


Gifted Girls' Passion for Fiction: The Quest for Meaning, Growth, and Self-Actualization

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Abstract

To illuminate the nature of the relationship that very able girls have with fiction, this is an interpretive account of the meanings that reading fiction holds for verbally gifted preadolescent girls. Ethnographic field methods were used to uncover the essences of the reading experience in the contexts of their daily lives. Data sources included the researcher's field notes, the girls' taped book discussions, parent interviews, and the girls' reading journals. Major findings were that the girls read and make meaning in and around three interconnected areas of intelligence and intensity: intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. As they read fiction, the girls engage in a process of determined growth in each of these domains of human awareness. The girls challenge themselves with difficult literature, critical and empathic thinking, and problem finding. As the girls read and make meaning, they are involved in constructing their lives' purpose. They are youthful self-actualizers.

Putting the Research to Use

Educators should understand the powerful place that fiction holds in the lives of young gifted readers. The verbally gifted learners of this report were passionate about fiction. The girls used fiction as they constructed meaning in and around three domains of human awareness: intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. They read with an intensity that led them to choose challenging fiction to gather knowledge and explore issues, create vivid images, and make connections with characters and authors. The girls experienced flow while reading, which led to an inclination as well as a determination to read. Time spent in solitude reading fiction helped the girls overcome adversity, allowed them to resist enculturation, and caused them to question the split between the way things are and the way things should be. The girls used fiction to self-educate as they began to realize their lives' purpose.

Keywords

verbally gifted girls, intellectual, imaginal, emotional intensities, growth motivation, youthful self-actualizers

Background to the Study

In an attempt to describe and explain the individual meanings that the reading of fiction holds for each of 8 sixth-grade girls in a suburban Canadian community, Meredith Cherland (1990) used ethnographic field methods to investigate the act of reading as a social practice; that is, as a product of social and historical forces that serve to shape the context in which the reading is done. The 8 sixth-grade girls who were the participants in Cherland's study were considered by their teachers to be the top readers at their grade level by virtue of getting good grades and reading the most books. They each came from stable, two-parent, middle-class homes and were of White, Anglo-Saxon heritage. Of interest to the researcher were the social patterns and organizations that serve to frame and define reading in classrooms, in relationships with peers, and at home. The 8 able female sixth-grade readers of Cherland's study were allowed to miss classroom instruction

in order to participate in a book discussion group. Transcripts of the taped book discussions, along with parent interviews, researcher observations and field notes, the researcher's theoretical notes, and the construction of narrative vignettes were the main data sources for the project.

Applying a framework of critical theory to the study, Cherland (1990), asserted that (a) the able girls of New Town read fiction to organize and fill their time and to escape boredom, (b) they read to "do gender" as part of a group of girls who read and because reading is an acceptable activity for girls, and (c) they read to enact and resist individualism as part of a consumer society in which books are acquired and,

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once read, either discarded or displayed as symbols of status. The girls of Cherland's study talked of "marking time" and "escaping time" by reading fiction when they were bored or had nothing else to do. In the culture of the sixth-grade girls of New Town, time was best spent in self-gratification. The girls enjoyed the comfort of having their own bedroom in which they talked on the telephone, listened to music, read magazines, and, when they had nothing left to do, read fiction. By "doing gender," Cherland referred to the feminist view that understandings of gender are socially and culturally constructed and enacted. The girls of New Town were doing gender as they participated in activities deemed by society to be appropriate for girls. They were involved in collecting series books that they read to be part of a group of girls who were reading the series. Finally, as young members of a consumer society, the girls enacted and resisted individualism; they read for points in class, for grades, and to achieve status as the fastest reader or the one who read the most.

After reading Cherland's (1990) study, a number of questions arose. Do verbally gifted girls read to fill the void of time, or do they read fiction as part of a quest for knowledge? Do they choose to read in order to do gender as part of a group of girls who read, or do they read to foster understanding and connection with the experience of others? Are young gifted girls reading to enact and resist individualism in a consumer society, or do they read to experience other lands and other eras? Is the reading experience of verbally gifted girls somehow *qualitatively different* from those in Cherland's report and from the experience of other sixth-grade girls of more average reading ability?

Theoretical Frameworks

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand the meanings that reading fiction holds for a group of verbally gifted sixth-grade girls. Literature concerned with verbally gifted children who read fiction presents a striking contrast to the rather bleak picture of the reading lives of the girls of New Town described by Cherland. Clark (1997) remarked on the opportunity afforded verbally gifted children through reading to explore challenging concepts as well as to plumb emotional understandings through the plots, characters, and themes in fiction. Parents and teachers of young gifted readers have reported the excitement gifted children find as they travel vicariously through the pages of books. Boyce (1996) described the "love affair" that gifted children have with words. A review of the literature will serve as an aid to frame the ways by which verbally gifted children organize and construct meaning through reading fiction.

The Characteristics and Qualities of Verbally Gifted Children

Verbally gifted children share a high level of language development, verbal proficiency, and advanced vocabulary at an

early age and an interest in reading in and out of class. According to Boyce (1996), verbally gifted children begin developing linguistic virtuosity at an early age. They are fascinated with words, wordplay, and word relationships; often read early; and in many cases teach themselves to read (Kerr, 1994). These children possess the ability to deal with complex, abstract concepts (VanTassel-Baska, 1998). Many highly able learners take delight in thinking about complex real-world problems at multiple levels and from multiple perspectives. Tuttle, Becker, and Sousa (1988) suggested that a distinguishing characteristic of the verbally gifted child is the ability to comprehend and synthesize relationships among a variety of sources. They may display a longer-than-normal attention span and advanced powers of concentration when focusing on areas of personal interest and study and use books to advance those interests. Additionally, verbally advanced children may possess a high degree of emotional intelligence that allows them to form relationships with the characters in and authors of the books they read. Kerr (1994) asserted that gifted children "may be as affected by the voices of authors as by those of family and friends" (p. 83).

Common Themes in the Early Lives of Eminent Women

Kerr (1994) found that most of the eminent women she studied were voracious readers as children; that they spent an inordinate amount of time "absorbing information, opinions, and new experiences through reading" (p. 83); and that they neglected other responsibilities to read. Isolation, by choice or by circumstance during childhood, was a prevalent theme in the early lives of eminent women. A difficult adolescence that may have included ridicule and ostracism by peers was often reported. Resiliency in overcoming adversity was another common theme in the early lives of gifted women (Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996; Piirto, 1998; Reis, 1996) as was the development of a psychological armor to protect their innermost selves (Kerr, 1994; Noble, 1996). It was through the development of these "thorns and shells" (Kerr, 1994) that gifted girls were able to resist enculturation. In an investigation concerning women who achieved eminence after the age of 40 years, Reis (1996) found that several of the women she studied grew up in negative, nonfacilitative environments and that most of the women "increased their self-esteem and self-concepts as they became older and overcame obstacles in developing their talents" (p. 165). Furthermore, the ability to fall in love with an idea (Kerr, 1994) and the deep sense of purpose that may accompany the discovery of ideas and meaning can give direction to a young gifted girl's life. This ability, Kerr asserted, may produce "a lasting, often intense, absorbing, life-long interest that ultimately leads to an expansion of that idea or subject" (p. 90). A young gifted girl on a quest for knowledge, revelation, and inspiration will pursue her interest with intensity. Indeed, she may set out on a self-directed

course of study in which she uses and hones her gifts to ultimately discover her life's purpose.

Dabrowski's Theory of Overexcitabilities (OEs)

Dabrowski's hierarchy of development validated the holistic nature of intelligence by including emotional, imaginal, sensual, and psychomotor functions, as well as the intellectual or cognitive function, as areas of intensity and potential (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). According to Piechowski (1979), each form of overexcitability can be understood as "a mode of being in the world, or as a dimension of mental function" (p. 28). OEs are channels, wide or narrow, through which the individual views and makes meaning of his or her world. Dabrowski constructed his theory using neurological data that suggested that gifted and creative individuals exhibit heightened levels of physical energy, aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity and drive, empathy, and imagination (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977).

Intellectual OE includes many of the characteristics most often associated with the gifted, such as intense curiosity, keen observation, avid reading, capacity for focused concentration, the search for depth in analysis, fascination with complex issues and universal themes, and tenacity in problem solving. Imaginal OE involves frequent play of the imagination, an active and varied fantasy life, creativity or inventiveness, use of imagery and metaphor in communications, and a heightened ability to visualize. Emotional OE includes characteristics such as deep compassion, unusual degree of empathy with the needs and feelings of others, loneliness, complex and intense emotions and feelings, critical and sometimes painful self-judgment, and intense feelings of being different or set apart.

Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration

Positive disintegration is the process by which individual development evolves into structures that organize behavior; it is the disintegration and restructuring of underlying organizations of affective and cognitive systems and their replacement by new organizations at higher levels (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). For psychic transformation to occur, it is necessary that the individual experience conflict, instability, and disequilibrium. The outcome of positive disintegration is growth; the individual becomes a more complex person. The lowest levels of Dabrowski's developmental hierarchy are characterized by self-centered and self-serving behaviors. Reflective thought is extremely rare; aspirations are limited, and behavior is conformist. Intellect is subordinated to more primitive impulses, and psychic transformation through conflict, stress, or trauma is rare.

The interim levels of Dabrowski's hierarchy reflect the stages of developmental growth that occur as an individual enters into a life of critical self-examination. The individual makes a conscious move toward autonomy, responsibility,

and personality improvement. Tensions and conflicts are strong in these levels. The individual reflects deeply and often about the way things are as compared with the way things ought to be. According to Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977), human development at this level equates to Maslow's (1968) conception of the self-actualizing individual. It is at this stage that self-determined directed growth and development become paramount. At the highest level of Dabrowski's hierarchy, the individual directs efforts to the righting of wrongs and the alleviation of suffering, toward making the world a better place for humanity.

