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PART I

A Case for Affective Education

This is the story of 20 women. It is a story of courage, connection, and self-care. The soundtrack for our story is the sweet cacophony of high school and college: laughing, weeping, wailing marching band instruments, cheering at athletic events, and the syncopating ding of Facebook and text messages received. In the background you can almost hear our mothers; they speak to us in quick Mandarin, Vietnamese, English, and Sinhalese. Of course, this is also my story. There are signs of this work everywhere. My desk, for example, is cluttered with snapshots of student groups. Along my basement wall are stacks of journals and binders of notes that stand as tall as my 6-year-old. I pause, remembering advocacy projects, counseling groups, meals shared, and successes celebrated. I consider how my experiences as a teacher led to this research, but how once I began researching, I realized that my experiences as a student led to my teaching. So much of this is cyclical. This is a story I have been waiting to share.

The gifted and high-achieving young women I worked with have the intellectual capacity and emotional sensitivity to make significant advancements in their respective fields (Lubinski, Benbow, & Kell, 2014). However, there is trepidation surrounding their bright futures (Robinson & Reis, 2016). They face great pressure and often insufficient social-emotional support (Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003). Further, the messages they receive about gender continue to limit the ways they experience college and career (American Association of University Women, 2018; Bell, McLaughlin, & Sequeira, 2002; Clance & Imes, 1978; Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003; Miller, 2014). My research explores how 20 young women negotiated these

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messages and experiences in high school and college, and how educators can use these lessons to employ more wholehearted strategies in schools.

As usual, I am getting ahead of myself. . . .

Let's back up and start again, this time in a high school classroom at lunchtime. The teacher (me) is optimistic and naive. The room is packed with students. If an administrator dropped in, she would probably comment on how messy (and warm) the room is. Papers, art materials, and lunch trays line the tables and counters. Students sit, sometimes two to a chair. A group of juniors crowds around my desk eating the cheese crackers I brought for my own lunch. I don't know yet that over the next several years these students will change the way I teach, lead, and parent. A few minutes later, the bell rings and students scatter, racing off to class. For a moment the room is quiet. I look around and shake my head, gathering up the homework students left when they hurried out. I throw away a few abandoned milk cartons. I sit down to finish my Diet Coke and wonder what the rest of the day will bring. Just then a young woman walks in, almost in tears.

LESLIE'S JOURNAL

Senior in High School

January 17, 2015

God, I'm so tired. I submitted five scholarship applications this week, and I still have more due for February 1st. Just the thought of more work makes me even more tired. I just don't want to do anymore work. I'm so stressed, I want to cry. No, correction: I am crying, for no reason in particular, of course. I'm crying for everything, for the walls that I feel are closing in on me. I know that graduating from high school and going to college is supposed to liberate you, but it doesn't feel that way. I feel like I have to go to college, to fulfill my parents' wishes and society's norms. And I want to go to college, that's the thing. I know that I will learn a lot, meet new people, and that it is the only way I can have success in my future life. So yes, college is a good thing. College will be a good thing but it doesn't seem like that now. It seems like the only reason I'm not happy and that I've gained weight and that I don't get enough sleep and that I fight with my muom and that I am becoming apathetic towards my classes and that I am currently crying. And other people just don't seem to understand that. Other people think I have it soooooo easy, that I'm smart so it will ensure my success in the future. But they're wrong, I know that. I have to work hard to get the things I want: the grades, the scholarship money, the college acceptances. Just like football players have to practice to win games, I have to do my work to get better at doing future work. My mom always tells me "to those whom much is given, much is expected." If that's not a blatant pressure, I don't know what is . . . yet I know she only means the best and that she's given so much work in the college process too and supported me tenfold. But sometimes it doesn't seem that way. Sometimes we get in all-out screaming matches. I don't know what to do most of the time. I just take it one day at a time, trying to focus on the small tasks at hand. That's the only way I can cope with all this stress.

