

WHOLEHEARTED AFFECTIVE EDUCATION:
A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK FOR CULTIVATING COURAGE, CONNECTION,
AND SELF-CARE IN THE COLLEGE TRANSITION

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Doctor of Philosophy

by
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WHOLEHEARTED AFFECTIVE EDUCATION:

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AND SELF-CARE IN THE COLLEGE TRANSITION

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Leslie's Journal (Senior in High School)

1.17. 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 any more 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 mom 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 he is and that he just doesn't care as much as I do. And ugh. There is never 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. AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

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.

Five years ago, I took a position to chair the gifted department at a large public high school in a college town in the Midwest. The previous chair had shared with me that the biggest need facing this student population was a group of eight young women who were just starting their junior year of high school and who were struggling with social-emotional challenges. They were straight-A students who took advantage of our robust Advanced Placement (AP) program. It was common for them to take six AP courses a year. Most of the young women also played two instruments, studied advanced levels of one or more world languages, and played a sport. Because of these accolades, the faculty considered the young women to be excelling students. Hence, we were caught off guard when our “successful” students began presenting with a host of alarming social-emotional needs evidenced from depression including suicide ideation, disordered eating, and unhealthy relationships. Shortly before I joined the department, several of these issues reached crisis levels that required outside agency intervention from psychologists, doctors, and the juvenile system.

As the new educational leader for our department, I had to do some creative problem solving, urgently. I partnered with my school’s comprehensive guidance department and later joined their professional learning community (DuFour, 2008). I met with students, parents, and mental health professionals. Although these students were academically high achieving, they exhibited low self-esteem. They shared that they did not always think of themselves as smart, that they were reluctant to speak up in class, and that they worried about their ability to get into competitive colleges and to experience success after graduation. Therefore, we developed an empowerment group for

academically high achieving young women in high school. In the first year, we worked with mental health professionals to support this vulnerable cohort. In our group meetings we established norms, and practiced speaking honestly about difficult struggles. Working collaboratively as a team of women educational leaders (from the guidance and gifted departments), we coached the students on strategies for leading more balanced lives, these included forming a peer group, practicing mindfulness, yoga, and gratitude. We encouraged the young women to schedule in fun and when they resisted, saying they “didn’t have time” we added *just-for-fun* activities to our meetings to bring more laughter to our group. The empowerment group meetings sparked many deeply reflective conversations that ultimately led to lasting relationships. While the social-emotional needs (and in some cases emotional scars) would never go away completely, a healing process began.

I am still in touch with most of the young women from that first empowerment group. They are now applying for graduate and medical school. They call, text, and Facebook message me with news about their latest achievements, new extracurricular interests, and with stories of their continued challenges. These young women still reference our empowerment group as the place where they learned positive strategies to support their own social-emotional well-being. This inaugural empowerment group continues to give me rich insights into the complexities of being a high-achieving woman. I am grateful for these insights and value the disclosure and resulting friendships I have developed with these women over the years.

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 deeply.

These students like those I hear about when I lecture, needed more support and in our case, they found it in our empowerment group. The empowerment group for high-achieving young women in high school grew into a hallmark of the gifted education program I chaired. This work around affective education for high achieving secondary girls also struck a chord with other gifted education personnel and parents. I have been asked to write and lecture on our empowerment model at gifted education conferences across the state and nation. After my presentations, there are always a group of teachers and parents who thank me for addressing *their students* or *their daughters'* experiences. Often one of these people will take me by the arm to another gifted coordinator, counselor, or parent saying that my session covered the experience of a young women or group of young women whom they “were just worrying about.” I listen to the accounts of so many young women in high school who remind me of the students I care for and work with: bright, talented, intense students whose needs are often going unnoticed at their schools and are therefore unaddressed.

I want to venture new ways to improve affective support for academically high achieving young women. In the following sections I define key terms for our project including: the masked crisis giftedness, and academic achievement. I then outline our conceptual framework of wholehearted living. I end with an explanation of our research purpose, questions, and the significance of this problem as a topic for educational research.

A Masked Crisis

Too often the unique social-emotional needs of academically high achieving young women are absent from educators' schemas for identifying potentially vulnerable

populations (Kerr, 1994; Maurer, 2011; Rimm 1999). For instance, valedictorians are seldom thought of as “at-risk” students (Lovecky, 1992). This masked issue in schools is the consequence of first, a hyper-focus on achievement, and second, a complication of hegemonic notions of gender and success (Amen & Reglin, 1996; Robbins, 2006). While often cast as the “winners” in the educational game, high achieving young women continue to present with many alarming affective needs including depression, anxiety, disordered eating and unhealthy romantic (or peer) relationships (Fiedler, 1999; Herald, 2015; Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1992; Robbins, 2006). In fact, this casting as an extraordinarily *successful* student may exacerbate both the problem as well as schools’ failure to address it.

Success is often attributed exclusively to achievement and prestige. What if the traditional academic view of success, as defined by GPA, SAT/ACT scores, and AP scores, was disrupted? Students frequently tell me, often in tears, that the college applications and admissions process feels like a long year of being judged by only quantitative scores and coming up short. I hear this even from students with near “perfect” scores. What if success was also defined by attributes of character, affective well-being, and personal social-emotional fulfillment? Our research team aimed to explore these intellectual and affective quandaries by opening up a new feminist discourse around success, achievement, and mental health for bright young women on the precipice of college. We believe this educational discussion is needed personally and politically.

In many instances young women in high school gifted and advanced programs are considered academic superstars (Kindlon, 2006; Kerr & Nicpon, 2003). The achievement

view of academic proficiency may have an unintended consequence -- high achieving young women are considered thriving and, therefore, their affective needs may be ignored. There is a tendency among educators to relate quantitative measures such as ACT or GPA to qualitative measures of health and well-being (Kerr & Nicpon, 2003). This is a dangerous logical fallacy. In organizational theory this “masked crisis” is known as an organizational blind-spot (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Bolman and Deal posit that when faced with ambiguous data, educators fill the gaps with information they do have, or have seen, regardless of whether or not that information is true in a given situation. 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 young women from our empowerment groups tell me they experience a false rhetoric from educators and educational leaders that goes something like *she has a 4.0/ is in a gifted program/ is an AP student/ therefore she must “have it together” meaning she is also doing well socially and emotionally*. Our research team wanted to offer a counter and critique of this approach to academically high achieving young women.

We focused on young women in particular because gendered pressures cause high achieving young women to experience school in ways that complicate and call into question key aspects of their identities including but not limited to being: high achievers, leaders, and/or scholars in STEM fields (Kerr, 1992; Maurer, 2012; Will, 2015). Achievement trends in school have long shifted so that girls and young women now outperform their boy and young men counterparts PK-16 (Kerr & Nicpon, 2003; Kindlon,

2006;). Regretfully, even as bright girls and young women achieve at high levels they face different pressures, and barriers than their boy and young men counterparts. These pressures include traditional feminine archetypes such as beauty, sexualization, passivity, and domesticity (Ovais, 2014; Pritchard, 2014; Wiseman, 2009). However, there are also pressures to have the “perfect” social, academic, and personal lives—an impossible quest some scholars have called “superwoman syndrome” (Miller, 2014; Newell, 1992, Ovais, 2014).

Giftedness, A Loaded Label

In both my personal teaching practice and conceptualizing of this study I am careful and intentional about the language I choose to use and not use. In fact, during the course of this study, the student researchers and I explored the ways that labels and discourse were used to construct identities and systems of advantage and disadvantage. Giftedness, for example, is a loaded label. It is associated with privilege and tracking (Renzulli, 2011). “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” (Di Cinto, 2015, para 15). Calling an individual “gifted” may mask the unique challenges that high achieving and high IQ individuals encounter, including sensitivity and overexcitability (Lovecky, 1992).

As the chair for a vibrant gifted department at a public high school, I was intentional in problematizing and speaking back to how students were identified for and invited to participate in gifted education programs. To this end, I ran my department as an equal opportunity or open door program meaning there were no prerequisites to participate in my programming, including earning a specific score on an IQ test

(Fishman-Weaver, 2015). I 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, 2001).¹

Within this study I drew on literature from the gifted education cannon (Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Nipcon, 2002; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999). In drawing on these scholars' work I use the term *gifted*. However, the term *high-achieving* is more inclusive and gets closer to what I am trying to encapsulate with regards to the high stress, high stakes, high school environments and competitive college applications process the student researchers navigated. For this reason I often referred to the students in this study as *high achieving* or *academically high achieving*.

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement was both meaningful to the high achieving students on our research team and relevant to high stakes, high schools (Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006; Mathison & Ross, 2002; Robbins, 2006). In high schools, high 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

¹ [1] African American, Latino, and low-income students continue to be underrepresented in gifted education programs (Ford & Grantham, 2001, Renzulli, 2011). Implicit (and explicit) bias in tracking, referral, and identification processes for gifted programs all contribute to this problem. Identification processes require a referral and teachers are less likely to refer students from traditionally underrepresented groups (Fishman-Weaver, 2015).

indicators of achievement tell only part of the story of a student's experience. As our research team reconstructed and reimagined other terms in this project, we were interested in expanding our definition of achievement to include a growth mindset as seen in music, athletics, service (Dweck, 2008). To that end we were also interested in creative, professional, and civic achievements including a wide range of projects. As a teacher and researcher, I want to identify a wide range of work that stretches young people's cognitive and affective development.

Disrupting Crisis: A Paradox of Possibility

While I call the organizational blindspot (Bolman & Deal, 2013) described above a masked affective crisis and believe this is an appropriate term for the issues discussed herein, I want to spend a moment disrupting the notion of being *in crisis*. The students on our research team, like all young people, are wonderfully complex. Even as they struggled with intense social-emotional challenges, they were brilliant, compassionate, and creative (Lovecky, 1992). I recognize that crisis is a trigger word and have experienced uncomfortable reactions as I share my work with other academics. However, part of my agenda as a feminist is to disrupt the definitions and structures that limit our capacity to understand young women's experiences. Terms the research team sought to disrupt included: strength, vulnerability, courage, achievement, self-care, self-harm and crisis. While crisis is defined below, each of these other terms will be discussed and interrogated over the next six chapters.

During our research I began to wonder if *crisis moments* were unavoidable during the coming of age process. Although I have come to believe that crisis is a component of life, I do not advocate complacency in the face of crisis. Some of the crises the student

researchers experienced were the product of systems of inequality, including sexism, heterosexism, and racism. Our research team supports all work to end systems of inequality. Challenging hegemonic systems of advantage and disadvantage could lead to fewer crises particularly those due to bullying, violence and discrimination. However, it is not possible or even beneficial to completely eradicate crisis. Our project attempted to break the silence around the affective crisis and to offer more of those tools to help support young women. To begin this work, our research team had to be vulnerable enough to let crisis into our own dialogues.

I personally continue to be inspired by the level of disclosure, creativity, and thoughtfulness the student researchers possessed, even as, and in some cases, especially as, they worked through very challenging situations that included disordered eating, unhealthy relationships, anxiety, and depression. I called this an affective crisis for three reasons. First, I believe it is necessary to disrupt and open up conversations in education around affective needs and crisis moments so that educational leaders might offer wholehearted tools to help students navigate crises and challenges. Wholehearted living is discussed in detail below (Brown, 2010, 2012). Second, in multiple instances in my personal teaching practice, I have seen these issues reach the more commonly understood connotation of crisis as defined as needing outside agency intervention, including mental health, medical, or juvenile services. Third, I know if these issues continue to go unaddressed and proactive measures are not taken, these challenges could rob high achieving, young women of their complex, high-potential, rich, multilayered selves (Lovecky, 1992; Maurer, 2011; Roeper, 2012). Using the term crisis signals the urgency of this issue.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this youth participatory action research (YPAR) project was to unmask the affective crisis of high achieving young women on the precipice of college. The intent of our work was to find better ways to support the social-emotional needs of this unique student group. The young women on this research team have the intellectual capacity and emotional sensitivity needed to make significant advancements in their respective fields (Lubinski, Benbow & Kell, 2014). However, these responsibilities come with significant pressure and often insufficient supports for their social-emotional well-being (Kerr, 1992; Kerr & Nipcon, 2003). Further, gender discrimination, socialization and patriarchal structures continue to limit the ways the student researchers experienced high school and likely the ways they will experience college transition, and their post-secondary paths (AAUW, 2014; Bell, et. al, 2002; Clance & Imes, 1979; Kerr 1994; Kerr & Nipcon, 2003; Miller, 2014). Our study explored the ways young women negotiated these messages even as they continue to achieve at high levels in high school.

Public high schools are increasingly high stakes, high stress environments (Amen & Reglin, 1992; Hoy et al., 2006; Robbins, 2006). Because gifted and high achieving young women are perceived as adept at navigating the intense academic demands of this *overachievement culture* (Robbins, 2006), their social-emotional needs are often missed until they manifest at crisis levels (Amen & Reglin, 1992). Consequently, these mental health concerns catch many educators and counselors by surprise. The tensions between achievement and social-emotional well-being contributed to specific, albeit often unaddressed, social-emotional concerns for gifted and high achieving young women (Colangelo, 2003; Ferguson, 2012; Herald, 2015; Kerr & Nicpon, 2003; Maurer, 2011;

Roeper, 2012). This study looked at a student population whose needs are under-addressed and under-studied. We aimed to better understand the lived experiences of academically high achieving young women on the precipice of the high school to college transition. Our hope was that educational leaders and stakeholders could use this deeper understanding to put new supports, including policies, programs and professional development for students, teachers and counselors, in place to proactively address the masked affective crisis.

Research Questions

Our research questions, listed below, helped guide our project on exploring the lived experiences, social-emotional needs, and potential social-emotional supports for academically high achieving young women.

1. What are the lived experiences of six academically high achieving young women as they prepare for their college transition?
2. What are the social-emotional needs of six academically high achieving young women as they prepare for their college transition?
3. What solutions (or actions) can this research team offer to embrace wholehearted living and better support academically high achieving young women?

To answer these questions, we used feminist youth participatory action research (YPAR) methods. The intent of YPAR work is to collectively investigate an issue and take action to transform it (Maguire, 1987). One of our purposes was to disrupt status quo understandings of what it means to be a high achieving young woman. “Feminism is a worldwide movement for the redefinition and redistribution of power” (Maguire, 1987, p.

82). Just as feminist research is an alternative critique to male-dominated methodology and theorizing, participatory research is an alternative critique to the inherent power dynamics in traditional social science work (Maguire, 1987). YPAR gave us a methodological structure for young people to be active and central in the production of new knowledge. YPAR projects engage in a cyclical process of knowledge construction, where data analysis happens concurrently with data collection (Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2008).

I believed the most valuable starting place for understanding student needs and proposing appropriate supports for those needs is with youth themselves, in their own voices. This project was conducted with a group of young women during their own precipice from high school to college. The students on this current research team participated in the 2013-2014 empowerment group during their junior year of high school. Our study occurred during the latter part of their senior year of high school and the months immediately following high school graduation, a time-period we referred to as a precipice.

Pressures on *this* Precipice

Students who set their sights on selective colleges, find that the college applications and admissions process is a high stress endeavor. As such, this process often leads to additional challenges for young people, both in safeguarding their self-care and developing strong vulnerability. Self-care and strong-vulnerability are important educational pursuits throughout the PK-16 learning continuum; however, we chose to study them during a time period when they are uniquely challenging. By situating our study in the second semester of senior year of high school and the months following

graduation, we were able to explore a complex time for coming of age and identity development. We referred to the high school to college transition as a precipice experience. I revisit this discussion in Chapter 4 of our findings. As a feminist youth, participatory, action research (YPAR) team we drew on our lived experiences to provide insights into the overachievement culture, high school to college transition, and coming of age as gifted women.

I/we/our: A Note about Pronouns and Naming our Work

A team of seven women (six recent high school graduates and me) conducted this project. Participatory and feminist methodologies were central to our research design. Therefore many of our decisions, project directions, and activist projects were done collaboratively. When this was this case, I refer to the work as *our* work. However, as the facilitator and author of this dissertation it was impossible to erase all power dynamics within our project. There were times when I made decisions on my own. These decisions ranged from choices concerning methodology design, literature review work, certain parts of analysis, and considerable storytelling about our work. To signal this in the writing, I use the pronoun *I* to let the reader know that this is a part of the project that I directed or authored. Regardless of pronoun use, all aspects of the project were vetted by the student research team to the extent that they were interested and available to do so.

Conceptual Framework: Wholehearted Living

As a research team we looked for spaces where young women could engage in both self-care (Brown, 2010) and high achievement. We turned to Berne Brown's work (2010, 2012, 2015) on *Wholehearted living*. Wholehearted living is the process of engaging in vulnerability, sense-making, courage, compassion and connection from a

place of worthiness (Brown, 2010, 2015). Brown's work around these concepts became the basis for our conceptual framework.

Those who practice wholehearted living are not immune to crises including the crisis experiences described above or the masked affective crisis more generally.

...they don't have better or easier lives, they don't have fewer struggles with addiction or depression, and they haven't survived fewer traumas or bankruptcies or divorces, but in the midst of all of these struggles, they have developed practices that enable them to hold on to the belief that they are worthy of love, belonging and even joy. (Brown, 2012 p. 105)

Instead, wholehearted living, defined below, gave our research team a conceptual framework to think through potential supports for young women to develop resilience to crisis and challenge during times of transitions. While this study focused on the high school to college transition in particular, the more the student researchers and I learned about crisis, affective education, and wholehearted living, the more we realized that these skills are transferable across life transitions and challenges.

Vulnerability and Storytelling

Wholehearted living brought vulnerability to the forefront of our work. Brown (2012) writes, "Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences" (p. 12). Vulnerability includes honest disclosure to self and others. In order to unpack and make sense of our personal and vulnerable experiences we relied on storytelling and story sharing. Many of the personal stories we shared during our research, were stories we had never shared before and some were deeply situated in our feelings of shame. Brown (2010) writes that like the affective crisis described in this

chapter, shame is also a masked issue in society. Therefore, practicing wholehearted living requires a kind of unmasking. “We realize that to live with courage, purpose, and connection...we must again be vulnerable. We must take off the armor, put down the weapons, show up, and let ourselves be seen” (Brown, 2012, p. 112).

Self-Compassion and Perfectionism

Self-compassion is the practice of treating yourself with kindness and care. In our project, the student researchers and I often referred to this practice more generally, as self-care. We experienced all of the terms in our project exist on a continuum, not as absolutes. Perfectionism is another important term which exists on a continuum and that has the negative potential to undermine self-compassion (Brown, 2010). The student researchers and I saw in our peers and in some cases had experienced personally, behaviors and habits that started out of self-care such as healthy eating or exercise, but then became so extreme that they were no longer serving us or our friends in a healthy way.

Self-compassion (Brown, 2010) is a delicate issue with high achieving young women who find that perfectionism is reinforced by schools, parents, and even their peers (Rimm, 1999). “So rather than questioning the faulty logic of perfectionism, we become more entrenched in our quest to live, look and do everything just right” (Brown, 2010, p. 57). Brown contends that perfectionism is both self-destructive and unattainable. However, high stakes, high stress, high schools reinforce perfectionism by encouraging students to connect their self-worth to the grades and scores they receive. The results of this type of system are “disengagement, blame, gossip, stagnation, favoritism, and a total dearth of creativity and innovation” (Brown, 2012 p. 64).

As discussed throughout this study, our research team was committed to achievement and creativity. However, we explored the potential that practicing self-care, connection and courage offered instead of pressure, stress and perfectionism in the pursuit of achievement and creative production. Brown (2010) calls this type of high achievement *healthy-striving* (p. 59). By using wholehearted living as a conceptual framework, we aimed to find ways to support young women in engaging in both healthy-striving and self-compassion.

Significance of the Study

At the PK-12 level, the primary onus to safeguard and nurture high-achieving young women's affective well-being rests in the hands of teachers, counselors, and parents (Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Nipcon, 2003; Rimm, 1999). Barbara Kerr (1994) writes,

The implications for gifted girls and women of the data at our disposal are great. We know from other studies...that the conditions of adolescence in our society ...points to the awesome responsibility teachers and parents have to protect and promote the self-esteem and aspirations of gifted girls. (p. 168)

Sylvia Rimm (1999) echoes Kerr's (1994) position that adult stakeholders have the potential to support gifted and high achieving young women through their struggles, however, such work is challenging within our overachievement and patriarchal culture. She writes, "It is possible for you to set high expectations for your daughters [or students] and build their confidence without placing debilitating pressure on them" (Rimm, 1999, p. 53). Our research team aimed to explore how this might be achieved. We considered how educators, counselors, and parents could put more effective social-emotional

supports in place for high achieving young women, particularly during the transition period between high school and college.

While this work informs adult stakeholders, our research team did not include any adult leaders, except for me. Instead, the research team was made of students. Using a feminist participatory action methodology, I sought out the perspectives and voices of young people as they were living through the high school to college transition (Belsey, 2000; Collins, 2000; Elliott, 1991; hooks, 2000; Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2007, Morrell, 2004). The student researchers and I discussed and deconstructed identities, constructs, and messages. Particularly, we examined how identities are conceptualized through language (e.g., *gifted*, *woman in STEM*), who espouses such messages (e.g., the media, teachers, counselors) and for whom they speak (e.g., self or others). This critical sensemaking allowed the student researchers to unpack the messages, narratives and stories that mattered in their own lives and to then take more informed steps as they planned how to speak back to systems they wanted to change. Our collective, personal and intellectual discourse around these messages shaped the directions of our project (hooks, 2000; Kohli, & Burbules, 2013; St. Pierre, 2000).

Our work offers insights and strategies to address the masked affective crisis for academically high achieving young women. This work of supporting students' social-emotional well-being is of great importance to a variety of educational stakeholders including: high school and college counselors, academically high achieving students, gifted program coordinators, honors and advanced course teachers, college professors, administrators, and the parents of academically high achieving and gifted students. In particular, our research team offered both specific and general ideas for supporting the

social-emotional needs and development of academically high achieving secondary students, empowerment models for young women during the college applications and admissions process, and feminist critiques of high stakes, and high stress, high schools. Filling these gaps in the literature is important for educational leaders to better understand and support the unique needs of an understudied yet vulnerable student population.

In the following chapter, I outline our feminist theoretical framework and synthesize related literature on the social-emotional needs of high achieving young women, paying particular attention to affective education. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of our research design and methodology. Our findings are presented in Chapter 4-6. Our research team identified three major themes in our work: courage, connection, and self-care. Each is covered in detail its own chapter. Chapter 7 discusses the implications of this work for policy, practice, research and theory. This chapter also introduces our framework for wholehearted affective education that emerged from our work. Consistent with our YPAR and feminist commitments, all of the chapters are directly informed by stories and dialogues that were created or co-created with the student researchers during the course of our work together.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Elaine's Journal (Senior in High School)

7.14.2015

It's been about 3 months since the last time I wrote and man so much has happened. I got into the University of W----- and I'm still waiting on M---- and B----. I doubt I'll get in, but at least I have W-----. I just can't stay here anymore. I don't have anything against [hometown University], but I feel like being gay would be easier living somewhere else. I told mom and dad that I'm gay. They thought I was going through a phase and my mom wanted me to go see a psychiatrist but I said NO. I was so hurt that they didn't think I was old enough or smart enough to know. They explained that "later, if" I'm gay" they would love me no matter what and nothing would change, which is better than what some kids have to go through so Imma [I am going to] take it. It definitely was awkward for a while after that, but things blew over and things are pretty normal now.

I made the state band on alto (3rd) and bari (2nd) and I made callbacks for jazz on guitar, which was sweet. I definitely wasn't expecting to make bari because I didn't even practice the music. As for Calc III, I got a 95% on the final, keeping my A in the class and my 4.0, which was a relief. I remember walking out really upset because I didn't finish. I remember my dad took me out to get frozen yogurt though, which made me feel a little better. At that point I just got out of knee surgery for my

meniscus so I was worried about what I was eating since I couldn't work out. My knee is feeling a lot better now. I'm sure future me remembers making a fool of myself the day after surgery when I went to band rehearsal on pain meds. That's all I'm gunna [going to] say about that.

Senior year so far has been great.

This project began the work of unmasking the affective crisis for academically high achieving young women on the precipice of college. Currently, in PK-12 schools, affective needs are seen, at best, as auxiliary to academic needs and at worst, as irrelevant to standardized and high stakes curriculum (Colangelo, 2003; Lovecky, 1992; National Association of Gifted Children, 2014; Roeper 2012). Our study builds the case for why affective education and support must be brought to the foreground for guidance counselors, gifted education teachers, and school leaders. Affective education is critical for the well-being of high achieving young women, particularly before leaving for college. The following chapter is organized as an inverted triangle moving from broad concepts to the specific gap in literature that our study addressed. I open with a discussion of our feminist theoretical framework. I then give an overview of affective education paying particular attention to the contributions of women's voices to this literature. Next, I build on studies that problematize hegemonic definitions of success and achievement. I then review related literature on the ways high achieving young women experience high school and their early post-secondary years. Finally, I unpack the research concerning affective needs specific to gifted and high achieving young people, highlighting gender differences. With these pieces in place, the critical gap in literature that our study aims to fill is clear; the social-emotional needs of high achieving young

women during the transition from high school to college are both understudied and under-addressed.

Theoretical Framework: Feminism

Feminism is a broad ideological construct that can be used as theory, methodology, and political agenda in order to explain and critique the discriminatory gendered experiences of women and girls (Crotty, 2013; hooks, 2000; Maguire, 1987). Feminism has a varied history generally described in the west as spanning three distinct waves (Mack-Canty, 2004). In particular, I am interested in feminist epistemologies that explore gendered influences in the production of knowledge (Anderson, 1995). I drew on cultural hegemonic theory to make sense of—and take issue with—the structures that normalize dominant stories, and in doing so, mask other life-experiences. Inherent in our project was the work of unmasking or making public our own stories and experiences. Exploring and telling these lived-experiences was a complex task. In particular, it was complicated by the multiple identities we all brought to this project. To better understand the systems of advantage and disadvantage and the interaction between our various social identities we drew on the feminist literature on intersectionality. Both cultural hegemony and intersectionality are explained later in greater detail.

Identifying as a woman was central to this study. Gender was important in how we lived our lives, how we experienced ourselves as embodied individuals, how we interacted with others, and to how we contributed to the production of knowledge. However, being a woman (or young woman) was not a single generalized experience. “Woman itself is a contested and fractured terrain...the experience of ‘woman’ is always constituted by subjects with vastly different interests.” (Nash, 2008, p. 3). Each of our

identities, including our gender identities, were nuanced and contested (Nash, 2008) by our own lived experiences.

As a feminist epistemological project, I wanted to offer a critical alternative to traditional research and methodology (Anderson, 1995; Kohli & Burbules, 2013) that highlighted the rich, complex—and messy—life-stories of the student researchers. This work is in the spirit of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1997), from their foundational text, *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Within this study, Belenky et al. (1997) identified a concept called “constructed knowledge.” They saw this in their participants as,

...effort[s] to reclaim the self by attempting to integrate knowledge they felt intuitively was personally important with knowledge they had learned from others. They told of weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and integrating objective and subjective knowing (p. 134).

Feminist epistemologies examine the relationship between people, society, and language with the intention of understanding the process by which meaning is made (Belsey, 2002) and offering alternative paradigms for social criticisms (Kohli & Burbules, 2013, p. 59).

Feminists rightly reject the universalist claim that all women share a set of common experiences, but they do not discard the concept of experience altogether. Women...look to personal experiences to provide knowledge about how the world operates and to trouble dominant narratives about how things should be. Indeed, the personal story constitutes one of the central hallmarks of third-wave feminism (Snyder, 2008 p. 181).

Feminist research projects, including ours, privilege the personal story for its potential to illustrate political and social phenomena. Therefore, we paid particular attention to the unique multiple identities and lived experiences we brought to this project.

A distinguishing feature of feminist agendas, “is [the] insistence that both the charged consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change” (Collins, 1990, p. 403). Likewise, in considering the unique social-emotional needs of gifted young women, we wanted to create *new knowledge* that incorporates multiple salient identities including gender and giftedness/high achievement as well as the intersection of these identities. The research team and I hope that this work will inform meaningful interventions to address the masked affective crisis for other academically high achieving young women.

As a feminist inquiry project we actively and intentionally drew on the lived experiences of the students on our research team to deconstruct the multiple ways we made meaning about who we were. We began our project with bell hooks’ (2000) definition of feminism as, “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression” (p.1). Our feminist framework embodied five key assumptions: 1. Gender is a social construct; (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Synder, 2008); 2. The current hegemonic social order disempowers women; (Belenky, et al., 1997; Collins, 2000, hooks, 2000) 3. Micro and macroaggressions against women and girls are both overt and increasingly covert; (Adichie, 2015; Kohli & Burbules, 2013; hooks, 2000) 4. Personal stories and experiences matter in political movements; (Brown, 2015; Kohli & Burbules, 2013; Synder, 2008) and 5. There is a need for a change agenda that focuses on gender equality

and equity (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Kohli & Burbules, 2013). Feminism informed our work both theoretically and methodologically. It influenced the questions we asked, the actions we took, the way we saw and read our data as well as our views about the production of knowledge.

As a feminist project we considered all lived experiences to be a kind of text that could be read and re-read (Crotty, 2013). While there were infinitely many meanings in these stories, they all exist in the interplay between the personal and cultural (Belsey, 2002). Our research team explored how these personal stories mapped against cultural trends. We viewed and used our personal stories as important and powerful political tools to elicit change. For these reasons, this study highlighted student voice, story, narrative, action and participatory methods.

Gender was one social identity within a milieu of multiple salient identities for each of the student researchers. Within our research project, the student researchers paid particular attention to the ways gender, but also race/ethnicity (particularly Asian and White), and ability, provided advantage or disadvantage during the tumultuous period just before leaving for college. We also discussed the ways age, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation influenced the varied experiences of the student researchers.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality provided another lens in our feminist framework to account for these multiple identities. Intersectionality is a structural analysis and critique of the systems of social inequalities (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Grzanka, 2014). It is an active attempt to complicate and add multi-dimensionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to the theorizing of identity (Nash, 2008). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991) a feminist scholar,

first introduced intersectionality into the literature in her work around Black women in critical legal studies (Crenshaw, 1989; Ferguson, 2012; Grzanka, 2014). Since then, scholars have debated the most appropriate way to use intersectionality in research design and methodology (Grzanka, 2014; McCall, 2014; Nash, 2008).

Social identities are not fixed, but context specific, what Anthias (2008) called, “translocational positionality.” This means identities carry status value dependent on social hierarchies of power and advantage (Collins, 1998; Ridgeway, 1991). These social hierarchies are also fluid depending on community and context. Through sharing our lived experiences, and interrogating our own positionalities, we explored the tension between flexible and durable identity characteristics (McCall, 2014). While we did not employ an intersectional analysis to this project, the student researchers and I were drawn to the commitment of intersectionality scholars to employ broader understanding of the complex interplay of multiple social identities including: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and nationality (Collins, 1990, 2000; hooks, 2000; Snyder, 2008). We all brought multiple identities to our research team and at various times certain identities were more salient than others.

Conversations around identity were central to our project, however, we tried to couch these conversations in a larger discussion of power. Power and hegemony interacted with each of our multiple identities in complex ways. As a feminist project, drawing on cultural hegemonic theory, we aimed to employ strong intersectionality that was both critical of the centrality of power and celebratory of the multiple experiences the young women on our team brought to this project. Dill and Kohlman (2011) suggested that there are two ways scholars might approach privilege through

intersectionality. They called these approaches "weak" and "strong". The former is characterized by incorporating diversity broadly, but superficially into a research project. Weak intersectionality fails to result in structural, radical, or change-oriented agendas (Dill & Kohlman, 2011). Conversely, strong intersectionality is characterized by a deep analysis of the structures of privilege and power with the intention and possibility of "producing counterhegemonic knowledge about marginalized and subjected groups" (Granka, 2014, p. xix). Through unpacking the interplay of multiple identity constructs, our research team was able to explore structural inequities that contributed to what had previously felt like "personal" challenges (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Grzanka, 2014).

Another concept from the feminist literature on intersectionality that resonated with the student researchers, was "identity maintenance". Identity maintenance is "a dynamic process whereby an individual actively negotiates, performs, and receives feedback often across multiple identities simultaneously" (Sheilds, 2008). The student researchers spoke of how they took issue with mainstream gender norms even as they, sometimes actively strove to "fit in" with those same norms. We used intersectionality to bring our different interests, experiences, and identities into a broader scholarly discussion of power (Zack, 2005). Through storytelling and sharing from multiple identities and identity experiences, we were able to engage in a counter-hegemonic process of unraveling dominant storylines. Counter-hegemony is a concept from Antonio Gramsci's (1929) theory on cultural hegemony.

Cultural Hegemony and the Masked Affective Crisis

By providing a framework to understand the invisible power structures inherent in high stakes and high stress, high schools, cultural hegemony helped us make sense of how and why the affective crisis is masked (Levinson, 2013). Further, it helped our research team recognize some of the structures and social processes that contributed to the masked affective crisis for high achieving young women. Cultural hegemony, first conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci (1929), posited that the influence of those in power, in this case educational policy makers, administrators, and teachers, is not that the ability to make systems visible, but that they are able to make them invisible, and thereby normative (Gramsci, 1929-1936; Levinson, 2013).

Hegemony as a theoretical lens becomes an important tool within critical theory for making sense of how those in power maintain order and, moreover, why the less powerful may act against their own self-interest to support the ruling order. (Levinson, 2013, p. 70)

According to this theory, the hegemonic structure operates invisibly, which can cause even those who are oppressed by dominant ideology to support dominant interests (Levinson, 2013). This normalization happens for two reasons. First, people believe it is in their best interests to align themselves with the dominant class or ideology. Within the context of our study, standardization and accountability produce schools that reward students for scoring in the advanced categories of standardized and high stakes tests. These scores often become the only valued measures of excellence (Mathison & Ross, 2002). Second, the interests of the dominant class or ideology are neutralized through culture to seem normative, even as they disempower certain groups. For instance, the

masked crisis occurs when school personnel ignore or miss the ways students must compromise their mental, physical, and emotional health in order to achieve at increasingly high levels (Robbins, 2006). Instead of the students' well-being, the focus is on a standardized score. This is an essential problem our project addresses.

The current political pressures for standardization and academic accountability experienced by administrators, teachers, and students are prime examples of the hegemonic achievement structure in PK-12 schools (Beyer, 2002; Ferguson, 2006; Waite et al., 2014; Reis, 1987). Holding students accountable for learning, teachers accountable for teaching, and schools accountable for being safe environments for both teaching and learning, is certainly *not* in itself a system of oppression. However, when accountability structures are setup to systematically privilege certain groups of students and types of achievements over other groups of students or qualities of excellence, then that system can become both hegemonic and oppressive. Within school, and school reform in particular, accountability and standardization can be used as a hierarchical system to designate who is valued and who is not (Lipman, 2003, 2004; Mathison & Ross, 2002). Within our research context, overachievement and standardization are seen as normative in schools (Ferguson, 2006; Mathison & Ross, 2002; Robbins, 2006; Waite, Boone, & McGhee, 2014).

There are many troubling consequences of such a system, but the one our study focused on was how the “hegemony of accountability” in PK-12 schools masks affective needs in general and the affective needs of high achieving students in particular (Mathison & Ross, 2002, p.88). Gramsci (1929) advocated for counterhegemonic classrooms that empower youth to wage a war of ideology. Gramsci (1929) believed that

schools need to be central sites for counterhegemony where students are explicitly taught to evaluate privilege as a social construct which is intentionally hidden (or masked) to support dominant interests (Levinson, 2013; Mathison & Ross, 2002).

