Navigating Gifted Pathways

Ashley Rosenthal

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj

Recommended Citation
Copyright © 2023 Ashley Rosenthal

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Navigating Gifted Pathways

Ashley Rosenthal

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Dance

Bridgewater State University

April 18, 2023

Dr. Jody Weber, Thesis Advisor  Date: 4/22/23

Dr. Donna Dragon, Committee Member  Date: 4/23/23

Prof. Tina Mullone, Committee Member  Date: 4/27/23
Introduction

Programs for gifted students have been used to identify and advance youth who show talent and academic potential in their academics for years. These programs separate the course load for gifted students from the typical education of their peers and allow them to further explore knowledge with advanced and accelerated work programs that manage the pace, content, and applications of their intelligence and talents. This research project investigates what it means to be a gifted student, how these students are identified, what the mental health trends of burnout are, the social-emotional relationships between peers, and how gifted students later bridge their skills and passions in life. This research is partnered with a video project that includes a choreographed series of three original dance works that represent different perspectives of a gifted student: burnout, gifted programs in private vs public schools, finding balance, becoming contributors to their communities, and finding passion for themselves in their futures.

Choreographic research entails the collection of research, data, and stories, analyzing these facts, creating movement sequences to support the message of the research, and using choreographic tools to enhance the meaning and audience comprehension of the piece. I began this research in fall of 2022 in a Dance Production Theory class as I created my first choreographic work, “Gifted Kid Syndrome”. This piece was developed based on the abstract concept of this research project and was accompanied by light research about personal experiences from gifted students. I spent the following semester focusing mainly on the traditional research for the project and completed all of the written research in this paper. The semester after that I worked on developing my second choreographic piece, “Luminary Burden”. This piece used the research I gathered about the socio-economic divide between gifted programs as well as the social-emotional aspects of separating gifted students from their peers to
create a piece to bring to the stage. The final development of this project created the third choreographic piece, “The Evolution of Self Enrichment”, as well as redeveloping “Gifted Kid Syndrome” for a new number of dancers and editing together the videography of each piece into a final work.

This link is the video project to accompany this research:
https://youtu.be/Av29_oGYQbQ

**Defining “Gifted”**

To better understand what it means to be a gifted student, let’s begin with the general definition of giftedness. To be gifted is to “have exceptional talent or natural ability” (Oxford Dictionary 2022). Many people view gifted students as people who have high IQ’s and are skilled in STEM areas (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Though these traits can be true for a gifted student, there are more definable qualities that make these students unique. David Yun Dai, a psychology author, provided his own perspective on gifted students in an article titled *Assessing and accessing High Human Potential: A Brief History of Giftedness and What it Means to School Psychologists*. Dai explains the development of the word “gifted” in relation to academics and students in the United States and proposes changes to the ways American school systems define and identify gifted populations. He argues that giftedness can go beyond a student’s IQ (Intelligence Quotient- measuring reasoning and problem-solving abilities) and can be broadened to students who have exceptional social skills, work determination, and overall talent (Dai 2022)

Gifted and talented programs began in 1979 at Johns Hopkins by Julian Stanley who titled his program “Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth”. The program started as a research
study about how academically advanced children learn and later developed into a program that brought together “…The brightest minds of the next generation and offers them unique, intellectually challenging, and socially rewarding experiences” (Johns Hopkins 2022). This program set the groundwork for all gifted programs to come and defined how to give advanced children lesson plans to learn and continue developing their abilities that they will later take into their professions and futures. These programs were meant to build up students and encourage their academic pursuits based on their talents. However, through the developmental progression of programs in the United States, some students felt too much pressure in these areas.

Gifted programs can look very different based on fields of interest and private or public education. I inquired with a Bridgewater State University professor, Danielle Bazinet, about her time working at The Sage School, “an independent, coeducational school for academically gifted students from the Greater Boston and Providence areas” (The Sage School 2022). According to Professor Bazinet, The Sage School has a yearlong theme that the students use to drive their lesson plans and content learning around, and each field of interest is divided into a team (STEM, Fine Arts, Foreign Language). They use this theme and their field to come up with a project that can help a specific community or learn about a certain topic through hands-on learning and application experience so that the students are actively learning to apply their skill and knowledge to societal needs. The Sage School is a private education system where every student is seen as gifted and talented (The Sage School 2022). This creates a community of students who understand each other and understand the purpose that they are all working towards. This community allows students to be more open and willing to be themselves and to feel more comfortable with who they are and discover who they want to be. Bazinet described their learning process as deeper and more challenging work as opposed to more work in a shorter
period of time (Bazinet 2022). This allows teachers to help their students gear their learning towards discovering how they can benefit the community and how their unique skills and thinking can be used for greatness. Having more work in an accelerated program is a pedagogy that many public schools implement in their gifted student program and is one of the top contributors to burn out. Public school systems use exclusive programs for their gifted population and therefore create a barrier between gifted and talented students and their peers and can later be labeled as “different” or “nerds”. There is less of an encouraging environment to use their talents to be great and instead cause some students to feel like they need to hide their talents in order to be accepted by their peers. Community plays a large role in a student's developmental progression with their social skills and the two approaches between public and private education can help or hurt their ability to grow and thrive in these communities.

**Determining Giftedness in Students**

There have been multiple tools that have helped schools and education systems decide if a student is gifted or not. The criteria and purpose of testing has adapted over time from using tests that revealed IQ’s, to tests that focused more on developmental functions of students in a specific age range, to tests that can also identify preferred learning methods. Professor Bazinet shared how The Sage School uses testing for admissions and how it has developed over the years. The first test we spoke of is the WPPSI, the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, which is more outdated than some of the tests I will mention later but can still be used to determine IQ and verbal performance as well as processing speed for general intellectual ability and cognitive functioning (What is the WPPSI and What Does it Measure? 1). This test requires a 1:1 meeting with a psychology professional and takes up to an hour to complete as they test 14 different subtests in core, supplemental, and optional sections. The number of
subtests or types of subtests the student takes depends on their age. The fourth version of this test is usually required by private schools for admission much like The Sage School, but is limited in many creative or social fields that some students may excel in. The WISC 5 (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children) has become the test for gifted students. This test measures the five cognitive domains: episodic memory, speed-attention-executive, visuospatial ability (identifying space and relationships of objects), fluency, and numeric reasoning, and is much more open to students' abilities in determining their giftedness.

