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Frederick Milacci, *Liberty University*

James Zabloski, *Liberty University*



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GIFTED DROPOUTS: PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDIES OF RURAL GIFTED STUDENTS

Jim Zabloski
Liberty University

Fred Milacci
Liberty University

In this qualitative phenomenological study, we sought to explore the life experiences of 7 rural gifted individuals who dropped out of school. In addition, we investigated whether participants shared commonalities that might have led to the phenomenon of dropping out. The problem was that a paucity of research exists about gifted dropouts; subsequently, no one had asked our participants to share their stories prior to the present study. By searching for meaning in their individual and combined stories, we uncovered two overarching themes related to their decisions to drop out: the Influence of Relationships (with the subthemes, relational traumas, and relational losses) and the Influence of Teachers. Within the subthemes, we noted data not previously reported in other literature or research on gifted dropouts. Specifically, all of our gifted dropouts experienced a relational trauma in middle school that affected later learning experiences, and may have been the catalyst to their later decision. By focusing on their progressively declining interest in school through the lens of relationships, we noted new data that added to existing literature.

The phenomenon of giftedness has been under investigation since the early 1900s; however, the preponderance of research completed about gifted students took place in the decade following the release of Sputnik and the height of the space race (Kulik, 1992). Since the early 1970s, studies in gifted learning grew less frequent, with an average of 7 to 10 year intervals

between major studies (VanTassel-Baska, 2006), many of which were quantitative in nature. While quantitative research may provide valuable numerical data, it may not reveal the meaning behind the numbers. When investigating the phenomenon of gifted dropouts or any other phenomenon for that matter, meaning is important because it describes a lived experience and tells the stories behind statistics. The present research study reported in this article sought to find an answer to the question; what factors do gifted students identify as leading them to drop out of school?

Several of the most influential writers on gifted education issued a call for more in-depth investigation into the stories and lives of gifted

Jim Zabloski, Ph.D., is Adjunct Professor of Education at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Fred Milacci, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Research at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to zabloski1@nelsoncable.com.

dropouts (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Matthews, 2006; Renzulli & Park, 2002). There was concern that large numbers of gifted students were dropping out of school due to boredom and disinterest on the part of teachers and administrators (Kanevsky & Kieghley, 2003). Interestingly, out of all high school dropouts, as many as 20% of them may have been gifted (Renzulli & Park, 2000). Some gifted students deal with bullying, depression, anger, and suicidal ideations (Cassady & Cross, 2006). Out of frustration, some students, even honors students, turn to violence and become school shooters to get their voices heard (Dedman, 2000). These incidents bear further investigation.

The present study sought to understand the factors that resulted in the phenomenon of gifted students dropping out of school. Information regarding their upbringing, attitudes about their giftedness and about school life, and an exploration into other factors that may have led to their leaving school were critical to understanding the phenomenon of becoming a gifted dropout. In order to reveal fresher memories, emotions, and stories leading up to the event, our study focused on gifted adults who dropped out of school, and who were between the ages of 18 and 40. Three specific questions framed our investigation:

1. How did gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of high school?
2. How did gifted dropouts respond to specific traditional educational constructs?
3. How did gifted dropouts' responses compare or contrast?

In various studies cited by Callahan et al. (2004), survey results showed that while gifted females rely on peers for support, gifted males rely on adults for guidance and comfort. However, when surveyed, school guidance counselors admitted they did not understand the specific issues related to at-risk gifted students (Peterson, 2006), and as Douglas' (2004) research of 23 seventh grade gifted students indicated, gifted students were verbal and yet lacked skills needed to represent themselves and their arguments well in counseling situations. As a result, they could not self-advocate their concerns and could not voice their displeasure to counselors or teachers, nor could they offer solutions in a meaningful and respectful way. Some

students considered their only alternative was to drop out because they felt misunderstood. By the time they cried out for help or dropped out of school, it was too late to repair the damage (Douglas, 2004).

The literature also indicated that gifted students required caring teachings (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007); however, caring alone may not be enough (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Studies have consistently revealed a desire among dropouts for teacher relationships (Cross & Burney, 2005). For example, McCluskey, Baker, and McCluskey (2005) studied underachieving talented youth and concluded that in order for at risk students to remain in school, they needed a personal attachment to someone, a sense of belonging throughout an extended period of time, and feeling valued and important. The longer a teacher develops a relationship, the more social capital they have with a student.

Hamre and Pianta's (2001) study tracked 179 heterogeneous students from a large city school district from kindergarten through the eighth grade and reported the importance of teacher-student relationships as early as kindergarten and elementary school and the effect of those relationships in academic and behavioral outcomes. Yet, as Phelan, Davidson, Locke and Thanh's (1992) research of 54 high school freshmen revealed, those teacher-student relationships are paramount in middle and high school grades where students perform better based on their relationships with teachers. Pianta's (1999) report also suggested that nowhere was the teacher-student relationship more vital than in middle school as students transition from small and safe elementary environments to unfamiliar and somewhat hostile surroundings. Since some at risk students may come from hostile home environments, it becomes all important for schools to be a safe, trusting harbor.

Davis and Dupper (2004) attributed strong teacher-student relations to at risk students' decision to remain in school. They suggested that positive, healthy relationships may provide the motivation to come to school. Both Davis and Dupper (2004) and Gallagher (2002) concluded that non-gifted dropouts consistently report extreme alienation and disengagement from faculty.

