportionate levels of

perfectionism, the uncomfortable amounts of competition, the prevalent fear of failure, the BFLPE, and the numerous appearances of both academic stress and decreases in self-concept all indicate that somehow, we have seriously misrepresented giftedness to these students. If students have learned that being gifted is dependent upon their performance, then they have learned that from us.

If we are going to continue to label students, we are obligated to help them understand what being gifted actually means. Formal identification is merely a process by which schools determine which academic environment would best meet students' scholastic needs. It is a mechanism to allocate the school's or district's resources, not a permanent designation to distinguish students who are talented and those who are not (Borland, 2003). Giftedness is not a static trait that they are at risk of losing or something they need to constantly prove that they have. As educators and parents, we are most proud of their effort, their improvement, and whether or not they expanded their thinking. Grades, test scores, and class rankings can factor into that, but certainly not as the most critical facet, and only as a means of self-reference. Labeling distinguishes students as different; but all students are as different from one another as they are similar, and additionally, being different is not inherently negative. All students have high academic potential if they are given the appropriate supports and apply their effort, especially if the real measure of intelligence is in improvement and application.

Although many parents and educators likely agree with this conceptualization, we have somehow lost this message in translation. This is due in part to the nature of formal identification, and distinguishing students based on their performance of one high-stakes test. We might not be able to bureaucratically address the implications of formal labeling, but we do have significant influence over how we promote the value of classroom learning and intelligence.

It is imperative that we actively advocate these principles in our actions, otherwise we direct students down a path that pushes the limits of their learning and abilities without also giving them the understanding that that was the intention.

Our other and most beneficial option is to avoid intelligence labeling altogether. Research demonstrates that academically talented students already feel the impact of implicit social labeling. The reality is that they are academically talented whether we tell them or not. Identifying students as gifted only augments whatever social stigmas these students already face. It also undermines our goal to promote effort and improvement as the real value of learning, as it emphasizes the importance of scores and assessments. We want to truly support these students, and officially identifying them does not contribute to that. If we forego identification, we can bypass many of the negative associations with giftedness. In doing so, we can actually set students up for success.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are many areas for future research, specifically with regard to policy making, teaching techniques, and parenting strategies. First, since labeling seems to hurt students more than it benefits them, policy research should focus on other strategies to provide services to highly academically talented students without formal identification processes. Rather than formally labeling students as gifted, what are other ways where we can determine which students need more rigorous academic work? Additionally, what other, non-academic services might benefit highly capable learners who do struggle with their self-concept?

Second, concerning teaching strategies, we need a better understanding of which specific environmental aspects have the most influence over positive self-conceptualization. What aspects of our approach to giftedness cause these misunderstandings? Research should focus on

identifying which factors most negatively and most positively influence self-concept. Once we have identified those areas, we can construct more tangible and successful ways for teachers to promote healthy learning understandings of intelligence.

Finally, gifted research also needs to allocate more attention to parenting approaches. When families recognize the academic talent or potential in their children, they need to be aware of the costs and benefits of labeling. Even without formal identification, these students face many barriers to healthy development of their self-concept, and parents should be knowledgeable about how their approach to their child's education influences their self-conceptualization. How can we better prepare parents for successfully supporting their highly capable children?

Our goal as educators is to support the learning and self-conceptualization of all students. Although we have endeavored to support highly capable learners in this domain, the existing research suggests that by formally identifying students, in most instances, we have not succeeded. Indeed, their formal identification may be one of the largest inhibitors to their ability to thrive. Our responsibility is to alleviate the influences of those stereotypes within the classrooms, so that when students do encounter negative stereotypes, they do not allow those stigmas to define them. Our task is monumental and of utmost importance; but it begins by rethinking the "gift" of the gifted label.

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APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF MAJOR BENEFITS AND COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH GIFTEDNESS

| BENEFITS | | COSTS | |
|--|--|--|--|
| Claim | Authors | Claim | Authors |
| Competition and perfectionism can be motivating, because it provides students with standards to work towards | Phillips & Lindsay, 2006; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Rimm, 2008; Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Hoekman et al., 1999 | Parental pressure negatively impacts self-concept through emphasis on giftedness, performance, and high academic expectations. | Schulz, 2005; Moulton et al., 1998; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Cornell, 1989; Fletcher & Neumeister, 2012; Robinson et al., 2007; Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Rimm, 2008 |
| Identification allows students to participate in self-contained classes | Moulton et al., 1998; Hertzog, 2003; Berlin, 2009 | Social cues about giftedness (often derived from parents, peers, and teachers) lead students to develop unrealistic expectations for themselves, both in terms of perfectionism and competition. | Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Rimm, 2008; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Marsh et al., 1995; Weinstein, 2002; Greenspon, 2000 |
| Self-contained classes positively impact social self-concept because students are surrounded by intellectual peers | Gross, 2002; Wright & Leroux, 1997; Moulton et al., 1998; Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Hertzog, 2003; Gross, 2002; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997 | Gifted students often interpret academic difficulty as a challenge to their identification as a gifted student | Greenspon, 2000; Hoekman et al., 1999; Clinkenbeard, 2012; Gates, 2010; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2009; Moon et al., 2002 |
| Identified students have higher academic self-concept than non-labeled peers, especially when in mixed-ability classes | Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999; Robinson, 2002; Hoogeveen et al., 2009; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Zeidner & Schleyer, | The nature of formal identification and gifted classes might foster performance orientations | Gates, 2010; Cross & Frazier, 2009; Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Moulton et al., 1998; Hoekman et al., |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1999; Marsh et al., 1995; Weinstein, 2002; Cross & Swiatek, 2009 | | 2005; Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Schapiro et al., 2009; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006 |
| Students often appreciated the academic distinction that accompanies giftedness | Manaster et al., 1994; Feldhusen & Dai, 1997; Kerr et al., 1988; Moulton et al., 1998 | If students believe that their label causes a disconnect between themselves and their peers, they might pursue social motivations in place of academic ones | Gross, 1998; Mahoney, 1998; Greenspon, 2000 |
| | | Because of emphasis on their giftedness, students understand their intelligence within certain subject domains, both in terms of school subjects and careers | Gates, 2010; Siegle & Schuler, 2000; Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Moulton et al., 1998; Greenspon, 2000 |
| | | Students find their label socially isolating because they believe that others are not accepting of the gifted label | Coleman, 1985; Kerr et al., 1988; Manaster et al., 1994; Wright & Leroux, 1997; Robinson, 2002 |
| | | Gifted students often resort to underachievement, deliberate limiting of personal information in new situations, or highlighting non academic strengths in order to take attention away from their giftedness | Rimm, 2002; Greenspon, 2000; Gross, 1998; Cross et al., 1993; Wright & Leroux, 1997; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006 |