All of these tests that are used to assess children’s abilities explicitly utilize Howard Gardner’s theory of the 8 multiple intelligences. The theory of multiple intelligences is that the traditional views on intelligence and IQ is a psychometric measurement of learning and do not allow inclusivity to students who learn differently or have differently focused talents. These categories include: Visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic (Gardner). Multiple intelligences allow students to acknowledge and understand what type of information they are more likely to process easily. By understanding this, students and teachers can then analyze this information and adapt their lesson plans to better succeed in the students’ academics by connecting it to their intelligence classification. The 8 multiple intelligences help test promoters be more willing to complete standardized testing creatively with different approaches and therefore be able to identify more students with advanced abilities and accept them into different programs.

**Gifted Kid Syndrome**

The phrase, “gifted kid burn-out” is a common term used by today’s generation. It refers to students who learned to read faster than others, or who excelled in math from a young age. But as these students grow up and get to college, they
have lost their sense of a “gift” and feel as though they are cracking under the pressure (Rosenthal, Dance Kaleidoscope 2022)

Gifted programs sometimes create a stressful atmosphere where students feel like they need to succeed, or they will be seen as a failure. To combat the stressful atmosphere, Dai strives to redevelop the language used to define gifted students to phrases like “gifted behavior” as opposed to “giftedness” and is beginning to utilize non-intelligence factors to determine a group of students for gifted programs (Dai, 1516). These adaptations help reclaim the history of giftedness and help others to see it as something that is not only intelligence but also talent, determination, and skill. Gifted classes are often thought of as programs for students who read fast, can do quick math, and are scientists at elementary ages. Though these factors can play a role, it is important to recognize talent in other areas of education and performance to aid in boosting societies communities in the future.

I created a choreographic piece titled “Gifted Kid Syndrome” that explores different elements and emotions that surround gifted kid burnout. Gifted Kid Burnout is a term that has recently become popularized in the United States to label students who experience gifted programs early in their academic careers and are now stumbling under the pressure society puts on them to make a difference and be the smartest of the bunch. The competitive outlook of gifted students creates a toxic environment via the mindset that there can only be one smart student who will be successful in the future rather than encouraging an environment that allows students to explore their interests and apply their specific talents and skills to those areas. Students are participating in trends where they share their experiences of mental health in resonance to being labeled “gifted”, and many share stories similar to each other where they felt talented as a child, continued their education thinking they did not need to put in as much effort as their peers in
order to succeed, and now lack good study habits, coping mechanisms, and overall self-confidence. This mental trend could be in relation to the types of public-school programs they participated in and were feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers while also having to participate in non-accelerated activities with their peers in the same day. Some of these activities, in a public-school setting, would be joining the same art or gym class where students who do not excel in academics may thrive. Seeing their peers thrive in these activities may give them a sense of imposter syndrome or thinking that their giftedness does not make them unique.

Gifted kid burnout is one of many worldwide trends on social media platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms give youths a space to share their experiences and relate to each other to feel less alone in their struggles and to better understand the experiences of others. Many who participate in these trends are a part of millennials or generation Z and are around the age of 16-29. This population is entering adulthood and are confiding in one another to try and make sense of what they want their futures to hold when they are no longer titled “gifted” but still feel as though they are being held to high standards from their youth and suffer the mental health declines as they grow up and their work slows down.

The purpose of this research is to aid my creation of a visualization using art, words and movement that demonstrates the effects that being labeled “gifted” can have on a young person in the perspective of the student, the parents, the community, and the mind.

1. **Choreographic Analysis- Gifted Kid Burnout**

Dancers: Chanel Masody, Ashley Rosenthal

Link: https://youtu.be/AHPa4ntnnk

Music and Sound: “Idlewild” by Julia Kent
Theme: This piece explores more of the mental obstacles gifted students are prone to endure. Pressure from teachers, parents, peers, and themselves can spark strong emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger, and exhaustion. These emotions can severely impact the student's motivation and work ethic as time goes on and the student must learn how to fight to not succumb to the pressure.

Analysis

The first choreographic section of this thesis depicts the invisible symptoms of being a gifted student like struggling with anxiety, depression, and anger. The upstage dancer represents this invisible monster that lurks in the shadows of the other dancer’s world. She wears a dark grey, ripped tank top to show the disheveled nature of the brain while in a state of burnout or stress. She also wears a dark blue tank top underneath the grey shirt to connect her to the other dancer who is dressed in a light blue long tank top and light grey pants. These costumes have similar silhouettes and color schemes, but the monster is darker and more mysterious than the personified dancer herself.