As the above review indicates, dozens of books and hundreds of articles discuss gifted students from a variety of perspectives. However, few articles have addressed the phenomenon of gifted dropouts. Because of these gaps in the literature, our study sought to discover whether an in-depth need for relationships affected gifted students, and if so, how much of a factor did such relationships play throughout their time in school leading up to their decision to drop out.

Method

Phenomenologists agree that a more meaningful understanding of any human occurrence demands a thorough investigation of people's lived experiences (Groenewald, 2004). They further argue that the richness and depth of phenomenological meaning can be found in the participants' voices (Milacci, 2003). In light of the fact that the purpose of this present study was to hear the stories of individuals (Groenewald, 2004) and to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon of why gifted students drop out of school, qualitative research in general (Creswell, 2003) and phenomenological inquiry in particular proved to be the most appropriate methodological approach.

Participant Selection and Rationale

Our study tells the story of seven individuals who were between the ages of 18 and 40 when we conducted our study. Each had been identified as gifted through testing and observation in either elementary, middle or high school, and either were admitted into a gifted program during their K-12 education or qualified to do so. Participants were a mix of males and females. We initially contacted 178 students who entered college by completing a General Education Diploma (GED), which by definition qualified them as dropouts (Renzulli & Park, 2002), and asked whether they had been identified as being gifted. Ultimately three of those contacted agreed to participate in our study. Given the low number of participants through direct contact, we turned to snowball sampling based on qualitative researchers recommendations (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006; Bogden & Biklen, 2007). We contacted four more participants through the snowball approach than by direct contact via school records. To snowball, we contacted the local adult education center to

determine whether any of those seeking their GED might also have been in gifted programs. The administrator provided the names of three individuals, two of whom she immediately confirmed to be in the gifted program in elementary and middle school. A third participant was seeking her GED through the center while incarcerated and subsequently confirmed her testing and admittance to a program for gifted students in second grade. Through education acquaintances we further used the snowball technique and acquired another participant. We understood that snowballing had limitations as it could quickly run out of steam, however in this case it actually produced more results ultimately than other sampling methods.

We interviewed these gifted dropouts who qualified either in person or, in the case of the incarcerated individual, in writing, to determine their interest in and qualifications for the study. Because saturation is possible with any number of sample members, a specific number of students was not predetermined. While both Boyd (2001) and Creswell (2003) suggested that 10 interviews with participants is optimal to reach saturation, we determined through the constant comparison method that these seven gifted dropouts provided enough deep and repetitive data for saturation.

Variations of definitions occur between researchers on the terms dropout and gifted (Renzulli & Park, 2002; Matthews, 2006). To date, there are no universal, conclusive definitions for either the terms dropout or dropout rate. Because the working definitions for both giftedness and dropout vary among gifted education researchers, it was difficult to settle on one over the other. For the purpose of this study, we defined a dropout as one who: 1) was not currently attending high school, and either 2) did not graduate with his or her class, or 3) earned a GED or other nontraditional diploma, or 4) did not complete his or her high school education. The definition of dropout could have been more restrictive, but we chose to use the federal government's usage of this definition. Other researchers used the government's data (Renzulli & Park, 2000); therefore, our study followed similar established guidelines. Our rationale also defined a gifted student as one whose school, county or district where the student previously attended labeled or identified them

as such. If the school system tested, assessed, and identified students as gifted, and they either dropped out of school or earned a GED, they qualified for our study. Verification of this criteria would have been in the student's permanent school record; however, school administrators told us that access to student records were denied despite possession of a signed FERPA release form, or that files had been purged, or that a lengthy appeals process involving the state board of education would delay the research. Two schools we contacted indicated they purged all high school records per district policy 2 years after a student graduated. Because physical examination of documentation became impossible, the participants qualified if they self-identified their participation in a gifted program and could give specifics for verification. In addition, when we could contact a positional authority as back up verification, we did. For example, one participant, Arnold (Note: we used pseudonyms throughout this article) assisted us in contacting his fourth grade teacher who recommended him to the gifted program; she verified his claim. Mike and Randy's GED teacher verified their giftedness in their school records. Kristie provided the name of her high school biology teacher who, as it turned out, currently served as the school's gifted education coordinator; she verified Kristie's admission to a gifted program. Conversely, Shelley's gifted record remained unconfirmed because she was 38 years old at the time of our study and the school records had long since been purged. At the time of her interview, Diane was serving time in jail and her records were in possession of the legal authorities. However, we confirmed her self-identified giftedness by contacting her elementary school. Both Shelley and Diane self-reported the year they were tested and identified as gifted, the name of the program they were in, as well as some of the activities in the gifted program. Finally, regarding Buck who had been home schooled, his confirming positional authority was his mother who indicated he demonstrated gifted traits and had taken several SAT exams and scored well, but had not been involved in a formal gifted program. Based on Simonton's (2008) research showing that the basis for giftedness can be related to IQ and that one's IQ and giftedness are stable, we had Buck tested for giftedness in a local university by a

licensed practitioner who confirmed that Buck would have qualified for a gifted program had one been available.

