

**The Development of Gifted Women**

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**by**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David M. Dixon", is positioned below the printed name of the thesis advisor.

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## **Abstract**

**This discussion is limited to the development of gifted women, centering on Karen Arnold, Kathleen Noble, and Rena Subotnik's model of female talent development. Along with this discussion, there is an exploration of other research on gifted women to develop further questions for research/study. Some selections for discussion include career development, determinants and consequences of creativity, and self-actualization. Finally, there is an explanation of eminent women from Barbara Kerr's research project on eminent women.**

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## **The Development of Gifted Women**

The subject of gifted women in education was chosen for a thesis topic with much enthusiasm. There is pertinence to the research presented here, as societal concerns and pressures warrant that questions are asked and answered about gifted women and how they interact with the world around them. Further research is necessary to advance understanding of the issues that gifted women face; this project is an attempt to formulate several questions concerning gifted women that may be examined in years ahead. There were many reasons to pursue research and further questions to be asked about the subject before approval was given. As with any subject, the importance of understanding initial research is crucial with this topic, as many research articles on gifted women summarize initial research rather than cover new ground.

### **Female Talent Development Model**

Arnold, Noble, and Subotnik (1996) developed a model of female talent development based on the life experiences of gifted women from a variety of backgrounds. The model was synthesized from studies contributed by more than 20 scholars, educators, and psychologists. Key issues addressed in the model are the personal, professional, and cultural challenges common to gifted females. Also addressed are strategies for coping with these challenges, spheres of achievement that gifted women aspire to, and ways to assist gifted females in the process of self-actualization.

A social revolution has been developing, and the subject of gifted women is at the core of it. The past several decades have seen many changes and opportunities in the lives of females, including women in the workforce and the feminist movement. More

attention is being paid to the developmental patterns of females. There has been insufficient research, however, focused on the development of female talent (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

Talent development is a complex, involved process. Gifted females must actively pursue understanding of their affective needs, psychological issues, values, and spiritual goals from a young age. These females require support, but it must not be limited to praise. Family, communities, and institutional support serve them best by informing them of realistic obstacles and teaching them coping strategies. Other opportunities to support gifted women include modifying occupational structures to accommodate women's family roles and increasing the number of females in male-dominated professions.

The process of turning talent and potential into achievement has been generally researched and discussed for men but not for women. Women's experiences have largely been overlooked in history books and studies of talent development. The term "glass ceiling," or the invisible obstacles women have faced in reaching the top levels of their fields, has entered the vocabulary. This means that many women are not able to experience the rewards of expressing their talents to their fullest potentials. This information needed to be studied by scholars to determine what could be done to increase the presence of women at all levels of public life (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

The female talent development model proposed by Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1996) is composed of several crucial variables. The variables move in a progression, where one variable influences another to proceed. Individual and demographic traits affect women's interaction with opportunities and talent domains. A woman's interaction

with opportunities and talent domains affects her expression of talent in private and public spheres of influence. This conception is unique because it addresses context by concentrating on women's relative distance from the core of their societies' power centers.

According to Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold, women are underrepresented in the elite professions (1999). Rural American women who resist the tug of conservative sex-role stereotyping and the expectations of low achievement to pursue graduate degrees are pioneers. Unusual accomplishment depends on the degree of women's initial economic and cultural marginalization.

The middle components of the model (interactions with opportunities and talent domains) serve as filters through which personal and demographic attributes become gifted behavior. Opportunities (perceived, acted upon, or actual) interact with the specific talent domain to affect the realization of high potential (Noble, Arnold, & Subotnik, 1999).

