Conceptualizing Gifted Adolescent Girls Using the Bicultural Skills Model:

Implications for School Counselors

Jennifer L. Pepperell

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Deborah J. Rubel

Oregon State University

Laura A. Maki

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Abstract

In counseling research and practice gifted girls often lack identification as a cultural group with unique features. Yet, girls in this population have specific and distinct struggles, worldviews, and ways of navigating social and academic groups. The purpose of this conceptualization article is to apply the bicultural skills model to adolescent gifted girls and to discuss the subsequent implications for school counseling practice.

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Implications for School Counselors

School counselors are uniquely positioned to serve all students, yet one population that is often left underserved is gifted adolescent girls. This population has unique counseling needs related to their identification as adolescent girls (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988) and as gifted students (Kerr, 1994; Rimm, 2002). School counselors who work with adolescent students recognize that this age group has its own language, behaviors, and values, becoming a social group that counselors may not intuitively understand. As school counselors consider how counseling programs can assist gifted girls, they encounter a vast gifted education research body. The difficulty for counselors lies in that the gifted literature is primarily dedicated to academic areas. The gifted literature is focused on identification issues, curriculum development, and classroom instruction (Peterson, 2006). Literature related to appropriate curriculum for gifted children is also plentiful and focuses variously on ideal pacing, differential programming, teacher training, and the role of curriculum in gifted underachievement (Baldwin, 2005; Callahan, 2005; Feldhusen, 2003; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Reis, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 2005).

By comparison, a smaller selection of research and theory focuses on the social and emotional needs of gifted adolescent girls. Counseling-oriented literature has indicated that the transition into adolescence may be a critical time for gifted girls (Bain & Bell, 2004; Kerr, 1994). Bain and Bell (2004) suggested that gifted girls have lower self-concepts than boys and explained that gifted girls "experience diminished self-confidence as they enter adolescence, likely due to parental, teacher, and societal

expectations" (p. 168). In addition, Rimm (2002) found that gifted girls may continually monitor their social behavior to conform to their peer group. The literature further suggested that while gifted children, and in particular gifted girls, seem more popular than their non-gifted peers during elementary school, this advantage disappears by middle school (Bain & Bell, 2004; Kerr, 1994; Rimm, 2002). Both Kerr (1994) and Rimm (2002) found that by adolescence, gifted girls experience social isolation in a regular classroom. This potential isolation comes at a time when relationships are crucial to identity development (Gilligan et al., 1988).

While the current body of gifted education and counseling literature contains some research and recommendations regarding the social-emotional needs of gifted girls, understanding their experiences using the concepts of biculturalism, bicultural stress, and bicultural competence may provide a perspective useful to school counselors in visualizing school environments and interventions that better serve gifted adolescent girls. The purpose of this article is to conceptualize gifted adolescent girls as a unique cultural group, apply the bicultural skills model to their functioning in school, and explore implications of this application for school counselors.

Unique Traits

In addition to the above-described dynamics, many gifted adolescent girls share a set of unique traits that contribute to their cultural experiences. These have been noted in the literature and summed up by Ryan (1999):

a) an unusual degree of sensitivity to the feelings and expectations of

others; b) a sharp wit that is often used as a coping mechanism; c)

heightened feelings of self, even at very young ages, often

accompanied by a strong sense of being different from the rest of the world; d) high idealism and a passionate sense of justice, of right and wrong; e) higher morality than others their age, often higher than society in general; f) emotional super-sensitivity along with great emotional depth; g) high expectations of self and others, often leading to perfectionism; and h) the need for abstract values and actions to compliment each other. (p. 15)

Additionally, Lovecky (2000) described a complimentary and overlapping set of traits including divergent thinking, high emotional intensity, high sensitivity and compassion, heightened sense of fairness, high goal orientation, and high motivation. While these traits may ultimately serve gifted girls, during adolescence they can lead to isolation, confusion, and mental health concerns. And as with all diverse groups, there is a wide array of individual differences and perspectives amongst gifted girls. Moderately gifted girls may not struggle at all while more highly emotionally or perceptually gifted girls may struggle much more (Boland & Gross, 2007). Regardless, the experience of gifted girls bears resemblance to that of other marginalized cultural groups, which have commonly been described as experiencing a sense of alienation, feeling misunderstood, and feeling unaccepted by others (Sue & Sue, 2003) suggesting a potential similarity in social support needs. Biculturalism, bicultural stress, and bicultural competence provide useful ways to conceptualize the social process, potential for distress, and means for intervention.