Flow and Peak Experiences and Self-Actualization

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defined the human states of joy, creativity, happiness, and meaning making as optimal experience. He suggested that the phenomenology of enjoyment, or flow, is a state of being in which the individual is so deeply engaged in the challenge of the task at hand that a difficult problem suddenly becomes effortless. To achieve optimal experience, the focus of the individual must be completely absorbed in an area of human endeavor where all relevant skills are concentrated on the challenges of the situation. In a state of flow, mundane thoughts and feelings disappear; senses are heightened; awareness of time, place, and self are transcended. Optimal experience is intimately related to what is personally meaningful. It can ultimately lead to a sense of deeper union with the environment of the activity itself and toward a "feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 64). The outcome of optimal experience is psychological transformation and growth: The individual becomes a more complex person (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Unlike the flow experience, a *peak* experience involves no personal struggle and may take one completely unawares. Often, a peak experience occurs as an individual recognizes a moment of great truth or beauty in thought or in the natural world. The peak experience may be considered a moment of ecstasy and pure joy; there are feelings of limitless horizons, wonder, and awe. Like flow, the peak experience is a state of unselfconscious freedom from anxiety; there is a loss of time, space, and self and a feeling of unity with the universe. The experience is personally meaningful and so valuable that it can be life altering. Dewey, Barnes, Buermeyer, Mullen, and Mazia (1929) stated that a peak experience is one that may be viewed by the individual as rounded off and separate from the rest of one's experience.

According to Maslow (1971), these types of altered experiences may combine to inform the direction of one's life. He maintained that peak experiences are common among persons who are engaged in the process of self-actualization. Maslow loosely described self-actualizing people as those who put to full use their "talents, capacities, potentialities, and the like" (p. 126). He proposed several criteria that serve to indicate self-actualization. Resilience in adversity, time

spent in solitude, resistance to enculturation, autonomy, an awareness of and concern for the split between what is and what ought to be, problem centering, acceptance of self and others, a kinship with the human experience, and the experience of peak or other altered states tend to characterize movement toward an ideal self. Self-actualization may be perceived as the self-directed action toward psychic transformation and growth.

Research Design and Method

This study grew out of the researcher's experience as a teacher of verbally gifted girls for more than 12 years and from reading *Girls and Reading: Children, Culture, and Literary Experience* by Meredith Cherland (1990). To the author of this report, the reading lives of the girls of New Town seemed sterile and bleak. The essences of the reading experience of the able girls of New Town did not resonate with the author's more than 12 years of experience teaching and mentoring verbally gifted girls who read fiction nor did it resonate with her own reading history. The author was compelled to investigate through a deep interest and commitment to gaining an understanding of the qualities of the reading lives of gifted girls. The study was undertaken to describe, interpret, analyze, and explain the meanings that the reading of fiction holds for eight verbally gifted preadolescent girls.

The primary question that guided the research was: What meanings does the reading of fiction hold for 8 verbally gifted sixth-grade girls? A related question was: How do these meanings compare with the meanings that the reading of fiction holds for the 8 sixth-grade girls in Cherland's (1990) study of the same nature? The researcher chose a qualitative research design that used features of ethnographic field methods and the construction of narrative vignettes to inform theory building. When the researcher is interested in the nuances, complexities, and interdependencies that are inherent to a particular setting, qualitative methods are appropriate (Patton, 1987). Research problems that are most appropriate to ethnographic methods are those that suggest themselves to the researcher out of commitment and interest, that are broad in conception but are narrowly focused on a particular community, and that allow for "mucking about" in the field by the researcher (Wolcott, 1975). According to Graue and Walsh (1998), vignettes are snapshots or minimovies of a setting, a person, or an event. They tell a story that illustrates an interpretive theme within the research. Erickson (1986) asserted,

The meaning of everyday life is contained in its particulars and to convey this to a reader the narrator must ground the more abstract analytic concepts of the study in concrete particulars—specific actions taken by specific people together. A richly descriptive narrative vignette, properly constructed, does this. (p. 150)

The role of the researcher in an ethnographic study is negotiated with the participants. In this case, the role of the researcher was that of researcher-ethnographer, teacher, mentor, participant, and report writer. In addition, Smith (1994) referred to the "personhood" of the researcher as one of the multiple contexts within a qualitative study. Wolcott (1975) suggested that as the instrument of research, the investigator should possess the characteristics of curiosity, sensitivity, and perception. According to Peshkin (1982), the subjectivity of the researcher in qualitative research can be virtuous in that it can provide added empathy and insight into the examination of the contexts and cultures of the participants. To see and conduct the research clearly, it was necessary for the author as researcher to fully explore her own relationship with fiction in order to locate and explicate bias. The author used a reflective process to examine rigorously the history of her relationship with fiction. Although her thinking concerning preadolescent girls and the reading of fiction evolved through the course of the research project, and despite serious reflection, the author found that she was more affected by the pleasure she found in reading fiction than by hegemonic forces such as gender and/or individualism that Cherland (1990) suggested may have been at work in the lives of the adolescent readers of New Town.

Graue and Walsh (1998) discussed the lived realities, or culture, of children and contended that meaning is constructed in multiple contexts. They maintained that for the ethnographer to gain an understanding of the lived realities of children, she must come to "find it out" in context. As the teacher of verbally gifted girls in a sixth-grade language arts program, the researcher had immediate proximity and authentic access to the reading culture of the 8 verbally gifted sixth-grade girls. The researcher invited the girls to participate in a shared book discussion group. The girls met to discuss books they were reading as a group once or twice a week for a total of 19 "book chats." The author's role as mentor allowed the girls to share personal feelings and emotions as they made connections between the readings and their own lives. The author's role as teacher led, through questioning, to further exploration of concepts or themes in the books that the girls brought to the discussion. Additionally, the author's role as researcher required some clarifying questions such as, "What do you mean?" and "Can you describe how you felt?"

Because giving up class time during the school day was not a possibility for the girls or for their Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) teacher, the girls decided to give up their lunch recess two times a week to engage in the "book chats." The discussions were scheduled and conducted by the participants; they took place from late February through June. The participants also chose the books they wished to read and discuss. The girls were limited in their choice of books to those for which a set of eight could be obtained. The books used for discussion included *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Shabanu*, *A Girl Named Disaster*, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, and

The Giver. The book discussions were conversational in format and student led. The discussions were audiotaped; the girls passed around and used a microphone to speak. The researcher had the sole responsibility for the design of the research, the data collection, and the analysis of the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study included the collection of five different kinds of qualitative data. These five were the transcripts of the audiotaped book discussions, transcripts of the audiotaped parent interviews, the girls' reading journals, observational field notes, and the researcher's theoretical notes. The construction of narrative vignettes also informed the research. Audiotapes of the book talks were made and were transcribed verbatim. An interview was conducted with the parents of the participants to gain a deeper understanding of the place that the reading of fiction held for each of the families and for their children. The interviews were conducted in an informal manner, were conversational in style, and were conducted in the homes of the girls. Parent interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written daily. Theoretical note making proceeded throughout the research project.

The Abductive Research Process

Analysis during the investigation was ongoing and overlapped the collection of data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that concepts and hypotheses are inductively discovered through continuous comparative analysis. During the readings, the researcher was engaged in the induction of categories of meaning and action that pointed to developing themes, which, in turn, led the author to deduce areas that were in need of further focused investigation. This cycle is referred to as an abductive process; it involves induction, deduction, and reflection (Smith, 1998). The abductive research process was informed by the construction of data displays, narrative vignettes, and the researcher's ongoing review of the literature and theory that became interrelated parts of the continuous comparative analysis of the data. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) maintained that qualitative researchers need make use of middle-range theory as a scaffold for directing questions of their study as well as for reflecting on their findings. The theory that informs the mind of the researcher as he or she participates in the study of children is one of the many contexts embedded in the research (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Because the researcher becomes the research instrument in a qualitative investigation (Wolcott, 1990), the research process may be reported as it occurred, entwined as an abductive cycle rather than deconstructed into its various components. Analysis of the data, theory building, the construction of narrative vignettes, and other data displays began almost immediately and proceeded simultaneously. Based on recollections

of reading experiences as a child, the author began with the idea that girls read fiction "to go"; that is, to travel vicariously through the pages in the books. Wolcott (1990) promoted the construct of "idea-driven" research. He wrote,

To conduct an inquiry of any sort, somebody must have an idea. As inquiry proceeds, the idea that prompted it should become both better formed and better informed. The one critical attribute that qualitative and quantitative approaches share is that each begins with an idea that reflects human judgment. (p. 7)

As the study began, the author was reading the book *Flow* by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in which he described the criteria for optimal experience. His description of the flow experience resonated with the author's childhood experience of "going places" through the pages of fiction. Almost immediately, it was evident that the girls were accumulating knowledge through reading fiction. This was reaffirmed in the literature concerning the characteristics of gifted learners. The girls read fiction "to know" was considered a category. A comparative analysis of the accumulated transcripts revealed that the girls were greatly intrigued by interesting words and language. The author read *Developing Verbal Talent* by VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, and Boyce (1996). Another pattern that arose from the transcripts and field notes was data that centered on the girls' emotions. Not only did the girls interact with the characters in the books they read, they also talked of being the characters and of seeing things from the characters' points of view. The girls' talk reflected a degree of empathy that was particularly evident in the transcripts. The author read Goleman's (1995) *Emotional Intelligence*.

As the book group continued to meet, the researcher visited the homes of the participants to interview the parents and gather ethnographic data with which to inform the theory-building process. The visits uncovered patterns of adversity and resilience in the girls' lives, as well as the inordinate amount of time each required for solitude. Interviews with parents reinforced the idea that the girls possessed an intense determination to read that was also becoming evident in the book discussion transcripts. After a visit to Mei's home, the researcher constructed the first of 17 narrative vignettes that served to inform the study. Vignettes were built from data from the book discussion transcripts, the participants' journal entries, the parent interviews, and the researcher's observational notes. These notes were written after classroom and playground observations, after discussion group meetings, and after the home visits. The vignettes served as an analytical tool to illuminate further the meanings that reading fiction held for the participants, and they aided the induction of the themes, patterns, and categories.

The researcher used the emerging data to develop data displays that served to clarify themes and categories. The data displays permitted an organized, compressed assembly of the

information and highlighted salient themes for analysis. Data displays included the development of structured summaries, charts and diagrams, and the narrative vignettes that crystallized participant action, meanings, and contexts through thick description (Erickson, 1986). All data displays showcased actual data, reorganized in ways that, according to Erickson (1986), illustrated analysis and interpretation. Exceptions and disconfirming evidence were examined through the construction of alternative categories and assertions.