Participant Portraits

Randy. Randy was an 18-year-old who recently finished his GED. When he was four years old, he traumatically watched his father drown in the family lake. Randy said his mother preferred his sister, often left him to his own devices, and took no interest in his education, saying: "She never cared." He spoke of her only in negative terms. She gambled away what little insurance money they received, as well as her monthly government checks. When he was in sixth grade, his grandmother filed for custody to remove him from his mother's house. She lost the suit but he finally moved in with her at age 15. He could not recall having a positive relationship with any middle or high school teacher. Students physically and mentally abused him on the school bus daily. With no friends, no extra-curricular activities, and no challenge mentally, he said: "I was just kind of just sick of it," and dropped out in ninth grade.

Mike. Mike was also 18 at the time of his interview, worked at a fast food restaurant, and attended the same high school as Randy, although they were not friends. When he was in middle school his parents divorced and he moved into low rent housing with his mother and sister. He began suffering from depression, and his grades never recovered. He said he could make straight A's, but never cared to do so. Mike said he had a few friends in elementary, but in middle and high school only a few close friends. The school expelled him for having drugs and weapons on school grounds. The only classes Mike succeeded in were those in which he had a personal relationship with the teacher. He said teachers just gave up on him.

Arnold. Arnold was 21 years old and extremely upbeat and positive. Arnold said: "I grew up in a country home, out in the country. My dad was an alcoholic. We were on welfare." As far back as Arnold could remember he was extremely poor. In elementary school Arnold's friends did not notice his poverty, but when Arnold went to middle school he found himself in a class warfare. His closest friends rejected him because of his poverty. He got into several fights, his grades dipped, and he began

associating with older boys at a local skating rink who introduced him to drugs, alcohol, and guns. He suffered his greatest personal loss in sixth grade when his best friend was shot and killed. Arnold said that he never tried to form a relationship with any middle school teachers, nor they with him. That pattern continued through high school, until he dropped out in ninth grade.

Buck. Buck was 23, single, and a freshman in college whose life motto was, "How is this different from everybody else?" As a child, his parents moved every few years. Buck's education took place entirely in his home with a few rare field trips interspersed as his family was rural and poor. His father was the sole income source and his mother home-schooled him and his brother. As a result of living rural and moving often, Buck led a shy, isolated life with few friends. In middle school Buck's mother went to work outside the home, leaving Buck responsible for his own (and his brother's) education. Buck was truly on his own and independent, a trait he later describes as "horrible." He felt abandoned by his mother and overly responsible for his brother. From that point on, his interest in education waned until he completely withdrew from all aspects of it around tenth grade.

Diane. Serving time in jail for violating the conditions of her probation, Diane was a 23 year old who hoped for a quick parole at the time of her interview. Diane's unwed mother raised her and her younger siblings. Diane did not know her father. She grew up poor, but her mother worked two jobs to make ends meet. She was not close to her siblings or her mother. She said she only had two friends in all her schooling. In middle school, Diane's uncle sexually molested her, which sent her into depression and resulted in behavioral issues. A relative encouraged her to get involved in extracurricular activities, but Diane turned her attention to making friends. At 15 Diane attended a new high school, and delved into sexual promiscuity. In the end, taking care of a child, boredom, peer pressure, and drinking and drug abuse all culminated in Diane's decision to drop out of high school.

Shelley. At age 38 Shelley spoke passionately about education from the start. Like all of our participants, Shelley grew up in rural America.

Her family owned a 181-acre ranch raising horses and cattle. When Shelley was in elementary school, she attended five different schools. In middle school she started dating an abusive boy, though she lied to her parents about the bruises and blamed the horses. Once Shelley entered high school, her grades started dropping as her abusive boyfriend grew more violent. Over the course of several years he threatened to kill her father, mother, and brother. To cope, she drank heavily, but remained in school until the school inexplicably dismissed her favorite science teacher. Between her stalking boyfriend, her favorite teacher fired, her boredom with school, and her rebellious attitude, she finally dropped out to live on the streets with her friends.

Kristie. Kristie spent most of her life in rural settings. Now age 32, she was our only bi-racial participant. Her father was associated with the Black Panther movement and her White mother and family often fled the authorities. She recalled seldom living in one place for more than a year or two her entire life and she often changed schools. Kristie grew up poor, recalling a time her family had no electricity and no running water in their rural shanty. Kristie recounted various childhood traumas: "I guess I have a lot of memories of unsafe, abandoned places." In sixth grade, Kristie lamented that for the first time in her life, she experienced severe racial discrimination from her closest friends. This rejection sent her into severe depression about which she journaled suicidal ideations. By the time Kristie entered high school, she concluded she was so far above the crowd academically that she decided school offered her little and quit in tenth grade.

The participants' demographics varied in gender and race and academic advantage. They told their life stories in response to our first guiding question: How did gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out of high school? Our participants were from rural backgrounds, and all of them but Shelley came from low socio-economic backgrounds. They attended schools in different counties and in some cases different states as Table 1 illustrates.

All participants (excluding Buck) were admitted to a state-approved gifted program in elementary (Arnold, Randy, Mike, and Diane),

Table 1
Participant demographics

	Randy	Mike	Arnold	Buck	Diane	Shelley	Kristie
Age	18	18	21	23	23	38	32
Race	White	White	White	White	Black	White	Bi-racial
SES	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Upper middle	Poor
Marital	Single	Single	Married	Single	Divorced	Remarried	Engaged

middle (Kristie) or high school (Shelley) and spoke of their admission into a particular program for gifted students including detailed descriptions of the program activities. Six of the participants received their GED; one was in the process of obtaining one. We examined the participants' descriptions of school life through the semi-structured interview questions summarized by the second guiding question: How do gifted dropouts respond to specific traditional educational constructs? Finally, the explication of themes answers the third guiding question of how their lives compared and contrasted.