Silent Subculture

When describing gifted adolescent girls, Ryan (1999) used the term *silent subculture* to express the nature of the difference between gifted girls and other groups this age. The societal pressures directed toward girls, in general, and the experiences unique to gifted girls, in particular, indicate that much of what creates this cultural divide is related to gender. For example, many issues affect girls at this age, such as media pressures, body image, and sexual identity concerns. Furthermore, gifted girls are asked to hide a specific component of themselves – their giftedness. This is one of the aspects of that makes them unique (Ryan, 1999). As Sue and Sue (2003) have asserted, these experiences of alienation and rejection are characteristic of other marginalized cultural groups. Gifted girls are faced with messages from peers and adults to hide or play down their giftedness; to act more like the dominant group. Moreover, Fleischer (2005) described the display of intelligence in the classroom, where teachers may feel threatened, as a door to ridicule; therefore, the social pressure to downplay intelligence is very strong.

Yet, hiding giftedness puts girls at higher risk to lose track of their true selves. As Gilligan (1982) discussed, girls are pressured to take up traditional female roles. While this occurs at some level for all girls around this age, gifted girls are also pressured to suppress an intellect that they may begin to view as a burden. They may fear being seen as unfeminine, both by peers and by young males (Ryan, 1999). Or, they may decide to try to take on traditionally male roles such as having a strong intellect or risk isolation. Roeper (2003) shared the insight that while giftedness had been accepted, it had only been accepted in terms of the male world. Gifted girls still must model their

understanding of intelligence based on male norms (Roeper, 2003). For example, if a girl were to display her skill at math or science, she must take on more male characteristics, which may result in difficulty having friends and fitting in.

In essence, this system is asking girls to give up their femininity for their intelligence. For an adolescent girl, as Reis (2002) and Kerr (1994) have pointed out, this is often too big of a burden. Due to the stress of navigating between acceptance by the larger society and an intact sense of self, gifted girls are particularly vulnerable to mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Ryan, 1999). They also show rapid decreases in self-esteem and self-confidence (Calic-Newman, 2003).

Negotiating Relationships Across Cultures

For gifted students, the culture of middle school and high school can be very difficult to navigate, and for girls it can be doubly so. Calic-Newman (2003) described a change that occurs between the ages of 11-17 when many gifted girls shift from focusing on achievement and academics to focusing on friendship and belonging. This focus on friendship and peer relationships and away from academics was noticed as early as Terman's 1935 study (Calic-Newman, 2003). This early work found that as gifted adolescent girls focused more on fitting in with peers, their career aspirations changed. This finding was a marked change from his groundbreaking 1925 work where he found that young gifted children, both boys and girls, had similar test scores, similar levels of achievement, and similar career aspirations (Calic-Newman, 2003).

The importance of relationships in the development of gifted girls was highlighted in a study conducted by Pepperell and Rubel (2009). This qualitative exploration of

seven gifted girls' experiences of transitioning from elementary school to sixth- and seventh-grade supported the observation that gifted girls increasingly focused on their connection to significant others, particularly friends. A strong sense of identity provided a basis for these connections by allowing these gifted girls to make conscious choices about how to fit in with gifted and non-gifted peers. To fit in, particularly with non-gifted peers, these choices included participating in non-academic activities such as sports as well as *regulating giftedness* or choosing how to present their giftedness in a particular context. Regulating giftedness was qualitatively different than hiding giftedness due to shame and was viewed by participants as a way to strengthen relationships without devaluing self. The connections that the participants made, in turn, supported a feeling a belonging and a strong sense of self (Pepperell & Rubel, 2009).

The participants' coping strategies paralleled, in some ways, the concepts of biculturalism, bicultural stress, and bicultural competence, which describe the experiences of individuals who function within two cultural groups (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). The ensuing sections will explore gifted adolescent girls as a unique group similar to a cultural group; apply the concepts of biculturalism, bicultural stress, and bicultural competence to these experiences; and discuss the implications for school counselors.