Specifically, the categories of time, gender, and individualism were examined for fit. Data that would indicate the girls read out of boredom, to “do gender,” or to enact or resist individualism were not in evidence. The girls of this study did not read to enact and resist individualism. They did not collect books to display as symbols of status; only a few of them had more than two or three books of her own that she treasured. Although many of the girls earned excellent grades, most refused to participate in the grade-level reading program in which one could earn points for reading books. Points did not hold any attraction for the girls. The girls were not reading to be part of a group of girls who read because they chose to read fiction that other girls at their grade level were not reading. Significantly, the gifted girls of this study spoke of “making,” “finding,” and “needing” time to read. Furthermore, the data indicated that girls often forego social activities to read. When three of the girls mentioned that they set alarm clocks to wake up in order to read before school, the researcher abandoned “time” as a category and concentrated on the girls’ emotional connections with the books, and on their intense need to read. In fact, it was “intensity” itself that was found to be an emerging pattern. The author located information concerning gifted children and OEs. Categories were combined and expanded into the “intellectual” and the “emotional.” Intensity was seen to be a common thread in and among the categories. A third and comparative reading of the transcripts was illuminating. Optimal experience and other peak experiences occurred in both the intellectual and emotional domains.

However, not all of the emerging data fit into these two categories. A book published in 1867 by William M. Thayer called *Women Who Win or Making Things Happen* that contained the life histories of eminent women of the era such as Harriet Beecher Stow, Florence Nightengale, and Dorthea Dix proved to be illuminating. Themes common in contemporary literature on the lives of gifted women coursed through Thayer’s work. Voracious reading in childhood, solitude, adversity, resilience, in fact, many of the patterns that the researcher was uncovering in the data were there. A description of the childhood “ailment” of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, diagnosed at the time as suffering “premature development of the brain,” led the researcher to discover the role that imagination played in the lives of the young participants. Margaret Ossoli had visions, daydreams, and fantasies; she loved playacting and theatricals. Diving back into the transcripts and into the girls’ reading journals, the researcher found fantasies, imagery, and

visions. The participants’ ability to “see the story” was evident. Imaginational intensity became the third category, along with intellectual intensity and emotional intensity. The researcher found that “flow” and other altered states occurred in each of the categories. As the final assertions were constructed, the researcher noticed that in each of the categories the assertions moved from those involving lesser order skills of the domain to those involving higher order skills. The researcher found determined growth in each of the categories.

Description of the Setting

The diverse group of verbally gifted girls who participated in this study lived in a large city in southwestern United States. They attended Desert Sage Elementary School, a Title 1 school that served approximately 900 school children in kindergarten through Grade 6. A large number of the school’s students participated in the free and reduced-cost lunch programs. The school was built of sturdy red bricks more than 40 years ago. The older classrooms were big and lined with windows, but the newer portable buildings were smaller and without character. The surrounding neighborhood included small single-family homes, apartment buildings, and a trailer park. Ringing the community were grocery stores, minimarkets, bars, motels, and video stores.

Selection of the Participants

Each of the girls of the study had been identified as verbally gifted by having attained a standard age score of 132 or a percentile score of 97 or higher on the verbal portion of the Cognitive Abilities Test. Because of their identifying score, each of the girls was a participant in the Desert Sage Elementary School’s gifted language arts program taught by the author of this study. The gifted language arts program (GATE) was an “in lieu of” reading and language arts class that the students attended on a daily basis. Some of the girls had been involved in the GATE program since they were in third grade. Others had come into the program as they had been identified at various grade levels. The researcher invited all of the identified sixth-grade girls to participate in a book club. Permission for their participation in the study was obtained from their parents. Pseudonyms, chosen by the participants, were used to protect the identity of the girls.

The Participants

Mei. Mei was slight of stature, strong, and graceful. Her hair was straight and black, cut blunt. Her dark eyes were almond shaped behind her glasses. Mei spoke in a soft voice but had the most astonishing sneeze; a sneeze so loud that people jumped when she sneezed. She liked her sneeze: It “is the other side of my voice,” she said. Mei was 11 years old and lived with her parents, 2-year-old brother, 6-year-old cousin,

two aunts, one uncle, and grandmother in a small three-bedroom home in which she shared a bedroom with her parents and baby brother. Years ago, Ko'ing Von left his wife and 1-year-old daughter to travel to the United States. When he arrived in Big City, Mr. Von found work in a Vietnamese market. He worked from early in the morning until late at night every day. By the time his wife and daughter followed him to the United States, Ko'ing had purchased the home they live in today. Over the next 5 years, he brought his brothers and his wife's family to the new country. Mei's father was originally from China. The maternal side of Mei's family was from Vietnam. Most of the adults in her family spoke Chinese and Vietnamese fluently and some English. Mei's grandmother spoke no English.

Although books were a luxury the family could ill afford, Mei's mother, Kihm, read to Mei from the few Vietnamese books they possessed from the time she was a toddler. "Mei is filled with question," said her mother. She asked questions of her parents, her grandparents, the Chinese Baptist minister, her teachers, her friends. "What do you think of violence, Grandma?" "Why do magazines have to be like that, so sexist?" "What is change?" "How can heaven be a perfect place?" "What is our purpose in this life?" Mei read books in English and Vietnamese. She kept a dictionary with her as she read and often used it when she came across an interesting new word, although sometimes she was just too engrossed in the story to stop and look up the words. She read science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and adventure books with equal zest. Some of the books Mei explored on her own during the time of this study were *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, and *The Diary of Ann Frank*. Her all-time favorite book was *Oh, The Places You'll Go*.

Mei was a motivated student of all things; she liked to learn. She earned straight As in school. Mei did not hang out with any particular group of people at school. During recess, she most often sat on the bleachers reading. Sometimes she sat quietly watching and listening to conversations around her. She listened to girls make fun of someone they were mad at or of someone who did not fit in. She wondered why people have to put other people down. Mei knew when someone was acting "all cool." She knew when they were "fake laughing." "But, you know, why do people wear masks?" she asked. After school, Mei did her homework, her chores, spent time with her family, wrote in her journal, and read.

In the closet of her parents' bedroom, Mei had fixed a smaller space, a little room for herself. Her mattress was on the floor and she had shelves and a lamp for reading. Another place Mei went to read was up on the flat roof of the house. There, Mei could look out over the neighborhood, read her books, think her thoughts, and ask her questions. Mei did not just ask questions of others, she asked them of herself. She contemplated her questions: rolled them over and over in her mind for long periods of time. While reading about Ayla in *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, Mei wondered what it

would be like to change the world. Up on the roof top and alone in her small closet space, Mei read and, as she read, she wondered.

Natalie. Twelve-year-old Natalie lived with her mother, Cheryl, in a two-bedroom apartment located on one of the major through streets that bound the neighborhood. It consisted of the two bedrooms, a small living room and kitchen area, and a handicapped-accessible bathroom that had a shower but no bathtub. Natalie's room contained a daybed, a white dresser with shelves on top, and a grocery cart filled with her possessions. On the top shelf of the dresser there stood a magnificently dressed doll. Natalie's mother was wheelchair bound because of a stroke that she had suffered when Natalie was 7 years old. Natalie had always been concerned with her mother's health. She really wished she could do something to help her mother walk again. Natalie had not seen her father, who is African American, since she was about 2 years old, but she might visit him in Michigan after sixth grade. She would worry about leaving her mother alone, but she was excited about seeing her father and meeting his new girlfriend and the young half sister she had never known.

Life at school had been hard for Natalie. She had been teased for her African American heritage as well as for her White heritage. Kids put her down because she was overweight and they made fun of her short Afro hair style. Natalie responded by wearing shorter and shorter skirts and platform shoes so tall she was a little wobbly when she walked. Most of the sixth graders who went to school with Nat failed to take note of her wide and beautiful brown eyes or the blush of rose against the cocoa color of her cheeks. In homeroom, while the other students answered social studies questions, Natalie read. When she was placed in a cooperative learning group where the other students treated her as if she did not exist, Natalie read. And when sent to "Lunch Bunch" for not turning in her assignments, Natalie read. There were many zeros across from Natalie's name in the grade book.

When Natalie got home from school, there were usually four or five preschool children in the apartment. Even with the reduced rent, the family had trouble making ends meet, so Natalie's mother babysat neighborhood kids. Cheryl, exhausted after a day of taking care of them from her wheelchair, let Natalie handle the little ones until their parents arrived to take them home. Nat read to them, wiped their noses, tied their shoes, and took them to the bathroom. In the evening, it was Natalie who fried the hamburgers for dinner, and it was Natalie who did the dishes. She turned on the radio while she worked; she knew all the words to all the songs.

In her room, Natalie read. She brought books home from the school library. Natalie's favorites were classics such as *Little Women*, *Heidi*, and *The Secret Garden*. Alone in her room, the gorgeously dressed doll, the shopping cart, and the musty smell of molding carpet all disappeared. In her room, Natalie escaped into books that took her far, far away.

Jan. Even though she was 12 years old, Jan was the smallest girl in sixth grade. Parted in the middle, Jan's long brown hair reached almost down to her waist. Because she was so thin, some kids called her "Stick" or "Twig." Jan had many friends in sixth grade, mostly girls, but some boys too, and they were important to her. Jan cared very much about her friends. She got upset when her friends played the kinds of games that sixth-grade girls play, when they gossiped or were mean. Jan's feelings were deeply hurt when her friends got mad at her or put her down.

Jan's favorite pastime was reading. She read anything she could get her hands on. Mostly, though, Jan read fiction. And most of the fiction that Jan read came from one library or another. Jan loved libraries, especially the huge one downtown. Jan hunted for hours, reading the cover pages and the backs of books. Sometimes she read the first couple of pages to get an impression of the way the book would go. Jan liked the local library, too. It was a cozier place than the big one, but she could not find as many books there.