The last component of the female talent development model departs significantly from other talent development theories. A single outcome measure of gifted behavior (or eminence, the ultimate fulfillment of potential) is not sufficiently comprehensive given women's continuing relationship with the personal realm. Varied spheres of influence constitute legitimate, logical expressions of women's giftedness. These spheres of influence include (1) self- and community actualization; (2) leadership in organizations, institutions, communities, and professions; and (3) eminence (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

Self-actualization, a concept originally coined by Abraham Maslow (1954) to describe people who are fully engaged in the process of living, is described in the female talent development model as an intrapersonal achievement that might express itself through a creative product. Women achieve community actualization when they transform community conditions. They enter achievement arenas in which institutions or professions are affected and influenced by leadership. They achieve eminence by transforming a profession or field through unique creative contributions. The combination of the sphere of influence and the degree of social marginalization are crucial variables in the female model of talent development (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

The foundations of the female talent development model are demographic and individual factors. The context of a woman's life deeply affects her talent development, including factors more subtle than race and gender. A woman's background affects her opportunities and perceptions of possibilities for achievement. Women must become well versed in both public (career, male) and private (domestic, communal, and/or female) achievement spheres. The centers of achievement and power have been largely defined by Western traditions, middle class, male, white, urban, and heterosexual values, practices, and assumptions. Dual allegiance, however, exacts a cost. When gifted women adopt new value structures and ways of being and knowing, they are likely to feel distanced from their culture and family. They will not belong at home or in their new environment. Gifted women must channel their goals into opportunities within specific talent areas and use these opportunities when they occur (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

Gifted women tend to be more androgynous in behavior and attitudes and to rebel against prescribed gender roles, but stereotypical expectations continue to sway female aspirations, self-perceptions, and behaviors. Giftedness can pose problems for women as they move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. These women risk perceiving themselves as deviants of society. Many gifted women report they were criticized for being “too verbal,” “too sensitive,” “too driven,” and “too intense”. These situations lead to embarrassment and a tendency to conceal their abilities from themselves and others (Noble, 1994).

There are many constraints that prevent the most gifted individuals from fully expressing their gifts. When giftedness is defined by a standardized test score, participation in a special program in elementary school, or admission to an elite school, potentially able adults who were not recognized as such may fail to realize their capacity for achievement.

In order to develop their talents in the face of these obstructions, women must cultivate resilience, or the ability to respond to stress with competence. Resilient people believe they have the ability to exercise some measure of control no matter how dire the circumstances in which they find themselves. A resilient personality has the key components of independence, sensitivity, curiosity, intelligence, the willingness to reach out for support and love, a sense of humor, self-awareness, and optimism in the face of adversity (Noble, 1994).

Resilience is commitment to psychological health. Resilient people want to be actively mobilized and ready to react to any setbacks. They take the time to recuperate from trauma and strive for a coherent philosophy of life to maintain emotional vitality.

They are not superhuman; they trust themselves and turn inward for comfort and safety. They trust their own beliefs instead of accepting the ideas of those around them.

To be resilient, these women must cultivate a strong sense of self and a solid working knowledge of their values and needs. They must resist internalizing the profusion of messages about female inferiority and learn to recognize and externalize sexism and discrimination in whatever forms they appear. From an early age, they must expect to encounter some resistance both within and outside themselves and develop strategies for overcoming it. A mindset allowing for mistakes is essential (Noble, 1994).

Although adversity is an important component in developing resilience, it is inadequate as a motivator for talent development. Women must want to be resilient, and they must also want to achieve. Filters such as opportunities and talent domains allow them to do both.

Opportunities are available for women depending on their distance from the mainstream. They must be able to perceive that they can indeed accomplish a goal. The opportunities must be actively pursued, and gifted females must be encouraged to think about their goals and recognize that they may need to struggle with difficult life decisions should they choose to aspire to certain levels of achievement (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

Talent domains afford unique challenges to women. Gifted females encounter obstacles unique to various domains. The biological clock for childbearing poses particular dilemmas for women in male-dominated professions such as medicine and research science. Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only women of great wealth could engage in science, philosophy, and the arts and letters for their personal intellectual

enjoyment and growth. Opportunities within diversified talent domains vary for women depending upon the societal and historical context of the field in question (Silverman, 1995).

The third category in the female talent development model contains spheres of influence. Both the personal domain and the public domain contain different spheres of influence.

In the personal domain, becoming a self-actualized individual in the face of institutionalized sexism is an intrapersonal achievement having to do with such qualities as efficacy, resilience, spirituality, and wisdom. Creativity can be channeled in many ways. A second private sphere of influence is the expression of talent through community actualization. While this area of achievement goes unrecognized by standard definitions of achievement, the work of many women in such fields as tribal councils, schools, neighborhood groups, and churches can lead to momentous achievements on behalf of local communities.