The differing levels between the two dancers at the beginning of the piece plays a role in establishing power dynamic of the dancer on the high level controlling the dancer on the low level. The upstage dancer uses instrumentation to adapt the movements created by the low-level dancer by using head initiation to move across the horizontal plane while the low-level dancer uses foot initiation to axially move in the sagittal plane to sit up. The seated dancer looks toward the monster's hands as she offers them to her to lift her up. This is one of the few times the two physically touch, and the seated dancer is hesitant to give into the assistance of the monster, unsure of what it will cost. She takes the hands of the monster and is lifted to an equal level with her with the monster remaining behind in the shadows of the other dancer. The monster is not
revealed until the two lean in opposing directions, staring at each other with curiosity and hesitation (0:12-0:13). The monster leads the dancer upstage left, foreshadowing the defeat to come, however the dancer cuts in front of the monster and changes direction but trips and is unsuccessful of escaping. The monster then leads again, stopping short to block the dancer from travelling away from the corner anymore. This zig zag pathway decreases the negative space between the two dancers. The monster is more direct in her pathway as she leads the way the majority of the time and uses a punch effort action to quickly stop her and her partner in their tracks. The shapes that are formed between the two dancers' negative space almost mimic each other as the monster directly influences the actions the dancer is performing. After being stopped upstage right, the dancer has no other option but to travel back towards the upstage left corner where the monster originally intended to take her. The monster lurks behind her, running to catch up and push her deeper into the corner, but the dancer rips away at the last second to travel back to the downstage area where she first began. The monster chases after her and wraps the two of them together until the dancer drops and the monster re-establishes her dominant power on the high level. The dancer circles back to the mid-level with the monster growing more exhausted from trying to escape and reaches toward the back left corner with the monster stabilizing her pose. The monster continuously looks at the dancer as she moves through space awaiting the right moment to lead her to defeat. The dancer rarely acknowledges the monster directly because she is unaware of how much she is being watched.

The dancer is lured back to the upstage left corner of the stage as the monster circles around her. This section creates the spiraling feeling many gifted students experience when they are burnt out from the expectations and work they have on their plate. They may look calm on the outside, slowly moving through space, but the thoughts, or monsters, inside of their head are
rapidly spiraling around and make it hard to continue. The monster completes three cycles around the dancer. The first cycle has quick and direct movements of the arm slicing contralaterally across the body. The sharpness of this movement represents the quick thoughts that pop into the minds of anxious people about the worst-case scenario. It is a quick change of pace that can completely derail or sidetrack a gifted student when they become overwhelmed with tasks. The second cycle demonstrates the depressive blocks gifted students can experience. There is a sudden weight shift that throws the monsters upper body forward while staying grounded in the legs. This rebounding movement resembles hitting a physical block repeatedly, making it harder to continue forward. The third cycle can be interpreted as the sudden manic moment’s students experience under the weight of their stressors or when they are feeling under stimulated and burst out with energy.

When the dancer finally reaches the upstage left corner again, she manages to escape one more time by using locomotor movement reversing the diagonal she just walked. The monster travels closely behind which the dancer does not realize until she glances behind her and crumbles under the defeat of still having these thoughts in her head. The monster, again, uses the high level to tower over the dancer. The dancer acknowledges the power of the monster by looking directly up at her. From this point on, the monster has complete control of the dancer even when they are not in close proximity. The dancer reaches toward the monster as they increase the negative space between them. The monster takes this time to increase her power as she uses her distal reach space to create as much positive space within her own body as possible, She covers all three levels within space to take up every inch of the dancer’s internal mind until the dancer comes running towards her. The monster pushes the dancer back to the low level and continues to take her under the monster's control like a puppet. The dancer no longer has energy
to fight as she rocks back and forth on the low level in defeat. The monster pushes and pulls the dancer, insinuating that she is controlling the dancer’s thoughts in her head causing her to act like this. As the monster uses locomotor movement to travel to increase this wave of feeling, the dancer breaks away in one last attempt to fight off these feelings. She travels to the center of the stage keeping a close eye on the monster. Using her far reach space and central movement, she flails around trying to break through her thoughts as the monster circles her. The monster, taking up the most stage space walks slowly around the front of the stage and toward the upstage left corner knowing she is winning. The dancer is dragged by an invisible force towards the corner, occasionally being ripped away from this feeling by the impending workload, exhaustion, and burst of energy on the high level. These brief shapes are all inspired by the three circles the monster cycled around the dancer earlier. Begging to have a break, the dancer falls in defeat as the monster approaches her in the corner representing the successful mission of the internal thoughts of the dancer overwhelming her to break.

Process

This piece was originally developed for three people when my research first began and included more pedestrian and literal movements at first. The idea of having one dancer portray the gifted student and the other dancers portraying the different internal mindsets of the student remained the same, but the quality of movement drastically changed from the next version. The next version was a quartet created for the stage. There were still many pedestrian movements like pantomiming using a computer, falling asleep, and displaying anger. The final version of this piece is a duet. This duet had one dancer encapsulate all of the mindset identities that I had created over each version of the dance. I wanted this character to be more like an ominous monster than a simple thought or emotion like it had been in the past. The other dancer portrayed
the gifted student who battled succumbing to the invitation of depression the monster provided and needing to meet a sense of validation and success by pretending she was not burnt out.

This final version was probably the easiest of the three choreographic works for this project because the theme had been developed and tested from the beginning. It is, however, interesting to look at the original trio and compare it to the final duet and figure out what concepts were lost in the process and why.

**Luminary Burden**

*Gifted students in both public and private schools face differences in how they are supported by their communities. Could a bond between these students help them to become the leaders, creators, and community builders of the world? (Ashley Rosenthal, Winterdance 2022)*