During her sixth-grade year, Jan's parents were going through an extremely acrimonious divorce. Jan spent the entire year not knowing if she, her mother, and her sister would be moving or where. Her mom made several weekend reconnaissance trips to California looking for a suitable apartment or small house to rent. One day, Jan told the other girls that she would be moving in 2 weeks, and yet another time she said they were definitely moving over the weekend. It was hard on Jan, not knowing what was going to happen, but it was harder for her to hear her parents fight. Jan's headaches always seemed to be worse when her parents were fighting. She got terrible headaches.

When her parents argued, Jan and her younger sister closed the door and stayed in the bedroom they shared. Jan made up stories for her sister; she had been telling stories since her sister was just a baby. Usually, the stories were about two girls off on the most amazing adventures. They could be struggling in a snowstorm in pioneer times or sailing the ocean with swashbucklers. When she was not making up stories, Jan read. She would read any book, but she really loved books in which the characters had problems to solve. She read *Treasure Island* and all of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Another great book for Jan was *The Girl Who Owned a City*. Jan read that book over and over, and it led her to search out more science fiction books. But, Jan's all-time favorite books were still the *Nancy Drew Mysteries*. She began reading her mother's Nancy Drew books in the summer before third grade. She read them all, many times. Jan liked that she could pick up the books, and there they were, her good friends Nancy, Bess, and George, and they did what they always do: Solve mysteries together.

Sienna. Sienna was passionate about many things. She loved her family. Spending time with her family gave Sienna a good feeling inside. They went fishing and camping. They ate dinner together at the big round table. Sienna's family was

a large one. Her mother came from Mexico to the United States when she was a teenager. Her father was of German descent. Sienna had an older sister and brother, a younger brother, and another sibling on the way. They lived in a house that kept getting bigger as they added rooms and space for the growing family. Sienna was also passionate about swimming. She had a swimmer's build, long and lithe. She loved team competitions because they were hard and she had to push herself. Someday, Sienna wanted to go to the Olympics.

Books were another of Sienna's passions. They had been since she was very little. When she was reading a good story it was as if she became the character. It did not matter if the character was a boy or a girl. Sienna did not just read *Gone with the Wind*. Sienna was Scarlet O'Hara. She was Nhamo in *A Girl Named Disaster*, and when she read *The White Mountains*, she was Will. Sienna's mom said that she had always acted out the characters in stories. When she was 2 or 3 years old, at story time all the other children would sit and listen, but Sienna would move around and mimic the actions of the characters. *The Jungle Books* were among her favorites. Sienna had very few books of her own. In her room there was a copy of *The Red Badge of Courage* and a copy of *Gone with the Wind*.

At school, 11-year-old Sienna made good grades with little effort. She was pretty and popular and at ease in social situations. Sienna was emotionally sensitive and unusually responsive to the needs and feelings of others. She worried about kids who were "left out of the happy things in life" and she went out of her way to be kind to kids at school who were less popular than she. It was intensely distressing to Sienna when it was reported in the news that a child of illegal immigrants was denied treatment at a local hospital and later died. Sienna wanted to do something to right this wrong. Maybe she would be a lawyer when she grew up, so she could help people who could not help themselves. The thought gave Sienna a thrill of excitement. Maybe she would do that after she swam in the Olympics.

Muriel. Muriel had very fair skin with a smattering of freckles, curly strawberry hair, and straight white teeth. At 11 years of age, she was tall for her age and a bit overweight. There were not many people who Muriel called her friend. She did not hang out with the popular crowd at recess, or any crowd for that matter. Muriel's best friend was Sammy, who had Down's syndrome, and Muriel spent most of her recess and after school time with her.

There were eight children in the Mauldin-Smith family. Four of the children were adopted and four were not. Of the families in this study, Muriel's were the only two parents who had college education. They shared a great passion for books, and books were their one extravagance. The shelves in the family room and in the den must have held hundreds of volumes. On the wall next to her bed, Muriel created a word collage. There, she collected and displayed quotes that inspired her from books and from people. She pinned up words that

for some reason looked or sounded interesting, lines from favorite poems, and inspirational messages. Muriel carefully drew, in ink, small illustrations in intricate detail to go with certain words and phrases.

Muriel adored math. It was especially fun “when you have to struggle with the problem.” She liked cryptograms and crossword puzzles, too. Muriel could get lost in the puzzles for hours on end. She enjoyed puns and other jokes, and she made them up. Often, Muriel giggled deeply at her own humor, even if no one else got it. In homeroom, Muriel’s teacher was concerned about her disorganization, poor handwriting, and sloppy work. Every paper that Muriel turned in was “a complete mess.” Except for handwriting, though, Muriel got good grades.

Sometimes Muriel felt like she was “on top of the world,” lighthearted and silly. But, other times she just felt empty. She did not know where the empty feeling came from. Her mother thought she might “be bipolar, whatever that means.” What that meant to Muriel was that on some days she just did not feel right. The one thing that almost always made her feel right again was reading a good book. Science fiction and fantasy fascinated Muriel. She read *The Time Machine* and *War of the Worlds* earlier that year. Muriel read *The Hobbit* and all of *The Lord of the Rings* books and those of Madeline L’Engle. But when she was down, Muriel usually choose humor. She admired the way Roald Dahl found exactly the right words at the right time. Of all the Roald Dahl books, *The BFG* was her favorite. She chuckled at the deliciously twisted characterizations. Muriel caught the irony and laughed at the sarcasm. She loved getting lost in the intricate word play.

Megan. Eleven-year-old Megan had thick, straight brown hair, dark eyelashes, and a pale complexion that turned pink when she blushed. She lived with her father and sister in a small house near the school. She had lived there all her life. Originally from New York, Megan’s father worked long hours in construction. Although as a single parent it was very hard, Mr. Fisherton was steadfastly committed to “being there” for his daughters. When Megan was in third grade, her mother, Sarah, was diagnosed with lung cancer even though she had never smoked. She died the following summer and Megan dropped out of GATE. She did not come back into the program until the beginning of fifth grade.

Fifth grade was a hard year for Megan. Every year was hard, but in fifth grade Megan had lots of trouble turning in her homework assignments in her regular classroom. She could not seem to focus on answering social studies questions, finishing her daily oral language, or working on her math. None of it really seemed to matter much. Megan’s fifth-grade teacher spoke to her GATE teacher about her bad attitude. In sixth grade, Megan made sure that she at least got Cs or above in all of her subjects.

After school, Megan spent all of her time in her room. She liked books that allowed her to picture herself somewhere else, somewhere faraway. She liked fantasy books and science

fiction best. Megan read two or three books a week. In fact, Megan read in her room so much that it worried her father who would have liked to see her spend more time with her friends. “She’s not going to find what she’s looking for in those books, you know what I mean?” he asked.

It was hard for Megan to talk about the death of her mother, but she did open up with the girls in the book group. She missed her mom, and it hurt. Sometimes she was mad at her mom, but then she hated herself, and that hurt, too. Sometimes she was mad at her dad for not doing something, but what could he have done? Megan liked to read, no she “needed” to read books that totally captured her imagination, books that she could “see.” The “color” of the story was very important to Megan. She felt like she really knew the characters in the books she read and the authors, as well. She thoroughly enjoyed *Jane Eyre*. This year, Megan was reading *Frankenstein*. In her room, Megan imagined Mary Shelly at the age of 17 writing her masterpiece in a gown of “fury orange.”

Mandee. Twelve-year-old Mandee spoke two languages fluently. English was her second language; her first was American Sign Language. Because both their parents were deaf, all the children in the Holland family communicated fluently in sign language. The children were all bright and athletic, outgoing, and popular; Mandee was no exception. A pair of jeans, athletic shoes, a T-shirt, and a black windbreaker was her daily attire. Mandee was an outstanding athlete. She participated in a fast-pitch softball league and she got such a rush from competing. Sometimes, Mandee lost all track of time when she was playing baseball. The same thing happened when she was reading.

The family, which consisted of Mandee, her parents, and her three brothers, lived in a three-bedroom home that they rented. Her parents cleaned houses for a living. After school and in summer, the children all worked with their parents, cleaning houses. Recently, Mandee’s father entered the state university to pursue his dream of becoming a certified teacher. Mandee was very protective of her younger brothers and her parents. She had seen people make fun of her parents. Kids on the street where they lived imitated the way her mom and dad used their voices. When Mandee was younger, she was embarrassed that she needed to translate for her parents at parent teacher conferences or order for them at restaurants, but now she was proud of her ability, and proud of her parents. She loved them so much it hurt almost physically when other kids put them down. Mandee thought it would be good if all kids were exposed to sign language.

Mandee was a straight A student. Most subjects were easy for her; she did well in social studies and science because “all you have to do is read it and you know all the answers.” Usually, Mandee finished her class work and then read at her desk, but sometimes Mandee read instead of finishing her class work. She knew she could throw it together and turn it in at the last minute with no problem. “I have a need to read,”

Mandee said. Mandee's passion for historical fiction and biographies led her to read about Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth I, Mary, Queen of Scots, Joan of Arc, and Helen Keller. In her room, Mandee pretended to be Mary, Queen of Scots, or Cleopatra. She dreamed of living in those strange countries and in far-off times.

Mandee was quite sensitive to slight nuances of expression in others. She knew exactly when Megan was thinking about her mother. She knew when Jan was worried and had a migraine. She felt it when Natalie was feeling mistreated or when Muriel was blue. Even though she had not been made privy to the information that her homeroom teacher, Mrs. B, was going through a divorce, Mandee knew that Mrs. B was "very sad and upset about something." Mandee had her finger on the pulse of the emotions of others.

Skye. Skye was very fair. She burned easily in the desert sun. Her blue-green eyes were wide and questioning behind her granny glasses. She had long, streaky blonde hair. Skye became the eighth member of the girls' book group when she transferred into Desert Sage Elementary in the middle of sixth grade. In her short 11 years, Skye had already lived in California, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, and Montana. She had attended so many schools she could not keep track of them all.

No matter what state she was living in, or what school she was going to, the work was always extremely easy for Skye. She did not even have to think about it. Skye easily finished whatever work was assigned in class and then read. She did not participate in after-school activities; no sports, music lessons, or summer camps for Skye. She never seemed to fit in with the kids at any of the schools. Even in a class of 30 students, Skye felt isolated.