Our study further complicated the hegemony of accountability by adding gender and affective education as layers in our analysis. We were interested in how the high stakes culture of high school (Mathison & Ross, 2002; Robbins, 2006; Waite, Boone, & McGhee, 2014) influenced young women's social-emotional well-being (Ferguson, 2006; Lovecky, 1992). Through story sharing, activism, and dialogues, the student researchers engaged in counter-hegemonic work around unmasking the affective crisis. Below is a description of another theoretical concept that informed our understanding of the ways social structures interacted with both the varied and similar experiences of the student researchers. The following section examines the ways hegemony has also influenced the development of affective scholarship, highlighting in particular some of the ways women scholars have offered new knowledge around affective development and education.

Affective Education

Educational psychologists study two primary domains, a cognitive domain (thinking) and an affective domain (feeling) (Krathwohl, 2002; Nuhfer, 2005). While the two are necessarily related, our study focused on the affective domain and advocated for a greater emphasis on affective education. Affective education supports students' personal and social development; it includes attending to social-emotional needs, moral development, and self-concept. The following section gives a brief overview of the components of affective education. Throughout this study, I read across sociological, psychological, psychoanalytic, neuroscientific, and micro-sociological sources to gain a

more rounded understanding of the history and field of affective education. I discovered that foundational scholarship on the affective domain has been dominated by men's voices and some sexist perspectives (Gilligan, 1982). However, I also found feminist and women scholars speaking back to the male-bias in this field and offering their own research on the affective domain. I draw heavily on the work of Gilligan (1982, 1988), Lovecky (1992), and Belenky et al. (1997) who took this issue up and offered meaningful insights into the affective domain in general and the psychological development of women (and in the case of Lovecky, high achieving women) in particular.

Affective education, as understood in our study, explored the tenuous, albeit symbiotic, relationship between affective and cognitive needs. Within this study, I aimed to understand the affective needs of academically high achieving young women during the transition period between high school and college. If left unaddressed, affective needs, particularly in gifted and high achieving young women populations can lead to the affective crisis (Fiedler, 1999; Lovecky, 1992, Robbins, 2006).

Affective (or sometimes *moral*) needs include feelings, emotions, motivations, and personal and social development (Ferguson, 2012; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Ward & Taylor, 1988; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014; NAGC, 2014). Several psychological and educational theories have built on the concept of affective education to better understand students' emotions, motivations, and behaviors. The following theories are traditionally cited as contributing to affective education: Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1970, 1972) theory of positive disintegration and overexcitabilities, Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development, and Krathwohl's (Krathwohl, Bloom, Masia, 1964) affective taxonomy.

However, all of these theories have been critiqued for their strong male bias as well as their espousal of traditional gender binaries and masculine hierarchies (Gilligan, 1992; Miller, Falk, & Huang, 2009). Therefore, I approach these theories from a critical distance and rely also on the scholarship of feminist scholars to gain a more holistic understanding of affective needs and components of affective education. Below is a brief overview of the traditional affective theories followed by two feminist theories on affective education.

Maslow (1970a, 1970b), a psychologist, argued that human behavior and motivation is hierarchical meaning that people's needs have to be fulfilled in the following order: physiological, safety/security, belongingness and love, esteem, cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualization and self-transcendence (Maslow, 1970a; Maslow, 1970b). This list is taken from Maslow's last version of the hierarchy in which he also accounted for higher order needs including beauty, potential, and service (Huitt, 2007). Krathwohl expanded Bloom's (1956)² theory to explore the intersection between the cognitive and affective domains. Neither scholar focused on gender. Krathwohl (2002), an educational psychologist, aimed to provide a schema that built on Bloom's taxonomy while also accounting for the intersection and interaction between the affective and cognitive domains (Krathwohl, 2002). Kohlberg (1981), a psychologist, proposed that humans moved through three levels of moral development. Level one is characterized by a pre-conventional/pre-moral orientations towards punishment and ego. Level two is

² Benjamin Bloom (1956), an educator, put forth a taxonomy that included the following hierarchy of thinking tasks: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Bloom's taxonomy focused explicitly on the cognitive domain.

characterized by conventional/role conformity where moral choices are determined by perceptions of “being good” and following authority or the social order. Level three is characterized by post-conventional principles where moral choices are determined by conscience and principles of right and wrong (McLeod, 2013).

Feminist and other social theorists took issue with the linear, masculine, and hierarchical nature of Maslow, Bloom, Krathwohl, and Kolberg’s theories as described above (Gilligan, 1982). Routedledge (2011) wrote that human behavior and motivation is not linear or always hierarchically ordered. In fact, she contends it is more often circular. For example, the needs Maslow described are indeed human needs but they are only possible through relatedness, (Hanley & Abell, 2002) social connection and collaboration (Routedledge, 2011). Feminist scholars (see particularly, Belenky, 1997; Brown, 2002, 2008; Gilligan, 1982, 1988) built on the vital importance of relationships, interdependence, and social networks in their own affective theories. These constructs became critical components for our research team’s work around affective education.

Carol Gilligan worked as a research assistant with Kohlberg (Blum 1988). While both scholars were invested in moral development, Gilligan criticized Kohlberg’s insistence that advanced moral development was always characterized by impartiality and rationality (Blum, 1988). Instead, Gilligan suggested that moral development is particularized, especially for women. In her language there is “a different voice” in moral development, this *female voice* (her term) includes historical context, relationships, and an ethic of care (Blum, 1988, Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan (1982) published her critique of Kohlberg, *In a Different Voice* to much acclaim. In this volume she posited her theory on

moral development. Her work opened up new conversations around an ethic of care and women's psychological and moral development. The value of adding,

Women's perspective to the conception of moral development is to recognize for both sexes the importance throughout life of the connection between self and other, the universality of the need for compassion and care. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 98).

By adding compassion, care, and relationships as salient factors in moral decision making, Gilligan offered "a more generative view of human life" in the conceptualization of moral development (Gilligan, 1982, p. 174).

Belenky et al. (1997), discussed above, also put forth new and important insights into knowing, relationships, and development. These ways of knowing included silence (as a schema for disadvantage), received knowing (learning through listening), subjective knowing (beginning to assume personal agency), procedural knowing (characterized by constant analysis and reason), and constructed knowing (an integration of rational and emotional knowledge beginning in metacognition). Their study concluded with educational implications for how these ways of knowing play out in the context of families and schools. These implications included the complicated relationships of daughters with fathers and mothers, discourse patterns as manifestations of power and the need for classrooms that take into account women's ways of knowing and to empower young women students through affirmation and high expectations. Our research team discussed these in relation to our self-concepts.

Personality and self-concept is developed through a process of disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972). Positive disintegrations, growth in self-concept,

push individuals to develop increased sensitivity toward altruism and morality (Dabrowski, 1967, 1970; Mendaglio, 2002). Disintegration can be a painfully emotional process. Another complication of personality development specific to gifted individuals is a range of overexcitability (Dabrowski, 1977). Overexcitability refers to highly sensitive responsiveness to stimuli and is a common topic in literature on gifted populations (Lovecky, 1992; Mendaglio, 2002). Further, scholars in gifted education have suggested that high IQ individuals have more intense affective needs than their average IQ peers (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Nipcon, 2003; Lee et. al, 2014; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999). These social-emotional needs and particularities include divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness and entelechy (Lovecky, 1992). In addition to our focus population, the high school to college transition period also presents with significant affective challenges (Amen & Reglin, 1992; Fishman-Weaver, 2014; Lee et. al, 2014). The student researchers and I explored this unique array of needs during a transition context so that we could better understand how to support affective development for gifted and high achieving young women.

The Achiever's Dilemma:

Disrupting Definitions of Achievement and Success

To support this project we needed to understand how concepts of success and achievement were constructed through culturally hegemonic systems in general and in schools in particular. Further, we wanted to know how students, especially young women, incorporate these definitions into their own identities. Achievement and success continue to be essential values in PK-12 schools and society writ large (Beyer, 2002; Ferguson, 2006; Harvard Law Review, 2008; Maier, 1997; Waite, Boone, & McGhee,

2014). Sylvia Rimm (1999), a psychologist and leading expert on the affective development of gifted learners asked similar questions about the relationship between success and self-concept for high achieving young women. Her study was co-authored with her own high achieving daughters who had already obtained higher degrees. The Rimm research team analyzed data about 1,000 “successful” women. While Rimm et al.’s study played to society’s preoccupation with “success” and “winning” her research team also included an important social-emotional criteria in their participant selection. Namely, participants were only considered “successes” if they had both fulfilling careers and “reasonably happy” personal and family lives (p. 2). However, the study did not consider whether the participants considered themselves successes (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993).

The Rimm (1999) research team advocated many common sense educational empowerment strategies to support holistically successful lives for young women including: setting high expectations, fostering motivation, valuing work ethic and resilience, being open to professional help if/when needed early-on and encouraging young women to take math and extracurricular activities. Rimm’s team advocated that teachers and parents work together to support bright young women in leading full, balanced lives. They further suggested that such balanced lives are indicative of success. The importance of proactive measures in PK-12 schools cannot be underscored (Dweck, 2008; Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999).

Carol Dweck (2008) a renowned success psychologist, offered additional insights into how success plays out in regards to students and learning Dweck began her work by studying failure, and was struck by the different ways individuals responded to failure.

She was most interested in the individuals who were inspired by failure to work harder or think differently. This led to her later work on success in general and mindset in particular. Dweck (2008) wrote that people have two mindsets: a growth and a fixed mindset. The former is a predictor of achievement and the latter a limitation to achievement. She found this pattern across her work with PK-12 students, athletes, and professionals. The growth mindset is characterized by the view that intelligence is malleable--one can always learn more, achieve more and improve. For individuals with a growth mindset, challenge is thrilling because it is an opportunity to learn more. The fixed mindset is characterized by the view that intelligence is static, one is born with a certain amount of intelligence or talent and there is not much that can change that. For individuals with a fixed mindset, challenge is terrifying because the results are interpreted as indicative of innate intelligence. According to Dweck (2008) the tumultuous period of adolescence is a uniquely dangerous time for the fixed mindset to limit the academic achievement of young people. Appropriate praise, however, can help guard against a fixed mindset.

Praise helps young people develop positive self-concepts (Dweck, 2008, Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999). Self-concept is the image we hold of ourselves (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). Dweck's (2008) research shows that with the support of parents and teachers who praise work ethic over intelligence, everyone can *grow their mindset*. However, in high stakes, high stress, high schools educators are often pressured to praise achievement over effort. Dweck suggested that this kind of praise is damaging for all students and this may be particularly true for gifted students (Dweck, 2008; Herald, 2015; Lovecky, 1992; Fiedler, 1999; Rimm, 1999). Both Rimm (1999) and

Lovecky (1992) advocate for a focus on process, creativity, and effort over product, particularly assessments judged solely by standardized measures. For healthy psychological development adults must help students explore and play with ideas for the joy of learning and not as a means to earn extrinsic rewards for a final product (Lovecky, 1992). Instead supporting a growth mindset and positive self-concept can support intrinsic motivation and affective well-being.

Hoge and Renzulli (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of empirical studies to compare the self-concept of students identified as gifted with students not identified as gifted. Students identified as gifted tended to have more academic self-concepts, meaning they saw themselves as academics (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). However, Hoge and Renzulli did not tease out the consequences of having this academic self-concept. Instead they noted that there were social and emotional implications for youth identified as gifted and that currently there is too little research on affective education which might address these needs (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993).

Success appears to have important affective complications, among these are unhappiness and self-doubt. Vance Caesar and Carol Caesar (2006) a leadership coach and behavioral therapist respectively have dedicated their professional lives to working with high achievers in business and education. Vance Caesar conducted an organizational psychology study of high achieving executives who became successful entrepreneurs. He found that less than 8% of them identified as being happy. Caesar and Caesar (2006) named the high negative association between achievement and happiness “the achievers dilemma” (p. xiii).

Self-doubt may be a product of high achievement or “success” (Caesar & Caesar, 2007; Clance & Imes, 1978). Caesar and Caesar (2006) contend that “shaky self-esteem” is often a precondition for high achievement (p. 2). Shaky self-esteem is typified by the “imposter phenomenon.” Developed by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, psychotherapists at Georgia State, the imposter phenomenon, is a belief a person holds, that despite mounting evidence to the contrary, she has achieved success only through tricking others about her abilities. In Clance and Imes’s language, victims of the imposter phenomenon exhibit, “an internal experience of [being] intellectual phonies”(p. 1). Clance and Imes connect this internal experience to women in particular, “Women who experienced the imposter phenomenon maintained a strong belief that they were not intelligent, in fact, they were convinced that they had fooled everyone.” (p. 166). As a result, these individuals live in fear of the “truth” of their phoniness being revealed. The fear of being found out as a fraud, coupled with low self-esteem, can cause dramatic drops in confidence and self-efficacy that can lead to unhappiness and high-risk social-emotional behaviors (Caesar & Caesar, 2006; Clance & Imes, 1978, Robbins, 2006). Our research team explored earlier manifestations of the achiever’s dilemma for young women in high school.

Alpha Girls:

Achievement Trends for Secondary and Postsecondary Young Women

Over the last 40 years, significant gendered shifts changed the achievement landscape of schools. Gifted and high potential “alpha girls” (Kindlon, 2006) outperform boys in GPA, high school graduation rates, undergraduate admissions, completion of master's degrees and they are beginning to overtake men in enrollment in PhD programs

(CEP, 2010; Kindlon, 2006; Kerr & Nipcon, 2003). This section explores the implications of this important shift as more girls and women achieve at higher and higher levels in schools, even as gender discrimination and patriarchy continue to limit the professional achievement of women following their formal schooling (AAUW, 2014; Bell et. al, 2002; Cotter et. al, 2001; Maier, 1997).

Kindlon (2006) completed a study of over 150 high achieving adolescent young women whom he called “alpha girls.” Kindlon was struck by the relentless drive of these *alpha girls*.

One of the deepest impressions the alphas left me with was how hard they work—how intent they are on putting their abundant energy to good use. They are determined, resolute, tenacious, yet they are also touchingly eager... In their rock-solid work ethic, in their energy and optimism, they embody the best in American character. (Kindlon, 2006, pgs. 177-178)

It is this *relentless work ethic* that contributes to loading a teenager’s schedule with advanced placement and college classes and then celebrating her “perfect” 4.0 GPA. Kindlon asserted that this is the hallmark of the American character. Our study asks what is the cost of this intense academic work ethic on students’ well-being? Further, what are the affective implications of high achievement in an unequal, patriarchal rewards system as indicated by the pay gap, the glass ceiling, and other discriminatory influences (AAUW, 2014; Bell et. al, 2002; Cotter et. al, 2001; Maier, 1997)?

Unfortunately, the alpha girl trend is not indicative of gender equity or an environment free of discrimination. For instance, women in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) “currently earn 41% of PhD’s in STEM fields, but make

up only 28% of tenure-track faculty in those fields” (Executive Office of the President, 2013). Lubinski, Benbow, and Kell (2014) tracked the achievements and lifestyles of “mathematically precocious males and females” 4 decades after they were identified as 13 year-olds (p. 1). The participants in their sample of nearly 2,000 individuals were identified as being in the top 1% of mathematical reasoning ability. While both the men and women in this study did become top performers in their respective industries, there were important gendered differences between them. First, the men in the study out-earned the women and were more likely to be chief executives and in STEM positions. Men devoted significantly more time to career development and women devoted significantly more time to domestic activities. While both men and women cited their family lives as more important than their career lives, women invested considerably more time, emotion, and “hands-on support” to family life (p. 9).

Lubinski et al. (2014) found the men participants were more *success oriented*, “Men, on average, were more concerned with being successful in their work and feeling that society should invest in them” (p. 9). In their study, academic excellence presented early and these “early manifestations of exceptional [academic] talent [did] lead to outstanding creative accomplishments and professional leadership, but *with notable sex differences*” (p. 13, my emphasis). Because both groups reported high levels of satisfaction, the researchers conclude that there are “multiple ways to construct a meaningful, productive and satisfying life” (p. 13). While I agree that gifted and high achieving individuals can be happy in multiple paths, it is critical to explore why life-paths and definitions of success continue to be gendered. In particular, our research team

explored the social-emotional factors influencing how high achieving young women on the precipice of college begin to map out their own life-paths.

Harvard Business School recently released a report on recent men and women alumni looking specifically at career and personal success and satisfaction (Miller, 2014). The women in this study, Harvard graduates, were certainly high achieving women. In general, they wanted the same things as their men counterparts: a thriving career and a successful personal life. However,

even though career-oriented women don't see their roles as different from men's, other factors — like public policy, workplace norms and men's expectations — are stuck in a previous era, when the lives of women and men looked very different. (Miller, 2014, para. 4)

The women in Miller's study were surveyed in their 30s and were considerably more dissatisfied with their divergent personal and professional achievements than the older participants in Lubinksi et al.'s (2014) study. This Harvard study told the story of young, ambitious, high achieving women who consistently hit up against impenetrable and invisible barriers. These systemic barriers inhibiting the advancement of women and minorities often referred to as the glass ceiling (Bell et al. 2002; Cotter et al. 2001). The glass ceiling effect, the revising of unmet aspirations and the pressures of patriarchy have social-emotional costs and consequences for high achieving young women. These consequences can include feelings of guilt, lack of worth, anxiety and depression (Ferguson, 2006; Lovecky, 1994).

Our study explored the affective implications for young women who are aware of and angry about inequality and patriarchy even as they continue to achieve at a

hegemonic game of schooling that is rigged against them and all non-dominant groups. The nature of high stress and high stakes schooling is discussed below.

Overachievement Culture

Some pressure is an inherent and necessary part of the educational experience. Pressures in school stem from academic demands, but can also include peer, family and extracurricular influences (Rimm, 1999; Robbins, 2006). However, in the high stakes and standardized high school culture, students, particularly high achieving students, are not experiencing *some* pressure, they are experiencing extreme pressure. Hoy et al. (2006) wrote of school environments with an *academic emphasis*. Academic emphasis in schools was characterized by

...the extent to which a school is driven by a quest for academic excellence---a press for academic achievement. High but achievable academic goals are set for students; the learning environment is orderly and serious; students are motivated to work hard; and students respect academic achievement. (p. 427)

What are the emotional consequences of academic emphasis in schools particularly for young women? And, is it possible for schools to have too much academic emphasis?

Alexandra Robbins (2006) a mental health advocate and investigative journalist, would say yes, schools, particularly high schools suffer from too much academic emphasis. Her own study of high achieving, high school students she characterizes the high stakes, high stress, high school environment as an “overachievement culture.” Robbins (2006) found that mental health concerns, including at times suicidality, were the product of our high stress, high schools.

In 2003, 16.5 percent of high school students made a suicide plan, and nearly 9 percent attempted to follow through with it. Among college students, one study found that one in four had considered suicide. A variety of factors contribute to student suicides, but there is no doubt that overachiever culture also plays a significant role. (Robbins, 2006, p. 357)

Moreover, long term school stress has been linked to depression, drug use, ulcers, asthma, eczema, hives, headaches, arthritis, hypertension, colitis, and heart disease (Amen & Reglin, 1992).

Overachievement and perfectionism may be self-perpetuating for academically high achieving young women because they find these traits are frequently positively reinforced by educational leaders, parents, and even peers (Rimm, 1999). “It is difficult to help an internally pressure girl to back off from her overstudy. Her overstudy and perfectionism have made her so successful...for working too hard” (p. 128-129). The student researchers were experiencing a critical time when the myriad of pressures discussed herein often come to a head. An essential question for our study was how to support the affective (or social-emotional needs) of students experiencing this kind of intense academic pressure. To answer this, we sought more information on the affective needs of high achieving and gifted young women.

Affective Needs for Academically High Achieving Young Women

High IQ individuals process information and feelings differently than their average IQ peers (Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999). These differences are often characterized by intensity and sensitivity, two traits that are heightened during adolescence (Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1992). The intensities of gifted individuals translate

into intense social-emotional particularities, vulnerabilities, and needs (Colangelo, 2003; Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999; Roeper, 2012). “Giftedness brings with it an array of intrapersonal and interpersonal issues...very advanced cognitive abilities and intensity of feelings deal with issues about self and others in ways that ...require specialized understanding (Colangelo, 2003 p. 373).” The unique social-emotional needs of gifted and high achieving learners require different interventions and support than their average IQ and average achieving peers. These specific psychological and social factors are explained in greater detail below.

Deidre Lovecky (1992) a psychotherapist who specializes in giftedness, identified five common traits PK-12 gifted students generally exhibit which contribute to “social-emotional vulnerability” (p. 1). Lovecky argued in her study of 92 gifted individuals that these five traits are often inherent to a gifted child’s identity. However, the behavioral manifestations of these traits vary considerably according to psychological and social factors, some which are within a child (or adult’s) locus of control and others which are innate to the individual (Lovecky, 1992; Roeper, 2012). These traits included: divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness, and entelechy (known roughly as self-determination).

A preference for the creative, unusual, and original characterizes divergent thinking. It often presents in youth as absentmindedness and disorganization (Lovecky, 1992). Excitability is characterized by high energy, emotional reactivity and high arousal of the central nervous system. Excitable students are often “stimulus seekers,” or children with a “need for novelty” (p. 4). They tend to experience powerfully intense emotions. Sensitivity is characterized by a strong depth of feeling through passion and

compassion/empathy. Sensitive students intensely commit to people and ideas. They too can be overwhelmed by strong feelings. It is sometimes difficult for a sensitive person to distinguish between their own feelings and the feelings of those around them.

Perceptiveness is characterized by an ability to understand multiple aspects of a situation simultaneously and to arrive quickly at the core of an issue. Perceptive students often have a strong commitment to truth, fairness, and justice and are haunted by guilt when the classroom, school or societies do not exhibit the ideals of truth, fairness and justice.

Entelechy is characterized by self-determination, goal setting, and inner-strength. The strong-will of students with entelechy is often misinterpreted. Students with entelechy have a tendency to take on too much responsibility and struggle to set appropriate limits. For example, a strong-willed, young person may constantly berate her teacher for not recycling her soda cans and consequently develop a tense relationship with her.

Gender and patriarchy add yet another layer of complication and understanding the social-emotional needs of high achieving young women navigating the high school and college transition. “There are special issues for gifted girls, such as decreased self-esteem, at-risk behaviors (eating disorders, substance abuse, and unsafe sex), inequity in the classroom, and the culture of romance” (Kerr & Nipcon, 2003, p. 502). Barbara Kerr, in her research on “smart girls” explores why bright young women receiving high grades and high test scores continue to lose confidence. Isolation and loneliness are cited as common among high achieving young women in high school (Rimm, 1999, p. 13).

However, because student success is typically defined by academic proficiency, the social-emotional needs of high achievers are often hidden, creating the masked affective crisis (Ferguson, 2006; Lovecky, 1992; Roeper, 2012). As a result, counselors and gifted

education personnel are left responding retroactively to social-emotional issues, risky behaviors, and unrealized potential among high achieving high school girls.

These struggles are particular to the intersection of gender and giftedness (Kerr, 1994; Maurer, 2011; Rimm, 1999). However they are absent from the educational literature on vulnerable populations. Ginny Maurer (2011), a gifted educational scholar writes, “Although growing up a girl is just plain hard...growing up a gifted girl with an intense degree of perfectionism, perseverance, sensitivity, empathy, nonconformity, or introversion, may make it even harder” (p. 198). Our research team explored some of the ways gender and high achievement interacted during the transition between high school and college. Further, we aimed to propose healthier solutions and supports through affective education. Affective education supports individuals in positively nurturing and managing the social-emotional traits outlined above (Lovecky, 1992). Creativity, compassion, courage, energy, and higher-order thinking can all be positive traits, but only with appropriate social-emotional support. Our study begins to fill the gap between literature and practice to better support the affective needs of high achieving young women on the precipice between high school and college.

The Precipice

The major transition between PK-12 and higher education is *the precipice* that our study examines. While senior year is an emotional time for both young men and young women, in our study, we were interested in the lived experiences that high achieving young women named during this *precipice* or transition. At present, the U.S. educational system is marked by a sharp disconnect between PK-12 and higher education (Amen & Reglan, 1992; Boyer, 1986; Lee, Daniel, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck 2014). Namely,

PK-12 and higher education are seen as separate and distinct entities and there is little work to smooth that sharp divide (Amen & Reglan, 1992; Lee et al., 2014). In addition to their trusted peer group, new college students may also lose contact with the high school teachers and counselors they may have built rapport with over their formative adolescent years (Fishman-Weaver, 2014). This means that going away to college may also mean leaving behind social support systems. In their large sample (1,118 participants) and longitudinal study of the high school to college transition Lee et al. (2014) found that “the transition to college can be a stressful experience, and may initiate or exacerbate depressive symptoms in emerging adults” (p. 560). In the case of our study, this is of particular concern, as some of the student researchers on our team had already presented with depressive symptoms in high school and yet were seldom recognized as vulnerable.

Amen and Reglin (1992) conducted a survey study of stress factors for high school seniors. They drew on literature that suggested that academic emphasis and stress can be positive factors particularly for student achievement, however, they “can be detrimental if applied in excess” (p. 27). They found that stress factors are a serious problem in schools, particularly for high school seniors who are coming of adult age, making difficult choices about their post-secondary paths, while responding to peer and academic pressure at their high schools. All of these decisions are wrought with emotions, and because our study worked with gifted students already noted for their emotional intensity, this is a particularly challenging time between childhood and independence (Lovecky, 1992; Kerr, 1994; Maurer, 2011). Our study was situated in the month immediately preceding high school graduation and the summer months before leaving for college. While this was not a college readiness or traditional college transition

study, it is necessary to unpack the complexities of this particular time in life for the young women on our research team. For many high achieving young people, senior year is marked by emotionally intense conversations with parents and family members about college applications, admissions, decisions, and financial aid (Myers & Myers, 2012). In their research on college choice, Myers and Myers determined that these family conversations were critical in determining which school a student finally attended. The student researchers frequently referenced similar critical dialogues with their own families and they were a frequent conversation topic in our own team meetings.

As young women, the students on our research team also expressed additional concerns during the high school to college transition period that were directly related to gender (Snyder, 2008), including identity (Shields, 2008), discrimination (Collins, 2000), safety (hooks, 2000), and stereotyping (Adichie, 2015). These concerns were heightened by the high school to college context through the student's' extracurricular and academic activities, school functions, peer groups, and the college decisions process. The students on our research team tended to activities that were dominated by their young men peers, including sports, science, math, and technology. They then planned to pursue these interests as majors and continued activities in college. The heteronormativity of prom was another instance where gender and sexual identity were foregrounded. The cultural hegemonic trope of a young woman and young man attending prom as potential romantic partners was a mismatch for most of the students on our research team, who chose either not to attend prom, or to attend with a platonic friend who also identified as a woman. Additionally, gendered (and sexual) violence (Adichie, 2015; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000)

on potential campuses was a serious factor for students (and their parents) to consider as they made their college decisions.

Utilizing feminist and youth, participatory, research (YPAR) methods, we sought greater understanding of the social-emotional needs of high achieving young women and appropriate affective supports to address those needs. In chapter 3, I discuss the specific methods we used to design and conduct our research project.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the social-emotional needs and lived experiences of academically high achieving young women on the precipice of leaving for college. Because gifted and academically high achieving young women are perceived as adept at navigating intense academic demands, their social-emotional needs are often missed, resulting in a masked affective crisis (Amen & Reglin, 1992; Robbins, 2006). Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodologies enabled me to learn with and from student researchers who were active members of the high stakes and high stress, high school community (Amen & Reglin, 1992; Hoy et al., 2006; Robbins, 2006). In the following chapter, I give a description of our research context, followed by brief overview of YPAR. I then discuss our project specifics including data collection, student research team selection, timeline and data analysis process. I have also included specific sections on trustworthiness, ethics, and positionality as each are important issues in qualitative work in general, and YPAR and feminist projects in particular.

Research Context

Our project took place in a vibrant Midwest college town with a population of over 100,000. Education is the lifeblood of this community. The city is home to three major postsecondary institutions, including a flagship university. The university and colleges afford residents rich cultural arts events. The city has extensive bike and hiking trails and many recreational programs. Other top industries in the community include healthcare and insurance. There are four public high schools and three private high schools in town. In general, community support for the schools is very strong.

Barnwood Academy³ the focus high school, opened its doors in the 1970s as the second public high school in town. At the time, it was significantly smaller than the other high school and was surrounded by farmland. Given suburban growth and sprawl, 45 years later, the school is now in a densely populated community with restaurants, shopping, and businesses. Since opening, the high school has doubled in physical size and quadrupled to over 2000 students, making it now the largest high school in the community. The school's student ethnicity demographics are 71% Caucasian, 12% African American, 6% Asian, 5% Multiple, 5% Hispanic, and less than 1% Native American. Barnwood's vision and commitment statements emphasize shared decision-making, collaboration, and a focus on student learning. The school operates on a block schedule and allows juniors and seniors open campus privileges throughout the day. Barnwood has a robust Advanced Placement (AP) program, with 19 AP courses across all subject areas. Their orchestra, band, debate team, and journalism program receive state and national titles regularly. Additionally, the school is experiencing tremendous success in athletics, with 20 state championship titles since 2008. Seventy five percent of students go on to 4 year institutions after high school.

At the time of this study, I served as the division chair for the gifted program at Barnwood. The gifted program was considered a model in the state. Teachers who wanted to start or improve their own high school gifted programs frequently came to observe the Barnwood program. The heart of the program was an open-door resource room built with classroom culture in mind. Open door referred to our policy that being

³ The information for this section was pulled from the institutional website for the focus high school. It is not cited in here to preserve the confidentiality of the research site.

identified for gifted services was not a prerequisite to participate. The open-door resource room was a district team decision to increase the access of students of color and students in poverty who are underrepresented in traditional gifted programs (Ford & Granham, 2003). While I had seen gains in diversity as a result of this practice, at the time of our study, the gifted program was still a majority White and Asian. We had many program partners including the guidance department, community internship hosts and several service learning sites. Students in our gifted education program were frequently working on projects outside of the traditional classroom through learning in science labs, serving in nursing homes, and working on other applied learning projects. The context of the community, Barnwood and the gifted program help situate our YPAR project.

Research Design

Many aspects of our research design were co-created (Tuck, 2008). The young women on our research team had agency within the project to collect and analyze data and to enact action plans to address and redress affective education and empowerment for young women during the high school to college transition. I know firsthand that high-achieving young women are uniquely able to speak on their own behalf about their own realities. As a feminist researcher, I was committed to participatory methodologies that affirmed each student researcher as a valuable expert on their own experiences. From the onset, I was committed to including the student researcher's' own stories (written or spoken) in their words with as little editing as possible. These student-rich perspectives enabled us to offer a new contribution to the research on affective supports for high achieving young women.

Feminist and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods supported my commitment to working with (as opposed to on) student communities (Maguire, 1987). As a team of women we were invested in supporting each other, hoping to unmask the affective crisis and engaging in action work that would support other young women outside of our research team. This section discusses the ways feminism and YPAR worked together to determine our research design.

Feminist Methodologies

Feminist research methods are grounded in feminist theory/epistemologies (Kolmar & Barthkowsky, 2000), are committed to social change (Collins, 2000; Reinharz, 1992), recognize diversity (Collins, 2000; Reinharz, 1992), humanize researcher-participant relationships (Appadurai, 2006, Tuck, 2009), and draw on personal or lived experiences (Adichie, 2015; Hesse-Biber, 2012; hooks, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). Feminist methodologies seek to create new meanings through questioning, dialoguing, and placing the personal experiences of women at the center of social inquiry (Belenky et al. 1997; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Reinharz, 1992). Our project used personal storytelling as a vehicle to build community while learning more deeply about the lived experiences and social-emotional needs of the student researchers. Feminist researchers and activists seek to form and/or support caring communities to work for social change. I am reminded of hooks' (2000) conceptualization of feminist sisterhood:

We understood that political solidarity between females expressed in sisterhood goes beyond positive recognition of the experiences of women and even shared sympathy for common suffering. Feminist sisterhood is

rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form the injustice takes. (p. 15)

In this study, we are all academically high achieving women; however, it was our diversity of perspectives, experiences, and social identities that added complexity and depth to this project. We were athletes (varsity and recreational) and scholars. Members of our team identified as Republican, Democrat, Christian, Jewish, atheist, gay, straight, Vietnamese, White and Chinese. Within our project we explored how these social identities and others interacted with our identification as high achieving women. We used this understanding to then take action to better safeguard the affective needs of academically high achieving young women. Our dialogues, reflections, and actions focused on these activities.

During the course of this study our community evolved into a sisterhood that served as a compassionate support system. We shared compelling, personal stories and built relationships with one another. However, our solidarity came not just from caring about and for each other, but from taking action together to end mental health stigma, unmask the affective crisis and speak out against gender discrimination. In this way, our personal storytelling became a community platform for taking action.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a qualitative methodology that seeks to provide an alternative and empowering forum for conducting research with communities (Taylor et al., 2006). PAR projects seek to address practical problems or issues in communities (Heron & Reason, 2002). Although the particulars to each PAR project are unique, there are a number of underlying tenets that inform PAR work including a

cyclical process of: investigating a problem or issue, engaging individual and community reflection, taking action that benefits both communities and people involved in the research project, and building cooperative alliances between researchers and “participants” (McIntyre, 2008).

The participant-to-researcher relationship is another critical difference between participatory and traditional research methods. Within participatory research, “community groups and/or community members [form] an egalitarian partnership with researchers” (Taylor et al. 2006, p. 4). YPAR projects embody these ideologies, but the ‘Y’ signals that they do so with youth communities. PAR projects adopt a “strengths-based approach” toward communities, community researchers, and in the case of YPAR, young people (Taylor et al., 2006 p. 5). Throughout the PAR process(es) the research team becomes a unique knowledge making community with their own relationships, objectives, and sense-making systems. Our own research team and sense making processes are described in detail in this chapter. Central to (Y)PAR is a belief that not only are community members capable of research and action, but in fact, they are the best suited individuals to report on the status of *their* community (Heron & Reason, 2002). Further, they are often also the most effective agents to elicit change within those communities (Heron & Reason, 2002; McIntyre, 2008).

Marrying YPAR and Feminist Methods

(Y)PAR is an iterative process that engages the complex personhood of individuals and communities (Appadurai, 2006). While not explicitly feminist, the process of (Y)PAR aligns with many tenets of feminist methods. For example, feminist methods include mitigating power dynamics between participants and

facilitators/investigators. YPAR accomplishes this through a co-researcher model where the “participants” and facilitator learn together through cycles of observing, acting, and reflecting (James, Milenkiewickz, & Buckman, 2008). Further both research methods emphasize personal, lived experiences (Heron & Reason, 2002; hooks, 2000; Morrell, 2004).

While there are significant and common trends in the affective needs of high achieving young women (Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1992; Maurer, 2011; Rimm 1999), our research team did not intend to provide a single generalized narrative for *all* high achieving young women in the high school to college transition. In fact, both PAR and feminist methods (see Adichie, 2014; Brown, 2012; Collins, 1998, 2000; Kolmar & Barthkowski, 2000) aim to produce new knowledge that can serve as a counter to the generalized story. If I were to do this same project with six different high achieving high school seniors, I would anticipate some similar themes; however, our specific discussions, projects, and narratives would all be different. This project aimed for a deep exploration of the personal narratives of this specific research team rather than a broad exploration of all high achieving young women. Unpacking the rich narratives of six young women as told in their own words provided great insight into the nuances and complexities of the social-emotional needs of high achieving young women just before leaving for college.

(Y)PAR and feminist projects offer a counter-hegemonic alternative to “damage-centered research” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409), which can present marginalized communities as broken. These traditions can reinforce and exacerbate hegemonic power dynamics including teacher-student and researcher-community (Appadurai, 2006; Tuck, 2009).