<div align="center">**Biculturalism and Bicultural Stress**</div>

In as much as gifted adolescent girls, as a group, may share the characteristics of a marginalized cultural group, the concepts of biculturalism, bicultural stress, and bicultural competence may provide counselors with some keys to providing them with effective social emotional support in schools. Many of the intrapersonal and

interpersonal challenges faced by gifted adolescent girls as they move through school may be understood as the result of having to navigate in and between environments with different values, beliefs, and social behaviors. In the case of gifted girls, these environments can be divided into two categories. The first would include environments that validate, value, and allow free expression of both femaleness and giftedness. These environments *may* include family, gifted peer groups, and pockets within the academic system created by specialized programming or knowledgeable staff. The second would be environments that are shaped by those who are unaware of the uniqueness of gifted girls, are passively biased against gifted girls, or are actively biased against gifted girls.

The multicultural counseling and psychology literature provides several related constructs that may be useful in understanding this navigation – biculturalism, bicultural competence, and bicultural skills. While the term *bicultural* or *biculturalism* is used to describe varying experiences, it usually indicates that an individual exists and must function within two cultural groups; groups that usually have unequal status and power within a larger society (LaFromboise et al., 1993). The differences in culture, power, and status may result in *bicultural stress*. Bicultural or acculturative stress has been described extensively in the literature regarding the experiences of immigrants within a majority society (Chen, Benet-Martinez, & Bond, 2008; Romero, Martinez, & Carvajal, 2007).

The literature has described bicultural stress related to prejudice and discrimination as especially detrimental to vulnerable adolescents, particularly at the level of peer interactions (Romero et al., 2007). The experience of bicultural stress may

be similar to the tension experienced by gifted adolescent girls as they feel pressure to conform to age and gender norms, to be authentic and pursue their interests, and to conform to the high expectations that may be imposed by society, teachers, family, or themselves. This bicultural stress, in part, results from interactions with culturally dissimilar and similar peers who exert pressure to conform to either group. While the source of bicultural stress may largely come from peers, it may also originate from school and family (Romero et al., 2007). Studies have also shown that bicultural stress in adolescents is positively correlated with negative mental health outcomes and depressive symptoms (Romero et al., 2007).

Coping with Bicultural Stress

The literature has described several models of second culture acquisition that provide further understanding of how individuals may cope with bicultural stress. *Assimilation models* describe the processes whereby culturally non-dominant individuals lose their original cultural identity and develop an identity consistent with the dominant culture. A gifted girl who has assimilated to the dominant culture would accept traditional female models of behavior and deny, devalue, or be unaware of her giftedness without an internal sense of having made a choice. *Acculturation models* are similar to assimilation models in their basic assumption of a unidirectional and hierarchical relationship between the two cultures with non-dominant individuals adapting to dominant culture to function. However, acculturation models emphasize persistent identification of the individual as a minority. A gifted girl who has acculturated to the dominant culture would have gained skills to operate effectively in the mainstream world, while maintaining an identity as a gifted girl and marginalized individual.

Alternation models, however, are based on assumptions that are bidirectional. These models are based on the idea that individuals can understand and belong to more than one culture and can choose social behaviors and language to suit different social situations (LaFromboise et al., 1993). With their emphasis on valuing multiple cultures, alternation models seem to offer the healthiest option for conceptualizing healthy gifted adolescent female adjustment. A gifted girl who alternates would be able to select behaviors depending on the situation and could, therefore, honor the values of both cultures. For example, the participants in Pepperell and Rubel (2009) described making choices about regulating their giftedness in order to maintain and support their friendships. The girls did not describe this choice as negative, but as a way to move between cultural groups.

Bicultural Competence

LaFromboise et al. (1993) described the outcome of *bicultural competence* as the ability to function effectively in two cultures without devaluing one's self or either culture. Other authors have also used models of bicultural competence to conceptualize development of effective functioning for individuals from marginalized groups (Blechman, 1992; Parks, 1999; Villalba, 2007). The implication is that, unlike assimilated or acculturated individuals, bicultural individuals identify to varying degrees with both cultures and, at best, are capable of participating effectively in aspects of both cultures. Some research in the field of psychology indicates that despite early detractors who believed that it hindered individual development; biculturalism (along with bilingualism) promotes positive academic and personal development (Chen et al.,

2008). LaFromboise et al. (1993) outlined a set of six skills essential for bicultural competence:

- Developing awareness and knowledge of the history, institutions, rituals, and everyday practices of each culture

- Developing positive attitudes toward both groups

- Developing bicultural efficacy or confidence that it is possible to have effective relationships in two cultures

- Developing the ability to effectively communicate ideas and feelings, verbally and nonverbally, to members from both cultures

- Expanding the range of culturally or situationally appropriate behaviors or roles in which an individual can engage

- Developing a social support system that will serve to reduce the inevitable stress created by bicultural living

Although the model describes functioning as occurring across two distinct cultures – with gifted girls, as with any marginalized group, it may be more realistic and effective to view them as existing within several overlapping cultures (Silverman & Conarton, 2005). These cultures may include, but may not be limited to, the predominant social group at school, school academic culture, and family culture. It is also important to not assume the importance of each of these influences but to pay particular attention to each girl's sense of how each culture contributes to her identity and experience. In the following sections, the implications in the school environment of each element of this model will be discussed, with further suggestions for action for school counselors.