Lenses

Qualitative authors contend that researchers must present a qualitative study in detail. For example, Goodall (2008) encouraged the qualitative researcher to present the stories of participants in a phenomenological study in great detail. Hence the first lens used to examine the data was the lens of the story.

According to Groenewald (2004), the phenomenologist cannot detach himself/herself from presuppositions, feelings, history, or personal likes and dislikes and should not pretend otherwise. Bruner (2004) noted: "Life is not how it was, but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 708). Riessman (1993) added that qualitative phenomenologists merely "interpret the interpretations" (p. 5). Good qualitative interviews are inter-views,

or an exchanging of views between individuals around a theme of interest to both (Groenewald, 2004). The interviewer and interviewee talking and listening together (Riessman, 1993) produce a narrative; hence, the lens of the researcher comes through. The final lens used to explicate the data (the lens of relationships) came from applying Moustakas' (1994) suggestion that transcendental phenomenology should not focus so much on the researcher's interpretation, but on the investigator taking a fresh perspective of the phenomenon. As Riessman (1993) stated: "Returning to research interviews, narratives often emerge when you least expect them" (p. 43). After months of constant comparative analysis, we applied this process and in doing so, several themes and subthemes emerged. The data revealed two thematic ribbons with sub themes permeating consistently throughout the participants' stories. The prior themes and sub themes reflected a symbiotic relationship, and as we analyzed each life in terms of relationships with friends, family, or teachers, the themes became evident.

Validation

Trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Creswell, 2003) all speak to the issue of ensuring that the collected and analyzed data were as accurate as possible. We resolved any potential trustworthiness issues through triangulation and used multiple interviews and

multiple interview methodologies, peer review, and member checking. Bracketing (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007) author bias allowed separation of personal experiences and feelings from that of the participant; bracketing was another validity procedure we used to ensure triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Using rich, thick descriptions of the findings aided in transporting us into the life world of the participant (Groenewald, 2004), and was another triangulation tool.

Data Collection

Once the gifted dropouts met our criteria, we scheduled an interview appointment with each participant. Because giftedness is not solely verbal, and gifted students prefer to communicate according to their learning styles (Davis & Rimm, 2004), we encouraged the participants to write down any additional thoughts after completing a questionnaire or any time during the study. We sent a questionnaire via email attachment to the participants except Randy, who wanted to discuss it during the interview. This questionnaire included a rating scale about different aspects of high school environments. Participants rated these constructs according to how they felt about them from no emotional response (1) to having a strong emotional response (10) in the hope the topics might jog other memories about which they wished to write. Topics for this questionnaire came from educational literature on gifted students (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Higgins & Boone, 2003; Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Lin & Overbaugh, 2007; Mann, 2006; Matthews & Foster, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Plucker & Levy, 2001). These constructs included the following in random order: boredom, homework, gifted, teachers, attendance, extracurricular, peer pressure, acceptance, rules, support, risk, bully, depression, choice, independence, caring, standard of learning (SOL), counseling, dropout, potential, grades, learning, guidance, challenge, advanced, excellence, imagination, perfection, and scholarship.

For each question in which the participant rated a six or above (indicating strong positive or negative emotional response), the participant gave support for the response with a brief explanation as to why he/she felt strongly about that particular construct. We added these comments

to the oral interview data which consisted of asking semi-structured questions found in the peer-reviewed interview guide. The incarcerated individual in this study specifically requested the questions and answers be in written form as any face to face interview would be rushed, chaperoned, and limited (several interview requests were denied by the legal authorities hours before the scheduled interview), and, as Diane stated: "I have all the time in the world" to write thoughts. We considered that this approach was consistent with Groenewald's (2004) research in which some participants wrote essays while others were personally interviewed, and still others held group discussions; in other words, using multiple forms of data gathering was a form of triangulation. Data collection continued until we concluded that no new information, perspectives, or topics came forth (i.e., saturation). Throughout the process and consistent with qualitative research procedures, we kept field notes, a memo log, and a reflective log during the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Analysis

During this process, we used the constant comparative method of analysis. We noted words, phrases, interpretations of thinking patterns, expressed feelings, and events through open coding on each transcript in Atlas.ti. Some initial open coding included In Vivo coding. This coding included topics and units of meaning. As each participant mentioned a particular topic, theme or emotions, we identified a specific word to represent what was spoken in each word, phrase or sentence. These individual codes we then grouped into similar themes. After open coding the interviews three times, we identified 144 codes. From these codes, we applied selective coding to search for clusters of meaning.

We further regrouped the clusters of meaning into themes (Moustakas, 1994) from which we noted 29 themes. We replayed the audio recordings, re-read the transcripts, re-coded the data, and compared each interview a minimum of six times for consistency and to compare each interview to the other participants' interviews and determine whether any gifted dropouts had shared themes, and determine whether gifted dropouts had unique perspectives on

their personal experiences. We further analyzed co-occurrences of codes. During this compare/contrast process, duplicate or similar units of meaning and themes we merged, isolated, or eliminated. This reduced the number of major coded themes to 16. From these, the theme of relationships continued to surface, and two groups of relationships emerged: relationships with friends and family, and relationships with teachers.