Conversely, (Y)PAR aims to engage in “desire-based frameworks” (Tuck, 2009). Desire-based frameworks “are concerned with understanding complexities, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009 p. 416). This means to the greatest extent possible, I had to let go of constructs in which I was privileged as a “constructed knower” and the students as more disadvantaged knowers (Belenky, et al. 1997).

Appadurai (2006) contended that research is a right, not for those with advanced degrees (or pursuing advanced degrees) but for ordinary people as a means of investigation and sense making of their own lived conditions, experiences, and places for change. Our research study hinged on high achieving young women’s own perceptions of their lived experiences and challenges in the high stakes and high stress high school and near-college contexts.

This work was only possible through learning from students in their own voices (Belenky et al., 1997). We used YPAR as a feminist methodology to mitigate the power dynamics of traditional research, produce community knowledge, and take action on issues that mattered to our research team. The ways the student researchers engaged in sense-making and knowledge production was consistent with both feminist and YPAR methodologies. The student researchers sought to name their own affective needs and experiences during the pivotal months before leaving for college. As a research team we then used this information to understand how affective education might be operationalized for high achieving, young women. The students were active co-researchers in shaping the scope of this project. They led discussions (online and face-to-face), analyzed data, posed questions, and made decisions about the ways our work was

shared and storied. Information about how students were selected for the research team is outlined below.

Youth Research Team (Y)

Participant Selection Criteria

In the spring of 2015, I asked students to participate on the research team based on two interacting criteria. The first criteria was extraordinary high academic achievement as evidenced by three or more of the following: standardized test scores in the top 3% of the school population, extensive AP course enrollment (more than 8 courses), straight-A GPAs, and significant extracurricular accomplishments (e.g., music athletics, internships, or other academic competitions). There were not any high school seniors at Barnwood who academically achieved at a higher level than this group. The second selection criterion was purposeful and sustained involvement in gifted education. Purposeful and sustained involvement in gifted education included active participation in the resource room and gifted programs. The six young women on the research team all leaned heavily on the gifted education department particularly the gifted resource room. They were in the habit of studying and socializing in the gifted resource room daily, often for multiple hours of their school day. Further, they participated in several gifted education programs including: an empowerment group, enrichment book club, an internship program, service learning, and our college counseling programs. Through their participation in gifted education, I had been able to develop significant rapport with each of the student researchers. Lastly, I also hoped our study would offer a new contribution to the literature on gifted education. This required me to keep gifted students, programs,

and constructs central to selection considerations and our discussions. Giftedness is an identity concept that each of the student researchers on this team identified with strongly.

In conceptualizing this project, I immediately thought of three students who met all of the above criteria (i.e., purposeful and convenience sampling) and who I thought would be interested in this project (Blackstone, 2012). I then used snowball sampling (Blackstone, 2012) to identify the next three participants. I asked each student researcher individually if she wanted to participate. I explained that participation and the levels of participation were voluntary. Not only was everyone willing, all of the young women were enthusiastic about researching, learning, and taking action to better safeguard the social-emotional well-being of high achieving young women.

Once we had our team of six student researchers, I reviewed a roster of the entire student population served by our gifted program to see if we had missed any students who met the selection criteria. In particular, I wanted to make sure we had not missed any young women from traditionally underrepresented groups (particularly African American or Latina) in gifted education. There were other young women who were very active in gifted education, including students who had taken advantage of our open door policy; however, these young women did not academically achieve at the criteria set above. Although there is now more racial and ethnic diversity in the gifted program, Barnwood continues to have an achievement gap in GPA, standardized test scores, and AP course enrollment. Given the selection criteria for our research team, I felt confident that we had not left out any young women in their senior year who met both the academic achievement metrics and were significantly involved in gifted education.

Building a research team of seven (six students and me) was an appropriate sized team to cultivate trust and rapport, which are critical to success in (Y)PAR projects (McIntyre, 2008). In our case, our community evolved from an existing foundation of trust and rapport. I had worked with four of the young women for their entire high school career. I had worked with the fifth young woman since middle school. The sixth student researcher transferred to our high school her junior year, but during her senior year she spent more than half of every school day in my resource room. Four of the student researchers were self-labeled “best friends.” The other two student researchers were friendly with the four best friends but had different close peer groups. Having perspectives from different peer groups added richness to our project. Additionally, during this project, our research team evolved as both a research community and feminist sisterhood. Specific aspects of our participatory practice are discussed below.

Participatory Practice (P)

In the following section I elaborate on some of the ways we orchestrated this participatory project including: timeline, research space, and my role as the facilitator of this project. As co-researchers, we came to many of these decisions based on what made the most sense within the context and material conditions of the student researchers’ schedules and lives (Appadurai, 2006). Our context, community(ies) and personal constraints shaped the infrastructure of our group. While we were all fully committed to this project, I was sympathetic to the need to create meaning-making processes that were practical, humanizing, and flexible for enough for the student researchers to engage in this work while finishing high school and preparing for college. The student researchers were able to choose which aspects of the project to participate in, how fully they wanted

(or were able) to participate, and to some degree, their personal timeline for completing project tasks.

Timeline

Data collection, including the action projects, took place in the spring and summer of 2015, over the last month of high school and the months immediately following graduation. College decisions, high school graduation, shifting relationships, and new life paths were all personal, high stake experiences that happened during this project. We used an intensive 3 month research schedule that included the final 5 weeks of senior year and the 2 months immediately following graduation. We held regular meetings and communicated (via text, email, or in-person) near daily for the first 10 weeks of the project. During this time, the student researchers graduated from high school and prepared to leave for college. These 13 weeks brought closure to important work our team focused on, relationships we built, and decisions we made.

The final 3 weeks of our project were a soft concluding period for our team. We used a more relaxed schedule to add final reflections to our journals and for me to meet with each researcher for final one-on-one dialogues. During this time the student researchers were taking trips to visit extended family, attending college orientations, working to save money for college and otherwise making their final preparations to leave for college. By this time, we had finished all of our action projects and the student researchers had stalled on adding more to their reflective journals. As the facilitator it was clear it was time to end this stage of our project.

Research Spaces

As the facilitator to this project it was important to find physical spaces where the student researchers were comfortable speaking openly and honestly as we worked together. We used three primary spaces for our team meetings: the high school gifted resource room, a university women's center, and a university student union. During the academic school year, most of our meetings took place in the gifted resource room. As mentioned earlier, this space served as a school home for the student research team. Fridays after school, we held workshops in the women's center at a university campus. For many young women, gender non-conforming students, and in some cases young men, the women's center also serves as a campus home/safe space for college students. I wanted to introduce the research team to these supportive spaces as they planned for college. As a feminist research project concerned with the high school to college transition, this was a fitting space for our conversations and work. After graduation, we moved some of our team meetings to a nearby university student union. This shift was both out of necessity as the gifted resource room is used for summer school and as a metaphorical nod to the shifting spaces the student researchers would now frequent as college students. The student researchers selected their own locations for final dialogues and these ranged from coffee shops to nature parks. Our final celebration was held at my home.

Facilitator Role

While we designed a collaborative, feminist, participatory research project, there was still considerable leadership that I took on the backend and throughout that shaped our project. This included meetings with my committee at the university, the Institutional

Review Board (IRB), and the school district research approval team. I made arrangements with our NPR affiliate for the radio storytelling project. I suggested scholars whose work would support our project and purchased several books for our team to review and discuss. I made arrangements for the student researchers to lead their workshops at the governor's school. At our first meeting, I helped us establish norms and arranged team meetings. Throughout the project, I wrote the journal prompts. Frequently, I made suggestions and observations, mediated conversations, and gave guidance when requested. With input from the student researchers, I was the one who authored the chapters of this dissertation. I also plan to seek professional and academic audiences for our work and will likely be the one presenting and authoring many of these ways our research is shared within the scholarly community.

Action Projects (A)

As noted above, YPAR projects aim to take action on practical problems or issues in communities (Heron & Reason, 2002; McIntyre, 2008). They are grounded in taking action, or *doing*, as Maguire (1987) writes, “by linking the creation of knowledge about social reality with concrete action, participatory research removes the traditional separation between knowing and doing” (p. 3). Our research team took action in five distinct ways: presenting two formal presentations at a prestigious governor's school for gifted youth (in June 2015), recording their own public radio stories (aired May-June 2015), creating personal action plans to promote their own health and wellness (throughout the project) and initiating individual action projects inspired by our work together (ongoing).

As a research team, we planned these action activities to open up dialogue around the importance of self-care for high achieving young women during the high stakes and high stress, high school experience including the college applications and admissions process. The student researchers wanted to give both specific strategies for self-care and to engage in an unmasking of the affective crisis through courageous storytelling.

Research (R)

Our research tells of a constant circling back to definitions, ideas, and beliefs around feminism, achievement, self-care, identity, and transition. Given the iterative and cyclical nature of YPAR work, I created varied forums for us to observe, reflect, plan and take action based on our own lived experiences and social-emotional needs (Herson & Reason, 2002; Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2008). We often began with individual reflections that we then shared through our dialogues, journals, and team meetings. These reflections helped us plan ways to take action on the issues that mattered to our community.

Throughout our research, project we engaged in several research cycles that moved along a trajectory from individual reflection and experience to our research team community and then to public or broader communities as depicted at the bottom of Figure 3.1. Often, we first explored a theme through a research cycle that stayed within our research team. For example, we explored vulnerability in our own lives and shared our reflections on that concept through journals and dialogues with our team members. We then read more about the concept, and made meaning of it together. We decided that storytelling was a powerful way to practice vulnerability and so we shared vulnerable stories in our team meetings. This initiated a second research cycle, as we then reflected

on how those stories were received. This second research cycle ultimately led to a plan to share vulnerable stories through a broader public forum. This research process is illustrated in Figure 3.1 below. Evidence of these research cycles is shared in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

YPAR Research Cycle Process

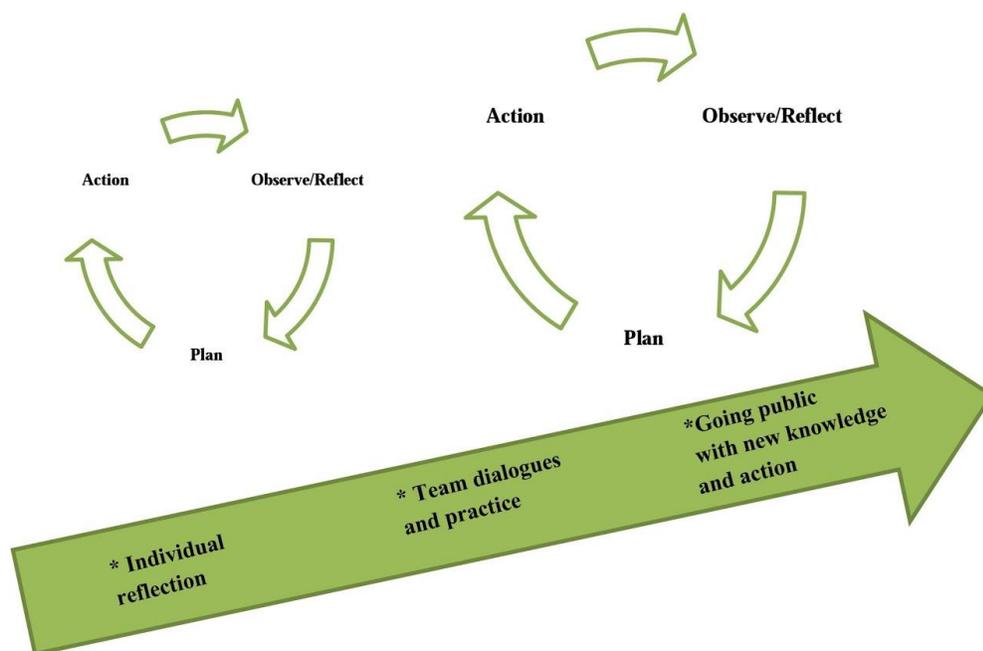


Figure 3.1. YPAR Research Cycle Process

Data Collection

Our data collection processes centered on personal story sharing. This story sharing occurred in three specific activities: dialogues, public literacy stories, and reflective journals. We strove for Belenkey et al.'s (1997) concept of *constructed knowing* (p. 134) by reclaiming and integrating personal and public knowledge through storytelling.

Individual Recorded Dialogues

I set up two times to meet with each student researcher individually for a recorded dialogue. These dialogues allowed me to explore the nuanced understandings and experiences that each student researcher brought to the project. The first of our dialogues took place while the student researcher was still in high school and the second a few weeks before the student left for college. The purpose of this was for the student researchers to reflect on how their hopes, fears, and perspectives on feminism, and identity evolved or stayed constant throughout our project. I used a semi-structured protocol (included in Appendix C and D) and the dialogues averaged 75 minutes in length. While most of the student researchers wrote extensively in the reflective journals (outlined below), our face-to-face dialogues opened up a more personal real-time format for conversation and relationship building that we all found valuable. Further, there was one student researcher who did not participate as fully in the reflective journals and these dialogues gave me an opportunity to visit with her about our project themes at greater length.

Team Dialogues

At a minimum, we met as a whole research team weekly over the 13 weeks to share our experiences and reflections, plan our action work, and engage in team building as a research team. Several weeks, we had 2 or 3 full-team meetings. I prepared agendas to guide our meetings and the student researchers used (and sometimes modified) these agendas as they led the meetings. As with the recorded dialogues, at our meetings we shared reflections and experiences including our hopes and fears. We workshopped radio stories, and planned our action projects. We also usually ate together; I believe the proverbial act of breaking bread (or bagels or Vietnamese spring rolls) together helped us form a community. As a team, we read widely on feminism (in particular: Collins, 2000, hooks, 2000, Lorde, 1984, Ngozi, 2014), wholehearted living (Brown, 2010; Brown 2012), and growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Mohr, 2014). We used these readings and others to ground our understanding of the project foci on social-emotional needs of high achieving young women and to buttress our arguments and action work around affective education. Our group dialogues were captured in a combination of audio recording and rich note taking so that we could refer back to them as needed. There were times when these notes or recordings helped us remember how our conversations had unfolded. If at any time one of the student researchers asked that the recorder be turned off, I honored that request immediately. While I hadn't anticipated it before the project, our group text message, emails and other messages also became part of the data we considered in this project.

Radio Storytelling

Through radio story sharing, our research team hoped to open up a community dialogue around identity, intersectionality, social-emotional health, and feminism as explored and understood by high achieving young women. Through a partnership with our local community NPR Affiliate the student researchers practiced courageous storytelling through producing a radio piece with the guidance and support of two college women mentors (Kelsey and Michaela) from the journalism school at the local university. The student researchers had full ownership and authorship of their stories. Their stories focused on a self-selected facet of our project that was personally important to them: for example, cultural identity, feminism, eating disorders, social-emotional needs, and women in STEM. These stories bridged storytelling and action work. These stories reached a broad listening base (over 1500 listeners or engagements to date) and are also be hosted on a website where they are globally accessible.

Reflective Journals

We used reflective journals to share ideas through writing and as an inquiry tool around the key themes and conversations from our project. Each student researcher had access to two journals. This first reflective journal was a community journal which we could all access to share thoughts, and continue conversations with the whole team. The second reflective journal was a two-way journal between each individual student researcher and me. Some of the student researchers already engaged in personal journaling, and chose to also share excerpts of those entries as part of our two-way journals. I updated the two-way journals and collective journals weekly with new open-ended prompts around college decision making, feminism, identity, and social-emotional

well-being. These prompts are included in Appendix A and B. Our journals became a rich and important philosophical space for us to venture new ideas (Elliott, 1991). We all benefitted from the processing time that the journals provided, particularly during our intense research schedule. The student researchers were active writers in the journals (with one exception). Some of the student researchers authored more than 60 single spaced pages of text during the course of our project.

Once we started our journals, the student researchers decided we needed for a mechanism to differentiate research stories from more personal (or community) stories, particularly in the two-way journals. Therefore, we developed a code for our reflective journals (marked by non-highlighted text, green highlighted text and blue highlighted text). If the text was not highlighted, the student researcher believed the writing was relevant to our research project and they were comfortable sharing this information with any stakeholder (or reader) of our work. The vast majority of the student researchers' journals were not highlighted. However, highlighting text in green, signaled that a student researcher thought the information could be relevant to our research, but it was more personally sensitive. The green highlights signaled to me that before sharing this information, I needed to disguise the student researcher's identity. Therefore when (and if) we decided to use any of these stories, I worked very closely with the student researcher on how she wanted to be represented in these data. There were also a few occasions during our research process, when a student researcher went back and removed the green highlights from their text, indicating that they now saw this story or reflection as relevant to our research and wanted the information shared in an effort to support our project aims. Blue highlights signaled that a student researcher had something to share

with me that they viewed as completely outside of our research context. The stories shared under blue highlighting were deeply personal and the student researchers believed that they were either irrelevant to our broader project goals, or they were too personally sensitive for me to share with others including the student research team. I did not include any of the specifics written in blue highlights in this dissertation. However, reading these stories and reflections did influence my sense making of the data, altering me in particular, to the emotional complexities around identity, coming of age, gender, discrimination, and managing difficult relationships.

Facilitator Journal

I also took diligent, reflective notes in a field journal (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In essence, I practiced reflective journaling alongside the student researchers. In my journal, I reflected on important “research moments,” such as conversations I had with the student researchers, critical moments, new ideas, questions, and connections between our conversations and the literature. I also found myself using my journal to reflect on my own feelings, philosophical quandaries and emotional reactions to things that happened during the course of our study. For instance, one conversation I had with Leslie prompted me to reflect on my own best-friendship from my senior year of high school. My journal also included direct quotes from student researchers particularly when they made me or the whole group think in new ways about affective education, wholehearted living, or the high school to college transition.

Students as Researchers

In their work with women, Belenky et al. (1997) posited a pedagogy of connected teaching that they call *midwife teaching* (p. 218). “Midwife-teachers focus not on their

own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the student's' knowledge (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 218).” While I was a facilitator to the students on this research team, I aimed to facilitate in a feminist and connected manner. “Connected teachers are believers. They trust their students’ thinking and encourage them to expand it” (Belenky et al. 1997, p. 227). Our dialogues, reflective journals, action projects, and radio storytelling were all spaces where we practiced expanding and validating our thinking. While I knew it was impossible to erase all of the power dynamics in the student-teacher relationship, our (Y)PAR process and particularly our commitments to storytelling and vulnerability actively blurred boundaries and reconstructed our relationship to that of co-researchers who practiced collective meaning making (Cannella, 2008; Collins, 1990, 2000; Herson & Reason, 2002; hooks, 2000; Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2008). I implicitly trusted the student researcher's thinking as valid and essential to this project. Further, throughout this project together, there were frequent times when the student researchers served as teachers to me.

As critical researchers, the students were actively engaged in the production of new knowledge around affective education, social-emotional health, and gender inequality. Each student researcher brought a unique frame and specialized interest to our broader themes. For example, Faith was committed to exploring supports for young women working through disordered eating. Whereas, Jessica hoped to explore economic inequality and the emotional toll of the college applications process. As the team planned their action projects, they also engaged in research and learning about how to “go public” with their findings. The student researchers wanted to be sure that they were producing high quality, academic work. The five students who participated in radio storytelling all

interviewed community experts as part of their own quest to better understand facets of our project themes. While I was available for support, the student researchers had agency over their own stories and research. For example, below is an email Leslie sent to set up an interview for her research on gender and education.

Email from Leslie to Dr. H---- (Higher Education Professor)

5.4.15

Dear Dr. H--,

Hello, my name is Leslie T----- and I am a member of Mrs. Fishman-Weaver's YPAR team. First, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to let me interview you for my [radio] story! I know Mrs. Fishman-Weaver sent you an email giving the basic overview of my radio piece, but I'd love to give you a little bit more information. I chose to investigate the relationship between gender, academic achievement, and professional success because I am both passionate about feminism and education. After talking with Mrs. Fishman-Weaver and doing some outside research, it became clear that women outperform men in terms of GPA across the high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels. Women are not, however, holding the highest leadership and professional positions (e.g., only 33 of the 1,000 Fortune companies are headed by women as CEOs). Thus, I wanted to discuss this in my radio piece, as it is a story that I want to tell. I think at this point the story is aiming for awareness and advocacy.

In our interview (which will only last as long as you would like it to) I will ask you some questions about what you do, where you work, etc.

Then, I will open the floor for you to talk about what you think is relevant. I have looked at several of your articles online and they seem to fit perfectly with the theme of my story. In other words, you are the expert so you can talk about what you know and are passionate about. (I may come with some other specific questions, if I think of them as my story develops). Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. Your opinion will be invaluable! In terms of scheduling the actual interview time, my deadline for having the recording is May 20, but I would love to meet before then. Are you free anytime this week or next week, preferably in the afternoon? Once again, thank you! Please feel free to express any of your worries or concerns to me.

Sincerely,

Leslie T----

As a YPAR project facilitator, I mentored the students in becoming critical researchers (Morrell, 2004). With the exception of Leslie who had done some qualitative work in her internship, the other students were only familiar with the positivist, quantitative methods learned in their science classes and observed at their STEM internships. Through our readings and discussions we learned about feminist and PAR methodologies. Positionality, reflexivity, and ethics were themes that ran throughout these strands of investigation, education and research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Maguire, 1987).

Data Analysis

As a feminist YPAR research project, we employed a cyclical and participatory analytic process through collaborative analytic memos (Herson & Reason, 2002; Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2008). While I was committed to a participatory process, I also recognized that research with communities must employ a kind of pragmatism that honors the lived lives of individuals (Appadurai, 2006). For us, the student researchers' high stress and very full schedules were a real material limitation that I wanted to respect. Therefore, our analytic memos enabled me to take on the time-heavy pieces of analysis including: reading and re-reading all texts and transcribing dialogues, while still inviting the reflections, push-back and interpretations of the student researchers needed to plan action and engage in our various research cycles. For example, we initially sought out trying to understand vulnerability, but during our reflections and observations, we learned that we were really seeking to understand courage. This realization led to an important research cycle examining the relationship between vulnerability and courage which ultimately led to an action project that used what we allowed us to practice courage by sharing personal and vulnerable stories. More specifics of our analytic process are explained below.

One of the first questions the student researchers asked me about this project was: "What are we were looking for?" They wanted specifics. They wanted to know how to find the "right" answer. As a team of high achieving students, they approached this project with pointed intentionality. We had three central research questions and each of us, in our own ways, wanted to proverbially solve for x. Throughout our work we all engaged in a kind of unlearning about this positivist and deductive approach to research.

However YPAR methodologies suggest letting youth communities start where they are most comfortable. The student researchers on this team liked road maps, algorithms, and finding right answers, so we started with a bit more structure than I might have, had I been using another methodology. Drawing on their background from our empowerment group discussed in Chapter 1, we identified three primary tensions to explore. These tensions were 1) self-care and self-harm, 2) vulnerability and guardedness, 3) strength and limitation.

To begin breaking down the data each week for our analytic memos I used these tensions as sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2011). However, I also read more broadly for emerging themes, points of contention and points of salience that we might not have considered (Charmaz, 2011). Once a week, I read through the student researchers' individual and collective journals, my own field journal, our group text messages and any other texts the student researchers had shared with me (e.g., essays and emails). Additionally, we took many photos during this project. While the photos were not used as data, I found it helpful to look back on this visual representation of our story as I read the texts. As I read and reread the story of our data process from the week, I put together an analytic memo in letter form to the student researchers' that outlined and gave examples of key themes and concepts across our data. These also included instances where we disagreed or had different experiences. The first draft of each analytic memo offered my personal reading of our work. However, I posted these memos to our collaborative online repository where the student researchers were actively encouraged to comment, critique, and add to them. Thus the analytic memos were living documents throughout the project.

As the first step in our analytic process, these analytic memos directly contributed to and supported our iterative and cyclical processes (Herson & Reason, 2002; Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2008). The student researchers and I came back to analytic memos from previous weeks with new knowledge and added new reflections and questions to the concepts, themes and tensions we had seen or experienced. If there was a concept that I noticed several of us were wrestling with, I added it to our other research activities for the following week either by writing a journal prompt that pushed our thinking on that subject, finding a relevant reading or adding it as a conversation topic for an upcoming team meeting. Often our experiences led to new reflections on these concepts, which led to us taking action, which in turn was a new experience that we reflected on in our individual writings and dialogues and then as a team. For example, one week we spent a lot of time talking about the importance of peer group and friend relationships. A student researcher then commented that she sometimes felt as if her peers were offering “false support.” This new concept of false support caused the student researchers to reexamine their friendships, relationships, and peer groups. The students wrote examples and reflections about this concept in their team journal and we then discussed relationships with a new level of complexity at our next team meeting. Through this iterative and cyclical process, our research team had multiple opportunities and ways to engage and reflect on the concepts, tensions and themes we identified as important.

Although our project was not a grounded theory study, we used concepts from grounded theory to guide our analysis process (Charmaz, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Grounded theory involves two primary phases: an initial phase and a focused phase (Charmaz, 2011). The goal in this first phase is to keep this work “simple, direct, and

spontaneous” (p. 113). We accomplished this by beginning with single weeks’ worth of data, focusing on sensitizing concepts, and chunking data into analytic memos that we could return to and modify over time as our research cycles continued. Beginning in week two of the project, I moved some of my analysis to a more focused reading. This included looking for the processes, actions, interactions and range of variance among our existing concepts. I did this while simultaneously engaging in open (or first) readings of the new data from the previous week. Through this process, all of the data was analyzed multiple times (initial and focused) as well as interrogated and reviewed by the student-researchers. We continued this process until we reached theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2007). By the close of the project, three broad themes had developed across our data sources: courage, connection and self-care. These themes helped us make sense of our research questions and contributed to layered and nuanced answers to our inquiries. These themes also enabled us to make a new contribution to theory around feminist affective education which is outlined in the concluding chapter.

Based on our research questions, we were committed to understanding the lived experiences, social-emotional needs, and potential affective supports for academically high achieving young women on the precipice of college. Through our collaborative work, in both the data collection and data analysis processes, the student researchers and I continued to refine and deepen our understandings of wholehearted living and affective education for young women approaching college. In fact, the group meetings became spaces of dialogue that facilitated individual and community-based actions that were unanticipated.

Our analytic process continued during our weekly meetings as we reflected on our collective responses to the analytic memos and discussed points of contention, intersection, unrest, and salience. These discussions continued to push the themes in new directions. For example, through our varied discussions, writings, readings and experiences, we came to more nuanced understandings of strength, gender, emotion, vulnerability and courage. As we came to these new understandings, we attempted to operationalize them in both our personal lives and groups meetings (e.g., practicing deep breathing and sharing courageous stories). Once we had done this, we used this new knowledge to take action to support more young women in our communities (e.g., leading a workshop on deep breathing and sharing our courageous stories publically). In this way, we moved from information to personal reflection to group dialogue to public action which then prompted us to seek more information, reflection and dialogue, hence, marrying our data collection and analysis processes.

All of our data collection activities were language-rich and were opportunities for analysis and the production of knowledge (St. Pierre, 2000). Feminist researchers (e.g., Butler, 2006; St. Pierre, 2000) write that all dialogues and reflections are inherently both data collection and data analysis. I wanted to put these texts in conversation with each other, which we ultimately did through the analytic process explained in this section. In addition to what we discovered about the lived experiences and social-emotional needs of high achieving young women in the high school to college transition, we also learned a tremendous amount from becoming a critical, feminist research team. These findings are discussed in Chapter 4, 5, and 6.

Trustworthiness

We took specific measures to ensure trustworthiness and rigor within this study. Guba (1981) posited four criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I paid attention to each of these criteria in shaping this study. While each (Y)PAR project is necessarily a unique endeavor, below I outline the specific strategies we took to create a trustworthy project. (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

In order to address credibility we grounded our study in established YPAR methods and design as described throughout this chapter. YPAR is an established qualitative research method for engaging in community and action work. Additionally, I took a number of measures described above to support honesty and disclosure among our researchers. These included opportunities to dialogue in a variety of formats and continued assurance that participation and levels of participation in all aspects of the research project were at the discretion of each individual researcher. In addition, member checks, peer checks, and thick rich description were all components of my credibility plan. I describe each of these below.

Member checks. Participatory work hinges on a collaborative process of collective inquiry and sense-making (Camarota & Fine, 2008). In qualitative work, member checking is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). In (Y)PAR projects, this commitment is often taken to a deeper degree through the collaborative co-research model described throughout this dissertation

(Cammarota & Fine, 2008; McIntyre, 2008). Member-checking was our within-team process to ensure that individual voices were both honored and accurately represented. These conversations supported our team's commitment to co-creating meaning (Cammarota & Fine; Morrell 2004) and served as a reciprocal, and cyclical evaluation of our data and project. Additionally, the student researchers read and critiqued chapter and section drafts and gave me feedback on those. I incorporated this feedback and shared subsequent drafts to make sure I was representing the thinking of our research team (and each member) accurately. In addition to checking for understanding, these conversations gave me a formal opportunity to connect one-on-one with each of the student researchers about our project.

Peer checks. Peer checking, or the beyond-team process, allowed us to engage our personal communities in this dialogue. At the onset of this study, I asked two women if they would be willing to serve as formal peer checks. These two women were members of our inaugural empowerment group and I knew they would be valuable thought-mentors to me in this project. They both met the same selection criteria as the student research team including extraordinarily high standardized test scores, GPA, extensive AP course enrollment and extracurricular involvement. They also identified with the gifted identity construct and were active participants in gifted education during high school. It was their vulnerability and disclosure that first taught to me the importance of cultivating courage as a critical component of social-emotional well-being. Additionally, it was this peer group who first alerted our school staff to the masked affective crisis. This gave

them unique insights into our interpretations of the data. We held conversations over Google Drive, Facebook, and met in-person when they came home for school breaks.

As our project continued the student researchers and I also identified other peers, mostly women, with whom we discussed our project, findings and areas of inquiry. These more informal peer checks served as an additional measure of credibility as we checked to see if our findings, and analysis were clear and resonated with others in our community. The generous feedback, pushback, and reflections we heard across our peer checks deepened the ways we conceptualized the problem of study, our analytical frames, analysis, and implications (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Our peers challenged and pushed us in ways that made our thinking more complex and my writing of this project richer (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Thick, rich description. Thick, rich description, creates “verisimilitude...for the readers

the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). I practiced thick, rich descriptions of the experiences, perspectives, projects, and insights of the student research team throughout my field journal and writing. Vivid detail helps a reader see our account as credible. Further, the verisimilitude these descriptions created supported our team’s commitment to complex storytelling and how I valued the student researchers and attempted to represent them authentically. Thick, rich, description also enhances transferability, outlined below by giving insight into the applicability our findings might have to their own contexts (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2009).

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to apply findings of one study to another context (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2009). I actively took measures to honestly address the limitation of transferability within this study. These measures included explaining the research context including the school site, particulars of the gifted program, characteristics of the student research team, and the use of thick, rich, description described above. I hope this information allows stakeholders in other high schools, gifted programs, and counseling departments to assess areas where our findings may be similar to experiences in their own educational programs.

Dependability

I had two advisors mentoring me through every step of this research project. Their guidance served as an external audit of our study (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, given the context, relationships, and personal nature of this project, I know this specific study could not be precisely repeated again. However, to address dependability I have given all of the detail needed if a researcher wanted to design a similar project. I described our dialogues, team meetings, action projects, and reflective journals in detail. I included our protocols as appendices. We chose a wide-variety of data collection tools to explore our research questions across modalities and approaches. Both data and researcher triangulation are explained below.

Triangulation. Data triangulation is the practice of using multiple data sources and types of data sources to explore how phenomena converge and contrast across different settings and methods (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Recognizing that we were exploring complex

themes including social-emotional needs and development, I was intentional in designing a study that allowed us multiple ways to explore these issues to ensure both credibility (defined above) and dependability. Researcher triangulation, or analyst triangulation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008) is the practice of using multiple researchers or analysts to make sense of the data. In this way, data is read through multiple perspectives helping to reduce blind spots and adding richness to analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Our commitment to multiple researchers and data sources (i.e., individual dialogues, team dialogues, reflective journals, story sharing, and action planning) were important in helping us see how themes mapped across contexts (Elliott, 1991; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As a collaborative and co-researched project, each of the student researchers and I analyzed and made sense of the data. We engaged in this process collectively in our team meetings and dialogues and also individually through our personal reflections and journals. Having multiple data sources and researchers enhanced the rigor in our project while contributing to a complex and layered understanding of our findings and implications.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research includes: admission of the researcher(s)'s bias including reflexivity, clear methodological explanations (discussed throughout) and openness about the study's limitations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). I recognize that this study had limitations. These limitations, and the measures we took to reduce them, are discussed later in this chapter. I am upfront and transparent about my reflexivity in this study, and particularly about my own positionality and bias. More on

my positionality and the positionality of the student researchers is discussed below. Our reflections and positionality is also woven throughout this dissertation.

Positionality

This research project was personal to me. My own socio-historical identities shaped many aspects of our work. In the following section I unpack my experiences and identities as a student, teacher, researcher, and mother. Each of these identities was salient to the methods and themes of this project (Gay, 2000; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). As an academically high achieving woman myself, I continue to empathize with many of the pressures the student researchers shared with me. My elementary and middle school history is marked, like the student researchers, by participation in gifted programming. In third grade, I was identified for a gifted program. While I enjoyed gifted education as an elementary and middle school student, there was no high school gifted program available at my school.

As a high school student, I too experienced many of the social-emotional challenges that come up for the student researchers during this project. There was a bright young woman in my close-knit friend group who suffered mental health challenges including depression and self-harm. These challenges came to a head our senior year of high school. In fact, many of my memories of my senior year still include strong emotions and worry about this friend. As a young person, I also struggled with healthy eating and body image. These struggles were sometimes exacerbated by my participation in dance and sports. I also had a very close friend who required emergency medical care for anorexia.

Like the student researchers, my high school schedule included advanced and honors courses, varsity athletics, dance, and theater. It was not uncommon for me to be at school from 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM. Given how much time I spent at school, I had limited availability to talk through any of these challenges with my parents. However, as a fiercely independent teenager, I might not have taken advantage of their counsel even if my schedule had been more relaxed. Instead, there was one AP Social Studies teacher whom my friends and I met with regularly to talk about our experiences and challenges. He was an attentive listener and the only school personnel I ever remember asking about our social-emotional well-being. It was not until this project that I realized what an impact this teacher had in supporting my friends and me.

Throughout high school, I did not receive college counseling guidance, encouragement to pursue advanced math or science classes, or any affective education, outside of the conversations with our beloved AP teacher. Later, when I started working with youth in gifted programs, and young women in particular, I reflected on the positive difference affective education through a gifted program might have had on my own social-emotional health, as well as the well-being of the two close friends I mention above. These personal reflections directly influenced my own teaching philosophy and practices as a teacher and researcher.

Both of my grandmothers played a significant role in shaping my identity, particularly my identification as a feminist teacher. My maternal grandmother taught in a one room schoolhouse in a farming community. When I became a teacher myself I went to her for advice. The stories we shared about our different and similar experiences in the classroom deepened our relationship. Although my parents were interested in social

causes and taught us about the importance of equality, it was my paternal grandmother who first taught me about social justice and activism. She shared stories about her own involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and her writing in underground social justice papers in New York City. These stories led to my interest in activism and then quickly to my development as a feminist. When I started at the university, I signed up for women and gender studies and sociology courses. There was a PhD student I connected with in my early coursework; he and his partner offered to mentor me through independent study courses on feminist theory. I met with them frequently throughout my bachelor's degree. Through these readings (many of which are cited in this study), dialoging about the readings, continuing coursework in women and gender studies and sociology, getting involved in programming with the Women's Center, and seeking deeper and more honest relationships with both of my grandmothers, I identified as a feminist. My feminist identity shapes how I write, parent, teach, and view the world.