Community and workload are two of the main stressors for students in gifted programs that can impact their mental health and wellbeing. Truc Thanh Thai is the author of the article *Perceived Stress and Coping Strategies in High School Gifted Students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam* and discusses the detrimental effects of not teaching gifted student methods of coping and relaxation to combat the academic stressors they endure in high school. Thai claims that “Gifted students may experience more stress, anxiety, and adjustment problems... due to several reasons” (Thai, 98). Accelerated programs expect students to be able to learn sometimes twice as much content as their peers in the same academic period and cause more pressure for students to learn and apply this knowledge without really having time to process and ask questions or figure out how to apply the information to themselves. These stressors can also derive from parental pressure of needing to score high grades while also being involved and professional which can often leave the student with little time for themselves to discover who they are and what their
own interests are. Coping strategies need to be taught to these students so they can learn how to independently reflect and process their education experience and continue to grow and develop at the rate they are expected. Thai proposes a new method of intervention for students who have experienced the negative effects of being gifted to cope by using positive reinforcement, problem solving, and restructuring. The study used to test this method showed that students who used these coping methods had lower levels of stress at the end of the academic year (Thai, 107-108). Without these coping strategies, students can have long term negative effects on their mental health that last into adulthood. Some of these include increased risk of depression and anxiety and can also lead to feelings of imposter syndrome or shame. Imposter syndrome is an internal feeling where one doubts themselves and their abilities thinking that they are not as capable as others believe them to be (Simply Psychology, 2022). Students in gifted programs may feel as though they do not belong or fit in with other gifted students regardless of their test scores or ability. This diminishes the confidence and self-esteem that drives them to perform well. These feelings may then lead to shame which is “…Generally recognized as an emotion involving feelings of inferiority, powerlessness, and worthlessness (Lee, 41). The psychological distress these students experience with the gifted program opportunities can impact how they view themselves and their impact on the world and causes burnout in this population. Coping strategies are useful in combating these feelings and mental health decline, but only when the tools students need to learn them are provided.

2. **Choreographic Analysis**

**Program Notes**

Dancers: Katelyn Cameron, Jenna Eiten, Lauren Gilbert, Annie Hayes, Vaughnesa Jipner, Isaiah Roig, Jaeda Walker
Music and Sound: “Glasswerks” by Man in a Shed
Theme: This piece explored the differences in community engagement and motivation between gifted programs within public schools and gifted programs within private schools. If these gifted and talented students used their leadership abilities to unite and work together, they could create a more diverse community for all students to thrive and be successful with their talents.

Analysis

This is the second piece of my honors thesis composition and is a continuation of the story development of how the label of “giftedness” impacts children in their mental image of themselves, their social engagement with others, and their community impact as they grow. From the start, I wanted to distinguish these two groups through costumes. Though many public schools do not have a strict dress code where everyone looks the same, I wanted the three dancers portraying this population to look uniform without the ability to express their individuality, much like the concept of being generalized as “nerds” or “losers” by their peers without ever being seen for having their own unique qualities. I also did not want a large range of costumes to distract from the unity of the group. The private school dancers wore sweater vests and collared shirts to allude to the socioeconomic factors that play a role in the access these students have to a strong education and community.

The first musical phrase is three duets between pairs of students and private school students as well as one highlighted soloist from the private school. The public-school dancers are all participating in the same phrase on the low level with a focus on the hand controlling the rest of the movements in the body. The low level expresses the weight and pressure these students feel when focusing on school and being labeled as gifted. I associate hard work with hands,
especially in a school setting because of the constant writing or typing and actively learning through hands-on experiences, so using the hand to pull up the head or trace a circle around their thoughts was the dancer’s sense of motivation. Even though they feel defeated and grounded on the low level, the use of the hand guides their movement and pushes them forward which leads them to reach for the private school dancers. This reach initiates the first connection between these two school systems and how each program can create a better solution for gifted and talented programs. The private school dancers contrast this phrase through their individually crafted phrases. Private schools that concentrate on gifted and talented students, students are encouraged to explore their uniqueness and how their talents can aid their individuality. Each of their phrases is based on the initial public-school phrase but highlights different strengths of the dancers. The downstage right dancer is performing a phrase that highlights the fact that although private school students may feel more supported in their academics and goals, they still feel the weight and pressure that is put onto public-school students, just in a different way.

The similar stressors of these students are also highlighted in the opening section of the piece. The use of hand initiation was also used in this section as the two dancers experienced the mirroring breath drawing up and releasing downward, then using the hand to pick themselves back up and focus their attention. Both the public and private school student experience the academic and social pressures to succeed which is why I wanted these two dancers to begin by mirroring each other rather than dancing in opposition because there are problems in both school systems through the expectations of their young students. The chatter noises during this section were used to set the scene for the audience. Everyone has experienced the white noise of chatter in the hallway and cafeteria and understands how suffocating those sounds can be when they feel overwhelmed. Gifted students are oftentimes diagnosed with anxiety disorders later on in life and
the expanding voices in a public setting like a school can sometimes ignite these anxious feelings. I also wanted to capture the anxious experience of feeling like the entire world is frozen around you. The other dancers in this section are frozen in their spots; the public-school students in their own mental cages facing away from one another, unaware that their peers are struggling just as much as they are, and the private school students who see this issue, acknowledge it and offer a helping hand. The setup of these students also made asymmetrical imbalances on the stage both in level and the shape across the stage.

The next two sections gave insight to the dynamic between the two schools individually without any distraction of comparison between the two. I thought it was important to highlight the attitudes, struggles, and community aspects of the different environments before they joined together to build each other up. The private school section created unity through shapes and interactions. After sending their partners off stage, the private school students began to build an intimate circle with one another using distal reaching with their hands, which play a common initiation motif throughout and direct their bodies inwards. Each dancer faces inwards in the circle creating a sense of community and group dynamic that the public-school students did not have. They dance in unison as they perform a sustained and direct arm extension that creates a diagonal in their bodies reaching to the person next to them in the circle. Their movements remain at the high level through jumps and arm extensions with energy through their fingertips. The movements in this section are very sustained and free flow because of their attitude towards academics. Gifted students in private schools understand what each person is going through because they are aware of the schedule they endure and are encouraged to find what purpose their gifts and talents hold for the overall community and becoming leaders. As one dancer struggles to reach this enlightenment of what life has in store for her, the others are there to guide
her back. This is demonstrated through the highlighted dancer's reaches and rebounds while traveling on the upstage backwards diagonal from left to right which represents her struggle. She reaches her hand while stepping backwards and allows her weight to drop all together when she cannot finish this reach. As she turns to give up, her peers have caught up to her and lift her to guide her in reaching her final position of getting back on the right track. This is juxtaposed with the next section.