Skye read *The Clan of the Cave Bear* and both its sequels in sixth grade. She read *Les Misérables*, *Hamlet*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. She did not mind the old-fashioned words and language. In fact, she liked them. They gave her the feeling of being in a different time. Skye liked issues and differences of opinion, and she would argue first one side of an issue and then another. She argued with the characters in the books she read, and with the authors. She even argued with herself.

Skye's parents might have been termed modern-day hippies, right down to the orange VW van parked in front of their house. They raised their two children to be independent thinkers; they had few rules but expected their children to act responsibly. When she was 10 years old, Skye decided to become a vegetarian out of a commitment to animal rights. At the age of 12, Skye gave up dairy products because of an in-depth news program she watched. Skye imagined that she would work on behalf of animals when she was older, perhaps as a veterinarian, or maybe as an animal rights lawyer.

During the first two meetings of the girls' book group, Skye watched and listened. At the first meeting, the girls were talking about being different. They were reading *The Witch of*

Blackbird Pond. Skye had already read it. In the book, Kit was so different that she was accused of being a witch. The girls were talking about being made fun of for their differences and about how their families were put down for their differences. Mandee told the girls how bad it made her feel when people hurt her parents. She talked about how different she felt from other girls on the inside. Natalie talked about how she did not fit in and how she was teased. She shared what it was like for her mom to spend her life in a wheelchair. Natalie mentioned that everyone in the book seemed to be judging everyone else. Jan determined that Kit was "handicapped" by her differences. Muriel spoke of how people made fun of her friend, Sammy. Megan told how she felt no one else was like her and how often she thought of her mother. These girls had known each other for a while. It was easier for them to open up with each other.

On the third meeting, Skye took the microphone. She was opinionated, and she was ready to share. She was critical of books, of school life, of television and magazines, of commercials, of society in general. She had ideas and viewpoints that were uniquely her own, and she was comfortable enough now to share those ideas. Skye had never been part of a group of girls like this: each of them so different; each with a different background, different passions, and different struggles; each of them with a love, a need for reading as great as her own. Skye finally fit.

Findings

The data revealed that the girls read with intensity in three domains: the intellectual, the imaginal, and the emotional. The girls experienced "flow" and "peak" moments in each of these domains while reading and at other times in their lives. These experiences motivated the girls toward further personal growth and psychic transformation. Intellectually, the girls used fiction as they played with words and developed facility with language. The girls read to gain knowledge. They constructed meaning as they examined issues that connected to their lives and their world. Imaginationally, the girls engaged in vivid imagery and fantasy experiences while reading. The girls' ability to picture scenes in the books they read enhanced the reading experience and added to their ability to construct meaning. Emotionally, the girls possessed empathic ability that they used to form relationships with authors and fictional characters. While reading fiction, they used emotional intensity and intelligence to gain personal understanding and insight to the experience and feelings of others.

Reading and Intellectual Intensity

The eight verbally gifted girls of the study were voracious readers. For the girls there was nothing more important or better to do than reading. They used fiction to explore words and language. They were attracted to the look, sound, and feel

of certain words and phrases. The girls used fiction to explore issues and ideas. Through fiction, the girls examined relationships and made connections in and among their home lives, school lives, their families, peers, teachers, television, and books. They used time reading fiction to ask questions about large issues such as justice, death, and the purpose of life; about what is and what ought to be. The girls used fiction to self-educate. They wrestled with intellectual questions with an intensity that led to growth and self-development.

Each of the girls of the Desert Sage GATE class recognized that she was intellectually different from most of the other girls in the sixth grade. Piechowski (1997) asserted that gifted students have feelings of being different than their same age peers often and early.

Of her experience at other schools, Skye reported,

None of the other schools I went to had a GATE program. I was different and they made fun of me. I look different. I dress different. I *think* different. For them, the best day is hanging out with their friends at the mall. For me, the best day is curled up reading with my cat in the window seat.

I've never been part of any group. This is the first group I've ever been part of. This is the first time I've ever wanted to be.

Nobody reads like me. Nobody reads the books I read. Even if I wanted to, I never had anyone to talk to about the kind of things I think about. Well, maybe they were there. Maybe they were alone like me. But, I didn't find them. Really, I didn't try, because I didn't think about it. I just went through the day being the odd girl.

All the parents of the girls in this study reported that their daughters were extremely curious from a very young age. Of Mei's curiosity, Mrs. Von stated, "Mei asks questions. She wants to know all. We can't tell all. She asks questions. She never quit. I tell her, after while, to ask Uncle, to ask Grandma. Mei is full of curious."

Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig talked about Sienna's quest for knowledge. "Sienna goes after knowledge like other kids go after baseball or football," Mr. Ludwig stated. "She's just so motivated. I don't know why." Mrs. Ludwig agreed:

She has always been that way. She just couldn't get enough. She would have me read every night. I would say "go get a book" and she would come back with a whole pile of them for me to read. She was only 2 or 3.

Jan's mother said, "Jan is so intense about reading. She'll read anything; anything that teaches her something." The family remembered well how Jan used the barbecue manual to teach herself to read when she was in kindergarten.

Of her daughter's reading, Skye's mom reported,

I've never seen anyone with such a determination to read. Skye has a lot of will power about everything. But, when she wants to read, she is so determined. It's really hard to put into words. It's really hard to explain. Skye reads with a sort of vengeance, if you know what I mean. She reads with will.

It is clear that each of the girls was not only aware that she was learning when she read but also that she chose to read in order to learn. The girls were glad there were glossaries in *Shabanu* and *A Girl Named Disaster*. Megan, Jan, and Natalie told how they used them before, during, and after reading. Mei used the glossary quite a bit. "I used the one to check on the history of Mozambique, and stuff." Mande said that the glossaries added a lot to the books. "You are always learning when you read. That is, if it is a good book. But the glossaries add to the book. They help to give you information about the place."

Mande talked about choosing fiction in order to learn. She said,

I have gotten into a phase of historical fiction. So, any books you can find that are historical fiction, I will read them. They show you so much about the past. I read this book, and what it was about was the assassination conspiracy on Abraham Lincoln. Did you know that the guy who shot him was a very famous actor of the time? John Wilkes Booth. Yeah, he was a leading man on the stage and he believed in states' rights, which was one of the big issues of the civil war. There was a lot in it about how doctors at that time had to steal bodies from graves in order to study them, to find out how to cure diseases and operate and stuff like that. They had to rob graves. That part of the book was based on fact. That's what I like about historical fiction.

The sounds and deep meanings of words and language caused the girls to stretch their minds.

Mei said,

There was this thing in the library and it said "yearn" on it. Yearn. And, I said to myself, yearn, hmm, that's the word. That's the way I feel. A longing . . . They had this chalk thing in the library that had the A, B, Cs on it and one word. Yearn. I like that word. It's like a burn with a "ya" on it. A yearn can burn. Yearning to go . . . Yearning to find . . . Yearning for love or something . . . The word "yearn" makes me yearn.

The girls used fiction to explore issues. During one book chat, the topic under discussion went from women's rights to the issue of polygamy:

“Did you know that wives couldn’t own property in the eighteen hundreds?” Sienna asked in the discussion group. “The men had all the money. When you got married, whatever property you had became your husband’s. Women couldn’t have their own bank account. I guess the smart thing to do, you know, if you had money, like from your parents or something, would be to not get married.”

“Imagine what it would be like to be sold by your family to your husband, like in *Shabanu*,” Natalie said. “I mean, we are poor, my mother and me. But she wouldn’t sell me to be rich.”

Skye said, “I watched this show on polygamy. All of the girls there who were interviewed, they grew up in, like, a family. So they were just like a bunch of sisters, and that’s the way they were taught. That’s the way they thought was right. It’s kind of like brainwashing, in a weird sort of way. One of the girls said it was like a community, the whole thing.”

Megan said, “I think they should marry someone only if they want to. And he shouldn’t marry her if she’s too young.”

“Well, all the women when they married him were like 14 or 15. And, he thinks of them as children or as things, sort of. And they said they loved him,” Skye said.

“Oh, please,” Mande interjected. “When you are at that kind of a young age . . . What I say to people who say ‘I’m in love with him’ or ‘I love him,’ I would say that ‘I love him’ is just a saying right now to you until, I don’t know what age it is, but until you’ve reached a full maturity. Like right now, in sixth grade, a lot of people say ‘I love him,’ but it is just a saying. It doesn’t really mean anything.”

“Boyfriend, girlfriend, the next week,” Sienna added.

Mei said, “I think that the girls that make that decision, that they never saw the world. They’ve never seen the beauty and the joys and the love of the whole world. They don’t know what true love is really. For themselves.”

The girls used time reading to ask questions about large issues such as justice and personal freedom. Although Natalie enjoyed reading, writing was not among her favorite pastimes. However, during the course of the book discussions, she became very interested in women’s issues and what started out as a report about Amelia Earhart expanded into research about early female aviators such as Bessie Coleman and Willa Brown.

The girls related real-world problems to the books they were reading:

Mei said, “There was this man in California a while ago, my mom said, and he had hung a picture of Chairman Mao in his shop window in the middle of a Vietnamese community there. And we have freedom of speech here, so he has that right, but the people of the community were having riots. So I asked my mom about it, and she said he was abusing the right of freedom of speech, that he only did it to hurt people who had lived through horrible, horrible stuff. I don’t know, but I think I agree with my mom. That’s not what freedom of speech is supposed to be about, hurting people.”

“In *The Giver*, no one hurts. They are all the same and no one gets left out of the hospital. There are no riots. No violence,” Sienna said.

“In *The Giver*, they have freedom of speech. But it doesn’t matter, because they don’t have any ideas,” Skye said.

Imaginational Intensities

Imaginational intensity was a vital component in the reading lives of the gifted girls. They led active fantasy lives. They liked to daydream, to pretend, to playact and role-play. The active fantasy lives of the girls were extended and expanded through books. Conversely, the world of fiction was extended and expanded through imagery and fantasy. The girls of the study appreciated metaphors, similes, and other literary devices that the authors used to create imagery:

Muriel said, “In the book, I like the comparison, where it says Nhamo is like a weed. Mulan is like that too. After I read that, I was like, ‘that’s kind of like Mulan because her father was like a tree and she was one of the. . .’”