In the undergraduate course I teach for pre-service teachers, I tell students that teaching is not a profession, it is a lifestyle. What I mean is the art of effective teaching is truly the art of building compassionate relationships with young people. Compassionate relationships cannot be compartmentalized into an 8:00AM to 3:30PM weekday-only schedule. Instead, I contend that teaching is a constant act of love expressed through planning, worrying, instructing, discussing, grading, and counseling. In this way, being a teacher is not merely what I do; it is an essential part of who I am. I carried this identity with me into my new position in educational administration.

Throughout this project, I drew on my background, training, and experiences in teaching and counseling diverse and alternative student populations. These experiences

include: mothering (and being a foster mom); a Bachelor of Science in Sociology and a minor in Women and Gender Studies; a Master of Education in Special Education; and teaching certificates in English Language Arts, Gifted Education, and Special Education. Over the past decade, I have taught in urban and suburban schools throughout the K-12 continuum. For the past 3 years I have been a member of a professional learning community for high school guidance counselors. As mentioned, I now also teach courses for undergraduates pursuing degrees in education.

I am currently nearing the completion of my PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. As a doctoral candidate, I am immersed in a culture of research and scholarship. My access to ideas and resources at the university contribute to my ability to translate some of the work I do in the classroom to academic audiences. As a student myself, I can intimately relate to many of the students researchers' frustrations with homework, constraints in academic writing, and criticism. I hope this gives me more empathy.

I, like a lot of educational leaders, wore (and wear) many hats. I was a teacher, counselor, division chair, editor, advocate, publicist, confidant, and coordinator. I served as a liaison between teachers and students, students and counselors, students and college admissions personnel, and students and parents. It is this last role that I want to discuss briefly. It was not unusual for a parent to email me to discuss many topics including at times their child's social-emotional well-being. Sometimes these conversations stayed on-line, other times the parent and I met in my office. Sometimes the young person was brought into this conversation, and sometimes the parent and I speak alone. In these conversations I tried to be an active listener, a creative thinker of solutions, and an

advocate for my students. As a mother myself, and a teacher who cares deeply for her students, I could empathize with an array of intense emotions that senior year provokes including worry, anxiety, concern, and love. I recognized that coming of age and approaching the precipice of higher education is a difficult time for both students and parents. I sought to form alliances across students, families, and school staff to work to support student needs.

As with all positions in education, a small percentage of students tend to require a great percentage of emotional and administrative energy. In the gifted department, this group was most often our highest achieving young women, including the students on this research team. These students had my cell number and personal email. They shared essays with me over Google Drive. They texted me (and continue to text me) their good news decorated with emoticons and written out in all capital letters. These messages light up my nightstand in the middle of the night. I wish them good luck before exams and major events. Likewise, they know about major personal and professional events in my life and wish me good luck and send their good thoughts often via text decorated with festive “emojis”. In short, my students and I formed powerful relationships based on learning, compassion, experience, and growth. These relationships mattered, they also shaped who I am as a teacher, researcher, and writer. While I have worked with the student researchers in class and as a counselor, these more personal relationships helped mitigate some of the power complexities one might expect in research engaged with a teacher and her students.

While I know it was impossible to remove all power dynamics inherent in the teacher-to-student relationships, I worked intentionally to engage in transformative

(Kezar et. al, 2006; Shields, 2004) and feminist teaching practices (Belenky et. al 1997) that build learning communities instead of hierarchies. During my tenure as the chair of our gifted department, I had the privilege of crafting a professional position that put relationship building at the center of my practice. Students and I frequently talked over tea or take long walks together. I coached students through their course planning, connect them with internships in their area of interest, and coordinate service projects around their passions. I edited personal college essays. I met with families to set high school and postsecondary goals. Students spent their free time studying and socializing in my classroom. We puzzled over complex math problems and played board games together. There is an annex to the classroom that once served as a small office. The students named this space “the crying room,” as we used it to talk through difficult issues: anxiety, stress, arguments with parents and friends, romantic confusion, college rejections, or worse, scholarship rejections. We went through a lot of tissues.

Although we strove for building open relationships, the student researchers and I both censored ourselves slightly. For example, the student researchers seldom used profanity around me, although I have overheard them do so when they talking amongst themselves. Likewise, I did not engage in discussions about my colleagues or school personnel that would have been inappropriate to share in my educational leadership position. As we worked together there were moments when our language patterns blurred. For example on the day of my proposal defense Elaine sent me a text saying #finnabeariot (which roughly translates to: *you are going to be great*).

In addition to being a teacher and counselor, I am nearly 20 years-older than the student researchers. As such there were some boundaries inherent in our relationship.

These were mostly boundaries of respect and are usually unspoken. For example, the student researchers still call me by my last name, although I signed my analytic memos and other correspondence with my initials. While we intentionally engaged in fun team-building activities together (such as aerial yoga and kickboxing classes), I was not a part of their other social events, except perhaps as a chaperone for school activities (e.g., prom) or as a guest at a graduation party.

As vulnerability and story sharing were central to our project, there were times when I practiced strength and disclosed personal stories that I otherwise would not have shared with my students. For instance, I shared with the student researchers that I worried about my son finding his niche at school. The student researchers confided that they also shared stories in this project that they had never shared before. Through these stories, we learned more about the importance of story sharing and vulnerability. Our relationships with each other deepened as we shared our own identities, experiences, and stories. During the course of this project another significant change occurred in my relationship with the student researchers. After graduation, they went from being students to alumnae. This was significant and something we talked about (e.g., after graduation I accepted the student researchers' friend requests on Facebook). Our research team evolved from a community of students and facilitator to a community of co-researchers to a group of women who cared about each other as friends. When the student researchers left for college, we also celebrated a major transition in my own life as I accepted an administrative position in the College of Education.

Research Team Positionality Profiles

Just as my own positionality influenced this project, the positionality of each of the student researchers also played an imperative role in our work. One of our first writing tasks as a research team was to explore our varied positionalities. This exercise was important to our work for several reasons. Given our research questions and methodology, it was important that we all had the opportunity to explore (and revisit) social influences on our identities and experiences (Crenshaw, 1998; Shields, 2008). Before writing their profiles, I gave the student researchers some readings on intersectionality as an introduction to the idea of social identities and social location (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1998). Some of the student researchers were more willing or interested in engaging in complex discussions about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age, than others. Because all levels of participation and disclosure were voluntary, I honored each student researcher where they were. As a participatory project, these positionality profiles helped us set an early norm that each of us were the primary expert and storyteller of our own lived experiences. As lived experiences are the heart of this project, more on the student researchers' identities, experiences, and stories is shared throughout the remaining chapters. Below are the original profiles written in the student researchers' own words.

Faith: I'm an 18 year old that's about to embark on a really scary and exciting journey. My mom has been one of the most influential people in my life. She is my biggest role model and has always accepted me with patience and kindness. She was there throughout my whole eating disorder and honestly I probably would've died without her help. I'm a woman, which has affected me in the sense that I care deeply about women's equality.

My faith, ELCA Lutheran, emphasizes equality of all people under Jesus Christ. I'm upper middle class and I know that because of that I am able to afford things and opportunities that a lot of other people cannot and for that I am extremely grateful (never grateful enough of course). I am very liberal. I feel like in our society today there is this perception that being Christian and being liberal are mutually exclusive, which I completely disagree with. I've always been really involved in music: piano, singing, organ, and saxophone. I am a huge perfectionist. I also hide my feelings nearly all the time and can nearly always hide behind a mask of happiness and pretend - which I've managed to do through bouts of depression and anxiety and the beginning of my eating disorder without anyone noticing. I've always felt like I cared about different things than most people my age.

Melissa: I am a woman, a scientist, a Chinese-American, a daughter, and a sister. I think this is absolutely true for me, but these are the identities I am proud of. I pride myself on my feminism, on my love of science, on my ties to my culture and my family. These all shape my life in positive ways. I also will always describe myself as empathetic, even when I don't want to be. I feel like I am tied to the feelings and thoughts of people around me, which makes me very extroverted and generally good with people. There are also other identities that I don't really think matter, like I don't really believe my intelligence, abilities, or extracurriculars define who I am. Which is weird, because these are the things I had to develop in high school to be "high achieving". I just don't find them important in shaping who I am and who I want to be. I don't often stop and think about identifying as Chinese-American. I just am, that's just how it is. Right now I live with my mom and sister. My dad hasn't lived with us for four years, although we are still close.

My mom raised us not to care about prestige or numbers or whatever. But it's important to her that we are not only smart but also pretty, not only successful but also, I don't know...happy? She's the most important and complicated figure in my life. I sometimes think of myself as a mess of contradicting identities, and I change a lot of my superficial aspects. But my family is always at the core of who I am.

Elaine: Who am I? Good question. Well, my name is Elaine Pho. I feel like the most important identity that I have is being a human-being because everyone is a human being and because of that, we should all be treated equally. Everybody love everybody is what I think. Unfortunately, society isn't at that level yet. Some people have issues and think less of human being based on other things such as a person's gender, race, or even looks. If I were to describe myself using those unimportant identities, I am a homosexual, female, Asian American who is 5'6.5" (5'7" on a good day) with dark brown hair and somewhat tan skin. Personally, I think those things should not matter when describing a person, but it does to some which makes me a little nervous about going to college. I think it's more important what someone is like as a person and how they treat others. Overall, I would say I'm pretty friendly. I love laughing and having fun with my homies whether it be in band, track, or even just taking a stroll in my neighborhood. If I had to describe myself, I'd use the words chill, musician, leader, athlete, and most importantly friend.

Leslie: I am the product of a Democrat father and a Republican mother. With these conflicting views surrounding me, I was encouraged from a young age to think for myself and form my own opinions. Both of my parents are highly educated and have received

graduate degrees and my mom even has a PhD. As a result, she has always made more money than my father and I think she is one of the major reasons I am a feminist. My mother is my role model as she is a strong, kind, and intelligent woman. She has showed me that women can be successful and achieve what they want. I come from a middle class home, where all of my needs and most of my wants have been satisfied. I recognize that I am fortunate and I am very grateful for all of the wonderful things my parents have gifted to me. Beginning from when my brother and I were very young, my parents aimed to show us how lucky we are to be in the middle class. They made sure to donate to the Salvation Army every year and do things like take us to the food bank to construct Buddy Packs. The pivotal moment, for me, however, was when I joined Girl Scouts. I began volunteering in new places and capacities that I did not know existed. I realized that some people never receive presents at Christmas time or have a nice meal at Thanksgiving. Inequities in the communities around me sparked a passion of mine for service. Additionally, I am White. So what? As much as I'd like to think that race does not play a role in our daily lives, I think it still does. Racism, like sexism, still exists. I know that in a similar way that my socioeconomic status afforded me opportunities, my status as a Caucasian has also benefited me in some ways. I am also a Christian. For me, my faith is an internal source of strength and not a huge part of my intersectional identity. Next, I am intelligent. This was a label given to me when I joined the gifted program in third grade and has stuck with me ever since. I think because I am "gifted," others expect more out of me. A final important underlying character trait of my identity is my empathy and tolerance. I can find a way to connect with most people and form a relationship.

Claudia: I will be attending the University of ---- in the fall. I plan to study a combination of Electrical and Biomedical Engineering, besides both being fields I find interesting I would like my future career to combine the fields for research. In addition to having already invested time into these fields they both hold personal value to me as I believe the current healthcare system has failed to fully utilize the available resources in engineering technology. I am also passionate about encouraging women to enter underrepresented fields such as the physical sciences and engineering. In my free time I enjoy Scholar Bowl, competitive team academics, traveling, baking, and shopping. I have found all of these to be not only great ways to relax but surprisingly enriching at times.

Jessica: Probably the most important aspect of me is the high-achieving part. It has determined my friend group, my activities, and my future. I am lucky to have grown up in a city with such a supportive gifted education program and emphasis on academics. I know when I was designated as “gifted” in elementary school I was worried about how I was different- I was the only one in my grade in gifted education- and didn’t want to go. But my parents forced me to. I think this was probably one of the only times my parents ever intervened in a significant matter in my life. As a general rule, they have tended to step back and let me do my own thing. Unlike my brothers, I was more motivated growing up, and I think that this led them to think I didn’t need their help as much. I also grew up as part of the middle class, but I think this had less of an effect on me than it did others. While I always had everything I needed, I didn’t always have everything I wanted. I grew up in an environment where if you want something, you work for it. So I started working the summer after fifth grade doing manual labor for a neighbor. I didn’t get a phone until the summer after sophomore year and I have to pay for my phone’s data

plan. Because I do have to pay for a lot of things myself, I am reluctant to spend money and this has led me to be perceived as “cheap.” I also have to pay for college myself so that really impacted where I applied. I only applied to schools where it was possible to get a full-ride, and I am attending the college I am because I got one there. I do understand that I have it a lot better off than many, and that is what motivates me to give my time. I really enjoyed volunteering with the kids at the Intersection, and right now I volunteer at the Humane Society. I also like to think that I am very principled. I don’t speak up in class a lot because I feel like the topics we cover are mundane or anything that could be said everyone already knows so there is no point in bringing it up. However, if I do speak up it is usually because it is something I feel passionately about. Sometimes people think I get too worked up over small matters (ex: the parking ticket) but I like to think I do things on matter of principle. I also think that sometimes people are not willing to fight for the things that matter to them because it is easier that way, and that worries me.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethics and reflexivity are inexorably linked in qualitative research projects and in YPAR work in particular (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As a critical researcher and public schools practitioner concerned with emancipatory research and ethics, I am particularly drawn to YPAR work; however, I know this work is ethically complex. Canella and Lincoln (2011) write, “critical, radical ethics is relational and collaborative; it aligns with resistance and marginality” (p. 81). My pre-established rapport with my participants gave me great insight into the nuances of our discussions. Our existing and caring relationship allowed my participants to open up more quickly and Marshall and

Rossmann (2011) would argue *more honestly*, to me than they would with a stranger. I was a frequent confidant to the student researchers as they navigated the high school to college transition and coming of age. This closeness, while giving us rich narratives, contributed to very personal disclosure. Such disclosure falls under a category of everyday microethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). As a YPAR researcher I constantly navigated these ethically important, albeit, small moments.

In ethical jargon, the principle of beneficence guided my work. This required that my research and actions were intended to benefit others (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In particular, I was committed to acting in ways that benefited the student research team and their goals in making a difference for other high achieving young women. I worked in partnership with our comprehensive guidance department to safeguard the social-emotional well-being of the student researchers. As mentioned earlier, some of the student researchers were working through complex and challenging social-emotional struggles. Our hope was that this project would be empowering to the student research team, while also bringing greater awareness to this masked affective crisis.

The Kantian maxim states that “people should never be used merely as a means to someone else’s end” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004 p. 271). I chose a YPAR, feminist research framework for its insistence that “the outcome of good research is not just books or academic papers, but it is also the creative action of people to address issues that are important to them” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179). From the beginning of the project the student researchers and I discussed how we wanted our work to be used to make a positive difference for real issues we collectively cared about. Ultimately we hoped to support high achieving young women lead healthier, more balanced lives. Below, I

describe the specific research protections I took in this study including: IRB and school district approval, confidentiality, and student well-being.

IRB and School District Approval

The University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this project. I had IRB approved written consent forms (for students 18 and over) and parent consent/child assent forms (for students under 18). Our study posed minimal risk to the student researchers. I informed them that their participation, including their levels of participation were voluntary. The student researchers were able to stop participating at any point. Additionally, we talked through a range of ways to participate in this research project including scaling back and opting out if needed.

The school district I worked with also had a separate research approval process. I detailed our research study processes with the school-district research approval team. Additionally, because this study addressed social-emotional concerns, I also shared the specific students I was working with so that we could determine if any of the potential student researchers were too psychologically fragile to participate. The school district agreed with IRB that our study was minimal risk and that all the necessary protections were in place for us to conduct our study. In fact, both the university IRB and the school district commented that our study might have personal benefits to the student researchers in allowing them to process their own experiences and needs with a peer group and trained facilitators.

Confidentiality

All of our data including transcriptions, reflective journals and analytic memos were stored in password-protected locations only accessible by the student researchers

and me. Confidentiality posed some unique considerations in this study. In the write-up of this dissertation I have used pseudonyms for the student researchers. However, the students were proud of their involvement in this project as well as in their designation as *researchers*. Therefore, there were some components of our project when the students “went public” with their work under their own names, these included our story sharing at the radio station and in their other action projects. As with all aspects of this project, decisions about identification were carefully considered and at the discretion of the student researchers.

Student Well-being

Beyond the research protections required by IRB or even the school district research approval team, I wanted to be certain that I had a plan in place should any of our work trigger difficult emotions for the student researchers. I have an established relationship with our guidance department and worked closely with our counselors to address social-emotional needs for some of the young women on our research team. I am also a mandated reporter, so if instances of abuse, or extreme harm/self-harm presented at any time during our project, I was required to work with school personnel to ensure that appropriate action was taken. If needed, I was willing to work with our guidance and crisis personnel immediately regardless of its impact on our study. While thankfully this did not occur, my students’ safety and well-being was always my top priority.

Limitations

While we carefully attempted to address issues of trustworthiness, this project does have several limitations. A research team of seven women is a relatively small team, however to privilege closeness and rapport we had to limit the size of our research team.

Additionally all of the women on our team identified as White or Asian, limiting some of the diversity we would have gained if other racial and ethnic groups had been part of our team. All of the student researchers attended the same high school and gifted program. As described in the research context section, both the school and gifted program had some unique characteristics. In fact, just having a gifted program at the high school level is uncommon. This support may have influenced the student researchers' self-concepts as gifted as well as their prior knowledge and vocabulary around issues of affective education. Had we drawn on student experiences from more urban or rural schools, different lived experiences would have been shared. Further, our project was conducted over an intense 13 weeks spanning high school graduation and leaving for college. Had our project extended into the college experience or began at the start of senior year, the insights and reflections our team collected would have been more extensive and contained different cycles of thinking around affective education and wholehearted living.

In addition to the potential limitations already mentioned, there were many practical obstacles including the student researchers' very high stress schedules that sometimes limited their ability to participate fully in all research activities. For instance, Jessica took a summer job working a night shift and was not able to finish her radio story until a month after the other researchers. Melissa's mother made family plans the week of our two workshops and Melissa was not able to present at them. Claudia was less involved in the reflective journals. She always planned to get to them later, but in the last couple weeks of the project she had to have a surgery that made it so she was unable to write or type. Elaine's track and field schedule conflicted with our radio storytelling and

so she also was unable to make a radio piece. Leslie was the only student researcher to consistently engage with the analytic memos. The other student researchers picked and chose specific topic of interests to push back on or made comments to the memos if and when their schedules relaxed a bit. Thus, while it was ethically important to me that this research project made sense within the real conditions of the student researchers' busy lives (Appadurai 2006), it was also vital that the student researchers knew that their participation and levels of participation were voluntary. However, I know some richness may have been lost in not having all researchers participate fully in all research activities.

Approaching the Findings

This project employed many language spaces (Kinloch & Pedro, 2014) including oral dialogues, written dialogues, electronic texts, photo exchanges, and group conversations. These varied language spaces gave the student researchers multiple opportunities and ways to reflect, analyze and share their lived experiences, social-emotional needs and analysis throughout the project. As a research team “we engage[d] in storying as we co-create[d]...narratives..grounded in critical literacy” (Kinloch & Pedro, p. 22, 2014). We did so with the intention of sharing more nuanced and complex stories about our own lived experiences and social-emotional needs. These stories created counter-hegemonic narratives about what it means to be an academically high achieving young woman. Throughout this dissertation, I have been intentional in sharing many excerpts and vignettes from these language spaces. However, the following three chapters employ a new narrative structure. This nonlinear, multi-voiced alternative narrative structure is aligned with the work of scholars invested in *humanizing research* (Charmaz,

2014; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Kinloch & Pedro, 2014). Kinloch and Pedro refer to this type of narrative structure as

...a framework for telling, retelling, and re-presenting stories in nonlinear ways--from left to right or right to left. Such nonlinearity leads us to present stories in ways that appear messy, complicated, complex, and multivoiced, which is why we rely on storying. (p. 22)

The purposeful montaging of journals, quotes, conversations, reflections, essays, texts and dialogues is a “storying” process that is more consistent with both the ways our findings emerged and the collaborative and participatory methods we utilized.

Chapters 4-6 uses this narrative montaging to better capture the participatory tone of the student researchers’ dialogues with each other and me throughout our work together. These narratives are organized around the three broad themes that emerged from our project (courage, connection and self-care). These themes were essential to the lived experiences and social-emotional needs of the student researchers. They also guided the action work we took throughout our project. The themes are presented in the order that the student researchers and I named them as findings (that is, we first identified courage, then connection, then self-care). There was a messiness and dynamic quality to our analytic process. For example, even before we *named* connection as a major and salient theme, we were talking about and wresting with subthemes of connection, including: relatedness, belonging, and critical listening. Our themes were named in our analytic memos. A theme became a theme when the whole research team agreed that the concept was critical to our work. We reached consensus about these themes in our team dialogues, reflective journals, and over text. Once a theme was identified, the student

researchers and I observed and reflected how it operated in our own lived experiences (e.g. what does courage look like for me?). These observations and reflections led to additional research cycles in our PAR process including planning (e.g. how can I practice courage?) and action (e.g. how can I cultivate courage in my community?). By the last third of our research project, we realized that we were working deeply with three broad themes including subthemes and nuances to those themes. This realization served as signal that we had reached a kind of data saturation in our research project.

Chapter 7 concludes this dissertation. This chapter discusses the implications of our work for practice, theory, and research. It also introduces the new framework for wholehearted affective education that emerged from our project. The framework for wholehearted affective education enabled the student researchers to map our three key themes across the tensions they had identified at the start of the project, giving them a holistic closure to certain aspects of our inquiry. . As the project facilitator and author of this dissertation, I have organized and edited all of the chapters carefully. However, I did so under the guidance and with the support of the student researchers. This research project is ultimately built on the personal story. We learned through writing, sharing, and creating stories individually and collaboratively in dialogue, journals, and action work. Over the next four chapters, I offer a close and applied reading of these collective stories.

CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS: COURAGE

Kathryn's Journal (Mother/Researcher)

5.31.2015

I pull up to our church at exactly 2:00 pm. The parking lot is full. Faith's recital starts at 2:00 pm, which means, I am running late, again. Luckily, it is my church too and I know my way around. I tiptoe back to the sanctuary and hear the most exquisite piano music. I settle in next to our pastor who is running the soundboard. After the first song I move a little closer. Faith alternates between quick and complex piano music and sad, difficult vocals. She is magnificent. She wears a floor length purple gown. I see her mother in the front row. I recognize that nervous look. There are times when she holds her breath and times when she releases it suddenly and beams with pride. She must know each spot that Faith has struggled with and breathe a sigh of relief after ever triumphant note or measure. I am sitting a few rows back from another set of parents to a young woman I have worked closely with. I think about all of the conversations I have had with both of these sets of parents over the past few years. I think about crisis. Both families have contacted me more than once when their daughters were in crisis. I know crisis is a term my committee is struggling with because it is a trigger word.

As I look back and forth between these two sets of parents and listen to the melancholy but powerful vocals of Faith, I wonder if crisis isn't more commonplace than we give it credit for. I wonder if some scars

in adolescence are unavoidable. I wonder if educators could learn to think about crisis moments and experiences as learning opportunities, as challenges that are an inherent part of the human condition. I wonder if that isn't an aim of this project.

Faith performs one song that is different from all the others. It is in English and the chorus says, "I am not afraid of anything." While it is not the most impressive technical piece, it is my favorite. After the recital I talk to Faith's mom. She thanks me for all of my support. I congratulate her on daughter. There is an understanding between us; we are both mothers. We know some of each other's secrets, vulnerabilities, and triumphs. It is a special connection, difficult to define, but almost palpable. We embrace. Later I hug Faith as we pose for a photo in the sanctuary. While we smile for the camera one of her classmates comes up and says his congratulations.

I turn to leave, but am caught by his question, "Faith" he says "I noticed all the songs you sang are so sad. Are you okay?"

Faith does exactly what I have done in similar situations—she laughs.

The moment passes.

As a research team, we aimed to better understand the lived experiences and social-emotional needs of academically high achieving young women as they prepared to transition to college. Ultimately, we hoped to offer educational leaders and stakeholders new insights for better supporting the affective needs of high achieving young women.

While we were interested and invested in affective education broadly, during the course of this project we also gained important insights about ourselves as individuals and our research team as a collective. Our data collection and analysis processes pointed us to three broad but related themes. These themes are courage, connection and self-care. Our findings chapters (4, 5, and 6) explore each of these themes respectively. In this chapter, I introduce the interrelated nature of our three broad themes and then unpack the lessons we learned on courage specifically. In order to explain the conditions and nuances of each theme I draw on our dialogues, journals, text messages, and recordings. Our various language spaces allowed students to process and share their reflections using different modalities and tools as appropriate to their the preferences and skills (e.g., Elaine liked to reflect with poetry, Leslie preferred the processing time her reflective journal provided, whereas Claudia preferred to talk through her thoughts in our dialogues.) Additionally, having so many avenues to reflect allowed students to think through concepts or stories using different media, which sometimes contribute to new insights. These different language spaces led to the rich, multi-voiced tone of our conversations: the laughter, tears, and voices of seven women talking to (and occasionally over) each other.

Interrelationships: Courage, Connection, and Self-Care

Courage was not an isolated action or experience; instead, it was reciprocally (though not always linearly) related to the ways we understood and experienced connection and self-care. With a few particularities, these three themes worked in concert with each other. We first set out to learn about vulnerability, however, as we studied and experienced vulnerability through our framework of wholehearted living (Brown, 2010, 2012, 2015), we reframed our focus to courage. This turn was caused by attempting to

make sense of how strength and vulnerability could work together. When we attempted to operationalize *strong vulnerability* (our term), we found we were really practicing courage. As the student researchers negotiated and navigated the conditions and nuances of what is meant to be courageous, they did so through their connection to others and through their own self-care practices. Self-care and connection were critical factors in the student researchers' willingness and ability to be courageous. Courage often led to self-care or connection, and reciprocally connection and self-care often led to courage. If we were interested in one theme, it often behooved us to pay attention to the ways we were practicing another theme, for in that intentionality we saw how they were all interrelated. Said differently, if we wanted to be more courageous, we often found we needed to focus more energy on our connections with others (often those in the research team) and/or on our personal self-care practices. Our project explored how these three themes worked together to support the social-emotional well-being of high achieving young women. This dynamic relationship is illustrated in Figure 4.1 below.

Interrelated Processes: Courage, Connection, and Self-Care

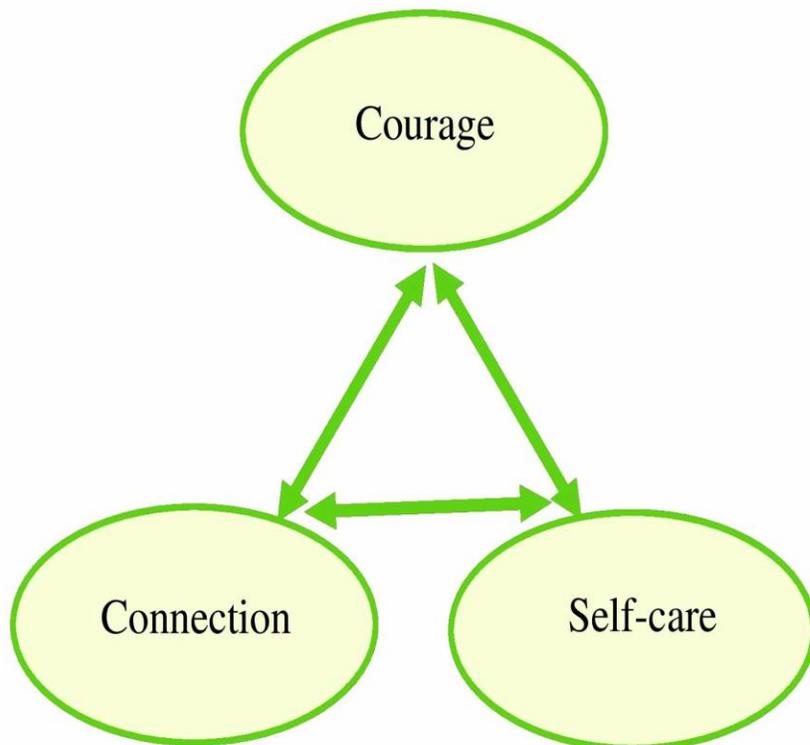


Figure 4.1 Interrelated Processes: Courage, Connection, and Self-Care

The student researchers and I defined courage as the emotional fortitude that linked strength to vulnerability. Courage took many forms in our research project including storytelling, speaking back to injustice, and asking for help. All of the ways we practiced courage were related to our other themes of connection and self-care. For example, as Melissa and I developed a caring counselor-student relationship, she asked for help with self-care. As she came to trust our connection, we worked on developing a self-care practice. We did this over time and through a number of activities including intentional listening, walking, and deep breathing. After several weeks of this work, Melissa opened up to me about an unhealthy situation at home. It took tremendous courage to share the things she shared. The unhealthy (and potentially abusive) behaviors

of her home life weren't new, in fact they had been going on for years. However, it took the right combination of connection and self-care for her to feel safe enough to come forward about this difficult situation and to ask for help.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss: how we named courage as a central theme in our study and how we experienced courage as contextualized by broader systems of power and privilege. I then share insights on the emotional experiences associated with how we practiced courage and the opportunities we found for practicing courage during the transition from high school to college. Finally, I share the ways we used storytelling as an act of courage; and the important pattern we noticed in the how practicing courage sometimes led to a ripple effect through our communities.

Naming Courage

At the onset of our project, we engaged in two research tasks that contributed to our theorizing about courage. The first was our discussions on the three tensions identified in Chapter 3: (1) self-care and self-harm, (2) vulnerability and guardedness, and (3) strength and limitation. These three tensions were the products of our conversations in the empowerment group and the reading we did together on wholehearted living. The second task was the writing of our positionality statements. These statements foregrounded our own lived experiences as central to this study and also gave each of us the opportunity to practice vulnerable story sharing.

Operationalizing Strong Vulnerability

Many of our early research team conversations centered on the relationship between strength and vulnerability. In our team meetings, we talked about how sometimes when we shared vulnerable stories we felt stronger. The student researchers

said that this was surprising as they often associated vulnerability with being weaker. For example, Elaine shared,

I hate wearing swimsuits. I feel like people will judge me, so I avoid water at all costs during the summer. I've felt this way since I was like 5, and I think I know where it stemmed from. When I was younger, [my brother] was always super skinny. He teased me for being fat, which made me believe I was fat all the way up til today... Admitting that this is something that makes me feel vulnerable. It is embarrassing and I don't like to talk about it too often. When I get invited to swim I always say I haven't swam since like the fourth grade, which is true. Some of my friends do see through it and say I don't need to be insecure, which I hate hearing because it sounds weak to me.

Elaine's comment that feeling vulnerable or "insecure...sounds weak" was a notion we wanted to counter in this project. In particular, we aimed to explore the conditions that connected vulnerability with strength. How and when did sharing these disclosing stories contribute to making us feel stronger? Exploring this question is what ultimately led to us naming courage. The student researchers engaged in a dynamic sense making process that ultimately contributed to our naming courage as the connection between vulnerability and strength. In the following section I share how our team arrived at this conclusion.

Trying to make sense of the connection between vulnerability and strength became our first major iterative conversation as a research team. The student researchers reflected on their experiences writing the positionality statements. They began reading

more literature on wholehearted living and feminism. They drew diagrams to illustrate different relationships between strength and vulnerability. They asked other students in the gifted resource room for their opinions on how to connect vulnerability and guardedness with strength and limitation. At one point, a small group of students were using calculus to explain a four dimensional model that related strength, vulnerability, guardedness, and limitations. The student researchers explained to me how a four dimensional model made the most sense, as it could account for motion. Elaine and Jessica made complicated notes on the back of an envelope on my desk. Leslie explained to me that if we wanted to account for all of the possibilities of the ways strength and vulnerability might be related we needed to put this model in motion. She explained how guardedness and limitations might fit into this model. Jessica crossed off the figure on the envelope. She was not happy with it yet. She pulled in another advanced math student. It felt as though we were on to something big. They did not know how to illustrate it yet.

When we reached a standstill, I encouraged the student researchers to use our reflective journals to share stories about times when they felt vulnerable or guarded, strong or limited. I suggested that if we better understood how these concepts worked in our lives, we might better understand how we want to represent them in our project. By our second analytic memo, we had identified courage as the link between vulnerability and strength. Below are some of Leslie's thoughts from that memo.

I believe that it takes courage to be vulnerable enough to empathize with others. One must be open and transparent because that is the only way they can develop meaningful relationships with others. Being honest and truthful is the only way to build trust. But, I will be the first to admit that it

is difficult at times to be honest. Certainly, telling others your secrets and sensitive information is hard, but I think the real challenge is being frank and honest with yourself...The first step then, is to tell ourselves the truth, but that takes strength and vulnerability because sometimes the truth is not what we want to hear. Overall though, I think that vulnerability is the basis of empathy and that the outcome of being vulnerable and raw is that others will connect with you...Often times, people are very guarded and it is hard to tell if you actually mean something to them and if they are being truthful with you. Thus, I believe that everyone should practice being vulnerable. If we all did that, the world would be a much more understanding place.

Leslie's analytic memo was the first time a student researcher named courage as essential to practicing vulnerability. It also speaks to some of our earliest work linking courage ("it takes courage to be vulnerable enough"), connection ("others will connect with you"), and self-care ("tell ourselves the truth"). As mentioned, the student researchers identified asking for help as an act of courage the cut across all of our themes.

The student researchers shared that naming courage as the condition that connected strength and vulnerability was personally empowering. Contrast Elaine's earlier reflection on feeling insecure as a weakness (which was written before we named courage) with the following excerpt from Faith's journal (written after we had named courage).

I'm definitely vulnerable, but I feel like the fact that I'm willing to share my vulnerabilities and I don't let them rule of my life (or at least I'm

working toward that) or cause me to live in fear makes me strong. I think that we're expected to be so close-lipped about insecurities and pretend like everything's fine but that's not a good idea. Talking about our vulnerabilities openly promotes understanding and education and also just helps in general.

Faith was able to identify with strength, not in spite of her vulnerabilities, but because of her willingness to share them. Her assertion that “talking about vulnerabilities openly...helps” became a central belief that guided our project. Writing our positionality statements gave us all an opportunity to practice some of this personal and vulnerable sharing. This process is discussed below.

Writing Positionality Statements

The positionality statements were our next exercise in truth telling and vulnerable story sharing. We wrote our positionality statements after reading on intersectionality and considering the ways race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion all played out in our personal lives. These were challenging topics for reflexivity. The student researchers and I negotiated what we wanted to share against the risks (discrimination) and benefits (connection) we thought would result from sharing. As we authored our statements, we paid particular attention to the moments we hesitated. We wanted to understand where risk and vulnerability were present in our storytelling. I too, experienced moments of hesitation when I wrote my own versions of my sample positionality statement. There were times when I decided to share, and times when I decided not to share some of the difficult experiences from my own childhood. This is similar to the hesitation I noticed when Melissa continued to revise her story on culture and shame in the journal excerpt

that opened this chapter. We discussed these sorts of feelings around risk as a research team. As we navigated opening up to our own research team, some of the student researchers said they felt safer (or more comfortable) sharing their positionality statements with a peer on our team (including me) before they posted them for the whole team. For example, Elaine first shared her positionality statement with the researchers to whom she had already come out.