Results

The findings initially answered the first of the three guiding questions: How do gifted students describe their life experiences prior to dropping out? The participants told their life stories; yet as qualitative researchers, we assume everyone self-reports their life story precisely and correctly, and that they leave out no important details. This prompted us to consider not only what the participants said, but what they may not have said which is critical to valid and trustworthy qualitative analysis.

The Influence of Relationships

The themes that emerged revealed a web of relationships that uniquely affected the participants. Some of those relationships were positive; many were not. It became evident that the participants discussed their life stories in terms of relationships. Many times some or all of those relationships affected different areas of life. For example, certain participants in this study did or did not do schoolwork based on whether they had a relationship with a teacher. Their relationships with friends, family or teachers (or the omission of them) had an influence on the desire to learn and the decision to drop out.

Many children from rural or poor backgrounds lack the skills to develop trusting relationships because of prior relationship disappointments. In fact, there is growing evidence that interpersonal relationships play a much greater part in the drop out decision by gifted students than previously thought (Renzulli & Park, 2000). It is generally understood that positive relationships are a strong motivator to attend school, but most dropouts have few positive relationships with peers, adults, or teachers. What differentiates our findings from prior research is the magnitude of relational dysfunction these

rural gifted dropouts faced. Those dysfunctions revealed both relational trauma and relational loss in all the participants' lives.

Relational Trauma. This subtheme emerged after reflecting on Kristie's statement: "I guess I have a lot of memories of unsafe, abandoned places. Yes. Lots of trauma." We conducted additional analysis and determined that the other participants also had traumas. They listed a litany of relational traumas during their childhoods. Randy, for example, rehearsed how at age four he watched his father die. Diane's parents divorced when she was in preschool. Buck watched his favorite uncle slowly die from cancer while lying in a hospital bed in Buck's living room. Arnold's father was an alcoholic, and Arnold had to deal with that behavior and inconsistency. Certain participants suffered more frequent relational trauma than others.

One of the most noteworthy findings in our study revealed that the participants faced a life-changing trauma during their middle school years, which birthed a change in their attitude regarding school, even if the trauma was not school-related. For Mike, it was his parents' divorce; until that event happened, Mike had good grades and was a performing student. After the divorce he reportedly suffered from bouts with depression, and he became an underachiever. Randy's relational trauma came during a heated custody battle between his grandmother and mother when he was in middle school. He became an emotional pawn in the fight over who wanted him (his grandmother) and who did not (his mother). Arnold faced two traumas in middle school; someone shot and killed his best friend, and his wealthy friends rejected his evident poverty.

Like Arnold, Kristie's world changed in middle school as her loyal elementary school friends rejected her, not because of poverty, but because of her bi-racial background.

The school that I moved to was much bigger. And especially coming at that time all those kids had been together forever and sort of a social hierarchy had already been established. And I was treated very much like I was different there. I felt very left out. People were more openly discriminatory there. Like would call us names when we got off the bus, and even the people who

were like the girls who were supposed to be my friends would say things like, "Oh, you know, we want to get a tan this summer, but not like Kristie." I'd be like, "OK. A tan, but not my tan. Because that's the bad kind." Or like I'd say I'd have a crush on a guy and they'd be like, "He doesn't date Black girls."

While students may experience a social awakening in middle school, for Kristie and the other participants, this new reality took on negative, or perhaps traumatic, consequences.

Diane's uncle sexually molested her just prior to entering middle school, but the effects of that molestation became manifest as she was shuffled to live with a guardian as a direct result of that event. She was compelled to leave her mother, siblings, and friends and move to another state at a time when she was dealing with the onset of puberty, sexual battery, and emotional and psychological trauma. Buck had three adults in his life: his favorite uncle who passed away in his home, his father who often traveled, and his mother who nurtured and taught

him at home. Buck's middle school world destabilized when his home schooling mother left home to work to help make ends meet. Last, Shelley began dating an abusive boyfriend in middle school, and she had to lie to her parents to cover up the physical abuse, which later spawned even more abuse, lies about drinking, drugs, stalking, grades, and more.

While the data cannot conclusively prove that these traumatic middle school events were the sole contributing factor of all of the participants' final decisions to drop out of high school years later, there is evidence that these gifted dropouts did deal with at least one major event that may have contributed to that decision. These gifted students' worlds drastically changed in middle school, and not for the better. To the casual observer, there may be no comparison between Diane's molestation in middle school and Buck's mother going to work. However, our study was not about the observer, but the participants and their life experiences, and the significance of an event can only be determined by the one who experienced it. That three of the seven gifted participants

Table 2
Coping Strategies

Randy	Mike	Arnold	Buck	Diane	Shelley	Kristie
				Addiction	Addiction	
		Anger			Anger	Anger
	Depression			Depression		Depression
Fantasy	Humor		Eccentric behavior		Eccentric behavior	Eccentric behavior
game play						
		Rebellion	Rebellion	Sexual promiscuity		
Withdrawal	Under-achievement	Violence	Under-achievement			Withdrawal

(Mike, Diane, and Kristie) suffered from debilitating depression after their middle school trauma took place may be an indicator of how these events affected them.

