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## Seeing the Unseen: An Educational Criticism of a Gifted School

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# Seeing the Unseen: An Educational Criticism of a Gifted School

## Abstract

There is systemic oppression of gifted children in many traditional school models resulting in disenfranchisement (Chu & Myers, 2015; Delisle, 2014). Yet, how can teachers be responsive to aspects of student development that they cannot see or do not understand? All students deserve instruction responsive to their unique strengths and needs, inclusive of gifted students. This study explores the aspirations and practices of a school designed to empower diverse gifted children. The selected school site is located in an urban area in the western United States and has been serving gifted students with a creative approach for more than 25 years. Currently the school enrolls approximately 250 kindergarten through eighth grade students. Eisner's educational criticism and connoisseurship research approach is utilized to grow understanding of the program's intricacies. Primary data sources include educator interviews, campus observations and artifacts. The study informs a program evaluation highlighting gaps and tensions between intentions and practices and success relative to the interpretive frame, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory. In the end, themes emerged from descriptions, interpretations and evaluation which facilitate recommendations for other schools and educators aiming to empower diverse gifted students.

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**SEEING THE UNSEEN:  
AN EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM OF A GIFTED SCHOOL**

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A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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by

Kate A. Bachtel

April 2017

Advisor: Paul Michalec, Ph.D.

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“For your creativity and ecstasy,  
For your maladjustment to that ‘which is’ and adjustment to that which ‘ought to be,’

For your great, but unutilized abilities.”

From the poem “Be Greeted Psychoneurotics” by Kazimierz Dabrowski

(1972)

**ABSTRACT**

There is systemic oppression of gifted children in many traditional school models resulting in disenfranchisement (Chu & Myers, 2015; Delisle, 2014). Yet, how can teachers be responsive to aspects of student development that they cannot see or do not understand? All students deserve instruction responsive to their unique strengths and needs, inclusive of gifted students. This study explores the aspirations and practices of a school designed to empower diverse gifted children. The selected school site is located in an urban area in the western United States and has been serving gifted students with a creative approach for more than 25 years. Currently the school enrolls approximately 250 kindergarten through eighth grade students. Eisner's educational criticism and connoisseurship research approach is utilized to grow understanding of the program's intricacies. Primary data sources include educator interviews, campus observations and artifacts. The study informs a program evaluation highlighting gaps and tensions between intentions and practices and success relative to the interpretive frame, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory. In the end, themes emerged from descriptions, interpretations and evaluation which facilitate recommendations for other schools and educators aiming to empower diverse gifted students.

*Keywords:* gifted, empowerment, holistic development, individualized learning, implicit curriculum

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Into the Unknown

One day after school, Clara asked me, "Why would a teacher ask me a question that a book already explains the answer to?" What a brilliant question! In this student, I saw a curious, confident critical thinker who was pushing everyone's thinking. To me, this question was a measure of instructional success. Does it truly constitute learning if the knowledge already exists? Her teacher at her previous, highly-acclaimed neighborhood school conceptualized Clara's behavior as disruptive and off-task. Her parents reported there were days she came home from school and said, "I want to die." In kindergarten! In a "great school." Clara transitioning from a traditional school model, to our more progressive model, was the difference between her thriving and feeling stupid and unworthy. After four years in gifted programming, this student is now an eco-minded, animal rights activist who is self-aware, has healthy relationships and has found ways to apply her strengths and interests in meaningful ways. Clara is the reason for this research. All students, inclusive of gifted students, deserve to be seen through the lens of their strengths and to be afforded equitable growth opportunities in school.

Responsiveness is at the forefront of many education-related conversations, but how can teachers be responsive to aspects of student development that they cannot see or do not understand? In 2015, only 52% of children in the United States reported caring about doing well in school and having done required homework the past month (ASCD, 2016). As the cultural and linguistic landscape of our nation continues to evolve at a rapid pace (United States Census, 2010) simultaneous to scientific breakthroughs regarding how to enhance cognition (Dispenza, 2013; Kaku, 2014), so must the design of our learning communities. As society learns more

about neuroplasticity, educators will need to be prepared to increase responsiveness to students like Clara with advanced cognition.

Current federal legislation provides a degree of protection for students with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016); however, gifted students who are equally as cognitively different from the norm are not afforded commensurate legal rights (Chu & Myers, 2015). This coupled with persistent stereotypes and misconceptions about giftedness have contributed to gifted children's needs often not being met within traditional school models (Delisle, 2014). To a certain degree, many gifted children's schools oppress them (Chu & Myers, 2015). Dr. Jim Delisle, expert gifted educator and researcher with more than thirty-five years' experience exclaims, "The title of this book, *Dumbing Down America*, is neither hyperbole nor exaggeration, for it appears that the educational establishments that are supposed to support and extol excellence are doing their best to make certain that America's gifted kids go nowhere fast. It is my hope that this book will serve as a clarion call to pay attention to the needs of our nation's most neglected minority: gifted children" (2014, p. xv). Given the oppressed can become oppressors (Coloroso, 2009), studying practices that support the empowerment of gifted students holds potential to break the injurious cycle. Unfortunately, few schools have been established with the expressed intent and requisite expertise to support gifted children in thriving. This study explores the aspirations and practices of a specific learning community designed to empower diverse gifted children. Two primary questions guide the inquiry: 1) What are the aspirations of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children? 2) Are those aspirations realized (or not) in practice?

### **Personal Context**

After nearly a decade immersed in the field of gifted and thousands of conversations with gifted children, parents, educators and clinicians, it is my experience gifted individuals are disproportionately prone to deficit perspectives. Gorski defines deficit theory as an approach that focuses efforts on “fixing people” rather than the societal conditions which perpetuate cycles of oppression (2008). In particular, people often use the word “too” to describe gifted individuals: They are *too* sensitive, *too* intense, ask *too* many questions, move *too* quickly or are just *too* much! All children, including gifted children, deserve to be seen through the lens of their strengths and potential. This belief shapes my practice - what teachers and parents see, children may very well become. Furthermore, research shows deficit perspectives are harmful (Delpit, 1995 & 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Shields, 2013). Given gifted individuals are typically empathic (Silverman, 2012), they may internalize other’s thoughts making them a particularly vulnerable population.

Serving culturally, linguistically, economically and cognitively diverse children, families and educators in a wide variety of roles and educational contexts has enabled me to see opportunities and challenges from a variety of perspectives. I have been part of healthy learning communities where engagement was high, where individuals were thriving and the level of synchronicity was magical. In the healthy communities, everyone was encouraged to bring their best selves forward; each member shared power by alternating roles as learners and teachers. In contrast, I have been in communities where inequities resulted in feelings of anger and frustration resulting in individuals hurting themselves or others. In my experience, failing to recognize and address the pain of the oppressed or injured, results in collective suffering.

These varied experiences coupled with extensive training in emotional development, helped me become more adept at discerning emotional skill gaps and potential mental health issues. In

administering and interpreting emotional development assessments, I have learned educators frequently equate the size of a student's social network with high emotional development, or likewise, falsely believe extraversion and charisma correlate with strong emotional skills. This understanding has increased my capacity to remedy inequities and support healthy community development. With practice, I have learned how to be more responsive to many significant and historically "unseen" aspects of student development, including emotional, sociopolitical and creative development.

My graduate coursework at University of Colorado at Boulder focused on educational equity and cultural diversity with an emphasis in multicultural and bilingual education. After significant self-reflection, I familiarized myself with my own stereotypes and biases and grew a deep understanding of who truly comprises the gifted population. I could not un-see what I saw. I felt the relatively large and well-informed local school district where I was serving as an educator and gifted and talented education advisor had a 95% fail rate with the gifted student population. The tragic outcomes including eating disorders, underachievement, social isolation and even suicides, were the fuel that inspired me to work to open a kindergarten through eighth grade school for gifted learners. I experienced first-hand how this program transformed lives. As a result of this and other experiences partnering with gifted schools, children, educators, clinicians and parents, I have learned little changes can have a big impact in the lives of children.

### **Situational Context**

My personal history informed the selection of my community partner for this research project. I choose a school with a similar educational philosophy where the original founder is still engaged and the current head of school by all measures appears healthy and earnestly committed to continued community growth. I have found that a strong relationship between a



school and its founder(s), the people who invested the most proportionately of their own time, expertise, relationships and other resources (beyond money) to open the school, to be a measure of community well-being. In some ways, a school's founders are the heart of the community and if no longer present, the community loses part of its soul. Fortunately, my first choice school welcomed the partnership.

The selected research site is an independent, creativity-focused school for gifted learners whose mission is to empower children, open doors and foster responsibility, independence and concern for others. The Creason School<sup>1</sup> is located in an urban setting with approximately 250 students ranging from 4.5 to 14 years old; 22% of students self-identify as students of color and 11% receive tuition assistance. The annual tuition is slightly more than \$19,000 per year. The community expresses a deep commitment to fostering an individualized curriculum to insure each child is challenged. It also communicates diversity and inclusivity as community priorities. Woven throughout individual student passion-inspired units, the program teaches critical thinking, provides a variety of specialist class offerings and hosts extensive field-based learning opportunities (Creason, 2016). As the school does not administer standardized tests, communicating about student outcomes has been an on-going challenge.

### **National Context**

Not all states require identification of gifted learners; additionally, there are variances in how giftedness is defined, how students are identified and what constitutes best practice (National Association of Gifted Children, 2016). Moreover, only three states require general education teachers to have training in gifted education (Chu & Myers, 2015). This lack of consistency among education agencies contributes to systemic inequities. With the new Every Student

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym used to protect privacy.

Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed under the Obama administration in December of 2015 championing a more “well-rounded” education for all students (United States Department of Education, 2016), countless grassroots parent and educator groups protesting disproportionate emphasis on testing to measure success (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2016) and educator reform researchers calling for schools to be re-conceptualized (Wagner, 2012; Robinson, 2010), there is hope educational systems might evolve in a way that affords equitable growth opportunities to gifted students with advanced cognition. This leads to the question, what happens if legislative and policy reform efforts are successful? Will we be prepared? Will we know what equitable instruction looks like for gifted students in practice?

Even in the relatively few states where there are research-based identification policies, educator preparation in gifted development and designated funding, inequities exist in terms of which students have access to responsive instruction. Sadly, there continues to be racial, linguistic and economic disparity among children in gifted programming and overall school and district demographics with Black, Latino, Native American and low-income students significantly under-identified (Dynarski, 2016; Ford, 2013). Furthermore, discrepancies in demographics often result in the field of gifted meriting elitist criticisms. I hope educators and policy makers can work together to seek solutions that increase access to responsive programming independent of identification process flaws and gifted definition inconsistencies. I propose increasing responsiveness to the various aspects of a student’s development accelerates progress in the direction of equity because it addresses the core unmet needs and strengthens relationships.

Formally identified gifted students whose differences are recognized and addressed in their academic coursework can still encounter unique challenges in school. Chu and Myers report,

“Gifted students experience many problems that can include social isolation and rejection, social adjustment problems (Colangelo & Kelly, 1983; Feldhusen, 1989), underachievement (Siegle, 2013), dropping out of high school (Renzulli & Park, 2000), and suicidal ideation (Cross, 2013)” (2015, p.44). Furthermore, research shows gifted children experience bullying behavior at approximately twice the rate of typically developing students (Peterson & Ray, 2006). According to Peterson and Ray, about two-thirds of gifted students have experienced bullying behavior by eighth grade (2006) in contrast with about 25-30% of the general population (StopBullying, 2016). The more gifted a student is, the greater the likelihood he/she/they will experience bullying (Peters, 2012). Bullying is another form of oppressive behavior and further evidence of the need to study programs that empower gifted youth. Gifted children deserve to feel safe and connected at school too.

### **Historical Attempts to Remedy**

In most recent history, Dr. Delise attempted to call attention to the oppression of gifted children in the previously referenced book *Dumbing Down America* (2014). Chu and Myers highlight injustices from a social work perspective, “Although American public schools demonstrate a concern for all types of students, the gifted population continues to be marginalized through neglect and prejudice” (Chu & Myers, 2015, p.50). In the past, advocacy efforts have focused on legislative, policy, identification, curricula, instruction and assessment modifications coupled with targeted educator professional development and community education efforts (National Association of Gifted Children, 2016).

Having initially worked in public school settings, I too have attempted to facilitate change through these channels, integrating new instructional tools and strategies, purchasing new curricula, shifting evaluations practices and also altering the physical learning environment.

When these changes only realized incremental progress, I invested my time, relationships, expertise and money in opening a school for gifted learners. This soul fueling endeavor reinforced Eisner's declaration, "When the structure of schooling conflicts with our aspirations or with the innovations we hope to introduce, it is likely that the structure will alter the innovation or modify the aspiration rather than the reverse. The school changes the incoming message more than the incoming message changes the school" (Eisner, 1998, p.8). I have witnessed how the structures of a school and implicit, or hidden curriculum, influence outcomes.

As Clara teaches, when students are unseen and their needs unmet, it can cause significant distress. Clara's past teachers were likely not malicious, they just did not understand the impact of their instructional choices. Sadly, Clara's story is not an anomaly. There are countless examples of tragic outcomes which could be prevented through increased understanding and alignment of intentions and practices. Part of the solution to the complex problem of the systemic oppression of gifted youth lies in outlining the intricacies of schools that *are* responsive to gifted learners' developmental complexities. Seeing what supporting gifted student well-being looks like in practice helps create positive change.

### **Preview of Method: Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship**

In order to richly describe the nuances of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children, I chose an educational criticism and connoisseurship (also referred to as educational criticism) research approach. Utilizing this method enabled me to describe, interpret, evaluate and create themes to grow understanding of the experience of empowerment for diverse gifted children. The selected school program, The Creason School, has more than a quarter century experience in pursuit of this mission, which made them an ideal community partner. My prior

knowledge and experiences serving diverse gifted learners in a variety of roles and settings prepared me to illuminate and communicate programmatic complexities (Eisner, 2017).

Educator interviews played an important role in deepening understanding. Reviews of school publications, student work samples and other artifacts also lent insights. On-site observations took place over the course of approximately 10 weeks in various learning environments throughout the school and yielded a significant body of data relevant to the study's guiding questions. Data collection and analysis were guided by this study's interpretive frame which references Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory to balance the need to understand and be responsive to gifted students' developmental complexities with every human's need to connect with others.

Chapter Three provides additional details on this study's methodology. In Chapters Four through Seven, I provide vibrant setting descriptions and interpret the program's practices through the lens of related literature as detailed in the next chapter. Finally, in Chapter Eight, I evaluate the significance of the program's practices and discern themes to support my community partner in better articulating the intricacies of their unique program. In closing, I integrate established themes in a way that supports other school programs in increasing their responsiveness to students with advanced cognition.

### **Significance of Study**

Quantitative measures are limited in what they can reveal about the nuances of an educational program. In addition, categorizing students from a diverse population under a single label, such as *gifted*, can inadvertently blind teachers to individual student complexities – numbers cannot explain how students are experiencing the world. A number will never be able to convey how Maya Angelou's reading of her poem, "And Still I Rise," inspires confidence, how

the vibration of her voice infuses peace or how her contagious smile transforms the emotional state of listeners. Nor can a number illustrate how a student learns to self-soothe through creative practices like writing poetry, creating music, painting or crafting. On the other hand, qualitative research approaches can grow deeper understanding.

By virtually transporting readers to a school site where the goal is to empower diverse gifted children, this study provides a vision of what responsive programming looks like in action and how educators might enhance their instructional care for gifted learners. While much research has been done on curriculum models, identification policies and evaluation practices within the field of gifted education (Lewis, Rivera & Roby, 2012; Purcell & Eckert, 2006) and defining giftedness (Neville, Piechowski & Tolan, 2013; Gardner, 2011; Renzulli, 2005; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005), relatively little investigation has been done on the aspects of gifted development that programming should support and monitor.

I hope this research supports my community partner in communicating program outcomes beyond traditional achievement measures simultaneous to providing a structure for continued growth. Findings and ideas presented aim to support the liberation gifted learners from oppressive learning environments. At the start of this project, I was curious to better understand what various aspects of the learning environment, including the implicit curriculum, teach children about power. By telling the story of a specific community dedicated to empowering diverse gifted children, I hope readers will learn more about what schools teach children about their roles in society.

Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of how the distance among outliers can be greater than the distance between outliers and the majority. The diversity at a gifted school can be greater than in a school where the programming is designed for neuro-typical learners.

### Normally Distributed Scatterplot



*Figure 1:* Normally Distributed Scatterplot

Programs that realize success in caring for diverse student populations expand educator instructional capacity. By studying an empowering program for diverse, gifted outliers, I expect to increase educators' competence for serving other diverse student populations as well.

### Summary

Given empathy is a powerful indicator of giftedness (Silverman, 2012) and the advanced developmental potential of gifted children (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Neville et al., 2013), freeing gifted youth from oppressive school systems supports societal evolution. Like the psychologist and humanitarian, Dabrowski, so eloquently pens in his poem, "Be Greeted Psychoneurotics," this study celebrates both gifted individuals' maladjustment to "that which is," their resistance to inequities, and their comfort in the imagined vision of a more just and peaceful society, their "adjustment to that which ought to be" (1972). Sensitivities and creative practices hold healing power (Barron & Barron, 2013). In studying what *is* working in practice, I am hopeful to support other educators working to liberate gifted children from oppressive programs.

The next chapter will detail the study's interpretive lens, as well as the literature base informing this inquiry.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### A Story from Home

It was a Friday evening. We sat down for dinner and I asked my son to tell us about his first week of school; he replied, “Mom, I don’t think I like first grade very much.” The rest of the conversation went a little like this:

Me:           What do you mean you don’t like first grade?

Bennett:      They *make* you draw.

Me:           They make you draw?

Bennett:      The teacher asked us to draw a picture of our family. I asked if I could please write about our family instead and the teacher said, “No.” I asked her why I couldn’t write and told her I thought writing was really important. She told me if I wrote instead of drew, I would lose recess. The thing is, I had already written a paragraph about our family so I hid it in my desk so I could go outside to play.

Me to myself: Uh oh. My son is lying to his teacher - this is definitely not good!

Ultimately, Bennett became a first grade drop out. We practiced kindness and patience with the teacher and tried to engage in dialogue. We met with the teacher, bringing some of Bennett’s writing to share in the hopes it would inspire her to provide more writing opportunities. She replied, “How do I know you are not just standing over his shoulder telling him where to put the quotation marks?” She accused us of lying and proclaimed there was no way a first grader could have written the way he did. We worked hard to support Bennett in assimilating to classroom expectations. Sadly, he continued to receive deficit messaging. Like many other gifted children, he was told his questions were disruptive. He was asked to spend



most of his day reviewing content and skills he had already mastered. Bennett learned school was not designed for how he experienced the world. Getting him out the door became a daily battle; he would do anything to avoid school.

Then Bennett started experiencing regular stomach aches. He had so many visits to the nurse's office that the school psychologist intervened, saying we needed to take him to the pediatrician to ensure there was nothing medically wrong with him. When the doctor asked Bennett why he thought he was having frequent tummy aches, he explained that once he had drunk a piece of a broken fingernail from the water fountain and that really, the school just needed a better filtration system. The doctor had Bennett leave the room, turned to me and asked, "This is completely psychosomatic, isn't it?"

We tried several different approaches to strengthening our relationship with the teacher and school, advocating for equitable growth opportunities for Bennett, coaching him on how to self-soothe and feeding his hungry mind, heart and body at home. He read incessantly, often ingesting books into the early morning hours. The imaginary worlds introduced in *Harry Potter*, and similarly rich literature, transported Bennett to a reality where he was welcome and introduced to true peers. He slept less and less. In the end, both a counselor to the gifted and his pediatrician agreed the school was harming Bennett and recommended removing him immediately. Bennett's experience is typical of that of countless other gifted students in poor fit school environments. This literature review is both a window into some of the *unseen* aspects of development that have a significant impact on outcomes for students like Bennett, and also a call to action to inspire change in oppressive educational practices.

I am hopeful that by illustrating the intricacies of a program dedicated to empowering gifted children, I will provide readers a vision of how schools might be transformed in their own

communities. This chapter will extend the depth of the dialogue by examining germane literature. First, I introduce key organizations dedicated to supporting gifted youth to lend insight into the advocacy landscape. Then, I discuss literature establishing gifted learners as a marginalized class. This leads to the introduction of the interpretive framework guiding this study. I conclude with a discussion of research relative to aspects of development critical to the well-being of gifted students that are often neglected in schools. I expect better understanding of the intricacies of development, coupled with a vision for alternative programming, will increase caregivers' capacity for responsiveness and create more inclusive and peaceful communities.

### **Key Organizations Supporting Gifted Children**

Many organizations recognize the unmet needs of gifted individuals and work to further society's understanding of gifted development. In chronological order, the organizations which have arguably done the most to accelerate positive change for gifted children are:

- The Roeper School founded in 1941.
- The National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) founded in 1954.
- Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) founded in 1981.

As this study explores the aspirations and practices of a school designed to empower diverse gifted children, this section will provide a cursory introduction to these institutions.

#### **The Roeper School**

The first school to recognize and support the unique development of gifted learners in the United States was the Roeper School, which opened in 1941 just outside Detroit. Today, it still “remains a sanctuary for the social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual growth of gifted children” (Kane, 2013, p.21). Annemarie Roeper's parents, Gertrude and Max Bondy, were both educators. Her mother was a psychologist in training with Sigmund Freud prior to the Jewish

family having to flee Nazi Germany. Roeper's parents founded several development-oriented schools and worked to promote a pluralistic and democratic society (Kane, 2013).

After marrying, George and Annemarie Roeper were invited to head a nursery school in Michigan (Roeper, 2012). Shortly thereafter, they opened their own grade school that continued the Bondy family approach to learning emphasizing the interdependent nature of emotional and intellectual development. Annemarie and George's dream was to create a school where global awareness and child-directed learning would prevent what happened under the Nazis from ever repeating (Roeper, 2012). The first year, there were only nine students; however, the unique approach quickly became so popular a new campus was purchased (Kane, 2003). George and Annemarie Roeper were subsequently invited to write gifted curriculum and Annemarie even consulted on the development of the popular children's television program, *Sesame Street* (Kane, 2013).

The writing of the gifted curriculum resulted in the Roeper School being officially designated as a school for gifted learners in 1956. Unlike other schools of the Sputnik era, the Roeper School emphasized emotional development, inclusivity and collaboration over competition (Kane, 2013). Later, Annemarie Roeper developed her own method of qualitative assessment to increase understanding of the nuances of gifted development (Beneventi, 2016). Today, the Roeper School continues to believe, as Annemarie Roeper once stated, "that the core purpose of education is to empower children to become independent thinkers and compassionate citizens of an interconnected world" (The Roeper School, 2016, n.p.).

The Roepers' vision and school philosophy influenced this study in several important ways. First, Annemarie Roeper speaks to the role of human development in teaching and learning, "We look at the field of psychology as separate from education, and we therefore do

not include the psychology of the child in the educational process. This means education does not know the child. How can we educate without knowing who the person is” (Roeper, 2006, p.13)?

The Roepers’ developmental orientation aligns with my personal philosophy and influenced the selection of my community partner and research approach. Roeper also developed her own educational model called the self-actualization interdependence model that supports each individual child in bringing their best self forward with conscious awareness of the impact of their words and actions on others (Kane, 2013). The selected research site comes the closest to realizing Roeper’s vision of any school I have encountered besides the Roeper School itself. Annemarie passed away in May of 2012 leaving a legacy as a pioneer in holistic development and the field of gifted education. Her life’s work serves as a reminder of the importance of aligning intentions and practices and that life and learning are inseparable (Ambrose, Sriraman & Cross, 2013).

### **National Association of Gifted Children**

The National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) works to support the adoption of legislation, policies and practices that will support the education of gifted children (NAGC, 2016). NAGC has crafted standards, in addition to position statements and white papers on a variety of topics related to giftedness. Their advocacy efforts have furthered the cause of providing gifted children equitable growth opportunities.

Unfortunately, the implementation of standards has simultaneously led some practitioners to falsely believe results of research in the field of gifted can be generalized; however, this is incongruent with supporting diversity and also perpetuates the myth that there is an obtainable “best practice” for all gifted children. As shown in the scatterplot in Figure 1, the distance among

outliers can be greater than between outliers and the majority. Moreover, by the time research related to gifted learners publishes, children, policies and curricula sometimes have changed and the data is no longer as relevant as it was at the time the research was conducted. It is difficult for standards to keep pace.

In 2016, NAGC moved in the direction of promoting the development of “the whole gifted child” (Betts, 2016). However, this goal is still pursued primarily through policy and curricular modifications with relatively little attention paid to implicit instruction and pedagogical artistry. Excellent instruction is both a science and an art (Day, 2002). Even the best curriculum is contingent on delivery, on how educators meet students in the moment. If a school community does not support teacher well-being and provide sufficient resources, growth will be stunted despite even the best curriculum and well-intentioned policies.

### **Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)**

SENG was founded in 1981 after a gifted youth who enrolled in college early completed suicide (SENG, 2016). Families of gifted students expressed an urgent need to better understand how to support the healthy development of their children. As Annemarie Roeper explained before many of her peers were prepared to hear, it became clear supporting emotional development was integral to the well-being of gifted individuals. To this end, SENNG’s mission is to support the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical and social development of gifted individuals across their lifespan (SENG, 2016). The organization’s reach now extends internationally. In addition to an annual conference, webinar programming and distribution of research, SENNG works to grow healthy community in practice through SENNG Model Parent Groups or SMPGs. SMPGs bring diverse gifted adults together to learn from each other’s experiences caring for gifted children (SENG, 2016). Given its dedication to the healthy

development of gifted learners of all ages, SENG's mission is referenced as a gold standard in the field.

### **Summary**

Connections with each of these three learning communities have influenced my practices as an educator, mother and learner. By attending conferences regularly over the course of the last decade, reading the latest research and facilitating SENG Model Parent Groups, I have learned directly from others who care for diverse gifted children in a variety of roles and contexts what has and has not worked in practice. This learning coupled with my own teaching and parenting experiences has deepened my understanding. In addition to the institutions described above, new advocacy organizations have emerged, as well as programs designed explicitly to serve this unique population. Currently, there are over 350 schools designated as serving the needs of gifted learners in the United States alone (Hoagies Gifted, 2016). The fact each of these organizations exists is a testament to an unmet societal need. It is also a perfect segue to discussing the gifted population as a marginalized class.

### **Gifted as a Marginalized Class**

In his recent book, *Originals*, Adam Grant makes a case for outliers, that non-conformists support societal evolution (2016). Yet, the education legislative and policy landscape in the United States continues to emphasize standards that by definition oppress outliers by asking them to abandon their true selves to conform to the majority. The introduction to this research project highlights expert educator James Delisle's recent work illustrating how gifted students have been historically underserved in the United States. Delisle introduces studies and expert opinions refuting many commonly touted gifted education best practices, including differentiation (2014). In addition, Chu and Myers present gifted children as a vulnerable and

oppressed population from a social work perspective (2015). Moreover, Dr. Tracy Cross' research illustrates patterns in coping behaviors exhibited by gifted students, including underachievement and in extreme cases, suicide (2011). Unfortunately, these experts are not the first to have drawn attention to gifted children's status as a marginalized class.

Many educators and clinicians have raised concerns about the frequency with which gifted children are misdiagnosed with disabilities (Webb et al., 2005). The work of Webb et al. draws attention to the difficulties in discerning gifted characteristics from disabilities and the need for educators and clinicians to have at minimum a cursory understanding of the pitfalls of the identification and diagnosis process (2005). Issues related to misdiagnosis are in addition to the increased frequency that gifted children experience bullying behavior at school (Peterson & Ray, 2006). Bullying can cause physical and/or psychiatric injuries including trauma-related diagnoses (Coloroso, 2009). Trauma symptoms can not only mask giftedness (Bachtel, 2016), but importantly, can negatively impact development (Devereux, 2016; Garrett, 2014).

### **Asynchrony**

The esteemed Columbus Group defines giftedness as:

asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally (1991, as cited by Neville, Piechowski & Tolan, 2013, p.14).

While for the purposes of this research, giftedness is defined in terms of demonstrated abilities in the top five percent of age-mates, asynchrony is a notable characteristic of giftedness (Gatto-Walden, 2016). The myriad ways asynchrony may manifest developmentally illustrates the complexity and diversity among gifted individuals. Importantly, there is no definitive line indicating where asynchronous development ends and twice-exceptionality begins. Twice-

exceptionality is a construct used in the field to define students who are both gifted and have a disability (Kay, 2000). Both asynchrony and twice-exceptionality can veil gifted learner strengths and needs providing further reasoning as to why gifted learners are frequently misunderstood and oppressed.

### **Summary**

Given their outlier status and complex cognitive profiles, it becomes easy to see why gifted students may become disenfranchised. A program designed to empower diverse gifted children is expected to be responsive to asynchronies in student learning. When diverse strengths and interests are celebrated, the definitions of achievement and success expand. This research project considers frequently unseen aspects of development reinforced in the literature as supportive of gifted student well-being; each is discussed along with the interpretive frame in the following two sections.

### **Interpretive Framework**

A human development lens is used for program evaluation given its proven success in informing programs such as the esteemed Roeper School mentioned earlier. There are two theoretical perspectives that guide my inquiry, action, as well as data collection and analysis. The first is Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration; this theory frames advanced human development in degrees of altruism (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Gatto-Walden, 2016; Mendaglio, 2012). Dabrowski's theory aligns with my community partner's mission of supporting gifted children in reaching their full potential. Next, Beckes and Coan's social baseline theory posits that humans are built for interdependence and that connection facilitates healing (2011). Validating the experience of outside-the-box gifted thinkers is critical to healthy development and relationships. Together, these theories provide justification for working to



remedy the historic oppression of gifted learners and a lens for exploring a program designed to empower diverse gifted children.

### **Theory of Positive Disintegration**

Dabrowski viewed human development in completely different terms – that is, as powered by the tension between the higher self and the lower, the good and the bad, experienced within the self. For Dabrowski, the drama of inner seeking, figuring out the world, feeling anguish, questioning the meaning of human existence, testing one's values and ideals, growing in empathy and understanding of others – these are the elements that encompass the striving for optimal human development (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p.7).

Dabrowski's humanistic theory of human development paints a vision for a more peaceful society. His work began with his curiosity to explore what drove differences in human behavior: Who was working for the greater good, in contrast with egocentric, individualist behavior (Piechowski, 2014)? Dabrowski held a master's in education and was a physician, psychiatrist and psychologist who studied at Harvard, John Hopkins and the Boston Psychopathic Hospital (Dabrowski, 2016). It was his personal experiences with suffering and injustice, specifically during World War I and World War II that fueled his studies. Dabrowski was imprisoned in World War II for helping to hide Jews and again afterwards for speaking against the state (Piechowski, 2014). He found a high density of individuals predisposed for advanced development, which he defined in terms of an altruistic orientation, in artistic communities (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Per Piechowski:

Dabrowski's life mission was to save and protect those who were tuned to the pain of the world and its dangerous trends but whose voices were unheeded. He saw that those who were open to higher realities were often poorly adapted to this world and thus at risk for not succeeding or even not surviving (2014, p. 21).

Dabrowski's theory informs this study in that it provides a window into how gifted individuals experience the world, something he studied over the course of his entire career (Piechowski, 2014). The theory of positive disintegration (TPD) indicates individuals with

advanced developmental potential have an intensified reaction to both internal and external stimuli; they are wired with more alert nervous systems (Piechowski, 2014). The rough translation of this heightened sensitivity in the literature is an *overexcitability* or *OE*, although Piechowski explains a more accurate translation from the original Polish is superstimulatability (2014). Overexcitabilities are one element of Dabrowski's theory. The more gifted an individual is, the greater the likelihood they will possess all five overexcitabilities (Gatto-Walden, 2016).

Simply defined, the five overexcitabilities (OEs) are as follows:

- Psychomotor overexcitability is an abundance of energy.
- Sensual overexcitability is heightened aesthetic and sensory sensations.
- Intellectual overexcitability is increased mental activity.
- Imaginational overexcitability is the ability to engage in playful exploration, fantasy and visualization.
- Emotional overexcitability is intensified feelings and complexity of emotions.

(Piechowski, 2014)

Please see Appendix A for an in-depth description of the overexcitabilities. I am hopeful evidence of responsiveness to overexcitabilities will emerge through this program exploration.

While indicators of *potential* for advanced development, overexcitabilities are not a guarantee of positive outcomes; these sensitivities can be a strength in certain contexts, and vulnerability in others. Likewise, strengths and talents can be used for personal gain or the greater good. Mendaglio clarifies that Dabrowski distinguished intelligence from intellectual and other OEs (2012). In other words, just because a person is smart does not mean their central nervous system is wired with potential for autonomous development aligned with values such as authenticity and altruism (Mendaglio, 2012).

Per Dabrowski, the presence of overexcitabilities increases the likelihood of a positive outcome post trauma or a crisis (2016). Here's where the theory gets its name. Disintegration, destruction and collapse can proceed improvement, creation and evolution, hence the term *positive disintegration* (Dabrowski, 2016). The concept of multilevelness is integral to the theory; Dabrowski asserts how people experience the world is impacted by their developmental level (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). These levels range from self-centered to selfless. As this growth is non-ontogenetic, a child may operate on a higher level than an adult (Dabrowski, 2016). This is relevant to this study as a reminder tension and struggle can be a precursor to integration and growth. Moreover, per Dabrowski, there are two types of integration: the socially integrated personality, where an individual acculturates to the beliefs and values of their social environment and a higher, autonomous integration, where beliefs are generated from self-reflection independent of the status quo (2016).

In sum, Dabrowski's theory aligns with the goal of empowering gifted learners, the intention of supporting altruistic behavior and ultimately, the development of more peaceful school communities.

### **Social Baseline Theory**

Social baseline theory, informed by the work of Beckes and Coan, teaches all humans are oriented to be interdependent (2011). Moreover, our healing accelerates in the presence of others – when life presents obstacles, the presence of even a stranger soothes and increases the likelihood we will succeed in overcoming challenges. In short, proximity to others decreases stress hormones and calms the nervous system (Beckes & Coan, 2011).

The nature of being an outlier coupled with the fact gifted youth are bullied at more than double the rate of the overall population (Peterson & Ray, 2006) reinforces the need to prioritize

connection for gifted children. Per social baseline theory, humans obtain better outcomes when held in the context of healthy communities, “virtually every measure of health and well-being is improved by access to close social relationships” (Beckes & Coan, 2011, p. 976). Social baseline theory indicates neurological benefits occur because social proximity reduces the expense of an individual’s interaction with their environment two ways: *load sharing*, energy preservation that occurs when trust and interdependence are established, and *risk distribution*, as group size increases, vigilance decreases (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Likewise, social isolation typically results in a decrease in a person’s capacity to regulate their emotions (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Furthermore, “In relative isolation, one might expect an increased need for sleep, increased food intake, decreased physical activity, and perhaps even decreased immune activity, all a function of increased perceived energy demands” (Beckes & Coan, 2011, p.982).

At SENG, many of the most popular social media postings and articles are those addressing the feelings of loneliness and isolation that gifted individuals experience (unpublished data set). This data affirms that for gifted, cognitive outliers, connection to community is perceived as a priority. In the absence of others to reflect their true selves, marginalized individuals may engage in self-distancing and assimilationist behavior, which negatively impacts development (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Social baseline theory supports the in-depth exploration of programs dedicated to empowering diverse gifted children, places where gifted students are not only less likely to feel alone, but where they can bring their true selves forward and have their uniqueness celebrated rather than criticized.

### **Developmental Aspects Influencing Student Empowerment**

After submitting the first draft of this chapter to my advisor, he replied, “Kate, I thought your study was exploring a program, not students.” Yes! In fact, during an interview, one Creason teacher articulately explained this dynamic, “I do not have one class of 23 students; I have 23 classes of one.” There is a stark contrast between these two states of mind. With the first, educators likely create one program that may be modified for each student. With the second, educators essentially co-create, in partnership with the students, individual programs with structural similarities. This will become more clear in the setting descriptions and data analysis in subsequent chapters.

The high degree of program flexibility and complexity can be difficult to conceptualize prior to being introduced to the unique structures and pedagogical practices of the school; coincidentally, this reinforces the need for this research project. While this study is an exploration of a school’s program, the *program* operates outside traditional program definitions. It may be helpful to conceptualize the program as more of an *approach* to supporting individual student and community development. The Creason School’s orientation seemingly aligns with Annemarie Roeper’s self actualization and interdependence model. Therefore, understanding of frequently unseen or under-addressed aspects of human development supports empowerment goals.

Many of these aspects of student development are neglected even among equity-oriented programs serving students with advanced cognition. In my experience, many school programs for gifted students focus on academic growth and are ill-equipped to support other developmental aspects critical to well-being and achievement. Lack of responsiveness to gifted students’ innate overexcitabilities contributes to systemic oppression. This section will discuss literature related to dimensions of the emerging gifted self as connected to Dabrowski’s theory of

positive disintegration, social baseline theory, standards established by Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) and also objectives communicated directly by my community partner in this research project, The Creason School. SENNG's mission is, "to empower families and communities to guide gifted and talented individuals to reach their goals: intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually" (SENG, 2016, n.p.). In addition, this study integrates multicultural, creative and eco-literacy development as related to the aspiration of empowering diverse gifted children. These aspects are discussed here as they relate both to gifted student overexcitabilities and to Creason's stated values and objectives. For example, the school has a full page statement on diversity that concludes, "...our children will be best prepared to succeed, to participate, and to promote unity in our increasingly diverse society" (Creason, 2016). Environmental education, bilingualism, multiculturalism and creativity are so valued at Creason that educators are hired specifically to support student development in each of these areas.

Each of these developmental dimensions relate to this study's interpretive frame and exemplary standards in the field that inform how an instructional program will be received by gifted children. For an overview of how overexcitabilities, or OEs, influence student development, please see Figure 2 below.

## How OEs Influence Development

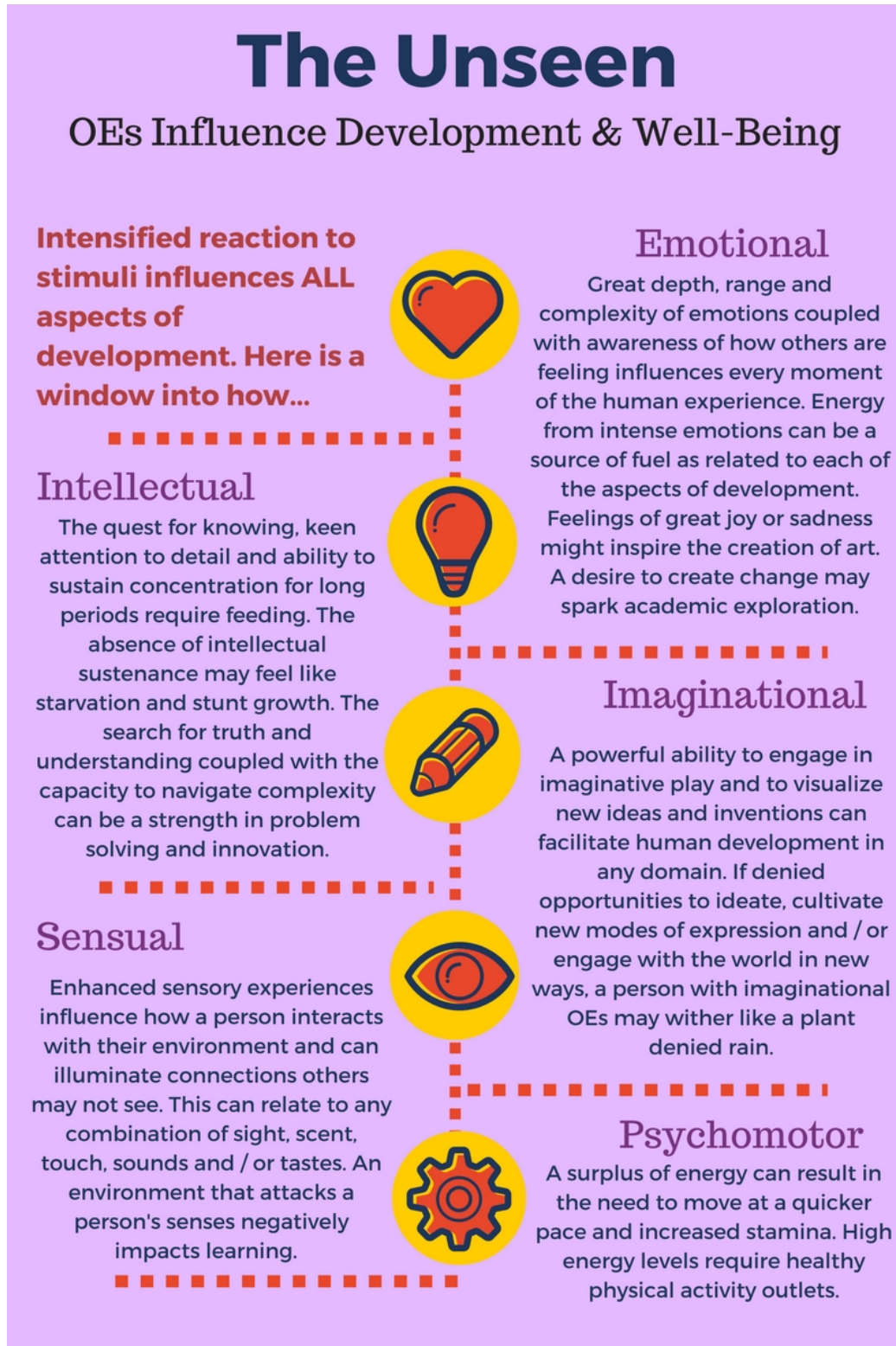


Figure 2: How OEs Influence Development

This graphic was informed by the work of Piechowski and Daniels (2009), Piechowski (2014) and Gatto-Walden (2016). Also worth noting is that Dabrowski claimed certain OEs are more critical to the developmental process than others, specifically emotional, intellectual and imaginational OEs enable transformation of the lower forms of OEs, sensual and psychomotor (Mendaglio, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of all OEs is requisite to potential for advanced development (Mendaglio, 2012).

### **Intellectual and Academic**

Many believe gifted students will be “just fine,” that because of their advanced cognition, they will do well in school and life independent of the instructional program provided. Stories like Bennett’s teach us otherwise. While gifted student academic growth is the aspect of development most frequently addressed in schools, there is a wide range of how programs are delivered. Some frequent instructional modifications for gifted children include: subject or grade acceleration, gifted curriculum, curriculum compacting<sup>2</sup>, telescoping<sup>3</sup>, cluster grouping<sup>4</sup>, pull-out programming, custom designed student projects, mentorship opportunities, extra-curricular programming or some combination of these options. A notable difference between Creason and other schools serving gifted children is that the entire program is designed to be responsive to gifted learners; this provides more flexibility than modifying an existing program or curriculum designed to serve neuro-typical learners.

As scientific understanding of the gifted brain increases, there is new evidence of developmental and physiological differences among gifted individuals (Gifted Research and

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<sup>2</sup> Students move through the same curriculum more rapidly.

<sup>3</sup> Students move through curriculum at an advanced rate resulting in an advanced placement or early graduation.

<sup>4</sup> Grouping all gifted students from a grade level in the same class.



Outreach, 2016). For example, the Eides' research provides functional brain magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) evidence of brain-based differences in gifted learners (2004). Specifically, the Eides note that gifted brains appear to be "on fire," that gifted brains are exceptionally sensitive and grow to be even more so with the right support (Eide & Eide, 2004). The Eides continue, "As a result of these special characteristics, gifted thinkers typically enjoy benefits including more vivid sensing, prodigious memory, greater fund of knowledge, more frequent and varied associations, and greater analytic ability" (2004, n.p.). This research explains the need for increased depth, pace, complexity and metacognitive training in instruction for gifted learners (Eide & Eide, 2004). Moreover, emergent research on physiological differences reinforces Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and the construct of overexcitabilities, which can also be conceptualized as super-sensitivities. Supporting gifted student academic development connects to all of the overexcitabilities. Forcing a student to sit in a class and suffer through the teaching of content and skills she or he has already learned is oppressive. An empowering program for diverse gifted learners is responsive to student academic needs and insures equitable growth opportunities commensurate with development.