Another stress factor in my life: boyfriend. This is my first real boyfriend and it was supposed to be the fun part of my senior year and someone who I could always turn to for support. It started out that way, for the first two months. But things hardly ever turn out the way we want them to. I feel like I am putting more effort into our relationship that [sic] he is and that he just doesn't care as much as I do. And ugh. There is never

The Masked Affective Crisis

enough communication. He doesn't text me enough and I'm too chicken to actually tell him I'm unhappy. And I think to myself: would I be better off if I broke up with him? No, certainly not. I like him too much. But I need to stop stressing about him and our relationship. I need to stop. It needs to get better. But I just don't know how. AHHHHHHHHHHHH!

Another stress factor in my life: not enough alone time. I am an introvert. I used to come home from school and have the house to myself for a few hours. I got to be alone. And then my dad lost his job and so he is always at home. Always. And so I don't find peace there. And I can't find that peace at school, because all the people. And when I'm not at school or home, I am usually doing some extracurricular activity or doing college/scholarship apps at my mom's office. And I can't drive so I can't go find myself somewhere else. And many times it's too cold to go walking to my favorite quiet bench spot under a tree. The only time I'm alone is when I'm sleeping, and even then I have dreams that haunt me when I wake up. I am maxed to my limit. I need my space but people keep asking me to do more and more things for them and of course, I can't tell them no. I need to find myself again. I need to be alone.

Another stress factor in my life: the future. WHAT DO I DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL? I DON'T KNOW HOW TO BE ANYTHING OTHER THAN A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT. MY WHOLE LIFE, I'VE BEEN PREPARING TO GET MYSELF INTO COLLEGE. AND I'M SCARED. I'm scared I won't be successful or it won't be how I imagined it. I'm scared I'll never learn how to drive and that I'll be a horrible adult. God, I'm so scared of the future. And now I'm crying again.

Although I am a researcher and now an educational administrator, I think of myself as a mother and teacher first. My interest in health, wellness, and the social-emotional needs of high-achieving young women began not in theory, but in practice, with students I care about. This work concerning affective needs for high-achieving young women has struck a chord with other gifted education personnel and parents. I have been asked to write and lecture on our empowerment groups at gifted education conferences across the state and nation. After my presentations, there is always a group of teachers and parents who thank me for addressing their students' or daughters' experiences. One of these people will often take me by the arm and lead me to another gifted coordinator, counselor, or parent, saying that my session sounded "just like" the young woman or group of young women

they “were worried about.” I listen to the accounts of so many young women who remind me of the students I care for and work with: bright, talented, intense students whose needs are unnoticed or misunderstood and, therefore, often unaddressed.

The young women from our empowerment groups told me they experienced rhetoric from educators and educational leaders that went something like, “She has a 4.0/is in a gifted program/is an AP student, so she must also be doing well socially and emotionally.” Young women in gifted and advanced programs are often considered academic superstars (Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003; Kindlon, 2006). However, this “stardom” has an unintended consequence—superstars are generally considered to be thriving, and, therefore, it is too easy to miss their struggles. There is a tendency among educators to falsely relate quantitative measures, such as ACT scores or GPA, to qualitative measures of health and well-being (Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003). In organizational theory, what I call *the masked affective crisis* is known as an organizational blind spot (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Bolman and Deal posited that when faced with ambiguous data, people fill the gaps with information they do have, or have seen, regardless of whether or not that information is true. For example, I often observe educators dismissing the affective needs of academically successful young women by not selecting them for counseling or social-emotional groups and by failing to recognize their affective challenges until they present in crisis level (e.g., the advanced stages of an eating disorder or suicidal thoughts). The students I worked with wanted to offer a counter and critique to these kinds of narratives. Together we wanted to venture new ways to improve affective supports for academically high-achieving young women.

Why Women?

I focused on young women in particular because I observed firsthand how gendered pressures caused high-achieving young women to experience school in ways that complicated and called into question key aspects of their identities, including, but not limited to, being high achievers, athletes, leaders, and/or scholars in STEM fields (Kerr, 1994; Maurer, 2011; Will, 2015). Achievement trends in school have long shifted so that young women now outperform young men (Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003; Kindlon, 2006). Regrettably, even as bright girls and young women achieve at high levels in school, they face different pressures and barriers than young men.