The public-school dancers enter with haste as the school bell rings. One dancer slowly walks in, dazed and confused as to why she is wandering the halls whereas her peers come in with anxiety and strides. These two entrances are used to embody the two attitudes towards the school day; one paralyzed with anxiety and unwilling to move forward and one who’s anxiety does not allow them to relax. These dancers then follow four phrases on three different pathways. One dancer is stuck on the diagonal pathway, combating the anxious need to always be moving and the slower more sustained desire to relax. Another dancer follows three pathways that push her forward going from her powerful entrance to traveling across upstage with more angular movements that pull her across to traveling downstage directly towards the audience with level changes that demonstrate the constant energy shifts these students experience with their workload. The third begins on the slower more sustained pathway seemingly wanting to give up, but her anxiety to drive her to push herself to work kicks in and brings her along with Katie’s pathways.

We then see all dancers re-enter from every direction on their own pathway. These unique walking and running structures are meant to portray different emotions and experiences while walking in the hallway. Sometimes we are anxious on the inside so others cannot see, whereas other times we run with haste to get to class on time or even ignore all of our peers to
make it through the day. A canon begins with an exploding jump that sets off a ripple effect of stress levels. Gifted students sometimes reach a breaking point of burn out from every expectation they have from adults or from themselves regardless of what environment they are learning in. They all reach towards the center, returning to the motif of the reach at the beginning with the duets (2:36) and return to using hand initiation to move them around the floor. The male dancer is a highlighted point of contact for this section as he reaches a helping hand to his peers trying to inspire them to regain strength and realize they are not alone. He is successful as he pulls one dancer from her low level and they join in gathering the energy of a pulsing circle. This energy invites the other dancers to join in and revisits an inward-facing circle as the private school students explored earlier on.

The intertwining circle is where these two schools begin to unite. They cross unique pathways that slowly begin to connect everyone to each other. The first pathway pushes the dancers out of their comfort zones to a new spot and come to stillness in a circle the tips towards the audience. This is one of the first glimpses of symmetry in the piece as the school systems are restoring balance amongst the students and the community they are starting to build. The second pathway was a direct line to switch spots with the person across from them, challenging them to collaborate with one another about the speed or level in which they all move in order to get across safely and on time which represents the struggles of collaboration young gifted students have to learn. They then come to stillness after a slicing motion that balances their level as for most of the dance the two schools were dancing using opposing levels. Dancers then start to collaborate more as they use partner work to switch spots with the person next to them and create unique shapes on the high and low levels. This supports their individuality and creativity as they grow. Dancers then grow their relations to one another as they test coming in and out of the
circle to see if they will be accepted in this new group. The last two pathways only strengthen their growth and collaboration together as they are forming this new dynamic and intertwining the two school systems. The final pose of this section has the public-school dancers on the inside of the circle and the private school dancers on the outside, however as they move around, public school dancers are welcomed into the warm community the private school students have created as the lighting changes to a brighter orange.

Up until this moment, blues and purples in the lighting were used when the students were stressed or overwhelmed, mostly during the public-school moments, but also when the two dancers began as well. When the private school dancers came on, the lighting was brighter and warmer, and this lighting choice carried on throughout the sections where the community was at its strongest.

The piece ends once all but one of the public-school dancers have been welcomed into the uplifting community that the private school students have fostered as they playfully pull one another in and cluster as a group. As the music ends, one private school dancer, who has been isolated before in the beginning section, notices the defeat of the left-out student. She looks towards the group to bring the community together to welcome this isolated dancer into the circle to ensure she understands that she is not alone in her struggles and belongs in a community that celebrates her strengths.

Process

As a choreographer, I learned a lot about developing a theme and how to execute teaching a piece while still developing the idea and choreography at the same time. I had to challenge myself this semester by being okay with starting to teach knowing that the piece was a work in progress that would be constantly changing from rehearsal to rehearsal. I think a major
challenge I had at the start was trying to communicate my vision to my dancers because I do not think I had a complete vision or understanding of my own work to begin with. Most of the beginning rehearsals were spent developing ideas that would later become more solidified sections of the piece. For example, one of my first rehearsals was teaching the section that the public-school students perform (1:03-1:29). Everybody learned this phrase together so they could all embody what the movement was supposed to feel like and what it sounded like with the music. I then did a final cast of my public and private school dancers and tasked the private school dancers to take the phrase they learned and create a phrase using additive prompts such as “mimic this on the high level” or “complete this movement using elbow initiation”, etc. During this process I learned that I could gather a lot of ideas from my dancers improvising with very specific guidelines in order to create a completed phrase that I collaborate with them on that highlights their strengths and ideas. As time went on and I finished choreographing the dance, I would say my biggest success and learning outcome as a choreographer was going with the flow. I had this big idea to have an intertwining circle that allowed the dancers to collaborate and create unique pathways and shapes by starting and stopping based on counts (2:58-3:24). The only issue with this was that I had no idea where to begin or how to set it. This is when I collaborated with my advisor, Dr. Weber, about how to guide my dancers to create their own phrases while I laid out specific guidelines to shape their improvisation. By doing this and working with my dancers in real time, I learned that choreography can be a collaborative process and this section ended up being my favorite part of the piece!

As a rehearsal director, I learned to set timers. Even with detailed rehearsal plans and outlines that I created and reviewed before the start of rehearsal I still struggled a lot with time management. It was difficult for me to teach a phrase and not be so detail oriented about it right
away. Being so detail oriented helped get my vision across to dancers but it took up a lot of time in earlier rehearsals where we could not learn large sections of the dance at one time. After noticing some trends about how I taught phrases and what teaching cues I was gravitating more towards as well as how quickly my dancers were picking up steps and concepts, I started setting timers for myself. I would create an outline of what I needed to complete during each rehearsal and dedicated a specific amount of time for it (ex. 10 minutes for review, 20 minutes to learn a new section, 10 minutes to experiment, 10 minutes to run). This allowed me to stay on track during my rehearsals and be more efficient in my teaching.