### **Multicultural**

Gifted children can be found in all racial, economic, cultural and linguistic groups (NAGC, 2016). Multicultural development nurtures the skill of perspective taking to grow strong relationships and to support students in feeling comfortable in diverse contexts. Unfortunately, not all gifted programming is culturally responsive; this further oppresses and marginalizes gifted youth of color and poverty, the antithesis of empowerment.

For more than a quarter century, there has been under-identification of gifted Black, Latino, Native American and low-income students in large part due to a lack of cultural responsiveness

(Dynarski, 2016; Ford, 2013). Culturally responsive pedagogy has arguably done more to transform teaching practices to promote equity than any other theory. Ladson-Billings explains culturally relevant pedagogy “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (2009, p.20). Culturally responsive pedagogy also promotes achievement of students of color and other marginalized student groups (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009) and holds potential to both increase identification and access to gifted programming for historically underserved populations. Moreover, given the inherent diversity among gifted individuals, evolving United States demographics and globalization, an environment that celebrates diversity and promotes cultural pluralism aligns with social baseline theory and the basic human need to connect (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Supporting student multicultural development validates the experience of being an outlier and implicitly teaches youth to value diversity.

Furthermore, relatively few bilingual students in schools in the United States have access to bilingual programming (Escamilla, 2008). Language is a critical window into culture; language influences identity development and how students perceive the world (González, 2001). Moreover, bi-literacy advances the goal of cultural sustainability. Paris differentiates cultural sustainability from cultural responsiveness in that it seeks to go beyond seeing students through the lens of their strengths and integrating student home culture and language into the classroom, to proactively cultivating a multiethnic and multilingual society (2012). Cultural sustainability reiterates the interdependent nature of the human experience and the need to support multicultural development in empowering programs for the gifted.

### **Eco-literacy**

Goleman, Bennett and Barlow introduced the concept of eco-literacy to communicate the strength of an individual's relationship with the natural world (2012). Molecular biologist turned expert counselor to the gifted and Dabrowski scholar, Michael Piechowski, feels a strong relationship with nature is essential for well-being (2014). Piechowski eloquently articulates his personal relationship with a property in Wisconsin where he lives, "I realized that I had grown into the land and the land had grown into me" (2014, p.5). Furthermore, emotional and sensual overexcitabilities may result in gifted students being more in tune with the natural world, and intellectual overexcitability may lead to advanced understanding of long and short term consequences of human behavior on the environment (Piechowski, 2014).

Sustainability practices and care for the environment are crucial to human health. Given the degree to which human beings are influenced by the environment, developing eco-literacy is relevant to all of education, but particularly to gifted individuals who, research indicates, can be more sensitive (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Eide & Eide, 2004; Gatto-Walden, 2016). Eco-literacy relates directly to gifted learner intellectual, emotional and sensual overexcitabilities, the higher OEs per Dabrowski (Mendaglio, 2012). As practices facilitating the development of eco-literacy support student health, learning what instructional practices strengthen students' connection to the environment and natural world is empowering.

### **Creative**

Imagination is indispensable to cognition... One can become so absorbed in an imagined experience that it becomes real. Not only what one sees, but also what one hears, touches, smells and tastes feels real. Absorption is like flow – to be so engaged that hunger, time, and the outside world cease to exist. Absorption, however, has additional qualities that connect it with imagination – creating alternate realities and living in them (Piechowski, 2014, p.110-111).

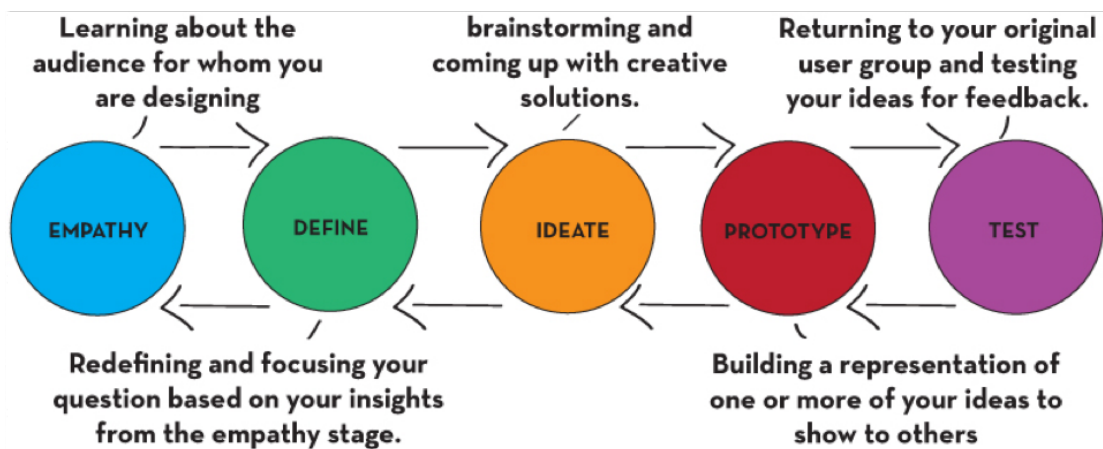
While an increasing number of schools are realizing the benefits of integrating the arts and inventive thinking activities supportive of creative development, many are unaware of how

to introduce the structures and resources to support innovation in practice (Robinson, 2006). Creativity pioneer Paul Torrance said teaching children creativity is a moral imperative requisite to preparation for a future replete with unforeseeable challenges and opportunities (1979). In addition, Eisner, the innovator behind the educational criticism and connoisseurship research approach, advocated for arts-based reform in school (2017). In the past, efforts to nurture student creativity often focused on affording additional course offerings in the arts.

In contrast, Piirto outlined the core attitudes of creative people: naiveté, self-discipline, risk taking and group trust (1998). Piirto's work on creative attitudes connects to Kaufman and Gregoire's recently published ten habits of creative individuals; these are as follows: imaginative play, passion, daydreaming, solitude, intuition, openness to experience, mindfulness, sensitivity, turning adversity into advantage and thinking differently (2015). These are characteristics that programs supporting student creative development may reference in the development and delivery of programming. There still is much to learn about how schools integrate the development of creative habits into practice.

Design thinking is one problem-solving framework that empowers individuals to engage with and create solutions to a variety of personal and community challenges (Barry, 2017). Design thinking also builds relationships among community members by proactively identifying and addressing unmet needs. Following in Figure 3 is a visual outlining the process.

### The Design Thinking Process



*Figure 3: The Design Thinking Process*

(Barry, 2017)

The rapid iteration process of repeatedly testing an idea and making modifications to improve outcomes, is a good anecdote for perfectionism common among gifted children (Greenspon, 2012) as it teaches risk-taking and illustrates limitless possibilities for continued improvement. Design thinking is being introduced as a collaborative problem-solving framework in some schools in an effort to support student creativity. In some ways, design thinking is an extension of Paul Torrance's Future Problem Solvers International program that engages youth with hypothetical scenarios and invites ideation on potential solutions (1979).

Creative development connects directly to all overexcitabilities as well. Many students learn self-soothing through a variety of modes of artistic expression. Furthermore, engaging in creative practices can accelerate healing (Barron & Barron, 2013). Evidence of support of student creative development, inclusive of problem-solving skills and strategies, is another empowerment indicator.

### **Physical**

An individual's development of their physical body directly impacts well-being.

Furthermore, many of society's noble professions including firefighters, farmers and rescue workers demand physical strength and agility. Clinician to the gifted for nearly forty years, Dr. Gatto-Walden, explains the relationship among aspects of development:

In actuality, each aspect of the self (mind, emotions, body, spirit and social self) interacts instantaneously with the others, influencing one another moment to moment. Scientists are uncertain which aspect of the self is the first to activate and thus to initiate a chain reaction by the other domains. Is it our thoughts that affect an emotional response and a physical reaction? Or do we have a physical reaction to an emotion, which is then coupled with a corresponding thought? In any case, our domains are inextricably interconnected, and yet many people focus on a single one, often neglecting the others (2016, p.13).

With a trend across the United States to shorten recess and decrease physical education programming in an effort to raise test scores (Kuehn, 2013), disproportionate emphasis has been placed on academic development; paradoxically, this is contrary to the goal of enhancing cognition. In addition to health benefits, there is a substantial body of research proclaiming the cognitive and emotional benefits of exercise. Medina's book, *Brain Rules*, explains the science of how our brains, bodies and performance outcomes are connected (2008). There is also increasing scientific evidence of a strong connection between physical fitness levels and cognitive function (Jacobs & Zhu, 2016). Despite this research, not all children are provided reasonable movement opportunities in schools (Kuehn, 2013). For gifted students with psychomotor overexcitabilities, access to programming supportive of physical development is even more critical, "People with this heightened energy level need a physical outlet to unleash the build-up of cellular energy and nerve impulses" (Gatto-Walden, 2016, p.67-68). How physical development is addressed at Creason will be explored as guided by the primary research questions related to empowerment.

## **Emotional**

For the purpose of this study, emotional intelligence, or EQ, is defined as “the capacity to blend thinking and feeling to make optimal decisions – which is the key to having a successful relationship with yourself and others” (Six Seconds, 2016, n.p.). Referencing more than 20 years of data from approximately 100,000 individuals across more than 125 countries, Six Seconds outlines specific emotional skills that are strongly predictive of performance, relationship strength, self-efficacy, well-being and life satisfaction (Freedman, 2016). The eight predictive skills are: emotional literacy, recognizing patterns, navigating emotions, intrinsic motivation, optimism, consequential thinking, empathy and pursuing noble goals (Six Seconds, 2016). Definitions of each emotional skill can be found in Appendix B.

The Six Seconds model was developed by Anabel Jensen as a direct result of her experiences serving gifted children, educators and families (Jensen, 2017). My experiences administering and interpreting Six Seconds emotional intelligence assessments have illustrated educators are often poor at predicting EQ score ranges and frequently confound social development, extraversion and charisma with emotional development. In the absence of an evidence-based approach to cultivating emotional competencies, behavior-related conversations between parents and educators can become contentious. In practice, I have found referencing the Six Seconds framework can unite parents and educators around strategies needed to support gaps in emotional skills development.

Moreover, emotional development relates directly to gifted student emotional overexcitability. Given the depth, range and complexity of gifted students’ emotions (Gatto-Walden, 2016; Fonesca, 2011; Piechowski, 2014), future research may reveal that emotional development has an even greater impact on the overall well-being of gifted children than of their neuro-typical peers.

## **Sociopolitical**

While many researchers reference social development, this study will consider sociopolitical development given the empowerment focus of the research, the Creason School's commitment to diversity and inclusivity and social baseline theory's emphasis on interdependence. This difference is important to the study because social development speaks to an individual's ability to connect with others, while sociopolitical development also encompasses moral development and prepares students to resist oppression (Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003). Research among gifted experts indicates gifted youth differ from their peers in their abstract moral reasoning (Lewis, 2013) and in their sensitivity to moral concerns (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Lovecky, 1997; Piechowski, 2014). Sociopolitical development speaks not only to one's ability to connect with others, but also their capacity to transform unjust systems (Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003). Watts, Williams and Jagers' concept of sociopolitical development encourages community reflection and dialogue related to the pursuit of a more just and peaceful society; their framework invites individuals to question if they adapting to unjust systems or working to transform them (2003).

Levels of sociopolitical development range from *acritical* (unaware of inequities) to *liberation* (aware of inequities and deliberately working to effect change). For definitions of each level, please see Appendix C. Based on a decade of working with gifted learners, it is my experience that gifted students' sociopolitical development often exceeds that of the adults caring for them in schools resulting in relationship tensions. Sociopolitical development connects to emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities; therefore, supporting sociopolitical development empowers diverse gifted children.

## **Spiritual**



Sisk and Torrance wrote *Spiritual Intelligence* in large part to ignite a conversation about spiritual development in education (2001). They synthesize prior writings from various cultures related to spiritual intelligence and also introduce their own thoughts and ideas. At its heart, the text encourages each individual to forge their own path and create purposeful lives. This relates to Dr. Gatto-Walden's and other researchers' definition of spiritual development that connects each individual's unique inner self with opportunities for service (2016). Michael Piechowski also studied and wrote about the spiritual experiences of gifted youth during his time at the Research and Guidance Laboratory for Superior Students at University of Wisconsin-Madison (2014). Spiritual development is introduced here independent of established group religions given the variety of ways spiritual experiences and an individual's relationship with the spiritual universe may manifest (Piechowski, 2014).

The work of the authors above also aligns with Annemarie Roeper's construct of spiritual development which she describes as connecting each child's inner world with opportunities to engage in social action (2007), as well as, Webb's research explaining how the search for meaning is particularly relevant to gifted learners (2013). Webb elaborates that the absence of meaningful learning and work can lead to existential depression in gifted individuals (2013). For the purpose of this study, spiritual intelligence, or SQ as coined by Zohar (2015), is defined as the ability to transform dreams of improving ourselves and society into reality. Spiritual development relates directly or indirectly to all overexcitabilities (Gatto-Walden, 2016; Piechowski, 2014) making it essential to empowerment.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of the intentions and practices of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children. I am hopeful this inquiry will draw

attention to critical, unseen aspects of development and ultimately support in transforming oppressive education systems and teaching practices. The interpretive frame references Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory to balance the need to understand and be responsive to gifted students' unique sensitivities with every human's need to connect with others. Literature connecting various developmental aspects to Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, and specifically, overexcitabilities, is included to call reader attention to how many school models neglect critical aspects of human development. Despite evidence many of these aspects are linked to cognition, well-being and achievement, little change has been realized in moving towards a more holistic, integrated model of education that Roeper prophesized was critical to healthy development more than 75 years ago (Roeper, 2006).

In sum, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, or TPD, situates this inquiry within an empowerment lens aimed at better supporting the evolution of gifted students within schools and society. TPD aligns with the goal of promoting equity. Social baseline theory informs society of its moral obligation to ensure all children are afforded opportunities to connect with community and not be bullied or isolated because of unseen cognitive differences. It also reinforces the importance of studying school communities, not just learners in isolation. Finally, social baseline theory also reminds us of the interdependent nature of the human experience and that what impacts gifted children effects us all.

Society cannot continue to be surprised when those who have been oppressed end up hurting themselves or others. We have failed too many gifted children. The literature presented here justifies the need for in-depth exploration of programs developed to empower gifted children and asserts the need to expand educators' understanding of developmental complexities. Outliers will influence the trajectory of an entire system. When gifted learners are oppressed and

have tragic outcomes, they can drag an entire system down. Likewise, when gifted learners thrive, they can rapidly propel a system forward. In an in-depth study of youth prodigies, David Henry Feldman concluded:

They are the frontrunners of human evolution. The intensified quality of experiencing in a higher key, its rich diversity and extraordinary range, and the higher level of physical, mental, and spiritual energy point in the same direction. The frontrunners and those behind them have a connection, the frontrunners pulling the others forward. Just as the first goose makes it easier for those behind it to slice through the air, so gifted and creative people make it easier for the rest of us to rise above the mundane by the excitement and stimulation they generate in us (as cited by Piechowski, 2014, p.325).

The subsequent methods section outlines how I investigated the nuances of the Creason School's program. I share details informing the study design, research approach, data collection and analysis strategies.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

The prior chapter offers research and an interpretive lens illustrating the need to better understand programs designed to empower diverse gifted students who are often oppressed within traditional school models (Chu & Myers, 2015; Delisle, 2014). This chapter describes the logic informing the choice in methodology, setting and participants, data sources, collection methods, analysis strategies, my role as a researcher, as well as limitations of this research project.

#### **Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship**

In this study, I engaged an educational criticism and connoisseurship, or educational criticism, research approach. Educational criticism affords the best opportunity to investigate and portray the intricacies of a specific school program. Eisner developed this method of qualitative inquiry with the purpose of facilitating educational improvement; this aligns with the goal of this study, to promote equity for gifted learners through deepening understanding of what an empowering program for diverse gifted students looks and feels like in action. Connoisseurship is defined by Eisner as the art of appreciation and criticism, the art of disclosure (2002). Hence, the researcher must have sufficient knowledge to discern nuances of the learning environment and program (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016). My lifetime experiences serving and studying culturally, economically and cognitively diverse children, teachers and schools in a variety of roles and contexts prepared me with a keen eye. Educational criticism's encouragement of the use of narrative and vignettes enabled me to virtually transport the reader to the school setting (Eisner, 1998 & 2017). Furthermore, educational criticism is unmatched in its capacity to communicate complexity which further explains why it is such a good fit.

Eisner highlights five dimensions of schooling that educational connoisseurs should explore (2017). Otherwise referenced as Eisner's ecology of schooling, these include the intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical and the evaluative (2017). In this study I focus on the intentional, structural and pedagogical elements. Intentions relate to programs goals and aspirations, the structural to the learning environment and organizational framework and pedagogy, to how teaching occurs (Eisner, 2017). A conscious choice was made to emphasize these three elements as it is the researcher's opinion they have the most influence on each learner's experience. Even the best curriculum is contingent on delivery. Eisner remarks, "Virtually all curricula are mediated by a teacher. How that mediation occurs has a substantial bearing on what is being taught and learned" (2017, p. 77). In many ways, this is similar to the cooking process. A highly rated cookie recipe does not always yield deliciousness – too much flour might be added, a fly might land in the batter, the doorbell may ring distracting the baker and causing the cookies to burn, etc. Curriculum is important, but what happens in the moment of instruction, how teachers meet students in their environment, ultimately determines impact. The last dimension, the evaluative, the value assigned to types of learning (Eisner, 2017), is outside the scope of this project. However, many of the school's assessment practices were revealed in observations. The final chapter also compares and contrasts the school's intentions and practices as guided by the research questions and interpretive frame.

### **The Four Aspects of Educational Criticism**

There are four features of educational criticism informing the system of inquiry: description, interpretation, evaluation and thematics (Eisner, 2002). Descriptions in this project begin by introducing each of the participants and their interpretation of the program's intentions. This is followed by rich descriptions of the learning environment and educators' instructional

practices. I use imagery to virtually transport the reader to the learning environment. This includes vignettes and rich narrative, vibrant enough that the reader can create his or her own criticisms, which might vary from mine. Descriptions and interpretations weave together to illustrate how Creason's aspirations are realized, or not, in daily practice and include attention to the implicit or hidden curriculum, nuances of educators' instructional craft, classroom presence, learning environment design, relationship structures, work products and any other germane details potentially influencing student outcomes. Description serves two purposes, "First it provides the evidence on which interpretations are built" (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016, p.38). Importantly, setting descriptions also place the results of the study in context to support in transferring what is learned in the study to other school communities (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2016).

The next step in Eisner's approach is interpretation (1998). Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye and Flinders distinguish interpretation as "a search for meaning and way of seeing" (2016, p.41). In essence, this affords me as a researcher the opportunity to examine participant meanings as contrasted with my own. I interpret the intentions, structures and pedagogy through the established interpretive lens. As I am writing from an empowerment perspective and equity orientation, I connect observations to Dabrowski's theory of human development and social baseline theory. Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration gages responsiveness to the developmental needs of gifted youth (Daniels and Piechowski, 2009) and Beckes and Coan's social baseline theory (2011) situates individual development within the interdependent nature of the human experience. Eisner clarifies, "When critics work with theory, they use it as a tool for purposes of explanation – not to meet the rigorous tests for the 'true experiment,' but to satisfy rationality, to deepen the conversation, to raise fresh questions" (1998, p. 95). Eisner also states

the distinction between description and interpretation is more ambiguous than most people realize (1998 & 2017).

The third aspect of Eisner's educational criticism is evaluation. Evaluation establishes the significance of participants' educational experiences (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016). Here I provide Creason with my interpretation of their empowerment work and also an evaluation of their program as related to their own intentions or aspirations. The educational critic identifies what is of value to both the individuals involved and also for the greater educational landscape (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016).

Finally, per Eisner, description and interpretation are only relevant to the extent they inform transformation (2002).

Recalling that evaluation provides an appraisal from the educational critic's perspective, thematics, the fourth dimension of an educational criticism, articulates the patterns, big ideas, and anticipatory frameworks for other educational situations. The themes distill the major ideas that run through the general educational matters and provide guidance, not a guarantee or prediction, for understanding broader educational contexts (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye and Flinders, 2016, p. 54).

Themes emerged from the descriptions, interpretation and evaluation that enabled me to make recommendations for other schools and educators who aspire to empower diverse gifted children. These are discussed in detail in Chapter Eight.

### **Validity of Educational Criticism**

Both schools and human beings are complex systems that require research approaches capable of matching their depth and complexity. Yet, like standardized tests with limited definitions of achievement, often the systems we are a part of orient educators and researchers towards a search for definitive black and white answers. Ironically, this diminishes one's capacity to tolerate ambiguity and navigate nuance, the skills requisite to engaging with complex problems of practice. Eisner puts this another way, "Typical evaluation practices emphasize

conformity to a predicted outcome...Teaching and learning are, in this model, essentially convergent activities rather than divergent ones. Predictability rather than surprise is given a priority” (2002, p. 238). Eisner further differentiates arts-centered assessment as formative, as assisting in accelerating student growth and enhancing educators’ practices (1998 & 2017).

In the research community, the validity of educational criticism may be questioned. Structural corroboration and referential adequacy are the mechanisms by which consensual validation, or a shared belief, is reached (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016) and which Eisner puts forward as evidence of educational criticism’s credibility (1998). Consensual validation allows the researcher to integrate multiple perspectives and interpretations of the same event. Eisner recognized different researchers could interpret the same data differently. To support accuracy, I shared my descriptions of the learning environment with relevant educators and incorporated their feedback. After each participating classroom and specialist teacher were provided their setting descriptions, the head of school was invited to share his insights on the overall program. In my reflections, I regularly asked myself, “Am I perceiving the environment the way it actually is or in the way I wish it to be?” It was important to proactively practice introspection given my prior transformative experiences with truly responsive gifted programming and desire to find evidence of intentions being realized in practice. I realize my steadfast commitment to providing equitable opportunities to students with advanced cognition could both influence what I saw in the Creason learning community, as well as where I focused my attention; this is both a researcher strength and vulnerability.

Structural corroboration is achieved when data from multiple sources are integrated into a cogent narrative (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016). Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye and Flinders clarify, “The structurally sound criticism is characterized by consistency



and coherence and deftly portrays the situation supported by evidence for the critic's impressions. Direct quotations, dialogue, rich description, and specific details paint the picture" (2016, p.59). In this project, I used four primary sources of data to establish structural corroboration: formal and informal interviews, observations, school communications and learning artifacts. While observing, I paid thoughtful attention to both physical elements of the learning environment and also educator instructional practices. The themes that emerged are supported both by data and annotations. Sufficient credibility is evidenced in feedback from the community partner and colleagues that the descriptions are clear and connect data from multiple sources (Eisner, 1998 & 2017).

Referential adequacy is achieved when the researcher sufficiently articulates and interprets the learning environment in a way that highlights previously unseen elements (Eisner, 1998). Eisner states, "Criticism is referentially adequate to the extent to which a reader is able to locate in its subject matter the qualities the critic addresses and the meanings he or she ascribes to them" (2017, p.114). It is important to me that this research is meaningful to my community partner, The Creason School, and that it adequately addresses the research questions posed. I hope as a result of this study the Creason community will grow more intimately acquainted with the nuances of their program. In this study, referential adequacy is achieved through aligning interview questions with the study's intentions, member checking and attention to the greater educational landscape (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016).

In sum, the unique depth and flexibility inherent in Eisner's educational criticism research approach was the best way to shine light on educational practices that empower diverse gifted children.

### **Study Design**

The research questions guiding this inquiry are informed by two of the three elements of the instructional arc associated with Eisner's work, the intended curriculum and operational curriculum (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016). The intended curriculum relates to what teachers desire and plan to happen and the operational curriculum to what actually happens. The third aspect of the instructional arc, the received curriculum, or what the students experience, is outside the scope of this project. Following are explanations of each research question, definitions of related terms and related data collected.

### **Research Question One**

1. *What are the aspirations of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children?*

This question relates to the school's intentions. *Aspirations* refers to the program's goals and objectives for individual students and the development of the community as a whole. For the purpose of this research, the term *gifted* references students who demonstrate abilities in the top 5% of their age group as evidenced by a body of data including aptitude/ability, achievement testing, work samples and feedback provided by parents and teachers. This definition aligns with the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) and also the selected research site's admission policies and practices. It is worth noting, many individuals who demonstrate abilities in the top 5% of their age-group do not self-identify as gifted. In fact, informal investigations reveal many individuals with advanced cognition have an adverse reaction to the word *gifted* creating a barrier to critical conversations. In this research project, the terms *students with advanced cognition* and *students with potential for advanced development* will be used interchangeably with the term gifted. Finally, *empowerment* is defined in line with the

community partner's definition which is to provide educational opportunities that allow each child to develop to her or his full potential.

In order to deeply understand each participating teacher's intentions, I conducted interviews. After obtaining consent, I interviewed the founder, head of school, three participating core classroom teachers and six specialist teachers to discern their interpretations of The Creason School's aspirations and practices.

The initial formal interview consisted of three questions. The first question was crafted to grow understanding of each educator's individual conceptualization of empowerment and how Creason supports realization of its empowerment objectives. The next question supported in discerning implicit messaging. I was curious to learn if the teachers at Creason felt empowered. As Ayers proclaims, exceptional teaching "requires a serious encounter with autobiography... because teachers, whatever else they teach, teach themselves" (2001, p.122). Eisner also speaks of the significant impact of the hidden or implicit curriculum on student learning (1998 & 2017) as does Roper (2006). Finally, I inquired about any potential perceived obstacles or challenges to empowering children at Creason to identify potential gaps between intentions and practices. I closed each interview by asking educators if there was anything else they wanted to share.

Additionally, school publications and web presence were examined to discern how the Creason community perceives and communicates its aspirations. Informal follow-up interviews were conducted with participating educators to clarify intent and logic behind instructional decisions post observations. This helped enhance awareness of the relationship between intentions and practices. Educators were invited to share anything they felt was particularly important to their practice that may have been missed. This second interview also provided closure to our time together and an opportunity for me to express gratitude for their participation.

**Research Question Two***2. Are those aspirations realized (or not) in practice?*

This question is specific to the school's operations, or daily practices. *Aspirations* are defined as intentions or goals as referenced above. I looked for evidence of achievement of intentions (or unaccomplished objectives) and explored how the program's aspirations manifested. The term *practice* as it is utilized here is specific to instruction and how the environment influences students; it is inclusive of implicit messaging as students often experience unintended learning as a result of educators' actions and their learning environment (Eisner, 2017; Roeper, 2006).

After initial individual educator interviews and review of school publications, I observed each participating teacher's instructional practices using an empowerment lens as informed by Dabrowski's theory of human development, social baseline theory and literature related to standards of exemplary practices for serving gifted children. Campus and classroom observations occurred over a period of approximately 10 weeks. Artifacts such as photographs of the campus and student work samples were collected. Given gifted students often have sensory sensitivities (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Lind, 2001), I also paid close attention to the learning environment during observations. I compared stated intentions with instructional practices in planning for closing interviews with each participant. The process of annotating data connected intentions and practices, and also revealed emergent themes. This project honors instruction as an art and that some of what is realized in practice may not have been an explicit intention in advance. Eisner articulately states, "It should be recognized that most situations about which an educational criticism is written will not be crystal clear or unambiguous; most of life is riddled with dilemmas, trade-offs, ambiguities" (1998, p.111).

In summary, these questions align with Eisner's educational criticism research approach designed to improve education by formulating criticisms that highlight gaps and tensions between intentions and practices (2017; Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016).

### **Data Collection**

#### **Site Selection**

When looking to learn more about programs designed to empower diverse gifted children, the pool of potential community partners was relatively small. I considered admissions criteria to insure alignment with the definition of the concept of giftedness in this project - students with abilities in the top 5% of their age group as informed by a body of evidence inclusive of qualitative and quantitative data. Based on this study's equity lens, I also looked to see if schools spoke explicitly to empowerment objectives in their communications. Additionally, diversity and inclusivity was an important selection criterion as it is an invaluable component of empowerment given the inherent diversity in the gifted population (Webb, Gore, Amend & DeVries, 2007).

Creason's online presence matched my expectations for a community partner, so I reached out to the head of school to see if he might be open to a conversation about the project. His openness to improvement discussions led me to believe Creason had the potential to be a good match for the project. A subsequent meeting included a tour of the campus and more detailed conversations on the program's intentions and dedication to growth reinforced initial impressions. Fortunately, my first choice for a strong fit community partner accepted my invitation.

Creason is a creativity-oriented independent school whose mission is "to provide an experience-based educational opportunity for gifted children of all backgrounds that allows each

child to develop individually to his or her full potential” (The Creason School, 2016). Their creative learning approach aligns with Eisner’s arts-centered school reform orientation (2002). The following five basic values inform the learning environment: empowering children, opening doors, fostering responsibility, fostering independence and fostering care and concern for others (Creason, 2016).

The Creason program originated more than 25 years ago. The campus is located in an urban setting with approximately 250 students ranging 4.5 to 14 years old. Twenty-two percent of families self-identify their children as students of color and 11% receive tuition assistance (The Creason School, 2016). The annual tuition is a little more than \$19,000 per year. The school is located on 13 acres and includes a technology lab, library, gymnasium, theater, kitchen and woodshop. Each multi-age classroom also has an attached space with tools and supplies to support creativity, design and innovation.

The program includes specialist teachers for technology and design, the arts, environmental education, Spanish and physical education. Each year, the school facilitates more than 750 field trips; this makes the physical learning environment unique as it extends beyond campus walls. Furthermore, the school expresses a deep commitment to creating individualized curriculum to insure responsiveness. To support their stated mission, the community of educators teaches critical thinking with an emphasis on:

- Research – searching out new information
- Reason – analyzing and processing data
- Record – documenting what is learned

(Creason, 2016)

Creason's inquiry cycle mirrors Eisner's impact-oriented research approach. In synchrony, students participated in research simultaneous to my study, making me a researcher of researchers.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

All Creason educators were eligible to participate in the study and were invited to volunteer in an email sent by me, the principal investigator, in September of 2016 (Please see Appendix G for a copy of the email). Prospective participants expressed interest by responding directly to me. Participants were selected based on the Creason program's structural design. My goal was to have one educator participant from each of the three divisions within the school (primary, intermediate and advanced), a member of the leadership team and specialist educators spanning the range of instructional opportunities students might encounter in the program.

When there was more than one volunteer for each area, I selected participants in the order of response. Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to engaging in the research that assured anonymity (Appendix D). Initially, there were multiple volunteers in some areas and a few gaps in others. A follow-up email was sent in October (copy provided in Appendix H) which fortunately resulted in the range of desired participants. In total, 11 educators participated in the study. In Chapter Four, I provide detailed introductions to each.

### **Interviews**

Before observing the instructional practices of participating educators, I interviewed each. Scheduling was coordinated via direct email communication with participants. During the consent process, each participant granted authorization to record which enabled me to focus on listening deeply and to avoid potentially distracting note taking behavior. The protocol was diligently followed on each occasion; this included soliciting the interviewee's opinion on the

preferred time and place for the interview, as well as mindfulness of environmental factors to insure the space was private and comfortable (Creswell, 2013). All but one participant wanted to meet in their own classroom outside instructional hours. The interview that occurred off campus was at a coffee shop in a neighborhood adjacent the school. I feel this attention to surroundings and monitoring of non-verbal communication supported genuine and complete responses. As described above, questions were crafted to elucidate understanding of each teacher's feelings, beliefs and experiences regarding the school's empowerment aspirations and practices and were purposefully designed to be open ended in order to capture participant meanings.

In all, 22 interviews were conducted; 11 were formal, recorded and hand transcribed. Manual transcriptions afforded me the opportunity to interact with the data on a deeper level. In addition, all transcriptions were shared with participating educators to insure accuracy. Overall, educators spoke to the questions in-depth; interviews ranged from approximately 10 to 48 minutes in duration based on response length. The majority lasted 15 to 20 minutes with a mean response time of 19.5 minutes. I solicited feedback on interview questions from expert educators outside the Creason community prior to submitting the study design to the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board. In addition, interview questions align with this study's research questions and Eisner's instructional arc (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016). On occasion, additional questions were extemporaneously posed in response to what an educator shared in order to extend understanding. In addition to educator interviews, Creason's admissions director participated in an informal interview to lend insight into the enrollment process.



Post-observation interviews posed clarifying questions and provided closure to our time together. Individual questions were crafted for each participant after reviewing related field notes. For the most part, these questions began “I noticed...” or “Tell me more about...”

Creason has three instructional groupings: primary (approximately ages 4.5-7), intermediate (approximately ages 8-11) and advanced (approximately ages 11-14). Initial plans were to begin with interviews and observations in the primary classroom; however, ultimately the project schedule needed to be coordinated in consideration of all participating educators’ schedules. Initial interviews never took place on the same day as the first observation to provide time for transcription and reflection first. The following chart provides an overview of the approximate interview and observation timeline which began in September of 2016.

#### **Overview of Study Schedule**

<b>Interview Participant</b>	<b>Preliminary Interview</b>	<b>Classroom Observations</b>	<b>Follow-up Interview</b>
<b>Intermediate</b>	Week one	Week one - two	Week two
<b>Advanced</b>	Week two	Week two - three	Week three
<b>Primary</b>	Week three	Week three - four	Week four
<b>Six Specialist Educators</b>	Prior to observations (each completed separately)	Weeks four - ten	After conclusion of each participant’s observations
<b>Head of School (Founder - single interview)</b>	Week one	(entire school/campus throughout)	Week ten - after conclusion of all educator interviews

*Figure 4: Overview of Study Schedule*

## Observations

Instruction was observed across grade levels, as well as on a field trip and during specials classes including physical education, the arts, technology and Spanish. Observations took place over the course of approximately ten weeks primarily in October and November, with a few happening in late September and early December. In total, there were over 60 hours of observations (See Figure 4 above for details). I observed in each core classroom over the course of about a week and a half and each specialist educator for a few days.

Observations focused on evidence of whether or not program aspirations were realized in practice. Careful attention was paid to conducting observations at various times of days and days of the week. Additionally, when scheduling observations, I was mindful of schedule anomalies such as days immediately preceding or following holiday breaks. I coordinated directly with each participant to insure observations spanned the range of instructional practices. As outlined in Appendix F, observations focused on Creason's structures and pedagogy as intentions were informed primarily by school publications and educator interviews. I documented as many details as possible in my field notes, as well as personal thoughts and reflections. I captured physical elements of the learning environment, student and teacher interactions and both explicit and implicit pedagogical details. Finally, work samples (without personal identifiers) and other artifacts were photo documented when possible.

Throughout field observations, I did my best to conceal my role as a researcher. On the first occasion I was present in each classroom, the teacher would briefly explain to the students why I was there as outlined in the observation protocol (Appendix F). Typically, I would sit at a desk on the edge of the classroom and type field notes quietly on my laptop. Sometimes I sat adjacent the teacher's desk. I tried to be within ear shot of conversation without risking being a

distraction to learning. Many participating educators mentioned how students at the school are accustomed to having classroom visitors. For the most part, it seemed students were unfazed by my presence.

My observations were guided by a matrix I created as informed by the literature review (The complete observation protocol is in Appendix F). I realize that despite even the best efforts of objectivity, to a certain extent, observations were filtered through my personal values as a researcher who hopes the program is successful in realizing its aspirations. Each day post observations, I would read my field notes and reflect on whether I was observing the program as it is, or as I wish it to be in an effort to address potential personal bias. I believe in the power of positive thought and did find my attention directed to what was working in practice, perhaps at times missing tensions and shortcomings.

### **Artifacts**

In addition to conducting interviews and engaging in observations, I also collected data from artifacts. In each of the core classrooms, I was afforded the opportunity to review student portfolio binders that included work samples, as well as student reflections on their growth and learning. I took photos across campus when there was not a risk of it being considered intrusive. Artifacts reviewed also included school brochures, photo albums on display in the lobby, website, staff directory, rubrics, agendas, temporary art displays, sample assignments and student work samples.

### **Data Analysis**

I used a number of strategies congruent with Eisner's educational criticism approach to analyze the data collected. In addition to typing field notes and hand transcribing initial interviews, I also recorded my personal reflections throughout the study in a field notebook. This

strategy afforded time and space to reference the interpretive frame, reflect on the guiding research questions, make connections and craft new questions. Towards the end of data collection, I began annotating data. This was a purposeful choice to avoid premature identification of themes that might influence subsequent observations.

The choice to annotate rather than code data was strategic. Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye and Flinders state:

Coding qualitative data can take on a technical character, one that isolates phrases, counts their occurrence, and takes meaning from frequencies...A literary critic, for example, does not usually talk about coding a poem or text, but rather annotation. Educational criticism, rooted in the arts, may offer an alternative to coding that, rather than isolating phrases, focuses on the relationship among them in a complete picture (2016, p.57).

While annotations do not have to be structured to be effective (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016), I referenced three different types of annotations in the analysis process.

Global annotations support in examining an entire data set to see what stands out, pattern-finding annotations identify more refined themes and cross-checking annotations seek out potential discrepancies (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016).

The interpretive frame, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory, guided the research process throughout. The study yielded a significant body of data relevant to the research questions, so large that I consulted directly with Dr. Bruce Uhrmacher, Chair of American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Elliot Eisner Special Interest Group (SIG), on how to best organize data analysis. As a result, Chapter Four begins by sharing a narrative introduction to Creason and participating educators as gleaned from data. It also provides a brief overview of the organization of subsequent data analysis chapters; these are structured in line with Eisner's intentional, structural and pedagogical dimensions of schooling (1998 & 2017). Structural descriptions include how time is used, the types of activities students

engage in, how space is used, relationship structures, aesthetic details and other design elements. The pedagogical dimension of the learning environment describes both explicit and implicit learning. Interwoven among the rich narratives illustrating intricacies of the Creason program, I interpret the school's aspirations and practices as related to Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, social baseline theory and germane literature.

In Chapter Eight, I transition to evaluation and thematics. The goal of the evaluation is to shine light on previously unseen aspects of the Creason program and the gaps and tensions among aspirations and practices. Finally, I identify themes from the descriptions, interpretations and evaluation to make recommendations for other schools and educators serving gifted children. Here lies the potential for reform.

### **Researcher Role**

More than anything else, I identify as the daughter of two social-justice-oriented public school teachers. Despite wanting to be a teacher for as long as I can remember, both my parents actively tried to steer my career path in another direction. These efforts stemmed out of concern for my fiscal, physical and emotional health. Both were deeply aware of the increasing demands and decreasing support resources available to educators; neither wanted me to struggle to pay bills. Yet, here I am, entering this study as an educator who co-led the successful opening of a kindergarten through eighth grade school for gifted and creative learners, an educational coach and also the board president of Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG). I participate in the investigation as a research practitioner by conducting teacher interviews, classroom observations, documenting learning artifacts, collecting community communications, analyzing data, and ultimately, in providing feedback to The Creason School.

In high school, I graduated at the top of my class and successfully participated in an embarrassing number of sports and extracurricular activities. My most vivid memory of getting in “trouble” is when I refused to dissect a frog in biology class due to ethical objections. I held an illusion that this near pristine record along with my exceptional test scores would allow me to pursue my passion of teaching at a university of my choosing. But, I was abruptly introduced to a second *golden rule* – he who has the gold makes the rules. Our family could not afford many college application fees, nor travel expenses even when I was awarded significant scholarships.

My undergraduate coursework plan was efficiently designed so I could graduate in the least amount of time possible. My family’s laudable goal was for me to receive a degree. A college education was a vehicle to get a job where you could make enough money to breathe. While I did graduate from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in a little over three years with two degrees, I regret not being able to stay an additional year to get my teacher’s license. Working 20 to 40 hours a week in physically demanding jobs while carrying a full course load was tiring and I did not know anyone I could ask to co-sign for a loan.

This history makes me cherish the opportunity to do this work that much more. It influences every aspect of the research process. I desperately want every child to have what they need to thrive. I know what it feels like to have various aspects of my developing self supported and in contrast, am familiar with the painful weight of oppressive systems and abusive human relationships.

My heart still holds a vision I have had ever since I was little in which *every* child has what they need to experience a healthy, joyful and meaningful life. I know that world through my dreams and also the park where I grew up where I both participated in holistic, Waldorfesque programming in the summers, and then taught at when I was in high school and college. Most of

my free time outside school, sports and extra-curricular activities was spent in the park with neighborhood friends. The park was circular and here we grew up with a beautiful balance of free play and parental oversight.

Society can support the well-being of every child. After collecting data for this study, America's political landscape starkly changed with the 2016 election. This has me more committed than ever to doing everything within my capacity to work in the direction of my childhood dream. In this sense, I am as much activist as researcher.

### **Limitations**

Findings from this study will likely be most relevant to schools serving similar students in similar contexts. Furthermore, the research is inherently biased because it is my hope the study will meet the community partner's needs and support other educators in increasing their responsiveness to the unique strengths and sensitivities of gifted learners. Finally, the scope and duration of the study is limited. While careful attention was paid to ensure that observations span the range and diversity of student learning environments and that diverse educator perspectives were collected and integrated, this study is a small window into a complex program for complex students.

A less significant, but still noteworthy limitation is how my status as the president of SENG may have influenced participant engagement. This was not communicated proactively to participants, but a few made reference to my affiliation with SENG in informal interviews. Consequently, educators may have augmented responses to enhance positive perceptions of their abilities to teach gifted children. Statements made may reflect not only teacher perceptions, but also their ideas of what I wanted to hear. In addition, despite extensive diversity training, as well as education on how biases inform perceptions, it is still possible my personal biases towards

participants affected my judgment on a subconscious level. My reflections document my thinking throughout and how it may have influenced my interactions and interpretations.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided information on how this study was conducted. It discussed how educational criticism facilitates communication of the intricacies of the dynamic Creason program. The credibility of educational criticism is also addressed. Furthermore, this chapter included information about the setting, The Creason School, as well as how participants were recruited and selected. Finally, the closing section explained my role as a researcher, potential biases and foreseeable limitations of the study.

In the following four chapters I will describe, interpret, evaluate and analyze by theme various aspects of the Creason program in order to identify and communicate elements that support gifted student empowerment.



**CHAPTER FOUR: INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS**

*Image 1: School poster<sup>5</sup> displayed in hallway*

**Welcome to Creason**

After exiting the interstate, I drive through contrasting neighborhoods. On one side, there is relatively new construction - sizeable homes with clean, pristine exteriors, fitness centers and new restaurants. Then I pass a police academy, a street named after a prominent civil rights leader and the size of homes shrinks considerably. There are a substantial number of apartment complexes where laundry hangs from railings. Buildings are in a greater state of disrepair. There are more people walking the streets and a greater percentage of people of color. A block from the school is a 7-11 convenience store, one of my favorite places. I feel peaceful in convenience stores, connected to the neighborhood, to the people who live and/or work in the area. I have

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<sup>5</sup> School name removed

stopped at this particular 7-11 on many occasions before visiting Creason as it provided grounding into the school's surrounding community, a space for me to transition from my professional and family roles to a focused, mindful researcher role.