Courage and vulnerability were often influenced by structures of inequality (e.g., heteronormativity, patriarchy, racism, and ageism). Within our positionality statements we found it was more challenging (felt more vulnerable) share experiences where we had felt marginalized by race, gender, class, or ethnicity. As a feminist research project, we explored all of our themes through a lens of social action, personal identity, and community. These lenses tuned us into the ways many of our acts of courage, including asking for help, were often contextualized by complex systems of power and privilege. Below I discuss some on the ways power and privilege influenced our decisions and ability to practice courage.

Courage is Contextualized by Power and Privilege

Power and privilege both elicited and impeded the student researchers' acts of courage. The student researchers were committed and enthusiastic to opening up new conversations around gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, and class. Given their own personal identities (e.g., women, Chinese, gay, Lutheran) and experiences, these topics mattered to the students individually; however, they were also contextualized by systems of advantage and disadvantage.

For example, one of the ways Elaine practiced courage during our project was by coming out to her friends, college admissions staff, and our research team as gay. The risks associated with her coming out stories were based on patterns of homophobia and heterosexism that we had all seen in our schools and communities. Elaine's personal identity was politically charged not because of whom she is attracted to, but because of larger system of hegemonic heteronormativity that marginalized sexual orientations that fall outside of the dominant group. Therefore, it would have been a non-story if one of the other student researchers came out about being heterosexual. The risks of telling counter-hegemonic stories are real and worth consideration. Elaine shared with me that she had once been punched and called derogatory name in reference to her sexual orientation (she did not want to repeat the name). As the project facilitator, I was inspired by the student researchers sense of fearlessness, even as I worried that they might need to temper it in certain situations where the consequences of hegemony were greater.

Several of the student researchers also spoke about hesitating before identifying as a feminist on college applications. The student researchers shared, that although they had hesitated, and recognized that there might be consequences to identifying as a feminist, that the risk was worth being true to their identity and beliefs. Melissa said,

I was writing on the women's empowerment group about being a feminist and I thought, "Do I really want to draw attention to this?" I had that doubt. And then I was like, wait, definitely!" But you're trained to think that someone somewhere will take that negatively.

Like Melissa, Leslie shared,

I wrote an essay about feminism for a [college scholarship] and I debated submitting it... But then I thought ... feminism is an integral part of me and definitely an integral part of the way my peers view me, so I decided to submit it. I did not get that thing that I was applying for, so I have no idea if that impacted it or not, but honestly, I feel good about submitting it because I know I was being true to myself.

Regardless of the outcome, the student researchers reported being proud after choosing to honestly claim their feminist identities. However, Leslie does not know if identifying as a feminist was the reason she did not receive the scholarship. Whether a marginalized identity impacts the outcome of a decision, is not a consideration for dominant groups. Likewise, the student researchers shared stories about wondering if their gender identities caused them to get overlooked for science and computer programs. Elaine shared that she often experienced lower expectations as an athlete because of her Asian-American identity and her identity as young woman. Below is an excerpt from an essay she wrote on this topic.

Elaine's Scholarship Essay (All State Shot Put Thrower)

May 2015

...As an Asian-American girl enrolled in multiple AP courses and deeply involved in my school's band program, I should have come to expect the judgment of my new peers as I entered the first day of practice to throw the shotput and discus for Rock Bridge High School's track and field team, events that require intense speed and power. Standing next to the other girls, I could almost feel myself practically shrinking next to their

built frames and looming heights, and I could tell by the way the coach critically looked me up and down that there was no doubt in either of our minds as to who had the upper hand....During partner drills, while everyone else paired up quickly, I was always everyone's last choice...My stereotype defined who they thought me to be as a meek Asian girl, but that wasn't who I was.

...I enrolled in Advanced Strength Training, a class full of hefty football players and strong female basketball players. There I felt the same judgment... Without even giving me a chance to lift, they already decided I didn't have what it took to make gains...Once during a workout, I fell doing a hang clean, one of the more advanced Olympic lifts. Snickers filled the room....Sometimes I would go to my designated rack and my straps would be gone. Sometimes other athletes would find it amusing to cover my view of the mirror during Romanian deadlifts. It was difficult to keep going when I knew my peers were only expecting me to fail, and there were times when I didn't want to have anything to do with athletics for this reason.

The judgement and bullying, Elaine experienced in athletics was gendered and raced (“as an Asian-American girl”). I think it is important to note that the adults in the system also failed to intervene in the bullying and judgment. Even worse, Elaine perceived that her coach initially shared in the student stereotypes. “I could tell by the way the coach critically looked me up and down...” Elaine told us, although it was very difficult, she used this unequal treatment as motivation to work hard and “prove them wrong.” During

the course of our project, Elaine was named “All State” in the shot-put and went on to win a gold medal at our state games in the Olympic lifting category. These conversations and experiences within systems of power and privilege, were emotionally charged. When the student researchers chose to practice courage and speak back to these systems, an outcome of doing so was often more intense emotions. In the following section, I discuss the roles emotions, and often intense emotions played in our work around courage.

Courage is Emotionally Charged

We found being courageous was an emotional experience. As a project on social-emotional needs and affective education, emotions were central to many of our discussions and work. During this project, we learned more about the ways emotions and vulnerability were connected to courage. In particular, we identified a cyclical relationship between strong emotions and vulnerability. Being vulnerable caused strong emotions, having strong emotions caused us to feel vulnerable which in turn contributed to more strong emotions. Melissa’s journal below speaks to this cycle of vulnerability and strong emotions.

Melissa’s Journal (Presidential Scholar)

5.15.15

...I started to have a full-blown panic attack in the back seat. And it lasted like 10 minutes and I couldn’t breathe and it was horrible. But it was worse because it almost felt like I was proving the point. I don’t know why I reacted so badly. Most of the time when people upset me I don’t let them know unless I’m reacting jokingly angry or something. No one has ever seen me have a panic attack, because I don’t get them as often as I do the

unnoticeable kind.... And my friends have never just [seen me] completely out of control in a blind panic when I feel like I'm about to die. I don't like feeling weak and I don't like making other people feel bad...I just want for all my feelings to go away sometimes. I feel trapped by them and I hate feeling sad or guilty or just overemotional. But I can't help it and I can't control them so I try to minimize their impact on other people and I've been doing a terrible job and yeah.

Melissa's journal reflects the masked affective crisis. "No one has ever seen me have a panic attack because I don't get them as often as I do the unnoticeable kind." She felt compelled to hide her emotions, particularly her strongest and most difficult emotions. "Most of the time when people upset me, I don't let them know it." She associated being emotional with being weak and she feels guilty over having such strong emotions and shame about the ways they are interfering with her friendships and relationships. However, holding in, hiding, or masking these emotions seemed to lead to real physical consequences such as panic attacks. In addition to Melissa, Jessica, Leslie and Faith all also shared panic attack stories during our project. The volume of these stories, suggests that within our research team, feeling unable to process strong emotions during periods of high stress and pressure was a significant (and shared) struggle.

As a research team, we discussed how strong emotions were gendered; being emotional was associated with femininity and because of hegemonic masculinity that meant being weaker and less capable. As a result, the student researchers shared that they viewed crying or having powerful emotions as a sign of weakness. One afternoon, Elaine and I were talking in the quiet annex outside of the gifted room and she started crying.

Afterward she apologized. I asked what she was apologizing for and she said, “For crying in front of you. I told you I would never do that.” As a research team we discussed the ways emotions and being emotional were seen as gendered experiences. Namely being emotional was seen as being a woman (or girl) which translated to being weaker. Even as the student researchers and I objected to this dominant storyline, we often struggled to reclaim our difficult emotions.

Elaine’s Journal (Track and Field Star)

5. 12.15

...I hate crying is because society makes it so that females are the emotionally weak and unstable ones because they tend to shed more tears than guys and because of that, men are not just viewed as “physically stronger” but “emotionally stronger/stable.” I find that VERY insulting, so I guess my hate for crying stems from trying to prove the stigma wrong that I’m not a cry baby female who is unstable and can’t handle my emotions because I have hormones and deal with mother nature every month. Forreal. Why can’t guys get over themselves and cry? Who cares if their eyes produce salty water?

It turned out, during the course of the project, we *all* shed tears. Many of us, including me, were surprised at some of the tears that fell. The more our research team paid attention to the outcomes of our strong emotions, the more our emotions surprised us with their power. As we shared our stories, particularly our more vulnerable stories, we were often caught off guard by the power of the emotions these stories elicited. Elaine

talked about this in the next section of her journal where she shared how she had to “fight back tears” in front of her coach.

Emotionally, I'd like to think I'm always strong. I don't like tears.

Although, as much as I hate to admit it, Elaine Pho can produce water from her eyes depending on the circumstances. I always say it's okay for people to cry, and I truly believe it. If one of my friends started crying over the smallest thing, I would still give them a hug and tell them everything will be alright...Although I think it is okay for people to cry, I don't think it is okay for me to cry. I hate doing it, and it embarrasses me when I get to the point where I have to fight back tears. That track meet this past Friday was one of them. I don't even like to cry in front of my own mom. Having to hold them back in front of my coach was awful. I feel weak when I do cry, and I also feel like people always expect me to be the strong one who keeps my head up when all cray [the craziness] breaks loose.

Elaine and I discussed this particular journal at some length. We talked about wanting to normalize emotions for our peers who identified as young men, as well as for athletes, and high-achieving women, such as ourselves. While Elaine wanted to help normalize strong emotions, including crying, for others, she was not comfortable sharing her own emotions. Elaine was not the only one on our research team to hold herself to this double standard (it is okay for you to cry, but not me). We predicted that if we all became more comfortable with being emotional, we would all be healthier. Sharing our difficult emotions was a courageous act in this research project. It felt uncomfortable and risky (we wondered how we would be judged). However, like other courageous acts,

including personal story sharing, and asking for help, we found we usually felt stronger and more connected as a group when we chose to share instead of mask or guard.

Although it was very uncomfortable for us, we decided to try practicing opening up about our emotions.

Sometimes, such as in the reflection Melissa shared about her panic attack, the student researchers admitted that they felt their emotions were “too powerful.” There were times when the student researchers spoke about being frustrated or controlled by their intense emotions. For example, before commencement, when Leslie reflected back on her senior year she shared,

I think my emotional volatility has had a negative effect on many of my relationships this year with my family and friends. I regret that I have been all over the place this year. But, I think that this year has been particularly stressful on me so I have been even more emotionally weak than normal.

I encouraged the student researchers (and myself) to challenge that hegemonic belief that being strong emotionally meant being guarded. Instead we discussed how being strong emotionally might really mean being open and honest about the power of emotions.

Below is a partial dialogue between Elaine and me on crying and strength.

Kathryn: I wonder if there isn't a strength in being able to cry in front of others,

to be okay to say, this is a strong feeling I am having right now.

Elaine: I guess there's strength in being able to cry in front of others. I personally don't view others as weak when they cry because I completely get it. When you're sad, you're sad and it's nice to see that some people

don't care what others think when they cry. I only view myself as weak when I cry because I feel like people expect me to "be strong."

I suggested that it takes courage to share difficult or intense emotions, particularly in a society where high achieving young women feel they need to hide their emotions.

Throughout our project, we came back to these comments to reconstruct new definitions of strength, vulnerability, and guardedness.

The student researchers and I began to explore what it would look like to practice approaching intense emotions with strength and courage. Allowing ourselves to feel, own, and name strong emotions became another act of courage we identified during this project. This was very personal work. For example, I began to notice my own inner-dialogue when I found myself crying. I noticed that my first response (like the student researchers) was to try to stop the tears immediately. After our dialogues as a research team, I changed my approach. Instead, I tried naming and affirming the emotion I was having. In this way, during our project, I allowed myself to mourn my aunt's passing. I allowed myself to feel sad, angry, frightened, and worried when a student came to me in my summer seminar and shared that she had been sexually abused. The tears that came with these emotions often happened privately, but naming and affirming my feelings helped me process them more completely.

In addition to exploring how we experienced intense emotions, we also started paying attention to when we experienced these emotions. The student researchers spoke of the structures of high stakes and high stress, high schools, the particularities of being gifted/perfectionist/high-achieving, and the nature of the college applications and decisions process as antecedents for many of their intense emotions, particularly the

panic attacks experienced by more than half of our research team. In the next section I explore this high stakes, high stress, near-college context, in relation to our broad theme of courage.

Precipice and the Possibility for Courage

As a research team we often talked about the precipice as a metaphor to illustrate the emotional state students experience in the period between finishing high school and starting college. Initially, I hoped our team would be able to reconstruct the precipice experience to that of a springboard experience. As a teacher, I wanted to alleviate struggle and help young women reframe challenging experiences as positive ones. This has long been my first reaction to challenge and crisis. I thought back to my early days in gifted education. I remember as a new educational leader how worried (and surprised) I was by the struggles of the inaugural empowerment group. I wanted to ease all of their hardships.

Through this research project, I have learned however, that one of the issues in educational leadership is not that the challenges are too big, but that the school system ill-prepares students with skills such as courage, self-care, strength, vulnerability, compassion and connection to face those challenges. As our team worked through this project, the metaphor of the precipice remained salient to our transition experiences and our lessons on courage. We started by learning to recognize precipices, the most obvious one being high school graduation. However, the more our team learned about courage and crisis, the more apparent it became that challenge is both unavoidable and often deeply beneficial. Courage, like other skills only becomes salient when it is used. The day after the commencement ceremony Faith shared the following journal with me.

Faith's Journal (Valedictorian, Recent High School Graduate)

5.23.15

A precipice makes me picture you are at the top of a mountain/path that you've climbed and you're looking out over the whole world and you see so many different things and you're unsure of what to do with it all. Previously your view has been obscured or you haven't been able to picture what it would be like once you got to the top because you were so focused on the journey there. But now you're at the top and if you want to take a chance in any one of those things you'd have to jump off the precipice which takes a LOT of courage. But at the same time, jumping off is the only way to move forward, because you cannot stand at the precipice forever, nor should you. I feel like that really describes our high school to college transition.

The student researchers frequently spoke of the transition from high school to college as a precipice. Although that precipice was accompanied by intense emotions, such as those outlined in the above section, the precipice also became an opportunity to practice courage. "If you want to take a chance in any one of those things, you'd have to jump off the precipice which takes a LOT of courage." The high school to college transition was the first (general) precipice we identified, because it was so central to our study. However, once we had adopted this language around transition, we found other precipice experiences (including more specific precipices within the college transition process). Precipice experiences included any major transition in which courage was required to navigate the uncertainty. With this operational definition, precipice

experiences, and therefore opportunities to practice courage, were everywhere. Once we had identified precipices (e.g., making a college decision, moving away, having a surgery, mourning a loved one), we explored how we could use them as opportunities to practice courage.

During our project, I reflected on my own life and considered my graduations from high school, college, and graduate school. I considered the precipice I am currently approaching as I near my final defense. I paused remembering more personal precipices: my marriage, the adoption of our son, the death of two of my grandparents, the birth of my daughter. I thought of the imposter phenomenon I had personally experienced at each new job I had taken, including the position I accepted at the close of our project as the Director of Academic Affairs for a K-12 school system. It turned out that I also had used courage, compassion, and connection to navigate each of these precipices. I shared this reflection with the student researchers. Melissa told me, “I AM SO EXCITED FOR YOU! You are the one who's taught me the most about making transitions through life so it seems fitting that we are going through one at the same time.” Melissa’s suggestion that I was a sort of *precipice mentor* (my term) gave me the confidence to approach my first day in my new position with a more courageous outlook.

Precipices were often marked by positive life changes (e.g., getting accepted to college). However, they were sometimes initiated by negative life changes (e.g., a parent losing a job, an abusive relationship, a new medical diagnosis). We referred to these precipice initiating events as crises. This is important, as I am not suggesting that individual acts of courage alone is all it takes to “get through” the varied precipices young people encounter, particularly those initiated by crisis. Further, some of the crises

that the student researchers shared, were products of broader systems of inequality including sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism, There were several times during my teaching career where violence, aggression or bullying necessitated that I work with outside agencies, including law enforcement, to ensure the safety of one or more of the high achieving young women in my program. Two of the students on this research team are included in those times. To suggest that social skills or affective education would have been a sufficient intervention is ridiculous. However, even in these extreme cases supporting young people to develop the affective tools of courage, compassion, and connection is an important part of moving past crisis. Our research team used these skills as important starting places for processing crisis, practicing self-care, and taking action.

Viewing crises and transition as part of a precipice landscape led to additional research cycles in our project. Collectively our research team believed that schools had not given them enough language or an appropriate skillset to process the precipices or crises in their lives. As our understanding of courage developed throughout this project, we used the idea of the precipice as a personal and collective challenge for our team. We actively looked for opportunities (large and small) to practice courage and encouraged courage in our research teammates. Often before a challenging situation, we sent a group message, wishing the researcher courage. I personally received some of these myself on my first day in my new position. As we refined and practiced what it meant to us be courageous, we attempted to operationalize that definition in our personal lives and groups meetings.

Once we had done this, we used our new knowledge to take action. In this way, we moved from information, to personal reflection, to group dialogue, to public action,

which then prompted us to seek more information, reflection and dialogues. The student researchers accomplished this through leading workshops, organizing action projects, and sharing personal stories. This work also resulted in new knowledge, including vocabulary (e.g., crisis and precipice), strategies (connection, storytelling, and self-care), and storylines about the social-emotional needs and the varied experiences of high-achieving young women. I discuss the ways we used storytelling to share this new knowledge in the following section.

Practicing Courage through Storytelling

As discussed earlier, the student researchers and I worked on reconstructing our definition of courage to the connecting fabric between strength and vulnerability (e.g., emotional fortitude). The primary way we practiced courage in this project was through personal storytelling. Our storytelling work continued in the feminist tradition of viewing personal stories as powerful political and ideological tools. Stories offer the capacity to humanize experience and difference. They are a common denominator across the human condition. They have been used to illustrate, teach, entertain, and to bring people together. Through our radio storytelling, I saw the student researchers' stories do all of these things.

An Excerpt from Claudia's Radio Story

Right now, I am the only girl in my electronics class of 20 students. I feel like I need to make them feel comfortable around me because I am a woman. I try to only talk about topics I know the guys are interested in, and I stop myself from talking about some of the things I like. I never talk to them about shoes. And I love to talk about shoes.

As I transition to college and then into the workforce, I believe it will be more of the same. Women are not choosing to go into or stay in STEM fields: science, technology, engineering and math. And my question is: Why?

Claudia used her personal experiences to develop her story on the larger issue of underrepresentation of women in STEM. However, there is a tension between buying into the dominant storyline (“I love to talk about shoes”) and wanting to counter the dominant storyline (“I am the only girl in my electronics class.”). In our team dialogues we discussed how our lived experiences occur within this tension. For Claudia, identifying as a woman and a scientist is both messy and personal. Telling her story in an honest way that acknowledges this messiness (e.g., loving shoes and being a feminist) humanized her argument. This was precisely the aim of our radio workshops with Making Waves. Below is a little background on our partnership with Making Waves.

Making Waves

Shortly before we started this research project, I received an email from Kelsey Kupferer, an alumna from my first year teaching at Barnwood. She was now a graduate student and wanted to start an educational youth radio program called “Making Waves.” She wondered if I would be interested in working with her and Michaela Tucker, an undergraduate student leader. After talking to the student researchers, I asked Kelsey if she would be open to launching Making Waves with the student research team. Kelsey and Michaela became role models, thought partners, and radio storytelling guides to all of us. The ways the students connected to Kelsey and Michaela were important in supporting the courageous stories the students shared.

The work we engaged in through Making Waves was purposefully tied to the themes and quandaries in the larger research project. In fact, radio storytelling gave us a forum for us to practice many of these themes including courage, vulnerability, and openness. The stories we shared were personally and politically charged. However, as we were exploring our own lived experiences, these stories happened (or were happening) within the material conditions of our real lives and the fabric of our current relationships. Below are two excerpts related to Melissa's radio story on her complex relationship with her mother and her Chinese culture.

Kathryn's Journal (Mother/Researcher)

5.27.15

Lilah (my three-year-old daughter), the student researchers and I are sitting in the library at the university journalism school. It is Melissa's turn to read us her story. I notice her suck in a quick breath. She is visibly uncomfortable talking to us about her experiences with race and culture. She and I have talked about this before. I know Melissa really wants to tell this story, but isn't sure what the other student researchers will think. She also worries about how much to divulge on her difficult relationship with her mother. She's edited and pared down the story many times. I smile at her, trying to send her some encouragement across the table. I want to talk to her again quietly, however, Lilah interrupts us with knock knock jokes. We all laugh. Maybe that was all the encouragement she needed. Melissa shares her story. This version of the story is further censored from earlier drafts, but it still talks poignantly about her complex relationship

with her Chinese culture and her own feelings of shame around race and ethnicity.

Melissa struggled with her story and revised it many times. She aimed to temper her disclosure in a way that still valued her relationships with her family. Melissa's mother not only knew about our work with the radio stories, she even let Melissa interview her for the project. Melissa navigated a fuzzy line between disclosure as courage and disclosure as shame. She often turned to the student researchers, me, and our readings on wholehearted living to negotiate that line with both courage and grace.

Excerpt from Melissa's Final Radio Story

When I was really young, I had a chore we called sai yifu. This meant I would lug out our wet laundry to my back patio, and hang them to dry on the clotheslines we strung up. This was one of my favorite activities to do when I was very young. But sai yifu also became my first experience with shame about my Chinese heritage.

Over the years, I began to dread this chore more than anything else. I grew up in a well-off and mainly white neighborhood. Nobody else I knew had to hang their clothes to dry. When asked to sai yifu, I would do anything to get out of it. And when that didn't work, I used to wait until nighttime to sneak out and begin. Looking back, I realize that much of my childhood was dominated by a constant, inescapable sense of shame.

It wasn't just sai yifu. I quickly learned to be embarrassed by almost everything about me. I wore shirts with Chinese words on them, I sometimes brought rice and seaweed for lunch, and my parents frequently

clashed with everyone from PTA moms to waiters. I was ashamed of the lingering bits of my Chinese heritage I couldn't "shake off" to fit in.

The students knew that being vulnerable was emotionally risky, but they also believed that being honest and courageous were necessary in order for their stories to make a difference. In fact, as we unpacked emotional fortitude, we found that accepting the risk (e.g., judgment, and changed relationships) was important in connecting vulnerability to strength. Using courage, the student researchers hoped to contribute counter-hegemonic stories that both complicated and unmasked the affective crisis for high achieving young women. Stories have the capacity to bring people together. Personal disclosure taught us as much about courage as public disclosure taught us about activism. In one of our group dialogues, Faith shared,

I decided to talk about my struggle with anorexia, and the reason I decided to talk about that was twofold. First, talking about what I've been through, and what I'm still going through, helps me to deal with it and to process it. And second, I think one of the hardest things for me is that anorexia is really misunderstood. And so many people who go through it feel shamed into not talking about it. So if me telling my story makes them feel like, "Oh, hey, she doesn't feel ashamed of talking about it, I shouldn't feel ashamed of talking about it, there's nothing to be ashamed of," then my story will have accomplished its goal.

The students chose difficult and personal topics for their stories. Melissa shared about shame. Claudia and Leslie both reported on gender discrimination. Jessica wrote a story about rejection. Faith shared about her experiences with anorexia. To date, the

research team's stories have reached over 1,500 listeners and they continue to receive weekly hits and engagements. We have all heard from students, parents, teachers, and other community members that our stories "struck a chord." Kelsey and Michaela have used the success of this first season of Making Waves to launch a second season with another group of student reporters. Leslie has already reached out to the new group of student reporters to encourage them to practice courage. The student researchers were invited for a roundtable at another NPR-affiliate show. We hope that their stories and work around storytelling might contribute to a positive ripple effect. Below is a description of other instances where we have already seen the ripple effects of courage.

The Ripple Effect of Practicing Courage

The student researchers shared stories of how their acts of courage sometimes led to other acts of courage or new courageous conversations. For example, Elaine told me she reached out to Melissa after she heard her radio story on Chinese culture and shame. She said that as a Vietnamese woman she related to so many of the points Melissa had made. However, she had never talked about those things. Melissa's story became an invitation to start that conversation. I observed this ripple effect of practicing courage, leading to more practicing courage multiple times throughout our research project.

One afternoon, a few weeks into our project, Leslie was working in the gifted resource room. As she was working, a group of high school students began talking about weight. A young man shared that he was "disgusted by overweight people." Before I could intervene a few other young women spoke up, asking him pointed questions about health and gender. Although he didn't rescind or apologize, the young man struggled to

defend his position. A few minutes later the bell rang and the group scattered. Leslie called over to him. She had not yet participated in the conversation.

The young man walked over to her. I wondered what she was going to say and was struck by her courage, when she asked, “Do I disgust you?”

He floundered, but choked out “of course not.”

Leslie said, “That’s the argument you were making.”

At that moment Jessica, Claudia and Melissa came running into the gifted room. They were oblivious to what had just happened and had some exciting news to share. Leslie flashed them a giant smile and enveloped Melissa in a hug. The young man left the room.

When the young man arrived to school early the next morning, I sat down next to him to process what had happened. I was prepared with a great teaching conversation. Instead, before I said anything, he told me.

I made a mistake yesterday. That was a really dumb thing I said. I could see that it was stupid pretty quickly, but I didn’t know how to back down. Then when Leslie asked if I disgusted her, I realized just how big I’d messed up. Last night I called her and everyone else who was in the room and apologized. I’ll be more careful about the things I say.

Leslie’s courageous approach in this scenario demonstrated how making the issue personal could lead to a new perspective. While Leslie’s courageous approach the day before had inspired me, I was even more moved by the impact it had had on the young man. Leslie taught her classmate to think more deeply about the implications of his words. She also inspired him to engage in another courageous act--apologizing. Later that

day I also talked to Leslie about what had happened. I did not have a good teaching conversation ready for that exchange. In fact, it was blatantly obvious to me that she had been the better teacher in that moment. She told me that it had taken courage to make the conversation personal, but that she also knew that might “wake him up” to what he was saying.

Throughout our project, we came to understand that courage often required saying and doing the difficult but right task, the one that requires strength (usually emotional strength). We talked about risk, how we often felt vulnerable in sharing difficult truths (e.g., battling with anorexia, feeling ashamed about culture, and being bullied). However, we saw great rewards (e.g., stronger connections, and inspiring courage in others) from taking these risks. As we practiced courage, we became more courageous and in turn we looked for more opportunities to show emotional fortitude around the issues we cared about.

Consistent with our research cycle trajectory of moving from the personal (micro) to the community (macro), the day that our radio stories aired, Faith decided she wanted to share her story via additional channels. She used social media (Facebook and Instagram) to reach a significant audience. Her Instagram account is publicly viewable. Her Facebook account is visible to over 1,500 contacts. She posted the following text (and the two mentioned photos) to both of these social media accounts.

This is the best kind of transformation Tuesday. In the left photo I was 99 pounds, depressed, and quickly starving to death. In the right photo I'm healthy and on my way to accepting and being happy with who I am and the body God gave me. It's been a LONG (and still continuing) battle and

I'm posting about this today because today my radio story about eating disorders and their misconceptions/stigma aired on [local NPR affiliate].

Faith wanted to use this opportunity as a springboard to bring greater awareness to these issues that were personally important to her. In her post she shared her personal struggle with her friends, classmates, teachers, pastors and relatives.

There's a stigma that if you're struggling (especially with mental health issues) it's your own fault, and that is simply NOT true. We don't always get to choose our battles. If there's one thing I learned from this and want to share, it's that EVERYONE is fighting something under the surface that you probably know nothing about. The best thing to do is to assume nothing, but instead listen, love, and treat everyone with the kindness and open mind they deserve. You never know how far a kind word or a hug will save someone or how much a quick judgment and false assumptions can hurt. #EndMentalHealthStigma#ItsNotYourFault

Faith's post garnered a tremendous response. Over 220 people "liked" the post and 34 people commented on her Facebook account. Faith responded to each comment. The Instagram post resulted in another 35 comments and 169 "likes." That is an engagement of over 400 people in Faith's networks all of whom were talking about mental health and eating disorders because of her personal vulnerability and courage.

The comments were all supportive. In fact, I saw in many of these notes the ripple effect. Faith's courage in sharing her own personal social-emotional challenges including struggling with depression and anxiety, led to others opening up, in some cases for the first time to such a big audience, about their own struggles with mental health. In this

way Faith's personal experience, and act of courage directly contributed to an unmasking of the affective crisis. For example, one person wrote, "Thank you for sharing this...As you may know, I have my own struggles with mental illness. I hope your path to the future is positive and that you continue to go forward. I'm glad you are recovering." Another person wrote, "Thanks for being open and sharing. May your sharing and words of wisdom be helpful to others. Love and prayers!" Still another, "Very well said. You are helping so many people that you will never meet because of your strength and honesty in sharing your story. And for fighting the stigma. I opened my "closet" when I did a Lenten sharing at church years ago and talked about my life-long struggle with depression. Prayers and love for you and your terrific future!"

Another outcome of courageous storytelling that the student researchers shared with me was hope. The student researchers shared that as they connected to other people through courageous storytelling, they often noticed they were more hopeful about human nature or even their own ability to heal. For example, towards the end of our project, a student from Leslie's new college reached out to her over social media. As they talked, Leslie shared many of the lessons and themes from our research project, including vulnerability, achievement, hope, and self-doubt, with her new classmate. She was excited to tell me this about their exchange.

Leslie's Journal (Ivy League Student)

7.8. 2015

I firmly believe that the assumption that successful people always have their lives together is really holding us back and holding affective education back. Why should more money be put into gifted education, they

are already smart and successful? That's what a lot of people think. They are wrong. We shared a lot of personal information and we were both very vulnerable. Through that discourse, we discovered that we had a lot of the same fears about [Ivy League School].

...And then he asked me "so what gives you hope?" That question blindsided me. At first, I didn't know what to say. Because just a few weeks ago, I would have said that there wasn't a lot of hope. Just a few weeks ago, I would have said that I think I am going to fail out of [Ivy League School]--don't ask me. But that wasn't what I wanted to say. So something changed. Something inside of me has changed so that I am not so pessimistic and negative. Don't get me wrong, I still have self-doubts, but I realized tonight that I am getting better. And that made me happy.

Leslie's observations and reflections that her work on courage, connection and self-care had led to a happier and more hopeful self-concept is significant. In this narrative, Leslie also speaks to the persistence of self-doubt among high achieving students, and the misconception that gifted students do not need affective education. "Why should more money be put into gifted education, they are already smart and successful? That's what a lot of people think. They are wrong." The student researchers used storytelling, vulnerability and strength to practice courage and make a difference on issues that were important to their personal experiences and their social-emotional needs. They worked to make a difference for others, but often through that process, they found our work continued to influence them on a personal level. In engaging in this work, they found they were more courageous than they had thought. They opened up to our research

team, their families, their peers, the community, and even to strangers. In doing so, they found that emotional strength rests, not in masking difficult feelings, but in opening up about them.

I opened this chapter with a discussion on their interrelated nature of courage, connection and self-care. I am closing the chapter in this same place. Both Faith's social media posts and Leslie's journal speak to all three of our themes. Both young women were courageous enough to talk openly about their struggles with self-care with the hope of forming healthy connections with others. Leslie connected with a stranger who could relate to the complexities of being a gifted student in the high stakes and high stress, high school to college transition. Faith used her connections to open a broader dialogue with her extended personal networks around mental health. In Chapter 5, I continue exploring the interrelated nature of the three themes, but with a focus on teasing out the ways connection and connectedness worked throughout our project.

CHAPTER FIVE FINDINGS: CONNECTION

Kathryn's Journal (Project Facilitator)

6.1.15

During this project, we were invited to one another's homes and met each other's parents... In a crowd of five hundred green gowns, we sought each other out at graduation for a group hug and photo. Snapshots of our research team are still tacked to our bulletin boards, set as lock screens on our phones, and mark a connection that we will long value.

While I knew that rapport, trust, and team-building were essential for PAR projects, I did not anticipate how the process of connecting with each other would help us better understand the affective needs of high achieving young women. Further, I could not have guessed that when asked, the student researchers would all say that connecting with the women on this team was the most important value they gained from our project. Learning the importance and potential of connection were significant outcomes of our research project. Within this project, connection refers to feelings of belonging, closeness, and relatedness. Through our work together, we forged powerful relationships we would not have otherwise. Those relationships mattered. Connection facilitated our group's ability to engage deeply in the personal nature of this research project and to then apply these lessons to create positive change in our communities.

Belonging

Belonging to our research team was a source of comfort and inspiration for all of us. However, the evolution of our community, as well as the other relationships that influenced the lived experiences of our research team was not always linear and positive.

These complex but powerful relationships are discussed in greater detail in this chapter. In Chapter 4, I discussed the ways courage, connection, and self-care worked as interrelated themes through our work. In this chapter, I explore how connection was a catalyst for the dynamic process that caused those interrelationships (see Figure 4.1). That is, before we could be courageous, we had to feel safe, which included feeling like we belonged to a group, in this case, the group we belonged to, was our research team. Likewise, before the student researchers could develop or improve their self-care practices, they first needed a healthy and supportive peer group (often our research team), a mentor (often me), or other close relationship (e.g., usually another team member or their mother). Faith reflected,

I think one of the biggest things this project has done has given me a group of friends that really understands some of the issues that I've gone through/am going through more than others. All of the girls in this group are very mature for their age and very gifted, so we all tend to have similar insecurities/fears and those insecurities/fears tend to be different than most other people that I interact with. It's nice because it's very easy to look around (especially when we were in high school) and be like "what's wrong with me, why am I so different?" But in this group I have found other people who understand and I'm so grateful!

All of the student researchers referenced the positive support, emotions, and connection they felt by belonging to this research team. In fact, now that they are in college, they continue to reference their membership in this community as important. We have

continued with the group text and are planning a holiday research-team reunion during the student researchers' winter break.

Relatedness

The student researchers frequently remarked that they had thought they were “*the only*” high achieving woman who experienced self-doubt, had anxiety, or struggled with the pressure of high stress schools, or other experiences and emotions we were surprised to find we shared. For example, Leslie learned that not only were many of her doubts shared by others in the group, but that some of her best friends had also experienced panic attacks and debilitating moments of doubt. Identifying as a team of women was another source of relatedness in our group. Below is a partial transcript of the student researchers discussing this:

Elaine: Being a woman, female, girl - all those things –

All: [Laugh]

Elaine: I feel like in high school I had to prove myself a little bit more than other people. An example would be strength training... And so I was learning new lifts, things I had never done before, using light weights, and I felt like they [young men] were judging me a little bit. And there was one time I was looking at my form in the mirror - you have to - and there was this guy blocking my view. He knew I was looking in the mirror. And I kept moving back and forth trying to look at myself. And he kept moving. And I was like alright, you're funny. And so that gave me more motivation to get better and work harder.

Claudia: I am the only girl in my electronics class. I think as a woman, there are a lot of stereotypes that you either have to avoid, or live up to, depending on your perspective.

Leslie: My gender impacted me much more when I was younger because I hadn't established myself as an intelligent, high-achieving individual yet. So there were a lot of people who doubted me. My turning point was when I entered the gifted program.

All: [Nodding]

Melisa: We have a sense of solidarity with other girls. You want to help them out a little bit. But then you also feel sense of competition. And you have to get yourself out of that.

In finding common points of intersection between being high-achieving and being women, including competition, identifying as gifted, and feeling like “I had to prove myself a little bit more” the student researchers felt more related to each other. While there is a not a single, generalized account of what it means to be a high achieving young woman, the student researchers related to many of each other’s experiences as young women. For example, there were important parallels in the “stereotypes” and “doubts” that Elaine encountered as a woman power-lifter, similar to those Claudia experienced as the only young woman in her electronics class. This relatedness resulted in deeper connections with our research team and the sense of “solidarity” that Melissa references.