“What beautiful blossoms you have,” Mei interjected.

“She is a blossom that is opening, that is finding the freedom and beauty of being yourself. And, that is basically what Grandma is saying. She is saying that Nhamo is a weed, and that when she grows up, she will be more beautiful because of the beauty inside, more beautiful than any other ever could be,” Muriel stated.

Because they were able to translate words and language into imagery and other sensory experiences, they were able to project themselves into other settings. They saw the landscapes. They saw the characters as they wanted to see them. They watched the story as events unfolded. They traveled with the characters and saw what they saw; sometimes they did what they did. The girls imagined themselves as the

characters, in those settings. The girls saw, heard, smelled, and even tasted through the pages and words in a book. Imaginational intensity lent vibrancy to the reading of fiction such that it elicited aesthetic and peak experiences. The influx of information and meanings via heightened imaginational experience expanded the girls' ability to make meaning and pleasure.

The girls of this study spent much of their time in imaginary worlds: some of which they created for themselves and some they found in the pages of the books they read. The extent of the visualization that the girls experienced while reading fiction is evident in the language they used to talk about the books they read.

Sienna asked the others: "Do you guys know that the witch is at Blackbird Pond? Have you read to the part where she is in it? Who hasn't gone out to the little house?"

"I'm right there," Jan said.

"Have you been to the field?" Sienna asked. "Who hasn't seen the field?"

"All of us who have met the witch know about the field, right?" Mandee inquired.

"Just the description of that field is so beautiful. Just the reading of that field and the way that Kit felt about that field," Mei said.

"Yeah," Jan sighed wistfully, "I like that field."

Concerning Nhamo, a character in *A Girl Named Disaster*, Skye stated,

It doesn't describe her. It just says she is not beautiful like Masvita. Well, I can see Masvita sitting there eating her clay. And she is pretty, but nothing great. Nhamo is special. They don't recognize her beauty. How would they know? Actually, I like that the author didn't describe her. That way I can do it myself.

Jan described her reading experience:

I am a camera. I am an onlooker. I'm not there. I just look with her. I am like a camera, just filming everything that she does. When I go into a good book, I turn my camera on. No, actually, it just turns on. I guess that's how I know if it's a good book or not . . . because, sometimes it doesn't turn on. Then I put that book down.

When she was reading Jan was a camera. When she put the book down, she imagined herself in situations depicted in the book. One of Jan's favorite books was *The Girl Who*

Owned a City. Jan envisioned herself leading the group of orphaned children:

I imagine what I would do. I would organize the food supplies, the medical supplies, and stuff like that. I would gather up the canned food from around the city. It's sort of like pretending.

"I always played *Little House* by myself," Mandee said. Alone in her room, Mandee nursed her family, who were sick from fever. She read all of the Laura Engles Wilder books when she was in third grade. When Mandee read *Moccasin Trail*, she would fall asleep imagining herself riding a dappled pony with the Indians up into forested mountains. She had been Mary, Queen of Scots, and Joan of Arc, leading armies into battle.

When I am Joan, I hear the voices. I try to convince the people to believe me.

I used to pretend I was a mermaid. I thought I was a mermaid. I was swimming through caverns. I was independent and on my own. I had it all to myself.

Authors' descriptions of colors evoked feelings and images for Megan. Different colors made her think of different things. Orange is a color that reminded her of fury. She described it as "fury orange."

"Blue reminds me of peace," Megan said. "If it is a grayish blue, it reminds me of sadness. If it is a whitish blue, it is the tears of angels. I think of angel tears and stuff like that.

"If you read the book first, and then see the movie, the people will not be right," she contended, "because, I always imagine the people. I make them the way I want them. That is what happened with *White Fang*. The boy wasn't right. The dog wasn't even right."

Of *The Veldt*, Megan declared, "You could actually smell lions. You could feel their hot breath on your arm and see the blood. The lions . . . you could smell yellow."

Remembering a long, dry walk in a desert canyon, Muriel told us,

I ran out of water before we started down. I felt just like I did when I was reading *Shabanu*, that part where they are riding forever through the desert trying to get water. My mouth was so dry. I was reading, and I kept drinking and drinking. I was thinking of the book on the way down.

Mei became physically aware of the fictional environments in her books. She felt the ice-cold air that blew on Ayla, and she felt the hot sand that stung Shabanu. When Nhamo

was ill in her island tree, Mei felt light-headed. "It made me feel sick, that she was sick. I was on my roof, and I felt like I would fall off. I was reading, and I was worried she would fall out of her tree. So weird."

Sienna said of *A Girl Named Disaster*, "I was hot and hungry. I was hunting and stalking. My heart was pounding so bad. It was me, not Nhamo."

Emotional Intensities

The intense imaginal and intellectual lives of the girls were integrated with their emotional lives. They analyzed and evaluated as they imagined and felt the lived experience of others. They synthesized as they invented possibilities other than the ones offered in fiction. They used imagination as they considered broad issues; and they experienced the effects of those issues in the real or literary lives of others. The characters in the books became very real to the girls. They interacted with them and talked with them as they read.

Mei said, "I was mad at her that she couldn't see she was going the wrong way. 'You stupid thing, you should be swimming *that* way,' I said to her."

"I told those people off. That woman, the mother of the little girl on the boat who was judging Kit? I told her off big time," stated Natalie.

"If I had a hold of Chipo, I would tell her how unfair she is." Skye gave a chuckle. "Well, actually, I did. I was in the window seat, and I was talking to the book."

The girls formed relationships with the characters in the books they read. For the relationship to occur, the problems faced by the characters must be intellectually and emotionally challenging enough to engage these avid readers. Emotional affinity with the characters enhanced the reading experience and fostered the construction of meaning. Because the girls empathized with Nhamo, they applauded her decision to escape the life that had been laid out for her; they admired her courage. They feared for and *with* her as she faced every danger on her solitary journey. They learned from Nhamo's experiences, and they decided what they would do. The experience of Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time* and Kit in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* resonated with the girls. This recognition of the search for meaning that Meg and Kit went through as they tried to understand why each was not accepted by others opened opportunities for the girls to experience the frustrations of the characters. They learned more about themselves and others. Natalie came to understand that Kit was "being judged for her differences."

Of Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Mandee said,

Meg is talented. She has a vivid attitude for school and things that she is determined to do. She is determined and feisty, you know? Like, she got that bruise on her cheek from that boy who was picking on her. I don't think he could hurt her with all the things he said unless he said stuff about her family. She fought back, defending

her family, not herself. But she has a soft side, too. She has deep love for her mother, her father, and Charles Wallace.

Emotionally, the girls of the study were very intense. They were at various stages in the development of emotional intelligence, but all possessed empathy and engaged in moral problem finding. They experienced deep and profound interpersonal relationships. The girls used books to explore their relationships with friends and family. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence is a "meta-ability" that functions as an integral component with the cognitive processes: an ability that enhances understandings. Emotional ways of knowing make the concrete stimuli, in this case the plot, the characterizations, or the themes of the fiction, more complex. This enhanced and amplified the girls' reading experience.

An example of the emotional intensity with which they read occurred when Sienna said that the saddest part of *Shabanu* was when the father beat her. Megan disagreed. "That is not the saddest part," she said. "Mithoo . . ." she began, but she couldn't continue. The thought of the death of the faithful camel was unbearable.

A discussion of *The Giver* highlighted the interweaving of intellectual, imaginal, and emotional intensities with which the girls read and made meaning:

Megan said, "The world has no color. Can you see it? How awful that world must be. I think that is what the author is all about, it's all about, take away our differences, take away our color, kind of, and what is left? Nothing . . ."

Jan said, "Yes. What were they supposed to do in life and how were they supposed to . . . go . . . in a world like that? And . . ."

"Why do it all? Why go through it? Why are you born? And how . . .?" Skye asked.

Mei said, "Like beauty, there is no beauty. They didn't have that either."

Megan continued, "They are all gray, just gray. Can you imagine?" The girls were silent for a while, staring into space.

"Everything was planned out for them," Skye stated.

"You don't have to feel anything, you don't have to choose anything, and it's better, 'cause you just don't have to do anything, they would say. You do your job and raise your family and that's all you do. They think it would be better if they don't have to do anything at all," Jan offered.

“Because there wouldn’t be questioning anyway,” Skye added.

Mandee asked, “Do they have courage?”

Muriel said, “I was just thinking. I think that is exactly what they don’t want. They don’t want there to be love, they don’t want there to be memories, and they don’t want people to know the real meaning of life. The book is describing the way we live now as something that would be bad. *The Giver* said that if everyone could marry their own mate, there would be chaos. That’s exactly how it is now.”

Mei asked, “What do you think is worse, a utopia or a world like ours?”

“A utopia,” Muriel answered.

Mei said, “But, think about it. In a world like ours, everybody fights. Look at what is happening.”

Mandee said, “In our world, we still have a choice. In a utopia, nobody has their choices, right? In this world, you have the choice to do what you want to do. If you really think about it, living in a utopia would be a lot worse than the world that we have because, like I said before, we have these choices.”

Skye said, “I was thinking about that place in *A Wrinkle in Time* where . . .”

“Camazotz,” Mei said.

“Yeah, Camazotz, where even if you coughed, they would kill you. They don’t want anybody to have pain. I don’t think that is right at all. I would really definitely have . . . not a utopia. I would definitely have a world like this.”

“I go along with Mandee, what she said about choices. Because I think that choices are the most valuable thing we have,” Muriel said.

Mei pondered, “What is violence, though? Do our choices lead to violence? That’s not what I mean. I know that. I mean, because we have choice?”

Skye said, “I don’t know if they have the capability to think anymore.”

“Like, the people who think there shouldn’t be GATE. Like, everybody should be the same, in the regular classroom,” Jan mused.

Muriel said, “There are always people who think they know how to create a utopia. And they become powerful.”