Today, when I drove into Creason's parking lot, a seemingly misplaced kestrel sat atop a skinny tree adjacent my car and the busy cross street. My entire life, hawks have come to visit me at important times, like life street signs pointing the way. The kestrel signals I am exactly where I am supposed to be. As I walk to the school's entrance, I pass a labyrinth and custom signs that read, "Learn Your Way" and "Far, Deep and Wide." A boy, about five years old, wearing shorts, a t-shirt and a hat with floppy ears, runs playfully crisscrossing his legs in front of each other, joyfully smiling ear to ear all the way from his parent's car to the front door. On my right, workers are busy transforming an old garage into a design lab space; this is essentially a workshop where students can use tools to create, much like in shop classes of the past. I pass a series of full-size, rainbow colored doors signifying the school's goal of "opening doors" for students. On the left are about a dozen raised, student planted garden beds with hand painted signs labeling the produce being grown. There is also a circular concrete pad surrounded by small rock clusters where adolescents converse. On the opposite side of the grounds, laughter spills from a small, traditional plastic play structure where children are running, swinging and climbing. I pass fall flowers and Buddhist prayer flags as I enter the building under a clear blue sky and blissful seventy-degree weather. The climate infuses serenity.

Here, situated in wealth and poverty, is a former prison converted to a school for creative learning. Welcome to Creason.

This chapter will provide an introduction to participating educators and an overview of the structure for subsequent data analysis chapters to facilitate understanding of what an empowering program for diverse gifted children feels like in practice.

### Meet the Teachers

The school is divided into three levels: primary, intermediate and advanced. Students in the primary program are typically the age of students in kindergarten through second grade. Students in the intermediate program are approximately the age of third through fifth grade students. Lastly, students in the advanced program are usually about middle school age. The chart below provides an overview of study participants and their position at Creason.

### Study Participants

Name	Position
Louis <sup>6</sup>	Head of School
Donna	School Founder and Dean of Students & Faculty
Grace	Lead Primary Educator
Mary	Lead Intermediate Educator
Angela	Lead Advanced Educator
Georgie	Arts Educator
Michelle	Spanish Educator
Ben	Math & Science Specialist Educator
Gayle	Physical Education Educator
Carmen	Design & Technology Educator
Joy	Student Educational Experience Designer (SEED)

*Figure 5: Study Participants*

As this study references Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory in the interpretive lens, the following introductory participant descriptions lend insight

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<sup>6</sup> All participant names have been changed to protect privacy.

into each participant's overexcitabilities. In my experiences, diverse and competing sensitivities are a common source of relational tension among gifted individuals. As social baseline theory teaches humans are wired for interdependence, awareness of and compassion for each gifted individual's intensified reaction to stimuli is critical to healthy community development. Furthermore, Eisner's work highlights the critical nature of the implicit curriculum, of how teacher behavior impacts student learning as much, if not more, than the explicit curriculum (2017; see also Ayers, 2001). The introductions to each of the participating educators below frames their sensitivities and overexcitabilities, historically seen by many as deficits (the *too*'s referenced in Chapter One – gifted individual's may be referred to as *too sensitive*, *too intense*, *too fast*, etc.), into strengths to transform thinking. Presence of over-excitabilities was determined based on observed behavior congruent with manifestations illustrated in Appendix A and my prior experiences administering and interpreting results of the OEQ-II, an overexcitabilities assessment tool. Introductions were also shared with participating educators to solicit their input.

Three common threads run through all participating educators: empathy, creativity and mindfulness. Every participant demonstrated these skills to an exceptional degree.

**Donna** (*founder*)

Donna feels like Gaia, mother earth. She is simple and complex; her appearance and attire are ordinary, but the way her mind functions is extraordinary. Upon entering her office, crystals hanging in the window overlooking the school's entrance radiate rainbow colors across the room. I am reminded of a conversation I overheard between a student and teacher about rainbows being the key to the universe. Donna's desk faces the window – in some ways, she is like the hawk perched on the parking lot tree. She is poised literally and metaphorically to watch

over the Creason school flock. In the room, visitors are greeted by a wall of books to address myriad interests and curiosities. In a short conversation with Donna, the depth of her insights quickly reveal her intellectual and emotional overexcitabilities. The aesthetics of the room's design reflect awareness of sensory sensitivities, there is something to support everyone in feeling welcome. Her wisdom, humility and capacity for complexity are revealed in her statement, "The answer to all questions at the Creason School is 'It Depends.'" Creativity science legend, Paul Torrance, teaches tolerance for ambiguity is a skill necessary for creativity (1979). Donna exemplifies this in practice. The fact Donna was able to realize her vision for a new approach to educating children is proof of both her imaginal and intellectual overexcitabilities.

**Louis** (*head of school*)

The first time I met Louis, I confess to having visited his LinkedIn page to research his background. I clenched when I saw he had attended Harvard's prestigious graduate school of education. Another colleague I had worked closely with in the past had attended Harvard and crossed a line from healthy grandiosity to narcissistic tendencies – this was a less than pleasant working relationship. As excited as I was about the school being a great fit for the research, I felt anxious about meeting its current leader given this prior experience. Louis surprised me. He is among the humblest, most transparent and bright school leaders I have met. His level of openness, genuine eagerness to learn and willingness to partner with people in the community to further the school's mission is laudable. A keen eye would recognize every one of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities in Louis within a short conversation. Outside school, Louis plays in a jazz ensemble with a social justice orientation. He practices what the school teaches with focused precision, yet remains in a learner's mindset reflective of the imperfection of the human

experience. At one point in our interview, he cried tears of gratitude for the opportunity to do this work. Louis is clearly living where his passion meets purpose.

**Grace** (*primary educator*)

Grace embodies her name: intentional, delicate and strong. She is stealth, quiet as a mouse who scurries for food crumbs unnoticed. This is how Grace moves among children. She is deeply empathic, in tune with each child in her care. Grace circles among students, engaging in deep, focused conversations with each. She asks probing questions to push thinking. The success of Grace's questions is visible in children's enthusiastic engagement. Often students are in such deep concentration they appear to lose sense of the world around them – this is sometimes referred to among creativity researchers as a state of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Like the mouse, her volume level is among the quietest I have ever observed among teachers. Grace's classroom has spaces designed for imaginative play, including a drama/theater section, where imaginational overexcitability is not only celebrated, but thoughtfully cultivated.

**Mary** (*intermediate educator*)

The first word that comes to mind when describing Mary is mindful. She lives in each moment. Her classroom feels like a nest preparing children to fledge. She has high expectations and compassionately pulls students outside their comfort zone to enjoy new perspectives. Mary balances freedom and discipline, "We have to be able to trust each other – that if I give you this freedom, you are still actually going to be on task." Her room is greened by plants connecting the indoors with the natural world, something that is also true for common spaces and many of the other classrooms observed at Creason. Wearing a t-shirt, cardigan and slipper style shoes, Mary is dressed to move comfortably and engage in messy learning should the situation merit. A sizeable green crystal hangs from her neck. All overexcitabilities can be observed in Mary's

instructional practices. From her deep intellectual curiosity, high emotional development facilitating strong student relationships, exceptional physical capacity as evidenced by her weekend outdoor adventures, to the imagination and creativity present in the co-architected student projects and the aesthetic sensibility of her classroom. Mary seems to thrive here.

**Angela** (*advanced educator*)

I felt an immediate connection with Angela when she started talking about animal totems. Within minutes of meeting, Angela explained to me that the honey badger is her spirit animal and that is why she had so many images of the witty creature posted around her desk area. She calls herself the “mean teacher”, but she is an angel in disguise, hence the pseudonym Angela. She connects with each of her students on an exceptionally deep and authentic level. After a decade in the field, I have an uncanny knack for being able to estimate scores on cognitive evaluations, intelligence or IQ scores. I sense them in my body as vibrations. Within moments of sitting with Angela, it is clear she vibrates wicked high and is likely at least .01% cognitively unique. As such, Angela has to be sly like the honey badger to survive. Others I have met like Angela who did not have honey badgeresque self-protection tricks have been tragically wounded or have left this world too soon having been built too sensitive for the current political reality. Positioning herself as “the mean teacher” among colleagues makes her intellectual prowess less of a threat. Towards the end of our first interview, Angela does confide that at least one of her own children has been identified as profoundly gifted, meaning his/her/their IQ score is north of the 99.9%. Angela reminds that all gifts are also vulnerabilities depending on context.

**Georgie** (*arts educator*)

Georgie beams. Her joy is supersize. I don't think there is a moment she is teaching that she is not smiling from ear to ear. In our interviews, expressions of gratitude overflowed.

Georgie is both on the go and in the moment, listening to children and adjusting. She pollinates students with love and play similar to a bumble bee. Students engaged in some type of improv practice during each class observed, truly learning how to be in dialogue with one another and their environment. Georgie is relatively short, but her posture and presence fill the room. She moves authentically, with rhythm. Bodies, minds, hearts and each sense come alive in Georgie's performing arts and music classes.

**Michelle** (*Spanish educator*)

Michelle is wicked fast; her brain moves in rapid fire connections and her mouth can communicate them just as quickly. Like other study participants, she is committed to growing her understanding of each individual student in order to best serve them. Michelle studies students like a scientist. She expresses gratitude for the flexibility she is given in her instructional art to meet students where they are and inspire growth. As a language educator, Michelle understands the links between culture, language and identity and supports students in practicing perspective taking. As a result of her high levels of overexcitabilities, she has keen awareness of her surroundings and floats among students asking questions to push their thinking while increasing their communicative capacity.

**Ben** (*math and science specialist educator*)

Ben is wise and gentle with high expectations. If he were a bird, I suspect he would be an owl. As one of the most tenured faculty, Ben also has familiarity with Creason's history and has taken part in the program's evolution. Ben's innovative and experiential instructional practices involve coaching students in assuming a teaching role with their peers. He asks thoughtful questions to invite new ways of thinking and likewise, expects students to challenge both him and each other. As a math teacher, he is challenged in a way some of the other teachers at



Creason are not; math was frequently mentioned among participants as more challenging to implement congruent with the Creason constructivist, self-directed and creative learning approach. Thankfully, Ben enjoys a good puzzle.

**Gayle** (*physical education educator*)

Gayle not only supports the physical development of Creason students in her role as a myg (gym spelled backwards) specialist, she led the launch of the core athletic extra-curricular offerings, including basketball and cross-country. Her high level of energy and giving to insure the program's success demonstrate how much she values Creason's unique approach and community, as well as her own psychomotor overexcitability. Gayle is fit, as would be expected among physical education teachers looking to model health and well-being. This is also the case for the majority of the Creason faculty; I suspect their overall level of fitness would exceed most teaching teams. Not only does Gayle support student physical development, but also emotional development. This is evident as she walks alongside students coaching them on how to move beyond self-perceived limitations.

**Carmen** (*design and technology educator*)

Carmen is passionate about her new position and the freedom she has been gifted in defining the design and technology specialist role. She is able to work with students across all grade levels to support with projects related to individual units, as well as other classroom projects. Carmen is also the go-to technology expert for many on campus. She shares resources and tools with teachers to support in growing technology literacy. Conceptualizing the role in this manner facilitates an understanding of technology as a vehicle to enhance collaboration and communication. This role enables Carmen to engage her intellectual, imaginal and

emotional overexcitabilities. Carmen teaches students to be learners by being one herself as evidenced when she taught herself how to use the school's new 3-D printer alongside students.

### **Joy (*SEED*)**

Joy is one of Creason's Student Educational Experience Designers. She has the unique task of orchestrating learning experiences in the extended community relevant to individual student units. Each SEED has access to a school van. Every year, each student at Creason enjoys at least one individually designed field trip related to their passions hosted by a SEED. This annual one-on-one experience engages the student with people of like-spirit in the learning community outside the school campus. As such, Joy facilitates student understanding of possibilities for how they can contribute in a world that needs them. Thankfully, Joy is intellectually, emotionally, imaginatively, sensually and psychomotorally over-excitable – without super-sensitivities, she would not have the power to weave instructional magic for diverse learners.

### **Organization of Setting Descriptions and Interpretations**

Setting descriptions and interpretations are organized in line with Eisner's ecology of schooling with emphasis on the intentional, structural and pedagogical elements (2017). The intentions relate to the programs goals and aspirations, the structural to the learning environment and organizational framework, and pedagogy to how teaching occurs (Eisner, 2017). About one third of the way into data analysis, I decided to separate two pedagogical elements, implicit instruction and dialogue, given observations at Creason and how frequently these aspects are overlooked in program and educator evaluation. Creason excels at these two critical elements so they are highlighted in individual sections for emphasis.

Each of the intentional, structural and pedagogical sections are organized differently to facilitate understanding. The intentional elements of the program are presented as communicated by school publications with focus on the goal of student empowerment and participating educators' interpretations of those objectives in line with the research question of "What are the aspirations of a program designed to empower diverse gifted youth?" The structural section is organized to align with aspirations in order to highlight potential gaps and tensions between Creason's stated objectives and the structural elements that would facilitate pursuit of said goals. Specifically, facilities, classroom design, aesthetics, the use of time and relationship frameworks will be illustrated. Finally, the pedagogical section is arranged by each of the primary, intermediate and advanced school levels within the Creason program, followed by specialist teachers and instructional leaders. In presenting descriptions and corresponding interpretations by level, I hope readers will gain insight into how the program manifests at different stages of student development. This structure is the same for both the implicit pedagogy and the instructional dialogue sections. Figure 6 below provides an overview of the organization of this study's findings which follow in the next three chapters.

### Structure of Data Analysis Chapters

	Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4	Section 5
Intentional	Why: The Mission	School History	Educator Interpretations of Aspirations	Who: The Students	How: Philosophy & Pursuit of Diversity
Structural	Facilities	Space Design & Aesthetics	Use of Time	Relationship Frameworks	N/A
Pedagogy - Implicit	Leadership	Primary	Intermediate	Advanced	Specialist Teachers
Pedagogy - Dialogue	Primary	Intermediate	Advanced	Cross Class Buddy Time	Specialist Teachers

Figure 6: Structure of Data Analysis Chapters

## CHAPTER FIVE: INTENTIONS

“Everyone is individual, and not compared to other students.

What does *this* student need?

What is *this* student interested in?”

(Michelle, Spanish Educator)

This quote represents how educators at Creason view their teaching craft. This section will grow understanding of why Creason exists, who it intends to serve, the intentions of the program and how those goals are interpreted by the educators who are tasked with implementation. In other words, it will answer the research question, “What are the aspirations of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children?” When opening the Creason marketing pamphlet, the first thing readers see is a quote by Ignacio “Nacho” Estrada, “If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn” (2016). While seemingly simple, this is no easy task. This statement embodies the discipline and flexibility informing the student-focused program design, discipline in studying children in-depth to understand what works and flexibility in instructional methods and modes of expression to meet students where they are.

### Creason’s Why: The Mission

The mission of the Creason School for Creative Learning is to provide an experience-based educational opportunity for gifted children of all backgrounds that allows each child to develop individually to his or her full potential. There are five basic values that help us create and sustain this dynamic environment:

- Empowering children
- Opening doors
- Fostering responsibility
- Fostering independence
- Fostering care and concern for others

(Creason, 2016, n.p.)

Creason literature defines *empowering children* as “the process of helping all children see that they have power, control over, and responsibility for themselves. In addition, this process helps children see that they are part of a diverse world and can be agents of change” (2016, n.p.). This definition honors the uniqueness of each student, while also growing awareness of their place in the world. There is no mention of gifted student sensitivities, or Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities, in the mission statement. Full potential is an immeasurable term; this makes assessing Creason’s success in realizing the mission a challenge due to the ambiguity.

Furthermore, there were nuances among participating educators’ interpretation of Creason’s aspiration of empowering diverse gifted children. The diversity in the ways educators conceptualize the school’s intentions is similar to the way each among us consumes the same piece of art or music differently. Importantly, the school holds space for the variance, honoring that words are never as black and white as society sometimes misleads us to believe. Given school leaders have a significant influence on program development, I begin here.

### **Creason’s Roots from the Perspective of School Leadership: The History**

When investigating the intentions of any program, it is important to explore its history and the logic informing the program’s inception as the past influences community development. When I first met Donna, the school’s founder, she said to me, “The answer to all questions at the Creason school is ‘It depends.’” This statement represents the school’s exceptional capacity for navigating complexity. When I asked Donna how Creason empowers diverse gifted children, she replied:

When I started this school, my idea was children were much better at educating themselves than we were at educating them. They knew themselves well, even if they could not articulate as an adult might about what something was or wasn’t or meant or didn’t mean, that they knew what worked for them, what gave them energy, what felt right and that if we let them do those things, they would be more engaged... Also, that as an institution we recognized that, what they were doing and if we gave honor and status,

support to what they were choosing, they would also see themselves as productive, as powerful, as empowered people going forward.

This aligns with the esteemed equity scholar, Paulo Freire's quote, "It is only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed which will be sufficiently strong to free both the oppressed and the oppressor" (1970, p.44). Donna's original intentions for Creason included teaching gifted children how to free themselves from oppressive systems, essentially breaking free from the restraints of society within a former prison building. I cannot think of a better place to teach liberation.

Louis is Creason's head of school. Louis' enthusiasm for the program is reflected in the length of his response to the same question. Themes weave through his words – inquiry, reflection, connecting students with primary resources, *co-architecting*<sup>7</sup> learning, affording access to true peers and validation of individual student uniqueness. He explains, "People don't like to use the word *special education* when you're talking about a gifted population, but it's special education. Special education is the best education because it starts with the learner, not the curriculum." When speaking of goals for empowering the students at Creason, Louis poses hypothetical teacher/student dialogue, "Is this your best work? If I gave you three more days, could you make it better?" He explains if the answer is "yes," then the project is incomplete. The goal is for students to bring their best selves forward.

Trust is key. Louis expands, "So I think for us, empowerment starts with trusting children and couching our egos a little because we don't know everything and it's cool for the kids to see that." This relates directly to Eisner's discussion of the implicit or hidden curriculum – students learn to be learners in large part by seeing educators engaged in learning themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Creason's terminology for their unique and collaborative instructional design process.

Additionally, trust is an indicator of relationship strength. According to Six Seconds, individuals who have well-developed skills of optimism, empathy and navigating emotions typically have high quality relationships (2016). A list of the skills comprised within the construct of emotional development can be found in Appendix B. The majority of study participants mention trust as critical to the pursuit of empowerment.

While Donna's and Louis' interpretations of the school's intentions honor the diversity and complexity inherent within the gifted population, they do not mention how gifted youth experience the world differently as related to overexcitabilities and Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration. Congruent with social baseline theory, Louis did speak to the positive impact of access to like-minded peers and how feelings of connection to community influence student outcomes.

### **Educators' Intentions Interpretations**

It's not ok for a child to go through life without any suffering, because the world does not treat them that way. And if they don't learn how to struggle and they don't learn how to stand up on their own, then they have a very hard time in the world. This is a really safe place to learn how to struggle and it's a safe place to learn to stand up or pick yourself up or lean on somebody else until you can stand or learn from somebody else a new way of standing up. This is a really safe place to do that.

(Angela, advanced educator)

Struggle and challenge was referenced as a program aspiration among many participants, including both the school leaders. Interestingly, this quote came in response to the interview question about the challenges or obstacles to empowering diverse gifted youth at Creason. Several participants spoke to how parents wanting to protect their children sometimes interfered with learning. Interestingly, affording space for students to struggle is a measure of learning and sometimes even trauma precedes personality integration and development (Dabrowski, 2016).

The words Louis pulls to articulate Creason's intentions above surface across the responses of other participating teachers as well. Following are a few standout quotes from lead teachers when asked how Creason empowers diverse gifted learners:

I think the most important thing is by trying really hard to recognize, celebrate and support kids for who they are and where they are without a lot of preconceived expectations so a child can be him or herself in the classroom and grow from there. I think that's the most important thing. And that, ideally, is something the child is crafting, developing and defining. It's not predetermined. - *Grace, primary*

The most prominent piece is that everything (self-corrects) – most – of what the kids do on a day to day basis comes from their choice...They are such intelligent and creative kids that I can't even fathom some of the things that they come up with... they have ideas that are far beyond anything we could come up with. Simply. It comes from them. They are the creativity. Why would I try and change that? - *Mary, intermediate*

What they are passionate about is good enough. Their best work, when it is their best work, is good enough...They are good enough. They don't need someone to tell them what they are supposed to think, they don't need someone to tell them the questions they are supposed to ask, their own questions are good enough. I think that is probably the most important thing that Creason does...By handing over the ability to be in charge of their own learning, both the positive and the negative, the responsibilities as well as the successes, it tells them that we believe in them in a way that a sticker or a grade never can. - *Angela, advanced*

Specialist teachers reiterate the messaging of the core classroom teachers. Gayle, the physical education specialist, states that Creason, "honors the individual." Ben, the math and science specialist says it another way, "It lets the gifted learner, the students here, be in charge of their own learning." For Georgie, a music and performing arts specialist, the key to student empowerment at Creason lies in learning how each individual student learns and taking a strengths-based approach, rather than focusing on weaknesses. This mirrors Angela's awareness of society's tendency to characterize gifted learners' sensitivities as deficits. In addition to the note above, the foreign language specialist, Michelle, states Creason meets each individual student where they are. A technology specialist, Carmen, one of the newest members of the



teaching team, talks about the *unprecedented* level of choice afforded students and teachers alike. Carmen's response was unique in that it indicated one of the intentions is to create space for unanticipated learning, "I think kids end up learning a lot of different skills than they intended at the beginning with their units, so they are empowered in ways I don't think they anticipate at the start." Last and perhaps most poignantly, Joy, one of the school Student Educational Experience Designers (SEEDs), compares and contrasts her Creason experiences with her work in other schools, "Other places that I have taught limit the potential, limit the distance you can go. At Creason, the student may reach their full potential, I have no way of measuring that, but there is no limit on how far you can keep going." Joy also eloquently speaks to a holistic view of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the distance between a student's current and emerging development (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010):

So you find that magic line, the learning edge, where it's not so challenging that you get completely disheartened, but it's not so easy that you kind of get bored. You try and find that for every kind of aspect in a fully educated, richly lived life and work at that place for each student. So that's a huge amount of diversity in individualization.

Figure 7 below provides a summary of participating educators' interpretations of the school's intentions. While there is validation for the uniqueness of gifted learners across participants, the advanced program teacher is the only participant who spoke clearly about how gifted children differ from other learners in terms of their intensified reactions to stimuli. Students cannot see themselves without a mirror (Gatto-Walden, 2016) and at Creason, teachers aim to see students through the lens of their strengths.

### Summary of Participants' Interpretations of Creason's Aspirations

Source	Response Themes
<b>Creason Community</b>	Provide an experience based education to diverse gifted children. Teach children they have power and responsibility in a diverse and dynamic world.
<b>Leadership</b>	Honor student uniqueness and facilitate self-directed learning with access to true peers, primary resources and extended community.
<b>Primary</b>	Meet students where they are and validate their authentic selves.
<b>Intermediate</b>	Listen deeply and afford choice. Enable youth to enact their ideas, to create.
<b>Advanced</b>	Validate student uniqueness and foster responsibility for learning.
<b>Specialists</b>	Honor individual students, afford choice and create space for unanticipated learning.

Figure 7: Summary of Participants' Interpretations of Creason's Aspirations

### Creason's Who: Defining a Creason Student

The head of school, Louis, clarified the teaching team talks about individual children, but does not spend much time explicitly talking about giftedness:

We do still have philosophical pieces that we're untangling. I think the gifted piece is never ending. It's like religion. It's like a never ending conversation and argument a little bit... In a school that does very little testing, it's weird that there's a test to get in.

Amy, the admissions director, spoke with me about the admissions process. She explained that the first step is for parents to come and see the program in action. She explained, "It's so different from what people have experienced, that describing it as non-traditional or progressive...they really don't know what that means." She also shared that other schools use the same language, so parents sometimes think they know what to expect, but are surprised to see how different the programming looks in practice at Creason. The words Amy uses as key to the Creason philosophy are *individualized* and *experiential*. Amy shared for most parents, the admissions process begins by attending a parent information session. Creason advanced level students lead campus tours and are encouraged to give their honest and open feedback on the program, and importantly, to be comfortable saying "I don't know," when they don't have answers to the questions prospective parents pose.

Applications include parent and student questionnaires, cognitive testing (including full written report, not just scores), work samples and a teacher recommendation. Amy explains Creason sees testing as a small window into how students take in information and express learning. There is no cut off score; however, most students do score north of the ninety-fifth percentile. Likewise, according to Amy, there is no guarantee of admission at a certain score level.

The admissions committee considers an entire body of data, and if students appear to be a good fit, they are invited for a classroom visit. Teachers record observations throughout and then make admissions recommendations. If the team does not feel a student is a good fit, Amy promptly calls the family and transparently explains why. All admitted students are sent invitations to enroll on the same day, which is also the same day all independent schools in the surrounding metro area make admissions offers.

To summarize, Amy says they are looking for evidence of the following when making admissions decisions:

1. Kids who are self-motivated at an age appropriate level
2. Students who see connections and look at the world through a different lens
3. Students who feel and experience the world differently (not better or worse)
4. Parents who are philosophically aligned

Amy indirectly referenced overexcitabilities, that gifted students see, feel and experience the world differently. What is fascinating, and unexpected, is preference afforded students with high emotional development. According to the first criteria shared, a gifted student who is low in the development of the skill of intrinsic motivation would likely not be a strong fit for the Creason program, nor would a student with challenging behaviors rooted in trauma.

Amy also shared some of the most commonly asked questions among families visiting the school:

- How do students do when they get to high school?
- What does a day look like?
- How do you know when a child is doing well?
- How does Creason communicate with parents?

Amy explains there is very little if any questioning of pedagogy. She feels a frequent question that parents have, but do not ask straight out is “What do you mean by gifted?” This is representative of the varying definitions that create tension in the field of gifted education as referenced in the first chapter. Amy also mentions how hard the Creason team works to proactively recruit and retain middle and low income families.

While there was little talk of giftedness among participating teachers, the Creason marketing brochure has four full pages explaining the differences between bright children and gifted children, debunking common myths and explaining how the Creason program addresses the characteristics of gifted children. The list of characteristics of gifted students in the materials are as follows:

- Are curious and have a strong desire to learn
- Have a long attention span
- Learn new ideas and processes quickly
- Like to question and express ideas
- Are extremely sensitive to fair play, honor and truth
- Prefer looking at the “whole,” rather than artificially segmented “parts and are able to think at advanced levels of complexity
- Has an advanced sense of humor
- Need to interact with mental peers

(Creason, 2016)

There are no citations to explain if there is a research-base informing any of these statements. A few of the descriptions on the list correlate to Dabrowski's intellectual overexcitability. The sensitivity to fairness, honor and truth relates indirectly to advanced socio-political development; however, I am unaware of any research connecting sociopolitical development to giftedness. The comment about "whole" to "part" relates to learning style, but could be considered misleading as not all gifted learners are visual spatial (Silverman, 2002). The section of the brochure that distinguishes bright children from gifted does reference qualities associated with not only intellectual overexcitability, but also imaginal, psychomotor and emotional. However, there is no mention of sensory sensitivities or characteristics of gifted learners with sensual overexcitabilities. As Dr. Gatto-Walden asserts, the higher the level of giftedness, the greater the probability an individual will demonstrate all five over-excitabilities, including sensual (2016).

### **Creason's How: Guiding Philosophy and Pursuit of Diversity**

Together, the Creason community has crafted a cogent philosophy statement:

The Creason School offers a unique learning environment for gifted children that stimulates academic accomplishment, critical thinking, and creativity while fostering peer interaction and personal growth. We believe that such an environment is most effective when a diverse community studies, plays, and grows together (Creason, 2016, n.p.).

Furthermore, Creason explains it realizes these goals in part by emphasizing process and critical thinking as guided by Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning (see appendix I) over content given the inability to predict what opportunities the future might hold for students (Creason, 2016). Publically available communication materials talk about nurturing inventive and creative thinking and behaviors.

Creason's diversity statement aligns with its philosophy and mission and explicitly states the program promotes diversity and pluralism encompassing: religion, race, gender, economics,

language, family structure, sexual orientation and disability “when a reasonable accommodation can be made” (2016). Creason articulates a quest to understand both shared characteristics and differences. The focus is on equity.

### **Summary**

The Creason program aims to honor children’s unique strengths and interests. It encourages questioning and exploration. Creason aspires to instructional practices responsive to each student’s developmental trajectory and to personally meaningful learning in the context of a healthy environment. It is unclear whether the Creason student population is representative of the diversity in the overall gifted population given the high expectations for emotional development upon admission. Not all gifted learners have high emotional development. The program expects educators to listen deeply to children and engage their individual strengths and interests. Students are held to high expectations and encouraged to bring their best selves forward each day. Creason works to balance individual student needs with the needs of the entire community. Program goals are not black and white, but rather afford space for individual interpretation in the classroom context. In this sense, the program’s aspirations are both simple and complex and require both discipline and creative freedom to realize in practice. Creason educators are expected to be learners, scientists and artists.

## CHAPTER SIX: STRUCTURES

Learning is always a creative act. We are continuously engaged in the art of making meaning and creating our world through the unique processes of human learning. Learning for humans is instinctual, continuous, and the most complex of our natural traits. Learning is also a key to our ability to survive in the environments that we create and that create us (Cajete, 1994, p.24).

The Creason community holds paradox and is often able to navigate seemingly conflicting concepts. Like the Cajete quote above reminds, we co-create the environment that shapes us. Creason educators have a high degree of autonomy in designing their own spaces, yet there are common threads that weave through all classrooms. Each classroom schedule appears simple if you look at a single day's agenda; however, coordinating schedules among classrooms, individually designed student units, with Student Educational Experience Designers (SEEDs), specialist teachers and environmental educators is complex. Likewise, while the aesthetics of the learning environment are warm and welcoming, students and teachers both are pushed outside their comfort zones daily. This section details the structures, including facilities, classroom design, aesthetics, the use of time and relationship frameworks that Creason utilizes to empower diverse gifted children.

### Facilities



*Image 2: Student Garden & Image 3: Decorative Flag Adjacent School Entrance*

The Creason School is located on a 13-acre campus. When driving up to the school building, there is a plastic play structure and swings on the left and a plain, unmarked field, about the size of a soccer field, with a few rows of bleachers, on the right side. There are four buildings in the shape of the letter “U;” the main building and entrance are at the center, or bottom. The playing field closes the rectangle. Upon entering on the left, is a smaller rectangular, one story building housing the cafeteria and after school enrichment programming. The main building in the middle is two stories high and also shaped like a rectangle, but with a courtyard in the center. Upon entering is the circular main desk with a small round table with a few comfy chairs where visitors can wait. The use of circles in community spaces is noteworthy as circles are implicitly inclusive. When children sit in a circle, it teaches that power should be shared equitably. Also on the main floor are the primary classrooms, arts classrooms and kids’ kitchen. On the second floor are the intermediate and advanced classes, as well as a small library, science lab and the deans’ and SEEDs’ offices. Set slightly behind the main building is a small garage that is in the process of being converted into a design thinking/maker space. Finally, on the right, is another building that is also one story, but with higher ceilings as it houses the gym and also a small theater for student performances. The main building is the part of the facility that used to house prisoners.

There is nothing particularly special about the facilities themselves. Throughout the main building are tile floors and standard fluorescent lights. The use of traditional lighting is particularly fascinating as it is not responsive to gifted students with visual sensory sensitivities or sensual overexcitabilities. The tables students sit at in most classrooms are the same kind one would find in most public schools across the country. Each classroom does have one or two sofas, none of which match. They appear to have been donated to the school or to have been purchased as budgets permitted. Every core classroom also has spaces for students to create and



innovate, places to engage their imagination. Creason had maker spaces before the Maker Movement was founded in 2012 (Maker Ed Website, 2016). Maker spaces are places that provide tools and supplies for students to design and create, including traditional art supplies and also industrial tools that might be found in a typical garage, including hammers, tape measures, pliers and screw drivers. Furthermore, the founder has amassed several collections for students to explore which include rocks, skulls, Legos, fossils and more.

Inviting children to make community signs, as shown in the workbench safety guidelines below, teaches students they are capable and their perspectives and insights are valued. Below are a few examples of spaces created for innovation in Creason's core classrooms:



*Image 4: Primary Workbench*

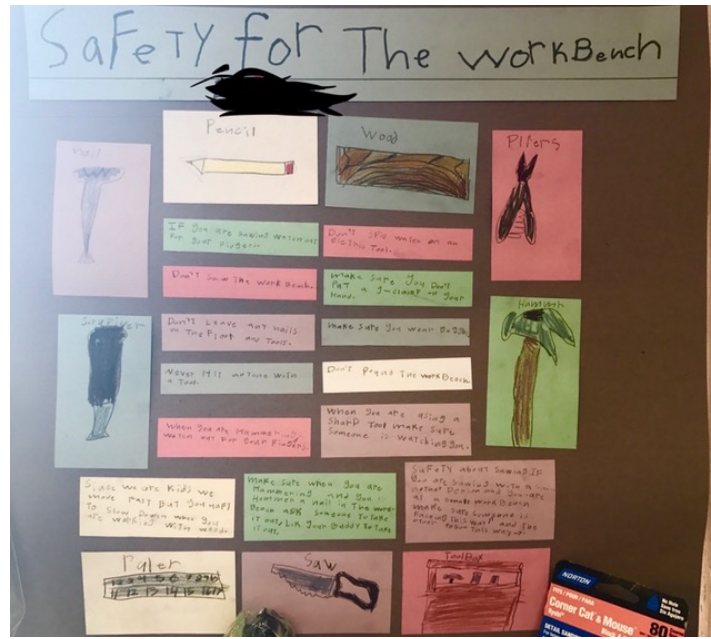


Image 5: Student Crafted Safety Sign (student name removed)



Image 6: Primary drama space



Image 7: Resource Room



Image 8: Intermediate Workbench



*Image 9: Advanced Maker Space*

In addition to providing spaces and supplies for students to create, including on-site gardens, labs, a publishing center, resource rooms and a kitchen, Creason insures the spaces are designed in a manner that facilitates collaboration. Specifically, most classrooms, including specialist classrooms, have more tables where multiple students can work together than individual desks

Each core classroom also hosts a space similar to a living room, where students can circle up in a warm, comfortable, home-like environment. Following are a few images of the spaces where teachers hold community meetings.



*Image 10: Primary Gathering Space*



*Image 11: Intermediate Gathering space (this is bordered by two sofas)*



Image 12: Advanced Gathering Space

**Space Design and Aesthetics**

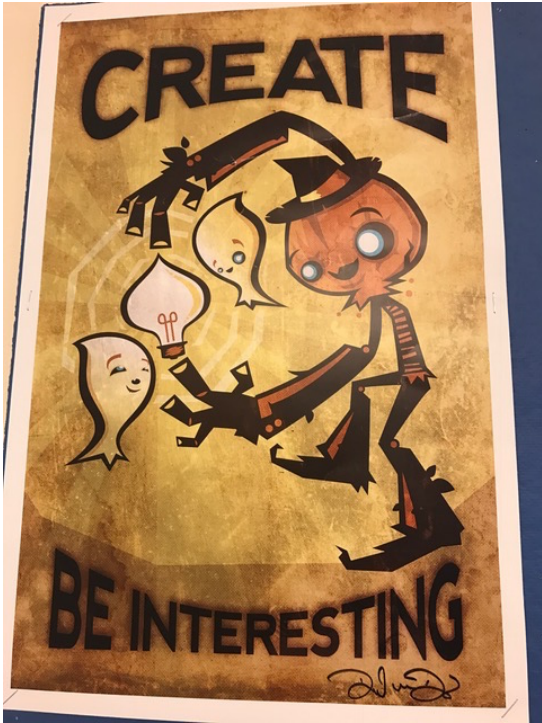


Image 13: Create Poster

When I entered the first core classroom where I conducted observations, one of the first things I noticed was a poster hanging above a display of science books. It reads “I pledge allegiance to the Earth and all the life which it supports. One planet in our care, irreplaceable with sustenance and respect for all.” On the teacher’s desk is a small plant growing out of a paper cup. There are several other large potted plants scattered throughout the classroom. The outside world is present within. On an adjacent table, is a basket of rocks. A big rock in the center is painted to read “I am present – what a gift!” It is surrounded by smaller rocks, each with a student’s name. There is a laminated sheet adjacent with several spaces labeled corresponding to spaces throughout the building including “bathroom” and “with a SEED.” This is the system for students to communicate with the teachers where they are without having to ask for permission to leave; students can simply move the rock with their name on it from the main basket to the location where they will be on the sheet. Congruent with stated intentions, this supports the development of trust and empowerment.

Following is an overview of the Creason campus and classrooms through the lens of Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities. Examples of how each OE may manifest are provided in Appendix A. Given gifted individual’s intensified reaction to stimuli (Dabrowski, 2016), the learning environment may have an even greater impact on their performance than for students who are less sensitive.

### **Intellectual**

The design of learning spaces at Creason enable reflection, sustained concentration and problem solving. The primary campus library space is smaller, with significantly fewer books, than most public school libraries. However, each classroom also has a handful of desktop computers where students have access to endless virtual research resources. As learning is

structured for each student via individual units to provide responsiveness to the depth, pace and complexity gifted minds crave (Eide & Eide, 2004), while also honoring the diversity inherent within the population, little is needed from an aesthetic point to facilitate this. In most classrooms, students can easily access their own co-designed curriculum, or individual units, in a hanging file folder or binder. To pursue individual aspirations, students work autonomously in their classroom at whatever work space best suits their needs. More often than not, this is sitting at a rectangular table with a few other students. Sometimes students work on the floor, while sitting on a sofa, in a maker space or even in a student built loft like the one below. Furthermore, students have freedom to move between work spaces and also to other parts of the building as needed. The implicit message is that students know what they need to learn best. In teaching children to listen to their bodies and inner knowing, or intuition, Creason educators grow student self-awareness.



*Image 14: Loft Built by Primary Students*

*(Individual student unit plans can be accessed in the hanging files in the box on the table.)*

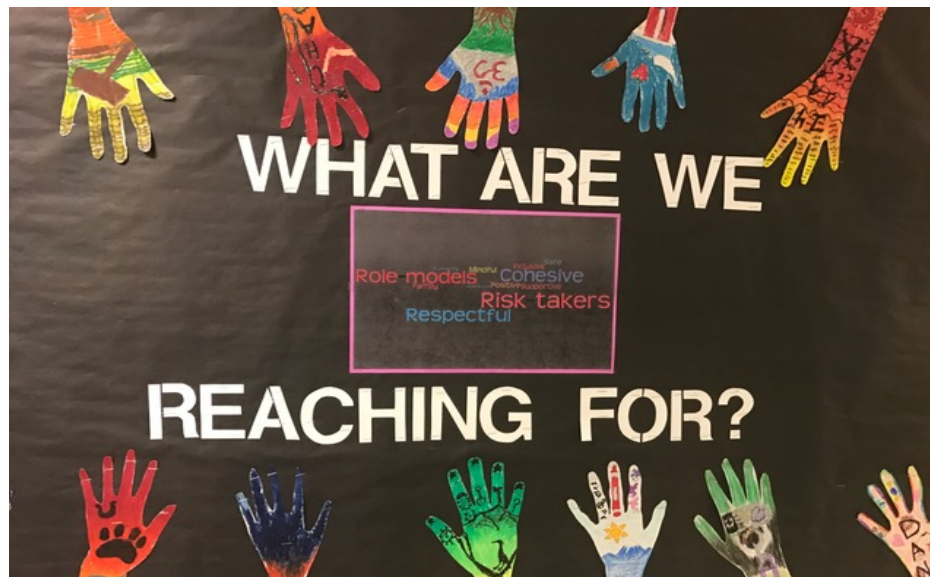


Importantly, spaces to feed intellectual curiosities are not limited to the Creason campus. Each student goes on at least one custom designed field learning experience a year with a SEED. Each of these community adventures relate directly to individual student interests which makes learning that much more meaningful.

As a researcher, the aesthetics of the physical space allowed me to be focused during interviews and observations. At the same time, the varied displays of student work sprinkled throughout the hallways and classroom walls sparked my curiosity. Some students might find the abundant visual displays distracting, but this is not something I witnessed during observations.

### **Emotional**

The aesthetics of a space can engage our emotions as illustrated by both the emotional and intellectual experience created in viewing student work samples. Threads of community and connection with the natural world are woven throughout many of the creations. Following are a few more publically displayed examples of student learning that tug at heartstrings.



*Image 15: Temporary Hallway Art*



Image 16: Hallway Wall Painting



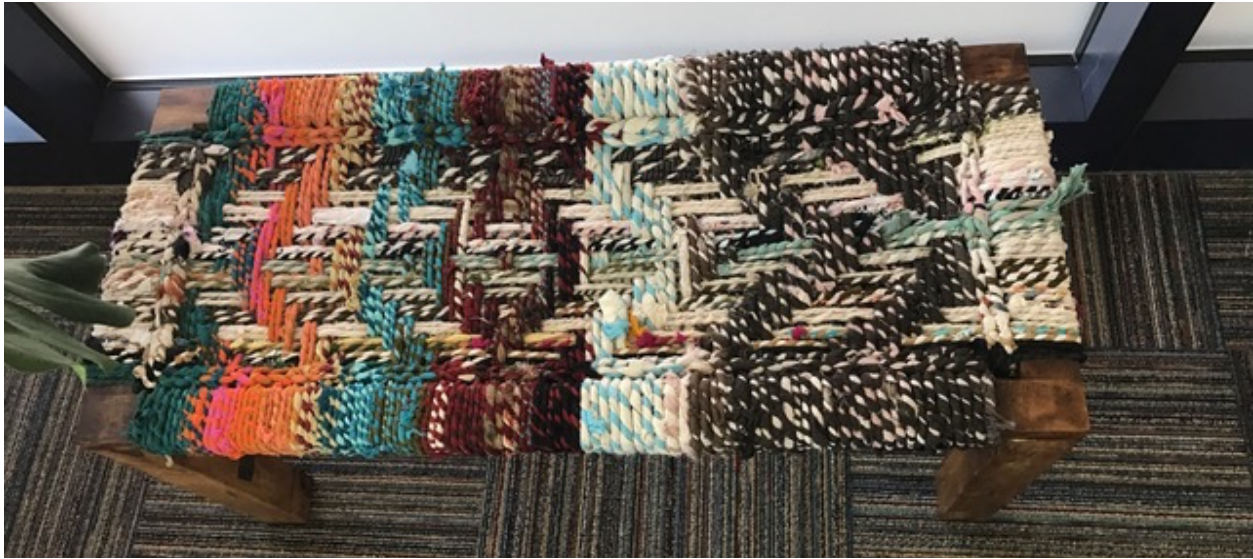
Image 17: Paper Eco-System Relief



*Image 18: Circle of Friends (shading covers photos and names)*

Students at Creason share their learning in a variety of spaces and through multiple modes of expression. This contrasts with many traditional school models where writing is valued more than other ways of communicating learning. Through these practices, Creason implicitly teaches inclusion. At the end of each unit, there is some formal communication of learning which students have a say in determining. In addition to what is displayed on campus, there is also an annual exposition where students across the school share their learning with each other, parents, other teachers and the extended community. Work products include: posters, books, sculptures, videos, models, talks, poems, mobiles, prototypes and more. The freedom in choice encourages exploration of the best fit communication mode for the specific learning objectives. It also fosters empathy in consideration of how the messaging might be received by different audiences. Students co-create the environment resulting in emotional connection to the campus. There are countless examples of spaces co-designed by students, both permanent, like the sculptures and

mural paintings outside, and temporary, like the chalk drawings on the sidewalk and bulletin board displays sharing current projects. Here are a few more examples from around campus.



*Image 19: Woven Bench*



*Image 20: Election Art*

Creative expressions often originate from strong emotions and likewise, yield emotional responses. In fact, Dabrowski found a high percent of gifted individuals in artistic communities in his work (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). The opportunity to view a rich variety student

projects had a profound impact on my emotional experience as a researcher. While there were no student participants in the study, seeing their artistic expressions of learning made me feel connected to both the students and the community. The diversity in modes of expression represented makes students and visitors with a variety of strengths feel welcome in the learning environment.