These pressures include traditional feminine archetypes, such as beauty, sexualization, passivity, and domesticity (Wiseman, 2009). Additionally, young women frequently feel pressure to have “perfect” social, academic, and personal lives—an impossible quest that some scholars have called “superwoman syndrome” (Miller, 2014). Our student research teams attempted to sort through these gendered complications. In doing so, we learned that although there are patterns such as those listed previously, gendered experiences are, in short, difficult to generalize. We left with a more nuanced and messy understanding of what it means to be a gifted young woman, as well as more compassion for young men in gifted and advanced programs.

Giftedness: A Loaded Label

Giftedness is a loaded label. It is associated with privilege and tracking (Renzulli, 2011). Intentionality concerning the labels and terms we choose to use or not use is important to me as a researcher and an educator. Implicit (and explicit) bias in tracking, referral, and identification processes all contribute to a lack of diversity in gifted programs. Identification processes often require a referral, and teachers are less likely to refer students from traditionally underrepresented groups (Fishman-Weaver, 2015). African American, Hispanic, and low-income students continue to be underrepresented in gifted education programs (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Renzulli, 2011).

During my work in gifted education at Barnwood, I attempted to problematize and respond to systems that sometimes excluded very bright students from gifted programs. To this end, we ran our department as an equal-opportunity or open-door program, meaning there were no prerequisites to participate, such as earning a specific score on an IQ test (Fishman-Weaver, 2015). We did this because gifted education has important historical and social connotations that map to specific systems of privilege and advantage, particularly across race and class lines (Ford & Grantham, 2003).

I often draw on literature from the gifted education canon. In drawing on these scholars’ work I use the term *gifted*. However, the term *high-achieving* is more inclusive and closer to what I am trying to encapsulate with regard to the stressful nature of the high-stakes school environments the student researchers navigated. The term is also more aligned with the literature on talent development, which suggests that achievement and giftedness are malleable depending on social-emotional conditions (Neihart,

2016; Subotnik, Worrell, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). For this reason, I often refer to the students in this study as *high-achieving*. I recognize that all of these terms are imperfect: The term *gifted* has left out too many groups of people, and the term *high-achieving* often negates affective needs. Therefore, I do my best to reconceptualize these terms through the stories of the young women in this research.

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement was both meaningful to the students on our research teams and relevant to high-stakes schools (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Mathison & Ross, 2002; Robbins, 2006). In high schools, achievement is measured by GPA and test scores. The student researchers were invested in keeping these quantitative measures as high as possible (Hoy et al., 2006). However, these quantitative indicators tell only part of the story of a student's lived experiences, passions, and accomplishments. The young women I worked with wanted to expand definitions of achievement to include more categories, such as music, athletics, and service (Dweck, 2006). As a teacher and researcher, I want to identify a wide range of work that stretches young people's cognitive and affective development. We don't yet have enough formal structures in school to recognize the different ways young people are learning and making a difference.

These tensions between achievement and well-being contribute to specific, albeit often unaddressed, social-emotional concerns for gifted and high-achieving young women (Colangelo, 2003; Di Cintio, 2015; Ferguson, 2006; Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003; Maurer, 2011). The "gifted" and "high-achieving" labels don't help with this issue. Calling an individual "gifted" may mask the unique challenges that high-achieving and high-IQ individuals encounter, including sensitivity and overexcitability (Lovecky, 2011). According to Di Cintio (2015), "To speak of giftedness as a disability seems counterintuitive. Part of the problem may be simply semantic; the word 'gifted' suggests an advantage and does not conjure up the intense challenges these children can face" (para. 15). Our research aimed to unmask and help us better understand the lived experiences of academically high-achieving young women during high school and college. It is my hope that educational leaders and stakeholders will use this deeper understanding to put in place new supports for students, teachers, and counselors, including policies, programs, and professional development.