Moving forward, I think I would spend more time finalizing what I wanted the finished product to look like so I could help my dancers understand earlier on. I wanted to challenge myself as a choreographer this year to develop movement sequences and phrases prior to creating the overall outline and storyline of the piece. I think in the future I will try and merge these two techniques together so that I can develop it more coherently while still fostering the creativity of movement without any barriers of what I think will and will not fit into my theme. I feel as though the lack of a strict outline allowed me to explore movement I am not used to and later adapt it using different choreographic motifs or tools to help it fit into the finished outline.

**The Evolution of Self-Enrichment**

*The progression of a gifted child’s goals and desires stems from the trajectory of their education. From the disciplined routine in school systems, finding new ways to develop social-emotional relationships with peers, and finally discovering what they desire in life, a gifted child may find the path to bridge their passions and skills. (Ashley Rosenthal, Dance Kaleidoscope 2023)*
The limitations of “giftedness” date back to the history of advanced education, as mentioned previously, and draw more focus and attention to students who excel with STEM based talents and do not allow students with arts related or social related skills to increase their knowledge and learn ways to use their talents to benefit society in the future. They are accepted into typical educational programs that do not fulfill their needs to thrive and be challenged but do not fit the standards of high IQ’s and intelligence to be accepted into private organizations. This is why schools, like The Sage School, require in person meetings with applicants as well as test results because it allows the administration to see the student’s drive and passion and willingness to work towards greatness even if their test scores are not perfectly up to par.

So, why do we still use gifted programs if they cause so much stress? Well, these programs build and develop the people that will benefit and support the community in the future. It is important for gifted programs to gear education towards the strengths and talents of the students and teach them how to effectively use their skills and knowledge of critical thinking, problem solving, and communication. These are all skills that are learned and developed over time, no one is simply born with them. However, by teaching these skills in a manner that gears the lessons towards areas of interest, students will feel more empowered and willing to learn about their talents and how they can use them to best fit where they want their future to go. This method of teaching can be done through the Triad Model of Giftedness. The Triad Model of Giftedness is one structural design of teaching and education that was created in order to “Improve the world’s supply of creative and productive people” (UConn, 2019). The Triad Model encourages the creative process by

...(a) Exposing them to various topics, areas of interest, and fields of study, (b) teaching them how to integrate advanced content, thinking skills, and
investigative and creative problem solving methodology to self-selected areas of interest, and, (c) and providing them with the opportunities, resources, and encouragement to apply these skills to self-selected problems and areas of interest (UConn, 2019, 4)

These processes are taught through exploratory activities, group training activities, and individual and small group investigations (UConn, 2019, 4). The Triad Model supports the concept of raising gifted students up to later benefit the community in different areas of expertise through exposing them to more opportunities to use their talents and teach them how to use these talents rather than just throwing educational content at them because they can learn faster. Gifted programs give students an opportunity to have a more interpersonal experience and route of success by being encouraged to continue growing and not be discouraged for being “different” because of their learning style and skill rather than become burnt out by simply doing extra work that does not gear them towards their individual goals and areas of success. Students feel pressure to already know what their area of success is in these programs and are taught to practice those areas so much that they never practice the art in feeling confident about not knowing what the answer is. They tell themselves that if something does not come easily to them then they are not good enough and never learn to like challenges. This is why many gifted students burn out in college once they find themselves being challenged socially, academically, and with a change in lifestyle and do not know how to cope.

3. **Choreographic Analysis**

**Program Notes**

Dancers: Ashley Rosenthal

Link: https://youtu.be/JRRT8hYZ9B4
Music and Sound: "Orange Sun (Piano Classical Mellow Film Score Relaxed Happy Light Drama)" From Pond5

Theme: This piece explored two halves of the gifted kid experience. Ballet is a disciplined art form that requires training, structure, and dedication much like the rigorous education that gifted students tend to receive. These strict systems foster learning and growth within students but can oftentimes make the student feel as though they are stuck in a box. Once the student graduates and moves on from this lifestyle they can find freedom in their own passions and discovery. The true testament to the gifted kid's experience is finding a way to bridge these new passions and old skills together to create something of their own.

Analysis

This is the final developed work of this thesis. I wanted to create a sense of being split in two both within my body homolaterally and physically with the stage. I began to develop this idea immediately by designating one half of the stage to strictly have ballet movement concepts and shape creations and using the other half of the stage to explore transverse and free flow movements. Once I established this, I began to think about how the lighting design could support this story. The lighting I designed used the down warm lights on stage right and down cool lights on stage left for the majority of the piece. This piece was choreographed in an ABA’ compositional structure where the second section contrasts the first and the third section restates the first using a new approach.