### **Imaginational**

Students' imaginations are sparked both by having a variety of spaces in the building where they are invited to create, and also by the abundant creative expressions displayed throughout as highlighted above. Beyond innovative project opportunities, students also observe their teachers and fellow students creating. Being in an environment that engages in creative behaviors regularly implicitly teaches students to do the same. While there are lots of tools and supplies to facilitate innovation, many of the spaces themselves are actually quite simplistic. Take for example the courtyard where primary students break for recess. It is essentially a rectangle of grass, about a third the size of a football field, with sidewalks on the short ends. In many ways, it is like a blank play canvas where students can invent their own games and engage in imaginative play. If there were more equipment, it might be a distraction to invention; the aesthetic simplicity encourages imaginative play.

In addition, posters like the one at the introduction to this chapter, "Create, Be Interesting" explicitly demonstrate how the Creason community values creative habits. Individual units, one of the pillars of the program, also engage educator and student imaginations.

### **Sensual**

The Creason School's creative approach to learning engages students' senses more than programs where the primary focus is on academic achievement. I find myself wondering how utilizing sensory sensitivities may enhance them over time.

The school is one of the quietest campuses I have experienced in terms of low volume levels throughout, which for someone like myself who has sensitivities to loud sounds, makes the learning environment particularly peaceful. In each of the core classrooms where I observed, students had access to noise cancelling headphones if needed. Moreover, students' ears for sounds are cultivated proactively through mandatory performing arts classes in the primary years and additional optional theater and music class offerings throughout their time in the Creason program.

In addition to auditory considerations, the lighting in a learning environment has a significant influence on behavior and achievement (Olszewski, 2017). It is my experience that gifted students with sensitive eyes are especially negatively impacted by fluorescent lighting. I shake after being in a room with fluorescents – it feels like someone is zapping me with a low-level Taser. Often I hear the lights buzzing too. My energy level is much higher after spending the same amount of time in a space with natural lighting. The entrance and lobby area at Creason are abundant with natural light; however, the core classrooms have overhead fluorescents despite many windows in most rooms. This is unfortunate because it makes the spaces harder to be in for those with visual sensitivities.

Some gifted students I have served get upset stomachs in response to strong smells, many of which are tied to either food or harsh chemicals. Fortunately, at Creason the cafeteria is in a separate building so food smells do not travel into classrooms. For the most part, the community is eco-conscious and seems to use more natural cleaning products as evidenced by discussions

overheard among teachers. The only place I noticed strong smells on campus was during instruction in the kids' kitchen during cooking activities. The sense of taste is related, but less relevant here. Like most schools, students are afforded the choice of bringing food from home or purchasing it at school. Students are also welcome to snack.

The last sense, touch, is enacted through kinesthetic learning opportunities that are woven throughout the program's creative learning practices. In some classrooms, students have the option of sitting on bumpy sensory cushions. Providing choice in work space allows students to identify what works best for them personally. The implicit message is for students to trust themselves. Finally, inviting expressions of learning through multiple modes, beyond traditional writing and speaking activities, encourages students to create with their hands.

It is easy to forget how a learning environment that is taxing on a student's sensory system negatively impacts their learning. While this has consequences for all students' learning, gifted students with an intensified reaction to stimuli can be even more negatively influenced by their environment (Gatto-Walden, 2016).

### **Psychomotor**

Students are afforded movement opportunities in their classrooms: They are permitted to work standing up, while sitting on a wobble stool or even on their knees on the floor. In addition, children participate in regular physical education courses to support physical development and optional athletic program offerings including volleyball, cross-country, basketball, soccer and ultimate Frisbee. Students also have movement opportunities during daily scheduled recess breaks. Physical development is realized through movement on the sports field, in the courtyard, on the playground equipment and in the gym. Most of these spaces are minimalist and similar to what would be encountered in most public schools. As an aside, it seems relatively few families

live close enough to the school to be able to walk or ride bikes to and from. I did not notice any bike racks nor people entering campus by means other than car.

Finally, a relatively less appreciated, but still relevant psychomotor expression is a rapid rate of speech. At Creason, many students and teachers can speak quickly. Here, people keep pace, where as in other learning communities, a Creason student or teacher might be criticized for talking too fast. As a researcher with a similar rapid rate of speech and thinking, the quick pace makes it easier for me to observe. In classrooms where the rate of speech is slower, it requires greater energy expenditure on my part to remain engaged in sustained observations. Slowing down is hard work because it is unnatural.

### **Use of Time**

In our first interview, Louis, the head of school, told me about his time as a Latin teacher and how many people misunderstand the origins of the word *sacrifice*. He explained people often think the word is about what we are omitting, but rather its roots are tied to that that which we make sacred, to what we prioritize. This is highly relevant to the use of time at Creason. As a community, Creason has decided to make individual student units sacred. This means a good portion of instructional time is set aside for students to have uninterrupted blocks to advance through their co-architected, individualized curriculum. Louis explains after individual student units, the school has a motto, “trips trump.” This is in reference to the SEED designed off campus learning experiences. No matter what is happening in the classroom, be it an assessment or student led presentation, participating in field-based learning comes first.

Most daily schedules include some combination of unit work time, a specialist block where students participate in elective classes (please see Appendix J for examples of offerings), math, lunch, recess and circle time. Classes also participate in full class units, many of which are



coordinated with environmental educators and include full class field trips. Teachers have autonomy to design daily schedules as long as they coordinate with elective and math offerings which becomes increasingly relevant as individual student math needs become more diverse as students age. In the advanced classes, it is not uncommon for students to be spread across six or more math groupings with various teachers outside the core classroom.

### **Relationship Frameworks**

At Creason, students call their teachers by their first name. The strength of relationships among teachers, students and parents is a priority. As Louis, the head of school, would say about kids:

It's trusting them first which allows them to trust us, but then themselves which obviously is the most important part. Building trust between teachers and children is a challenge, but has more to do with the environment we create for the children than their ability to trust.

What is most notable is the diversity in relationship structures. The head of school role is not conceptualized in the same hierarchal way as a traditional school principal. Louis serves as a teacher, facilitator, learner, parent and administrator at Creason. As such, Creason takes a distributed leadership approach where power is more equitably distributed among educators in the building than in familiar principal leadership structures.

Furthermore, educators at Creason act as instructional coaches and learners as much as teachers. Relatively small class sizes of fewer than 25 students each, supports educators in getting to truly know each of the children in their care. There is very little direct instruction. The art of teaching at Creason is incongruent with images of teachers society presents in the media where a teacher stands in front of students sitting in desks. Given the diversity in student interests and individually designed curricula, there are high expectations for collaboration among educators. To realize the program, teachers need to be able to partner with one another and also

the extended community. Each lead core classroom educator is partnered within an associate teacher for support.

Likewise, students learn to innovate by both watching the adults in the building engage in creative practices and being afforded spaces and tools to create. Self-awareness is cultivated not only by honoring each child's genuine self, but by celebrating individual student strengths by affording leadership opportunities – from participating in the annual exposition, publishing a book on a topic of interest for other students to read, producing a video and more. Students lead. Each person in the Creason community is a learner, teacher and leader. Furthermore, there are high expectations for behavior. Michelle, a Spanish teacher, says:

The school has always been about respect and responsibility and students are held to a very high standard - you just don't get away with whatever. When things happen, they are dealt with really swiftly so students are held to this high standard of how they interact with their peers, with teachers. So that has really struck me since I have been here, how these students are such neat people going out into the world, more so than other places that I have seen because it (Creason) fosters this warm environment for growth.

The diversity in roles among community members develops perspective-taking and strengthens relationships; this is integral to both individual student well-being, as well as the community as a whole. It also relates directly to social baseline theory; we need connection to thrive. In experiences with gifted adults, I have learned some have limited relationship role diversity; some are only comfortable being in the power, or helper, role in relationships which results in imbalance. The diversity in relationship structures among community members at Creason facilitates interdependence.

### **Summary**

School structures have a significant impact on student development and aligning structures with intentions accelerates progress (Eisner, 2017). At the Creason campus, various design elements support empowerment goals. This includes the extensive use of circles which

implicitly communicate inclusivity. Furthermore, by providing each classroom access to maker type spaces, students can use a wide variety of tools and supplies to innovate and express themselves. For the most part the learning habitat was mindful of student sensory sensitivities; however, the use of fluorescent lights is not ideal. Evidence of the natural world within the classroom coupled with extensive field-based learning opportunities connect Creason students to their physical world and extended community. Overall, the variety in work spaces at Creason accommodates a wide range of learning preferences and needs.

In inviting students to self-report their whereabouts, educators communicate trust. Alternating teaching, learning and leading roles among community members develops perspective taking, strengthens relationships and facilitates interdependence. Multi-age classrooms allow teachers to have more time growing understanding of individual student complexities. In addition, the use of time communicates school values. Instructional time is invested in educator / student co-designed units that are responsive to diverse individual interests, as well as depth, pace and complexity needs. In summary, the Creason facilities are similar to those encountered in the majority of public schools. It is the use of space, allocation of resources and relationship structures that are unique.

The descriptions and interpretations of Creason's structures in this chapter included facility details, how time is used, relationship structures, the sensory experience in the environment and how spaces are co-designed. The next chapter will explore The Creason School's pedagogical practices.

## Chapter 7: PEDAGOGY

Most of the problems in schools that we say affect children, we created. And we are trying to fix what we created. If we only created an environment that was less hostile, for lack of a better term, to children, then we would have less problems to fix. When we think of the whole sweep to bring mindfulness into schools, I'm not against that, but it seems first, start with the mindlessness.

(Louis, head of school)

To this end, one of the primary acts of mindlessness in schools is following a set curriculum that financially benefits publishing companies and narrows the definition of success. More often than not, canned curriculum exerts power over students by insisting on an appropriate learning destination without ever having a two-way conversation with the individual whose learning it is supposedly intended to benefit. As such, pre-packaged curriculum often maintains the unjust status quo. Instructional dialogue shares power with children to co-create a vision for a more peaceful society where each human being is honored for their uniqueness.

This section relates directly to the research question, "Are those aspirations realized (or not) in practice?" Setting descriptions and vignettes crafted below are informed by multiple data points to illuminate pedagogical artistry. For each the primary, intermediate, advanced and specialist classes, I reviewed field notes, interview transcripts, my own reflections, as well as annotations. The narratives included here are representative of both typical instructional practices observed throughout my time on campus, as well as anomalies, both of which provide a window into the intricacies of Creason's instructional program. Events are interpreted through the lens of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory. Importantly, descriptions lend insight into Creason's unique process where curriculum is co-designed in partnership with students and is to a degree emergent as instruction unfolds in a dynamic environment with educators and students who are complex by nature.

### **Pedagogy: The Implicit**

The implicit, or hidden curriculum (inclusive of educator behaviors), has more impact on students than we realize (Inlay, 2003). Data informing this section comes from teachers' responses to the second interview question, "How does Creason empower you as an educator to reach your potential?" and instructional observations.

### **Leadership**

Beginning again with the leadership team, Creason's founder, Donna, concisely explains, "How Creason empowers children, it is also exactly the same for adults. It's for people. It's not because you reach a certain age it is no longer true." She continues:

It's a place that allows me to be who I am, to try things that are new, to lean on or get support from many other humans who can add to or give me suggestions or support in looking at things. It allows me to spend my days doing what makes me feel good and it makes me also...put more into it. It's the same circle as it is for the children. It's that what I do is valued. I grow just like the children in that I take my passions, I try some things, I see how they work, I evaluate them, I talk to my peers, I get support, I do the next thing. I think it's how people learn. And so I'm just a people. Bigger, but just a people like the other folk.

Donna is keenly aware that learning is a dialectal process among humans. At the same time, she grows community by focusing on the development of diverse individuals within rather than emphasizing social development, which per Dabrowski encourages assimilation and self-distancing (2016).

Donna also contrasts the Creason learning environment with her experiences in public school environments:

Well, if you have ever been in a public school, then you have, you gotta understand what a crappy place it is for human beings to be, little ones and big ones. And it is usually a pretty poor place to be because it is sort of castrating. It's sort of the opposite of empowering. It's kind of immobilizing.... the world is a constantly evolving place that is not always friendly to children and other living things.

Interestingly, like other individuals with potential for advanced development, Donna experiences public schools through the lens of her own OEs and in her case, advanced level of sociopolitical development. Herein lies the critical difference between social and sociopolitical development – social development asks individuals to aspire to norms based on current inequities while sociopolitical development invites people to work to transform unjust systems.

Like Donna, Louis demonstrates a high level of sociopolitical development. By being agents of change in their community, Donna and Louis teach children through their own actions how to do the same. Louis speaks in depth about how he feels empowered by Creason:

Oowfff! Are the tissues nearby? I left education once because I was burned out when I was young. But I almost left education twice or thought about it. Once was during graduate school when I was in special education because I was like “Wow - this is the good stuff!” Because it is about the kid. It has always been frustrating to think of “Let’s graph this curriculum onto the kid. Or let’s find a hook...” The reason you had to have a hook was because the class was no good...It was a weak attempt at not admitting the problem was the core of what we were offering.

Louis continues to explain how it feels “Twilight Zoney” to be the head of school in a school that actualizes child-centered instruction. He poses a hypothetical conversation between himself and the extended community:

Louis: Well here’s the school, they’ve been doing this (*referencing child directed instruction*) 30 plus years!

Community: That doesn’t work.

Louis: Yes, it does.

Community: Well you have a gifted community, it wouldn’t work here.

Louis expresses excitement to be in a new chapter of Creason’s story where he can continue to grow as a practitioner and help others realize how these instructional practices can be replicated:

To be able to be an agent of change is exciting. I always joke with friends, I feel like I have my superhero cape in my trunk, there is a part of me that still wants to save the world and I feel like my version is to educate. To have the opportunity to not only help 250 kids, in rotation every year, but to think, “Wow! Donna Layton (founder) is a

national treasure. People may not know it, but she is.” And so part of what is going on for me is this opportunity to shine a light on that, but also light fires because that will only help other kids.

When I think about starting in DC public schools where I was a lab teacher with 30 plus kids in a classroom, it’s so clear many more kids would have come to school if they could have studied what they were interested in. And while we didn’t have the money for SEEDs and unit field trips to get off campus, we did have a phone. We could have called Midas muffler guy and said, “Can you spare 20 minutes on Thursday at 2pm to talk to this kid about engines?” (*Midas Guy*): “Sure, whatever. You’re in walking distance, come down to the shop.” People are eager, which is another why this model works, to educate children. There are a lot of people who say I would have been a teacher but I can’t afford it. So when you call them and say, “Can you spend an hour with a child?” They’re like “Phew – yea, of course. Gladly!” And so what it allows me to do as an educator is to solidify some of my ideas about learning, but also be a part of change. And every time I see a crime committed on the news I am like, what were they like in 6<sup>th</sup> grade? When they were 12, what seat were they in? Were they honored? Because at a certain point, when you are not honored and feel like you have nothing to lose then you just get it wherever you can. I just feel the mental health implications of a failing education system are really a big part of this.

I don’t think it’s these quick fixes, “Let’s flip the classroom!” I don’t think these things are really the answer because we have been doing those kind of quick fixes for years. I think what’s happening to education now is the wheels are coming off because we have not been doing it right. Now it’s really not working and we have to retool. I am hoping that there’s an opportunity to be part of that conversation for the good of everyone.

As illustrated in the introduction to Louis earlier in this chapter, he has a high level of imaginational development. This is invaluable in the endeavor of growing innovators and agents of positive change as it models innovative behaviors. Teachers teach students to be creative by engaging in creative practices themselves. Louis is also a musician. Most study participants shared about creative endeavors explored outside school hours at some point during our time together.

### **Primary**

Grace, the core primary teacher study participant, directly correlates her empowerment to her students’ empowerment:

In similar ways to the kids. The kids have a lot of avenues through which they can grow and learn and that's true of the adults here as well. I have my classroom, I set it up the way I want to. We have some sort of basics things that make a Creason classroom a Creason classroom, but really each teacher interprets that in his or her own way. We have a lot of latitude to do whatever we think will benefit kids in the class, individual students. As Donna says, "Whatever works." Whatever resources we can find, whatever methods. In having that kind of flexibility and support, I feel very trusted. Professional. I can find all kinds of different resources and methods, but also it is just fun. It's creative. Like the kids, I can be who I am in the classroom. I don't put on a different personality or a different voice that I hear teachers do sometimes. I can be who I am in the classroom as a person as well as a teacher. I'm not leaving things I believe at the door because I have walked into a particular kind of school setting. I think an important piece of Creason is crafting learning together. The kids bring their pieces and I bring my pieces and Joe (associate) brings his pieces and others throughout the school; there are so many adults involved and other students as well, buddies. There is so many people involved that the kids get a really well-rounded experience. As a teacher, I have amazing resources available, like a huge web. All the resources here and then all those people have resources. It's a pretty amazing support system.

Grace names one of the core tenants of empowerment as the ability to bring one's authentic self to the classroom. This capacity relates to the emotional skills correlated with self-awareness: emotional literacy and recognizing patterns (Six Seconds, 2016). Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize and appropriately express our emotions and recognizing patterns, awareness of our own habitual reactions (Six Seconds, 2016). Growing self-awareness may be more of a challenge for cognitively unique gifted learners (Gatto-Walden, 2016).

In addition, Grace speaks to the importance of dialogue and how an element of instruction is emergent. Each member of the community is a learner and teacher and is autonomous in the context of tribe.

### **Intermediate**

Mary, the lead teacher, reiterates the strand of trust that weaves through instructor responses as related to feelings of empowerment:

I think that there are a couple pieces to that. One is that the higher ups here, whatever you want to call them, there is the dean of students, then there's the founder and our administrators, they hire people that the really trust to make good decisions. And so, there's a



lot of freedom in the sense, “We think you’re intelligent and know what you’re doing, so go let yourself be creative.” And so to give you that space to say umm you know “We trust that you are going to have good ideas.” It makes you feel like ok, now I can really run with my ideas. And I think when you give a person, a child, that trust they then feel more safe to take more risks. So there’s that piece. And then I also think the other thing is everybody in this building feels that way and so we share a lot of ideas.

She describes how collaborative the unit planning process is, how all teachers are aware of each other’s students’ units and openly share ideas and resources in manner that exponentially increases learning among educators and students alike. The palpable collaboration among educators models for youth how to positively partner with one another.

Mary continues sharing how the environment and structures at Creason also support her empowerment:

I think a lot of it is the resources that we have. There is literally no ceiling (*points up to show there are no ceiling panels and giggles*). If a kid wants to build whatever... a wagon... we figure out how to build that wagon. There are endless supplies. You know, Donna, the founder, has closets full of, some ridiculous amount of skulls to look at. Just real collections of things. She has moon rocks, she has every rock you could ever imagine, so we have in building masters as well. It’s all about those first, primary resources. How can we get our hands *ON*? The school does a really good job of having those resources or going out into the world and finding them and that’s really supportive. Big time.

Mary describes empowerment in a manner similar to the definition of spiritual development, in connecting children’s unique inner worlds with opportunities to engage in meaningful learning and action.

### **Advanced**

In the program for advanced students, which equates to approximately sixth through eighth grade in traditional school models, the lead teacher explains how the balance of freedom and expectation of self-discipline enable her to bring her best self forward:

They let me do it my way and they don’t tell me how to do it. They tell me ways I can do things better. Sometimes. Sometimes they just give me opportunities that are beyond what I am capable of and I learn that way. Kinda like what we do with the students. They trust me

and they respect me as a professional. That's nice. Because it doesn't happen everywhere or anywhere, but it happens here.

Both teachers and students engage in self-directed learning guided by high expectations; having a compassionate community net to catch you if you fall makes it easier to leap, to try something new.

### **Specialist Teachers**

Specialist teachers radiate similar thoughts. Joy, one the school's Student Educational Experience Designers, or SEEDs, talks about how this role is a particularly good fit for her learning needs as a multi-potentialite, someone with aptitudes that span multiple domains:

*(Laughs)* Well I have a very short attention span and I am easily distracted so this is the best job. In the way that I like to function, this is totally selfish. From childhood, I like to work really hard on a project for a limited amount of time and then I'm done with it. That worked really well because I was in theater for years. You work really hard in a show, make this great community and then you are kind of done and move on to the next one. I'm insatiably curious and have this attention tendency so I can dive deep for a period of time and then I get, I don't know, oversaturated in a certain area. So being a student experiential education designer (SEED), I get this great list of topics, like a surprise package in the fall and then I open each one and dive in and find out everything I can about it. And find all these cool people and I get so excited. And then we do the field trip, we do some follow-up and then I have another project to work on so it empowers me. As a teacher I have the trust of the administration and the students and the core teachers that I'm going to be able to provide a rich experience for each student and the freedom to organize the time for that to happen. Which you have seen for us to meet is logistically challenging *(laughs)*. But I also get to teach a math class which, you know, I did grow up from a child with no attention to someone who can sustain so I like having the community of the classroom and building a relationship with a group of students to explore a particular topic over a time, but I think if I was just doing that, I would not feel empowered. I would feel pretty stifled and suffocated after a short while.

Joy's wonder and gratitude cultivates and validates the same among her students. She excels at optimism, a skill linked to achievement and well-being (Freedman, 2010). Her stance as a learner is visible in her focused interactions with students at Creason. She treats students as peers. Joy's strong relationships result in students listening deeply when she provides sage guidance.

Like Joy, Georgie, one of Creason's arts teachers, sparkles with enthusiasm and positivity when sharing about Creason and how much she loves her job:

Oh! It's a dream true! When I first started here I had never had my own classroom. I'd done a lot of teaching. They let me think outside the box and create a lot of programs that are exciting for the students, in ways that engage them. For instance, making music videos. I'm writing a murder mystery right now. The Cabaret is something I came up with where kids bring their own songs that they want to do. They just let me think outside the box and do wonderful things with the students.

Georgie's joy and the roots of her empowerment are in the process of creating and enabling students to do the same. Like with the other Creason educators, Georgie's OEs normalize the students'. Creative practices support healing (Barron & Barron, 2013) and subsequently, the transformation of sensitivities into power.

Normally one does not think of physical education teachers as creative, but here, the name of the program is even unique – it is *myg* or gym spelled backwards. Having been in the role for some time now, Gayle, Creason's lead myg instructor, shares that one of the ways Creason empowers its teachers is by promoting their self-care:

I know I need to use my personal days because I get really tired because it's a lot of work (*giggles*). I think just seeing what everybody else is doing empowers me to see how hard everybody works. It's not, I should not say it builds competition to do better, but I think it's just seeing that "Hey, that's working for that person - I need to try that." Some kids just take a lot of work and we need to spend the time and energy on it.

Gayle recognizes all the time and energy invested in getting to know and customize instruction to students reaps immeasurable benefits. She expresses how strong relationships among teachers at Creason facilitate sharing of information about students that empower each educator to deepen their understanding and ultimately better care for each child. This said, during our interview and a few times during observations, Gayle appeared fatigued. She slouched at her desk during our interview. The physical demands of this position are high, even for someone with physical strength and stamina.

Michelle, one of the foreign language specialists, is unique among participants in that she mentions Creason empowers her by supporting her family:

So I can have a full life with my family and also be doing something that I love, working with these students. There is a ton of autonomy that teachers have. I recently read a book on the smartest kids in the world, about where is education working around the world. In Finland, they (*referencing teachers*) have a ton of autonomy with their students. It's more of a profession where teaching colleges are where people want to go. Basically, we have a lot of freedom as teachers.

Michelle spends a fair amount of time with her students in the classroom size kitchen on campus at Creason – she feels she can teach students practical vocabulary in this experiential setting while also introducing cultural pieces. Michelle recognizes this is something she would likely not be able to do if her class size was larger. She also feels empowered through the process of instructional design:

I think that is the ability to create your own curriculum instead of going by a set, “This is the text book we are using this year.” We are able to meet the class where they are at. We teach to the class, not to what we think, not to a specific curriculum...It's a dynamic process. It's not something that every year we do this exact same thing...The overall freedom that we are given as teachers and then opportunities to learn and grow as teachers. It's not this bureaucratic feeling place. These are all very smart, passionate, professional people and that is how we are treated in every meeting and in all the communications. So it's a pretty neat community to be working in.

Like Angela, Michelle has an exceptionally rapid rate of speech. She is among the fastest two percent of talkers I have ever met. The fluidity of Michelle's ideas, questions and connections demonstrate her intellectual, psychomotor and imaginal overexcitabilities. Interestingly, while Michelle mentioned part of her feelings of empowerment at Creason are tied to having enough family time, at the end our initial interview, she mentioned her own young children do not attend Creason because their family cannot afford it and feel uncomfortable having to navigate the tuition assistance process as they feel their financial needs are not as high as others in the local community. While this is evidence of Michelle's empathy and high emotional and

sociopolitical development, I wonder if she would feel more empowered if there was a tuition remission program for faculty.

Carmen, a technology specialist teacher at Creason, talks about the freedom of self-expression and to explore new learning opportunities:

We have a lot of freedom here to be our full selves; however nerdy that might be in my case. I really have the freedom to design my own day, whatever that is going to look like. If I want to spend time putting together a newsletter of resources for teachers, I can do that. If I want to become a Google certified educator, I have the support to do that. I did that. I have the freedom to tell teachers how I want to meet with kids, how I want to make that happen and what partnerships I want to do. Really, there are things that people bring to me that we figure out, but for the most part I am very much allowed to craft my own vision for what this job is supposed to be. It's still evolving and I think that is a good thing. It can be a lot of different things. And I think teachers are encouraged to share and collaborate and be friends outside this professional environment. To also appreciate we all have these past lives. We moonlight in a lot of different ways. What are the individual gifts we all have as humans, not just as teachers.

Creative habits permeate.

Last, Ben, a math and science specialist teacher who is a proud, long-tenured Creason faculty member, summarizes much of what others have said. Simultaneously, he highlights one of the primary program tensions, utilizing a creative approach in math and science instruction.

It's a very similar thing in that there is a lot of autonomy. So, I choose for the science classes, I choose what I want to teach by thinking about what the kids would like and it still follows the kids following their passions because they are elective science classes. They sign up if it sounds interesting to them. It gives them exposure then to things that the student wouldn't otherwise perhaps choose through their unit. Now we went back to the student. But that's where it always has to come from. My empowerment is I have a lot of latitude and autonomy to do what I love. Then I do unit support as well. So teachers will come to me and say, "I have got this kid with a unit on... see what you might think would be good. So I get to create, "Oh I think this will be really cool for the kid!" and then I get to create and to talk to the student and say "Does this sound like something you want to do? So let's do this together." So I'll dissect a sea star. For chemistry units we will do certain experiments that I think will really jazz the students up. So I have a lot of autonomy and chances to be creative. Math I have a little less autonomy. We are following an algebra curriculum. But we take our time through Algebra one, we do it in two years instead of one and so we have more time for applications and "Oh this sounds really cool for the kids to be doing in algebra rather than let's get through Chapter Six. But "Wow, this system of equations, what can we do to show that these are really cool things."

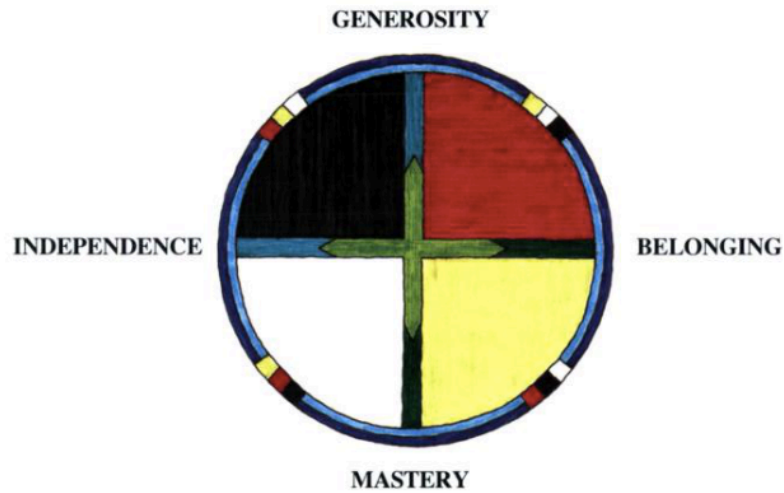
**Summary**

While there are commonalities among participant responses, there is also beautiful diversity. Ben mentions autonomy twice – every participant uses either this word or a related word, such as freedom or choice, when explaining how Creason empowers them as educators. References to being part of a strong community and feeling supported in pursuing new learning opportunities were also associated with feelings of empowerment.

As the educators at Creason are gifted and feel they can be their authentic selves in the classroom, they validate the experience of being outliers. In addition, each teacher at Creason innovates and engages in creative practices daily; this models positive risk-taking and moving outside one's comfort zone. In being learners themselves, teachers teach children to learn. Herein lies the purpose of school.

**Pedagogy: Instructional Dialogue**

A few months after data collection was complete and initial setting descriptions were drafted, I was introduced to traditional Native American educational practices that have been utilized and refined over the course of 15,000 years across approximately 200 tribal languages (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2009). Caregivers focus on growing whole human beings first by cultivating belonging, followed by mastery, then independence and finally, generosity. This correlates to the medicine wheel as illustrated below.

**Native American Educational Practices and The Medicine Wheel**

*Figure 8: Native American Educational Practices and The Medicine Wheel*

(Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2009, p. 498)

Interestingly, variances in what is represented in the narratives below connects to indigenous educational philosophy. In the primary pedagogical practices, there is a strong emphasis on nurturing feelings of belonging among students. Subsequently in the intermediate classroom, there is increased emphasis on supporting mastery and personal competence. Finally, in the advanced program, students are shepherded along a journey of greater independence. One might hope this prepares students to contribute to their community in meaningful ways in high school and beyond.

**Primary****Into the Day: Circle Up.**

Students are spread throughout the classroom and read wherever is comfortable. Some cozy up on the couch, another is perched high above in a student made, wooden loft, a few sit on wobble stools that allow them to move while they read, and yet others lie on their bellies on the

carpet. A poster next to the lead teacher, Grace's, desk shares a B.B. King quote, "The beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take it away from you." One student has a pile of eight to ten books next to her as she reads. Grace sits next to a student, "What are you reading, my dear?" The girl with glasses and eager posture points enthusiastically to the pages and explains the storyline to her teacher. Grace touches her gently on the arm and she begins to read out loud. The student pauses and asks about an unfamiliar word and Grace makes a gesture so she can figure the word out without verbal explanation. The young reader's head bounces up and down like a buoy riding the waves and then Grace asks her a question in return. The girl touches her face in reflection then explains while pointing to the page to reference the justification for her response. A boy then approaches Grace with a book exclaiming "This looks like a great resource!" Grace continues to circulate among students as they read. Each learner is autonomous in the context of community.

Music then begins to play and Louis Armstrong's voice inspires, "I see trees of green, red roses too, I see them bloom for me and you and I think to myself, what a wonderful world." The students swiftly rise and put away their books away without any instruction. A few students hum along or sing quietly to themselves as they gather in a circle on the carpet in the adjoining resource room. There is only a moment of silence between the time Louis Armstrong is over and the whole class begins singing together, "Ting-a-lay-o! Come little donkey come..." The students and teachers do hand motions coordinated with the lyrics.

On the sole basis of appearances, an outsider looking in would likely consider the group eclectic. One boy wears a safari hat, another a bright pink hoodie covered by a vest. A girl with Einsteinesque hair wears a fuzzy coat and vibrant, multi-color, hippy style bell bottoms. After



singing two songs together, Grace invites students to share with the group. One student, Riley<sup>8</sup>, tells the class about a guinea pig his family recently adopted. Another student, Karen, shares “I may feel a little stressed today because today I have a Halloween performance and I am worried I may not remember my lines.” The teacher wishes Karen good luck and asks her if she will please let the class know how it goes. Another four or five students share – some about their days, others pieces of art or work they are proud of. Corina shares her new glasses and explains they are fake. One student asks Corina why she wears fake glasses and she explains they are a fashion accessory. At quick glance, it appears about twenty percent of the class wears glasses. I wonder if Corina is “trying on” glasses in an attempt to fit in, to belong. After all the students interested in sharing have had a turn, the teacher begins counting softly and students disperse back to the primary room and sit on the carpet in front of the white board. Grace says, “Very nice 10 second switch. Thank you.” She then announces that one of the students, Ron, made a book about how Legos are formed and if they would like to read it, they can find it on display adjacent the classroom library. Then Ron’s classmate, Ellory, shares about a book she made on animals in our National Parks. Grace invites Ellory to share her favorite page with the class and then explains her book will also be on display next to Ron’s.

Many aspects of student development are seamlessly supported during this relatively short time period. The skill of emotional literacy, critical to overall emotional development, achievement and well-being, is supported by affording students time and space to share about their feelings and unmet needs during class circle time. All feelings are honored for the important data they provide and none are conceptualized as *negative* or *bad*. Grace also gently touches students on the arm, shoulder or back to provide physical reassurance and connection. Each

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<sup>8</sup> All student names have been changed to protect privacy.

student reads at a level commensurate with their development and responsive to their individual interests in a space that is comfortable. Likewise, students swiftly moved from listening to an accomplished musician to creating their own music. Listening, reading, speaking, writing and singing communicative capacities are all practiced. Students learn, and also teach, as exemplified with the books Ron and Ellory published. Moreover, these pedagogical practices are responsive to each of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities.

Teachers sitting among students in a circle visually communicates a desire to share power among community members. For the most part, educators at Creason sit beside students rather than standing above them looking down. Students appear to feel safe as demonstrated in their vulnerability sharing about feelings. In the circle, all belong. From here, I transition to individual student unit time, which is sacred at Creason, one of the pillars of instructional practices.

#### **Unit Time: A Boat Named Colossal Squid, Teeth and Galaxies.**

Upon returning from morning recess, Grace shares students have about an hour for unit work. One student gets a light up screen that he lays transparent paper over for tracing. Another student works on a book she is writing about leaves. Grace has a group of four or five students clustered at her desk asking questions. Another student works on a computer investigating the Hubble tuning fork. Grace explains to a student working on the floor, "It is your job to make certain this stays rolled up. Just like a carpenter – measure twice, cut once." At a group table, one student gives advice to another not to wiggle his tooth too much, that when she did that hers fell out before the adult tooth grew in. Grace asks the student deep in tooth explanation to move seats.

The boy wearing the safari hat, Eli, is working on drawing and labeling a boat. He explains to Grace, "It is definitely not as good as my smaller boats." In looking closely at the

drawing, I can see he has named his boat the *Colossal Squid*. He asks Grace, “Is that how you spell Colossal?” She replies, “That is something you need to figure out.” Grace artfully lets Eli sit with the discomfort. A student passing by remarks, “Nice boat!” Overall, the volume level is low, maybe a two out of ten. It becomes clear the student who had been talking about teeth was working on a model of a tooth with the various elements labeled. Grace asks, “There is bone – where do you want to put your root sign? Is that everything?” The student replies yes and Grace asks if she would like to share the finished product with the class tomorrow. Students all appear focused. Wow.

Grace moves on to working with another student, “This is what astronomers use to determine what kind of galaxy it is. What kinds have you learned about?” A boy named Darrel lists: spiral, elliptical, bard...Grace interjects, “What is the difference between these two galaxies? I want you to try and classify these. You can write underneath what you think they are and if you are unsure, you can leave it blank.” Grace returns to Eli, “Another thing you can do if you want to is use a ruler here to draw a very light line to help make it easier to write your words.” A student who had been away with a SEED teacher on a field trip related to sewing returns to the classroom. All are busy, busy, busy!

And so it goes for the remainder of the hour. During unit time Grace and her associate are learning facilitators who circle among individual students working individually on a variety of projects ranging from boats, to teeth and galaxies. These instructional practices engage student’s intrinsic motivation, a skill that directly correlates to life outcomes including health, achievement, self-efficacy and life satisfaction (Freedman, 2016). Through each of the projects students practice the Creason three “R”s: researching, reasoning and recording. In many traditional school models, emphasis is placed primarily on reading and writing. While each of

these is thoughtfully supported through unit work, other communicative capacities and modes of expression, including speaking, building models, creating posters, designing games, creating pieces of visual art and more, are also encouraged.

Students at Creason all have intellectual overexcitabilities, an intense drive to learn, as revealed in the school's admissions practices. Individual units feed hungry minds by allowing students to delve as deep as they can, at their own pace, which is often considered "too fast" in other learning environments. The instruction during unit time looks very different than during math instruction observed.

### **Math Assessment: Traditional in the Progressive.**

Overall, supporting math development challenges Creason's self-directed, constructivist instructional beliefs and practices. Today, Grace tells students they will be working on math in a way that is different than what they have done before. Grace explains she needs to better understand what the students know about math already and the quickest way to figure that out is to have them complete a pencil and paper challenge. Grace continues, "My goal is to find out where you are on this kind of math so I can get you started on activities that are at a good level for you and putting math in your math binder that is not too easy so it is boring or not so hard that it is frustrating." This is followed by a brief overview of instructions, "You are going to do the best you can. Since this is an assessment, please do not sit next to anyone you might talk to and please don't look at anyone else's work. When you get your page, you may get a pencil and choose a place to work." Classical music plays softly as the students get to work. One student sits on a sensory cushion (a rubber balloon like pillow covered in nubs), the majority of the other students work at tables that can comfortably sit up to four students. At any given time, one or two students have their hands raised with questions. Grace reminds, "If you have a question that

is challenging for you, you can move around to other parts of the page.” After a half hour Grace shares with the class they are going to transition to snack and if they are currently working on a problem, they are welcome to finish it.

This was an instructional anomaly. It is the only time I witnessed a formal assessment during my time on campus. The data collected from the test was used to support student academic development related to mathematical thinking. Grace referenced the assessment results to inform individual math challenges provided to students in their math binders and also during rare whole group instructional periods. The assessment did engage student’s intellectual overexcitabilities and supported academic achievement.

While recess often is not conceptualized as instructional time, perhaps it should be. The instructional antithesis of what was observed during the math period, recess at Creason provides important time for students to engage their rich imaginations and also develop body awareness, strength and agility.

### **Recess Cheetahs.**

The play area for recess is relatively small; it is essentially a grass canvas as described earlier in the chapter on school structures. There are plantings around the perimeter and sidewalks on each side. On the far end, opposite the school entrance, are pillars that hold up the second story of the school building above a concrete pad. Each of the pillars is painted by students in a variety of themes. One has ocean creatures painted all over – octopi, fish, jellyfish, etc. There are also flowers, yin and yang symbols, warriors, monsters, sports equipment and a sunshine. Some students draw with chalk on the sidewalk and other appear to be playing a variation of tag. The majority of children seem to be engaged in imaginative play. I wonder if this would still be the case if there was more playground equipment or toys. A girl who appears

to be about four or five is dressed in long john style pajamas. Her long brown hair is tangled, but her big brown eyes have laser focus as she proclaims to the students around her “This is our base!” She carries a small pink cheetah stuffy with her as she runs with her peers. This grabs my attention as award-winning author Stephanie Tolan once wrote an article called, “Is it a Cheetah?” as an activist piece to explain how gifted youth experience the world (1996). A cheetah is not better than other creatures in the animal kingdom, just different. If a cheetah is in a cage, similar to gifted kids in traditional schools, you will never learn that they can run 70 miles an hour.

Next to the girl with the stuffed cheetah, two students crawl through the grass on their forearms. Another student joins them and they make animal noises while sneaking up behind two teachers who are talking to each other in the courtyard. There is a good amount of running, movement, giggles and screeches happening at recess. The overall energy is joyful. A teacher calls “Ollie, Ollie!” to signal recess is over and all run to collect their belongings and line up at their respective doors. As students walk in I notice a pole with painted rocks in the garden which resembles a totem pole or cairn tower - nature transformed to art.

The courtyard space affords students freedom with teacher oversight. Children are empowered to make choices on who they want to play, learn and create with. They move in groups and on their own as guided by their own internal instincts. In many ways, recess is like a play jam session – each student can bring their strengths to riff with each other not knowing what beautiful music or discordant sounds might be created.

### **Birthday Book: All for Each.**

Upon returning from recess, students gather on the carpet between the white board and the comfy sofa. Grace says:

So you guys were thinking hard this morning. You were using your brains to do a lot of math. This activity is going to use a very different part of your brain. We are going to work on a birthday book. You can work on a rough draft on a separate piece of paper. If this is a hard thing for you, I definitely recommend the loose paper. Your name goes in the bottom right corner so it does not get hidden in the binding and illustrations are in colored pencil.

She continues inviting students to detail three specific things they notice, like, respect or admire about the birthday student, Avery, “If you think Avery is funny, what specific things does she do or say that make you laugh?” If you write “Avery is funny,” I am going to ask you to share more about why you chose that word. Grace has high expectations. This time as students begin working she plays jazz in the background. Grace and her associate, Joe, circulate among the students encouraging them as they write. Grace invites one student who appears reticent to begin to look at past birthday books for ideas.

The girl with the Einstenesque hair winces in distress, “That looks terrible!” and begins crying softly to herself. She tells Grace, “I need to cry over it.” Grace whispers in her ear, coaching her on how to navigate her emotions, and the girl then gets up and retrieves a new piece of paper to start over. Yet another example of how instruction at Creason seamlessly supports student emotional development. Grace then moves on to supporting another student who she encourages to extend his writing, to elaborate on what he had already drafted. Across the room, two students high five one another in celebration while “When the Saints Go Marching In” plays in the background. Joe helps a student with his drawing, “The best way to shade is by lightly brushing with the pencil. You can also add layers to make it darker.” He then turns to another student, “The thing is, no one is really definable. Everyone is more expansive than you think; it helps if you can share specifics about what you admire about a person. You are in a good thought process... What does Avery like?” In my head I exclaim, “Yes!”

Shortly after, Grace calls “Ago” and the class chimes back “Amay!” This is a West African call which translates roughly to “Please pay attention” and the response, “We’re listening.” The students begin cleaning up their materials. One sings to herself “Shake it off” while putting away the pencils. After everything is back in its place, the students transition.

**Unit Time: Disciplined Practice for Freedom.**

Today unit time was after recess. Students quickly pull out their unit projects, each finding a comfortable place to work. Grace announces, “You can check in with me if you need to.” Amaya is working on creating a paper mache cat. She peers from behind goggles while covering the table in newspapers. Grace explains how to place a thin layer over the entire cat so she can add details like whiskers and encourages Amaya to think about how she might want to do that in a realistic way. Grace then moves on to Ellie who she reminds to take notes in her journal, to make a description of each supply she might need. After, Grace transitions to the next student, “We need to make certain you have finished strong drawings because you will be working with Carl on Tuesday. Try and get the list done and check your resources.” Carl is a SEED and will work with the student on an architecture project.

Grace helps a student get books from the top self of the library which is beyond his reach. Another student has what appears to be fox and coyote pelts and skulls laid out in front of him while he takes notes and draws in a field notebook. Next, Grace moves on to helping Ron. She sits adjacent him on the floor in the resource room, “So after you have built these and learned how the gears work, they have different challenges to build different kinds of machines. First we do the skill building though.” Grace pulls a box out and explains it will have most of the pieces Ron will need. She also shares that if Ron finds there is a piece he needs that is not in the box that he can go ask Donna for a Lego kit.



Across the room, Eli continues researching how to sail independently while taking notes in his field notebook. Grace then visits another student, “So what do you think?” The student explains about the Tinker Cad program he has been working on. In reviewing his unit plan, Grace notes:

The first thing you did was make a book about how Legos were made, so you can check this one off. We are also working on printing a 3D Lego, right? I am going to show you a kit that helps you learn to solve mechanical problems. Inside that kit are different colored cards. You start with the blue cards which teach you how to do different things and then the red cards challenge you to invent new things. You need to do the research. I am looking for information on different inventions, not just googling things.

To an outside observer the classroom might appear chaotic. However, if you look closely, the level of student engagement, as demonstrated by non-verbal behavior including leaning over projects, concentrating on co-designed tasks, smiles, eye-brow scrunching, creative production and the occasional stuck-out tongue indicate focus. Unit instructional practices are beautifully responsive to diverse gifted student overexcitabilities and sensitivities. If student engagement is an indicator of empowerment, Creason has achieved success.