We did not only connect as high achieving students and women, we also connected based on culture, religion, and additional identities discussed in this project. For example, after Elaine heard Melissa’s radio story on the shame she felt around her

Chinese heritage, Elaine reached out to say “she felt that too.” Melissa and Elaine then talked about the ways their experiences as Vietnamese and Chinese young women were both similar and different. For example, there was a special moment of closeness at my house one afternoon when Elaine taught Melissa how to make Vietnamese spring rolls. As they were rolling their spring rolls, they swapped family peanut sauce recipes and shared stories about the similarities of their family dinners. Both young women also educated our team about the ways their cultures, as well as stereotypes (and in some instances, experiences of discrimination) about their cultures, influenced their experiences and identities as young women. These related experiences led to a deeper friendship between Elaine and Melissa.

Closeness

Working together and having shared experiences brought us closer together, but disclosure and vulnerable storytelling deepened our closeness to each other. While our closeness was a source of comfort, it was also the beginning of new ways of thinking about affective development, difference, and relationships. The student researchers frequently commented on how powerful it was to learn that they were not alone in their feelings of self-doubt or imposter phenomenon. Their fears, anxieties, and worries were lessened when shared. Through talking and working as a team, we found countless reasons to connect with each other. These reasons were grounded in an empathetic attempt to try and understand each other’s lived experiences, both those that were similar, and those that were different.

In addition to finding points in common, it was just as valuable to learn that we were also connecting with women whose experiences and identities were often different.

Elaine was Claudia's first openly gay friend. Faith was the first person many of the student researchers knew who had struggled with anorexia. Melissa shared powerful stories colored with both shame and pride about her Chinese culture. Jessica challenged our team to think more critically about the financial costs associated with high school graduation and the college applications process. One hot, summer afternoon, Faith and I sat in my backyard to record our last dialogue for this project. I asked her if her views on feminism had changed as a result of our project. She hesitated and then said,

Actually yes. This might sound silly, but... I know Claudia is a Republican. Before this project I didn't think you could be both a republican and a feminist, but I learned that Claudia has a lot of the same views on gender equality as the rest of us. She just comes at it from a different way. It was helpful to learn about new kinds of feminism and ways to be a feminist.

Instead of assuming someone is *either or* (e.g., either a republican or a feminist), we learned, as we connected to each other, that more often people are *both and* (e.g., high achieving and insecure). As a result, we learned to assume less and listen more, which brought us back to our commitment to personal storytelling. We walked away from this project with new, more developed, and more accepting ideas about people who identify with different political, religious, ethnic, and national identities.

The Momentum of Connection

Once our research team had experienced the power of connection, we felt compelled to connect with others. In this way, once initiated, connection often gained momentum and led to deeper relationships and new relationships. For example, our

relationships with each other led to a desire to connect with and support, more high achieving young women outside of our research team. Jessica reflected that our research, ...made me more aware of how unhealthy the pressures gifted girls like us put on themselves, and how it doesn't have to be this way. We can do things to change the norm and help others—like how we gave the workshops at [the governor's school].

Like the workshops Jessica mentions, connection served as an impetus for several research cycles in our project. As with our other research cycles, this work of identifying and reflecting on a problem that mattered at a personal level, followed by planning ways to address that problem, and then taking action to offer solutions, followed a trajectory from micro to meso to macro. I describe specific examples of this trajectory later in this chapter. Once the student researchers found ways to support one another, they then sought out ways to connect with and support larger and more diverse communities, such as when Jessica initiated a cap and gown drive for low-income seniors and in the production of their radio stories. Leslie shared that she hoped her radio story connected with others.

I really do hope...that some of the listening audience heard our stories and became all that more aware about many of the problems facing teenage girls today. Adults can be clueless sometimes and I hope our honest dialogue opened their eyes to the truth. I do know my uncle listened to them and even though he is an old conservative...he thought our stories were good.

Connection and the desire to connect more purposefully or more broadly resulted in a wide-range of action projects.

Below are some of reflections on the ways Elaine saw connection as “*blurring lines*” between people and how connection influenced the ways she initiated and maintained relationships with younger students.

Elaine’s Journal

6.15. 2015

I never really saw myself as a mentor to be honest, but looking back on senior year, I see many moments where I was one...Being the drum major allowed me to build strong relationships and earn respect from many individuals in band and trust developed from there. There were times when my kiddos would ask for advice whether it be in band, nerves for an audition, classes, how to approach a teacher, things going on at home, and even... relationships which is actually pretty flattering that they trust me enough to come to me for guidance.

Through track and band, Elaine took on leadership roles as she connected with her peers, particularly younger peers. These relationships shifted Elaine’s self-concept about her own ability to be a mentor and leader. While her mentorship and leadership were based largely on trust and relationships, there are still some traditional hierarchies in the ways Elaine spoke about these relationships, including the older student as having more power and referring to the students she led as “her kiddos.”

...I guess I was also a mentor in track as well the more that I think about it. I did mentor B----- kind of although I never viewed it as mentoring. I

just see it as a close friendship. I think with compassion many of these lines can blur and I think that is often a value.

...It's a lot easier to be a mentor to those I already have a relationship with and it feels less like I'm being a mentor, but the impact left is a lot stronger. It never hurts to be the one to reach out and lend a helping hand to those I don't know though, and I guess an impact can still be made.

Just as Elaine does in reflecting on her relationship with B-----, our research team explored the imperative roles compassion and trust played in the evolution of our own community. Elaine credited connection as the catalyst for effective mentoring. Likewise, in our research team we saw connection as the catalyst for courage, action and several care. As Elaine noticed through her relationships in track, the “impact left is a lot stronger.” when connections are intentionally developed and nurtured. This impact was both personal (in our relationships and self-care work) and public (through community action).

Further, our research community did not exist and develop in a vacuum. Instead, each of the women on our research team came to this project as part of their own communities. These additional communities of experts informed our research, inquiry, and perspectives. Elaine's band and track mates are examples of these additional communities as is Leslie's Girl Scout troop, Faith's church congregation, and the alumnae students from previous empowerment groups. During the course of our project, all of these communities continued to evolve and change. However, the student researchers frequently shared that the nature of the high stakes, high school interfered with their s ability to develop and nurture these other connections, particularly during

testing and other high stress times. I explore this experience of disconnection in the following section.

High Stress, High Schools and (Dis)Connection

During intense periods of school stress, the student researchers did not speak of connection, but of hurt and misunderstanding. The student researchers shared that the nature of high stakes and high stress high school, particularly during the AP testing window, is incompatible with supportive friendships and relationships. We observed during the most intense periods of stress (e.g., AP testing season, typically the middle 2 weeks of May) that the students' relationships outside of our research team suffered. There were more disagreements with peers, romantic partners, and parents. There were more tears and talks of self-doubt. Unfortunately, these were the precise periods when students could have most benefited from a supportive peer group. Below is a conversation between Leslie and Faith, written in our collective journals during the AP testing period.

Leslie: Ughhhhhhhhh. Lack of sleep and constant stress have been plaguing me recently. I would say I am getting about 3 to 6 hours on average, but I have been having to pull some all-nighters recently. Also I have been very stressed out about making my college decision recently. It is hard to make such a big decision, knowing it will affect the rest of my life. Additionally, I have been severely doubting my abilities recently, which definitely made selecting [an Ivy League] difficult. I didn't think I could be successful and I am not quite over that. I think that a lot of my

social and emotional problems will resolve themselves once the school year ends, or at least I hope they will.

Faith: I would say that sleep is definitely lacking right now, and I would agree that I am doubting my abilities a lot - to keep my 4.0 and excel on my AP tests. Probably more even than that I'm doubting my abilities to memorize an hour of music for my senior recital. I want to be able to be there for all of my friends graduation parties and end senior year in a somewhat stereotypical high school way so to speak, but at the same time that's not really possible with how much practicing I have to do and I'm really starting to doubt my abilities.

In this conversation, Leslie discussed how the high stress and high stakes decisions and assessments of the end of her senior year inhibited her ability to take care of herself. The theme of self-care is discussed at length in Chapter 6. As Leslie talked about all of the stress and her feelings of self-doubt, she does not mention any supportive connections. Faith, who echoed many of Leslie's reflections on the lack of self-care and increasing self-doubt, did mention supportive connections. "I want to be able to be there for all of my friends," however she adds, the nature of the high stress context makes it "not really possible [to maintain these connections] with how much...I have to do". While the student researchers found it difficult to maintain their personal communities, they shared that they were grateful for the continuity of our research team.

They said they could "count on" our group. The student researchers credited our community as the connection that helped "pull" them through the precipice landscape of AP tests, the college decision process, and graduation as "happier and healthier" young

women than they would have been without our team. As we identified connection as an important theme, we then sought to better understand how connection happens. That is, we asked, what are the conditions that facilitate connection? We identified three key conditions: critical listening, compassion, and communication. In the following section, I discuss how these worked together.

Critical Listening, Compassion, and Communication

Critical listening, communication, and compassion all require time and intentionality. Connection does not happen by accident. In my early proposal for this research project, I stressed the importance of voice. At that time, I thought that voice was analogous to agency and authorship. As a PAR researcher, I was committed to making certain the student researchers' ideas were central to the study. As our specific project unfolded however, I noticed that we were also attending to and valuing each other's voices in a literal way. Instead of focusing on agency and authorship (as I had planned), I found we were also paying attention to audio through critical listening (which I had not considered previously). Listening, hearing, and processing the stories and sentiments of our co-researchers had powerful implications for connection.

Critical Listening

Using critical listening to closely attend to the ways we communicated as a research team, added another layer to our sense-making process and the ways we storied our work. This section explores the development of our critical listening practice, highlighting in particular, our attention to the nuances in each other's voices. Below is a related excerpt from my journal.

Kathryn's Journal (Project Facilitator)

5.15.15

This week we carved out extra time for our first extended one-on-one dialogues...These dialogues reminded me how important it is to set aside one-on-one time for all relationships. The student researchers and I were already close, but sitting together and listening, truly listening was striking. During finals week, quiet space is a scarce commodity at our school, so we had to find some creative spaces to talk. We visited in Claudia's car, the guidance conference room, a supervisor's large office and the small annex next to the gifted center. Each of the interviews lasted about an hour.

...I noticed the students' voices: each varied and distinct but also similar in their youth and hope. They were confident and questioning, emotional, warm, full, and edged with humor.

When I first observed that our research team was paying attention to the variance in our voices I contributed this to our workshops on radio storytelling. I had assumed we were simply utilizing a new tool in our storytelling repertoire. However, the more we talked about it as a research team, the more I realized that the reason our voices mattered to us was not only because of the radio lessons on sound. Instead, it was our compassion and concern for each other that gave these voices value.

Compassion

Within our project, compassion included feelings of concern, love, and empathy. As our community developed, each of our unique voices became familiar, and hearing

them garnered a warm emotional response. There was sentimentality in attending to these audio details, which reminded me of the photos we collected during our project.⁴ As mentioned above, the nature of high stress, high schools often made “carving out” time for meaningful connection challenging. However, as a teacher and counselor I felt that the benefits of listening to young people far outweighed the logistical challenges to make that happen. Further, our commitments to our research team, and this project, necessitated regular dialogues and group meetings. These regular meetings, in turn, facilitated the evolution of our community. Below are some more of my reflections from our first round of one-on-one dialogues.

Kathryn’s Journal (Participatory Researcher)

5.15.15

I noticed new qualities in their voices. Claudia’s voice reminded me both of my sister and my dear friend Lisa, a nurse in California. I noticed the softness in Jessica’s voice, the warmth in Faith’s voice, the reflection in Leslie’s and the clarity in Elaine’s. These were emotional conversations for all us. Eyes filled with tears. Voices cracked. For a few of the students this was the longest I had listened to them, just the two of us, uninterrupted.

We attended to the tempo, rhythm, and variance of our voices because these were precious details of women we cared about. Our dialogues, laughter, tears, and whispers were the additional details we collected as we cataloged the development of our

⁴ While photographs were not part of our data set, as our community evolved, we became emotionally invested in preserving details of the special relationships we had formed. Hence, we snapped many team photos, particularly, “selfies” at our team meetings.

community. We noticed the ways laughter could bring people together. We paid attention to the times voices broke from sadness and used this as a signal that more compassion might be needed. Being able to identify these nuances facilitated even deeper relationships.

Communication

Communication is the relationship between critical listening (as explained above) and attentive, reflective expression. Attentive and reflective expression took many forms in our study including writing, speaking, composing, singing, texting, and nonverbals. The learning process that happened between what we shared (often courageously) and what we heard (thorough critical listening) led to deeper connections and new knowledge. That is, personal stories brought us closer together and reflecting on those personal experiences in a community, allowed us to posit new ideas about identity, gender, the college transition, and affective development.

The topics covered in our dialogues included great breadth and depth. Below are some reflections on a roundtable discussion I held with the student researchers.

Kathryn's Journal (Participatory Researcher)

Roundtable discussion with the student researchers

5.28.15

In a classroom large enough to hold 100 students, the 6 of us pull desks so close together they are touching. I have prepared a few topics for us to cover. We talk about social-emotional needs, gender, self-care, hopes and fears. The students are honest; they practice courage in a way that inspires me. There are moments when they are uncertain, There are times

when they sound young. There are times when they disagree. ... We talk at length about fears as the students ready themselves for college. On this topic there is little disagreement; everyone is worried about failure. "I am afraid, I've fooled everyone and that I actually can't do it." Everyone nods in quiet agreement. I think about all I have read on imposter phenomenon.

...The tape runs for over an hour. Sometimes voices break, other times we laugh loudly. I am thrilled to have these sounds, the humanizing audio of our team, preserved on tape.

In the above journal, the student researchers covered a wide-range of topics ("social-emotional needs, gender, self-care, hopes and fears"). However, instead of their hopes, they chose to focus more deeply on their fears. "We talked at length about our fears." Throughout the roundtable, the students practiced both reflective expression by drawing on their personal experiences and challenges, as well as the critical listening covered in the previous section.

Group Text

Oral communication was not the only way we communicated and built community. The student researchers set up a group text as another communication structure for our team. Our group text connected academically high achieving young women and me, their advisor in a way that had not existed prior to our research team. The group message required minimal setup (the students set it up in 5 minutes at lunch). Once setup, we used the group text near daily. The student researchers were able to carry this on-going conversation with them in their pockets and could access it between classes, in

a moment of crisis, or as soon as they had received good news. Through the group text we were instantly connected with each other. The text messages were short, supportive, and covered a wide-range of topics. Here is an excerpt from our group text generated over a 10 minute period:

YPAR Team Text Message Chat 5.4.15

Kathryn: CONGRATULATIONS to Melissa Chen! She was just named a 2015 Presidential Scholar!

Faith: GO MELISSA! :) :) :) :) :) :)

Elaine: yayayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!

Melissa: Thanks Faith! And thanks Elaine!

Claudia: Congratulations, Melissa. We all knew you were amazing--now there is proof. *****

Melissa: How was chem[istry]?

Claudia: Hardish but okay.

Melissa: Aww, that sucks but I'm sure you rocked it!

Claudia: Thanks!

Kathryn: Sending all of you positive thoughts for your AP tests this week!

Faith: Thank you Mrs. Weaver :)

Text messages often decorated in smiling emoticons cheered the student researchers on, offered support, and celebrated our group connection. We used this space to offer encouragement, ask questions, make plans, and share each other's accomplishments. The group message was as an additional language space to organize our work and build connections with each other. During the course of our project, all of

the messaging in our group text was positive and contributed to the compassionate and positive evolution of our research community. However, the student researchers did share other less-positive experiences they had with group texting in other all-student-groups. The content and hurt feelings these texts elicited were sometimes the topic of conversation at our team dialogues, suggesting that the simple act of moving a conversation to text is insufficient at fostering compassionate communication.

Raising Our Voices

Performance, including singing and public speaking, is an exercise in larger-scale connection. As we considered the role of communication in general and voices in particular, I was also reminded of Faith's public singing. Four times during our research project we heard Faith sing in front of large crowds, twice in front of thousands. The student researchers commented on how her courage to sing in such large public arenas inspired them to also connect with broader audiences. The vulnerable stories the students shared through community radio is an analogous example. However, there was an even more literal example when Elaine also agreed to sing in front of thousands of people at our graduation ceremony. Elaine's rock ensemble was the closing act at graduation.

While planning their act, one of Elaine's bandmates asked if she would sing as part of the performance. Elaine is a very talented musician; however, she does not consider herself a singer. She weighed her decision with our research team, decided to take a risk, and said "yes." Her band's performance was a highlight of our huge graduation ceremony. During this project, our research team saw Faith and Elaine connect with entire auditoriums of people through their voices. While we were not all moved to sing publicly, through our

stories, dialogues, and action projects, each of us, in our own ways, attempted raise our voices courageously and warmly.

Connection is Complicated

Through our work on connection, the student researchers and I identified critical listening, communication and compassion as essential elements that when attended to, could nurture relationships. When ignored or used hurtfully these same elements could damage relationships. Said differently, the qualities of connection were powerful and complicated. Although membership in our research team evolved into a community of support, we learned that connection was not always linear, simple or smooth. More often it was complicated, messy and rough. While we experienced acceptance, compassion, and celebration we also experienced contention, disagreement and hurt. Throughout this project, our relationships to each other evolved, however, some parts of that evolution were more challenging than others. While I observed this as the students connected with each other, I also personally experienced it as the student researchers and I connected with each other. Connecting with the research team required me to negotiate and navigate my own multiple roles in this project including: project facilitator, co-researcher, teacher, and counselor. Below is a journal excerpt I wrote on some of these complicated facets of connection following an extended dialogue with Leslie.

Kathryn's Journal (Teacher/Counselor)

5.11.15

Leslie is back from AP Bio. She's the second student to return from the exam. The first shared that the test was harder than everyone expected. Leslie has tears in her eyes and a bag of Taco Bell in her hand. I offer her

jokes, chocolate and tissues. She says “yes” to the tissues. Someone asks if she is upset about bio, she says “it’s not that.”

Another student and I offer to dance for her. The student elbows me in my ribs and jokes, “You can’t keep up with me!”

At this point, Leslie starts to cry. The student stops joking immediately and asks if she would like some of her gluten free cheesecake. Leslie shakes her head. I am grateful for all the kindness in the gifted resource room.

I can see Leslie needs some space so I go back to my desk to work. When she finishes her tacos, she comes over. I ask if she would like to go on a walk. She says “yes.”

It is sunny and windy outside. We talk about biology. It didn’t go well. She didn’t finish. There was an error in timing that got resolved, but it “threw her off.” The proctors forgot to check calculators, but scientific calculators weren’t allowed, so the students who used those had to have a note sent in with their tests. I ask her if her AP score matters. It doesn’t. As a biology major she thinks she should probably take biology at her [Ivy League] college. She says, “it is just embarrassing.” We keep walking.

I don’t want to press her, so I ask her about Mother’s Day. I am aware that we have walked quite a distance from school. We turn right to make a large loop. There is park and Leslie suggests we cut across it. She tells me there is something she wants to talk about, but she is afraid she will cry.

I tell her, “It’s not a big deal. I cry all the time.”

“What if I cry so hard, you can’t understand me?”

“I am a pretty proficient translator.”

She smiles. She tells me that she and Melissa spent all day Saturday studying at the public library. Then Claudia called to see if they wanted to do a bio study session at her house. She said she was worried about how productive it would be, but they decided to go. She said it started off alright. They got a pizza and were all working. She tells me that she is a very visual learner, so she needed to look at everything, not just hear it. She said she was getting distracted, so she moved into a corner by herself to focus.

Her friends made fun of her. She told me she doesn’t think her friend group builds each other up, that instead they “are all so competitive and really make fun of each other when someone doesn’t get something.” She thinks this is contributing to her self-doubt.

She tells me, “I felt so horrible when I realized that. Then I got a migraine.”

She called her dad to pick her up. She woke up to a group text initiated by her boyfriend, who was part of the study group. He said he was sending this text on behalf of the group to say she had been very immature.

She wants to know what to do with her friends. She wants to know what to do with her boyfriend. She tells me her boyfriend said he would be a horrible school counselor, because if anyone came to him with a

problem, he would just tell them to “get over it.” She says he never talks about feelings.

Instead of walking towards school, we find ourselves walking around a lake behind the park. I tell her that it must be hard to go through that. She nods then asks if I see the goslings. I don't at first and then I notice a few little birds, so young their feathers still look fuzzy. We've come upon a whole gaggle of geese. Leslie snaps a photo with her phone. We tiptoe closer together. There are dozens of little goslings; they are everywhere. One of the grown geese stares us down directly. I imagine she is the mother goose. It is another bird that catches my eye though. She stands apart looking at us from her periphery and then pretending to look away. Something about her demeanor is familiar; she is protecting in her own way. She is aware of each gosling, but uncertain in the best course of action. Leslie and I try to count all the goslings, but there are too many. Suddenly a large group takes to the water and they glide away across the lake.

Leslie experienced hurt and misunderstanding by her friend group and boyfriend. These were some of the people she cared the most deeply for, and when they did not support or understand her in the ways she had expected or needed, she felt isolated and confused. As Leslie and I talked about her friend group and her boyfriend, we discussed the conditions of how connection is established and maintained. Leslie used communication, compassion and critical listening to repair and improve her relationship with her friend group. She tried to use these same strategies with her boyfriend, but

continued to feel unheard and unsupported. A week before she left for college, they broke up.

The story I shared above, not only explored Leslie's relationship with her peers, it also reflected how my connections with the student researchers were also complex. These complications included: not always knowing the best ways to offer guidance, support, or counsel to the student researchers. When our project started, I was a counselor, teacher and facilitator. However, as our community evolved the student researchers also became my teachers; they listened to my personal worries, and we engaged in co-research on this project. By the end of our study we had forged a unique friendship.

For example, near the end of our project, I confided in the student researchers that I was nervous about taking on my new position as Director of Academic Affairs. Melissa was both eager to relate to my experience and excited to offer her encouragement. She told me, "You are the one who's taught me the most about making transitions through life so it seems fitting that we are going through one at the same time." I told the research team that I was drawing on our lessons on courage at a precipice to take this leap into educational administration. Faith said, "That's so fantastic! I'm so proud of you...I know you most definitely have the courage to take this leap in stride." It might be unusual for a student to tell their teacher that they are proud of them, but the participatory nature of our community had evolved into a connection beyond the prescribed teacher-to-student.

As the student researchers emotionally invested in each other (e.g., disclosing sensitive stories, developing deeper friendships, and seeing each other during vulnerable times), they found, in addition to deeper support that they could hurt each other more deeply. While there were challenges and points of a disagreement in our research team,

we also found joy and support from belonging to this community and relating to each other. Below is a discussion of another critical relationship that I observed both exacerbating and alleviating the student researchers social-emotional needs.

Mothers: Mentors and Critics

While not within the original scope of our research activities, the relationships we had with our mothers was another connection that directly shaped our sense making processes and many of our understandings of what it means to be young women. Collectively, as a research team we came from many different kinds of households: women-headed, mother bread-winners, egalitarian homes, and traditional patriarchal households. Culture played a role in some of the relationships student researchers had with their mothers. For instance, Melissa talked to the group about “tiger mothers” (Chua, 2011) a phrase that refers to the extreme intensity, pressure, and emotional distance Westerners sometimes perceive in Chinese mothers.

Melissa’s relationship with her mother was the most complicated mother-daughter relationship for our research team to understand. Melissa shared with us stories of shame, fear, and intensity. And yet, even as her mother did things that infuriated or hurt her, their connection was one of the most important connections in her life. She loved her mother deeply. Below are two excerpts illustrating the ways Melissa negotiated connection with her mother. The first is an excerpt Melissa shared in our collective team journal.

Melissa to the YPAR Team (From a team discussion on “false support”)

5.24.15

This sounds bad...but my family would definitely see the things we talk about [in our YPAR team] are soft or weak. Like the power of vulnerability and stuff is very much a Western way of thinking. And sometimes I feel stifled because I've always been taught that you should keep your negative aspects within the family. And when I seek support outside of my family I always think: what reason do these strangers have to support me? And I feel like I'm almost betraying my family. There's this Chinese concept called "losing face" that encompasses your personal image and how others perceive you as strong or weak or whatever. This is pretty personal, but most of you know: I got child services called on me and my mom and the kickback from that was not great from my family. Sometimes I really hate the "Chinese" form of support. I know my family would do anything for me but there's just an entirely new set of permissibility than what I've been taught here and it's difficult to reconcile the two. All of this makes it difficult to accept or reach for support.

The connection Melissa had with her family led to a different worldview than the themes our research team pointed to. While Melissa embraced the themes of our study, particularly our work on courage and vulnerability, her family and cultural background led to different internal tensions about key project concepts including affective education and wholehearted living. The connections Melissa maintained and valued with both her

family and our research team were important in shaping the ways she navigated the high school to college transition, her own struggles with mental health and wellness, and her personal beliefs about strength and vulnerability. Below is another illustrative narrative from our research project detailing the powerful, albeit, complicated connection Melissa has with her mother.

Kathryn's Journal (Gifted Education Chair)

Board of Education meeting recognizing Melissa as a Presidential Scholar

6.8.15

The superintendent comes out to greet us. He shakes Melissa's hand and then her mother's. Once we are settled he reads an introduction I have written for him which talks of her many accomplishments. Melissa shakes hands with each of the board members. The audience claps, rising to their feet to give her a standing ovation. Melissa's mother and I stand too. While standing Melissa's mother turns to me, "You know her sisters are better, their scores are higher, but they didn't get this, I realized it is because of you." I don't know how to respond. We are standing at the board meeting clapping for Melissa.

Melissa returns to her seat. Someone turns around and congratulates her mother. I congratulate Melissa. Melissa leans over and asks if we can take some photos afterward. I tell her, of course. Immediately outside the door, her mother says to both of us, "You know, Melissa is so lucky to have you. Really her sisters are better, but I know she got these recognitions because of you."

I take Melissa's elbow. I tell her mother, "Melissa is great all on her own and that this is a great honor."

She says, "No, really, you take the ordinary and make it sounds great."

Melissa nods, "It is true."

I have thought about this exchange several times since it happened. At the time, I was torn between my connection to Melissa, my pride in her accomplishments, my professionalism as a teacher representing my school at the board office, and the love and respect I knew Melissa felt for her mother. I wanted to do the right thing in all of these roles, but I recognized there was not always a way to ensure that. I worried most deeply about Melissa's feelings. She had done so much work on self-care, and I feared that these kinds of comments from her mother would undermine the efforts she was making for personal growth.

This is uncomfortable for both of us. I ask Melissa where she would like to take the photos. She suggests out front. I snap a photo of her and her mother. They stand together, both holding Melissa's certificate. We switch, and Melissa's mother takes a couple photos of Melissa and me. Melissa asks if we can take a selfie of all three of us. Her mother thinks we should find someone to take a photo for us, but I tell her it will be fine. We snap a few selfies.

Melissa and I hug and I shake her mother's hand. Her mother thanks me again and says she would like to repay me for all I have done for her daughter. She promises to take me to China one day.

At home, I think about how I should have responded to her comments, particularly in front of Melissa. I text Melissa the photos and say: I am so proud of YOU! That honor is all you, Kiddo... I take out Kiddo in case it sounds patronizing, even though I only use it as a term of affection. I put in her name instead, so it reads: I am so proud of YOU! That honor is all you, Melissa. And it's a huge honor.

Melissa responds: "Thank you! For the pictures and the kind words and the two years of incredible support you have given me."

I send her a smiley face and tell her: You are most welcome (times three).

She updates her Facebook cover photo with the picture of her and her mother.

When Melissa updated her Facebook page with that photo, I realized I had not yet grasped the complexity of Melissa's relationship with her mother. Even when her mother was dismissive, or critical, Melissa still looked to her as a mentor. Melissa's Chinese culture played a critical role throughout both her struggles and successes. As she explained, Melissa's mother found the work we were doing around self-care soft or weak. By both US and Chinese standards, Melissa's older sisters were extraordinarily high achieving women with each holding multiple higher degrees. Her mother pushed her daughters in ways that sometimes seemed to exasperate Melissa's struggles. On the day Melissa mentioned in her journal, the behaviors she shared with us were so extreme, that as a mandated reporter I had to contact child protective services. After a short time, the

investigation was dropped. All of this is complicated. Melissa found tremendous pride in her Chinese-American identity. She adores her sisters and loves her mother fiercely.

As a feminist educator, I aimed to listen rather than assume. I made it a point to learn from Melissa's perspective even when it was difficult for me to understand. I know this listening contributed to the trust, rapport, and connection we found with each other. This commitment to critical listening is both consistent with our understanding of the conditions of connection, as well as essential to the kind of teacher, researcher, and person I want to be. Kinloch and Pedro (2014) wrote, "listening, as well as talking, storying, and authoring become important acts and actions for (re)defining our human relationships within a discourse of trust, care, and ethics"(p. 28). During our project, through critical listening I was able to have several warm conversations with Melissa's mother.

Melissa saw her mother as both her central critic and central mentor; as we dug deeper, we found this to be true of almost all of the mother-daughter relationships in our research team. Often the student researchers talked about their mothers as *the voice in their head*. In our team meetings we discussed the importance of self-talk. As we evaluated the ways we spoke to ourselves, we found that often the voice and messages we heard in our heads, came from conversations we had with our mothers. Like all the relationships discussed in this chapter, the ways we connected with our mothers was complicated. While the student researchers spoke of their mothers using terms like proud, loving, and supportive, they also spoke of worry, pressure and disappointment. For example, Leslie shared,

My relationship with my mother is complex and complicated, but I love her more than anything and I know she feels the same way. She always calls me “her greatest accomplishment” which quite honestly I feel is unfair to my brother, but it is the sentiment that counts. I wouldn’t trade the world for my mom and I will be extremely lucky if I turn out to be half as wonderful as she is.

Elaine shared the following with our team in the collective journal:

I LOVE MY MOMMY! She’s the best. I think it’s funny how everyone posts on social media that they have the best mom in the world because little do they know that I actually have the best mom in the world. Lol, but forreal [sic], I’m kind of afraid to leave my mom here when I go to C-----. She’s always worrying about me, even when I’m out in broad daylight doing something school related. I hate being out knowing my mom is worried sick...

The student researchers shared that they knew their mothers worried about them when they were at school, social events, and extracurricular activities. Perhaps their fathers worried too, but they did not come up nearly as often in our dialogues. Instead, the students researchers frequently mentioned needing to call, text, or check-in with their mothers before going to an activity, or if they were running late. While they sometimes seemed annoyed at having to check-in with their mothers so frequently, they all confided that they were scared to leave their mothers when they left for college. Below are some excerpts from a poem Elaine wrote for her mother for Mother’s Day.

I did write her a poem for Mother’s Day. Here are a few stanzas from it...

You have always been a role model in my life,

And have taught me so much.

I can't imagine leaving for college,

I'm going to miss your hugs and gentle touch.

I want to make you proud,

And make you say, "That's my baby."

I finna [going to] graduate from [university] with a 4.0,

And prove that I'm a well put-together young lady.

But mom please don't worry about me,

Because I know you always do.

I'll always be your little girl,

I'll always be Elaine Pho.

In a few short stanzas, Elaine explained how her deep connection with her mother was formed by love, affection, and worry. She also shared the pressure she feels to make her mother proud. This pressure was a near constant in all of our conversations about our mothers. Elaine spoke about the tension between her mother's identity as a woman compared to her own identity as a woman. She mentioned wanting to "*prove that I'm a well put-together young lady.*" Elaine's personal style is casual and athletic, she prefers sporting clothes, ponytails, and does not wear makeup. During our graduation events, however, Elaine's mother bought her dresses. Elaine also let her mother do her hair and make-up. At baccalaureate and commencement, I heard several students and faculty remark that they did not recognize Elaine.

Elaine also influenced her mother. Elaine shared that in the weeks before she left for college, her mother asked her for some tips on strength training and Elaine worked with her to begin a weight lifting regiment. During her senior year, Elaine experienced an award-winning track season, was severely injured twice, found weightlifting, came out as gay to her parents, and chose her college, and potential career path. These were all emotional experiences, and through all of them, Elaine turned to her mother for support. Elaine's connection with her mother was a central source of support. More specifically, she could count on her mother to give her closeness, relatedness, and belonging. This connection was grounded in love and an empathetic attempt to try and understand each other's lived experiences, both those that were similar (e.g., being Vietnamese women, and valuing the same family-specific traditions) and those that were different (e.g., their age, and the ways they performed their gender identities).

Claudia was a bit quieter on our discussions on mothers; on the afternoon of her final one-on-one dialogue for our research project, I asked her about her relationship with her mother. To my surprise, she started weeping.

Well... Most of my family is very well educated, but my mom...She did well in high school and then she took one community college class and flunked out and that's it. So...I know she's given up a lot for me. I also know she is so proud of me. And I don't think I've ever told her how much that means to me.

It was difficult for Claudia to get through this as she was crying. We sat together on the couch in my living room. When she was ready, we talked some more. I did not press Claudia with follow up questions; however, it felt as though she was sharing a confession

or a secret with me. Claudia seemed to feel some personal guilt about her mother's life path. She shared that she and her father (an engineer) sometimes "looked down" on her mother. As she and I talked, it was obvious that Claudia was having a difficult time processing that realization.

During her final interview, Claudia was in a large hard cast that covered her shoulder and arm. Her mother dropped her off and later picked her up from my house, because Claudia could not drive in the cast. A couple weeks later, Claudia was moving to an apartment a few minutes away from her college campus. Because of the surgery, her mother was going with her to school for the first month or so of Claudia's college experience. During our dialogue, Claudia told me she now planned to use that time more intentionally to build a stronger connection with her mom.

While I am certain, Claudia's love and appreciation of her mother would have been strong without this research project, leaving for college, as well as our dialogues on connection and mothering that led her to consider her relationship with her mother in a new way. In turn, this led Claudia to plan way to build a deeper, more connected relationship with her mother. Through the observations and reflections of the student researchers, which often came out in courageous and complicated stories about their mothers, Claudia began to consider her own relationship with her mother. She identified a gap in connection and made plans to intervene. As I am writing this chapter, Claudia and her mother are living together in an apartment. Claudia's mother is teaching her how to cook and there have been "lots of movie nights." Like Claudia's example, there were many ways, small and big, that we saw connection contribute to taking both personal and

public action. In the following section I discuss the ways connection acted as a catalyst for our action projects.

Connectedness as Catalyst for Action

Connection formed a series of research cycles that moved from the individual to the small group to the larger collective. As Elaine demonstrated in her earlier journal on mentoring younger students, we often saw connection as a catalyst for action. The student researchers spoke of mentoring younger students, and supporting friends who were struggling with mental health, the college process, or other challenges. The student researchers were eager to share the lessons they had learned while going through the high stakes, high stress, high school and college applications process, as well as the strategies and themes we had discovered through our research project. The more connected we became, the more interested we were in connecting with people on a broader scale. As our project continued, the student researchers planned workshops on health and wellness, organized clothing drives, and engaged in larger projects with broader and more diverse communities. Below is an excerpt from one of Leslie's college essays that speaks of the meaning she found in connecting with others through service.

An excerpt from one of Leslie's college essays (Co-president of High School Service Corps)

What does it mean to "lead a meaningful life"? Do I have to cure cancer or mediate a peace agreement between warring countries? I do not think so. I believe that making a difference, no matter how small, is creating meaning and purpose to one's existence...I must seek out every opportunity I can to make someone's day better, but I also cannot beat

myself up when I fail to see the impact I have made. I engage in community service because I know that I would feel eternally hungry if I did not attempt to make the world a better place. I live with myself, knowing that I did not try to help others in my limited time. I want to be able to wake up in the morning and know that if I died today, I would be satisfied with my contributions to the world and its people. I cannot wait until tomorrow to give back to my community, I must do everything I can today to make a change, thus leading a meaningful life.

