

**ABSTRACT**

**DISSERTATION:** An Exploration of the Sense of School Belonging, Connectedness, and Life Satisfaction of Students from a Residential High Ability High School, Differentiated by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

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**DATE:** May 2020

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Limited research has been conducted on the intersection of high ability and sexual orientation and/or gender identity/gender expression, particularly as it pertains to school belonging and overall life satisfaction. Using Self Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2008) as a framework, this study presents an examination of high ability students’ sense of their autonomy, competence, and relatedness and their influences on the student’s sense of belonging and connectedness to their high school, as well as their influence on overall life satisfaction, and whether there were differences in these areas based upon sexual orientation and/or gender identity/gender expression. High ability students (n = 505) in this study all left their hometown high schools to attend the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities – a public, residential high school for high ability Indiana students. An analysis of survey data found: 1) an educational environment with a specific high ability focus had positive effects on gifted students overall, but more so on gifted Non-Normative students; 2) school climate, the ability to be/discover who they are, and lack of like-minded peers make a difference in school choice for gifted Non-Normative students, whereas these three areas plus bullying make a difference for gifted Normative students, while academics do not make a difference in school
choice for either group; and 3) competence, autonomy, and relatedness carry on from a student’s high school environment into their adult lives, and the more the environment fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the greater the overall life satisfaction.