### **Math Talk.**

Today, math was after free reading and circle time. Grace explains the math challenge for the day, “You did a great job with the paper and pencil assessments yesterday. Today we will get some new math partners and practice place value. Does anyone know what I mean when by *place value*? In the number 257, raise your hand if you can tell me the tens number.” Five students raise their hands and one answers correctly. Grace shows the class a game board she designed and a set of base ten blocks:

The cool thing about these – mathematically, they are carefully planned. The *one* is exactly one-centimeter-long on each side. Each one weighs one gram. You would know immediately how much they weigh. We have a base ten system which is why we focused on tens when we were working on fluency. Here is why – we are always making tens. The magic happens when we put ten of them together. The problem is if we use ten ones,

it is difficult to tell if it is ten just by looking at them. (Shows one base ten block). This is always ten.

This period is different than other instruction that has been observed to date as it involves a higher percentage of teacher talk time. Grace continues holding up blocks until students work their way up to one thousand. Eventually, she attempts to create a tower of ten-thousand blocks. Students sit on the edge of their seats, “It’s going to fall!” One student asks, “Do you have insurance for that building?” Grace writes the number 10,000 on the board and walks through place value with the students again. She then outlines how to play the game:

Every time you roll, you take whatever number you roll and take that number of one blocks. So if I roll a five, I put five ones on my board. On my next turn, I may roll a seven. I am going to put those here. There is one huge rule to the game. You can never have ten or more in one column. Ten means you get to trade up. So I am going to take ten of my ones and trade them for a ten. If I do that, my board is going to look like this. What’s my score now?

The students chime in – 12! Grace invites the students to play. This is the first time I felt I was sitting too long. The pace of instruction feels a bit slow. Stella, the student with Einstenesque hair, seems to be among the more advanced students in the class and seems to have disengaged. Another student yawns. When Stella begins playing she gets silly and the teacher’s tone turns a bit stern. I wonder if Stella just needs to move more quickly. Grace asks her if she needs to take a break, but Stella decides to stay and continue playing. In general, the volume in the class has been fairly low, but with this game it crescendos to about a four or five on a scale of one to ten.

As with math, Grace designs literacy instruction to be responsive to a wide range of primary student achievement levels. Implementing book clubs, where students of similar abilities can explore a book together, is one vehicle by which Grace pursues empowerment goals.

### **Book Club.**

Five students and Grace gather at a rectangular table adjacent a rack of art supplies. One of the students sits on a wobble stool that allows her to move while sitting. All students are holding a chapter book titled *Frank Einstein*. Grace says, “Hey Jackson...” and he quickly responds, “Can I start on the bottom of page 23?” Jackson and Grace briefly discuss where will be best to start. Jackson reads swiftly, stumbling to pronounce the word “circulatory.” Jackson’s quick pace is softened by his tender smiles and blue glasses. He has sticky notes throughout his text. When he arrives at one he says, “And here comes my question...” Grace explains that the group is going to pause on questions for now and keep reading. Ellie shares it would be helpful for her if students read more slowly. I notice she does not have her weighted blanket with her as she has other days.

The next student begins reading. He uses his finger to track the words. His wrist is decorated with a watch and two bracelets. On his t-shirt is an ice cream sitting on a cloud and what appears to be a hand sewn bumble bee patch. He owns his quirk with confidence. Another student takes his turn reading. Grace counsels, “So when you get to the end of the sentence, you stop and take a breath before starting the next line.” He continues reading and Grace interjects, “Do you know what perforated means?” Students nod no and Grace explains referencing the dots on paper where they cut in art class.

After all students have had a turn reading Grace says, “So the next thing I would like to do is hear some of your questions. When you are the question asker, you pick a question to ask and then you call on each other person in the group to share their thoughts, and then you share your thoughts, and then pick the next person to ask a question.” Then Grace models, “My question is Plank and Clank have very different personalities and are made of very different things. I am curious to hear if you think if there is a relationship between what they are made of

and their personalities. What do you think, David?” David responds, “I think one thing that affects Plank’s personality is that he is built of parts (stumbles on his words and uses fillers for a bit) – since he is not built of leftover parts he is nice and understands things really well. He has good robot parts, all the things a robot needs. Since Clank is built of leftover parts, he does not have all he needs.” David then elaborates about how Clank having a keyboard might have contributed to his love of music.

Grace moves on, “I want you to think a bit about the questions you have and try and pick one out that you feel will be really good. Let’s start with Stella.” Stella asks the group, “Was Plank’s lab coat really washed a thousand times?” Jackson chimes in that he thinks it was and David chimes in he thinks so too because it is a fiction story. Grace reminds students sometimes authors exaggerate for effect. It’s Jackson’s turn next, “What is a nuclear reaction?” Stella hypothesizes, “If you drop something nuclear from a high height, I think it creates a spark that creates a nuclear reaction. I think it reacts with a molecule or an atom and then it explodes.” Liam makes a guess too, “I think it is when one atom collides with another atom and another atom and another atom which can either be very helpful or very dangerous.” David adds, “and that creates heat and energy and then it lights on fire if on the ground or explodes.”

It’s Liam’s turn next, “Why did the author use famous scientists and people as the characters?” Jackson answers, “Because it is a science fiction book and to make it funnier the author decided to use real people.” The students nod in agreement. Grace asks David, “Would you like to ask your question?” David inquires, “Why does the cuckoo clock bird pop out and say *warning!*” Grace quickly adds, “If you have mistakenly read past to other chapters and know the answer, please keep quiet.” Jackson speculates, “Because there are some intruders in the lab that want the robots.” Then Stella describes, “It is a motion detector that alerts of visitors.” Liam

suspects they are intruders, not visitors. Grace declares, “This is an exciting place to stop. Our time is up. We need to figure out what we want our next assignment to be. We will start on page 61 – where shall we read to?” The students agree to read through to page 94 for their next meeting a few days from now. Grace summarizes, “You did a fabulous job for your first meeting. I like how you showed support for each other by saying you agree.”

I am impressed with the quality of dialogue which exceeds what I have experienced in some adult books groups. The children’s listening skills are strong and they are truly interested in hearing what each other has to say. Besides sharing ideas with each other informally throughout book club, unit time and other instructional periods, Grace also integrates instructional practices that afford more formal sharing of learning.

#### **Learning from Each Other’s Research.**

When talking about sharing of research, it is rare to think of primary age students, but that is exactly what happens in Grace’s classroom. One day after the daily singing of songs, check in and morning meeting, Grace invites students who have recently completed projects to share their learning with the class. Three volunteer.

*Darrel* is the first up and shares a poster with images of all the different types of galaxies he has studied. He begins with the peculiar and tells his classmates peculiar galaxies are made of dust and gas. He continues, “Next we have elliptical, which are called that because of their shape. And then we have Bard Spiral – this is the milk way. The milky way is where we live.”

Grace asks Darrel, “What makes it a bard spiral?” Darrel quickly responds:

The inside that is like a line. The next is irregular. It’s like a cloud of dust and gas. The next one is lenticular. Well, lenticular is a galaxy you find very far out in space. If it is a circle that goes up and down. You can identify a galaxy by looking at the middle of it. Lenticular galaxies have a big dot in the middle. Last we have spiral – there is a part called disk on it which glows. There are spiral arms and the bulge is the middle of it.

Grace opens the floor for questions. Jackson asks, “Why do lenticular galaxies have to be far out in space?” Followed by Nora, “How did they get their names?” Darrel does not know and guesses, “I think from the scientists.” Eve questions, “What makes a milky way galaxy?” Darrell explains, “I think I have learned something - you can’t create a galaxy. You have to create a black hole which could create a galaxy. Galaxies are made of a lot of dust and gas and stars. So the star explodes which can create a galaxy.” Stella continues, “So, what resource did you use to get this information?” Darrel shares his source was the computer, that he went to a NASA website.

How amazing that students are already considering the credibility of a source at such a young age! All clap and Grace invites the next student to share with the group. The children continue sitting attentively in a circle as Tamara steps up.

*Tamara* has created a timeline to share the history of sewing machine manufacturing. She shows the class an image of the first sewing machine needle and explains, “The earliest one was in 1755.” Grace mentions, “You don’t have to read each one, but maybe show us an overview.” Tamara continues explaining she has an old sewing machine in her house and how complicated they can be. The timeline is on five by seven inch pieces of tag board connected by tape so it folds like an accordion. Tamara explains briefly how sewing machines work, and tells the class in 1854 Isaac Singer patented a home sewing machine. She clarifies it was mostly a copy of a prior machine that had not been patented.

Next, one of her classmates, Jess asks, “What made you choose sewing machines?” Tamara responds, “I had one and was curious so I started researching them and learned sewing machines are really hard to make. It is amazing they made one in 1854. If you look at these two you can see they are very different from each other.” I notice Ellie holds the associate teacher’s

hands and retrieves her weighted blanket which seems to bring her comfort. Grace shares Tamara's timeline will be available for people to look at, but to be gentle with it. She demonstrates the different ways they can fold and read it.

Next up is Jones.

*Jones* shares in a reticent tone, "This is my flyer about how to identify birds." Grace asks, "Can you read us seven tips?" Jones shares seven things to consider when trying to identify a bird: color, field marks (example: stripes), size, shape, where it is found, the behavior and the sound the bird makes. Next Jones shares an image he created that is labeled with the various parts of a bird. One student asks about field marks and Jones explains the bill is really small and usually the details on wings can be different. Tamara asks Jones if he can name two birds with the same beaks and he responds robin and field sparrow because they both break seeds with their beaks. Jones continues, "An eagle would have some really sharp talons and other birds have feet that are good for wrapping around trees to help them stand."

Another student inquires, "Why do you call them feet instead of claws?" and Jones answers that he doesn't know why. Grace asks, "What if this was a duck?" and Jones shares not all birds have claws. The students applaud Jones and Grace asks them to make a 10 second transition to carpet for the last student, an unexpected fourth, to share. Grace says in an awe-filled tone, "This is a very different kind of a thing."

*Jackson* explains he tap dances, "I could not think of anything to share this week so I decided to bring my tap shoes. I am going to perform the single time step." Jackson begins dancing and then says in an apologetic tone, "That wasn't the whole time step." Both teachers smile ear to ear. Jackson dances with concentration for a few minutes before he pauses and Ellie asks, "How did you learn to tap dance?" Jackson shares he goes to a dance school on Saturdays,

that he has been tapping for a couple of months. Another student asks how the shoes make the noise and Jackson speaks to the design of the bottom of his shoes. A different student asks if he has any upcoming shows to which he replies no. Grace concludes the sharing by asking Jackson to please let the class know if he does have a show.

Afterwards the students quickly line up at the door and follow Joe, the associate teacher, out for snack and recess. As they transition, I notice a new student created poster on display titled “Classification of Wolves, Coyotes, Fox and Dogs.” There are impressive, hand drawn images of about 15 different animals along with their scientific classifications. Students are surrounded by opportunities to learn at every corner. I feel like I belong and I am not even a part of the class.

### **Intermediate**

The varied learning habitats at Creason have instructional similarities. All afford individual unit instruction, math development, environmental education, specialist offerings, community meeting or circle time, SEED field outings, as well as recess and lunch. Beginning in the intermediate program, students can choose from an extensive list of specialist class offerings (see Appendix J). Prior to intermediate, primary students all participate in physical education, visual arts, performing arts and Spanish. As students transition from the primary program to intermediate and feelings of belonging have been established, there is an increased emphasis on skill mastery.

#### **Unit Time: Questioning for Growth.**

Today when I arrived, students were already engaged in unit work. Mary asks a student, “Does this go in order of events?” Four students sit at computers diligently researching. One remarks in smiles and with a little giggle, “I really need help with this.” She seems to be



socializing with her peers more than others and Mary uses a warm, yet firm tone to inspire reflection, “Natalia, do you want to find your own space please?” Natalia repeats, “I really need help” and Mary responds, “You know how to ask for it.” Natalia swiftly resumes work. On the wall is a poster that reads, “Collaborative Group Expectations:”

1. Students are responsible for their own work and behavior.
2. Students must be willing to help any group members who ask.
3. Students may ask the teacher for help only when everyone in the group has the same questions.

One student asks another, “Do you have food coloring?” and another chimes in, “I know where the food coloring is,” and then goes to retrieve it for his classmate and returns to a thoughtful, “Thank you for helping me find it!”

All the while Mary continues working, sitting on her knees eye-to-eye with a student, asking him questions to support his research. When done, she gets up and asks another student, “Where are your notes?” The student goes and retrieves her notes and then tapes a paper with an outline of a human skeleton on a window so she can trace details with the sun shining from behind.

While the classroom is busy, it remains relatively quiet. At one point, when the volume started to rise, Mary whispers, “Shhhhh!” and begins playing music softly.

One student arrives late to class and is greeted enthusiastically by Mary, “You are here!” Mary leans over and gently hugs his shoulders, “How are the chompers?” The student proceeds to share details of his visit to the dentist office. As Mary circulates among students, her associate teacher moves back and forth between the main room and the resource room where the tools and supplies for students to create are housed. Mary kneels next to another student working on the floor, “When you look at these, do you know what you need to do?” The student begins answering, then asks Mary a question, but begins thinking aloud before she can respond. Mary remarks, “Did you just answer your own question?” Student sighs, “Yes” and Mary cheers,

“Awesome!” Meanwhile, at another work table, one student asks another for help. Two students quickly chime in, “I can help.”

The energy in the classroom is focused, collaborative and positive. Mary asks a student working at a table, “Are you going to do a translation, rotation or slide?” The student responds, “Translation,” to which Mary responds, “Cool” and continues on to sit adjacent two students working on the classroom couches. She asks them if they are comfortable with the music playing the background; they confirm this is fine. Quiet conversations happen occasionally among pairs of students. A boy who had been reading leans over to share what he learned with the student sitting next to him who is drawing. Adjacent the pair, a student works on an experiment with a bottle and balloon explaining in smiles to other students at her table, “It works because of carbon dioxide.”

Next to the teacher’s desk is a rolling set of file folders, one folder labeled for each student in the class. This is where the co-designed individual student unit plans are kept. A student comes to retrieve a piece of paper from her file and then returns to a work group table. Another student, the one who had been standing up writing quietly exclaims, “Ta Da!” He smiles and puts his hands over his head proud in his achievement. A few tables over, Mary checks in with the student performing chemistry experiments with the bottle, “You seem inspired by that, maybe you should try it?” The student nods her head yes and continues.

Relatively, teacher talk time is a small percentage of the overall instructional conversation. When Mary does speak, a very high percentage of her talk is questions or reflections on specific evidence of student progress. Mary asks more questions of her students than just about any other teacher I have ever observed. While some questions are specific to emotional development, and specifically growing self-awareness and self-management, the

majority of questions challenge students' thinking and feed intellectual OEs. Furthermore, the limitless topics and modes of expression provide a framework enabling engagement of students of varying developmental differences, interests and sensitivities.

As unit time closes, Mary high fives a student and then moves on to consulting with another before inviting students to clean up before recess. Each student has a role and coordinating responsibility that is posted on a board adjacent the door. Examples include taking out the recycling, sweeping and watering the plants. No one leaves until all the work is done. The daily clean-up ritual grows students' awareness of their interdependence.

**Recess: Minds and Bodies Connected.**

While the primary students take their recess in the courtyard, the intermediate students have a more traditional plastic play structure and small field area in the front of the school to play on during their breaks. Today as I follow students from class to the playground with their teacher, a loud helicopter passes over. A handful of students run to the play structure and begin playing an unknown game seemingly previously invented. The level of fitness and agility among students strikes me. It occurs to me there are no overweight students in this bunch. It is unclear the degree to which Creason supporting student well-being in their programming impacts the fitness of students as this was outside the scope of the research project.

Adjacent the play equipment, one student plays in the dirt, drawing with a stick by herself; this appears to be a meditative practice. Close by, children playfully shout out, "Interference!" as one student accidentally crosses into the four square court. A few students practice cartwheels in the field. Recess ends at 11am when the teacher cries, "Ollie, Ollie!" like the primary teachers did. Recess is a period where psychomotor, imaginal and emotional sensitivities are cultivated. I am reminded innovation skills are born from free play.

When students return to the classroom, they have free reading time while also eating snacks. All are remarkably quiet, immersed in books of their choosing. At 11:20am sharp, Mary rings a bell and students transition to math.

### **The Science and Art of Math.**

In a basket on Mary's desk is a pile of individual student math challenges. In the one on top, the student was tasked with estimating the cost for a tiny home he had designed. Mary designs individual math connection challenges for each student that are responsive to their mathematical skill development and also integrate content from their individual units. Mary began this practice this year as a way to explore how to better implement math instruction congruent with the Creason philosophy. While time-intensive from a planning perspective, the results are extraordinary as math instruction becomes personally meaningful. This pedagogical approach requires Mary to be both a scientist who is intimately aware of each student's mathematical development, and also artist who creatively contextualizes the learning in an authentic way.

In addition to individual math problems, Mary also provides small group math instruction. Today she asks a group of about 12 students to get out their notes and review them. She references a glossary of math terms written on the board and asks students to write notes for any of the terms they are unfamiliar with. This is the first evidence of direct instruction observed. Students are then asked to look for patterns in the times table. Afterwards, Mary explains how arrays illustrate multiplication. She invites students to provide numbers and then draws the array together as a class, reminding them to label directions. After scaffolding the activity, Mary asks each group to pick a number and the corresponding array and list the factors and the product. Students quickly engage in the task in groups of two to four. Upon completion, Mary transitions

to practice with double digit arrays. When she notices a group working with focus complete the challenge she exclaims, “Boom!” in celebration. Students in the group cheer “Yes!” in response with some raising their hands over their heads in excitement.

### **Independence for Unity.**

Today is another blue today with not a cloud in sight. It is about 60 degrees outside. The temperature in the classroom is comfortable, similar to outside. Upon arrival, students were quietly reading in comfortable places of their own choosing. Soft music played in the background. At 1:30pm sharp, Mary rings the bells and students gathered on the carpet in the class living room. She reminds, “Please do not forget your math connection is due at the end of the day today. Once you know exactly what you are working on you can tell me. Be specific.” One student shares, “I need to finish the description of how I did my tessellation.” And another explains, “I am going to start studying body movements.” And another shares she is going to work on *Sudsational*. Mary asks, “Are you ready for that one?” After each student shares what they plan to work on, they transition to their group work tables. It is amazing how seamless the transition is. Students move quietly, eagerly and swiftly to engage in their personal unit projects.

Except for the students asking questions of the teacher and associate teacher, there is complete silence. Occasionally there is the sound of a pencil or eraser on paper. Mary approaches a student and asks, “How many prosthetics does Legs for Africa hope to give away in the next two years?” The student pauses to reflect and resumes work and Mary turns to another student, “How many burn days has he had? Can you explain your mathematical thinking and share how you solved this?” Adjacent, a student is drawing designs. Mary moves two tables down and asks a student, “So does this go in order of events?” A student approaches Mary and before he can speak, she inquires, “Do you need to get a book from the library?” Moving on to

another student, Mary asks, “So you need to draw a dog park on 107 acres, where would you start? You can get a different piece of graph paper if that would help you.”

One student stands while stapling his art together and another student appears a bit fatigued, occasionally glancing in the distance. For the most part students are writing, drawing, measuring, engaged. One student who is tracing a human skeleton on the window (continued from previous unit study time) quietly remarks, “The sunlight hurts my eyes, let me see if I brought sunglasses.” The student cannot find hers so Mary shares her personal pair.

Two students wear clear crystals hanging from strings around their necks, like Mary. Mary gains Eleanor’s attention, “Are you staying focused? Does that seat work for you or do you need to move?” Eleanor adjusts and gets back to work (this is the same student who appeared to be daydreaming earlier). A student working on a math problem shares quietly, “One hamburger for \$11, that’s just wrong!” At another work table, one student asks another for help spelling a word. The student spells it for him and he replies with a singsong, “Thank you!”

In one corner of the classroom there is a graph of the different types of fingerprints present in the classroom that I had not noticed prior. This includes whorl, loop, arch and composite. I had no idea there were categories of fingerprints! The depth and variety of student work samples illustrates how teachers must be open to learning from students to successfully realize the Creason mission.

Across the room I see a student typing away at a computer in the overflow room – she is on fire! All students appear in creation. One is designing a sign on a computer now and two more appear to be typing stories or essays of some type. Another student pulls out a poster titled “Animal Communication” that includes more than 20 different ways a mouth moves to express: teeth chattering, lip curling, play, lip smacking, pouting, gaping, etc. For each description is an

accompanying clay mold of the mouth shape attached to the board visually portraying the communication style.

Mary moves to the classroom living room where a student, Jane, is working on the floor. Jane tells Mary, “We need milk, orange juice and lemon juice. After I finish all of that, I get to do this which I am REALLY excited about!” Mary replies, “So if you finish this next week, you will get to bake your biscuits the following week so I am going to make a date for you in the kid’s kitchen.”

Mary then walks over to a student working at a group table who informs her, “I haven’t really been able to make an Eiffel Tower – it is really, really, really hard!” Mary responds, “What does that tell you about the people who actually made the Eiffel Tower? You are going to have to do more research about making Eiffel Tower models. You might try tooth picks, pipe cleaners, etc. The first try might not work, the second try might not work – and that is ok. What is not ok is giving up. You have to keep trying. Maybe ask your Dad for ideas this weekend. Mary asks, “How tall does it have to be?” The perplexed student responds, “6 inches.”

Outside the classroom windows, students can see green trees swaying in the fall breeze. The leaves have not turned yet. Nature is both inside the room and visible outside. Mary rings the cymbal meditation bells again and tells students it is time to clean up. Each swiftly begins working; together they clean the space so it is ready for future learning.

### **Circling for Roses & Buds.**

When students are done with their clean up jobs, they gather on the carpet and sofas in the class living room. Mary sings “Ollie, Ollie!” and the few straggling students join the group. Mary tells the students, “You need to think about a Rose Bud. What is something good? What is

something you are looking forward to? This is a speed round – no times for thorns today.” They go around the circle with each student sharing. Responses include:

- My rose is being at school today; my bud is my birthday party.
- My rose is finishing my project; my bud is doing a magic show with my friend.
- My rose is that I finished my fingerprint poster; my bud is my game this weekend.
- My rose was part of my plaque is done; my bud is for the NHL season to start (from female student).
- My rose working with Joe; my bud is to work with him again.
- My rose is there are so many things to decide between.... I got to start on my Griffin page; my bud would have to be Monday!
- My rose was nature experience; my bud is getting to watch *Harry Potter* tonight.
- My rose is I got my two posters done and my bud is I get to spend the weekend with my aunt because the water is not working at my house. Mary responds, “I am glad you have a place to go.”
- My bud is the sleepover I am going to and my rose was our unit work time.

After all students have taken a turn, Mary shares, “My rose is our unit work time and my bud is I am going rafting tomorrow on the river.” Gratitude practices support development of optimism which positively impacts student outcomes (Six Seconds, 2016).

### **Peace in the Chaos.**

Mary rocks back and forth in her chair, reading a story to students with animation. Students listen intently. Some draw while she reads, others sit perfectly still. When Mary puts the book down, students groan in disappointment. Mary asks the group to share what they will be working on during unit time, the varied responses include:



- Finding baking soda recipes for biscuits
- I am working on making my compound
- I am going on a unit trip with a SEED
- Recording information from my experiment
- Editing my timeline
- Spray painting my sword. Mary asks, “What else can you do if an associate teacher is not available to help? You might need to look at your unit schedule.”
- Math connections
- Math connection and Newton’s Law
- Gestation of dogs. Mary advises, “Let yourself be consumed by one animal at a time.”
- Work on word bubbles for my poster.
- Working on sketch of Lin Manuel Miranda.

On the white board in the center of the class are the following three writing choices:

1. What do you think are the most important characteristics to be a good president for the U.S.A.? Write about how they are important for the job. If you have some knowledge about our current presidential candidates, who would you vote for and why?
2. Write a poem that has to do with information you have learned about your unit.
3. Design a treehouse made specifically for a book club to meet in. Be sure to think about the kind of tree that would work best, the floor plan, furniture and view!

This assignment is independent of unit time, but is included here as it highlights the creativity, flexibility and discipline in Mary’s instructional design and is a window into how she supports students’ literacy development.

Mary asks a student about her experiment, “About how long did it bubble for? Did it make noise? How did it stop? Did the bubbles go away?” The student beams, telling the story of what happened. Mary shares, “Those are really good observations. I think you should have a section for observations.” A few students open a cabinet in the corner of the room I had not noticed

before. He emerges with spray paint, apparently for the wooden sword he is making. Today there are no students at group tables. All students are working on the carpet, in the work room, at computers or in the overflow room. One student got on a computer and another said to him, “You should be focusing...” Students support one another in practicing self-management skills.

Meanwhile, Mary intuited Connor was struggling and invited him to sit on the carpet with her. Across the way, a student struggles to get a basket down off a shelf and another student steps in to help. Mary asks a pair of students, “Why are you looking at me guiltily? Do you need to move to separate spaces? I know you really want to sit together; do you want to try one more time?” The students resume work quietly. Mary returns to Connor who is working on a timeline on the floor, “Now you have the same issue here – I want you to try and fix that.”

The admissions and outreach director, Amy, enters with someone who appears to be an advanced student. The student is practicing facilitating school tours for visitors and the students don’t seem to notice. Mary provides feedback to the student working on the anatomy drawing, “Now that you have your outline, you don’t need to trace, you just need to fill in some things. There is muscle here...I think if you get a colored pencil, you can fill in the outline. This is great work! You just have a little more to do.”

Next, Mary moves along to a student working alone at a table, “Let me see your plan. I see what you are saying, but you jumped from ice blocks to here, which was confusing to me. Can you better explain how you got there? You need to make certain you have clear definitions before you move on - the most scientific definition you can come up with.” A student throws a piece of paper towards the recycling bin, but misses, “I was so close!” Small moments of play pop up occasionally, but the engagement in work remains strong.

Mary turns off the light and says “It’s about that time.” Kids whisper “No.” She instructs if they have not finished math connections, they should probably do it for homework tonight and that it is time to pick up. Mary interrupts a student who is putting books away to ask if he wants his work laminated and the student replies yes. Mary responds, “Then next week I am going to show you how to fill out a publishing request and have another student show you where to go to put it.”

Then Mary turns to a student who has paused, “Brooke, how can you be helpful?” The students finish cleaning and then meet on the carpet where Mary rocks in the rocking chair, “While we are waiting, go ahead and take a nice deep breath in through your nose and sigh it out. Another one. Another one.” There is explicit mindfulness instruction. Mary then explains about an all school challenge:

I know there have been some questions about the yearbook cover contest. Everyone from the school can submit a cover. You can draw it, paint it, make it on the computer. If you want to, try and design a cover that could win.

Alright, deep breath in. Quickly, calmly, efficiently, go get your stuff and line up.

### **Student Portfolio Binders.**

In the primary classroom, a window was provided into how students share their learning with each other in informal ways at classroom community meetings, by the displaying of work on the walls, sharing of student published books and more. The intermediate program continues these practices, integrating multiple ways for students to share their learning with each other. I also had the opportunity to review portfolio binders with student work samples in each of the core classrooms. This instructional practice allows students, parents and educators to dialogue on student progress during the two-three years they are in each multi-age classroom. Following is a glimpse into the intermediate portfolios.

***Sam***

Like other students in intermediate, Sam pens a letter to parents and teachers detailing the ways he has grown as a thinker, writer and as a researcher through his passion project. Sam starts by thoughtfully reflecting on some of the social struggles he encountered over the course of the year; he discusses the level of strength of various relationships and how those have changed over time. Sam is forthcoming about struggles with feelings of loneliness at times. He also expresses pride in his accomplishments in his passion project and at exposition, the school's annual school-wide sharing of student learning.

Sam's letter is two full pages typed. When talking about how he has grown as a thinker, Sam reflects on his increased ability to engage in perspective taking. He also is honest about his success in being a critical thinker and discloses times he fell short of his own expectations. Sam notes that practicing note taking more regularly has improved his research abilities. In addition, he speaks to the growth in his mathematical thinking and specifically his increased ability to understand fractions and do advanced multiplication and division problems. Sam expresses confidence in his poetic abilities and capacity to use strong language to convey his emotions. He closes in sharing how he uses his strength of writing poems to alleviate suffering of people with chronic illnesses in his passion project. In partnership with a few of his classmates, Sam sewed 24 teddy bears that he gifted, each accompanied by one of his poems, to patients at a local children's hospital.

***Quinn***

Like Sam, Quinn shares a variety of work samples she is proud of in her portfolio. One of the first pieces is a complex math problem that she struggled completing. She writes reflections below an image of the actual problem, detailing the mistakes she made along the way and how

she fixed them. Quinn also shares an activist piece explaining how pink dolphins are endangered and encouraging people to protect them.

The next project Quinn shares is personally meaningful to me as a researcher – it is a book she created titled, *World of Crystals*. Annemarie Roeper once wrote about how gifted youth are often drawn to rocks (2007). I noticed the same in my work and in fact, kept a book on the metaphysical properties of various crystals in my office. Children would often enter with excitement and then wonder, “How did the crystal know what I need?!?!?” In her book, Quinn shares how crystals are the most stable form of energy and how different crystals hold different types of powers. She details a few crystals claimed to have healing properties. Additionally, Quinn shares the process of how crystals form and draws her own illustrations. I wish all children had this type of connection with the natural world.

The portfolios provide evidence of growth and mastery across multiple aspects of student development via a variety of modes of expression.

As described in the methodology section, each of these setting descriptions was shared with participating educators for their review. Below is the response received from Mary after reading what was crafted here:

Wow. That actually brought tears to my eyes. What a treat to get the "fly-on-the-wall" perspective of my classroom. I am honored that you perceived my instruction so clearly and positively. It is nice to know that everything I intentionally put effort towards actually turns out that way during the hectic school-day. It has been a treat to work with you through this process!

I do not have any recommendations, only positive feedback. I think that the categories you have chosen work well, that you have painted a complete picture of the school-day, and that you took very complicated observations and wrote about them concisely and clearly. You are a wonderful writer!

Thanks again for letting me read that. What a treasure.

Gratefully, Mary

In total, three of the eleven participants made minor content clarifications. Overall the feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

### **Advanced**

As students transition from intermediate to the advanced program at Creason, the pedagogy raises expectations for autonomous learning. Students are increasingly independent.

#### **All Things Red: Love and Blood.**

Today it is overcast and rainy. The advanced students are gathered in their living room space together, some sitting on sofas, others on the floor and still more sitting at desks behind the sofas while the teacher, Angela, sits cross-legged on a stool adjacent the white board. She shares announcements for the day in less than 10 minutes and then asks the group, “Cooliosity?” This is one of a handful of invented terms used during playful banter among learners. All disperse to work on unit projects, without the explicit check in on what students will be working on observed in the intermediate classroom. Each is trusted to prioritize learning activities in a way that will enable them to realize co-designed instructional objectives. When a student fails to meet mutually agreed upon goals, Angela invites a direct conversation.

Angela, tells a student, “Walk with me please. This feels like an excuse to me. The fact that you have not turned anything in yet is concerning.” Another student approaches; she appears to be among the youngest in the class. Angela begins explaining how if a forensic scientist collects a finger print, they automatically do not understand who it belongs to. Angela asks the student, “Why does the government have someone’s finger prints?” and the student responds, “It means they committed a crime?” Angela responds, “Or...they applied for a license, or a government job, etc. Don’t make a conclusion without enough information.” Angela continues, “Do you understand what you are trying to say here?” and the student swiftly responds, “Yes.”

Angela asks her, “Can you say it in a more clear way so I can also understand it? You can be a little more scholarly here, ‘This data shows....’ Keep your tone professional.” Angela keeps reading and then remarks:

You are comparing high and low impact splatter here, but people need to understand medium impact spatter before understanding high impact spatter. Force matters in terms of what kinds of blood splatter you have, you need to explain them in the order that makes sense to the reader. How does force impact the size of the splatter, how far it goes, the size of the droplets, etc. Also, Don’t use “you” in a scholarly paper. I told you that lots of times already. Next time I’m not going to be nice – I’m going to start using frowny faces.

Angela continues asking the student to be more precise with her words, “Explain the value of pressure – how the splatter happens and why.” The student sits attentive while the teacher continues to give non-stop feedback, questions and criticisms. Angela encourages:

Go into more detail on Luminal here because it is cool. This used to be a prison. If I sprayed Luminal in the room, we may find some here. Also, we have a lot more assaults than murders – don’t get caught up in the glamour of murder.

While Angela coaches the student on her writing at her desk and suggests a possible FBI field trip with a Student Educational Experience Designer or SEED, the majority of remaining students work on their laptops.

Two more students approach Angela and ask, “Can we talk to you in the hall for a sec?” Angela responds “Am I in trouble? I hate it when I am in trouble” as she follows the students out the door. The student whose forensics paper had been reviewed now sits with her feet up on the couch while editing and revising. Angela’s classroom reflects how learning happens in the real world. While the students in the intermediate class uses rocks placed on a board to let the teacher know where they are, here students use magnets on a board hanging adjacent the front door so it is easy to see where each student is at any given time.

Another student walks by with a piece of writing to share with Angela. There are red pen marks all over the paper. Literally all over; there are at least 20 suggested revisions. Angela is generous in both the quantity and quality of her feedback. When she leaves the room to check on students in the overflow space, students continue working quietly despite the lack of teacher presence. Most students appear to be in flow. When Angela returns, she banter with students. While I cannot hear the entire conversation, I do hear Angela playfully reply to a student, “Are you suggesting my logic does not apply across domains?” The student corrects his teacher, “No, I’m saying your logic is fallible.” Imagine that – a classroom where the teacher playfully embraces her own imperfection! In being open to criticism, Angela models for students how feedback is requisite to continued growth.

So far, I have observed each of the eight EQ skills in practice: empathy, applying consequential thinking, recognizing patterns, optimism, engaging intrinsic motivation, pursuing noble goals, emotional literacy and navigating emotions. Students are validated for their emotional complexity, but not coddled. Angela holds high expectations. As she sits adjacent another student she warmly demands, “Stop giving me data and start giving me thinking. Technically did you do what I asked? Yes. Your brain needs to be more involved in this. Quite honestly, I am tired of reading this so I’m not going to.” Angela asks the student a question to grow her understanding that two of the sentences are duplicative and then moves on.

Angela is able to discern how different approaches work with different students to cultivate specific competencies. In the situation above, she takes more of a tough love approach. Moments later, she supports a different student in engaging his intrinsic motivation using a much warmer tone, “Ian, do you have a minute?” Ian comes and sits in the chair next to Angela’s desk, she pulls out a piece of his writing and asks:



What is going to make it interesting to you? Your first notes were really good and for the past few days you have not been engaged. How are we going to get this to be something that puts that light back in your eyes and the glow back in your smile?

Angela continues, “Close your eyes. What do you see? You have really been connecting with art lately in a huge way. Can you use that here in some way?” When the student expresses concern about integrating art into his project on how computers and networks have evolved, Angela invites him to consider other ways to visually represent his work. She reminds Ian of the importance of the brainstorming process, “Don’t pass judgments on the ideas, just get ideas out there so we can get it done.” Ian shrugs his shoulders and his body language shows a lack of confidence. In tune with his feelings, Angela shares, “This is good writing, it is not great writing because you checked out so it became boring.” Ian nods in agreement and returns to one of the classroom sofas where he resumes writing.

Yet another student approaches Angela’s desk and expresses interest in learning more about the drug wars in Columbia. His stature reminds me of a peace warrior – he is solid, one of the physically biggest students in the class with long thick hair that he hides behind. Angela asked the student, Josh, if he has played the *World Peace* game and suggests he consider trying to find a way to introduce the game in Columbia as many children growing up there have become accustomed to drug wars and violence. She exclaims Columbia has been at war for 52 years! The student asks why he cannot just write an essay. Angela artfully responds:

Because you adore me and are willing to do things to make me happy and I am going to capitalize on that while I have you. I want you to be uncomfortable because you trust me enough to be uncomfortable.

Here is where our greatest growth lies – outside our comfort zone. The following dialogue ensues:

Angela:           Nothing says art and emotion like 52 years of drug wars. Have you ever looked at word art?

Josh: Kinda....

Angela: *Searches some on her laptop. Brings up image of Guernica and asks, "Do you like modern art?"*

Josh: No.

Angela: Does it make you uncomfortable?

Josh: No, I just don't like that way of representing war.

Angela: Do you paint?

Josh: No.

Angela: I'd love you to try.

Josh: Engages in some negative self talk about his artistic capabilities.

*Angela reminds him of feedback he received from peers on a prior project and coaches him through this unhealthy, perfectionist behavior.*

Josh: War is not black and white.

Angela: It's not.

Josh: You don't go into war saying "I don't care."

Angela: What color is passion?

Josh: Scarlett.

*Student makes another derogatory comment about himself that does not serve anyone well to repeat.*

Angela: You would not treat anyone else like that.

Josh: But it's me.

Angela: I wish you could see you through my eyes.

*Pause and moment of silence for reflection.*

Angela: When is a reasonable timeframe for you to produce a visual of the Columbian Drug War and a short explanation? That is what you need to

do or I will string you up by your toes.

Angela and the student discuss the schedule and come up with date the following week.

Angela: Let's give you two weeks.

*They agree on October 28<sup>th</sup>.*

Angela: So you will have enough time to work on your Halloween costume after. Ok, let's get this done. Love you!

Yes! How many teachers tell their students explicitly how much they care for them?

When educators communicate their feelings, they teach emotional literacy. In follow-up conversations with Angela I learn that this particular student is new to Creason; he entered the advanced classroom without having participated in either the primary or intermediate programs. Angela's tone reminds me of the concept of *warm demander* introduced by Dr. Franita Ware to describe culturally responsive teachers. A warm demander is a teacher who meets each student with both compassion and high expectations (Ware, 2002).

Angela gets up and walks around the room checking in with a few students working at a table on the opposite side of the room. A student drops a pile of papers accidentally and Angela says to him, "Hi Sweetheart, love you." I am reminded that one of the first things Angela told me when we met was that she was the *mean teacher*. This clearly demonstrates otherwise. One student approaches Angela with a simple question and she replies, "Watch it, read it – does it make sense? A lot of questions you could figure out on your own if you just sat with it." One student wears headphones. It is unclear if he is listening to music or if the headphones are intended to cancel out sound. Angela then passes Anna and asks, "Can I borrow you?" Anna follows Angela back to her desk where they have a conversation:

Angela: Have a seat.

*Angela pulls out a piece of paper that appears to be a piece of Anna's writing.*

Angela: Have you always been an amazing writer?

Anna: No. I used to be really good from first to third grade then eh hh.....

Angela: Tell me about the *ehhh*..

Anna: When I got older I *had* to write and I did not want to write because it was boring. I felt bad, because there was not enough dialogue.

Angela: You said when you started writing it felt really good.

Anna: But then it got boring.

Angela: It is really good. You use all of your senses. You are taking your reader into the experience. I can see where you got fatigued because you started to get into a summary. I'll bet if you write in hour long spurts that won't happen. This papers wants you to proofread it. You need to make sure you have punctuation, but I don't think you gave this a good proofread.

Anna: You are right. I didn't.

Angela: The next step is for you to proofread it and make sure you are saying what you mean to. Take this and get me a really good proofread.

Anna heads back to a desk and another student approaches. Angela asks him how his trip was yesterday and he replies "Good." Angela reads his non-verbal communication, "Why don't I believe you when your eyes look down and your shoulders shrug?"

Angela has one of the fastest rate of speech of any teacher I have ever observed – it is absolutely the right pace for this population, but likely way too fast for students with a different cognitive profile. Like the other Creason classrooms, the volume level in the classroom is still low. Observers would be impressed with the quality of feedback which is as good, if not better, than the support I have received in graduate coursework. Students by in large wear comfortable clothes for movement. Even though this is a private school, there is no pretense or visible elitism.

To an outsider, some spaces may appear messy at times with projects in various stages of development and supplies requisite to creation strewn about. Innovation is messy.

### **Evaluation as Conversation.**

It is first thing in the morning and Angela sings, “Oh the flurry of activity when there are things to do right at 8:30am. If you are on a computer, will you please log out? Pretty please with sugar on top?” The students gather around in a circle in the middle of the room. Angela discusses with them how rubrics have changed this past year and how that will impact upcoming student-parent-teacher conferences. She explains that in the past teachers often would take days off to write rubrics. It is clear the Creason community has high expectations in terms of quality and depth of feedback provided. Angela shares that over the course of the past year teachers have been collaborating to find a more efficient way of communicating with parents and thought it would be helpful for the class to review the changes in practice together. Angela passes out a copy of the rubric to each student. With awareness of gifted learners’ tendency to be their own worst critics, she shares:

I don’t want you to look at these and say, “I am only developing in...” Many among us are pretty hard on ourselves and pretty competitive. You’re learning and you are eleven to fourteen-year old kids. These are things graduate students work on, these are things I work on. If something is an area of concern, you probably already know about it and so do your parents. The last thing I ever want is for a parent to be surprised by a rubric. It’s not pretty and I don’t want to go through it again.

Angela continues, listing elements the rubric addresses:

- Are the questions you are asking the questions you should be asking?
- Do you fact check?

You are responsible for your own writing, your own research. You need to accurately cite the places where you got the information from.

- What are your reasoning strategies?
- Are you efficient?
- Do you get it done too quickly?

- Are you comprehending what you are doing?
- Do you have a voice or does your writing sound like a robot?
- Do I have to drag you by the nostrils to write something?
- Do you take chances or play it safe?
- Do you get paralyzed by analysis? Sometimes you need to just put your name on something and turn it in.

Evaluation occurs each trimester for each of the following categories: research, reason, record, as well as reading, writing, quantitative and behaviors. There are five levels of development articulated: skillful, proficient, developing, beginning and area of concern. This framework invites dialogue on students' intellectual, imaginative and emotional development. Furthermore, the qualitative data collected grows in-depth understanding of each individual student.

#### **Teacher as Editor.**

Angela introduces a new writing activity to students, "You are going to write, but you have a choice. Please settle, settle, settle." Angela explains students may be familiar with the PBS (Public Broadcasting System) story makers contest where students are invited to write a story of 700-1,000 words. Angela continues sharing there are two students in the class who have won in the past and that she would like to keep the streak going. She shares, "I also understand writing this kind of story is not everyone's bag. You do not have to do it. That does not mean you get to get out of writing. You will write something else." A student asks if they may write a story, but not submit it to the contest and Angela clarifies this is fine. Angela explains further that students who do not write a story will need to respond to one of their choice of writing prompts. The majority of students choose to participate in the writing contest.

The students disperse and begin writing. Angela initiates her desk-based student coaching sessions. At one point, the volume rises higher than normal and Angela says, "I am moderately unhappy at the conversation level." Students immediately stop chattering for the most part,

except for a few who continue project related dialogue. Angela remarks, “Cool, that was effective.” In glancing toward students’ computer screens, it is clear a lot of writing is occurring – pages and pages.

***Ashley.***

Angela invites, “Ashley, can you bring your last version of your story please? Did you look at all the comments?” Ashley brings her story over. Angela begins:

You are such a great writer. You took me to the moment, and then here, you got fatigued. Here you start summarizing and it is not storytelling anymore. It is just a paragraph, but probably wants to be a page. I am not as concerned about the deadline as I am concerned about your writing. It is ok to get fatigued. You just understand you get fatigued and you put strategies in to address it. I am irritated you did not take the time to reread it and rewrite it by today. Now you’re late. I want it by the end of the day. I am only slightly frowning. Let’s take time to put in strategies so this part is the same caliber as the first.

Ashley sits in the chair next to the teacher’s desk with body language that concurs and takes responsibility.