As Leslie attested in her essay above, during this research project, we learned that there are many ways to make a difference. Throughout our research project, there were several research cycles of observing, reflecting, planning, and then taking action to offer support to one another, communities, networks, and groups. We learned through this process that there are many affective outcomes of engaging in community action, and that these included becoming more confident and connected. As Leslie suggested in her essay “making a difference, no matter how small,” is what leads to a “meaningful life.”

While Leslie, Melissa, and Faith, all included activism as essential to their feminist identities, Jessica viewed her identity as an activist as more important than her identity as a feminist. In fact, she was reluctant to identify “or label” herself as a feminist at all. She said she “would rather be understood through [her] actions than by a [feminist] label.” This was a frequent topic of conversation at our team meetings, as the other student researchers all tried to persuade Jessica to own a feminist identity. In the end, Jessica shared that she proudly and enthusiastically supported the feminist values and

methodologies of our project, but preferred to think of herself as an activist. She defined her activist identity as such,

To me, being an activist means that when you see a problem you try to do something to change it and make the situation better. That can come in many different forms, like raising awareness, volunteering, raising funds, etc. I do consider myself an activist.

Poverty and income equity have always been of interest to Jessica. This is the young woman who spearheaded a grant-writing effort to subsidize the costs of summer programming for low-income youth, raising over \$1,000 as a 16 year-old. I know much of this interest is personal; her parents told her that she would have to pay all of her college expenses herself. The ways this reality limited her post-secondary options, became a catalyst for Jessica to take action. Below is a story about one of the ways Jessica used her own experiences with economic strain during the high school to college transition to connect with her graduating class, and initiate change around this issue.

Kathryn's Journal (Teacher/Counselor)

5.22.2015 Graduation Day

It is a few hours before the commencement ceremony. My phone dings. It is Jessica.

Jessica: I had an idea to do a cap and gown donation drive. That way people who can't afford it will only have to buy the tassel. What do you think? If you like the idea, I was thinking we could set up a box in the [gifted resource] room and people could stop by next week. And I'll put

out info before graduation on people's seats and maybe make an announcement.

Kathryn: Love it! Run it by [an assistant principal] tonight. I'm thrilled to help.

My phone dings again.

Jessica: Great! I will make up some info sheets and email [the assistant principal]. Thanks!

...Later at commencement, I pin Jessica's white collar onto her gown. She shows me her large stack of announcements advertising the cap and gown drive. I smile and then watch as she weaves through all of the chairs, leaving an announcement on each seat, seemingly oblivious to the flurry of hugs, tears, and green gowns.

8.10.15 Update

I am cleaning out my classroom readying it for the school year and a new division chair. A few tears catch in my throat as I pack up cards and letters from my students. I think about the student researchers also packing up their rooms for college. I notice the big gray tub that Jessica brought in her for her cap and gown drive. I sigh. I was surprised that it wasn't a bigger success. Then I look closer and notice the lid is ajar. The tub is filled with green caps and gowns. When did we get so many more? I do some investigating and find that another announcement went out over social media.

Jessica used the tools of our observation, reflection, planning, and action from our PAR research cycle to initiate her cap and gown drive. She observed and experienced the ways that financial scarcity limited her own college options. She was frequently struck by how expensive the high school to college transition process was. From testing fees (AP, SAT, ACT) to college application fees, to cap and gown fees, to the expenses associated with prom, it seemed that everywhere Jessica turned there was another expense. She brought this up in our team meetings. She wanted to do something that would help, even if only on a small scale. The cap and gown drive was her solution. Working with some of the communication tools we used throughout this project, including written announcements, text messaging and social media, she orchestrated a drive to help eliminate the cap and gown cost for low-income seniors. Through her own experiences struggling with the financial costs of high school graduation and the college applications process, Jessica was able to relate on a new level to other students who experienced financial strain. She used this new connection to create positive change for future students.

An Exercise in Hope

Connecting with the young women on this research team had a profound, positive impact on all of us. While all of our experiences were colored by our individual positionalities, collectively we forged new relationships, practiced courage, and took action to improve the health and wellness outcomes of high achieving women, including ourselves. For all of the ways that the student researchers took action each had a profound hope in common. The student researchers believed that through connecting with others,

they could contribute to positive change. When reflecting on our storytelling work, Leslie shared,

I think stories are one of the most compelling forms of media that there is because it really allows you to be empathetic and understand people in a way that, you know, other forms of media can't. And that's something I've learned with this project and with the research team...and I just love the way that stories and sharing honestly and vulnerably can really connect people and form a community.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the influence my paternal grandmother had on me. When I was young, my grandmother taught me the Hebrew phrase, Tikkun Olam. Tikkun Olam, which literally translates as *world repair*, but is often used more colloquially as: to heal, repair, and transform, or even simply to engage in social justice. It was easy to see how my grandmother had lived this principle in her own work as a civil rights and feminist activist. I have long wanted to work for justice with a similar vigor.

In recent years, Tikkun Olam has become popularized in American culture (Salovey, 2015) and teaching in particular (Block, 2008). During our research project, Yale president, Peter Salovey delivered a baccalaureate speech urging his graduate students to also practice Tikkun Olam.

What I am going to suggest to you today, however, is that your purpose in life as a graduate from Yale is simply this: to improve the world. In the Jewish tradition this is called *Tikkun Olam*, literally to *repair the world* (para 9) Go forth from this place with grateful hearts, paying back the gift you have received here by paying it forward for others. Find that part of

the world that feels chipped or bent or broken – and commit yourself, once again, to Tikkun Olam (para 25).

In many ways, connection is the act of healing, repair, and transformation. To believe that healing, repair, and transformation are possible requires hope. Throughout this project, we saw our own ability to heal, repair and transform ourselves, our research team, and even our larger communities. With connection as a foundation, the student researchers were able to take courageous risks, many of which led to deeper and more honest relationships, as well as to action projects to support the communities they cared about. The student researchers inspired me, as my grandmother did, for their ability to take action against injustice and hurt. The student researchers tackled gender discrimination, homophobia, poverty, and mental health stigma. These young women had the faith to imagine a more just world and the courage to begin making that vision a reality. As an educational leader, my hope rests in young people such as these, the dynamic possibility of connection and the power of our collective imagination.

In Chapter 6, I explore the nuances of our third (and final) major theme, self-care. Because the three themes were interrelated, this chapter rounds out our discussion on the ways courage, connection, and self-care contributed to a dynamic support process for the affective development of our research team. The final chapter, Chapter 7, discusses the educational, research, and theoretical implications of our study findings.

CHAPTER SIX FINDINGS: SELF-CARE

Faith's Journal (Student Researcher)

6.20. 2015

Self-care does mean being physically fit and healthy and that is extremely important to maintain as we grow up and are exposed to new things. At the same time, however, I think most people's definition of self-care focuses too much on the physical and not enough on the mental aspects. Being healthy and well means being confident in yourself and your abilities. It means loving yourself, regardless of other people's feelings toward you. It means pushing yourself and not allowing yourself to become lazy, but at the same time recognizing when something is too much and being okay with treating yourself or relaxing. Health and wellness is being satisfied with who you are...you have to learn to be accepting of who you are.

At the onset of our project, the student researchers identified self-care as an area they wanted to work on. In some ways this was an extension of the conversations we had shared in our empowerment group the year before. However, we also knew that self-care was an important component of the framework for wholehearted living (Brown, 2010, 2012, 2015). The challenge, the student researchers shared, was that that the nature of the high stakes and high stress, high school, and college transition process, left little time or encouragement for practicing self-care. The student researchers recognized this as a growth area to work on both individually and as a group. They hoped our research project

would help them reconcile their high academic achievement with the potential to practice self-care. For example, in the first week of our project, Leslie shared with the research team,

Lack of self-care is definitely one of my biggest weaknesses. I think I put my physical and emotional well-being and health at the bottom of my priorities. I feel obligated to fulfill my academic and family responsibilities before I tend to myself. Oftentimes, there is just not enough time in the day for me to exercise and sleep enough. Additionally, when I get stressed I tend to eat less healthy food, which is a habit that needs to stop. For me, I get in my head that I have to be successful and my definition of success, unfortunately, does not have self-care in it.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how at the beginning of our project, the student researchers did not consider themselves “successes.” Leslie’s reflection pointed to the additional disconnect she felt between being successful (which she wanted to be, but did not think she was) and practicing self-care (which she wanted to do, but did not think she had time for). Over the months of our project, Leslie, and the other student researchers, were able to bridge this disconnect. In fact, by the end of our project, rather than seeing success as conflicting with self-care, the student researchers believed that self-care and success were symbiotic. This is an important shift in perspective that facilitated our continued work around self-care; this evolution is explored in the following chapter. Just as Leslie commented that she “feels obligated to fulfill my academic and family responsibilities before I tend to myself,” the tension between high academic achievement and self-care

was a related, constant struggle that the student researchers discussed throughout our project.

Early on in the project, Faith shared that for her practicing self-care,

Is definitely hard. I am still not over my, I must exercise every day thing. It's more of a compulsion that's a side effect of still fighting anorexia. So I wake up every morning (by 5 at the latest) and exercise for at least an hour...I'm also still pretty much eating the exact same thing every day...but I know that I won't be able to continue eating like this every day at [college] and that thought stresses me out. I also occasionally cut back whenever I'm stressed out which is bad because that's a slippery slope.

And I still definitely have a distorted body image of myself. Yoga was helping for a while, but I don't really have time to do it anymore with everything going on so I've pretty much gone back to daily stress and body image insecurities (I'm fat, not pretty enough, etc.) I need to really work on chilling out. I get in my head the idea that I have to be "perfect" by not only is that impossible and not a good goal, my idea of perfection (specifically in body image) is very distorted because of anorexia so that leads me to unhealthy behavior.

Faith echoed many of the concerns shared by Leslie and others on our research team, including that the high stress conditions of the high stakes, high school to college process, acted as a barrier to self-care. This was true even when the student researchers recognized that there were psychological, physical and emotional consequences to forgoing self-care (including as Faith mentions, exacerbating stress levels). Faith's reflection, also points to

another important dimension in our work around self-care—individualized contextualization. Faith’s battle with anorexia framed her self-care goals in different ways than did the chronic pain that Claudia experienced with her wrist, or the depression that Melissa worked to address.

Leslie’s focus on both “physical and emotional well-being and health” was paramount to how our team framed self-care. Building on the multifaceted self-care needs that the student researchers shared, as well as our framework for wholehearted living, we worked with a guidance counselor at Barnwood to define self-care. Our working definition of self-care was: the intentional practices to relieve physical, emotional, and mental stress in order to promote personal health and wellness. However, how this definition manifested in each of our own lives continued to be highly individualized and dynamic. Using this definition to give us some common language, we reflected on our personal experiences, including our struggles.

Through our personal dialogues and reflections about self-care, we were able to plan collective and public action projects including two large-scale health and wellness workshops.

The research cycles that emerged from studying self-care were some of our most personal work. As with all of the research cycles in this project, our work on self-care moved along a trajectory from micro to macro. We began these dialogues by focusing in, on the ways self-care (and its converse, self-harm) presented in our own lives. We were later able to move from this smaller, more personal context, to broader projects around self-care in our larger communities. For example, Leslie shared,

I think that in order to be an activist for self-care, you should try to practice self-care yourself. I think that being an activist for self-care means encouraging the people around you to eat healthily and exercise regularly. It's so much easier to exercise (particularly if you aren't fond of it), if you have somebody to do it with. The same goes with eating. If going out with friends, suggest a restaurant that offers healthy options. On a larger scale, I think Michelle Obama is an activist for self-care with her exercise and food initiatives. Finally, I think that being an activist for self-care means being an empathetic and supportive friend. Being supportive to those who you care about is important for both your mental health and their mental health.

Leslie observed ways that self-care and activism around self-care played out in her personal experiences and friendships. She then commented on how she had seen the First Lady take up the cause of self-care on a national scale. Throughout our project, we aimed to find ways to develop better self-care practices in our lives so that we could ultimately become happier and healthier women. While there were many common factors in this personal self-care work including: nutrition, mental health, exercise, positive peer group, and sleep, the particulars of each of our self-care journeys were varied and personal. In the following chapter, I share our work on self-care, including our personal work. I also unpack the ways our understanding of self-care developed throughout the project.

Self-Care through Courage and Connection

We had found that courageous disclosure tended to result in a deeper sense of connection. In Chapters 4 and 5, I discussed the interrelated process of our three major themes: courage, connection, and self-care. In this chapter, I share the ways self-care amplified all of these themes. Repeatedly we found that when we worked on self-care, we were also working on either courage or connection, or in some cases, we were working on all three simultaneously. Our work around self-care required courageous disclosure, such disclosure was only possible once we had established ourselves as a compassionate and safe community. In the beginning, we worried about the risks inherent in sharing our struggles. These perceived risks included losing or damaging relationships, and opening ourselves up to criticism and judgment that was pointed at our vulnerabilities. Often the topics around self-care were highly charged, including our experiences with: mental health, panic attacks, grieving, and disordered eating. The student researchers and I wondered if revealing our imperfections would jeopardize the community we had built? Thankfully, we found the opposite to be true. The more honestly (and courageously) we shared our struggles (and triumphs), the deeper our connection to each other became. As our connection to each other and our comfort with being courageous developed, so did our willingness and ability to engage in self-care. This was a constant thematic pattern that ran throughout our project.

Below is a note I shared with the student researchers reflecting on some of my own struggles, as well as my observations of the ways our self-care work was influencing me at a personal level.

Analytic Memo Excerpt

Week 3

This has been emotionally tough period for me. My aunt passed away earlier this month. My dog was just diagnosed with cancer. My son is having a hard time finding his place at Barnwood. All semester I have been back and forth with my committee on defending this research project. It's a lot on the heart. I don't talk about these things at school, because I don't think it is appropriate for teachers to share this kind of heartache with their students, but I think it is important that I share some of these things with our research team as I know one of our aims is practicing strong vulnerability together.

I remember feeling nervous, and vulnerable, to share this sensitive information with our research team. I was embarrassed to admit, that initially I wondered if the student researchers would think less of me for having these struggles. I wondered if I would seem like less of a mentor or teacher, if I shared my own vulnerabilities. Just as our conceptions of success evolved throughout our project, so did my stance on this. As I wordsmithed my comments in this analytic memo, I took faith in how our research project pointed to exactly the opposite. Indeed, after posting this memo, the student researchers responded, not with judgment, but with love and support. I continued with some of my reflections on the ways our dialogues around self-care had changed my own response to working through challenge.

I have noticed something that I think it is directly a result of our work on affective education. As I have worked through these hard things, it has strengthened (not weakened) my resolve to practice self-care. Some days I recognize that I need to listen to

a nice song and sip a cup of tea, or take three deep breaths. I make a great effort NOT to stay up past 11:00PM, and many nights we are in bed by 10:00PM. I go on regular walks and runs. I make sure I am eating fruits and vegetables and I have been trying to get more protein. I schedule in quality time with my husband and kids: home date Thursday, Saturday bike rides with my son, Sunday garden picnics with my daughter. I pray often. I have reached out to friends. I evaluate my own self-talk, and check to see if I am being patient and kind with myself.

Intentionality toward Self-Care

The student researchers and I all committed to each other that we would try to be more intentional in practicing self-care. While this was framed by our personal contexts, throughout the project, we shared stories about the ways health, including mental health, and wellness played out in our self-care practices. We committed to each other, among other things, to work on: positive self-talk, nutrition, fitness, gratitude, sleep, breathing, and laughter. Having our research team community support these efforts made practicing them easier. The student researchers also commented on how they always had Elaine as a role model. In our group, Elaine was often referred to Elaine as the “perfect model” of self-care and high achievement. She was a varsity athlete, powerlifter, valedictorian, and aspiring nuclear engineer. The student researchers often asked how she did it. Elaine shared with us that improving her personal self-care practice had more to do with opening up and making peace with who she was. In Chapter 4, I shared Elaine’s decision to come out to our research team. After that, she set another personal self-care goal to also come out to her best friend. She set a deadline of two weeks before she left for college.

Elaine and I had many conversations about this. One day we met at a park for a walking dialogue. When I checked my pedometer, we had already walked over 5 miles. Elaine was incredibly emotionally invested in this relationship with her best friend, which made the risks higher. Elaine worried that her friend would think less of her, and ultimately reject her. Elaine's best friend, was another young woman on the track and field team. Their relationship began as teammates and lifting partners. However, over the 2015 track season it grew into a deep friendship. In all the two young women had shared, Elaine had not told her friend about her sexual identity. At our final team celebration, Elaine shared a coming out poem she had written for her friend. Below are some excerpts:

Elaine's Poem to her Best Friend

8.2.15

Dear B-----,

I have something I've been wanting to tell you.

I've been keeping it to myself...

When you claim that I am "grumpy,"

you're so good at making me smile.

And for that reason,

I wanna keep you around for a while.

But if you're gunna be in my life any longer,

I need to tell you something about me

that will hopefully only make our friendship stronger.

... Usually, I wouldn't say a thing,

But I think you deserve to know.

How can I call you a close friend,

if I can't share this with you, and just keep it hidden down below.

Elaine drew on our research team dialogues about the interrelated nature of connection, courage, and self-care as she set up her rationale for coming out to her best friend. She had come to believe that if she and her friend were to continue to have a deep connection, that their connection needed honesty and disclosure. This was congruent with our research team conversations around honesty and disclosure, including in particular, our dialogues that being “true to yourself” was an act of self-care. She believed this even if the risk of sharing such personal information was challenging.

...I don't know how I waited

this long to this day.

But I've been wanting so badly to tell you

that I, Elaine Pho, am gay.

... You told me, I remember

that you're supposed to love thy neighbor.

So I hope that means we can stay the same,

I hope we can stay the way we were.

But I know you also grew up believing

That marriage should be between those of the opposite sex.

So I understand if you never want to see me again,

or converse over text.

...Really, your love and support

Is all I need.

I don't think this makes me a bad person,

I've never committed any terrible deeds.

... I don't mean to do this to you,

And put you on the spot.

I really care about you, B----.

I care about you a lot.

Elaine recognized that she and her best friend came from different political, religious and cultural backgrounds. She knew that these various social identities contributed to differing worldviews, and she worried about how her friend would negotiate her religious identity, in particular, with her closeness with Elaine.

... And dear B----,

There is one last thing I need to tell you before I go.

I really didn't choose this life.

If someone asked me to be gay, I would have said no.

But I have accepted myself for who I am,

And I hope you can do the same.

We have quite the history together,

Too many great memories to just throw away.

... Until then,

I wish you the best of luck in everything you pursue.

Imma miss you hellas [I'm going to miss you a hell of a lot].

Yours truly, Pho

Throughout her poem, Elaine used many of the tools we discussed and practiced in our project. She employed courage, vulnerability, storytelling, and creative writing to both make peace with herself, “I have accepted myself for who I am” and to open up to her best friend. For Elaine, being honest and open about who she was to the people she cared about was a practice in self-care. Shortly after she shared the poem with at our team celebration, Elaine found the courage to read it to her friend. Afterward she sent me the following text:

Elaine: I saw B--- tonight and told her before I went home. It went really well! I read her the poem and she said she didn't care at all and that nothing changes! We ended up talking for another hour and half maybe. What a great night!

Kathryn: I am SO glad.

Elaine: Thanks! I'm super hyped.

I was truly relieved. I always hope that the healthy risks young people take are met with support and acceptance. Elaine told me that through our research project she learned how much relationships matter. We found that connections, as discussed in Chapter 5, were critical to supporting and facilitating self-care. I hope Elaine also learned that her words have power, and that her story is important. There are enough pressures and struggles throughout the transition from high school to college; being accepted for who you are, should not be one of them.

The Interference of Self-Doubt in the College Decisions Context

Our project attempted to employ a feminist ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982). The ways we explored and conceptualized self-care reflected this commitment, additionally we employed hope. We used both an ethic of hope and care to reframe challenge as a

positive opportunity for growth, was not always easy. In the high stakes and high stress, high school and college decisions context, it took a lot of work, reflection, and personal growth to find and seize the opportunities for self-care. Before we could understand self-care, we had to talk through the absence of self-care, including in particular the constant interference of self-doubt discussed below.

Self-Doubt in the High Stakes and High Stress High School Context

At the onset of our project, the student researchers were in the throes of the high stakes and high stress high school context. They were preparing for advanced placement exams, waiting on scholarship news, and making their college decisions. Self-doubt, and other factors that led to self-harm were more salient than self-care. Like Melissa and Leslie, Jessica confided that during this time she thinks she had a panic attack,

I started panicking about failing my test and then losing my 4.0 and whatnot, and just in general realizing all the stress I'd been under and I started crying and my heart was beating crazy fast and I was uncontrollably gasping for breath. Anyway, that lasted over an hour before I could finally calm down. But I didn't have time for that because I had to study, so I just showered and started reviewing Calc during it [the panic attack] at like 3 in the morning. And I was just thinking, Wow, I'm a mess.

Jessica's narrative about her panic attack speaks directly to the challenges of practicing self-care in the high-stakes, and high stress, high school contexts. In the above quote Jessica clearly recognizes that she is not well "Wow, I'm a mess." However, she believes that the pressures to maintain her "perfect" GPA in her rigorous coursework, including

university level math, supersede the importance of practicing self-care by doing things like taking a break or getting enough sleep. Prior to our research project, Jessica had not considered or practiced any social-emotional strategies to respond to extreme stress. Further, she never considered that factors such as her physical or emotional health might be more important than achieving at such high levels in school. As a result of our work, we saw the ways overachievement and stress masked the need for students to develop self-care practices. We then attempted to act in ways that countered or challenged this. Faith shared that her own struggles with self-care in the high stress, high school environment contributed to debilitating self-*hate* (her term). She elaborates,

I hate myself for having anorexia and not being strong enough to be completely over it yet (even though I know that would be an unreasonably fast time frame of recovery), but then I also hate myself for eating because in the weird eating disordered part of my brain eating feels like “giving up”. Obviously none of this stuff is logical and so then I hate myself for not being logical enough. Anyway basically this leads to days where I sit and try to study for hours and everything goes in through my eyes and goes completely uncoded by my brain because I can’t focus. It’s awful and then I hate myself because I can’t study and I feel like I’m being lazy.

As Faith wrestled with developing a self-care practice that included recovering from anorexia, she frequently encountered the constraints of an overachievement culture “to study for hours” and the persistence of self-doubt.

Rejection

In addition to the high stakes, and high stress high school environment, the students shared that the college applications process and the unknowns of higher education contributed to their lack of self-care in general, and their self-doubt in particular. The college and scholarship application process was often the student researchers' first experience with rejection. Without affective tools to process rejection, this became a particularly vulnerable time for the student researchers to forgo self-care, or worse, for self-harm behaviors to resurface. When the rejections came in, the students found they did not have a schema to process rejection and therefore, it exacerbated (or even seemed to confirm), their feelings of self-doubt. Faith told me, "The whole [college applications] process really wrecked what little self-confidence I had. Logically I do understand it's a crap shoot. It's just hard to make your heart feel what your brain knows is true."

Faith applied to eight schools, and was accepted to four. Despite the acceptances, she viewed these four rejections as an affront to her worthiness as a student. Faith was not alone in this. During the course of our study, all of the student researchers experienced rejection as a result of the college and scholarship decision process, and all of them took these rejections personally. In many ways they saw these rejections as affirming their own self-doubts. Jessica shared,

I had to face rejection several times- getting waitlisted to W---, not getting the D--- scholarship I needed. Like I've heard people say a couple of times, it was the first real rejection I'd faced growing up. I mean, I'd been rejected before- I got cut from the 8th grade basketball team- but this was the first time it actually mattered in the long run. So yeah, it sucked.

Rejections are nearly inevitable for students who apply to select colleges and scholarships, yet the student researchers told me that they felt high school did little to help them prepare for, or process rejection.

Making College Decisions

Self-doubt directly impeded the student researcher's' ability to both make their college decisions and to feel confident after they had done so. Below is a partial transcript and reflections from Melissa's conflicted college decisions process.

Conversation excerpts from my field journal (Kathryn, Gifted Education Chair)

5.4.15

Melissa says, "Here is my dilemma. What I want to do is go to Taiwan [on study abroad] next year and then go to [our state university]. But I can't just tell my parents that I am going to do what I want to do." She is talking to Claudia.

Melissa was accepted to a selective gap year program in Taiwan and an accelerated BA/MD program. Claudia asks her if she is certain she wants to be a doctor. Melissa loves medicine, but isn't sure. Melissa is worried about telling her mom she wants to go to Taiwan. Claudia recommends preparing a "multi point presentation." Melissa starts crying.

The college decisions process played to many of the pressures of overachievement. Melissa believed that there was an expectation that she accept the most rigorous and prestigious college program available. This is the same student who took 15 advanced placement exams. However, Melissa had already experienced a school year of

self-doubt and depression and she was not certain that an accelerated BA/MD program was the healthiest choice for her. She also did not have the confidence to believe she would be successful in such a program. However, she ultimately decided that achievement (or even overachievement) carried more weight in her decision-making process than self-care or “having fun.”

5.5.15

Melissa asks if we can talk in the “crying room.” I grab a box of tissues. It’s 10:00AM and has already been an emotional day in the gifted center.

Melissa takes a deep breath, “I’m going to turn down [the BA/MD program].”

I ask her how she is feeling in general. She isn’t sure.

I ask her how she is feeling about Taiwan. She is excited. She tells me her parents think that if she doesn’t go to the BA/MD program that she shouldn’t go to medical school at all. She is now talking about a PhD in chemistry. I tell her I know she will be great in many paths. She accepts the Taiwan study abroad and begins making calls to defer her scholarships to the state university.

By the time college decisions came out, Melissa had spent a school year working with our guidance staff, including me, on developing a self-care practice. During this difficult decision, she committed to waking up, coming to school, leaning on her connections, and exploring her feelings, as she processed this difficult decision. These

commitments to self-care were significant. Formerly, Melissa would have stayed in bed for days wishing the decision would just go away. Instead, this time Melissa spoke at length with the student researchers, her family, and me about her potential options.

5.6.15

Melissa comes into the gifted room early in the morning. She's not a morning person. It is obvious she has been crying. I give her a hug. We don't hug often.

"I changed my mind," she tells me. "I did a complete 180."

"Did you talk to your mom?"

"Yeah, and my sisters...my whole family."

I ask what I can do. We sit in two chairs near my desk. I ask her how she is feeling. "I don't know."

"How are you feeling about [the BA/MD program]?"

"Good," she says, "even though I am crying."

We laugh. She tells me it is "the right choice." That it will be hard, but that she can do it. She says 6 years [the length of the program] isn't that long. She says Taiwan and [the state university] were the "easy way and more fun route, but I have my whole life for fun".

She starts making a plan. She is going to call her mom. She is going to accept [the BA/MD program].

"Right now?" I ask.

Melissa nods and tells me decisions are due tomorrow. She picks up her phone, goes in the hall and comes right back. “Mom didn’t answer.”

She sits down at a computer and logs in. The [BA/MD program] website is down. She calls them. Someone helps her access the acceptance page on her iPad.

She picks up her phone again and looks over to me. “When do you stop calling your mom before major decisions?” she asks me.

I laugh. “I don’t know. I still call mine.”

She calls her mom who confirms she is making the right decision.

She accepts. Melissa will be Dr. Chen in 2021.

There was not a clear “right choice” for Melissa, or perhaps more accurately, there were multiple “right choices.” Melissa is not the only academically, high achieving young woman I have worked with who made their college decision and then rescinded that choice within 48 hours to accept another offer. The stakes of this decision are high and in many cases, the highest stake decision a young person has made. As it was for Melissa, self-doubt is often a compounding factor in a student’s ability or inability to make a decision. Melissa’s doubts stemmed from many places: she distrusted her ability to make the “right decision,” she worried about her ability to do well in the accelerated and high pressure medical program, and she was concerned about moving away from her mother and sisters.

Self-Doubt's Continued Grip

Even after the student researchers were *accepted* to programs or higher education institutions, self-doubt continued to plague their decisions and planning. I asked Elaine how the college applications process impacted her self-concept. She shared,

It made me feel like “a nobody” to be honest. I felt average when applying for colleges and didn't feel like I've done anything special at all. For a while, I was sad because I didn't think I would get into [X University] and disappoint my parents and family, but after I got in, I felt a lot better! I don't think my self-concept changed. I still feel like the same person. Maybe it fed my ego a little bit more. I don't know. It's great that I got in, but now I'm nervous about not flunking out.

The student researchers, who were the highest achievers at Barnwood High School, honestly feared failing out of college. They had intense worries of not being able to complete their intended undergraduate degrees. They felt this way despite mounting contradicting evidence that they were capable and likely to succeed. During our study, the student researchers were accepted to selective colleges, graduated as valedictorians, and won generous scholarships. Yet, they told me they stayed up late worrying about failing out of college. In our work on self-care, we began to see the ways self-doubt impeded our mental health practices. We worked on reframing our self-talk, and focusing on self-compassion and gratitude. Slowly through our interrelated work on courage, connection, and self-care we did find ways to alleviate self-doubt and promote confidence and care. For example, Jessica shared, “[Our project] made me more aware of how unhealthy the pressures gifted girls like us put on themselves, and how it doesn't

have to be this way. We can do things to change the norm and help others- like how we gave the workshops [on health and wellness].” Some of these actions that the student researchers took to promote self-care are discussed later in this chapter.

Confronting Self-Doubt

The simple act of naming and recognizing self-doubt helped us respond to it in a healthier fashion. We found, the more we talked about self-doubt, the more comfortable we became talking about self-doubt, and then the more adept we become at recognizing it in ourselves. Once we had labeled self-doubt in a situation, we were then better able to work on evaluating whether the doubt was well-founded or not. Usually, when the student researchers considered the situation calmly, often through dialoguing with our research community, they found the courage to move past their doubts.

For example, near the end of our project, when Leslie reconsidered her college applications and decisions process through the lessons of our research team, she remarked that,

With every “no” I received from colleges or scholarships, I felt worse and worse about myself. It seemed like their rejection was just validating all of my self-doubts. Of course, I knew that that wasn’t the case, but for a while I took it really personally. I went over all of my accomplishments and thought “what more could I have done?” That was really unhealthy of me to do. But, now that I am on the other side of the decisions process I know that I shouldn’t have been so self-disparaging. That was a tough lesson for me to learn. It took a lot of tears for me to get over my rejections, but I did. And I think I am stronger for having gone through it.

Leslie was able to look back on her experiences in the college decision process with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). She recognized instances when self-doubt and criticism had led to “unhealthy” feelings. She (and I) hope that the next time she experiences self-doubt, she will be able to recognize it, name it, and in a kind and gentle manner dismiss it. Over time, we all began to re-focus and re-train ourselves to see challenge and precipice experiences, as opportunities to dismiss self-doubt and embrace self-care.

Em(body)ing Self-Care

Each year, I invite my friend and colleague, Amy to talk to our empowerment group. Amy has a background in biology, kinesiology, and nutrition. When she visits, she always fields a wide-range of personal student questions about the body (e.g., diet, menstruation, muscle-building, and sexual health). On more than one occasion after Amy’s presentation, a student has shared that she is struggling with an eating disorder that no one has noticed. These confessions shake my confidence as an educational leader. I spend evenings overwhelmed with guilt for not noticing sooner. How did I miss the signs, again? Through our work on self-care, the student researchers taught me the difficult lesson that perhaps the reason I was missing the signs, was because I was not asking the right questions. Just as affective needs are seldom discussed in school, I realized upon reflection, that Amy's presentation was often the only time the students in our empowerment group had an open conversation about bodies (and caring for them) with a teacher or counselor.

The student researchers taught me that a single, guest presentation was insufficient to address the complex topic of bodies. They helped me revise our research design so that there bodied experiences were more integrated into our research activities

and dialogues. After all, they pointed out, their bodies were central to their experiences as people, adolescents, and young women. Therefore, in our project, we talked about bodies more openly and frequently than I would have expected. This was a growing process for me that required a dramatic shift in my own perspective about body-talk with young women. I discuss the ways the student researchers helped shift my perspective in the following section.

Shifting Perspectives

Originally, in designing this project, I did not write any questions in our journals or dialogue protocols about bodies. Instead, I naively (and incorrectly) thought, *we'll just talk about health and wellness*. In designing the preliminary plans for our project, I did not think much about bodies, except perhaps that they were an abstraction of the “more relevant” concepts of health and wellness. The student researchers corrected me. They shook their heads and said, *we need to talk about bodies, our bodies, our relationship to these bodies, and our experiences with them*. And so we did. As a result, I learned that I had been wrong in my approach to talking about bodies, or more accurately *not* talking about bodies. This was a painful lesson for me to come to terms with.

I had believed that the best way to support girls and young women in developing healthy body image was to not draw any attention to their bodies. In the gifted resource room I had a “survival drawer” in my teacher desk that was stocked with Band-Aids, granola bars and feminine supplies. I told the students, including the student researchers, that they could take what they need, *without saying a word*. The message was, we do not have to talk about it. I believed that feminist teaching (and parenting) de-emphasized bodies and appearances. I had rationalized, that who the student researchers were

mattered more than how they looked. I worried that talking about their bodies, or inviting conversations about bodies, would undermine this key philosophy.

When I brought this approach to our research community, the student researchers shared that in fact their bodies were not always secondary and were never separate from their experiences. Yes, who the student researchers are continues to be infinitely more important than how they look. However, the student researchers taught me that how they feel about strength, courage, vulnerability, and confidence often manifests itself in their bodies. Failing to talk about bodies was not serving the affective or social-emotional development of these young women. Further, engaging in much of our work around self-care without would not have been possible without also considering how these practices (e.g., nutrition, exercise, sleep, and mindfulness) manifested in our bodies.

Team-Building

Our research team planned a few team-building activities to help our group form trust and rapport. These team-building activities became an exercise in self-care, for the ways they strengthened our community, challenged us with a fun low-stakes activity, and also in two cases, for the physical or cardiovascular benefits we gained from taking a fitness class together. The student researchers decided they wanted to learn something new and practice courage at each of our team-building events. They chose the activities for these team building sessions.

To kick off our project we signed up for an aerial yoga class. Aerial yoga involves practicing yoga poses and tricks (like flying, flipping, and hanging upside down) while being supported in a fabric harness. It was terrifying, exhilarating and yes, team-building. At one point Melissa got caught in the fabric while trying to pull herself upright. Later

during the class, I needed Leslie to stand next me for emotional support while I attempted to flip upside down. When I managed to flip backwards, I looked over my shoulders and saw Faith resting with her head on the ground in a headstand. She looked perfectly content. By the end of class we were exhausted and famished. Several of us, including me, were a little nauseous. However, we were also proud and a bit surprised that our bodies had been able to complete a class like that.

Physical Strength

During the course of this project, all of the student researchers discussed the connection they had experienced between feeling physically strong and feeling emotionally (or mentally) strong. They spoke of running 5Ks, trying new fitness classes at the gym or recreation center, and camping trips. Although the intention of our team-building activities was to have fun together in a low-stakes and healthy environment, it was challenging for the student researchers to let go of their overachievement and perfectionism.