Section A of this piece was lit with the down warm lights on stage right with a down pool spotlight upstage right. The dancer walks on stage investigating the spotlight, curious as to what opportunities it holds. The dancer glances towards the darkness of stage left, foreshadowing what is to come, but decides to stay in the welcoming light. This section utilizes choreography that is
inspired by ballet techniques to represent the disciplined structure of gifted kid education. Gifted students are typically used to being the first people in the class to understand a concept and typically do not handle failure or struggle as well as other students. When gifted students do experience the struggle of having to figure out a problem, they become frustrated and defeated quickly. In this piece, the repeated phrase begins with the arms carving through space over the dancer's head and down through the body with a shoulder roll and a wrist-initiated breath of the arms and head. This sequence represents getting into the mindset to “perform” for someone to show that the student is capable of the work ahead. The “show” continues with the phrase as the dancer travels downstage towards the audience and creates movement that has strong technique with straight lines through the legs and feet, creation of homologous shapes and curves of the upper body contrasting with angular shapes of the lower body, and free flow turns. The dancer, or gifted student, demonstrates that they are not happy with their work by dropping directly to the floor and slouching over, removing the poise and control they just had while attempting the phrase. Determined to do better, the student defeatedly tries again by lifting herself off of the floor and carving through space yet again with the upper body, only this time there is a heavier weight in the shoulders as they roll forward and back to show the dread in trying again in fear of not being successful. The dancer also travels back into the initial spotlight that remained as the lighting brighter with the movement with the down warm lights. The phrase repeats with more staccato transitions that line up with the sharp notes in the music. This sharper and more direct quality of movement has a sense of power and determination to “do better” than the last time. This phrase is lengthened with more movement that continues the value of shape creation and grace, but the dancer ultimately still melts to the floor, discouraged by her own work.
Suddenly, a blue light appears on stage left. The dancer curiously looks over towards the light but stops herself before she becomes too curious, however, the power of opportunities that come with the light become too strong and the dancer decides to explore it. She performs the repeated phrase again, this time focused more on the light next to her than her own qualities. The dancer gives up on trying to be perfect in her ballet performance and wants to explore what will happen if she travels to the other side. The dancer removes the ballet slipper on the left foot, reinforcing the homolateral connection that splits the dancer in two. It is a struggle to completely peel herself away from the ballet side at first as there is a push and pull quality of the next phrase. The dancer leans into the blue side while looking back at the ballet slipper, then uses the barefoot to push off and sustain the lifted movement leaning closer to the red ballet side while looking towards the left. This movement repeats twice; once with a pointed foot, and once with a flexed foot, which completely separates the dancer from her previous ballet side as flexed feet are uncommon in a ballet technique class.

The change in music, shoes, and lighting led to the start of section B. This section explores the discovery of the feet as a theme throughout the piece as the dancer periodically acknowledges her newly barefoot and how it moves without the constraints of the ballet slipper. The dancer slides to the ground rather than plopping down after emerging into the left side of the stage and creates a grounded pose on the low level that is half ballet half modern. This is accomplished by keeping the barefoot leg perpendicular to the floor in a straight line with a flexed foot and the right leg, that still has the ballet slipper, in a passe pose bent at the knee with a pointed foot. This leg then opens and reaches the flexed foot out, pulling the dancer even more into this new world and experience. Section B then goes on to explore transverse movements, which are movements that are developed in between central and peripheral space and
movements. The exploratory movement was important to me during this section because it is demonstrating the act of a gifted student leaving behind their academically rigorous lifestyle and finding the courage to uncover new passions and methods of doing things than they once even knew was possible. The excitement of exploring brings energy for the dancer to explore more of the high and mid-level without needing to be confined to the vertical plane. The high level is explored through a 1:1 jump that resembles a turned in pas de chat where the knees meet at the peak of the jump but separate before landing. It is also represented through an off-balance foot-initiated step falling deeper into the blue and causes a rebound to pull the dancer upstage. This is when the dancer remembers the shoe is still on stage with her and fights a push and pull between the arms and legs, battling which side to choose. Though gifted students may be finding their passions and lifestyles elsewhere after their traditional education ends, this part of their life still is and always will be a part of their identity- a part that cannot just be stripped of forgotten because it has set up the foundation of their childhood. If past gifted students think they need to make a choice about which half they want to be they may find it more difficult to let a part of themselves go. By creating a circle around the whole stage, the dancer is finally breaking the split between her two worlds. This circle consists of movements that begin to blend ballet and modern dance by using triplets, high level jumps, and limon circles. The dancer grows tired of having to choose which side to identify with and begins to bridge the two together as one. The circle is completed by funneling into the center down pool spotlight where the dancer re-acknowledges the shoe and the past she once left behind and decides to circle it, rediscovering her old ways and remembering what she has learned now.

Covering the entire stage space leads the piece into its final section. This section is about the experience of taking everything the student has learned from their past (determination,
critical thinking, structure, sophistication, etc.) and their new experiences (risk-taking, passion, excitement, etc.) and learning how to merge them to create a future of leadership and success. The dancer again acknowledges her own two feet lifting the left foot to place in a parallel position and the right foot turned out glancing in both directions and then finally faces the center in the middle of the two. The dancer then repeats the phrase that was done in section A with a new quality and additive developments in the sequence. The dancer changes the quality of the movement from an échappé to stepping up to each leg individually while maintaining the foot initiation from before and adding a plié once the dancer is on demi pointe. The once curved shape of the arm and torso on the vertical plane remains on the vertical plane but becomes linear and bound flow. The dancer then retrogrades the next movement releasing the linear shape to curve and regain the free flow momentum to demonstrate an additive movement substituting the original sustained turn to a high-level parallel jump. The dancer uses suspension and release that contrasts the original plopping to the floor by letting the arms initiate transverse movement while staying grounded through the legs and feet. This newly found stability gives the dancer more power to circle the stage rather than the lifted qualities she endured in section A. The dancer makes her way toward the center of the stage using arm-initiated pulling motions toward the ballet slipper and breaks the original split concept of the stage by doing a more modern inspired step-ball-change grounded through plié towards the right and a more lifted version towards the left. The last movements of the piece are centered on the stage, using balance and stability of the floor to posteriorly move the leg into a parallel position and hitting a flexed attitude position on the last beat of the music with arms displaying and connecting both sides of the stage.