***Harriet.***

Angela calls out loud to the entire class, “Do I have a Harriet?” Harriet approaches and Angela asks if she has a first draft. Harriet passes her paper to Angela and takes a seat. Angela starts with her investigative journalism practices. She shares about Amy Goodman and about the oil pipeline going through sacred Indian lands. Angela explains Ms. Goodman is reporting on the story and “catching a lot of flack for being an investigative journalist.” Angela continues:

I think it makes sense for you to look into that. Can you research and get back to me on Wednesday so we know what to do with this? With the Native Americans and question of is it legal? Is it ethical for the company to be going through their land? Tribes are coming from other areas to say this is wrong.

The exchange only lasts a few minutes, but it is enough to launch Harriet into action.

***Zach.***

Next, Angela playfully commands, “Zach, venga aquí con su agenda” (*Come here with your agenda*). Zach takes a seat in the chair and says, “In Zachland, we might have our deadline for the poster wrong.” Angela explains her last agenda says it was due the day after tomorrow and given the deadline was already extended once is not inclined to give Zach more time. Angela moves on to talking about Zach’s next project:

So we know that your poster is due Wednesday. So I was thinking, music is communication right? You are a musician. My brain went a couple of different directions with this. One of the easiest ways to connect music with communication is motion picture soundtracks. The music adds a whole other layer of communication. Is that interesting?

Zach: That is really fascinating.

Angela: The study may be three different films and how they use music to impact? Everything Tarantino does is far too graphic for me to say it’s ok for you to watch that. What if you pick three different movies.

Angela continues listing a few examples including John Williams of *Star Wars* and Hans Zimmer who did *Interstellar*. She asks Zack if he likes the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and then turns to her laptop to look up who did that film. Angela explains to Zach:

I like this project for you because you need to practice time management. The Zach sitting here is so different than the Zach that was sitting here last year. Maybe last year’s Zach was kidnapped by aliens and this is a new Zach. I mean you kind of look the same...this project will help you work at different levels than you have worked in the past. You are intuitive and emotive and this project will bring out those strengths. It could be easy for this to get too big. This is not a six-week project – this is only two weeks. This is only one area where music impacts communication. Let’s keep this to a two-week project. Find three before Wednesday. Write that down. (*pause*) Is this cool, yet?

Zach enthusiastically responds he likes the idea and gives a thumbs up sign. Angela reminds him about the poster due date and then gives him a trademark, “Coolio?” Angela has an ongoing joke with students regarding qualifications for word invention and tells them they need a degree before earning the privilege of creating new terms. One student interjects, “Dr. Seuss did



not have a degree and he invented words.” The word play and student-teacher banter engage intellectual, imaginal and emotional overexcitabilities.

Angela excels at using satire to provide feedback; her artful use of humor lightens the mood. While students at Creason are acculturated to receiving and sharing criticisms of each other’s work, gifted individuals are intense and typically still their own worst critics. Being playful makes it easier to receive and integrate feedback.

***Laina.***

In the advanced program, the amount of teacher student dialogue increases as students grow increasingly independent in their unit work. Where in the primary and intermediate classrooms teachers circulated among students, here students voluntarily, or by invitation, come visit their teacher. In some ways this is like professor office hours at a university.

Angela asks Laina, “Ok, what’s next? We started with how does British government work? Now you have to figure out how the EU works. Because that in itself is complicated. So..”

Laina: I have been taking some notes. Free trade and economics helped France and Germany to reconcile. Obviously, the two countries were tense with each other after World War II. Eventually, it merged with the European energy and coal society?

Angela: Germany was tense with the whole damn world. Is a map the best way to show this? You have already so much background knowledge. You can expand really deep from where you already are. What do you want to show?

Laina: Why was it created. Has EU done a good job of achieving its aims? It was created to promote diversity and equality.

Angela: Are you feeling ok? You have your hood up and that’s new.

Laina: Yeah, I just like it this way.

Angela: So you are not communicating to me you are becoming the Unabomber? So what will set you on fire to get this done? You are like a squirrel hoarding nuts with information. How can you show other people?

Laina: It is almost a series of different news articles from different periods.

Angela: I like this because it shows data and dates. You might need to define it before you get into the different perspectives. So looking at how it came about...I am amused you wrote homework for yourself on something we have not talked about yet. So let's think about this.

Laina: What is pedagogy?

Angela: The underlying thinking about teaching. Sort of like an ideology about teaching. A lot of teachers use Pinterest for ideas about teaching. A lot of it is hokey, but there are some ideas you can use as a starting point.

Europe has its own rich history. How does Europe show its history?

Laina: Monuments.

Angela: The families of England, they have the coats of arms which have different symbols that either the family has done or things it wants people to believe about them.

The volume starts to get a little loud; Angela raises her Nerf gun, "Do I need to fire on you?" She calls out Josh, "Would you please go back to the drug wars?" Angela then swiftly returns to her conversation with Laina:

The coat of arms is very, very British. Europe has their own way of showing themselves. (Speaks of train scheduling...)

At it's heart is it economic? Or is it bigger than that? I am having this idea now, and it might be a bad idea. What if you did a coin, or a coat of arms or a flag? What if you use these different historic symbols to take all that information you've got and represent it?

Angela reads Laina's body language and replies, "You don't like this idea. That makes me happy because it means it's outside your comfort zone. What if you do both the writing and a coin or another object?"

Laina: I don't like flags because they are more complex. Bhutan is a lot more complicated.

Angela: Do you know what? People go there for fertility. So here's the story.

Way, way back, there was a guy who wanted to be the best that he could be. So he went to the holy people. They said, well then you need to chant. It was straight up swearing - really inappropriate. So he began chanting really loudly, walking down the street chanting these things because his wife kicked him out. He dispelled the evil spirits by waving his personal magic wand, his private magic wand. And people started getting pregnant with his erect penis wandering around the town. They came there to be blessed by his magic wand. So they gave him his own space away from town. So it is a symbol they are proud of.

We digress. We are talking about Europe which is absolutely not ok with this kind of thing.

Is there a symbolic coin? So you will process the information first through writing which is comfortable for you and then make a coin? (*Laina nods yes*). Cool. I like it when ideas happen.

Laina: I am excited to do the coin, but not certain how I am going to do it. Drawing is uncomfortable for me.

Angela: Make certain you are focusing on the big idea. Where is the big idea?

Let's think of words like motivation, moral, perseverance. We are going to solve this. Make certain you focus on that. You are a detail girl, so sometimes you need to look at the big picture. So week one...essay, which explains what?

Laina: The mission, purpose and history.

Angela: Do you want to break this into when you need drafts done? That is not something I worry about with you. Do you want to just work at your pace?

Laina: Yes.

Angela: Final Friday, due end of day.

I learn that to date, no conversation topic is off limits. Everything within a student's inner or outer world appears to be fair game for exploration. Moreover, there is an increase in the depth of teacher and student dialogue in the advanced program. As students' individual units become increasingly complex, not only are they afforded more autonomy, but the educator's role continues to evolve in response. Check-ins occur less regularly, but when they do happen, the conversations are honest, purposeful and productive.

**High Quality Headquarters (HQHQ).**

Laina rises and returns to a table where she was previously working. Another student approaches Angela's desk and shows her *pecimen* drawing. Angela exclaims, "Cool! How long did it take you to do that?" The student replies one hour. In one corner of the room, about 10 feet from Angela's desk, she has a corner desk set up with an object on it and a sign above labeled *pecimen*. During my observations, this was a glass mason jar with objects inside. Students take turns, individually or in small groups, sketching the object on the desk. I asked Angela about *pecimens* in our follow up interview. She explained that the sign used to say *specimen*, but the "s" fell off and the class thought it was clever to change the assignment name to *pecimen*. This is an advanced program weekly instructional practice. According to Angela, the purpose of the *pecimen* assignments are twofold. First, the assignment increases students' capacity to take field notes and sketch objects when they are in the field; it increases their observational abilities, drawing skills and also qualitative research capacity. Second, Angela allows students to socialize while sketching. By positioning the *pecimen* relatively close to her desk, she can listen to student conversations while working. Angela details the important data she collects just in overhearing what students talk about with one another. Angela then integrates what she learns from student conversations into her instruction; often the learning relates to social and emotional development.

After the *pecimen* review, Angela announces, "I need a brief word with Hunter." Hunter asks, "Am I in trouble?" Angela explains privately to Hunter, "You put me in a terrible position. You are not going to get this kind of support with big assignments next year. It's a small thing, just do it. You're not in trouble." Her intent is clearly to light a fire. As Angela takes off her glasses and rubs her face, another student approaches with images of a timeline she has been

working on and Angela asks, “Are you so proud of this?!” The student replies yes and Angela responds, “You should be – this is a masterpiece! This is remarkable, like wow!” This is further evidence of Angela’s strong student relationships; she knows what defines a student’s best work and likewise where they are underachieving. Achievement is relative to growth, not specific levels of skill or content acquisition as is the unfortunate and inequitable reality in many schools.

High quality or HQ pages are another instructional practice that occurs in many of the intermediate and advance classes at Creason. Angela shares that this activity is poorly named as everything they do is high quality. HQ pages are a combination of synthesis and analysis of various events and speakers. Students are required to complete an HQ page for every field trip they attend; multiple pages are required for longer trips. The purpose is to provide students an opportunity to process what they learned in order to deepen understanding. Each sheet is 50% writing and 50% drawing. This particular sample HQ page relates to a moderated post-debate discussion students at Creason watched together:

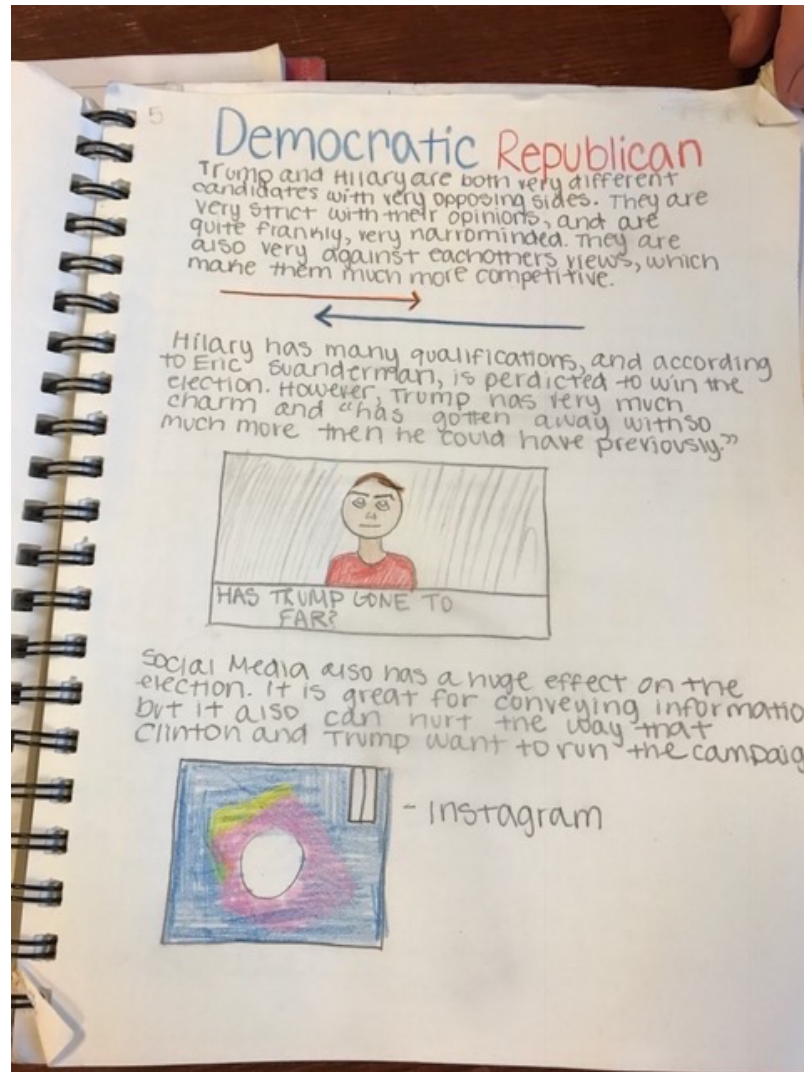


Image 21: Student HQ Page

### **Math Flexibility to Stretch Across Increasing Developmental Differences.**

Students in the advanced level at Creason participate in a wide range of math groups. The school currently supports mathematical development through advanced algebra. Students in this particular cohort are spread across several math groups. Today Angela called a student over to discuss his mathematical development and motivation.

Angela: I talked to dean of students yesterday about math because I knew you did not want to talk to her. She had an idea. How motivated are you to learn

math at a fast pace?

Michael: Relatively motivated?

Angela: How willing are you to do that in a more independent fashion?

Angela shares a story about former student who progressed through math at his own pace via an online program while attending Creason. She explains they could investigate that option for him, that there is a really good online math program, but that he would have to be self-motivated to pursue the opportunity (in the post-observation interview, Angela shares the program they have utilized in the past is Stanford math). Angela asks “Is that something you would be interested in?” The student is in the top math class in the school. He clarifies, “I wish it would speed up a little bit, but I do not want to double the work.” He was concerned about how the online program would be implemented and decides he is not interested at this time. It is shared here to illustrate the flexibility within the program at Creason and responsiveness to various levels of student mathematical development.

### **Authentic Expression and Audience Awareness.**

At the end of the unit work and writing block that extends from 8:30am to noon, Angela circles the students together in the living room. She sits crisscross applesauce on top of a metal stool and begins speaking:

One of the things we are doing here is learning to follow instructions. The instructions are clear. Where Creason is more loose on following direct instruction, it will not be like that for you next year. You are writing an original fiction story. It is your heart, your words. But because you are writing for a contest, it means it is also partially theirs. You have an audience; you have to consider this is *your* audience. Think about that audience. What is going to be their gauge?

A few students ask about the language rule (the contest instructions state you may not use *bad* language).

Angela: You may use the word *damn*. You may not use the word *shit*. If you are

writing a story about a student living on the streets, is it authentic if he does not drop a swear word? When you are an author, you are responsible. You can't change how someone reacts to something. You are also not oblivious to the fact that you have an audience who will react.

A student interjects, "They are not bad people because they curse." This is congruent with the deep empathy that is a powerful indicator of giftedness (Silverman, 2012) and also advanced socio-political development. Students recognize different words can hold different meanings in different cultural contexts. Angela removes the power from swear words by allowing students to discuss the social implications openly:

You do not have to submit your writing, but do you have to write for that audience. Are we clear on our language choices and how they may impact your story? You are great at negotiating around instructions and there are times that is not ok. You need to write well and also follow the rules.

A student calls out, "There are occasions when obeying the rules keeps you from writing well." Angela guides, "Then pick a different topic. Sometimes you have to follow rules and not be your most creative, expressive self. The world doesn't always let you do that." In this dialogue, Angela explicitly supports student socio-political development; transforming unjust systems requires intimate understanding of the rules of the system as it currently stands. The rest of the meeting, Angela explains in depth a formula often used by authors to create strong works of fiction.

### **Communicative Capacity and The Political.**

Mack joins Angela at her desk, "You have such a command of the English language! It has a cadence to it. What color are you? Most people have a color." Mack responds burgundy. Angela then launches into instructional dialogue, taking notes for Mack with her burgundy pen:

What are the arguments for and against a gun registry? What are the demographics of gun rights supporters? You can make an infographic at [infographic.com](http://infographic.com). It's a great way to show data and statistics and stuff. Snippets of information in symbolic format. The website helps you convert the data to this format. I think you will find it surprising.



Mack makes a connection between gun rights and the candidates in the upcoming presidential election, “I was going to wear my Trump hat today, but I thought that people would get pissed at me.” Angela is straightforward, “They might. They have the right to react, just not disrespectfully. If they did, then we would have to have a conversation. You have a right to wear the hat.” Mack asks Angela what the next step should be. Angela replies, “You need to know both sides.” Angela’s face is expressive and Mack notices her wince. Before he has the chance to ask if she is alright, Angela says, “I have actual pain. Last night I was training on forward head locks. Those are hard to get out of because you have to get on the other side of them.” It is clear they have spoken about martial arts in the past and that Mack knows Angela trains. Without skipping a beat, Angela pulls up *Picktochart*, an online software tool to create graphics, on her computer and sets up an account for Mack. She continues, “So let’s make certain we understand this. Who are these people? Find more than one source to make certain you get good data.” Mack responds, “Cool, I will start looking at polls.”

Overall, the amount of time allocated to students to engage in individual student work extends as their mastery increases. In the advanced program, this is more than double the time afforded students in the primary program.

### **When Advanced and Primary Meet: Students Teaching Each Other**

Buddy time is integrated into the school day; this allows advanced students to connect with and support primary students. Upon arrival in the primary classroom prior to buddy time, advanced students are scattered hiding throughout the room. Some under desks, some in the loft. A few were sitting on the sofa in plain sight. At 10:47am, the primary students enter. Their cheeks are rosy from recess. They take their coats and hats off and place them on the hooks in the hall. There are smiles and giggles during the mini game of hide and seek. Grace, the lead

primary teacher, sings, “Ago!” and the students reply “Amé!” Then she announces, “I will give you your white slips. Most of you are continuing a project you have been working on with your buddy, a few are starting something new. Find a place with your buddy and get started.” Grace calls each student by name and hands them a piece of paper with their objectives for this time together; the students have an established routine and quickly transition.

One pair of students appear to be working on making a model. At another table, buddies work on writing in a journal. The volume level is a little higher than normal as students discuss their various projects. Another pair of buddies work on some type of gear project. In the corner, Grace talks with students individually. She uses animated hand communication - her hands are speaking! I wish I could hear her words too, but the volume level is too high at this point.

Grace reminds a student, “Make certain you have your instructions so Calvin knows what your experiment is about.” Together the pair is working to create a model a skimmer. Another buddy pair sits on the sofa, the older student listens while the younger student, wearing a solar system shirt, draws on a notecard with his tongue hanging out. The big buddy offers advice and critiques his progress, “This part is hard to understand, what if this line went like this... *(the advanced student motions with his hand the suggested change).*”

Nearby, a student is so excited about a 3-D model she is making with her buddy on the birth of a black hole that she nearly falls off her wobbly stool – her little body is overflowing with intellectual, emotional and imaginal energy. They cut cardboard to link the various stages of black hole development using metal binder circles. Adjacent, another pair use clay and food coloring to make dirt colored putty. Yet another primary student is making a poster about wild cats. Her buddy coaches her on how to transcribe her data into a readable chart format. She handwrites her results in pencil and her big buddy asks, “Do you mean feet or inches here? Six

feet is from here to the sofa, is that what you mean?” The student corrects her unit of measurement.

The instructional dialogue happening at a computer where a pair conducts research on Betsy Ross sparks my curiosity. The advanced student remarks, “If you were Betsy Ross, in nine years you would be falling in love and getting married. She’s 17, in her third year of high school. That is a little weird, right? Do you think that is important?” The primary student nods yes and the older student responds, “Ok, let’s write that down.” Simultaneous to conducting research, the buddy is teaching note taking. She proceeds with this coaching as they read through the entire website. They learn about Betsy Ross’ personal history, including that she met her third husband when he came to deliver her second husband’s dying wishes (the two men had been in prison together). Importantly, they learn that while it seems certain Betsy Ross did in fact make flags, it is unclear whether or not she made the first flag. The primary student asks her buddy, “Why didn’t they just check the first flag for fingerprints?”

When Grace informs students their time together is coming close to ending, there are loud groans of disappointment.

This observation warms my heart. The circle repeats as students learn to teach by being learners themselves, exactly how they have been taught.

### **Specialist Educators**

Specialist teacher programming plays a significant role in the overall learning experience at the Creason School. This section shares setting descriptions and interpretations from a variety of pedagogical dialogues that took place across specialist classes. Vignettes provide a glimpse into various course offerings and how they are operationalized for students in the primary, intermediate and advanced programs.

**Physical Education: Life is a Dance.**

The physical education (PE) program is one way Creason supports the development of students' bodies. There are opportunities for students to try a wide range of traditional sports and also movement activities that support life-long well-being, including yoga. The unit on dance was particularly fascinating given the artful integration of mind, body and emotions into artistic expression. Dance class observations remind me most athletic endeavors expect participants to practice with discipline in order to be able to successfully engage in the dialogue of the activity, to adapt to competitors, audience responses, the environment and/or teammates' performance.

Upon arrival, the sky was covering the campus in a pristine layer of peaceful white snow. Inside the sizeable gym, the temperature is comfortable. I observe from the purple bleachers. Gayle, the PE teacher, calls to arriving primary students, "Take your boots off, put your shoes on and start moving!" After bending over to support a student in tying her shoes, Gayle walks alongside students engaging in brief check-in conversations. After walking for a bit, she yells, "Freeze!" Then reminds students to breathe before asking them to power walk. One student's shirt reads "Kind is cool" which catches my attention. Yes, indeed. A few students wiggle back and forth as they walk, swinging their hips with sass. Gayle then calls out, "I want to see slow motion – big, exaggerated walking!" Students continue with animated facial expressions and rosy cheeks. It occurs to me this is as much an exercise in listening as in movement. Students are asked to run five laps and Gayle pulls a few out at a time to get a drink of water, making certain everyone who wants some has a turn at the fountain. When they are done, students line up on the opposite side of the gym and Gayle instructs, "On your gluteus maximus!"

Gayle then explains that they are starting a unit on dance and it is ok if they have never done so before as all that is being asked of them is to try. Gayle explains just like with sports

where people do drills to learn skills before playing in a game, they are going to practice dance steps together, “We are not going to come in and start dancing away, we are going to learn the steps.” They begin by playing a playful memory game where the students try to copy the movements Gayle and her associate teacher make. Variations of clapping, snapping, jumping, head touching, silly arm movements, toe tapping and Egyptian like moves are integrated. New dance moves are invented too.

Next, the students lineup behind cones under the basketball hoop at the far, narrow end of the gym. Gayle instructs, “Unroll the top of your ears and turn all those little nerves on so you can really hear what I am going to say.” Gayle teaches the students a simple step ball change and asks them to practice the step the entire length of the basketball court. Students proceed one at a time, many furrowing their brows or with tongues stuck out in concentration as they work to coordinate limb movements. Gayle repeats, “Up, down, up down, step high, step low.” One student hugs another after realizing success. The next round, Gayle tells students they are going to try the step with music. She turns on *The Mexican Hat Dance* and students practice again. The activity appears to be on the edge of students’ mind and body integration capacity. They practice a few more steps. Afterwards, Gayle asks students if they recognize the music – one shouts out the correct answer. She then tells the class folk dances are dances with a story and that this dance helped people exert their social freedom.

To close their time together, Gayle turns on the Pharrell Williams song, *Happy*. Gayle explains, “I am going to call someone’s name and then you make up a move which everyone is going to copy.” The students’ moves were sometimes robotic, but always creative. Observers’ hearts would melt at the sight of the enthusiasm and joy. Gayle concludes, “You did a great job today – pat yourselves on the back. You followed directions and respected each other.” Students

circle back to walking the gym's perimeter. Gayle explains, "We are bringing our heart rate and blood pressure down." Students are dismissed one at a time to get their coats and lineup before the next class enters.

I feel happy, just like the song.

### **Spanish: Language and Culture Converge in Empanadas.**

Spanish classes at Creason take place primarily in a traditional classroom space where students play games and engage in a variety of activities to expand their linguistic capacity. Today, Spanish is being held in the on-site, classroom size kitchen. The smells trigger my bilingual memories and I take the majority of my field notes in Spanish. The class takes place at 7:45am, before school begins and is comprised of 19 advanced program students. Primary students are required to take a world language, but afterwards it is optional.

"Lávense las manos y pongan los platos en su lugar. Estamos haciendo empanadas de calabaza." Michelle, the Spanish teacher, speaks in Spanish to the class, "Wash your hands and put away the dishes. We are going to make pumpkin empanadas." For the duration of the class, Michelle only speaks Spanish. She asks students to get into their groups of three and explains half the class will be working on making the dough for the empanadas and the other half, the filling.

After reading the ingredient list, one student does not recognize one of the words and asks, "Que es moreno?" Michelle provides clues until she figures out it is brown sugar. There is a frenzy of activity as students gather ingredients, collect kitchen utensils and begin following their recipes. One student does a pirouette and dances around the kitchen in the process. Notably, this is met with joyful smiles rather than the scolding the student may encounter in a different environment. I notice later on that she is wearing a jacket from a local dance academy.

Fifteen minutes in, some students have already transitioned to the stove and the room is filled with the scent of delicious. Michelle calls to students to join her at the center table, “Chicos, vengan – voy a demostrar como cerrar las empanadas.” *Come here, I’m going to show you how to close the empanadas.* Michelle models how to assemble the treats and students catch on quickly and start making their own. She then reminds, “No tenemos mucho tiempo – solamente doce minutos. Entonces, todos necesitan trabajar.” *We don’t have much time; everyone needs to work because we only have 12 minutes.* One student jumps in and volunteers to start egg washing the empanadas. Michelle builds confidence by sharing that if they can make pumpkin empanadas, they can make any other variety as these are the most difficult given the liquid consistency of the stuffing.

As soon as all the baking trays are in the oven, students beginning cleaning up. The expectation is the kitchen will be left at least as clean as the students found it. Michelle expressively says in Spanish, “Look at all these beautiful tables...and then, there’s this one.” This is followed by a sad face. The result is that the messiest group steps up their cleaning efforts. As students prepare to leave, one starts up a conversation with Michelle about the empanadas he makes at home with his mom. They exchange cooking tips while heading out the door.

### **Math and Science: How Diseases Spread.**

Ben is a math and science specialist at Creason. In addition to teaching math to some of the most advanced students on campus, he also teaches a variety of science and math specialist offerings and supports students with work in their individual units. His math courses are rooted in strong student relationships and incredible content expertise; courses are both playful and

demanding. Following is an example of how Ben guided a student along his individual unit learning on infectious diseases.

Upon arrival in the science lab, the intermediate student, Hayden, shares how he is currently working on creating a Zika model. Ben and Hayden sit side by side on stools. Ben explains the simulation he has designed for Hayden to lead his class through and asks him what disease he wants his classmates to have. Hayden quickly responds, “Ebola.” “What a sweet guy you are,” Ben replies. He continues:

Here is what is going to happen. You get to decide which one person has the disease. One student will have a test tub with ammonia, all others will just have tap water. (*Ben offers a quick review of bases and acids*). We have to be careful so they cannot smell the ammonia because then they would be able to figure out who has the disease. We have to figure out the smallest amount that will trigger a reaction. You set the scene for classmates when they arrive.

The activity is designed to grow understanding of how Ebola spreads. Students will each have a pipette and exchange fluids a certain number of times representing contact with another person. Ben asks Hayden how many rounds he thinks they should do. Hayden quickly calculates that by four rounds a good portion of the students will have contracted the disease. They decide to use a base because it will change colors with a phenylalanine solution.

Together, they begin preparing the test tubes for the students’ arrival. They put googles on before opening the ammonium. Ben preps Hayden to remind students about how they should hold the test tube to avoid inhaling chemicals, and also so the smell is not revealed. They practice, adjusting the ammonium levels to the smallest level possible to trigger a change in fluid color. Shortly after, 18 students enter the room.

Hayden, one of the physically smallest students, explains about the particularly potent strain of Ebola present today and how it is in one of the 18 test tubes. He details how for the first round, everyone will choose someone and use the pipette to swap two drops with. One of the



students says with trepidation, “Tell me about this chemical.” Ben jumps in to explain the properties of ammonia and the precautions being taken to insure student safety. He then asks the class if there is anyone who can explain how this simulation relates to epidemics and one student eagerly responds with details. Ben and Hayden then model how to transfer fluids with the pipette.

Hayden explains there will be four rounds and asks if there are any predictions regarding how many students will end up contracting Ebola. One student responds eight and another explains why it may not double every single time. Hayden leads the students smiling under their goggles through all the rounds, as well as the final testing with the indicator solution. One student’s t-shirt reads, “Be Courageous” on the back. How appropriate! At the end, Ben snaps a photo of the entire class as they hold up their test tubes illustrating 14 students now have Ebola. Hayden will use this photo and write reflections on the learning experience in his field journal afterwards.

As the students clean up, Ben invites Hayden to consider how he might be able to create a visual to illustrate how the disease spread to result in 14 contaminations. Without missing a beat, Hayden responds by announcing to his classmates that before they leave for recess he has an assignment for them – to share with him who they exchanged fluids with and that he will use this information to create a visual on how the disease spread. Students chat, giggle and call out, “Thanks!” on their way out the door. Mission spread a disease is complete!

This exercise reminds me of the implicit curriculum and how pessimism, deficit thinking and relational aggression replicate and can spread like a disease in a school community. Breaking from oppression is arduous work. The process of empowerment requires recognition of inequity, conscious practice and focus on what *is* working.

**The Arts.**

There are a multitude of arts course offerings at Creason spanning both visual and performing arts. Introductory performing and visual arts classes are part of the primary program and then become electives starting in intermediate. Georgie is a performing arts specialist. Instruction observed spans from theater rehearsals, musical instrument practice, music video design, improv games and more. Georgie's classes take place primarily in the performing arts classroom or in the small theater space located in the same building as the gym. Today we are in the theater with primary students. There is a light and sound booth and a few rows of seating; the space can hold approximately two classes at time. I take a seat in the audience as primary students filter in.

***Flowing in the Moment.***

Georgie announces to students as they enter, "Today we are going to work on cooperating, focusing and of course, always using our imagination!" On a white board on the stage is an agenda that includes a list of the various performing arts games Georgie plans to play today. Students form a circle, taking turns acting out an activity that their classmates have to guess. Georgie starts. The kids ask, "What are you doing?" Georgie exclaims, "I'm riding a peacock!" They continue with each taking a turn. Here are a few examples of what students dreamt up:

- I was combing my hair which was so messy I fell down!
- Digging up worms and eating them!
- I am sitting in a chair!
- Playing soccer.
- I was being eaten by a whale.

- Riding a Spinosaurus.
- Trying to climb out the side of the theater and the actors were so angry they are hanging on to my legs.
- Buying new glasses.

When the circle is complete, Georgie explains stage directions. She then asks students to go upstage right as robots, then upstage center as marshmallows, center stage right as bunny rabbits and then upstage left as whatever animal they choose.

Afterwards, they play a game called mirrors. Georgie demonstrates with a student, Maria. Georgie moves and Maria tries to be her mirror and then they reverse roles. This activity supports the development of empathy and listening skills. Students get creative with their movements which become increasingly complex in an attempt to throw their mirror off.

The transitions from one activity to the next are quick and seamless. “Next up is quick change artist,” sings Georgie, “You will look closely at one another and then you are going to stand back to back. You will each change two things about yourselves and then turn back around and your partner will try to guess what you changed.” Students eyes light with mischief – some identify discrete, small changes like rolling up a sleeve or removing an earring, others get silly with obvious changes like rolling a pant leg all the way up.

The next game is an exemplary model of teaching emotional literacy. Georgie divides students into pairs and hands each student a card that has the name of an emotion on it. Students take turns acting out the feeling on the card while their partner guesses. One student struggles to guess their partner’s emotion and Georgie asks the actor, “Can you show us that feeling another way?” Georgie then collects the cards and redistributes the emotion cards along with an activity card. Each student is tasked with acting out what is on the card in the emotional state of the

emotion card. Children take turns performing as their classmates giggle and guess. One student has to pick flowers while scared. This stumps the group; it takes a while for them to figure it out. When they finally get it right, Georgie rhymes, “Winner, winner, chicken dinner!”

To close their time together, students return to the circle where they shake each other’s hands and do a duck-duck goose style tickle game where students touched a certain way fall down and then the group guesses who the tickler was.

***A Lesson in Shapes: Circle or Partially Digested Jelly Bean?***

In early November, Creason students in the advanced program are preparing for a production of *Aunt Edwina* as part of an optional specialist class offering. There are 22 students in the musical. As students enter the theater, one sings a song he made up about the election last night. It is a loud group. Georgie calls, “Ollie, Ollie!” All have a seat.

Georgie shares the set design plan before starting a warm-up with her associate teacher. She begins by asking students to circle up and then teases, “This isn’t a circle, it’s a jelly bean. A partially digested jelly bean!” Students re-shape and then begin by practicing breath work. Georgie shares in a peaceful tone, “We will warm up our voices, our minds and our bodies before doing a full run through.” Together, students start by passing nonsense sounds and words around the circle. Georgie explains it is a game of focus and energy, that they only have a second to carry the energy. One student enters late and laces up her ballet point shoes prior to joining the circle. Upon conclusion, all quickly disperse to begin rehearsal.

Georgie and her associate coach students in the same way most of us have seen in media, providing specific feedback to each of the actors and having them repeat lines, songs or scenes as needed. Georgie reminds students to send energy out into the audience, a spiritual task that both improves their performance and audience engagement. Much of the feedback encourages

students to be more animated and to exaggerate their expressions and movements for effect.

When a specific song lacks energy, Georgie has them practice without movements to concentrate on tone, projection and articulation. She encourages, “When you sing it like that, it is awesome. It’s just a matter of marrying the singing and the movement. The audience is going to go nuts! Ok, let’s take five.”

And so it goes throughout their time together; students practice to continue improving their performance. The multiple layers of a students’ identity, their overexcitabilities and developmental uniqueness, are honored. In supporting the mastery of performing arts skills in a way that nurtures whole human beings in the primary and intermediate program, there is an increased level of independence in the advanced program which underpins a phenomenal group performance.

### **Technology and Design: Lending a Pink Hand.**

Carmen welcomes two primary students to the computer lab. Both have individual units that revolve around prosthetic limbs. Carmen introduces the girls to a program called *Enabling the Future*. She explains the man who started the company made a prosthetic hand with a 3D printer as part of a costume and when a doctor saw it, he asked if he would share how it was made. This was the origins of the project that now has a prosthetic hand challenge where children use 3D printers and a proven design to create prosthetics. These two girls would like to participate.

Together they read the directions and learn it takes 13 hours to print. After creating all the pieces, they will have to assemble the hand. One girl wears ear muffs. She is tiny; her legs do not even reach the floor while sitting in the chair. It is hard to believe her mind is already working in the direction of creating prosthetics! Carmen invites her to retrieve the chip from the printer to

insert into the computer. The girls decide to use pink filament to make their hand and Carmen helps install the new wheel. “Let’s get out your journals and you can sketch what you see,” she says while working on the machine. Carmen details how the machine works and the girls pull up chairs to stand on to get a closer look. Then, on their knees on the floor, they sketch the 3D printer. Carmen reminds, “Make certain you look closely at the inside and get all the details, can you sketch the extruder and inside the bed too?” Carmen spells extruder and filament.

Another Creason teacher enters and begins asking questions about the project. Moments later she decides to go retrieve her own journal to document notes too. All learn the bed gets up to 200 degrees. Carmen explains, “Think of the hottest day you can ever remember and then double that. That’s how hot it gets!” Operating the machine requires both technological and manual dexterity and Carmen does a majority of the set-up work. Louis, the head of school, stops by and offers to check in on the printing project on Saturday given it will take nearly 13 hours. It is a team effort. The founder, Donna, peeks in too. She asks, “So the person who receives this will have a pink hand?” Carmen clarifies that after they donate it, they do not know who receives it or if they decide to keep it that color or not. The girls and Carmen also share about how rubber bands will be used to create tendons. And just like that, the hour is over and the girls say “Bye, bye” as the printer begins its work.

**SEED: Itty Bitty Bigs.**

I wait for the SEED teacher, Joy, to arrive in the lobby. I enjoy the sunlight and the peacefulness of the space. On the table next to the chairs are a few photo albums sharing examples of student learning. When she arrives, Joy invites me to join her in picking up a kindergarten student, Eve, from her classroom.

Eve's hair is shoulder length and disheveled. She is itty bitty, but wears confidence well with her tall boots, shorts and a monster band-aide on her knee. Joy shepherds her out the door, "Eve, can you please gather your car seat, field note book and backpack?" She tells me this is part of developing personal responsibility. Joy asks Eve about a small stuffy she has with her, a cheetah; Eve shares her name is Freckles. Eve tucks Freckles in her backpack and we're off. The car seat is as big as she is and I am impressed by Eve's strength as she carries it, along with her backpack, all the way to the SEED van in the parking lot. Today we are heading to the Wings Over the Rockies Museum.

We approach a van with paint flaking off and Joy explains the SEEDs have nicknamed this van Freckles because of it (just like Eve's cheetah!). On the drive over, Joy asks Eve why she decided to study *Star Wars*. Eve explains she was curious to learn how they built the Death Star. Joy shares the reason we are going to the Wings over the Rockies museum is because they have a Star Wars exhibit, specifically they have the X-wing fighter and Pod Racer from the film set on display.

As she drives, Joy asks Eve plot questions. Eve retells much of the *Star Wars* story after sharing she watched the movie first and then read the book. Eve explains the Resistance is the light side and the X-wing is the dark side. She also shares she plans to be BV8 for Halloween and that he is her favorite because of the way he rolls around. Eve recounts how BV8 could roll away to avoid being captured. She also talks about Finn from the dark side and how he quit because he did not think it was right to kill people. Eve then retells the story about a time he lied, explaining Finn said he was with the Resistance so people would not kill him, even though he wasn't and how he wanted to go with the girl, Ray. Eve asks Joy, "Do you know I have an R2D2 sweater?" Two words come to mind – precious and strength.

As we approach the museum, Joy asks Eve to get out her journal and share what her questions are so they can make sure to address them all. As we pull into the parking lot, Eve clings her Freckles cheetah close. Joy and Eve walk side by side into the lobby where they proceed past the front desk to the hangar where all the aircraft are displayed. There is a table with several volunteers, all with silver hair.

Eve quickly identifies the X-wing fighter. There are numerous signatures on the plane. Joy explains that Harrison Ford, the actor who played Hans Solo, is into flying and played a role in getting the X-wing fighter and Pod Racer to the museum. She continues explaining that several people involved in the film, including Harrison Ford, George Lucas and the actors who played R2D2 and C3PO signed the X-wing fighter. She shares with enthusiasm that these are the ships they used in the real movie. Joy then provides Eve a choice of where to begin: Does she want to address the questions in her journal or explore the facility? Eve chooses to sit in front of the X-wing fighter and start with the questions in her journal.

Eve exudes quiet curiosity. We appear to be the only ones here with the exception of a school group arriving on the other side of the building. Eve mentions to Joy that she saw the X-wing fighter, but not the pod racer. Both look around, but neither can locate it. Joy asks Eve, “Who can we ask for help?” They walk to the front desk together and then see the table with the elder volunteers. A man with a name tag that reads Hugh introduces himself. Hugh extends his hand for Eve to shake. Eve appears reticent, maybe due to the fact he was at least six feet tall which could feel physically intimidating to someone so small. Joy volunteers her hand and says, “Here, let’s shake together.” Both shake Hugh’s hand simultaneously. The field trips integrate social and emotional learning simultaneous to intellectual exploration. They ask about the Pod Racer location. Hugh shares “Here, let me show you.” They walk the length of the hangar before



Eve spies the Pod Racer with a model Anakin Skywalker standing beside. Oh the irony! Anakin Skywalker is a gifted kid who becomes Darth Vader when his affective needs are not met.

Joy and Eve sit on the concrete floor and pull out the field journal from her backpack, as well as a pouch filled with pencils, markers and pens. Joy and Eve start a conversation about using one's powers for good or evil as Eve begins sketching the Pod Racer. Joy asks, "How are we going to draw this? Do we need to move around?" Then she comments, "I like your idea of doing it in parts." Shortly thereafter, Eve relocates to get another perspective. Joy gives a mini lesson on proportions to help Eve with the accuracy of her drawing. Joy supports in breaking the plane into pieces so it is easier to replicate; she asks Eve, "What shapes do you see?"

Next, they read the sign adjacent the display that shares technical details and also production specifics, including how certain scenes were created using blue screens. This engages Eve's curiosity and she asks questions to better understand what a blue screen is and how it is used in the movies. Close by, a group of about 25 second or third graders tour the facility with a few teachers and parents. The contrast is stark. Eve is much more mature than these older students who do not seem particularly interested in being here.

At the end of their time together at the museum, Joy works with Eve to synthesize the experience:

What did we find out today? Tell me more about how you figured out the size. How do you define "big?" Pretend you are with your buddy. What would you tell them about today? What would you say?

Before they leave, Joy captures a few photos of Eve next to the Pod racer and X-wing fighter. On the drive back, Joy asks Eve if she might want to see costumes from the *Star Wars* films that are on display at another museum. Eve reviews her journal in silence the rest of the drive back.

Today she engaged her mind, body, heart and imagination – it was a big learning day for someone small in physical size.

And so the story continues. May the force be with you as you work to empower diverse gifted learners and break the cycle of oppression.

### **Summary**

The implicit section of this chapter shines light on how educator behavior influences students. The teaching staff at Creason consistently reported feeling they are treated with professional respect. While there was variance in the exact words used, each participant expressed gratitude for being extended such flexibility in instructional design. In reflecting on gifted advocacy organizations such as the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC), I find myself curious about the impact of standards on teacher attitudes and effectiveness. To date, much gifted advocacy work has focused on the creation of standards, white papers and position statements (NAGC, 2016). Several teachers spoke explicitly to the important role choice and the lack of limits played in empowerment goals. Not once did I see or hear mention of standards. Would standards impede creative practices that are seemingly central to the program's success? Do they diminish feelings of trust among team members? This is an area for future investigation.

In the instructional dialogue section, I highlighted how disciplined child study practices supported participating educators in meeting children's unique strengths and needs in the moment of instruction. The narratives provided insight into the various roles educators and students play in the classroom, from learners, scientists, artists, teachers, authors, inventors and more. As evidenced both through data collected in interviews and instructional observations, educators and students hold an expectation that learning will be uncomfortable and that

dissonance often precedes growth. Tolerance for ambiguity and perspective taking were witnessed across campus.

The final chapter includes themes that emerged from the study, recommendations and implications.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### DISCUSSION: EVALUATION, THEMATICS & IMPLICATIONS

The emotional intensity and high level of energy of the gifted child cannot be ignored because they disturb the routine and the order of the things set before the arrival of the little Energizer. Gifted children take in information from the world around them; they react and respond more quickly and intensely than other children. They are stimulated both by what's going on around them and by what moves from within (Daniels and Piechowski, 2009, p.4).

For many people, gifted children are associated with chaos. As outliers, their existence threatens the status quo. As outlined in Chapters One and Two, the systemic oppression of gifted students in traditional school models frequently results in disenfranchisement (Chu & Myers, 2015; Delisle, 2014). Well-intentioned teachers can cause harm if they lack understanding of and responsiveness to the unseen aspects of a gifted child's development. All students deserve instruction responsive to their unique strengths and needs, including gifted learners. This study explores the aspirations and practices of a specific learning community, The Creason School, designed to empower diverse gifted children. The Creason School has more than 25 years' experience in pursuit of the mission of serving gifted learners which made them an ideal community partner.

In the past, efforts to effect change have focused on legislation, policy modifications, improving identification procedures, altering curricula and creating new programs coupled with targeted professional development and community education. Part of the solution to the complex problem of practice of empowering diverse gifted children lies in studying what *is* working in practice and in examining innovative schools where gifted learners thrive. By deepening understanding of the intricacies of the intentions, structures and pedagogy of a program that aims to be responsive to the developmental complexities of gifted children, I hope to support other educators working to support student well-being.

### **Overview of Study**

In order to richly describe the nuances of the Creason program, I employed Eisner's educational criticism and connoisseurship (educational criticism) research approach. In this method, connoisseurship is the art of appreciation and criticism, the art of disclosure (Eisner, 2017). The researcher works to provide a deeper understanding and interpretation of events and then craft a clear, cogent portrayal of the situation. The goal of educational criticism is to enhance educational practices (Eisner, 2017) which aligns with the purpose of this study: namely, to improve education by better understanding the practices of a school designed to empower diverse gifted children.