Sienna stated, “In the community, they thought they had feelings. They didn’t know what they were. When they were at the table, they would have to talk about their feelings, but they wouldn’t really feel them. I don’t think there should be a Giver and have a community like that, because one person shouldn’t have to hold all those feelings and all that pain. Because, one person, it’s too much for one person, for someone to hold a thought of ‘war,’ everybody shooting and all that killing and all that blood. Why would someone want to have war? It’s too much for one person. I know pain, and I know happiness and being sad. But I don’t know the pain of being in a war, or of killing someone; the feeling of being *that* angry at someone. I do know the pain of losing someone that I loved, but not like war, or something like Hitler. I don’t know that kind of pain. Sometimes I can barely take the stuff in my own mind. I don’t know, if we could know it all, all the horror that’s in this world, I don’t know if we could take all that.”

When Sienna was the character in a book, she saw what they saw, and she felt what they felt. When Sienna read *The Giver*, being Jonas was almost overwhelming for her. In the book, Jonas was chosen to take on all of the emotions of his community. Sienna found this so disturbing. No one person could possibly survive all of those emotions.

Discussion

For the very gifted, very able girls of the GATE language arts program, the reading of fiction was essential. The girls were intellectually intense. They craved knowledge, and they deeply enjoyed the learning experience, if it was challenging. They were motivated by curiosity to attain knowledge for its own sake, for there was little reward offered at school for the kinds of advanced levels of learning required by the group of gifted girls. The girls used fiction to explore words and language, to ask questions, and to explore issues and ideas. Imaginational intensity was also a vital component in the reading lives of the girls. They led active fantasy lives and were able to translate words and language into imagery and other types of sensory experience. They saw the landscapes of the stories they read, and they watched the action unfold. Emotionally, the girls were highly empathic, unusually sensitive to the feelings of others, and they were working to understand themselves. When they came across examples of discrimination, hypocrisy, and injustice, they were deeply disturbed. Goleman (1995) described emotional intelligence as a “metability” that interacts with other cognitive processes such as intellect and imagination.

The girls were actively involved in self-determined courses of study of which the reading of fiction was a critical element. When the girls read, they did not gloss over the issues; they found them. Themes that arose during the discussions included power, choice, individuality, love, beauty, justice, heaven, death, equality, prejudice, violence, and change. The girls relished the opportunity to share and discuss ideas with other young readers who shared some of their intensities.

“Okay, I had this question,” Mei told us at the beginning of our discussion one day. “You know how every utopia we see is a bad sort of place because there is no real love and stuff? And they say that heaven is a perfect place? Well, a perfect place would be a utopia. So, wouldn’t heaven be a utopia?”

The teacher interjected, “Well, what you’re saying is that every utopia that we’ve read about has turned out to be not a utopia at all, right? It turns out to be an anti-utopia? But people expect heaven to be a utopia? Well, what are your thoughts on that?”

Mei said, “But if heaven is a perfect place, it would have love, because it’s perfect. But the utopia, their kind of perfect . . .”

“Has no feelings at all,” Muriel stated.

“Was no feelings at all, just some living, doing nothing important, boring stuff.”

Sienna said, “In the utopias, or anti-utopias, we read about, everyone ends up being the same. And if heaven is the perfect that I think it is, then everyone is different, and they are feeling love at least.”

Mei continued, “I was thinking that maybe we would have the chance to change the world, like when we grew up . . . What would you change, if you could change the world?” she asked.

Mandee answered, “I would change the Barbie Doll thing. There was this episode of *The Simpsons* and there was this Lisa the Lionheart Barbie Doll. For some reason, I like that better.”

Skye stated, “I think that what I would do to change the world is get rid of television. Because that is where you get all of these ideas about . . .”

“This is beautiful,” Mei said.

“You know, we’re supposed to be perfect, and you have to wear this to be perfect, and you have to have this, and you have to be like this, and think like this . . .”

“And, those nasty TV shows,” Sienna added.

Skye continued, “I would get rid of all these magazines that are like that. Maybe I would keep the news, but even the news is biased.”

Jan, “Like keep the Discovery Channel.”

“Yeah, and I would get rid of the billboards of people in their underwear. They say, ‘Oh, diversity!’ When, really everybody’s being made to be the same. I would get rid of those magazines,” Skye said.

Mandee said, “You can’t change the freedom of speech even though people abuse it. That is when there is no thought. Every person has to draw their own line. I mean, every person can, or cannot, draw something within themselves. If you start saying this can be shown and this cannot be shown, this is okay to look at and this is not, then it doesn’t matter anymore what you really believe.”

“So, I guess we just have to think what you think, and keep it to yourself. Is that all we can do?” Skye asked.

Mei said, “What if you get a really wonderful thought? It is the most fabulous thought you have ever had. It is a really good thought, and you had to keep it to yourself? Then you couldn’t do something great. If you had a thought that would do the world some good, and you had to keep it to yourself, then what would happen to the world? I mean, like what if Martin Luther King had his thought, and he had his dream, and he had to keep it to himself? If I could change the world, I would make everything natural. People wouldn’t be wearing their masks. And their talents would show through. And that would change the world.”

Positive Disintegration/Determined Growth

The girls of the study acquired knowledge and constructed meanings about their world and themselves in each of three domains: the intellectual, the imaginal, and the emotional. Piechowski (1997) posited that these areas of human perception are more akin to channels, narrow or wide, through which human beings experience “colors, textures, insights, visions, currents, and energies” (p. 367). He further maintained that OEs in these domains contribute to a person’s potential for development and growth (Piechowski, 1997).

The girls of this study have each faced adversities. They have experienced the trauma and stress that Dabrowski (1967) claimed must be present for positive disintegration to take place. They chose to read fiction that other girls were not reading, ask difficult questions, and examine critically the inconsistencies and injustices inherent in their lived experience. In

fact, the girls searched for answers to their questions with an intensity that can be misunderstood and unappreciated by teachers in their homeroom classes. The girls experienced the disequilibrium of not understanding, and so they actively sought resolution. They were motivated to challenge themselves and grow partly by having experienced the joyous state of coming to a greater degree of meaning making through reading and reflection. Reading and imaginative reflection leads to further questions, more conflict, and psychic transformation. According to Piechowski (1997), a powerful imagination and an uncommon intellect may lead to devastating self-criticism, but it may bring about an urgent desire to marshal one's psyche toward self-realization and service to others.

Youthful Self-Actualizers

Given that the girls were involved in determined self-growth and that they exhibited the characteristics indicative of self-actualization, it may be said that the girls were youthful self-actualizers. The girls exhibited a preference for solitude to read, reflect, and dream. They experienced adversity, and they chose to read. In part because of their reading abilities and reading choices, they were resilient and more resistant to enculturation. They used the reading experience to ask, answer, and argue questions and issues, and, in so doing, they developed the characteristics of autonomous decision makers. The girls were concerned about the way things really are, in the world and in their personal lives, and they compared these with the way they imagined things ought to be. This split in their personal vision caused disequilibrium, which in turn drove them to reestablish balance through advanced investigations that included reading fiction. The girls experienced peak and flow moments while engaged in critical inquiry.

According to Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977), persons at the upper levels of development plan and seek the solitude that is necessary for further development. The gifted girls of this study created places, physically and virtually, where they could read, think, question, and fantasize. The girls made time to be alone. They gave up other more social, and more socially acceptable, activities to get the time they needed to be alone to read and to think. According to her father, Megan "blows off" friends who call and ask her to go to the mall or out to a movie. Jan's mom reported that her daughter would read rather than spend time with her friends: "She can just shut herself up in her room with her books. She always has." Sienna, Mei, and Muriel set alarm clocks to get up early to make sure they had time alone to read. Skye had the luxury of her own bedroom. Her favorite place to read, however, was in the window seat in the living room. There, with the family goings-on around her, Skye was able to immerse herself completely in her books. She was able to attain solitude at will. Dabrowski (1967) suggested that only at the highest levels of development is one able to attain a state of solitude at will.

Time alone was essential if the girls were to *find and frame problems* in books and in their worlds. As they read

and reflected, they examined the systems and powers that affected their lives and the lives of others. They engaged in intellectual, imaginal, and emotional work and play that bolstered their *resiliency in adversity*. Each of the girls of the study had experienced hardships and difficulties in her young life. But the girls were resilient, and fiction was critical to their resiliency. When the girls forged relationships with the characters and authors, when they wrestled with words and language and ideas, when they played with imagery and fantasy, they experienced psychic transformation. Megan read in her room. She visualized Mary Shelly in a gown of "fury orange" writing her masterpiece by the fire. While her parents argued, Jan solved mysteries with her old friends Nancy, Bess, and George. Natalie read classic literature that took her to secret gardens or high mountain homes, far away from her bleak surroundings. When the "empty blue feeling" came, Muriel chose the humor and wordplay of Roald Dahl.

Reading fiction was more than simple entertainment for the girls of this study. They have developed the knowledge of when to evoke their reading skills and an inclination to read often. Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1997) believed that the inclination to read comes from a person's sense that the act of reading is an act of significance. Solitude in which to contemplate the issues they find in their world, and in the books they read, fostered a *resistance to enculturation* and *autonomy* of thought. For the girls, the act of reading was a personal choice. Most of the fiction they read was not assigned, and except for the purposes of this study, the girls did not read to be part of a group of girls who read. There was autonomy in the girls' decision to read. Their vast and varied reading exposed the girls to peoples and cultures of the world, to the experience of others, to the ideas of authors. They critically examined their world and resisted enculturation.

As they thought, learned, and grew, the girls of this study focused on the many ways in which the world is not fair or just; many times they found a *split between what is and what ought to be*. They found this split in the world around them, and within themselves, for often they are their own worst critics. Mandeel felt embarrassment at having to translate for her parents, and she was ashamed of herself. The guilt she felt was almost overwhelming. She rededicated herself to helping her family. Mei felt disgust at any sign of mean-spiritedness or "falseness" she found in herself. She knew that it was okay not to be perfect but strove toward becoming her ideal self. In some ways, the girls demonstrated *acceptance* of the dichotomies and injustices they found, and in others, they worked for change. Advanced levels of emotional intensity and intelligence, combined with the intellectual and imaginal curiosity that resulted in wide and eclectic reading, helped the girls develop remarkable feelings of *kinship with humankind*. Mei wrote in her journal:

I don't like makeup because No. 1 it has pat pooh in it and No. 2 it is like a tool people use when they are afraid to be themselves. I really respect people who

don't use it. People who wear makeup are afraid of themselves. They think that to be beautiful they have to be like those models on TV. True beauty is caring for others and doing beautiful things . . . True beauty starts from the inside. It shines through and makes your face beautiful. Like Roald Dahl said in *The Twits*, even if you had a turned-up nose but had a beautiful inner, then you would be beautiful. If you want to make yourself happy—make others happy. That is beauty.