Developing Awareness

Awareness of the beliefs, values, and rituals of each cultural group includes understanding the worldview of each culture and accepting the constraints of each culture (LaFromboise et al., 1993). For girls navigating between gifted culture and non-gifted culture, this awareness may have both interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities. Interpersonally, gifted girls may struggle as they transition to adolescence and perceive that peers are not accepting of their giftedness. They may attempt to fit in by appearing less intelligent and superficially valuing the same things as their peers. Lack of awareness of dominant culture on a surface level can result in disconnection from mainstream behavior norms. At a deeper level, lack of awareness may result in misunderstanding and internalizing of dominant culture attitudes and beliefs.

School counselors working with gifted adolescent girls who are struggling can help them navigate between the two cultural groups by helping girls clearly define the two cultures. This might take the form of contextualizing (in an age appropriate way) both their own experiences as gifted girls and others' constraining or negative reactions. Information about and exploration of cultural meanings of gender and giftedness at the levels of society, community, school, family, and self may be fruitful. Individual counseling interventions can focus on building self-esteem and self-concept, along with examining what it means to be gifted and what shifts the student is seeing. Additionally, there are typically varying responses to giftedness in schools, anything from providing unique services or courses, to ignoring it and taking the attitude that "everyone has gifts" (Moon, 2002). Depending on the unique culture of the school system, these beliefs can be discussed and processed as they are likely to impact the student's perspective

on her own identity. School counselors can also utilize group work to assist students in this first area. Homogeneous groups can allow gifted girls to explore their understanding of the new culture of giftedness and non-giftedness.

Lack of awareness of gifted culture or of their own traits and preferences within the context of giftedness, on the other hand, may result in a sense of rootlessness or devaluation. Their task is to develop an understanding of both cultural groups so they do not devalue themselves. The girls in Pepperell and Rubel (2009) described having a strong understanding of both cultural groups. The girls described a shift from being able to answer the questions in class during elementary school to having to be mindful of how often they spoke up in class. These girls stated that they felt secure about this shift because the teachers knew they knew the answers, and the shift helped them maintain their relationships with peers. The awareness of both a gifted and non-gifted culture was critical in making these choices without feeling devalued. This has implications for school counselors.

Developing Positive Attitudes

Developing positive attitudes toward both gifted and non-gifted culture has implications for gifted girls and for school counselors. One way of developing positive attitudes is to facilitate positive interactions with non-gifted peers. The gifted girls in Pepperell and Rubel (2009) connected positively to other girls in non-academic settings, which in turn helped them feel more positive about non-gifted culture. Once they felt good about both groups, they were able to move between groups without a sense of betraying themselves. Other ways school counselors can facilitate these positive attitudes is to coordinate groups where gifted girls will experience a safe environment to

better understand non-gifted perspectives and experiences as well as to experience commonalities. Counselors can emphasize the connection around the shared emotional challenges of being adolescent girls and also increase gifted girls' understanding of the role of socialization in the actions of non-gifted girls who treat them negatively. These actions will help them see the systemic causes of their devaluation and avoid internalizing negative feelings or blaming non-gifted girls in general for them.

Bicultural competence suggests that one freely selects culturally associated behaviors based on functionality. When non-dominant individuals are treated poorly within the dominant culture they will find it difficult to form positive attitudes about that culture and will not feel positive about choosing behaviors associated with that culture. Or conversely, non-dominant individuals may internalize dominant attitudes resulting in a devaluing of their own culture. Developing positive attitudes toward both groups is critical for individuals to feel good about moving between cultural groups (LaFromboise et al., 1993). During adolescence, gifted girls are likely to be the target of teasing, used for their intelligence, or left out (Calic-Newman, 2003; Ryan, 1999). This poor treatment can cause negative feelings toward the dominant group as well as themselves and other gifted girls.