To this end, two research questions guide this study: 1) What are the aspirations of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children? 2) Are those aspirations realized (or not) in practice? In total, 11 educators participated in this study which spanned approximately 10 weeks. Educator interviews played an important role in helping to clarify and understand the program's stated intentions and implicit instruction. Each participant was invited to an initial interview (protocol in Appendix E), followed by instructional observations (protocol in Appendix F), which yielded a significant body of data relevant to the study's guiding questions. A follow-up interview with each educator closed our time together. Interviews were hand transcribed which afforded me additional opportunities to interact with the data. Setting descriptions were crafted as informed by data collected from interviews, instructional and campus observations, annotations and personal reflections, school communications, as well as photos of learning artifacts and the school campus. Both transcriptions and setting descriptions were shared with participants who were invited to review for accuracy, critique and provide feedback.

Utilizing this method enabled me to describe and interpret the Creason educational experience in Chapters Four through Seven. In this chapter, I highlight tensions among the program's intentions, structures and pedagogy and create themes informed from data collected in the study to support Creason in better articulating the nuances of their unique program, as well as other school programs interested in supporting the well-being of students with potential for advanced development.

### **Summary of Responses to Research Questions**

In poor fit school environments, gifted children's intensity can cause frustration and even result in harm to both the students and educators ill-prepared to care for them. Like Clara who invited me to consider what constitutes true learning, gifted children who are cognitively complex, the outliers, push our thinking and expand our capacity as educators. Given their complexity, educators serving gifted children are provided a unique opportunity to increase their understanding of and responsiveness to the various unseen aspects of human development.

Findings are synthesized here as related to chaos theory. Chaos theory originated in 1960 when Edward Lorenz created a model at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to predict the weather (Gleick, 2008). Lorenz learned given the myriad factors influencing the weather, he could never fully understand the present situation; therefore, weather can not be predicted with 100 percent accuracy. This is called the uncertainty principle: The inability to fully understand all the intricacies of a complex system prevent us from accurately predicting its evolution (Gleick, 2008). Each human being is a complex system with countless factors influencing their development. While complex systems may seem disorganized from afar, if one looks closely, patterns emerge (Gleick, 2008).

Below is a summary of the responses to the two research questions guiding this inquiry. This is followed by more in-depth discussion in the thematics, recommendations and implications sections.

### **The Uncertainty Principle: Research Question One**

#### *1. What are the aspirations of a program designed to empower diverse gifted learners?*

The uncertainty principle is relevant to this study as gifted students, and the schools that serve them, are complex (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Neville et al., 2013). Educators and parents caring for gifted youth, even with high levels of expertise, may never truly understand all the factors influencing development. Acknowledging and appreciating this mystery keeps educators well-rooted in the humility required to facilitate continued growth. This ineffable complexity is also the case for studying the intentions, structures and pedagogical practices in-depth.

To a degree, the aspirations of the Creason program are ambiguous. Creason aims to honor students' authentic selves. This is both a simple and complex objective as it requires educators to listen deeply to children, and one another, as well as co-design instruction through an emergent and dynamic process. Each educator works to balance individual student needs with the needs of the entire community which requires both discipline and flexibility to realize in practice. As a result, the program goals are not black and white, but rather afford space for individual interpretation in the classroom context. This is represented in the founder's statement that the answer to all questions at Creason is "It depends."

In encouraging tolerance for ambiguity, The Creason School expects to prepare students to engage with complex challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, it intends for community

members to hold a broad definition of success as epitomized in the diverse projects displayed during the school's annual exposition event.

Educators pursue their empowerment goals by aspiring to be social scientists who study individual children, learners who navigate the unknown daily, and artists who respond to students and the environment in the moment.

### **Attractors: Research Question Two**

#### *2. Are those aspirations realized (or not) in practice?*

Another element of chaos theory is attractors. Complex systems appear chaotic to the outside viewer, but if one has the capacity to look closely at chaotic systems, patterns will emerge (Gleick, 2008). Over time, complex system will achieve equilibrium; the term *attractor* is used to describe the patterns in complex systems that eventually calm the system, and *strange attractor* is the term used to describe the dynamic patterns within a complex system that repeat in an attempt to balance, but never settle down (Gleick, 2008). Gifted children in learning environments that do not understand their development are similar to strange attractors; neither the complex system that is the child, nor the school community feels at ease, but rather maintains an energy of conflict. In contrast, gifted children in responsive learning environments operate more like attractors, resulting in high levels of engagement and even flow. Flow is defined by Csikszentmihalyi as times when humans experience exceptional moments and their actions feel effortless, when they are engaged in activities that use their strengths and time passes without notice (2013). An example would be Clara in the introduction; a good fit school was the difference between her barely surviving and thriving.

Students and educators observed across Creason's campus appeared to have the highest level of engagement of any program I had previously witnessed in action prior as detailed in the



setting descriptions across campus. Instructional practices could be described as a beautiful meeting of the science and art of teaching, a place where true, two-way dialogue takes place. As such, the Creason community appears to be in symbiotic relationship with the majority of individuals within. In this sense, the program supports both individual and collective development and is successful in realizing its aspirations.

Still, even within exceptional programs, there will be areas for improvement in part due to the aforementioned unseen aspects influencing development.

### **The Butterfly Effect: Thematics and Recommendations**

Unfortunately, the first step will have to be “We’ve been doing this totally wrong.” And that part must be scary for educators which is why we keep finding new little fixes instead of admitting maybe we’re just doing it wrong. It’s tough. We have whole institutions dedicated to bad education... This is the most simplistic version of teaching. There is no real trick to it. It’s talking to the child. And it’s so wonderfully simple.

*(Louis, head of school)*

Perhaps the most important lesson from chaos theory is that small changes can have big impact in complex systems. This phenomenon has been labeled the butterfly effect (Gleick, 2008). The butterfly effect has been evident throughout my work with gifted children and also in this research project. As a result of co-opening a school for gifted students, I witnessed firsthand how incremental shifts in practices better supported the healthy development of gifted children, which is a source of great hope. The Creason School illustrates how altering program intentions, structures and pedagogical practices can support empowerment. This said, as Louis mentions above, when those small changes are a threat to an individual’s or organization’s identity and current belief systems, instructional habits can be hard to break.

One of the most fundamental small change challenges is how schools conceptualize curriculum. By shifting emphasis from the explicit to the implicit, communities are reminded

they grow learners by encouraging teachers to learn. Furthermore, co-designing instruction in partnership with students invites dialogue and transforms how power is shared among individuals. More equitable sharing of power in schools may lead to societal evolution as students acculturate to peace.

Creason educators participate in curriculum design as part of a research cycle that mirrors student learning experiences. This process invites educators to explore areas outside their comfort zones and be agile in their instructional practices. In viewing program design as a vehicle to support varying aspects of individual human development rather than a set of pre-packaged learning experiences with specific academic destinations, teachers can create space for conversations that facilitate deep and meaningful learning while building strong relationships.

Five themes emerged in this study that manifested in the program's intentions, structures and pedagogy practices: passion + purpose, creative behaviors, emotional skills, environmental connections and agility. Themes "articulate the patterns, big ideas, and anticipatory frameworks for other educational situations" (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016, p.54). In the following section, I describe how Creason's aspirations are realized by connecting intentions, structures and pedagogical practices to Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (2017) and social baseline theory (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Tensions among intentions, structures and pedagogy are integrated into the discussion. Each of the themes relate to Creason's daily practices.

### **Passion + Purpose**

Engaging students' passions in meaningful ways was expressed as an aspiration by each of the study's participants. Related language included: strengths, interests, purpose and application of learning. The word *passion* specifically was used by seven of the eleven

participants during formal interviews. During each observation, educators and students at Creason applied their strengths and interests to explore relevant questions.

First, passion + purpose presents in the program's intentions. Creason aspires to facilitate self-directed learning, where children co-architect individual curriculum in partnership with their teachers. Creason aims to support each child in researching topics of interest, reasoning and synthesizing information and finally, in communicating their learning to others. Structuring time to prioritize individual units is congruent with this intention. The hiring of SEEDs, Student Educational Experience Designers, to imagineer field based learning experiences related to student interests, also aligns with this intention. With regards to pedagogy, passion + purpose is revealed both in implicit instruction and also through instructional dialogue. The narratives crafted in prior chapters highlight pedagogy during individual units as the delivery of instruction during this period is relatively unique.

Practices that engage students' passions in purposeful ways, are responsive to individual overexcitabilities, but especially the OEs identified as most critical to advanced development: emotional, intellectual and imaginal (Mendaglio, 2012). Emotions are the heart of instruction; feelings provide the data that inform individual passions. In some ways, emotions are like magnets connecting a learner's unique inner world with the exterior reality. Intellectual hunger is fed by allowing students to explore topics in great depth at their own pace. Additionally, each unit at Creason engages the student's imagination, both in the design process and in the communication of learning.

Furthermore, designing instruction this way supports multiple aspects of human development. To begin, intellectual and academic development is a given. Through each individual unit, students grow their research, synthesis and communicative capacity. Each plan

includes the three elements of the school's three "R's" approach – research, reason and record. At Creason, not only are literacy skills supported, but students are invited to explore alternative modes of both learning and expression. This results in an expanded definition of success and achievement. Content area expertise also increases as a result. More importantly, teachers share power with children, resulting in implicit instruction on the sharing of power and collaboration. Students learn how to learn and also how to share their learning effectively. Providing equitable growth opportunities, rather than limiting students' learning to a set curriculum, supports empowerment.

As an intention and instructional practice, passion + purpose is also congruent with culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009) in that it creates space to engage diverse learners' strengths and interests and holds high expectations rooted in warm, caring student-teacher relationships (Ware, 2000). Bilingual staff and a foreign language program support linguistic and cultural sustainability (Paris, 2012). The opportunities to engage with individuals of other cultures is also afforded via the high number of field trip opportunities.

The primary tension that presents among aspirations, structures and pedagogy is in math instruction. Ben, one of the school's most tenured faculty, reports:

For the math, it is a little bit counter to the philosophy and it isn't necessarily kids following their passions...We haven't yet figured out a way for students to get all the math that they need to be successful in high school and beyond just through unit work. We do a lot. The teachers do put a lot into the classroom units, but if a student is studying Shakespeare, when are you going to do fractions? It is harder. You can do it, but sometimes it seems a bit contrived. You can do what fraction of the audience was this economic group and what fraction was this, but that's probably not really what the student is interested in so the math has to come from more than just unit work. So we have a more traditional math program where we do have an algebra text book that the students are following. It's a challenge being this sort of square peg for a round hole and trying more and more, how can I relate this to this particular kid's unit, maybe not

everybody's. That's a challenging thing if we are trying to promote education by students following their passions. Math is a more difficult thing.

This struggle is expressed not only by Ben, but presents in the core classroom setting descriptions as well. Mary, the intermediate teacher, seems to be a school leader in creating individual student math connections.

In consideration of Creason's aspirations, I have two points of curiosity around opportunities to better align math instruction. First, is it possible for other educators at Creason to observe Mary's practices or for her to host professional development for the team on her math connections? Next, I find myself reflecting on Eisner's words, "For some aspects of education, quantification may be the most appropriate means for inquiry – the scientific experiment, for example – may have nothing to do with qualities" (2017, p.5). Surprisingly, I find myself wondering what would happen if Creason measured and communicated students' math growth using numbers. What if Creason utilized some type of formal math skills test, like Grace administered in her primary classroom?

Finally, passion + purpose instructional practices support student spiritual development, the journey of creating meaningful lives. Educator, Parker Palmer, who writes about spirituality in education, states:

A vocation that is not mine, no matter how valued, does violence to the self – in the precise sense that it violates my identity and integrity on behalf of some abstract norm. When I violate myself, I inevitably end up violating the people I work with (2007, p.31).

Rarely do traditional school structures allow students to explore diverse areas of interest to gain understanding of what potential vocations might be strong fits for them later in life. In this sense, empowering students to explore topics of personal interest in purposeful ways works in the direction of a more peaceful society.

### **Creative Behaviors**

Creason speaks explicitly to their creativity aspirations in their philosophy statement, “The Creason School offers a unique learning environment for gifted children that stimulates academic accomplishment, critical thinking, and creativity while fostering peer interaction and personal growth” (Creason, 2016). Furthermore, other school communication pieces convey nurturing creative and inventive behaviors as priorities. Creative practices engage imaginal overexcitabilities; in the absence of opportunities to use one’s imaginative strengths, students’ behaviors could be interpreted as being disrespectful, inattentive or off-task in other contexts.

Creason supports its aspirations for creative behaviors by providing spaces, tools and supplies for students and educators to innovate. Creation can be a messy process, which is not always welcome in other school environments. As outlined in Chapter Six on school structures, each classroom has an attached maker space. Additionally, the school is converting an old garage into a design thinking lab with even more tools and space for students and teachers to work on larger projects. In some ways, the entire campus is a blank canvas with student creative expressions, both permanent and temporary, displayed throughout as illustrated in the photos in Chapter Six. It is unclear in observations the extent to which students at Creason are afforded instruction on the design thinking process and similar problem-solving frameworks that enhance creative abilities.

Furthermore, intense emotions can be channeled in healthy and productive ways through the arts. As revealed throughout setting descriptions and interpretations, educators exercise creative behaviors daily, which implicitly teaches that creativity is valued. Not only are teachers learning daily, but the process of co-architecting curriculum is innovative. In addition to their creative practices at school, the majority of participating educators shared about their personal creative practices outside school ranging from cooking, painting, playing instruments,

photography, dance and more. In addition, enacting individual student curricula simultaneously, as captured in the instructional dialogue in Chapter Seven, requires strong creative capacity on the part of teachers.

The process of creation can integrate emotions, intellect and even the body depending on the form of artistic expression, which supports empowerment goals. Kaufman and Gregoire speak to the habits of creative individuals, which include: imaginative play, passion, daydreaming, solitude, intuition, openness to experience, mindfulness, sensitivity, turning adversity into advantage and thinking differently (2015). Fortunately, creative behaviors can be cultivated (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2015). As portrayed in vignettes, students at Creason are regularly invited to practice many of these habits.

Particular attention is paid to turning adversity into advantage and openness to experience, or positive risk-taking, as it relates to the theory of positive disintegration and the struggle that can precede growth (Dabrowski, 2017). Rarely do students in traditional schools see their teachers invited to take instructional risks. At Creason, educators are encouraged to try new practices. Louis, the head of school, explains:

I tell teachers, please invite me to your class for disasters because those are the best!  
*(poses hypothetical dialogue)*

Teacher: I'm trying something new. This may be horrible.

Head of School: Great! Let's go!

Because that's where you are going to find something out. And it's cool. I don't care how bad it is, you are trying something new. That is where the learning is, in those scary moments and "Holy crap, this works!" Because if you just phone it in and you just go with safe, then you are not going to grow.

Having a head of school who values positive risk taking influences the creative behaviors of educators and students within the entire community. Several of the participants spoke to how

feeling comfortable with being uncomfortable was integral to learning and growth, both for themselves and their students.

The increasing diversity in American schools combined with ever-expanding opportunities for collaborations around the globe beckons each of us to become increasingly aware and innovative. Content expertise will not be sufficient to support children in thriving. Like teacher and creativity scholar Paul Torrance, I feel teaching children creativity is a moral imperative (1979). Society is evolving at record speed and teaching creative practices helps prepare children for a future replete with unimaginable possibilities.

Interestingly, after a sabbatical in Japan, Torrance wrote about *satori*, the spiritual “Aha!” moment a person is rewarded with for following their passions with focused discipline (1979). The themes of passion + purpose and creative practices move students along their unique personal paths, towards exactly where they are supposed to be, like me when I saw the kestrel in the parking lot tree.

### **Emotional Skills**

The construct of emotional intelligence is comprised of three skill groups – those relating to self-awareness, self-management and self-direction (Freedman, 2016). Each of these clusters is represented in Creason’s aspirations and practices.

Honoring the authentic selves of students and teachers is a clear program aspiration that carries across participants, observations and school communications. When speaking to Creason’s intentions, Grace, the participating primary teacher, states:

I think the most important thing is trying really hard to recognize, celebrate and support kids for who they are and where they are without a lot of preconceived expectations so a child can be him or herself in the classroom and grow from there.



Until we truly know ourselves, our capacity for strong relationships is limited. Esteemed clinician to the gifted, researcher and author, Dr. Patricia Gatto-Walden shares that for gifted individuals who are so unique, it can be challenging to know oneself in the absence of a mirror, without access to true peers (2016). In bringing gifted children and teachers together, Creason facilitates self-awareness.

The other emotional skills that correlate to the depth of one's self-knowledge are emotional literacy, recognizing and appropriately expressing one's feelings, and recognizing patterns, awareness of our habitual reactions (Six Seconds, 2016). Educator participants across campus regularly communicated their feelings to students and colleagues and invited students do the same, both during instructional periods and community meeting times. This included creating time to share feelings during circle time in Grace's primary class, explicit instruction in mindfulness as detailed in Mary's classroom, and honest emotional expression in response to student work present in Angela's advanced program. While it was difficult to discern how aware community members were of their habitual reactions, overall, the instructional practices appeared to result in students having a high degree of self-awareness.

Seven of the eleven participating educators spoke explicitly to feelings of trust as a measure of their personal empowerment. All tied having strong colleague relationships and/or a supportive community to feelings of empowerment. Within emotional development research, the skills of empathy, optimism and navigating emotions directly correlate to one's ability to form strong, healthy relationships (Jensen, Fiedeldej-Van Dijk & Freedman, 2012). In addition to educators referencing collaboration skills directly in their interviews, high levels of empathy and emotional development were observed throughout as detailed in the narratives in Chapter Seven.

A small, yet significant area of tension is the advanced teacher's references to herself as "the mean teacher." As profoundly gifted, unique among the unique, I am curious to learn more about the experiences of the profoundly gifted within the Creason community. Are their feelings of connection to community as strong as others within the school? Are students aware of her self-deprecating behavior and does this influence outcomes? Another example of this is the several times a participating educator made references to me privately about the "challenges" of a particular student; she appeared to be concerned that the student's behavior may reflect poorly on her instructional practices. As an outsider, it seemed the student she was referencing was also profoundly gifted. Students who are this empathic often internalize the feelings of others, whether or not they are expressed verbally (Silverman, 2012). As a researcher, this made me feel uncomfortable. Interestingly, this particular young student seemed to be more aware of my presence than others, often walking close by to check me out. While we did not speak, I would smile when she looked at me and send her positive thoughts. In our closing interview, the teacher remarked she was surprised by how this student seemed to be on her best behavior, the most calm, during my observations. This experience reminds how what we think and feel about highly sensitive individuals can indirectly influence outcomes.

It would be fascinating to administer the Six Seconds psychometric emotional development assessment to the eighth grade students at Creason. With a few years' experience administering and interpreting the results of this assessment, I hypothesize the emotional development scores of youth at Creason are strong relative to age-mates. Given that emotional development scores are significantly predictive of academic achievement, well-being, self-efficacy, relationship quality and life-satisfaction (Freedman, 2016), this seems particularly relevant not only for Creason, but other school communities as well. Given the increased depth,

range and complexity of the emotions of gifted individuals (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Piechowski, 2014; Gatto-Walden, 2016), having strong emotional skills may have an even greater positive impact in the lives of gifted children than Six Seconds research shows for the overall population. Moreover, thoughtful attention paid to student emotional development influences both individual outcomes, and the well-being of the entire community (Freedman, 2016).

### **Environmental Connections**

Environment is referenced here in relation to students' connection with the natural world, their sensory experience in the learning environment and also the school's cultural climate. What is particularly powerful is to reflect on the transformation of the space from its original use as a prison to a place where the goal is to empower.

#### **Ecological Education.**

At Creason, there are both explicit and implicit references to the aspiration of fostering connection with the natural world. The raised gardens at the school's entrance implicitly show that the school values caring for the environment. In addition, the school has three full-time environmental educators on staff to facilitate environmental learning experiences in partnership with core classroom, specialist teachers and Student Educational Experience Designers, or SEEDs.

From a structural standpoint, recycling bins are present throughout campus. There are also signs reminding students to conserve energy by turning off the lights and posters like the one described in the structures narrative pledging allegiance to the earth. The plants being grown within the classrooms and common areas also connect students with nature.

While many students explore individual units related to the natural world over their tenure at Creason as illustrated in prior vignettes, this is not mandated. However, all students learn from each other's units during informal classroom sharing and formal presentations during the annual school-wide exposition. Furthermore, the environmental educators coordinate with each core classroom teaching team to support students eco-literacy development (Goleman, Bennett & Barlow, 2012) over their tenure at the school.

### **School Habitat.**

With regards to sensory sensitivities, overall the campus feels warm and welcoming. While some instruction may appear chaotic to the outside viewer as students are not sitting in desks in rows, the energy throughout campus is peaceful. For the most part, volume is low. Students often also have access to sensory cushions, noise canceling headphones and other tools to increase their comfort. Moreover, they can move and work in a variety of spaces. While there is abundant natural lighting throughout, one challenge to some students with sensual overexcitabilities is the fluorescent lighting. This was particularly taxing on my own system in certain spaces on campus. I would encourage the Creason team to consider not turning on these lights, or when absolutely necessary, bringing in lamps with softer lighting.

Creason excels at connecting students to their learning habitat by empowering them to play a role in the co-creation of the physical space. In the many times I was on campus, there were frequently new displays of student art in the front entrance. Often these were individual projects, but sometimes there were group pieces too. These artistic expressions, extensions of self, affected me deeply and grew feelings of connection with the children. In addition, there was frequent exhibiting of new student work in the hallways throughout the school. Temporary art,

like sidewalk chalk drawings at recess, permeate too. Seeing diverse student strengths celebrated visually portrays the school's inclusivity values and supports empowerment aspirations.

### **Cultural Climate.**

Whether intentional or not, schools and educators facilitate connection to society through the implicit, or hidden, curriculum (Eisner, 2017). This is particularly relevant to empowerment aspirations. Creason's innovative distributed leadership model relates to social baseline theory and the fact that all human beings are wired for interdependence (Beckes & Coan, 2011). Creason's shared leadership practices enable collaboration. Distributed leadership practices model for students the sharing of power and collaboration that is expected from them in order to work in the direction of a more just and peaceful society. At some point during formal or informal interviews, every single participating educator referenced the freedom to be able to make decisions relevant to the programming of the children in their care as an essential ingredient in the school's success. Many critical instructional choices reside directly with teachers who are closest to the students.

As with the term gifted, there are varying definitions of distributed leadership, and the literature is emergent. Core tenants of distributed leadership models are that they inspire collective responsibility, emphasize collaboration and distribute power among individuals within a system (Ritchie & Woods, 2007). Distributed leadership distinguishes leadership from roles and titles, which challenges many traditional school leadership structures. Additionally, distributed leadership stands out in its emphasis on reciprocal interdependency; educators are supported in sharing and replicating each other's best practices (Ritchie & Woods, 2007). Distributed leadership is explained in terms of not only actual structures, but also culture and social attitudes and practices (Ritchie & Woods, 2007). Importantly, Ritchie and Woods

illustrate how the complexity of distributed leadership models mirror the complex reality of today's schools. While I witnessed these leadership practices in action at Creason, distributed leadership was not listed explicitly among program aspirations.

Another simple, but powerful way Creason educators support connection with the environment is through mindfulness practices. As noted in the section introducing participating educators, this was a skill strength observed across all educators participating in the study. At its heart, mindfulness grows an individual's awareness of and connection with their surroundings. Creason supports the development of mindfulness among students both through explicit and implicit instruction.

Given that Creason is an independent school, there are operating expenses that require parents to pay tuition. While Creason does have a robust tuition assistance program, there is still relatively less economic, linguistic and racial diversity, which is incongruent with the aspirations of supporting students of all backgrounds. Moreover, there are Creason educators who mentioned wanting to enroll their own children, but not being able to afford it. The reported lack of a tuition remission program for faculty creates a tension with the school's goals of creating a diverse and inclusive environment. Additionally, the way the program is currently designed, it does not support bilingual development longitudinally so would likely not be a strong fit for gifted children whose primary home language is not English.

While the economic reality presents a challenge to some elements of Creason's stated aspirations, supporting student sociopolitical development prepares students to be agents of positive change. Student awareness of the systems they are a part of, and familiarity with the extended community, are pursued both through implicit instruction and other pedagogical practices. To begin, SEEDs facilitate community-based learning experiences for each of the

school's students. Remarkably, Creason hosts more than 750 field trips per year. Both the head of school and founder demonstrated advanced sociopolitical development in their interviews; Louis and Donna are aware of the injustices within traditional school models and consciously work to transform practices at Creason (Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2013). Throughout individual units, students are encouraged to explore multiple modes of communication with consideration of how the message will be received by their audience. This practice increases student communicative capacity and prepares them to be activists should they choose. In addition, the countless opportunities for artistic expression also support sociopolitical development as arts can be a way of speaking truth prior to society being ready to hear it.

Pedagogical practices that strengthen a student's relationship with the natural world, are mindful of sensory sensitivities and promote diversity and inclusivity are empowering. Ecological education may cultivate a desire to engage in sustainability practices, which also indirectly supports the well-being of others. The same holds true for a cultural climate that promotes pluralism and models equitable distribution of power. In addition, connecting students with both the environment and people outside the school through field-based learning opportunities aligns with social baseline theory (Beckes & Coan, 2011).

### **Agility**

The jobs these kids are going to have don't even exist. How can we prepare them for them? We don't even know what they're going to be. We have to support them being learners and risk takers and people who are willing to look at things from a variety of places. If we don't do that, we are not going to have the people to fill the jobs that will exist when these kids are looking for them. But as long as we hold on to whatever we have decided is where they need to stand (*referencing a set lesson destination or curriculum*), then it's going to continue to clash. I don't know how we are going to get past that one. Usually the way we get past it is we have some great catastrophe, some big war, some big .... You know the whole nation falling apart, which...anyway...

*(Donna, founder)*

**Hearts, Minds and Bodies.**

Agility encompasses the physical, emotional and intellectual realms; it ranges from perspective-taking to the physical agility required to play a newly invented game of tag while climbing a play structure at recess. As Donna indicates above, it also includes the important responsibility of preparing students for the unknown. Donna's reference to the role destruction can play in growth connects to Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (2017).

From an aspirations or intentions point of view, Creason references agility in the opening page of their marketing materials with the quote from Ignacio Estrada suggesting teachers alter their instructional practices rather than forcing children to learn the way schools teach (2016). Educators implicitly teach agility in how they move and think, maneuvering around the classroom to coach students on a variety of self-directed lessons. For all teachers, this requires intellectual and emotional agility, but often it requires physical agility as well, especially for the physical education and performing arts educators, as well as those supporting during recess. High energy levels encountered in the gifted (Gatto-Walden, 2016), or psychomotor overexcitabilities, need healthy outlets in order to avoid negative health consequences. During physical education, students are afforded opportunities to practice specific physical skills to enhance agility in a wide range of sports and movement activities.

**Embracing Paradox.**

During instructional observations, I noticed the teachers at Creason had a unique ability to hold paradox. As discussed above, Creason's aspirations are unique in that they allow space for multiple interpretations honoring the diversity of the individuals within. Additionally, the ambiguity provides space for evolution of objectives over time. Finally, the ineffable nature of the program's intentions supports community members in holding paradox. Perhaps it is the



ability to navigate these tensions that is at the heart of Creason's success. There are three paradoxes in particular that Creason is agile in maneuvering: challenge (or high expectations) and compassion, discipline and freedom, and individual and tribe. The ability to artfully balance these, as discussed in the prior chapters, results in peace and chaos. Cajete eloquently states:

In the mythology of all ancient cultures, chaos plays a central role in the creation of the universe, the earth, humankind, and other major elements of the world. Chaos and its offspring, creativity, are the generative forces of the universe (2000, p.17).

Like Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, chaos theory speaks to the role destruction can play in evolution.

While the ambiguity may be confusing to some when reading Creason's mission statement, philosophy or educators' varying interpretations of the school's aspirations, I find myself wondering if this discomfort has purpose. In line with Dabrowski's theory, do feelings of uncomfortableness and dissonance play a role in inspiring reflection and continued growth? The ability to hold paradox increases capacity to navigate complexity, which leads to the overarching theme of peace.

## **PEACE**

The interpretive frame for this study is rooted in peace. The purpose of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration was to better understand and support the development of empathic individuals who could feel the pain of others and worked to remedy injustices (2016). Social baseline theory also relates to peace in that it explains the neurological benefits of feelings of connection to community (Beckes and Coan, 2011); this is especially important for outliers like gifted children. I feel in supporting the healthy, autonomous development of each individual, connections with others deepen.

Overhearing Joy's conversation with Angela about a student telling her that rainbows are the key to the universe stuck with me. Rainbows represent diversity, connection, beauty, balance, peace and more. It sparked a connection for me between this study's guiding interpretive frame, the themes that emerged from the research and the influence the themes have on student development. In light of this, I worked in partnership with a friend who is a graphic designer to create Figure 9 below to visually communicate the relationships among elements. In the center is each individual's ineffable essence, the undefinable human core that makes each of us unique. Individuals with potential for advanced human development have varying degrees of five overexcitabilities (OEs), intensified reaction to stimuli, as outlined in Dabrowski's work: intellectual, emotional, imaginal, sensual and psychomotor (2016). In this graphic, OEs are portrayed by the hearts. The OEs most critical to development (Mendaglio, 2012) are strategically placed on top. As these are nervous system differences (Piechowski, 2014) that may vary in intensity and change over time, OEs influence how gifted individuals experience their internal and external environment (Dabrowski, 2016). The themes that emerged from this study are the practices aligning with the intention of empowering diverse gifted children: passion + purpose, agility, creative behaviors, emotional skills and environmental connections. Themes are represented by the concentric rings that pass through the OEs. The rays extending out from the center illustrate the impact practice has on development; the length of a developmental ray will be determined by the intensity of the OE and the amount of time and effort invested in practicing. The developmental aspects listed on the right below the themes are the eight brought forward in the literature review related to gifted student empowerment: emotional, eco-literacy, multicultural, physical, creative, intellectual and academic, sociopolitical and spiritual.

PEACE

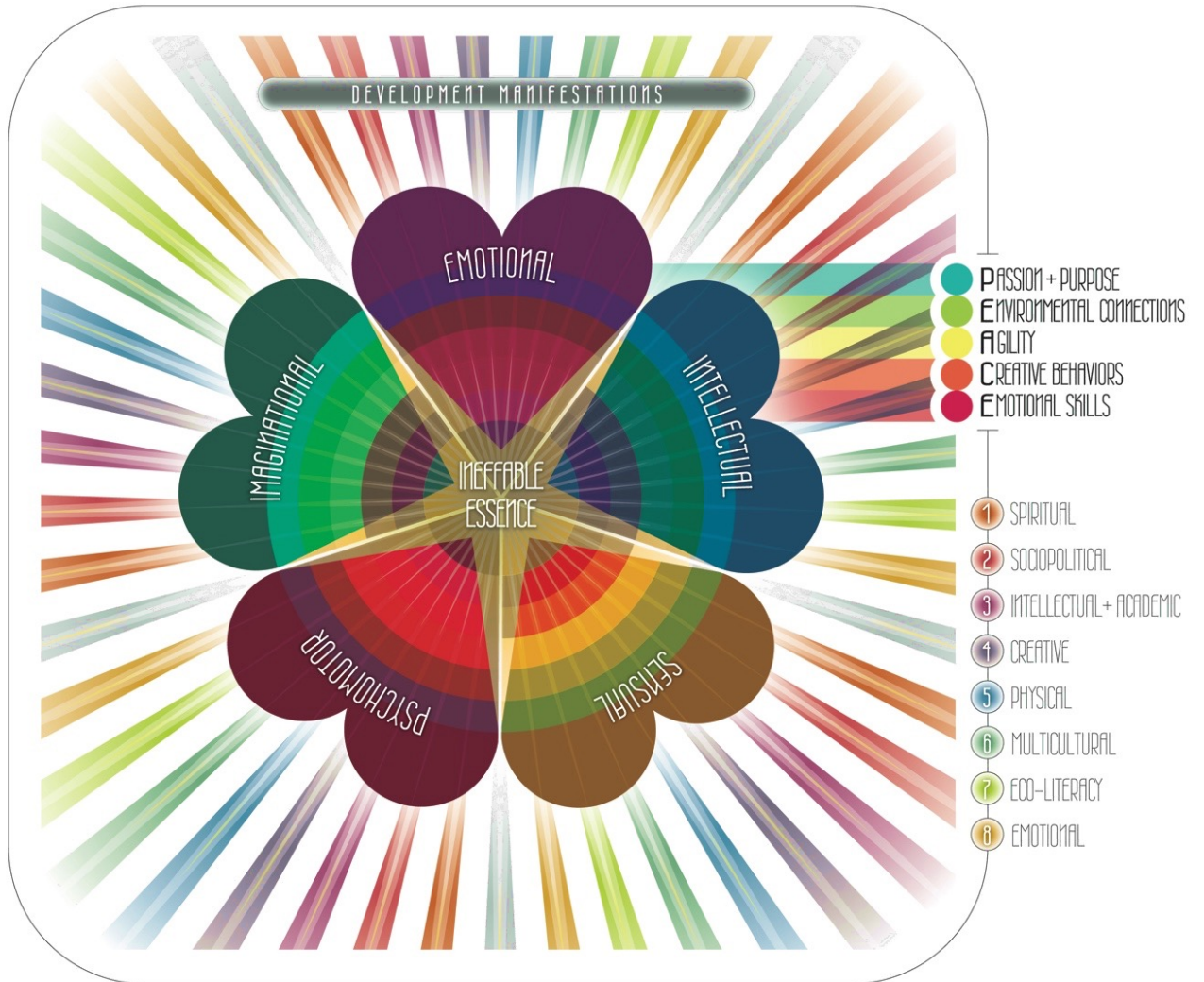


Figure 9: PEACE

(Design Work by Pamela S. Ryan)

This graphic also represents my personal educational philosophy that connects back to Annemarie Roeper. Like Roeper I feel the primary purpose of education is to support self-

actualization and interdependence (Kane, 2013; The Roeper School, 2016). In order to be able to realize empowerment goals, I feel responsibility for disciplined study of both the latest research related to human development and also individual children. Importantly, I work to forgive myself the distance to my perfect and recognize practice is messy, that falling is part of the learning process. Part of what touched me most deeply during observations is seeing how educators at Creason joyfully engaged in the practice of teaching with open hearts and minds. The program has its shortcomings; however, if all children had educators who behaved similarly, great progress would be made. Also congruent with Roeper, I believe education systems have social responsibility to promote a more democratic and pluralistic society and that this can be accomplished through child-directed learning and global awareness (Roeper, 2012).

The following implications section discusses practical recommendations for Creason, as well as other schools and educators and extends discussion related to the themes introduced above. Findings are also related to current advocacy efforts.

### **Implications**

Perhaps the biggest question that will emerge from this study is could the Creason program work for all children? Is it simply good teaching?

### **Excellence for All**

Louis, Creason's head of school, asserts, "To be honest, we really think this approach would work with all children because it honors them first." In the spirit of paradox, yes and no. In my opinion, this approach would work with all children. However, the delivery of the approach would need to vary to ensure equitable growth opportunities. Specifically, the depth, pace and complexity needs to be responsive to the cognition of the students in the particular school environment. For example, gifted students with overexcitabilities need instruction that

matches their rapid rate of acquisition; otherwise, the pedagogy is at risk of being oppressive. Likewise, it is unfair to deliver instruction in a manner that moves too quickly or is too complex for students. Sheltered Instructional Observational Protocol (SIOP) for bilingual learners encourages educators to slow down their rate of speech and contextualize language (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2016). In contrast, increasing the rate of speech to match advanced cognitive processing often increases instructional success with gifted learners as illustrated in the setting descriptions in this study. How do teachers both speak more quickly and more slowly at the same time? While this is an area for further exploration beyond the scope of this project, it illustrates a challenge in implementing the model for an even broader audience.

As the students at Creason enter the program with a body of data, inclusive of cognitive evaluations, which demonstrate uniqueness for their age range, the term *gifted* is applied within education and psychology research. Yet, as noted above, the term is not widely accepted by all individuals who fit this profile.

### **The G Word**

Cognition is not stagnant, but can be enhanced as indicated by research on neuroplasticity (Dispenza, 2013; Kaku, 2014). Participating educators had varying degrees of comfort speaking about the experience of being gifted. Louis, the head of school, eluded to tensions caused by conversations about giftedness. Creason's discomfort speaking about giftedness mirrors the greater education community's struggles. Interestingly, visible, physical differences are frequently associated with potential in other areas. Someone who is tall may have greater potential to excel at basketball or volleyball. A person with long fingers and an ear for nuanced sounds may be more agile creating instrumental music. The examples go on and on. Yet,

individuals with potential for advanced development remain by and large unseen for their potential to engage with complex challenges.

Words matter. Just like deficit messaging, words that implicitly convey superiority can cause harm too. If terminology creates more painful distance among people than already exists and impedes earnest communication, it is worth exploring alternatives. Congruent with Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and social baseline theory, I orient towards language that encourages altruistic development. There is no purpose in talent development if strengths are used to cause harm. Figuring out ways to speak about cognitive differences through an equity lens is an area for growth.

One of the potential criticisms of this project is that it will be difficult to replicate because it examines gifted educators and gifted youth. Louis encounters similar critiques in the community when speaking about the school. In our interview he shared, "No one else is doing this so they always think we are freaks, so they are always going to assign the fact that we serve a gifted population as to why this works." This is confusing. If this were the health care industry and not education, all would be eager to study with the top surgeons. They wouldn't say, "Oh, we could never do that complex procedure because we aren't *gifted* surgeons." All health care providers aspire to improve their skills in order to best care for patients. Isn't that what society should be doing in education too, studying the best to help our children grow into healthy, whole human beings? Examining exceptional educators' instructional practices works in the direction of improving outcomes for all children.

### **A Summary of Practical Recommendations for The Creason School**

The prior thematics and recommendations section speaks to gaps and tensions within the Creason program and practice pillars, or themes, to reference when designing programming with the goal of empowering diverse gifted children.

If we focus too heavily on the problems in schools, we may end up spending more time and energy fixing them than supporting student development. When I participated in sports when I was younger, one of the most valuable lessons I learned was that our bodies go where our eyes are looking. If we are riding a bike and there are rocks on the trail, if we look at a rock we will hit it. We avoid a collision by looking at the space between the rocks. This basic science lesson relates to creating change in schools too.

Last summer I accidentally met eminent positive psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman and we had a conversation about trauma and the role positive psychology can play in growth. He shared about a disagreement he had at dinner the evening before with esteemed intelligence and creativity scholar Dr. Robert Sternberg. As it was reported by Dr. Seligman, in this conversation both scholars were talking about how to best accelerate positive change. Dr. Seligman stated his position was to focus on the positive, on what is working in practice, while Dr. Sternberg asserted that struggle and tension inspire innovation which expedites progress (M. Seligman personal communication, August 2016). Perhaps we need both. In consideration of the fact we go where we are looking, I would encourage Creason to focus on the practices which are positively impacting children and the educators who care for them as guided by the themes that emerged in this study. At the same time, if we are looking at the ground and ignore the sky and it starts hailing, there is a good chance we will be hit. Therefore, in this section I also offer Creason pragmatic recommendations for program improvement.

**Tell Me Your Why.**

In 2010 Simon Sinek gave a talk on the power of “Why” (Sinek, 2010). In this presentation Sinek explains how clearly articulating why you do what you do accelerates progress in the direction of mission. While I appreciate the ambiguity and diversity in responses regarding Creason’s intentions, increased clarity and articulation of purpose could support program expansion. As a researcher, it was difficult to uncover Creason’s intentions, perhaps in part because this work has not been completed internally. Leaning into critical conversations on giftedness, whether or not that term is used to describe the phenomena, would likely help this process. From an outsider’s perspective, the school exists to support cognitive outliers in bringing their true selves forward in a world that needs them.

### **Self Define.**

Currently Creason literature references a multitude of characteristics to define giftedness, some of which are researched based and others not. Based on what was observed in practice, Creason students exhibit intellectual, emotional and imaginal overexcitabilities. Some also demonstrate sensual and psychomotor. If the community is not comfortable with the term “overexcitabilities,” it could consider referencing expressions of these super sensitivities as discussed in Appendix A. In addition to some combination of OEs, with emotional, imaginal and intellectual being most relevant to the need for Creason programming, consistent with Dabrowki’s theory of positive disintegration, individuals at Creason were often their own worst critic (2017). It is my experience OEs and self-criticism carry across cultures and communicating these characteristics could support Creason in identifying other strong fit students.

It is unclear whether Creason intends to serve all gifted children, or if there are certain gifted student populations that push the limits of the program’s capacity. For example, the



admissions criteria appear to extend preference for gifted students with strong emotional skills, especially the skill of engaging intrinsic motivation. If this is a program prerequisite, I would encourage Creason to communicate this explicitly. Likewise, I am curious as to how the outliers among outliers, including students in the highly to profoundly gifted range and those diagnosed with twice-exceptionalities, such as dyslexia, feel about their experiences in the program. This nuanced understanding of who the program best serves could uncover areas for future growth.

### **Be Proud of Your Exceptional Emotional Development Programming.**

As discussed in the previous thematics section, Creason excels at supporting the development of specific emotional competencies that are significantly predictive of life outcomes (Freedman, 2016). However, when I shared this feedback with some of the participating educators, they seemed surprised by this. I wish I had explored these reactions in greater depth. It is unclear if the surprise was due to not realizing how impressive their instructional practices were or other reasons. Past informal investigations revealed even gifted educators often associate the size of a person's social network, extraversion or charisma with emotional development level despite a lack of evidence indicating correlation. In the absence of in-depth understanding of the skills comprised within the construct of emotional development, students may be underserved by competent, well-intentioned teachers. I would encourage the staff team to review the evidence-based emotional competencies detailed in Appendix B and reflect on how they are supported at Creason. It may be worth administering an emotional development assessment, such as the Six Seconds SEI-Youth Version, to support in better understanding students' current development levels. I anticipate EQ scores would be high relative to same age peers. In addition, I expect this awareness would increase capacity among

educators to identify potential skill gaps in future students, talk about their practices with other educators and support the school in better articulating how their practices influence outcomes.

### **Talk Math.**

Math instruction practices were revealed as an area of tension with the Creason philosophy. This merits further exploration. While I have taught and observed math instruction, I am not a math educator by training. However, a few ideas come to mind. First, consider sharing the intermediate teacher, Mary's, individual math challenge approach. Could this be replicated by others? If resources permit, could a temporary or permanent position be created to support campus wide implementation? Math circles are another practice that I have seen work beautifully in other gifted schools. The Helios School in California has a similar educational philosophy to Creason and has been successfully implementing math circles with high levels of student engagement for some time now. This could be worth investigating too.

### **Ditch the Fluorescents.**

This one is easy. Use the abundant natural lighting throughout and where more light is needed, consider full-spectrum bulbs. Using full spectrum lights reduces eye strain while reading and counteracts drowsiness caused by fluorescent tubes (Olszewski, 2017). Furthermore,

When you can change the school lighting from incandescent or fluorescent to full spectrum, students' grade point averages will go up half a grade point, they will stay out of glasses longer, they will be less hyper, and strangely their dental cavities drop like a rock. And the reason? It stimulated vitamin D on the skin, resulting in more calcium to the teeth and less dental decay. Full spectrum light helps depression and the immune system during the winter, and it is the only natural colour to use for viewing artwork and other colour products (Ott as cited by Olszewski, 2017, para.18).

### **Know Your Zone.**

While parents were not a part of this study, in general parents whose children have exclusively been in gifted programming from a young age may not understand how cognitively

different their children are from their age-mates. Not better or worse, just different. Pay close attention when people idealize the program and prophesize it would work for all children. I have been part of gifted school communities that changed their admission practices in an attempt to welcome more children and families. While well-intentioned, these changes resulted in increased conflict. Part of the reason why relates to pace of instruction. If you think of each student having a specific optimal operating speed or RPM, when trying to serve a broader audience sometimes educators are asked to do the impossible, to go both slower and faster at the same time. This can result in relatively fewer students feeling they are well-served. Against my advice, a school designed for gifted children that I worked with several years ago was guided by a marketing expert to extend admission to students who did not exhibit advanced cognition in an effort to increase enrollment. The decision contributed to an approximately 30 percent teacher attrition rate and at least the same, if not greater, student attrition the following year. Consider this when looking to expand programming. The delivery of the approach may need to vary to be responsive to developmental differences.