Each participant coped with life's traumas in different ways. Randy said he tried to become invisible. Mike became an underachiever, while Arnold turned to fist fighting and selling drugs for acceptance. Shelley and Diane self-medicated the pain with sex, drugs, or alcohol. The participants' coping mechanisms are noted in Table 2.

This middle school trauma finding became notable for three reasons. 1) None of the participants blatantly revealed a middle school life changing event because we asked them to do so; the data emerged from the participants' reporting of their life experiences. 2) All of the participants referred to it with pathos and passion. 3) Analysis of the personal portraits after the middle school event indicates that this traumatic event's effect was substantial enough to be considered an influencer for change in behavior, outlook, grades, emotional state, and other risk factors.

Relational Loss. As we chronologically progressed through the life stories of these gifted dropouts, we noted times when they had relational support, times when they did not, and times when someone withdrew relational support after having it provided. This latter relational loss emerged as a second theme. Positive characteristics gifted students enjoy can also have negative aspects to them, particularly when it comes to relational loss. In addition to the trauma they faced, these gifted dropouts also had to deal with negative relationship changes.

For example, Randy had strong support from his father as a young child. When his father drowned, that support disappeared. He had no support from his mother: "She never cared." His grandmother was his only caring relation. When speaking of family relations, Randy stated: "My mom's side of the family prefers my sister, and my dad's side of the family prefers me. And when I go to my nana's and papa's, my papa just beams when he sees my sister. Maybe he sees my mom in her, but they don't ever really talk to me." Randy's friends who supported his giftedness in elementary and middle school violently turned on him and became the ones

who bullied and abused him each day on the bus in high school. Randy reflected: "I had a couple of friends on that bus, but most of them had kind of changed I guess. Switched their whole friends. So I didn't, wasn't really, really friends with them anymore."

Mike's relational support changed several times. He lived with both parents, then they divorced and he lived with his father. A year later after a custody battle, he moved in with his mother. After that point and until just before our interview he did not have a relationship with his biological father. In the interview, Mike said that kids bullied him as a child because he was smart Mike added that he "had a weird growing up period." He had a few caring teachers in his life, but most were impersonal. He gave up on his high school counselors: "I feel like they don't help." After his expulsion from school for possessing drugs and a weapon on campus, all of his friends abandoned him except one.

Arnold's support did not come from his alcoholic father or mother, nor from counselors, but from "an irresponsible delinquent" friend. He did have one Christian man who mentored him, and who "poured his life" into Arnold as long as Arnold towed the line and dated his daughter, but once Arnold started reverting to his old ways the mentor abandoned him. When Arnold became a Christian, his drug-pushing friends pulled away. When he strayed from Christianity, his religious friends withdrew.

Buck had the support of his mother who was his only teacher, but once she started working and left him on his own she grew frustrated with him and eventually handed him his education: "Here. Choose your own path." He was left with no friends to speak of outside of his home for support, and no extended family. After his mother went to work, Buck said he spent much of his time playing video games and sleeping.

Diane ended up living with a guardian during her formative teen years. That move meant she lost her singular best friend from elementary school. She moved often and said she "never fit in." Friends were few, and she did not testify to having any relationships with teachers or counselors. She gravitated to relationships with young men her age, but admitted those relationships were primarily sexual in nature. They did not last long. She married in high school, but

the marriage lasted only 28 days because, according to Diane: "He committed adultery."

Shelley did have family support, even after she ran away from home and joined a punk street gang. Familial bonding was consistent throughout her development. Her breakdown in relational support happened at the personal and academic levels. Her choice of abusive boyfriends who were unsupportive of her needs caused a feeling of increased loss, and this loss resurfaced later as she watched friends in her punk group die from drug overdoses. Shelley mentioned that one of her favorite teachers was her science teacher. He was popular, dynamic, interesting, challenging, motivating, inspiring, and innovative. Students skipped other classes to sit in on his lessons. He knew the students and they loved him. Then the school suddenly fired him. Shelley recounted those moments:

I mean because he was almost like a mentor, too. He was, he just made you passionate about wanting to learn. I remember feeling that you know maybe, maybe it's not so bad. Maybe school's not so bad, learning, you know what I'm saying? That entertaining the idea that maybe going to college one day, things like that. With him gone, it was like I didn't even care about school anymore. That made me mad at the school. I was a teenager who was just very mad at the school.

Shelley's comments regarding her experience with the relational loss she experienced with her teacher were typical of the other participants' experiences and comments.

Kristie had a father, but he literally and figuratively abandoned her. Her mother was there for her most of the time, as were her older twin sisters, but friends teased and tormented her. She discussed relational loss when referencing her middle school years, and the racial tension that emerged at that time. Her best friends turned against her because she was not equal to them, so she withdrew into books. When reflecting on her life with her siblings, she said she sensed that she was not equal with them either: "As a pre-teen and early teen, I became acutely aware that I was the unspecial middle child. So I was quite frequently referred to as the other girl. Ya know, people would be like, 'Oh, is this one of the twins' 'No, this is the other girl.'"As

she progressed through high school, Kristie expressed a lack of people with whom she could communicate on her intellectual level.