Fostering positive attitudes toward gifted culture is equally important. This process includes helping the girls to identify other gifted individuals – especially girls and women – and to see the value of their contributions. It will also involve exploring their own unique expression of giftedness and its benefits and burdens. Authors such as Herbert, Long, and Neumeister (2005) suggested that bibliotherapy might be a useful tool for this exploration.

Bicultural Efficacy

Bicultural efficacy is the belief that one can develop and maintain interpersonal relationships in two cultures without compromising one's cultural self (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Bicultural efficacy allows gifted girls to weather the inevitable challenges of navigating between two cultures. Without bicultural efficacy, gifted girls may feel forced into interacting solely with one group or the other or be fearful of losing themselves while relating to others. This limitation potentially contributes to lack of awareness of the other group as well as less positive feelings about the groups and themselves.

Bicultural efficacy, therefore, has implications in school counselors' work with gifted adolescent girls. Girls who have learned to navigate between gifted and non-gifted groups while maintaining a strong sense of self have developed bicultural efficacy. For school counselors, this facilitating development entails encouraging gifted girls to interact in safe situations where success is critical and they have a high likelihood of acceptance. Supporting them as they try new skills and also helping them process their feelings as they stretch their relational boundaries is also important both to ensure success and to ensure positive meaning-making from the process. And though hiding giftedness is seen as a damaging strategy in the literature, counselors should not immediately pathologize gifted girls' choices to regulate their presentation of giftedness to others. Clearly, encouraging girls to use this strategy without fully exploring their feelings about it would be counterproductive, but it can also be a path to relational efficacy when used mindfully.

The participants in Pepperell and Rubel (2009) exemplified bicultural efficacy and described their own bicultural efficacy quite well. They spoke with confidence when

describing relationships within gifted circles and outside of these circles. The factor that seems to differentiate functional regulation of giftedness from hiding was the degree to which the gifted girl was able to distinguish her actions as a choice versus a mandatory condition of worth. For example, although the girls in the study described choosing to regulate their giftedness at times to help connect with others, they also clearly described having friends with whom they choose to not regulate this part of themselves. They expressed clarity in their choices and believed these choices did not harm them.

Effective Communication

An individual's ability to communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, is the foundation of bicultural competence (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Effective communication helps build connections within the culture of origin and the secondary culture, which in turn builds positive attitudes about both cultures and bicultural efficacy. While this may be easier to conceptualize when referring to multiple languages, as LaFromboise et al. (1993) were referring to, effective communication is also critical to the bicultural competence of gifted adolescent girls.

The task for school counselors is to be current in the language spoken in the halls and to note when communication skills or style may play a role in a gifted girl feeling isolated, being unable to connect, or not getting her needs met. It is critical that school counselors stay current not only on the issues that affect teens but also on the current icons, phrases, and terms being used. It is not suggested that counselors use these, but that they understand them in order to help students that may feel isolated or singled out due to this issue. The ability to communicate with peers is critical, and the only way counselors can assist with that is to be current. Again, it is also critical that the

recommendation for gifted girls to use differing language depending on context should not be a blanket prescription but an option that is carefully examined and accepted by the student only if it is of overall benefit.

Adolescents of both genders co-construct a language that is unique to each generation and setting. Often, the adolescents that are the most popular are the ones that have the clearest mastery of the language and are aware of subtle changes that occur over time. While gifted adolescents are often highly verbal, particularly gifted girls, they often have vocabularies that exceed or differ from their peers. Their task is to learn to not only communicate with adults and their gifted peers but also to speak the language of the rest of their peer group when it will benefit them.

Expanding the Range of Behaviors

An individual's ability to comfortably take on new behaviors and roles depending on cultural context is another key aspect of bicultural competence (LaFromboise et al.,1993). The implication for school counselors is that they must be prepared to help gifted adolescent girls realistically evaluate the impact of their roles and behaviors, process how changing roles or learning new behaviors will both feel and impact them socially, and support them in their decisions to undertake action. Areas that girls may need to or choose to work on are listening skills, general social skills, and moderating competition and drive.

In their review, LaFromboise et al. (1993) indicated that individuals whose repertoire of behaviors was limited struggled more than those with a wider range of behavioral resources. For gifted adolescent girls this may mean that girls who are unable to shift from accustomed roles and behaviors when moving from gifted to non-

gifted may be more stressed. Being able to employ a range of situationally appropriate behaviors and roles will assist gifted girls in their comfort and effectiveness when moving between both their gifted cultural group and the larger non-gifted cultural group.