In the public domain, women who break into a field by mastering traditional models of excellence are pioneers. These pioneers pave the way for more women to forge creative identities within a domain. Women of exceptional talent can then bring their unique experiences to bear upon the discipline of their choice. Aspiring to spheres of influence in the public arena entails a different set of coping skills, such as organization, articulation, leadership, charisma, and vision. Women in leadership positions may encounter resistance from men and women who are uncomfortable with females taking positions at the highest levels in public affairs. While maneuvering through these constraining social attitudes to become a leader can be extremely

demanding, the sphere of influence does not require that women extensively change the field they have entered (Noble, Subotnik & Arnold, 1999).

Self-knowledge is an essential element of talent development that must be encouraged and supported throughout a woman's life span. It is an ongoing process, not a solitary insight, and one that originates long before adult status is reached. Self-knowledge demands deep and determined awareness of one's growing values and needs, personality traits, psychological issues, and existential states. Whether gifted women implement their talents to help others, to experience the joys of personal progression, or to make meaning through self-expression is a choice that only they can make.

### **Gifted Women and Teaching**

Within the literature on gifted women, studies have suggested that feminism has contributed to the devaluation of traditionally female occupations. This is noteworthy because it highlights many of the struggles gifted women face in career development. Teaching is a career that puts educators in the public eye, and as such places gifted women who teach in the public domain sphere of influence.

The attitude that teaching is somehow less important than other professions is prevalent, with emphasis on the idea that choosing to teach is commensurate with underachievement and loss of potential for gifted women. Efforts of the feminist movement to increase the number of women in male dominated occupations are attributed to the attitudes gifted women have about teaching as a legitimate profession. Teaching has been marginalized as women's work, and has been depicted by working conditions that include low salaries and status, a lack of autonomy and control, and isolation. Many gifted girls are counseled into math, science, and other traditionally

male-dominated classes and occupations. These gifted females may have been actively counseled away from careers as educators (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1996).

Kerr (1994) defined achievement as "the use of one's gifts and talents, as one understands them to the fullest". Achievement, then, is recognized as "a woman's fulfillment of her own dreams". Kerr applies this definition to "professionals" only, and teaching was excluded from her definition of "professional". Teaching, however, provides an outlet for the fullest use of one's gifts and talents, and a career in education can fulfill the dreams of even the most intellectually or creatively gifted women.

Participants in Kerr's study, identified as gifted women, were told they were too smart to be educators. Other female educators they encountered were also told they were too smart to teach, and the participants realized their experiences were not unique. In Kerr's study, all respondents were women, former classroom teachers, practicing teacher educators, and recipients of doctoral degrees in education. Each respondent clearly fits within a variety of current definitions of giftedness based upon her career accomplishments, local and national recognition achieved through teaching evaluations, publications, and research, and personal attributes which are consistent with the literature on talent development in adult women.

Multiple, in-depth interviews were conducted and data were searched specifically for stories of teaching and feelings about careers in education. Four themes emerged that link the individual narratives of respondents with respect to career fulfillment: resiliency and reflection; generativity and innovation; connection and collaboration; and change (Kerr, 1994).

All participants in Kerr's study demonstrated adversity in overcoming diverse obstacles. All of the respondents have experienced the obstacle of sexism. Concentrated self-reflection has enabled them to transform pain into growth and to achieve success and fulfillment in both personal and professional fields. Instead of allowing adverse circumstances within the profession to take them away from teaching, the women sought ways to focus on fulfilling aspects of educational careers (Whatley, 1998).

Another way these gifted women have been able to transform past traumas into opportunities for growth was engagement in continual introspection about personal and professional choices. This active reflection allowed the teachers to develop reflective habits in their students, as well (Whatley, 1998).

As educators, each gifted woman that participated in Kerr's study found an outlet for creativity in a career in education. They were allowed to generate new ideas and create unique career paths. These women provided opportunities for artistic expression, experimented with unconventional methods, and assumed a variety of professional roles. These non-traditional experiences defined their careers as innovative and productive rather than oppressive and restrictive.