The Influence of Teachers

In terms of quantity of data we gathered, the majority of conversations, events, stories, and references reflected back to the participants' teachers. Throughout the narratives, every participant put into view their relationships with teachers at various times throughout their schooling. Ultimately, it became apparent to us that teachers were a powerful influence in their lives. At first, this theme seemed inconsequential to us until we considered in light of transcendental phenomenology (TP). In light of TP, we revisited not only what was said, but how the participants said it, and asked ourselves whether we overlooked the obvious.

What ultimately emerged was that six of the seven participants did have relationships, and indeed, wanted meaningful and more frequent relationships with their teachers. For example, Kristie said: "I remember very clearly in high school I had this guy for my homeroom teacher. I thought he was really sort of pathetic. I didn't have any mentors at the high school." Mike echoed a similar sentiment of his teachers: "You know, I've had, obviously everybody gives you advice, but you know I never really had a singularly mentor person like that." Arnold voiced yet similar sentiments: "I don't believe that I tried to develop any relationship with my teachers, although there were those teachers and some cared, but a lot of them didn't." From kindergarten through high school, the participants mentioned a positive or negative relationship with one or more of their teachers during the interview process, thus emerging as a second important theme.

Discussion

Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written about gifted students; few however, address gifted dropouts. For example, Christle, Jolivet, and Nelson (2007), Cross and Burney (2005), Davis and Dupper (2004), and Gallagher (2002a) reported that a notable factor influencing the decision to drop out involved student-teacher relationships. The results of our study align with these findings. We set out to determine if there was a phenomenon involved

in gifted students dropping out of school. The data indicates there is. Relationship issues we uncovered ascended above all others as a driving force to drop out. Participants complained that teachers seemed not to care whether they passed, failed, attended, or simply dropped out.

Our interviewees discussed relationship issues, from dysfunctional families to unsupportive friends and teachers to abusive friends. These seven gifted dropouts desired more in-depth and personal relationships with their teachers, but rarely did this outcome occur, as Gallagher's (2002a) study revealed. Hansen and Johnston-Toso's (2007) findings of 14 gifted dropouts revealed similar outcomes: "Not one dropout reported a sustained meaningful connection with a teacher" (p. 36). In other studies (e.g. Davis & Dupper, 2004), the most frequently cited reason that dropouts gave for leaving school was due to poor or nonexistent relationships with teachers. Nationwide, only six percent of dropouts said they considered their teachers as friends (Altenbauch, 1998). Gallagher noted that few dropouts had relationships with any adult while in high school, thus interpreting the lack of relationships as lack of caring. Davis and Dupper (2004) reported that at risk students need the community of strong, positive relationships with a caring adult in their lives and urged implementation of programs geared toward enhancing teacher-student relationships. Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) stated: "Teachers are an important source of social capital for students, and teacher-based forms of social capital reduce the probability of dropping out by half" (p. 333). It is noteworthy that our gifted dropout participants referred to their relationships with teachers more often than the teacher's pedagogy, curriculum, or other peripheral factors.

For three of the gifted dropouts in our study (Randy, Arnold, and Kristie), some form of social rejection fueled the decision to leave school before graduating. They had no friends in school, and given the lack of academic rigor they found there, they concluded there was no reason to continue going. As Shelley stated: "When it came to staying in school, the bottom line was, what was the point?" The participants used words such as, "sick, pathetic, boring, horrible, unchallenged, devastating, disappointing, frustrating, and uninteresting"

to describe school and school experiences. Although in elementary school our participants admitted they were high achievers and liked school, they gradually lost interest in the rural school environment.

None of the participants in our study mentioned or complained about school overcrowding, large classrooms, or lack of technology in the learning environment. Despite home, school, and social problems, these participants were optimistic in their decision to leave school. They wanted to make the decision and move on with their lives. They earned their GED, except for Diane who was currently pursuing that option. Kristie went on and earned her bachelor's degree, and Arnold, Buck, and Shelley were working on their college degrees. Shelley and Kristie planned on continuing their education with a master's degree, and Arnold had hopes of earning his Ph.D. They faced many obstacles and traumas, but persevered through them. They exuded a sense of destiny and control over their lives. For these gifted dropouts, leaving school early was not the end of the world, but the beginning of a new opportunity.

Certain gifted dropouts in our study were aware early in their academic studies that they were somehow special and gifted, and yet they managed to socially fit in for a time. Only when their middle school trauma happened did they begin having issues with depression, anger, rejection, or withdrawal. Now as adults, they were able to reflect back and see what took place and evaluate it. Although they expressed regret at having dropped out of school, they expressed goals and plans for a brighter future.

The findings from our study validated existing literature findings, but also included several new discoveries. As Gallagher (2002a) pointed out, the decision to leave school was not spontaneous; it took a lifetime. The rich data found by interviewing these gifted dropouts supports Gallagher's premise because our research covered a span of at least 18 years per person; hence, our investigation covered more than a singular event of a student deciding to drop out. The phenomenon became evident through the exploration and comparison of lifelong experiences. Our study exposed that an event occurred after elementary school, which negatively affected these gifted dropouts' attitudes toward school, and which contrasts Hansen and

Johnston-Toso's (2007) conclusion that "problems began in elementary school" (p. 37).

On the basis of our research alone, it is impossible to determine whether any singular sub theme such as drinking, drugs, regrets, middle school events, depression, socioeconomics, moving, boredom, homework, challenge, learning, attendance, mathematics, extracurricular activities, interest, or interventions played a greater role than others in the students' decision to drop out. Nor can one draw any conclusion from the emergent data that all the participants were from rural schools and counties, or that they dealt with social rejection, or that each experienced a traumatic event in middle school. While those anomalies differentiate our research from other scholarship, more research is needed to determine whether any or all of those factors played a role in the dropout phenomenon.