Process
As both the choreographer and dancer of this piece I had to rely on the metaphors I was creating and my knowledge of choreographic motif and development. I used my own experiences as both a gifted student and a dancer trained mostly in ballet to find ways to connect these two aspects of my life and find the commonalities between them to create movement. The first thing I did in this process was create three lists all containing (a) How I felt dancing ____,(b) Structures/objects in my life during this time, and (c) Big moments during this time. In each of these sections I jotted down words or phrases that I felt or experienced during these times. The first list was about how I felt dancing ballet in high school. This was also around the time I was beginning to experience burn out for the first time being in all honors and AP classes. I had words such as “pressure”, “stiff”, “insecure”, and “strong” - all words that I found while doing my research about gifted students as well. The second list was about dancing in college and experiencing more modern styles of dance. Some of these phrases were “restricted at first”, “unwilling to let go of structure”, “energetic”, and “excited”. I noticed that this list was far more diverse than the first. This was because this was a very transitional time in my life. I was leaving all of the structure and past that I had known so well and did not want to lose it all while I was experiencing new things. As time went on and I became more open minded and was gaining more opportunities I realized that I did not have to leave these parts of myself behind, but that I could use my past to enhance my new experiences and create my own present and future. This led into my last list of combining these two sides of myself in the present. This list is still blank. I didn’t feel the need to write anything down because the story started pouring out of me. From this moment I conceptualized the entire idea of this piece being split in two, leaving a piece of myself behind, finding something new, and gathering it all as one.
The choreography itself was more difficult for me to create. It took a lot of trial and error to create phrases that I thought looked aesthetically pleasing and conveyed this intricate story I created. I completed section A first. This was the easiest section for me to produce because I allowed myself to tap back into my past experiences and create a ballet phrase that was repeatable. I ended up editing the different versions of the phrase many times, but the original piece remained the same throughout the entire process. Once I figured out that phrase, I skipped over to the last section of the piece because I knew I wanted to reconfigure the movements to look more modern while still maintaining those original qualities. Filling in the rest of the choreography was the hardest part. When asking for creative help developing how I could tell this story, I was given some great advice from my advisor as well as some of my peers. These conversations helped me functionally develop the ballet slipper theme as well as the “watching from an outsiders’ perspective” theme in the beginning. These points were pivotal in helping me finish my choreography and making the original story come to life.

The modern phrase was the hardest for me to create. I found myself battling between going back to those ballet-inspired movements of staying lifted and creating shapes. Once I allowed myself to do some somatic exploration, I started creating transverse movements that were more grounding and covered more space. This perfectly contrasted the first phrase I created and with some editing along the way, I had my finished product.

**Conclusion**

There are multiple perspectives and approaches to labeling students as gifted and/or talented and skilled. Learning about the history of giftedness and how these programs began and how they have developed to be more inclusive and involved will help me create movement pieces and choreographic structures to help my audience better understand the different
perspectives of being gifted. In addition to this research, I have completed three choreographic pieces depicting three aspects of gifted student life: burnout, social-emotional relationships with peers, and the bridging between students’ passions and skills to bring to the community. Exploring the elements of giftedness and its impact of individuals and communities allows educators to think deeper into their “gifted and talented” curriculum to give their students more creative freedom and opportunities to find their own passions earlier. The more students are able to find their passions and connect them to their education to make the experience more fulfilling rather than stressful in their workload and social life. Exploring this topic also helps gifted students become more reflective about their life path and what they desire rather than attempting to please others and destroy themselves with the pressures.
Appendix - in order of appearance within the text

Upstage- The horizontal half of the stage farthest from the audience
Downstage- The horizontal half of the stage closest to the audience
Levels- High, mid, and low; ranges of space where the dancer moves
Axial Movement- Movement that travels around a fixed point
Planes- Vertical, horizontal, sagittal; Two dimensional movement
Instrumentation- Creating similar movements using different body parts
Body Part Initiation- The origin or place in which the movement starts from
Pathway- Linear, curved, zig zag; How the dancer travels their movement
Effort Action- A combination of effort elements of space, time, and weight
Negative Space- The unoccupied space around or between a dancer
Positive Space- The occupied space a dancer takes up
Contralateral- Movement that crosses the center line of the body
Locomotor- A movement that causes the dancer to travel through general space
Reach Space- The distance between the core of the body and its limbs
Central Movement- Movement that moves from the center of the body outwards
Homolateral- Movement that is distinct in the left and right halves of the body
Transverse Movement- Movement that moves within the space between the core and perimeter of the body
Homologous- Movement that is distinct in the upper and lower halves of the body
Peripheral Movement- Movement that moves along the edges of the body’s reach space
Acknowledgements and Credits

Thank you to everyone who helped me during my time working towards completing this thesis. Every question, idea, listening ear, and supporter has allowed me to continuously grow during this process as a learner and a researcher. Thank you for everything!

Dance Faculty Support

Advisor: Dr. Jody Weber

Dr. Donna Dragon    Professor Tina Mullone
Dr. Danielle Bazinet    Dr. Kristy Kuhn-Donnelly    Professor Audra Carabetta

A special thank you to:

Professor Emmett Buhmann
Professor Jessica Pribble

Honors Faculty Support

Dr. Jenny Shanahan

Dr. Jibril Solomon- Honors Program Director

Dr. Halina Adams- Commonwealth Honors Faculty Fellow

Dr. Wanchunzi Yu- Departmental Honors Faculty Fellow

Ms. Sean McGuire    Ms. Jen MacCallum

Dancers

Katelyn Cameron, Abbie Dube, Jenna Eiten, Ashleigh Faiella, Lauren Gilbert, Annie Hayes, Allison Hodgson, Vaughnese Jipner, Chanel Masody, Soraya Moreau, Isaiah Roig, Jaeda Walker

Videographers

James Moore    Caroline McNelis

Additional Backstage Support
Kellsey MacKilligan  Matthew Greene

Mark Johnson       Kathy Walker

A Special Thank You To

Steve and Michele Rosenthal, my parents who pushed me to the finish line

Cathy Hazeltine Fallon and Jessica Wilson, my dance instructors who ignited my passion for
dance and ballet training

Amanda Nogueira, my best friend who was there for the entire journey
Works Cited


Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY), cty.jhu.edu/.


“WPPSI: Overview of the WPPSI-IV (2022 Update).” *TestingMom*, 31 Mar. 2022,
www.testingmom.com/tests/wppsi-test/.