Making connections with other people and among ideas was vital to the lives of these women. Forming relationships in professional contexts was equally important. These gifted women believed that everything they did in their private, personal lives influenced their public lives. All of the women believed that careers in education were well suited to such connections between personal and professional domains (Kerr, 1994).

All of the women in the Kerr study were invigorated by change. Each respondent continually sought out ways to change the educational system, her own life, and the lives

of her individual students. They believed that change was exciting, and that creativity does not stay sharp when a person remains in the same position for more than five years. They felt a stronger need for change than stability. They sought graduate degrees because of a desire to gain new information that would improve their teaching. They believed that they were required by their profession to be lifelong learners. By becoming teacher educators, these gifted women felt they were able to influence the type of institutional change that they first recognized as necessary while they were classroom teachers. They believed that teaching in the classroom allowed them to touch a certain number of students, but training future teachers allowed them to touch a far greater number (Whatley, 1998).

The study indicates that the participants are clearly fulfilled in their careers as educators. They transformed adversity into creative productivity and interpreted problems as challenges. Their talent development was an ongoing and lifelong process that required cognitive and emotional flexibility and reflectivity. They were aware of their intellectual potential. They could see discrepancies between education as it was actually being practiced and their beliefs about how it should be practiced (Noble, 1996).

Noble (1996) and Silverman (1995) suggest expanding definitions of women's giftedness to include a focus on maintaining personal relationships. This focus was so important to the women in Kerr's study that, when it was not present, the women found ways to create it.

Although teaching was conventionally viewed as a traditional occupation for women, the respondents in the study chose to re-vision it as innovative and stimulating through their active engagement in creating prospects for change and growth. In

changing the field of education, they might also construct intellectual communities that support gifted women who choose to enter this traditional field rather than belittling them (Whatley, 1998).

### **Identity Formation in Career Development**

Chickering presented seven vectors or dimensions that comprise the development of identity in gifted college women: developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity. In addition to this, individualized, goal-oriented career counseling and educational interventions are required to help gifted women develop their sense of identity. When these women develop a secure sense of self, they can develop appropriate career aspirations and base career decisions on deeply held values (Phelps, 1991).

Gifted women who aspire to possess these traits are cultivating skills developed in the initial stage of the female talent development model. The development of individual traits such as resilience, independence, sense of humor, self-awareness, and intelligence must be done before a woman can aspire to eminence.

Chickering viewed competence as being comprised of three separate departments: intellectual competence, physical and manual competence, and social and interpersonal competence. While gifted women have intelligence and ability, they may not be fully aware of or appreciate these benefits. Opportunities to develop interpersonal skills must also be offered to gifted female college students.

Managing emotions is another vector, involving heightened awareness and integration of emotion. Gifted women need to become more accepting of their emotions,

and to be encouraged to seek new modes of expression. Journal writing and creative writing may offer opportunities for increased self-expression (Phelps, 1991).

Becoming autonomous is a vector that involves establishing emotional autonomy, attaining instrumental autonomy, and recognizing one's interdependence. The development of autonomy is a process that is triggered when the student begins to disengage from her parents. Once a student becomes at ease with personal emotion, she is more reliant on her own thoughts, perceptions, and ideals. This comfort level will allow her to cultivate a sense of responsibility for her own life, which allows for enhanced connection with others (Phelps, 1991).

Components of the identity establishment vector include conceptions concerning personal appearance, physical needs, and characteristics. Clarification of sexual identification, sex-appropriate behaviors and roles are also important components. The successful resolution of this vector supplies the framework for the remaining three vectors which develop simultaneously.

The fifth vector, freeing interpersonal relationships, is characterized by openness, respect between individuals, increased tolerance, greater trust, commitment, and independence in relationships. Having reached a higher level of autonomy, relationships may become less defensive. A woman can move toward greater trust, commitment, and independence because of this (Phelps, 1991).

Developing purpose is the sixth vector according to Chickering. Central issues appear that require a set of priorities and a plan of action incorporating these three components: recreational and avocational interests, lifestyle issues including concerns for marriage and family, and pursuit of a vocation. The development of purpose includes

considerations of lifestyle which focus on issues related to long-term goals and personal priorities. A gifted woman needs to be challenged to think about and plan for a way of life which is compatible with her interests, personalities, and values (Phelps, 1991).