What is conclusive from our research is that all of the participants loved learning and welcomed mental challenge and did not find it in their public school (or in Buck's case, home school) environment. What is also conclusive is that all of these individuals thrived on and yearned for deep, meaningful relationships with friends, family, and teachers. Their life stories revealed that many times they felt abandoned, rejected, or even abused by those they trusted with their emotion and intellect, and that betrayal may have played a part in their withdrawal from the relationship and eventually from school. While our study included no quantitative analysis, a quick review of the interview transcripts showed us that the majority of conversation with these gifted dropouts centered around relationships both good and bad. The interviewees placed much less emphasis on academics in the discussions than they did on who delivered the academics, how they delivered it, and why they liked or disliked the person doing so. For example, if they spoke of boredom, they explained who was boring more than what was boring. Relationships with teachers were important. Mike voiced this sentiment well for the others in our study: "I just found it hard to learn because she [teacher] was, I don't want to say hostile, but just, I dunno, she wasn't easy to be friends with and listen to." Put another way, the gifted dropouts in our study seemed to be particularly relational beings.

Limitations & Future Research

Other than the personal verification of gifted labeling by the participant's school system or a positional authority, we used no other document analysis in this study. As stated earlier, document analysis became difficult (if not impossible) because of school policies to purge student records after a set number of years. We resolved this shortcoming by contacting any positional authority who could verify the participants' testimonies. Participants did authorize inspection of school records beyond the gifted labeling to corroborate any information as needed. Another limitation we faced concerned the number of participants. The limitation of using seven participants became an asset once the constant comparison method revealed that these individuals from different communities, different states, different gifted programs, and different schools, and who had been educated in methods and in various parts of the country, all grew up in rural conditions, and faced similar challenges. As each new participant's information came forth, such a strong pattern emerged that we stopped acquiring new data after the seventh participant's story mirrored the prior six. We determined that such pure, strong, rich data saturation justified stopping the study at seven participants.

What went on in the homes of the gifted students goes beyond the scope of influence for curriculum supervisors and teachers. Teachers may not be able to prevent a student from being molested at home or from trying drugs on the weekend. Educators cannot prevent teenage marriages from ending in divorce after 28 days, or from families moving every year. Yet these domestic situations had as much influence on our gifted dropouts as did unchallenging curriculums and uncaring teachers. Unfortunately, these gifted dropouts had no one with whom to confide when such issues arose.

According to Cross and Burney (2005), Peterson (2006), and Gentry's (2006) research, gifted students are the least likely of all student groups to seek help from a school counselor, perhaps because perceptive gifted students sense their lack of training (Peterson, 2006). Counselors could play a vital role in positively advising at-risk groups like these gifted dropouts, if properly equipped and trained. We would recommend elementary, middle school,

and high school counselors allocate one-on-one time with students in their gifted programs.

Since the participants in our study positively viewed their GED option, educators and counselors could recommend a GED as a viable option for struggling gifted students. Complementing the findings of Entwistle, Alexander, and Steffel-Olson (2004), five of our participants said they opted for the GED because it was a faster option; they tired of the slow, lock step pace in their high schools. Educators or administrators may want to coordinate with a local adult education center to see if an advanced GED is a possibility since one of these gifted adults voiced what the other participants expressed. She considered the GED "a piece of cake." From the stories of these gifted dropouts, we recommend four other strategies that may reduce the number of gifted students dropping out. Beginning in elementary school, we recommend that schools develop mentorship programs for gifted students.

The data showed that our participants enjoyed a meaningful relationship with a teacher in lower grades. Instruct teachers to establish in-depth relationships with gifted students who seem to be losing their interest in learning. Studies have shown that dropout rates decline when teachers learned to care and to focus on the student and not the material (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). A number of studies provide information on how to recognize the signs that a student is preparing to drop out (Gallagher, 2002b; Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Renzulli & Park, 2000). Underachievement, disinterest, and poor attendance are common signs of this phenomenon. Our research revealed other signs, including opting to home school, withdrawing from social connections, and repeated attempts at independent studies.

We recommend schools place greater concentration at the middle school level. None of the turning points in the lives of our participants were the result of academics; they were relational or social. Teachers, counselors, and aids should be aware of social activities, family complications, or changes in peer groups particularly in middle school, and should take steps to intervene when appropriate.

Our participants stated that they were ahead of their classmates academically, and two

suggested they knew more than their teacher. According to Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart (2009), gifted students need challenging curriculum. We agree. Gifted students, including those in our study, showed a keen desire for subjects not offered in their standard school curriculums (Caraisco, 2007). Educators should supplement the standard curriculum with alternatively challenging, and perhaps individualized assignments.

We recommend further study to determine whether traumatic events in middle school may generate decisions to drop out of school, and whether this is a phenomenon in other gifted dropout stories. Furthermore, we encourage research on the relational aspect in gifted students to determine the strength of need, and whether lack of relationships or rejection of established ones has specific bearing on dropping out. Finally, we recommend more research to determine whether current interventions for gifted dropouts meet the needs and expectations of those represented in our study.

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