### **Celebrate Dissonance.**

Several participating educators perceived parents' unwillingness to let their children struggle as a barrier to learning and empowerment goals. I suggest hosting a community forum (or series of discussions) on this topic. One way to do this would be under the theme of resilience. Dabrowski's work celebrates the role dissonance and disintegration can play in transformation (2017). It is in the tensions, in the uncomfortableness, where the greatest potential for growth lies. I encourage Creason community members to consider ways they can celebrate risks they have taken and even failures that ultimately contributed to learning. Maybe staff could create a mistake wall of fame to celebrate the biggest lessons learned.

**Communicate Student Outcomes as Related to Aspects of Development.**

Currently the Creason program utilizes a wide range of formative and summative assessments to inform instruction. While evaluation practices and the received curriculum were outside of the scope of this study, several were observed in instructional observations and the collection of artifacts. For example, the Creason community references a rubric to communicate student progress at student / parent / teacher conferences. As described in the advanced program setting descriptions, this rubric communicates student development on a five category scale ranging from *area of concern* to *skillful*. Skills that are evaluated relate to research competencies and academic development. Creason could expand this rubric to invite conversations on student progress related to other aspects of development informed by the literature presented here. So as to not cause feelings of overwhelm, perhaps start with a few at a time. To begin, I might add emotional development, creative development and sociopolitical development. Over time, other aspects could be added that align with Creason's mission.

Transitioning to other school contexts, in the next section I provide suggestions for educators and policy makers as informed by this study.

**Top 10 Takeaways for Educators and Policy Makers**

Returning to the butterfly effect and that little changes can result in significant improvements or likewise, cause harm, following are practical recommendations based on the findings that emerged from this study. First and foremost, like with Creason, I advise all to focus on what *is* working in practice and to align Eisner's dimensions of schooling: intentions, structures, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation to accelerate progress (2017).

**1. Increase Collection and Communication of Qualitative Data.**

Changing how schools measure success holds tremendous potential to positively impact educational practices and subsequently student outcomes. Associating children with numerical scores can dehumanize and blind educators to individual student developmental intricacies, to understanding how they are experiencing the world which is the key to facilitating growth (Roeper, 2006). To this end, I recommend an increased emphasis on the collection and communication of qualitative data. At Creason, the multi-age classroom structure enables educators to spend more time with students thereby growing familiarity with their complexities. Multi-age classrooms might not be possible or practical in some schools, but there are ways to better share qualitative data among educators serving the same students.

Formal and informal instructional rounding or check-ins as an evaluative practice enhances dialogue among educators and students and supports in the communication of important qualitative data. I would encourage education activists to look at how hospitals collect this data as a model. In hospitals, when nurses round with patients and administrators with nurses, there are improved patient outcomes including enhanced quality of care, patient safety and nurse retention (Baker, 2010). As nurses are “boots on the ground” with patients, they have more data than physically distanced executives. Referencing a greater body of data typically results in improved decision making.

It stands to reason improvements to student outcomes would occur if similar evidence-based practices were implemented in schools. I like to imagine what would happen if superintendents and district level leaders were held accountable for rounding with school instructional leaders and being responsive to their needs and inquiries. I imagine the positive impact on student outcomes would be significant, just like it was for patients in hospitals.

Taking it one step further, what would happen if school instructional leaders rounded with teachers and likewise teachers with students, even on as little as a monthly or quarterly basis? This is something I tried in practice, spending a few minutes each week with a rotating group of students. These conversations provided rich data for the ongoing refinement of instructional practices. Typically, I would ask only a few questions such as:

- What was your most significant learning this week/month/etc.?
- What are you curious to learn more about?
- Where do you feel most uncomfortable and why?
- What would you change if you could?

Insuring each child has high expectations that require them to move outside their comfort zones is a quick way to assess equity objectives. If a student does not have times during the day where they struggle with new ideas and skills, they are likely not learning.

At Creason, even though the term rounding was not used, this was observed in the pedagogical practices of each of the participating core teachers, and sometimes among specialist teachers as well. In the advanced classroom, this occurred during the regular check-in conferences Angela has with students at her desk. In the intermediate classroom, this manifested differently due to developmental differences. For the most part Mary rounded with students by coming and sitting beside them while they worked. This was similar in Grace's primary classroom, but the check ins typically occurred more frequently and were shorter in duration.

I posit rounding could be a bridge to supporting an increased emphasis on instructional dialogue in schools and classrooms. Rounding practices also align evaluation practices with equity and empowerment intentions. Eventually I hope rounding would lead to the co-

designing of curriculum between a student and their teacher similar to what occurs at Creason. I would much rather see money invested directly into children and educators than curriculum publishing companies.

The biggest barrier to implementation is district, school and class size. There are no silver bullets in education reform, but instructional rounding communicates value for each child's and educator's voice. As a practice, it cultivates feelings of belonging, the first purpose of education according to indigenous educational practices (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2009). Another challenge in implementation is creating communication structures to record data collected. In my case, I piloted the same voice to text rounding software used in hospitals. This worked wonderfully. Mr. Zuckerberg and The Gates Foundation, are you listening? This is where you should be investing your money.

## **2. Emphasize PRACTICE.**

As the head of school clearly stated earlier, adults in school systems spend much of their time working to solve problems that they have created. Many teachers have seen this occur in district education centers or state departments of education. If there are complex policies, procedures and standards to be followed, it reinforces the need for administrative roles; the system can maintain its unjust status quo. I suggest increased trust in teaching professionals and simplification of policies, standards and procedures so more time can be invested in educating and caring for children. Each educator I know has experienced times where policy and / or a high volume of administrative tasks negatively impacted the quality of care provided students.

I suggest evaluating district and state level administrators on how well they support educators in engaging in the practices outlined above in the PEACE framework. Are

educators afforded the resources and structures needed for success? Are they responsive to the strengths and needs communicated by educators in instructional rounds? Are they trying new, evidence-based instructional practices? A measure of practice and moving outside one's comfort zone includes evidence of the occasional failure. Yes, failure can be a measure of progress. In addition, I feel part of how districts and states are assessed should include teacher well-being to insure stress is not created by setting expectations beyond what could be accomplished with the resources provided. Following are some examples of how district leaders could support educators in practicing each of the five themes from this study:

- **Passion + Purpose** – Provide time in the schedule for individual student passion projects that hold high expectations for each student based on strengths and needs. This is starting to occur in some schools, sometimes under the title of a “genius hour.” Another way to engage student passions in purposeful ways is by identifying needs in the community and then creating student design challenges to address them. This can be as simple as improving the welcoming experience. Students can interview community members on how they feel entering the building, then brainstorm and prototype solutions to create change in their school.
- **Emotional Skills** – I encourage educators to focus on developing strategies to support the development of specific emotional skills, such as those outlined in Appendix B, that correlate with outcomes. As demonstrated by the educators at Creason, this does not require a formal curriculum, but rather awareness of the skills and strategies to support development in practice throughout the day. An example of this is the attention Creason educators pay to identifying and articulating feelings. All emotions provide important data (Six Seconds, 2016).



Connecting with the data emotions provide is supportive of emotional literacy, a skill particularly important to gifted children given the intensity of their emotions (Gatto-Walden, 2016, Fonseca, 2011 & Piechowski, 2014).

Different combinations of emotional skills influence life outcomes: some have greater impact on relationship quality, health, life satisfaction and self-efficacy. Optimism, intrinsic motivation and consequential thinking are the skills that have the greatest impact on achievement (Jensen, Fiedeldey-Van Dijk & Freedman, 2012). I recommend starting here as these are easy skills to support the development of in practice.

- **Environmental Connections** – Provide schools with supplies to bring the natural world indoors. This can be as simple as seeds to be planted in small paper cups like Mary did on her desk. Over time, this could lead to creation of on-site student planted and maintained gardens. Environmental connections can also be nurtured through campus recycling and composting efforts. Even an imaginary field trip to a forest can make a difference. How wonderful would it be if states and districts redistributed some funds to insure all children experienced at least one nature based field trip a year? That is the type of accountability measure I could get behind!
- **Agility** – Implementing rounding would indirectly support perspective taking and perhaps even increase capacity for complexity. Another component of agility is integration of mind, body and heart. Yet, the current reform landscape has many schools limiting recess time and physical education for students. As discussed in the literature review, the benefits of movement extend beyond physical fitness to

enhancing cognition (Jacobs & Zhu, 2016). I suggest schools be required to challenge students' bodies each day, preferably through physical activities that can be continued over one's lifetime at little or not cost (such as walking, parkour, yoga, dance, jogging, etc.).

- **Creative Behaviors** – Support both educators and students in engaging in creative practices. This includes writing poetry, making art out of nature or singing a song. Artistic expression and the process of invention support empowerment goals. The only potential barrier to implementation are personal educational philosophies that do not value the role creative practices play in development. When this occurs, I suggest sharing research presented here by creativity scholars including Kaufman and Gregoire, Piirto and Torrance.

In the current reform climate, I feel the United States education system is denying children the developmental food required for academic achievement. This is similar to measuring how fast children run after not eating for days. I hope society starts to realize the impact this starvation is having on student performance and is courageous enough to change policy to support increased developmental understanding and responsiveness.

Shifting emphasis from policy to practice is politically tricky; many jobs are tied to policy implementation and on-going administration. Where are the checks and balances? How do we measure the performance of policy makers? What if district and state leaders had to participate in 360 degree reviews to evaluate their leadership performance? What if their success was in part measured by educator evaluations? Ideally, society would flip the evaluation system to hold policy makers accountable for providing educators adequate resources for supporting children's optimal growth.

### **3. Implement Distributed Leadership.**

Many district and school mission statements reference equity and diversity, but their leadership structures do not align with stated goals which inhibits progress. Patriarchal principal structures are incongruent with equity goals. Distributed leadership models, similar to the one described at Creason, better model for children the sharing of power and collaboration required to create a more peaceful society. I wonder how policy makers might move school, district and state leadership teams in this direction?

Inequitable distribution of power has become the norm in many organizations. In my experiences, transitioning an organization to a more distributed structure resulted in increased trust, autonomy and collaboration among team members. The challenge has been when it comes to the most difficult decisions, sometimes it takes coaching and scaffolding on the art of navigating critical conversations. Thankfully, emphasizing emotional development and non-violent communication practices can make it easier to discuss sensitive topics.

### **4. Pivot from Social Development to Sociopolitical Development.**

If working in the direction of a more peaceful society is the goal, each of us should be tasked with knowing where power resides within a group and working to support equitable distribution. This aligns with diversity and inclusivity goals, as well as social baseline theory and autonomous integration as outlined in the theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 2016). As trust and interdependence is established in a group, vigilance decreases and each member expends less energy to interact with their environment (Beckes & Coan, 2011). At times, connecting with a person or group socially could support the oppression of others. An extreme example of this would be the Ku Klux Klan. Extending social support for racist and abusive behavior promotes violence. A sociopolitical development orientation respects each

person's humanity while explicitly promoting equity objectives. Sometimes this requires individuals to bravely name the injurious behavior of people in positions of power and to initiate restorative practices. Growing awareness of the levels of sociopolitical development as outlined in Appendix C is a first step. The biggest opposition to sociopolitical development conversations will likely arise from those with disproportionate power or who have been abusing privileges.

### **5. Connect Students with Primary Sources.**

Part of high expectations is supporting students in becoming scientists no matter what their future field(s) of study might be. As evidenced in this research project, when educators see themselves as part social scientist, they carefully study each student's strengths and various aspects of the developing self. Fortunately, given technological advances, students have increased access to primary sources. Educators can now shift to teaching students how to discern quality and credibility of sources. Connecting students with primary sources could be a concrete goal in school and district planning. Shifting away from an over-reliance on pre-packaged curriculum towards increased emphasis on the teaching of research skills could be met with opposition from publishing companies. It may also push some educators who had grown accustomed to always following a set program outside their comfort zones; some may need additional support during the change.

### **6. Invest in Student Educational Experience Designer (SEED) Type Positions.**

Whether or not field-based learning is an economic possibility, creating a position where the primary responsibilities include designing educational experiences for children is powerful. A long-term goal would be to provide each child an experiential learning opportunity related to their individual interests like what occurs at Creason. This might look

different in a bigger school. For example, maybe the SEED coordinates artists in residence or recruits similar community partners. There are countless ideas for learning experiences that could be designed responsive to individual and group interests and needs such as the painting of a mural on a school campus. This type of position could also hold responsibilities for teaching design thinking (Barry, 2017) and other similar inquiry and problem solving frameworks. An implementation concern that may arise is insufficient staffing budget. Imagine what would happen if state and district policies were simplified; funding could be reallocated from administrative oversight positions to SEED and other high impact educator roles. There are creative ways funds could be reallocated.

#### **7. Invite the Messiness of Design and Creation.**

While not every school has the physical space to store tools and supplies like what was shown at Creason, all can create maker carts or boxes that could travel among classrooms. Some may express concern over the funds required to implement, but from experience this can be realized through the investment of a small amount of time and money. Local businesses and families are often willing to donate supplies. These can include household goods that might otherwise be thrown away including cardboard boxes, food containers, straws, magazines, components of broken appliances and also treasures found in nature including rocks, sticks and leaves. If classroom mess is a concern, projects can be worked on outside too.

#### **8. Expand Communicative Capacity Beyond Speaking and Writing.**

By inviting multiple modes of expression educators can expand student communicative capacity. In an increasingly global society, it is foreseeable students will be asked to communicate not only verbally and in writing, but also visually and quantitatively. HQ

pages, as described in the Creason advanced classroom, support students in learning to synthesize and record data in the field while developing handwriting and manual dexterity. Technology literacy also plays a role in expanding communicative capacity and may be necessary for careers of the future.

In addition, it is likely students will need to be familiar with more than one language and that they will benefit from understanding the connections among languages and how the languages we speak influence identity development (González, 2001). I am hopeful schools in the United States will work in the direction of affording bilingual development opportunities for all students. Besides enhanced ability to connect with others in line with social baseline theory, broadening the definition of language development also supports cultural sustainability, in supporting the development of a multicultural society (Paris, 2012).

#### **9. Engage Students in the Co-Design of Learning Spaces and Afford Freedom to Move Within.**

As evidenced by the individual and collective student work samples across the Creason campus, visual displays of learning and artistic expressions grow feelings of connection among community members. This is also relatively easy to replicate. If rounding practices existed, the diversity of work samples displayed could be considered a measure of success when district leaders visited school sites. Engaging students in the design of the learning space also helps them become familiar with what they need to learn best so they can recreate these conditions outside school for the rest of their lives. If possible, creating a variety of work spaces and allowing students to move among them is ideal.

The aesthetics of a space influence student learning, maybe more so for students who have an intensified reaction to stimuli, including gifted students (Daniels & Piechowski,

2009; Gatto-Walden, 2016). Mindfulness around how classrooms will be received by each sense supports inclusivity goals. Like at Creason, I also recommend the removal of fluorescent lighting for the associated health and learning benefits described in the Creason practical recommendations section (Olszewski, 2017).

Depending on the size of the class, collaborative space design can be time consuming. In the past, I have made this into a fun before the school year event where parents were invited into the classroom. This had an unanticipated side effect of strengthening relationships as our first interactions illustrated prioritization of the same goal - optimizing student learning. One year we even painted the classroom together. The students did research on how the color of a room influenced learning and discovered colors frequently associated with the male gender, including blue green and gray, decreased participation rates among students who identified as female or non-binary. Other studies the students read indicated purple was a color that inspired creativity so that is what the group chose.

### **10. See Each Child Through the Lens of Their Strengths.**

The smallest change educators can make to their practice with the largest potential impact in the lives of children is seeing each and every student through the lens of their strengths. Given empathic gifted learners (Siverman, 2012) are consistently their own worst critics (Dabrowski, 2016) and the pervasive deficit thinking around gifted student behaviors, a strengths-based approach is a key to transformation. This does not mean ignoring areas for growth. As outlined in the first recommendation, every child deserves access to equitable growth opportunities. Nor does it mean using giftedness as an excuse for behavior that causes harm. Biases and a lack of understanding of how gifted children experience the world

contributes to the systemic oppression. I hope this study has helped readers better see this historically unseen population.

In summary, these are ideas for how to create change as related to the five themes that emerged from this study: passion + purpose, environmental connections, agility, emotional skills and creative behaviors. I share recommendations with the understanding they will not be interpreted as a prescription or formula, but rather a way to deepen improvement conversations. In the following section I relate findings to advocacy efforts discussed in the literature review.

### **Circling Back to the Advocacy Landscape**

Independent of the political climate, limitations of current assessment tools, standards or school reform efforts, each among us holds the power to determine how we are measuring our own growth and success. Earlier I introduced three key organizations that have created positive change for gifted children: NAGC, SENG and The Roeper School. Here I circle back to position this study within each of their current efforts.

#### **NAGC.**

NAGC advocates for gifted children through the creation of white papers, position statements, standards, publications and by hosting an annual conference (2017). Appendix K provides their current pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade learning and development standards. It is clear Creason not only exceeds the self-understanding, awareness of needs, cognitive and affective student outcomes, but that this study is an extension of the standards as it provides insight into how to realize these objectives in practice. In addition to the learning and development standards, NAGC also has assessment, curriculum planning and instruction, learning environments, programming and professional development standards. The most



prominent tension between the Creason School and NAGC is with the standards that relate to the use of standardized testing which Creason does not support.

### **SENG.**

From the beginning SENG was unique in its holistic mission (SENG, 2016). One of SENG's core program offerings, SENG Model Parent Groups or SMPGs, emphasizes the importance of connection to community and the need for collaboration among stakeholders given the diversity within the gifted population. Similar to SENG, Creason programming reinforces the need for gifted children to have access to true peers, people to validate the unique way they experience the world (Gatto-Walden, 2016). This relates to Dabrowski's work as well as he was one of the first to explain how gifted individuals may be inadvertently predisposed to misdiagnosis, in part due to the symptoms of positive disintegration and / or OE related behaviors (2016). Like SENG, Creason is a place where gifted individuals can be seen. That alone has immeasurable benefit, with some reporting finding tribe makes them feel "like they can finally breathe."

### **A Return to the Roeper Legacy.**

Today, neuroscience is catching up to Roeper's vision and the critical role understanding human development plays in educating children. As discussed earlier in the literature review, Roeper felt educating children required studying psychology, that without developmental understanding it was not possible for educators to know the children in their care yet alone serve them (2006). Affective neuroscientist Immordino-Yang speaks to the integral role emotions play in learning:

A revolution in neuroscience over the past two decades has overturned early notions that emotions interfere with learning, revealing instead that emotion and cognition are supported by interdependent neural processes...It is literally neurobiologically impossible

to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion (2016, p.18).

Roeper explained the critical role emotions played in learning and prioritized this in programming far in advance of many of her peers (2012). The most interesting connection between the Roeper School and Creason is the similarity in intentions. At the Roeper School, educators reference Roeper's self-actualization interdependence model, or SAI when designing instruction. The model aims for each child to bring their best self forward with awareness of how their behavior affects others (Kane, 2013). The language used is similar to Creason's. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the structures, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation practices of each school to identify similarities and differences and expand what was learned in this project.

From the situational and national contexts discussed above, I return to the personal.

### **Personal Impact on the Researcher**

While I did due diligence in researching a potential strong fit community partner for this project, I entered the study as a blank slate. I have worked in schools where the communications more closely reflected my personal educational philosophy and over time was disappointed to uncover significant discrepancies in practices. While the data collected in the beginning was promising, I held my breath. I participate in the gifted community on a national level and had not seen the school represented at conferences in the past. If anything, because I did not know members of the teaching team prior, a part of me expected the study to reveal more discrepancies between Creason's intentions and practices.

The synchronicities were a surprise. Most days when I left the Creason campus I felt excited by the unexpected connections occurring between the research and what was happening in practice. I remember thinking to myself as I was walking out the door after instructional

observations one day, “You have got to be kidding – I could not have designed this if I tried. It is too good!” The research process created feelings of peace, joy and also sadness for me. The energy around campus was mostly peaceful and seeing educators and children thriving was a source of great joy. Feelings of sadness came from missing being in practice with educators and students on a daily basis.

From a findings perspective, what transformed my thinking the most was the division of pedagogy into dialogue and the implicit. In some current reform efforts, education seems to have lost its humanity. Emphasizing implicit instruction and dialogue is a way for education to return to its true self. Much of what is presented here is nothing new. As the head of school shared, what happens at Creason is the simplest form of teaching – educators and students talking with one another. As detailed in the pedagogy chapter, there were similarities between instruction at Creason and indigenous education practices. School reformers would be wise to consult tribal elders.

I leave the project like many of the students at Creason, at the edge of my seat with my hand eagerly raised. The current political landscape challenges me more than ever to focus on the work of replicating what is working in practice.

### **Limitations**

Findings from this study are most relevant to schools serving similar students, in similar contexts. Furthermore, the research is inherently biased because it is my hope the study would meet the community partner’s needs and support other educators in increasing their responsiveness to the unique strengths and sensitivities of gifted learners. While I had processes in place to observe instruction objectively, including reflecting each day on whether I was seeing the program as it was or as I wished it to be, emotions and learning are inseparable (Immordino-

Yang, 2016). There are times my own biases may have influenced what I saw. For example, confirmation bias, the human tendency to prioritize paying attention to data that confirms preconceptions could be a study criticism. The observation matrix was designed to guide what I paid attention to as informed by research discussed in the literature review. The beautiful thing about Educational Criticism is that another researcher could read my setting description and interpret them through a different theoretical lens (Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye & Flinders, 2016) and their own experiences. Finally, while there was great depth to the data, the scope and duration of the study was limited. Neither students or parents were participants in the study and as a result their perspectives are missing. While careful attention was paid to ensure observations spanned the range and diversity of student learning environments and experiences and integrated diverse educator perspectives, this is a small window into a complex program for complex students.

Another potential criticism of this project could emerge from recent research that promotes the use of openness to experience, as conceptualized in the five-factor model of personality over overexcitabilities (Vuyk Espinola et al., 2016). In her dissertation study, Vuyk Espinola et al. argue that overexcitabilities and openness are conceptually equivalent based on a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (2016). Unfortunately, this is like saying because two different poems received the same score ratings from reviewers, that they created the same emotional experience for readers. As far as I am aware, there is no research linking openness to experience to potential for advanced development or altruistic behavior as described in the theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 2017; Mendaglio, 2012). Furthermore, coming from a counseling and therapy perspective, Vuyk Espinola et al. may not have experience

regarding how understanding of overexcitabilities can influence instructional practices resulting in improved outcomes for children like Clara.

### **Future Research**

There are countless opportunities for future research. More in-depth exploration of the teacher planning and curriculum design process at Creason could support other educators in replicating exemplary practices. In addition, I hypothesize that the educators and students in this program have relatively high emotional and creative development levels. It would be fascinating to do a formal assessment to see if this is indeed the case. Similarly, I am curious to learn if there is a relationship between emotional development and potential for advanced development. Do emotional development scores correlate with overexcitabilities in the context of the theory of positive disintegration?

Another area that stands out as holding potential for transformation is examining if students' cognitive capacities increase over their tenure at the school. Does the program enhance cognition? Similarly, can an individual's reaction to stimuli be intensified? In delivering programming responsive to overexcitabilities, can educators increase an individual's potential for advanced development and encourage altruistic behavior? Likewise, are there variances among how different gifted populations experience the Creason program? Do the highly and profoundly gifted perceive the program similarly to their peers? I hope Creason explores these questions and shares their learning with the field.

Finally, as related to the policy advocacy landscape, I am curious to explore how standards influence the perceptions and instructional practices of educators to gifted children. The instruction I observed at Creason was more powerful than among educators referencing standards in their instructional design. Is this because the educators at Creason are gifted

themselves? Do standards unintentionally limit educators or cause them to allocate too much of their time in explaining why they do, time that would otherwise be invested in program improvement? Is it because public school structures and practices do not align with some of their objectives? Do standards oversimplify and implicitly discourage creativity? These are rich areas for future investigation.

### **Closing Thoughts**

“Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently.” – Maya Angelou

The purpose of this study was to explore the aspirations and practices of a program designed to empower diverse gifted children for the purpose of transforming education. In setting descriptions, I tried to lend insight into the intricacies of the intentions, structures and pedagogical practices at Creason in a way that was both meaningful for the school and also other educators. Aligning intentions, structures, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation practices as Eisner recommends in his dimensions of schooling (2017) accelerates change. This study suggests that regularly practicing the following supports the empowerment of diverse students with advanced developmental potential:

- Engaging student passions in purposeful ways
- Creative behaviors, including access to tools and supplies to innovate
- Nurturing connections to the natural world, learning habitat and cultural climate
- Emphasis on supporting the development of specific emotional skills
- Agility to promote capacity for navigating complexity and integration

The key word is practice – practice in dialogue with students and educator colleagues.

Furthermore, this project reminds that the implicit curriculum teaches students important lessons about power and their role in society. Distributive leadership models for students the sharing of power and collaboration requisite for co-creating a more peaceful society. In addition, when teachers behave as learners, scientists and artists, they teach children these habits of mind. While there will always be aspects of human development beyond our understanding, as Clara identified in the introduction, the space between known and unknown is where teachers and students grow. In focusing on the unseen aspects of human development that support well-being, there is potential to work in the direction of that which “ought to be.” Here’s to the courage to practice being the change.

“In Peace”

May we have courage

To listen, learn and create

Until each feels peace.

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## Appendix A

### *Forms and Expressions of Overexcitability*

#### **Psychomotor**

*Surplus of energy*

Rapid speech, intense physical activity (fast games and sports), pressure for action (organizing), competitiveness

*Psychomotor expression of emotional tension*

Compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, nervous habits (tics, nail biting), workaholism, acting out

#### **Sensual**

*Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure*

Seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing; delight in beautiful objects, sounds or words, music, form, color, balance

*Sensual expression of emotional tension*

Overeating, buying sprees, wanting to be in the limelight

#### **Intellectual**

*Intensified activity of the mind*

Thirst for knowledge, curiosity, sustained concentration, avid reading, keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning, passion for precision

*Penchant for probing questions and problem solving*

Search for truth and understanding, tenacity in problem solving

*Reflective thought*

Thinking about thinking; love of theory, analysis, and logic; moral thinking; independence in thought (sometimes very critical)

#### **Imaginational**

*Free play of the imagination*

Frequent use of image and metaphor, rich invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, animistic and magical thinking

*Capacity for living in a world of imagination*

Predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds, imaginary companions, Dramatization

*Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension*

Catastrophizing, elaborate dreams, phantasms

*Low tolerance of boredom*

Need for novelty

#### **Emotional**

*Feelings and emotions intensified*

Extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings, identification with others' feelings, awareness of a whole range of feelings

*Strong somatic expressions*

Tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing, pounding heart, sweaty palms

*Strong affective expressions*

Inhibition (shyness), enthusiasm, ecstasy, euphoria, pride, strong affective memory, shame, feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

*Capacity for strong attachments, deep relationships*

Strong emotional ties and attachments to persons, living things, places; attachments to animals; difficulty adjusting to new environments; compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships; loneliness

*Well-differentiated feelings toward self*

Inner dialogue and self-judgment

(Piechowski, 2014, p.28-29)

**Appendix B*****Definitions of Emotional Skills Comprised within the Construct of Emotional Intelligence***

**Emotional Literacy** - Identifying and appropriately expressing feelings

**Recognize Patterns** - Awareness of habitual reactions

**Navigate Emotions** - Accessing the data and wisdom feelings provide to inform decision making

**Intrinsic Motivation** - Gaining energy from personal values and commitments vs being driven by others

**Optimism** - Taking a perspective of choice and opportunity

**Consequential Thinking** - Assessing short and long-term costs and benefits of choices

**Empathy** - Recognizing and appropriately responding to others' emotions

**Pursue Noble Goals** - connecting daily choices with your deep sense of purpose

(Six Seconds, 2016)

## Appendix C

### *Levels of Sociopolitical Development*

**Acritical** - Things are the way they are for a reason. The system is just.

**Adaptive** - There may be inequity and injustice, but what am I going to do about it? I'm going to work the system to my benefit.

**Pre-critical** - Something is not right. I'm not sure if I can go along with this unjust system.

**Critical** - The systems we live in are unjust. I want to understand why and have a positive impact.

**Liberation** - I simply cannot be complicit in an unjust system. I will be the change I want to see in the world.

(Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003)

## Appendix D

### University of Denver Consent Form for Participation in Research

**Title of Research Study:** Seeing the Unseen: The Art of Empowerment

**Researcher(s):** Kate Bachtel, M.A. Education, doctoral student at University of Denver

**Study Site:**

#### **Purpose**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research is to support educators in deepening their understanding of what an empowering program for diverse gifted learners looks like in action.

#### **Procedures**

If you participate in this research study, first you will be invited to an interview that will last approximately fifteen-twenty minutes. With your permission, I would like to audio record interviews to insure accuracy. Recordings will be destroyed after transcription. Additionally, I hope to observe your classroom over the course of about a week (less for specialist teachers). I will take notes during classroom observations which will be password protected on my computer. Finally, you will be asked to participate in a brief follow-up interview where clarifying questions will be asked. There will be several other educators interviewed for this research.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to be interviewed or have your classroom observed for any reason without penalty or other benefits to which you are entitled. There are no consequences if you choose not to participate.

#### **Risks or Discomforts**

Potential risks and/or discomforts of participation may include speaking candidly about your instructional beliefs, objectives and practices in interviews. Otherwise, there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts beyond what would normally be encountered in daily instructional practices. The study may involve risks to participants that are currently unforeseeable.

#### **Benefits**

Possible benefits of participation include support in better articulating the nuances of your instructional practices and the practices of the school community as a whole. Additionally, the results of this research could help other educators increase their responsiveness to the unique strengths and needs of gifted children.

#### **Incentives to participate**

There are no incentives or compensation being offered for participating in this research project.

**Confidentiality**

The researcher will use pseudonyms to keep your information safe throughout this study. If permission is granted for audio recordings of interviews, they will be destroyed after transcription. Your individual identity will be kept private when information is presented or published about this study. Should you choose to allow the researcher to photo document artifacts of instruction and learning in your classroom, any personal identifiers will be removed.

Full transcripts of your interview responses and data collected during instructional observations will not be shared with anyone. Excerpts of data may be used in presentations and published articles or essays. All data will be presented with pseudonyms.

The research records are held by researchers at an academic institution; therefore, the records may be subject to disclosure if required by law. The research information may be shared with federal agencies or local committees who are responsible for protecting research participants, including individuals on behalf of the University of Denver.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact Kate Bachtel at (303) 554-7300 or [kate.bachtel@du.edu](mailto:kate.bachtel@du.edu) at any time. The Faculty Sponsor overseeing this project is **Dr. Paul Michalec** and he may be reached at [paul.michalec@du.edu](mailto:paul.michalec@du.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing [IRBAdmin@du.edu](mailto:IRBAdmin@du.edu) or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

**Options for Participation**

Please initial your choice for the options below:

The researchers may audio/video record or photograph me during this study.

The researchers may NOT audio/video record or photograph me during this study.

**Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.**

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol

#### **Educator Interview Protocol**

Interviewee (Title and Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

This study will explore the aspirations and practices of a program designed to empower gifted youth.

#### **Introductory Protocol**

Thank you for taking the time to meet today.

To facilitate deep listening, I would like to record our conversation today. Would you please sign this consent form? As the principal investigator on this project, I am the only one who will have access to the recording which will be destroyed after transcription. All your information will be kept strictly confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may stop at any time.

I have planned this interview to not last longer than twenty minutes and have about three questions to ask. Please let me know if you need a break at any time.

You were selected to speak with me because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the school's instructional aspirations. The purpose of this study is to deepen understanding of the objectives and practices of a program designed to empower diverse gifted learners.

#### **Interview Questions**

1. How does Creason empower gifted children to reach their full potential?
2. How does Creason empower you to reach your full potential as an educator?
3. Please tell me about any obstacles or challenges to empowering children at Creason.
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations:



## Appendix F

### Observation Protocol

#### **Educator Observation Protocol**

This study will explore the aspirations and practices of a program designed to empower diverse gifted youth. Below are the dimensions of programming to be observed for this study and the ways in which the information will be secured, including details of observations.

I will conduct pre-observation interviews with each educator where I will set expectations for my time observing, namely that I will be discrete so as to not influence the learning environment, including not interacting with individuals within. Teachers will be provided the following script to share with students to explain my presence.

“For the next few days we have a researcher with us who studies schools. She will be observing how I teach to support other teachers in how to care for children like you.”

Additionally, as participation is voluntary, I will explain to teachers that if they wish to stop and for me to leave at any time, that they can signal me with the hand gesture used by crossing guards to signal stop.

Finally, an image of the observation matrix for this study is included at the end of this document. This template will support in focusing my attention throughout the observation process on the aspects of gifted student development related to the construct of empowerment.

### Dimensions of Programming

#### **Intentional: aspirations and goals**

- Interviews with selected primary, elementary and advanced teachers, as well as with specialist teachers and the head of school
- Collection of written documents

#### **Structural**

- Observation of how time is used, including types of activities
- Observation of how space is used: classroom layout, access to materials, location of teacher & students
- Observation of how time is used within the school as a whole
- Architectural layout of school
- Classroom and school aesthetics
- Comparison of various learning/classroom spaces within the school
- Post-observation interviews to ask clarifying questions regarding space design as needed

#### **Pedagogical**

- Classroom observations with a focus on teachers' actions and interactions
- Interviews with teachers for clarification and explanation of events observed

**Observation**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Educator \_\_\_\_\_

	Intentional	Structural	Pedagogical
<b>Academic</b>			
<b>Multicultural</b>			
<b>Eco-Literacy</b>			
<b>Creative</b>			
<b>Physical</b>			
<b>Spiritual</b>			
<b>Emotional</b>			
<b>Sociopolitical</b>			
<b>Implicit Messages about Power</b>			

## Appendix G

### Email to Educators Soliciting Participation

Dear Creason Teaching Team,

My name is Kate Bachtel and I am currently working towards a doctorate of education in curriculum and instruction at University of Denver and am seeking support with my doctoral research project. My research focuses on the objectives and practices of schools designed to empower diverse gifted students. In addition to my doctoral coursework, I have completed CITI basic human subjects research training. I also have a MA in education from the University of Colorado at Boulder where my studies focused on educational equity and cultural diversity with an emphasis in bilingual and multicultural education.

As part of this research, I hope to conduct brief interviews with several members of the Creason teaching team. I also hope to observe instructional practices of participating educators over the course of a few days to one week. I will not be recording any data which would identify students or participating educators and will use caution to be discrete and not influence the learning environment. I hope this study will support other educators and schools in improving their capacity to support diverse gifted learners.

Participation is completely voluntary. The attached consent form provides additional details. You are welcome to contact me directly at [kate.bachtel@du.edu](mailto:kate.bachtel@du.edu) or at (303) 554-7300 with any questions. If you are interested, please respond via email at your earliest convenience. If you are selected to participate, I will schedule a time to review the consent process with you individually and you can then decide whether or not you want to move forward with the initial fifteen to twenty-minute interview.

Thank you,

Kate Bachtel

## Appendix H

### Follow-up Email

Dear Creason Teaching Team,

Thanks to each of you who have volunteered to participate in the Creason research project - I am grateful for your time and expertise!

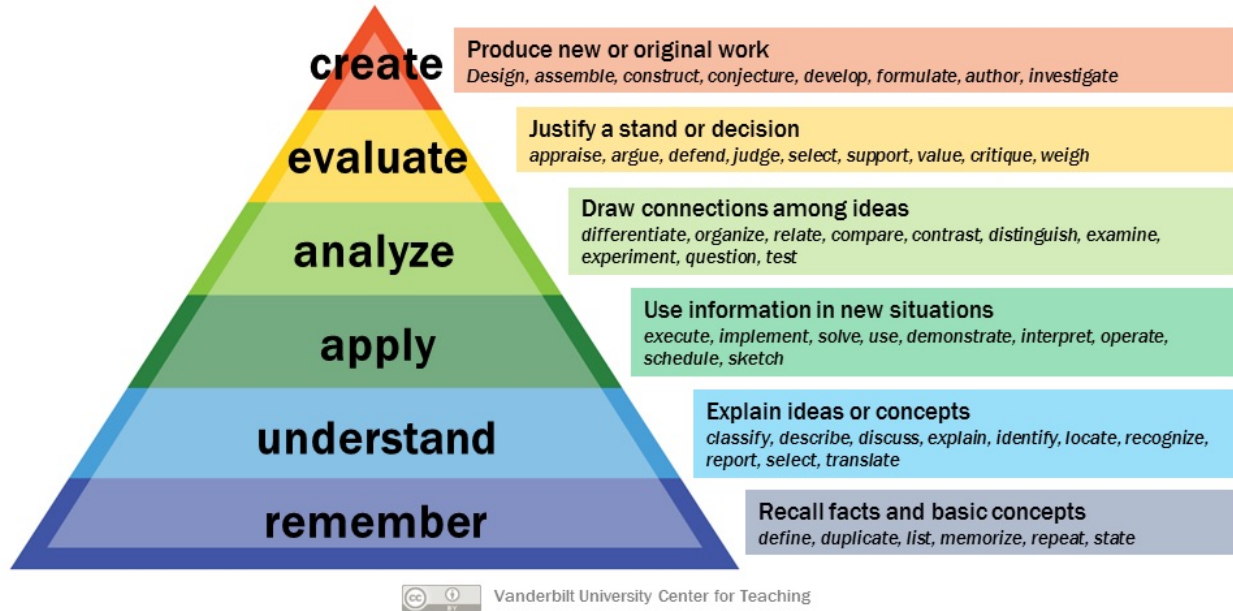
It would be helpful to have a few more volunteers - specifically, a **core primary teacher** and also a few more **specialist teachers**. This will allow us to better illustrate a student's experience longitudinally over their time at Creason and also represent the variety of learning environments and experiences.

The initial interview typically takes about fifteen minutes; it is only three questions. After the interview, each teacher is provided a copy of his or her transcript to review for accuracy. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identity. I will not be recording any data which would identify students or participating educators and use caution to be discrete so as to not influence learning. Additionally, teachers will be invited to review setting descriptions and vignettes crafted from classroom observations and provide feedback prior to the project being submitted to the University of Denver. I hope this study will support other educators and schools in improving their capacity to care for diverse gifted learners.

Participation is completely voluntary. The attached consent form provides additional details. You are welcome to contact me at [\(303\) 554-7300](tel:3035547300) or at [kate.bachtel@du.edu](mailto:kate.bachtel@du.edu) with any questions. If you are interested, please email me at your earliest convenience and we can schedule the interview at a time and location convenient for you.

Kind Regards,  
Kate

## Appendix I

**Bloom's Taxonomy**

(Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.)

**Appendix J**

<b>Intermediate</b>		
<b>1st Period</b>	<b>2nd Period</b>	<b>3rd Period</b>
Magnificent Machines	Musical	Musical
Oregon Trail	American History Scrapbook	Amazing, Incredible
Illustrating Stories	Papercraft: From Pop-Ups to Tunnel Books	3D Art Lab
Spanish 1	Know Your Knots	Bend it and Breathe
Spanish 1	Badminton, Pickleball, Oh my!	Sewing for Guys and Gals
Net It	The Regions of France	Bon Appetit!
Wonderful Water	Whodunit	Feel the Burn
Making Music Videos	Info Toolkit	1980's Trivial Pursuit
		Info Toolkit
		Furnish the Project Lab

**Advanced**

<b>1st Period</b>	<b>2nd Period</b>	<b>3rd Period</b>
Performance Play	Performance Play	Musical Cabaret
Murder Mystery	Commercial Success	Intro to Speech and Debate
PE Station	Net and Wall Games	Crossfitting Your Way to Strength
Beginner Spanish	Stage Craft	Stage Craft Continued
Printmaking	Inventors	La Dolce Vita: Italian Cooking
Gliders	Nature Drawing and Journaling	Study Hall
Creason Tech Corps	Law and Order	

(Creason, 2016)

## Appendix K



## 2010 Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards

## Gifted Education Programming Standard 1: Learning and Development

## Introduction

For teachers and other educators in PreK-12 settings to be effective in working with learners with gifts and talents, they must understand the characteristics and needs of the population for whom they are planning curriculum, instruction, assessment, programs, and services. These characteristics provide the rationale for differentiation in programs, grouping, and services for this population and are translated into appropriate differentiation choices made at curricular and program levels in schools and school districts. While cognitive growth is important in such programs, affective development is also necessary. Thus many of the characteristics addressed in this standard emphasize affective development linked to self-understanding and social awareness.



## Standard 1: Learning and Development

**Description:** Educators, recognizing the learning and developmental differences of students with gifts and talents, promote ongoing self-understanding, awareness of their needs, and cognitive and affective growth of these students in school, home, and community settings to ensure specific student outcomes.

Student Outcomes	Evidence-Based Practices
<b>1.1. Self-Understanding.</b> Students with gifts and talents demonstrate self-knowledge with respect to their interests, strengths, identities, and needs in socio-emotional development and in intellectual, academic, creative, leadership, and artistic domains.	1.1.1. Educators engage students with gifts and talents in identifying interests, strengths, and gifts. 1.1.2. Educators assist students with gifts and talents in developing identities supportive of achievement.
<b>1.2. Self-Understanding.</b> Students with gifts and talents possess a developmentally appropriate understanding of how they learn and grow; they recognize the influences of their beliefs, traditions, and values on their learning and behavior.	1.2.1. Educators develop activities that match each student's developmental level and culture-based learning needs.
<b>1.3. Self-Understanding.</b> Students with gifts and talents demonstrate understanding of and respect for similarities and differences between themselves and their peer group and others in the general population.	1.3.1. Educators provide a variety of research-based grouping practices for students with gifts and talents that allow them to interact with individuals of various gifts, talents, abilities, and strengths. 1.3.2. Educators model respect for individuals with diverse abilities, strengths, and goals.
<b>1.4. Awareness of Needs.</b> Students with gifts and talents access resources from the community to support cognitive and affective needs, including social interactions with others having similar interests and abilities or experiences, including same-age peers and mentors or experts.	1.4.1. Educators provide role models (e.g., through mentors, bibliotherapy) for students with gifts and talents that match their abilities and interests. 1.4.2. Educators identify out-of-school learning opportunities that match students' abilities and interests.
<b>1.5. Awareness of Needs.</b> Students' families and communities understand similarities and differences with respect to the development and characteristics of advanced and typical learners and support students with gifts and talents' needs.	1.5.1. Educators collaborate with families in accessing resources to develop their child's talents.
<b>1.6. Cognitive and Affective Growth.</b> Students with gifts and talents benefit from meaningful and challenging learning activities addressing their unique characteristics and needs.	1.6.1. Educators design interventions for students to develop cognitive and affective growth that is based on research of effective practices. 1.6.2. Educators develop specialized intervention services for students with gifts and talents who are underachieving and are now learning and developing their talents.
<b>1.7. Cognitive and Affective Growth.</b> Students with gifts and talents recognize their preferred approaches to learning and expand their repertoire.	1.7.1. Teachers enable students to identify their preferred approaches to learning, accommodate these preferences, and expand them.
<b>1.8. Cognitive and Affective Growth.</b> Students with gifts and talents identify future career goals that match their talents and abilities and resources needed to meet those goals (e.g., higher education opportunities, mentors, financial support).	1.8.1. Educators provide students with college and career guidance that is consistent with their strengths. 1.8.2. Teachers and counselors implement a curriculum scope and sequence that contains person/social awareness and adjustment, academic planning, and vocational and career awareness.

(NAGC, 2017)