Developing a Social Support System

A well-developed support system means a sense of "being grounded" (LaFromboise et al., 1993, p. 407). Having stable social networks in both cultural groups is critical. For school counselors, helping students develop a social support system can be done in several ways. The first is by helping them find extracurricular activities within the school in which they might be interested. This will help the gifted girls stay connected in school. If there are no programs available in school, school counselors can help students find support outside of school. This can be done through a church, volunteer work, or anything that the student finds interesting. In addition, school counselors can consider running a group in school. Group work allows the members of the group to connect around a common issue or concern (Chaplin et al., 2006) and the girls can begin to feel that sense of grounding within that group.

In Pepperell and Rubel (2009), this sense of belonging and connected feeling were both described as critical themes that emerged from their data. Their participants expressed that it was this sense of belonging that allowed them to move between both cultural groups. For the girls in the study, their sense of belonging was fostered through extracurricular activities.

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Discussion

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The literature generally presents gifted girls as struggling in the transition from elementary-school age to adolescence (Bain & Bell, 2004; Calic-Newman, 2003; Kerr,

1994; Ryan, 1999); however, there are few concrete suggestions in the literature to guide school counselors who want to provide focused and effective counseling for this population. This article attempts to provide school counselors with a unique perspective of gifted adolescent girls that can inform their practice. The Bicultural Skills Model proposed by LaFromboise et al. (1993) serves as the foundation for the article supported by the research of Pepperell and Rubel (2009) who found that gifted girls could navigate adolescence successfully with a strong sense of themselves and strong connections to gifted friends, non-gifted friends, and family, or all three. Conceptualizing gifted adolescents as a diverse population and applying a bicultural model of development to counseling interventions may assist counselors in being more effective in their work with this population.

Recommendations for School Counselors

School counselors can have a significant impact on gifted adolescent girls through their comprehensive guidance programs. Conceptualizing the needs of gifted girls using the goals developed from the bicultural model can be helpful as the girls are learning to move between two social systems, their gifted peers and their non-gifted peers. Both of these groups have social rules and are critical in helping girls feel connected to the school. Feeling connected is vital in their development and in forming their identity. School counselors can apply the bicultural model to this diverse group in all facets of their work, including in the creation of developmental guidance lessons, individual counseling, and group counseling and in advocacy work to help girls with their knowledge, skills, and connections to others.

To fully and effectively implement such programs, it is essential that school counselors become knowledgeable about the issues of gifted students in general as well as the issues of gifted adolescent girls. Biases and stereotypes about this population, both from the perspective of giftedness and femaleness, may limit counselors' perceptions of gifted girls' strengths and the potential challenges they face. Thus it is essential that counselors examine their biases and stereotypes as well as be vigilant about how these may also impact the way staff and administration view this population.

Future Directions

With this article being largely conceptual, a clear need for further research to apply the bicultural model to gifted girls in practice is needed. Of particular interest to the field might be a qualitative study of the effectiveness of applying such a model, both from the counselor and the student perspective. Another fruitful area to explore would be counselor, staff, and administration attitudes and beliefs about gifted students, particularly gifted girls. These attitudes and beliefs may be the biggest stumbling block to implementing ethical, fair, and effective programming for gifted girls.

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Biographical Statements

Jennifer received her Ph.D. from Oregon State University in Counselor Education and Supervision. Her primary clinical focus has always been with children and adolescents, either in shelter settings, or in schools. Her research interests are with girls, identity development, feminist issues and qualitative research. She is an assistant professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She can be contacted at Pepperell MSU, Mankato, Department of Counseling and Student Personnel; 107 Armstrong Hall; Mankato, MN 56001; E-mail: jennifer.pepperell@mnsu.edu; Telephone: 507-389-5837; Fax: 507-389-5074

Deborah received her master's in mental health counseling and doctorate in counseling from Idaho State University. Since receiving her doctorate in 2002, she has worked as a counselor educator at Oregon State University. Her primary passions are group work with diverse populations and the use of qualitative methods to explore psychosocial processes. She can be contacted at 452 Waldo Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon 97331; Telephone: (541) 737-5973; Fax: (541) 737-8971; E-mail: deborah.rubel@oregonstate.edu

Laura received a master's in communication studies from the University of Minnesota and is currently a doctoral student in counselor education and supervision at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Her interests include spirituality in counselor education and multicultural competence in student affairs. She can be contacted via e-mail: laura.maki@mnsu.edu