Optimal and Peak Experiences

Maslow's (1971) peak experience and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) optimal experience share common characteristics. Both produce a loss of sense of self and a sense of "time out of mind," a feeling that time has slowed or stopped or has shifted into fast forward. Both types of experience include a heightening of the senses that fosters an exquisite awareness of the environment.

Not all the girls reported peak experiences. A peak experience occurred for Mandee when she was lying on her trampoline "and was just looking at the stars for possibly 2 hours doing nothing but staring . . . well, really it might have been only a while." The experience left her with intense questions about space and infinity. She went on to develop a research paper for the GATE class that took her 3 months to complete and covered the evolution of stars, novae, supernovas, nebulas, the history of star charts and catalogs, constellations, and the classification of stellar spectra. For Sienna, peak experience was connected to her emotional intensity. Once, while camping with her family, Sienna watched a sunrise that caused her heart to ache with the happiness of loving her family.

Mei recalled a peak experience she had when she lived in Vietnam:

I was 3. We were walking down the street, my mom and me, and I saw a guy on the sidewalk. And he was sitting there, this guy. He had no arms. He was homeless, I think, because he was always there. I had seen him before, it seems. Anyway, I stopped, and I was looking at him. Just standing there, staring. My mom was pulling my arm because it is not polite to stare at people. She said, "Mei, come on. It is not polite of you," but I continued to stare, because my mom didn't understand. I was not staring at him that way. It was not rude. It was like a moment, long, short, I don't know. The world felt still. But, in that time, I knew that everyone was here for a purpose. And I knew that I would find my purpose.

All the girls reported flow experiences while reading. Optimal experience can only occur when and if skills and abilities are being stretched to their limits. The girls chose to push themselves by struggling with difficult language,

controversial issues, and personal meaning making. When they were challenged intellectually, imaginatively, or emotionally, or in some cases in all three domains, the stage was set for the girls to experience flow while reading. All the girls agreed that this is "the best place." They lost track of time and place. They built their intellectual, imaginative, and emotional skills. Once experienced, the girls actively sought reading material that would challenge them to repeat the experience. It was that desire that kept the girls coming back to books, hoping to find that great piece of fiction that would engage their intelligences and transport them to the zone where challenging reading and thinking becomes easy.

Skye found flow as she read and critiqued *Shabanu* or *Les Miserables* or *Hamlet*. She argued with the characters and with the authors. Skye thought that the author of *Clan of the Cave Bear* gave Ayla credit for too many "firsts." "It's kind of ridiculous to think that one girl could be responsible for all those firsts," she said. Figuring out how to make the book go her way was one of Skye's favorite things to do. "First I argue it one way, and then I argue it the other. It can get really confusing when I take a third side. But, it's how I make up my mind sometimes."

Jan remembered her first reading experience as a flow experience. She remembered learning to read on a trip to Texas when she was in kindergarten. Her parents remembered as well. It was when she was looking at the directions for lighting and using a barbecue grill, and struggling to figure out what the symbols meant, that Jan became aware that she was actually reading it. She remembered that she wanted to read it: She really wanted to know what the words were, and then suddenly she was reading. After that, Jan could read anything. When she read, Jan lost her sense of self, time, and place.

Of reading *A Wrinkle in Time*, Jan related,

After chapter three, I just turned on. I mean, the camera turned on and I could see it all. My camera was rolling. I'm glad, because that was one of the best books I've ever read, and I can still see it all.

My house, my mom, my sister, they're not there. Unless my sister comes in and says, "Jan, Jan, I need you." Then I'll be like, "okay, where was I?" And I have to search through the book and then I pick up my camera again and do it all over from where I was. And I lock my door.

Of the flow experience, Sienna reported:

I like the feeling of being in the water and swimming and I've always loved it. It's sort of a happy feeling. I push myself, hard, and then it's easy. I love it.

My other love is reading. I get that same feeling. It comes when I am *fastening* on the book. I guess I am pushing myself, trying to know that character better or something; trying to be there. Seeing how that person's family . . . It's like I'm not really in my room when I'm

fastening on the book. And I'm not the same. I'm feeling what that person is feeling. I'm doing what that person is doing.

Interestingly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described the state of flow as one that requires skill and challenge, familiarity and novelty, opening and *fastening*.

Mei described it this way:

There is a place. It is the best place. It's like you are reading, if you are reading something, and you are not the character, and you are pushing to understand and something takes hold of you and then something just snaps and I'm sitting on top of my house, but I'm in a room like the nursery in *The Veldt*, like a holodeck, and I'm seeing everything just like her.

The outcome of optimal experience is growth; the individual becomes more complex. To achieve optimal experience, it was not possible for the girls to remain at the same level of work or play in any of the domains. They must be challenged to experience flow, and so they pushed themselves. According to Maslow (1971), together these peak or optimal moments of understanding and joy may amplify and direct the course of a life.

Constructing a Life's Purpose

Kerr (1994) asserted that gifted girls' ability to fall in love with an idea may lead to the construction of their lives' purpose. Skye fell in love with the meanings she found in her concern for the well-being of animals. She always wanted to be a veterinarian. At the age of 8, and out of a deep conviction, she made the decision to become a vegetarian. After watching a news report, 12-year-old Skye determined to give up dairy products out of concern for the way dairy cows are treated. She passionately believed that animals have rights and that someday she might be able to argue for them.

Sienna pictured herself competing in the Olympics. But she had other plans as well:

I want to help people somehow . . . the people who are being discriminated against. Especially the little kids . . . Especially the little kids . . . I don't know what to do yet. But I'm thinking about it. I'd like to get to a place . . . a place where I have the freedom to concentrate on that; not worry about how to support myself.

Through reading and reflection Natalie was making a plan for herself. Natalie read *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and she thought about people judging people:

People are always making fun of other people. They like, go "ugh" at Mandee's mom and dad. People think

that if there is something wrong with a part of their body, that that part affects their brain.

A lot of times . . . like, I had a friend that used to make fun of my mom, and one time she started doing that, and I just started doing other stuff, like dreaming. Ever since I was little, I have thought about helping people walk. I will. That is one thing that I dream about.

Mandee dreamed of helping people who have difficulties hearing. She knew she would have to study hard and learn certain skills and techniques that she did not possess already. She checked out a book titled *American Sign Language* from the public library, and although fluent, she learned and practiced new signs. She read and dreamed about Joan of Arc, the girl who heard voices and led armies into battle. All the way back from a softball competition in Las Vegas, Mandee read *Helen Keller: A Life with purpose*. She was speculating about her life's plan.

Mei believed that "everybody is put here to do something." She knew she was here for a reason. The feeling had been with her since she was very young. In her journal, Mei wrote the following:

"Yearn," I think, is sort of like something people feel to get to a place beyond their ability even if people say they can't, they can't do it, they still try. No, not try, but do, and achieve. It's sort of like they're in a zone and they know they can do it. I think that "yearn" is the reason people achieve and do things in life. It's more than a want, but a need type thing—a need to do something for a reason that you don't exactly know why, you don't know if it's for you, but you know that you have to do it or else the world wouldn't be the same without your doing.

Of all of the girls, Mei was perhaps most certain that she was here for a reason, even though she had not discovered it yet. Time alone for reading and reflection in the intellectual, imaginal, and emotional domains may help Mei find and construct her life's purpose.

Implications

One should not attempt to generalize the findings of this study to other children. The participants were a diverse group of verbally gifted girls whose unique lived experiences included adversity, resilience, and determined growth. Each was a passionate learner whose interests were vast and varied. This study is a snapshot of the reading lives of 8 talented sixth-grade girls.

The report may serve to highlight the *qualitatively* different experience of verbally gifted preadolescent girls who read fiction. It may illuminate their quest for knowledge and meaning making in the intellectual, imaginal, and

emotional domains of human awareness. Intellectually, verbally gifted learners crave knowledge about their world, interact with words and language, and explore issues and ideas in the books they read. In the imaginal domain, verbally gifted children construct meanings with intensity. They create vivid images as they read, and they use their imagination to visualize themselves in the future. The imaginal intelligence of gifted learners should be nurtured with a curriculum that provides opportunities for work and play in the domain. Emotionally, verbally gifted children may be unusually empathic, which is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence. They may use fiction as they work to know and accept themselves and to grow toward their ideal self.

The girls of the study used and honed their skills and abilities in each of these areas of intensity and intelligence. They used their mental and emotional resources to actively seek growth through optimal experience and positive disintegration. Their reading sprang from an urgent impulse to grow. As youthful self-actualizers, they were involved in constructing a plan or a purpose for their lives and may be said to be growth motivated. Maslow (1971) stated that

the motivational life of self-actualizing people is not only quantitatively different but also qualitatively different from that of ordinary people. It seems probable that we must construct a profoundly different psychology of motivation for self-actualizing people, such as metamotivation or growth motivation, rather than deficiency motivation. (p. 133)

It is vital that educators perceive the important place that fiction has in the lives of verbally gifted preadolescent learners. Challenging experiences with fiction can excite the intellect, ignite the imagination, and touch the emotions of these able and passionate learners and should be a prominent part of any curriculum designed to meet their learning needs. Educators must consider the qualitatively different experiences and motivations of verbally gifted readers when developing instructional materials and strategies. These children long for meaningful interaction with stimulating materials that pushes them to the limits of their abilities intellectually, imaginatively, and emotionally. Mei said,

Well, you know in heaven, there are supposedly no faults in heaven. I was thinking that maybe in heaven we still have our faults, so that in heaven, we are still working and growing and learning.

Work and play in each of the areas of intensity and intelligence is necessary for development of the full potential of verbally gifted learners. Curricula that afford these children opportunities for exploration and growth in each of the domains will aid them on their quest for meaning making and self-actualization.

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