The final vector is developing integrity, which consists of central issues such as personalizing and humanizing one's values and demonstrating congruence between one's beliefs and behavior. Discussions of values and examples of mission statements are ways to encourage gifted women to think about ways to develop integrity in their personal and professional lives (Phelps, 1991).

These vectors help explain identity development for gifted women developing career aspirations and goals. Gifted women deserve an environment adaptable to their learning styles, especially if they are planning for a future career. When they are encouraged to fully participate in plans for their own futures, they will be able to maximize their academic, personal, and career potential.

### **Determinants and Consequences of Creativity**

In 1925, Lewis Terman selected and studied intellectually gifted California school children to determine their capacities for creativity. In 1987, forty women who had been selected were re-interviewed for two hours. A recorder assessed creativity, sustained activity outside of home (age 45), use of leisure time (age 45), psychosocial adaptation (age 65-75), husband's support of career and outside activities, and developmental stage. In a questionnaire self-report, the women were asked about career plans, their work satisfactions (age 40), and joy in living (age 60). Twenty were selected to be the most creative. The ego defenses of sublimation, humor, and altruism were more frequent among the creative women (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990).

The definition of creativity used by Vaillant and Vaillant is "putting something in the world that was not there before." When we note creativity in our friends and children, we set very different standards than when we judge creativity in the outside world. The Terman women were creative even by the standards we set for the outside world.

The women who were re-interviewed were not handicapped psychologically. Their mental health was considerably better than that of their classmates. In personality traits they showed significantly more humor, perseverance, common sense, leadership, and popularity. Their health was better. They had better mental stability, fewer headaches, and better nutrition. California tuition was cheap; 67% attended colleges and 24% attended graduate school. The Depression and World War II put pressures on these women to go into the workforce. The jobs they were permitted, however, were limited in scope and opportunity (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990).

Almost half the Terman women had full-time jobs and were homemakers most of their lives. Even in a 1910 birth group gifted women preferred dual careers. With the exception of increased happiness and generativity, there were no differences between the two groups on measures of mental health. They also retained a capacity for playing (over the age of 65). The late-life thriving of the Terman women may have been due to the retention of the capacity for play. This may have been a critical ingredient for successful aging (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990).

The Terman women were questioned in stages throughout their lives. They were assessed on subjects ranging from intelligence quotients to marital status to feelings about change. Studies on the Terman women provided researchers with factors influencing the

way all of these women developed according to the female talent development model. Information such as race and gender was collected and used as evidence of the initial stage in the development model, which was labeled demographic and individual factors. This background data determined answers received about opportunities and perceptions of possibilities for achievement, or the second stage in the development model. Finally, opportunities and talents affect the realization of high potential in self- and community actualization, leadership in communities, and eminence, or the last component of the female talent development model.

### **Eminent Women**

Barbara Kerr's (1994) analysis of eminent women yielded many results. Kerr used biographical studies to learn about the backgrounds, characteristics, and experiences of gifted women. Examinations of the biographies of such women as Maya Angelou, Marie Curie, Margaret Mead, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Eleanor Roosevelt produced several common themes.

Eminent women share many of the same characteristics. They have all had time alone in their lives, either by choice or necessity. This time alone yielded much fruit. It encouraged these women to read, think, and nourish their intellects. Time alone allowed them to experience solitary work (such as goal setting, evaluating progress, and rewarding efforts). They were able to be more productive because they had freedom from the distractions of others coupled with actual contentment in the work and in solitude (Kerr, 1994).

Eminent women are voracious readers. They spend much time absorbing information, opinions, and new experiences through reading. Most eminent women were

— prolific readers in childhood, growing up under the influence of great thinkers and expressive advocates. For some females, books take over guidance roles that might otherwise be played by family and school.

Eminent women felt different or special throughout much of their lives, in both positive and negative ways. Some of the gifted women were aware that they belonged to an unusual family as children; some used their gifts to become famous. Some women were ridiculed for their precocious behaviors, while others were aware of differences in their appearance. Whatever the fashionable look was, gifted women often came nowhere near it, so they learned to value their talents rather than their appearance (Kerr, 1994).

— Eminent women often received individualized instruction as children, usually in their areas of future prominence. Home schooling, private lessons in art or music, and language lessons were methods of individualizing education for the gifted girls who became eminent women. Tutoring and allowing girls to work at a faster pace probably prevented boredom while advancing their wisdom and proficiency.

Many eminent women experienced embarrassing social problems in adolescence. This uncomfortable season in their lives emphasized their separateness. It also left them with an enduring understanding of the costs and advantages of nonconformity. It extended their time alone and encouraged them to focus inwardly on their dreams and intellectual accomplishments. In some of them, it stimulated compassion for and identification with the anguish of oppressed or unaccepted people.

— These women were also creative, or willing to fall in love with an inspiration. They had the capacity to be interested. They had a life-long, intense, absorbing fascination that ultimately moved them to expand on their ideas. For some of them,

being in love with their ideas armed them well against the apathy they faced in society (Kerr, 1994).

Though many of these conditions were painful, and the difficulty of adolescence for gifted women seemed to be compounded by aloneness, separateness, and difference, the women were able to adjust. While these experiences occurred at the age when young women most prize peer acceptance, experiences of loneliness may have led gifted women to acceptance and even delight in solitude as a woman.

This analysis of gifted women also discussed today's gifted women and the struggles they face. Most gifted young women are now expected to be successful in a career as well as in marriage, yet they have few models and little guidance from older women. They are given two very different messages: on the one hand, they are encouraged to achieve their full potentials, and on the other hand they are discouraged from achieving too much, or from achieving in a manner that interfered with attracting marriage partners. They are encouraged to take the path of least resistance when they learn that society does not punish for withdrawing from accomplishment. Even though society responds harshly to a gifted male who drops out of education or a professional career, a woman who drops out to marry or raise children, or even to seek a partner, is simply considered to be practical. In all follow-up studies, women were earning far less than men were (usually one-half as much). The seeming hopelessness of this situation surely leads many gifted women to devalue their work just as it is devalued by society.

Eminent women represent the last component of the female talent development model. They have addressed individual and demographic traits, acted upon opportunities available to them, utilized talents to affect the realization of high potential, and

influenced through legitimate, logical expressions of women's giftedness. Research suggests that eminent women perceive the struggles they have faced and recognize that gifted women will be facing similar problems, as well as modern barriers, for many years to come.

### **Future Research**

The research presented here leaves much room for the advancement of knowledge on the development of gifted women. There are many questions that could be posed for future research. With the development of technology, will gifted women (who have been left behind traditionally in other fields) aspire to equal ground technologically? Are women already at a loss technologically (the new way of life)? What factors determine this? How can we objectively measure this research question? There are many other issues to research. For instance, how many gifted women have had individualized, goal oriented career counseling? When is the best time to begin career counseling for maximum effectiveness with gifted females? Should career counseling continue through undergraduate/graduate school? Would continual career counseling through college for all gifted women have a positive impact (or any impact) on their knowledge of themselves/their competency levels? Will the definition of eminence change for gifted women if the "glass ceiling" is shattered? These and many other questions must be asked and effectively researched to further knowledge of the development of gifted women.

The female talent development model is a wonderful tool for studying the development of gifted women. Talent development is a complex process; eminence, self-actualization, and/or leadership in communities or organizations is the prize. While the model is a semi-complex structure in theory, six crucial variables explain the process of

talent development for rapid understanding. Individual and demographic traits affect women's interaction with opportunities and talent domains, which affects their expression of ability in private and public spheres of influence. Female occupations have traditionally been devalued, and feminism contributes to that devaluation. Re-envisioning the devalued occupation as innovative and stimulating creates prospects for change and growth. Chickering's seven vectors of growth help gifted women develop their identities. There are many determinants and consequences of creativity, as evidenced by research presented on the Terman women. Also, studies of eminent women produce many common themes. Gifted women of yesteryear and gifted women of today face many of the same challenges in life, as well as talent development. There is much research to be done on the talent development of gifted women. As this thesis has shown, there is no shortage of topics to investigate for inspiration.

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