For our second team-building activity, my friend Ericka, a personal trainer and former bodybuilder, offered to teach us a kickboxing class. Her class was an hour of cardio and strength that left all of us (with the exception of Elaine) gasping for breath. We wore sweaty boxing gloves and punched and kicked the heavy boxing bags until we could hardly move. After class we snapped a photo. As we smiled for the gym manager, I noticed that Melissa was not looking well. She assured me she was fine. We went to the locker room afterward and Melissa headed straight for a trashcan and started vomiting. Elaine got her water and told her she was going to be alright. Melissa told me that she had not done any “hard exercise” in a long time and she had wanted to push herself to see

how hard she could run, jump, kick, and punch. She was testing herself, in much the same way she did when she took multiple advanced placement courses. She wanted to push herself to her upper limits, or past her limits, even if doing so would result in physical consequences. Melissa believed that through this process she would discover what she was capable of. Just as Faith shared ways the healthy eating and exercise had spiraled out of control during her battle with anorexia, I recognized that practicing self-care with high achieving and perfectionist young women is delicate. Melissa's experience at kickboxing is illustrative of the ways student researchers sometimes found it challenging to let go of the need to compete, push, and achieve, even during our "fun" activities.

Elaine also frequently spoke about wanting to push her body to its physical limits. In one of her journals Elaine shared the following,

...physically I always feel strong not gunna lie. Unless I don't hit the weights I want to in strength training. Then I feel like I'm getting weaker which is not good because I'm probably not getting weaker, just an off day. I don't think there's much else to say there. Well actually, maybe there is. Lifting wise I'm pretty confident in my capabilities.

Elaine's confidence, including her academic confidence, was linked to her capabilities and accomplishments as an athlete. As a smaller-framed, varsity athlete and power-lifter, Elaine often experienced injuries. When she was injured, and had to take off weight training for a week or more, she noticed a change in her overall mental wellness. This self-reflection, worried her as she thought about the pressures she would experience in her college life.

...I'm nervous I won't be able to work out in college because I'll be so busy with marching band and school. I don't want to get unhealthy. That would not be fun. Did you know that there was a study on how not exercising for a whole year affects a person who normally does so daily? They found that their brains literally shrunk among other things declining of course such as balance, locomotor skills. Little worried...

At the onset of our project, Elaine and Faith were the only student researchers who had developed consistent fitness programs. However, all of the student researchers spoke of the joy (and confidence) they found in proving their physical strength. Claudia had several medical conditions (chronic wrist pain and severe food allergies) that limited her ability to participate in as wide a range of fitness activities or and nutrition plans. Therefore, although Claudia took pride in proving her physical strength, as the other student researchers did, she did not feel the need to compete in physical activities like the other student researchers. Claudia focused her self-care practice more on psychological factors such as spending time with friends, positive self-talk, and relaxing.

Weighing the Connection between Health and the Body

The connection between being a “healthy weight” and feeling well was a conversation topic in several of our team meetings. Achieving, and even defining, “healthy weight” was variable and context specific depending on the student researchers’ needs and backgrounds. Faith’s battle with anorexia was a frequent narrative in our dialogues. Elaine talked about a cut she did during our study. A cut is when a body-builder or lifter follows a short-term, regimented calorie and fitness routine to lose body fat and get “chiseled” muscles. While our dialogues about bodies became an important

trope in our study, we were more interested in the emotional connection between health and the body than we were in calculating any specific diet or weight-loss/weight-gain plans.

While (losing or gaining) weight was a concern for several of the student researchers, in this section, below is an example from Leslie's self-care journey that developed directly out of our work on this research project. A few weeks into our project, Leslie shared the following,

Obviously, there are the typical measures of physical health: BMI, Weight, Blood Pressure, Heart Rate, etc. So I think those numbers should be within the "normal" range. I think you should exercise regularly and eat healthy. But, I also think it is important to be mentally and emotionally healthy. I think that means you should have people in your life who support you and who you can confide in. It means you should feel happy. You should be optimistic about your future. You should feel good in your own skin. You should feel confident. However, I think that most times all of these types of health are related. If you are physically healthy, you are more likely to be mentally and emotionally healthy. And that is a problem for me, because I am none of those things currently. So I just really want to start practicing more self-care because I think my emotional and mental health would improve as well.

Leslie and I talked about this. We brainstormed strategies to improve self-care. She reflected at length on her feelings about the areas where she could improve her mental, physical, and emotional health. She made plans and then acted on those plans. In

her own way, Leslie completed an entire research cycle around personal self-care based in part, because of her relationship to her weight. Faith and Elaine also completed similar research cycles tied to their weight (Elaine through her development as a weight-lifter and Faith through her continued healing from anorexia).

In one of her last journals for this project Leslie shared,

I had to submit a physical to [Ivy League school] which meant stepping on a scale for the first time in a year. The results shocked me. I had gained 30 pounds my senior year. At first I was mortified. I started going through pictures and sure enough, though I hadn't noticed it at the time, I gradually gained weight across the entirety of my senior year. The worst picture was the one that my mom had bought of me in my cap and gown at graduation. It is sitting on our piano and serves as my inspiration to get more physically fit.

As discussed the nature of the high stakes, and high stress, high school environment does not support self-care, particularly for high achieving young women. Rather than focusing on her health, Leslie was managing multiple advanced placement courses, safeguarding her “perfect” GPA so that she could earn valedictorian honors, and volunteering with multiple agencies.

While Leslie was upset by the weight gain at her physical, she thought back to the lessons from our research team and decided to engage in action instead of self-doubt or criticism. She wrote,

In the last 5 weeks I have lost 16 pounds. I am still far from my goal, but I know that I need to be proud of what I have accomplished so far. I know

the journey will only become even harder when I start college, but I will try so hard to stay motivated. Right now something I am using to push myself is a future post I will make on my social media sites. I know it sounds silly, but I want to write a “Transformation Tuesday” post (similar to Faith’s, but kind of the opposite) about how I worked hard to get healthy again. So that is an end goal for me, but I tell myself that my immediate goal is if I lose one pound a week and that is a success--if I lose more, then that’s even better, but I can’t put unrealistic standards on myself. I need to lose the weight in a healthy manner that will promote keeping the weight off.

Leslie called me a couple days before she left for college. She asked if we could go on a trail walk together. We walked for many miles. She shared that the positive changes she made to bring more health and wellness into her life had inspired her parents and brother to do the same. All four of them were practicing healthy eating and spending time walking and biking. She talked to me about the ways she could keep up her self-care practice in college.

“Workshopping” Self-Care

Two of the major research cycles in our project culminated in large-scale workshops for gifted youth. However, planning for these workshops caused us to refine our own definitions and understandings of self-care. In order to present on self-care, we had to be clear on what that concept meant to each of us. Therefore, we reflected on our own beliefs, experiences and challenges with health and wellness. Like all of the concepts in this project, the way(s) we defined and refined our definitions of self-care

were context specific and colored by our own positionality. Below is a partial transcript from our team dialogue on how the student researchers were defining self-care. This conversation occurred during the early stages of preparing for their workshops at the governor's school.

Elaine: Exercise and healthy eating habits are a must for [self-care] along with good personal hygiene. Another thing I don't think I talk about very often is happiness. Being well means being happy because if you ain't happy, what's the point?

Jessica: To me [self-care] means you are thriving both physically and mentally.

Melissa: [A self-care practice] means being in a good enough state to reach my goals. It doesn't really mean being super physically fit and happy all the time...just functional mentally, emotionally, and physically. It means being in a place where I don't have to worry about holding myself back from what I want to do.

While Jessica believed self-care should be synonymous with “thriving,” Melissa was willing to settle for “functional.” Each of the student researchers entered our work around self-care at a different starting place. For Melissa being able to come to school regularly, turn in assignments on time, and feel generally well, was an important first goal. Our research community attempted to honor the different places each of us were at, and to celebrate our self-care successes as we achieved them.

Our workshops acknowledged that all of the strategies we suggested, were ones we were still actively working on ourselves. In fact, in some cases there was an irony in

the topics we chose to present on. That irony wasn't lost on us. Faith told me, "My dad thinks it is hilarious in a really dark humor kind of way that I am presenting on nutrition." Rather than approaching their audience as omnipotent experts, the student researchers disclosed that they were also still "works in progress." Their workshops attempted to open up dialogue with high achieving, young people around self-care.

The first workshop offered guidance and strategies for high achieving students to practice health and wellness in the high stress and high stakes, high school environment. The second workshop, offered strategies for managing the college applications process without forgoing self-care. We presented our workshops to students identified as gifted at a statewide governor's school. As we had learned and experienced in this project, attendees of our workshops shared that often these were the first conversations they had been invited to on the topic of self-care.

Confessions and Reflections on Studying Self-Care

This was a difficult chapter for me to write. In order to honestly share the lessons we learned about self-care in our research project, I had to admit several instances when I had been wrong, misinformed, or naive, about the nature of self-care for achieving young women in general, and the needs of the student researchers in particular. As a high achieving and perfectionist woman myself, admitting I was wrong was hard to do. However, when I think back to the beginning of our project, I am embarrassed about how I thought we could keep our conversations around self-care at a "safe-distance" from our vulnerably personal experiences. I think I assumed we would talk and read about self-care abstractly, perhaps discussing generalized experiences of high achieving or gifted women writ large. Of course, this was a ridiculous assumption; both self-care and the

nature of our feminist research project, demanded personal reflection from our unique lived experiences. At times, these included our most vulnerable struggles with wellness.

Our dialogues around bodies, as well as my personal opening up about the grieving I was doing for my beloved aunt and then later for our family dog, were important turning points for me. It was in these instances, that the student researchers taught me how deeply embedded the masked affective crisis is for gifted women, including, I reluctantly admitted, myself. Luckily, I had six fantastic, patient teachers on my research team. They taught me that masking pain, either by ignoring it, hiding it in sweeping generalizations, or by closing dialogues around it, will never lead to healing or self-care. They taught me that yes talking about difficult and personal topics such as depression, doubt, and hurt, requires tremendous courage. However, over and again, they showed me by their example, that courage was often rewarded with deeper and more meaningful connections, healing, and greater intentionality around self-care.

In Chapter 7 I bring these many lessons together to discuss the implications our project has for theory, practice, and research. I also introduce the new framework for wholehearted affective education that we developed as a result of this work together. Finally, I close with insights on how these ideas might be extended moving forward.

**CHAPTER SEVEN DISCUSSION:
A FRAMEWORK FOR WHOLEHEARTED AFFECTIVE EDUCATION**

The purpose of this YPAR project was to unmask the affective crisis of high achieving young women on the precipice of college. We knew from the literature, personal experience and practice, that the social-emotional needs of academically high achieving young women often caught educators and counselors by surprise (Colangelo, 2003; Ferguson, 2012; Herald, 2015; Kerr & Nicpon, 2003; Maurer, 2011; Roeper, 2012). Thus, the intent of our work was to better understand and better support the affective needs of this unique student group. Therefore, the three questions that framed our study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of six academically high achieving young women as they prepare for their college transition?
2. What are the social-emotional needs of six academically high achieving young women as they prepare for their college transition?
3. What solutions (or actions) can this research team offer to embrace wholehearted living and better support academically high achieving young women?

In this concluding chapter, I use our findings to answer these three research questions. As it turns out, the questions, like our themes, were interrelated and messy. As we worked on answering one question, it led to discoveries about another. Our YPAR process took us in new directions in this research, leading to complex, unanticipated, and nuanced discoveries with direct implications for practice, and reserach. One of our most significant accomplishments in this study, the development of our new framework for

wholehearted affective education, is an example of the ways our lived experiences and focus on actions (or solutions) contributed to deeper understanding of the social-emotional needs of our research team. Through unpacking our findings around these central questions, our research team is able to offer some important contributions to why and how courage, connection and self-care (ought to) matter to educational leaders, schools, counselors, parents, and students. The discussions in this chapter put our findings and experiences back in conversation with the extant literature around gifted education, affective development, feminism, intersectionality, and achievement. This project points to the need for continued research and I outline 5 potential studies building from our project. I finish this chapter, with my reflections on exiting, or closing this study (Figueroa, 2014).

Lived Experiences of Academically High Achieving Young Women

YPAR projects engage in the complex personhood of individuals in community (Appadurai, 2006). Further, both YPAR and feminist methods emphasize personal lived experiences (Heron & Reason, 2002; hooks, 2000; Morrell, 2004). Therefore, our first research question, which explored the complex personal experiences of the student researchers was a necessary endeavor in this project. While there was obviously great diversity in worldviews, cultures, contexts, and beliefs among the research team, there were also some shared experiences, pressures, and circumstances. In particular, the student researchers' lived experiences, (prior to) and during our project, were marked by academic emphasis (Hoy et al., 2006; Mathison & Ross) including overachievement (Robbins, 2006). The student researchers shared powerful stories about the complicated pressures of multiple AP classes, the competitive college and scholarship applications,

and the quest to achieve valedictorian honors. Meanwhile they also shared complex stories about coming of age as complex, bright, sensitive (Lovecky, 1999; Rimm, 1999), college women. As our study illustrated, the masked affective crisis is well-hidden in high stakes and high stress high schools. Through the courageous telling of personal, central stories (described below) the student researchers began the work of unmasking this crisis, through stories of healing and new thinking about the success construct.

Central Stories, Tethers in our Dialogues

As I reflected back on our findings, I realized that each of the student researchers focused on 1 or 2 central stories throughout our project. While we puzzled and struggled over many experiences during this project, these 10-12 central lived experience stories became tethers in our dialogues. Without any member of our research team suggesting we do so, the student researchers focused in on 1 or 2 central identity stories from their lived experiences, and used their project to engage in deeper sense making (Belenky et al., 1997; Belsey, 2002) around those stories. Melissa's central stories included her struggles with mental health and her complicated relationship with her mother. Faith's central story was her recovery from anorexia. Delaney's central story was the role self-doubt played across her experiences. Claudia's central story was her identity as a women scientist. Jessica's central story was the costs (financial and emotional) of the college process. Elaine's central stories were her identity as an Asian-American athlete and coming out as gay. As we shared these lived experience stories (Appadurai, 2006; Heron & Reason, 2002; Morrell, 2004), which were rooted in identity (McCall, 2014; Ridgeway, 1991; Shields, 2008), the student researchers explored courage, connection and self-care in the context of their own dynamic stories. Across each of these personal central stories, we

saw aspects of our own lived experiences. These central stories became common narratives in our group as they were shared, revisited, revised, and reflected on frequently throughout the project.

Healing. Healing was a self-care process initiated by sharing our hurt with each other, which required both courage and connection. While we experienced healing, we did not “get over” our challenges or pains. Instead, with each iteration of our central stories, we found small ways to be kinder, gentler or more positive with ourselves; we noticed that slowly our physical or emotional pains hurt less as we shared them through the interrelated processes of courage, connection and self-care. The student researchers (and I) struggled with intense social-emotional challenges and a range of crises. However, it was in working honestly and openly through these challenges that we found tremendous moments of inner strength (Berry, 2010; Lovecky, 1992) and healing. Healing included forgiving each other, and more often ourselves, for our mistakes and imperfections (Brown, 2010).

In my early work with the empowerment group, I was most struck by the disclosure of the bright young women we were working with. I was struck by this disclosure not only for the courage it represented, although that was certainly admirable, but also for the unique ability I saw in the ways vulnerability supported healing and strength. Likewise during this research project, as the student researchers unpacked and continued to revise (verbally, written, or in practice) their central stories, we noticed a pattern of healing.

This process teaches us how to own our own stories of falling down, screwing up and facing hurt so we can integrate those stories into our lives and write new daring endings. (Brown, 2015, p. 39)

Through the healing experiences of story sharing and connection we became resilient (Brown, 2012, 2015) to move forward with greater strength and understanding after a crisis or challenge. We celebrated the inner-strength each of us found in living these stories, including growing from our mistakes.

During the course of this project we all experienced healing either physically or emotionally (and for some, both). For example, while Leslie still experienced times of doubt, by the end of our project she found was more able to identify her strengths. Faith shared that she knew she still had a distorted body image, but that she was also able to embrace that she continued to maintain a healthy weight. Elaine made peace with herself and her best friend. I healed from the grief of losing my aunt. Melissa developed a self-care practice that gave her the strength to enroll in her dream school and move away from her mother and sister. At the onset of the project, all of these stories of healing would have seemed unlikely or even impossible.

The Success Construct

The women on this research team were all high achievers in their academic and extracurricular endeavors, as determined by a combination of GPA, standardized test scores, advanced placement records, varsity athletics, and state and district music recognitions. There was however, an associated distance between *success* and *achievement*. While were often used synonymously in the literature (see Dweck, 2006; Caeser & Caeser, 2006; and Rimm et al., 1999) the student researchers saw these terms as

distinct. They were far more comfortable being labeled *achievers* (though often with qualifiers) they were not comfortable being labeled *successes*. The student researchers believed achievement represented what someone has accomplished, whereas success represented an identity construct. In the case of the high achieving women in our study, this *success construct* was separate from their own self-concepts (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). This was linked to struggles with impostor phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1987), gendered beliefs about women and self-promotion (Rudman, 1998), and the social-emotional challenges of gifted individuals (Dabrowski, 1967, 1972; Kerr, 2005, Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999). Teasing out the nuances of identity and self-concept (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993) became a topic of conversation among our researchers.

Social-Emotional Needs of High Achieving Young Women

Exploring the social-emotional needs of our research team was an exercise in courage, connection, and self-care. We used Brown's (2012, 2014, 2015) framework for wholehearted living to make sense of the unique affective needs (Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Nipcon, 2003; Lovecky, 1992; Maurer, 2012; Rimm, 1999; Roeper, 2012) of the students on our research team. Understanding and sharing our social-emotional needs required us to share many of our most vulnerable (Brown, 2010, 2012, 2015) and personal feelings and experiences with others. Brown's guideposts for wholehearted living provided a valuable framework and direction for our research team. These guideposts included cultivating: authenticity, self-compassion, resilience, gratitude, joy, intuition, trusting faith, play, rest, calm, stillness, meaningful work, laughter, song, and dance (Brown,

2012). These guideposts also encouraged letting go of numbing, powerlessness, scarcity, fear, the need for certainty, comparison, exhaustion as a status symbol, productivity as self-worth, anxiety as a lifestyle, and being “always in control” (Brown, 2012).

While the student researchers saw value in all of these guideposts, they often remarked that wholehearted living as it is currently written was focused on adult behaviors, feelings, and examples. They wanted a framework that applied specifically to young-people and student-specific behaviors, feelings, and examples. Additionally, they shared that while they were willing to interrogate the nature of high stakes and high stress educational environments (Robbins, 2006), they were not willing to give up their high academic achievement. Therefore, our research team needed to develop a new framework (Belenky et al. 1997; Belsey, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Reinharz, 1992). Our framework for wholehearted affective education builds upon Brown’s (2010, 2012, 2015) model, but includes examples, analysis and reflection specific to gender, and school achievement. In particular, we explore how to temper the pressures of high achievement while cultivating courage, connection, and self-care, specifically in high school and early college contexts.

A Framework for Wholehearted Affective Education

Our findings suggest that courage, connection, and self-care are essential social-emotional skills and supports high achieving young women need to navigate the high stakes and high stress, high school to college transition. This space where young women can cultivate courage, connection, and self-care, while still achieving at high levels was the target of our framework for wholehearted affective education. Our framework for wholehearted affective education is illustrated by two overlapping planes (shown in Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 below). The first plane explores the capacity for a

complementary relationship between strength and vulnerability. As our project developed this is the space where focused on cultivating courage. The second plane explores cultivating self-care within the context of high achievement. Meaningful connection to others (as described in Chapter 5) enabled us to combine our work on courage and self-care. Each component of this framework is explored in more detail below.

Courage—Plane of Strength and Vulnerability

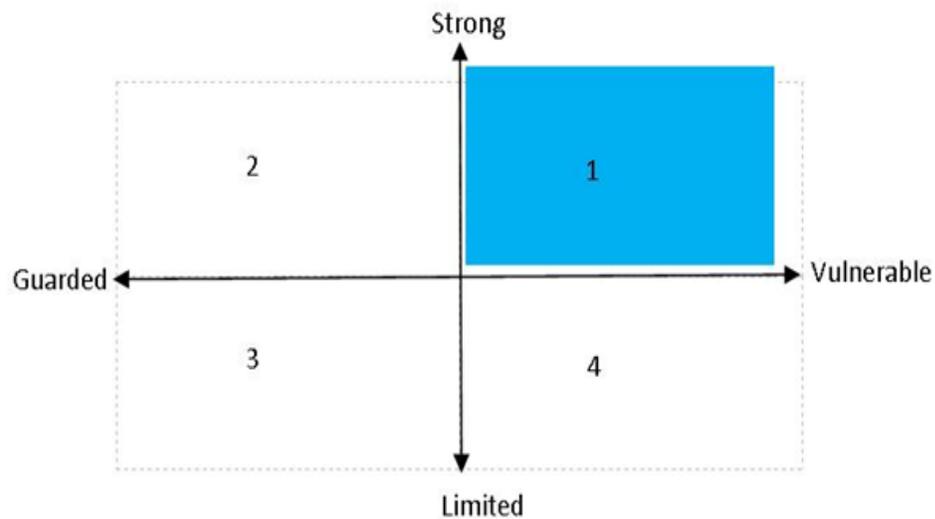


Figure 7.1 Strength and Vulnerability

Strong-Limited

Our operational definition of strength derived from feminist theorists as independent-interdependence (Beauvoir, 1974; Young, 2005; Gilligan, 1982). Independent-interdependence includes taking academic, professional or creative risks in concert and cooperation with others. Adding interdependence (Gilligan, 1982) intentionally disrupts the notion that strength is a solo activity. In her work on moral and psychological development, Gilligan (1982) asserted that interdependence refocuses definitions of power to actions of giving and care. Personal storytelling and community activism gave us an opportunity to practice independent-interdependent strength. We told stories out of a place that Brown (2015) called “the brave and brokenhearted” (p. 131). We first ventured these courageous, personal stories in the safety of the social support

system our research team had created. However, the student researchers then offered these same stories as part of a new narrative about being high achieving young women. In this way, our own lived experiences became a persuasive and political tool for making sense of social-emotional challenges.

Physical strength. Our understanding of strength is layered. The student researchers explored physical, emotional, and mental strength. Physical strength included our embodied experiences (Young, 2005). Young wrote that within a patriarchal society, “Girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full body capacities in free and open engagement with the world” (p. 43). The top digital campaign of the 2015 Super Bowl was an advertisement by Always for feminine products (Berman, 2015). The campaign #likeagirl used a dramatic appeal to pathos which “won kudos all over the Internet for changing the conversation about what it means to run, throw and do pretty much any activity *like a girl*.” (Berman, 2015). Of this campaign, Judkis (2015) wrote, “On a day that glorifies masculine athleticism, Procter & Gamble is making viewers consider female strength, as well.” While our project rejects the dichotomy of feminine/masculine strength, we appreciated the efforts to alter the conversation around strength and gender. Our conversations about bodies, and experiences as embodied (described in Chapter 6) informed our understanding of physical strength in this study.

Mental and emotional strength. The student researchers characterized mental strength as feeling equipped for an academic or intellectual challenge. Some wrote about sitting in an advanced class and understanding the content, or the thrill they experienced when they solved a complex problem. We found emotional strength as highly compatible with courage and vulnerability, discussed below. Our research team, contended that the

moments when they found strength were the moments when they were able to take creative risks, and to experience the full range of emotions and actions within the sociocultural context (Young, 2005). The connection to feelings and emotions is congruent with our project's feminist commitment to affective education (Ferguson, 2012; Lorde, 1977; Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999). Unless disrupted "crying like a girl" has similar to negative connotations to "playing like a girl" we wanted to reconstruct these experiences from a place of strength.

Feeling limited. The converse of feeling strong is feeling limited (i.e., isolated dependence). We defined feeling limited as the isolating experience of being constrained or dependent on structures, systems or people such that, these limitations prevent or impede creative risk-taking. Gender discrimination (Adichie, 2014; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000), including the glass ceiling (Bell et al., 2002; Cotter et al., 2001), racism (Collins, 2000, Hartlep, 2013), and the hegemony of accountability in schools (Mathison & Ross, 2002) were all constraints that limited the student researchers' ability to take creative risks, venture independent ideas, or forge interdependent (Gilligan, 1982) relationships. For example in her radio story, Leslie explored the gendered implications of the ways girls and women's achievements were limited by patriarchy.

Vulnerable-Guarded

Strength, as described above, is characterized by the capacity to make independent-interdependent decisions, including taking personal and academic risks. Therefore, vulnerability is compatible and necessary with this ideological pursuit. Vulnerability is central to both wholehearted living (Brown, 2010, 2012, 2015) and humanizing research (Kinloch & Pedro, 2014). We practiced independent-

interdependence through collective sharing of deeply personal stories. This is similar to the way Kinloch and Pedro (2014) wrote that “Discussing our vulnerabilities allowed us to engage in a dialogic spiral conversation in which we co-constructed knowledge” (p. 40). Brown (2015) defined vulnerability as “the willingness to show up and be seen with no guarantee of outcome. [It] is the only path to more love, belonging and joy.” (p. xvii)

In September of 2014, Emma Watson gave a speech at the United Nations to launch the *HeForShe* gender equality campaign. The speech struck a chord with the high school students I worked with at Barnwood, particularly the students on this research team. In her speech, Watson discusses the connection between strength and vulnerability.

We don't often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes but I can see that that they are and that when they are free, things will change for women as a natural consequence....Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong... It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum not as two opposing sets of ideals...I want men to take up this mantle. So their daughters, sisters and mothers can be free from prejudice but also so that their sons have permission to be vulnerable and human too—reclaim those parts of themselves they abandoned and in doing so be a more true and complete version of themselves. (Watson, 2014, para 22-26)

In patriarchal culture, strength is often connected to guardedness and seen in opposition to vulnerability. Our project took a feminist stance to reconstruct and re-value vulnerability, particularly in its relationship to strength. In terms of wholehearted living, Brown (2015) wrote of “the brave and broken-hearted rising strong” (p. 131). The idea of

being broken, hurting, or imperfect, (Brown, 2010, 2015) while also being strong and courageous was a central idea in our study,

Guardedness, which is synonymous with “playing it safe” is the inability to take emotional risks. Likewise, feeling limited is likened to not having the capacity to take professional and academic risks, due to the constraints of people or structures. Risk is an essential component of strong vulnerability. Strength as operationalized in the framework for wholehearted affective education is the ability to take personal, academic and professional risks. Vulnerability is the ability to take emotional risks.

Privilege, power, and vulnerable stories. Privilege and power influence the ease (or difficulty) that personal stories get shared (or silenced). Within a hegemonic system, it is routinely only dominant lived experiences that are shared publicly. (Gramsci, 1929-1936; Levinson, 2013). These “lived experience” stories serve to perpetuate the status quo and do not require risk or disclosure. These stories are culturally low-risk stories and guarded by dominant messages. By contrast, vulnerable and counterhegemonic story sharing employs emotional strength, disclosure and risk. Faith’s story about her eating disorder, Melissa’s story about shame and her Chinese heritage, and Elaine’s coming out story are all examples of counter-narratives that required risk and courage to share. Privilege interacts with risk taking capacity in meaningful ways. Marginalized groups typically have more at stake and less support for taking risks (Belenky et al., 1997; Collins, 2000, hooks, 2000). Additionally, the student researchers shared with me that as teenagers they sometimes felt that their stories were less valued than adult stories. I saw this too when we were told that our radio stories needed to include adult interviews to grant them “expert credibility.” This project speaks to the tremendous value of the stories

of young people as well as their ability to produce new and important knowledge on education, affective needs, mental health and gender.

As a feminist research team, privilege was part of our conversation around risk, strength, vulnerability, and courage (Adichie, 2014; Belenky et al., 1997; hooks, 2000; Snyder, 2008) . As White and Asian women, we had different privileges than our Black or Latina counterparts would have (McIntosh, 1990). While none of us identified as low-income or poor, we had varied class experiences including paying our own way through college and having parents finance expensive college educations. However, even these lived experiences are complex. For example, while Elaine’s parents were able to pay for her college at a high-price institution, the memory of their poverty in Vietnam was an important story in her family identity. Within our project, we attempted to tell new stories, to speak back to dominant perspectives on what it meant to be a young woman, a high achieving student, a White teenager, an Asian student, or an athlete. Telling these counter-hegemonic stories was an exercise in courage. We knew there was risk in this kind of “rising strong” (Brown, 2015), but we were prepared with courage, connection and self-care to practice what we called, strong vulnerability, described below.

Quadrant One, Figure One: Strong Vulnerability—Courage

Practicing strong vulnerability required us to cultivate courage (as described in Chapter 4) and personal disclosures. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, were critical to our research team’s work around vulnerability. Paying attention to our own self-talk informed many of our own vulnerabilities and growth areas for self-care, discussed below. Sharing these stories in our community allowed us venture alternative life experiences and counterhegemonic examples (Gramsci, 1929-1936). As the student

researchers shared their stories with each other and their broader communities they offered new, complex and nuanced accounts of what it meant to be a high achieving, young woman.

We defined courage as emotional strength or fortitude. We saw it as the connecting fabric between strength and vulnerability. In this project vulnerability was intentionally not in contest with strength. Instead, the intersection of vulnerability and strength (illustrated by the blue rectangle in Figure 7.1) was an essential theoretical space that our research team explored in supporting the affective development of young women.

In studying Brown's work (2010, 2012, 2015), the student researchers and I began to think differently about vulnerability. In particular, we began to see it as a concept married to strength, not in opposition to it. We called this concept, *strong vulnerability* and illustrated it with the blue rectangle in Figure 7.1. In Brown's (2012) terms "vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage" (p. 37). In our project, we practiced vulnerability or *rising strong* (Brown, 2015) through connection, courage, and self-care, particularly through personal story sharing. Phil Kaye (2012), a spoken word poet, refers to a "great vulnerability" when people connect through personal stories.

This is a concept that also emerged in hooks's (2004) work on feminist teaching. She contended that students (broadly defined) need safe spaces to voice the great vulnerabilities of their lived experiences. These spaces and this voicing is a precondition for being able to engage in resistance, activism, and autonomy (hooks, 1994). The radio stories and coming out poem are examples of strong vulnerability from our project. The student researchers employed strong vulnerability (by disclosing personal challenges) to

make a difference in the ways high achieving young women are perceived. The workshops and clothing drive were also examples of strong vulnerability as the students researchers worked to break the silence around issues of mental health and poverty and to then point young people to resources or opportunities for action that would help make a difference in their communities.

Self-Care—Plane of Healthy Achievement

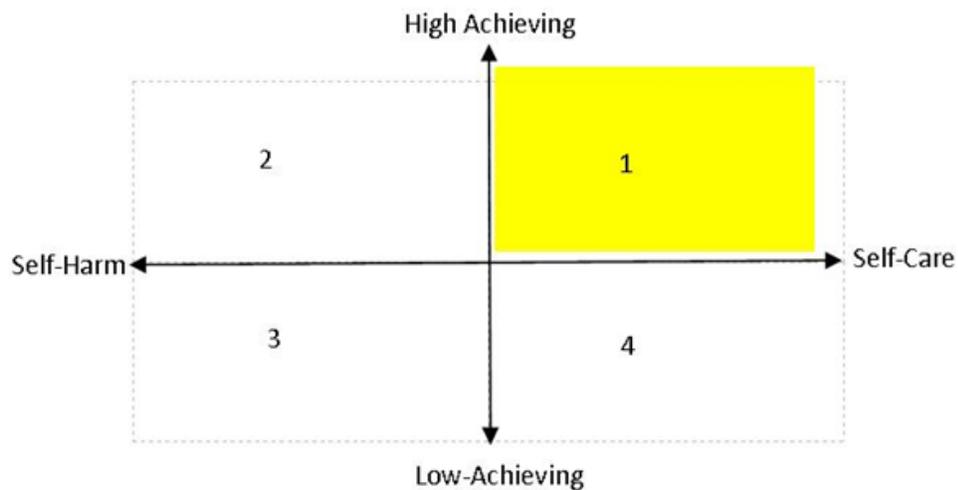


Figure 7.2 Achievement and Self-Care

High Achievement-Low Achievement

In high schools, high achievement is narrowly measured by GPA and test scores. The student researchers were invested in keeping these quantitative measures as high as possible (Hoy et al., 2006). Indeed, Leslie, Jessica, Elaine and Faith all shared top honors as valedictorians. Melissa was the woman Presidential Scholar for the state. In addition to her academic record, Claudia (who is a year younger than her peers) had already worked

for 2 years in a private engineering company. In terms of achievement, we began by looking at these indicators of academic achievement, as that was most salient for our academically high achieving research team, particularly while they were still in the high stakes, high stress high school environment and preparing for prestigious college programs (Hoy, et al., 2006; Mathison & Ross, 2002; Robbins, 2006).

Low-achievement was seldom talked about during our project. However, there are a few important exceptions where this concept surfaced during our dialogues. Melissa's grades occasionally dropped into the D and F range. With my help and generous extensions from her teachers, she was always able to pull them up into the A and B range by the end of the marking period. Her lower achievement was directly related to her challenges with mental health and depression. While Melissa was the only student researcher whose grades ever fell into a quadrant that educational leaders would consider "low achievement," Elaine's unique senior year schedule was another example the students cited during conversations about a potential range of academic achievement. Elaine did to not take any Advanced Placement (AP) courses her senior year. However, she still took Calculus III at the university, completed a college-level internship in engineering and graduated with valedictorian honors. Elaine's decision to not take AP classes, so that she could "enjoy senior year" and "focus on sports and music" was a choice that none of the other student researchers had ever considered. As we began to explore how young women could practice both self-care and high-achievement, Elaine's course schedule became an example we often talked about.

Academic achievement had to be included in creating a framework for wholehearted affective education that was both meaningful to high achieving students

and relevant to high stakes, high schools. However, these quantitative indicators of achievement tell only part of the story of a student's experience. As we reconstructed and reimagined other terms in this project, we were also interested in expanding our definition of achievement to include growth mindset (Dweck, 2008) in music, athletics, and service. We speculated that broadening our definitions of success and achievement would help lessen the likelihood of the masked affective crisis in schools. We wondered how creative, professional and civic achievements, including a wide range of projects could also fit into our definitions of achievement. If teachers, educational leaders, and college committees, encouraged multifaceted indicators of excellence (including music, the arts, athletics and service), high achieving students might feel less pressure to fit into only one narrow and high stakes definition of school success. Our work suggests that educators could help young people redefine the success construct in such a way that more students (particularly, high achieving young women) in more ways (such as how Elaine did through sports, music *and* academics) might be able to identify with it.

Self-Care-Self-Harm

We defined self-care as making an intentional decision to engage in behaviors that help relieve and balance physical, emotional, and mental stress. These may include deep breathing, laughing, getting enough sleep, finding a positive peer group, healthy eating, fitness, celebrating successes, and relaxation.

In contrast, self-harm is making an intentional decision to engage in behaviors that exacerbate stress. These may include disordered eating, unhealthy relationships and not getting enough sleep, to more extreme behaviors including drug and alcohol use, cutting, suicide ideation and others. Self-harm carries a particular connotation (e.g.,

cutting). Our framework does include a place to illustrate these extreme behaviors, at the far left x axis. However, the definitions in this framework attempt to capture more than just extremes. . All of the terms discussed in our framework for wholehearted affective education, exist on a continuum, not as absolutes. This is a delicate issue with perfectionist and high achieving young women (Brown, 2012; Rimm, 1999). Extremes are seldom healthy.

Further, while this framework indicates a focus quadrant (quadrant 1), we are not necessarily advocating that the healthiest point on the plane is the far top right. The student researchers saw in their peers, and in some cases had experienced personally, behaviors and habits that started out as self-care such as healthy eating or exercise, but then became so extreme that they were no longer serving the individual in a healthy way. Faith discussed how her battle with anorexia began as an example of this

Quadrant One, Figure Two: Healthy Striving—Self-Care

Healthy striving is a term from Brown's work (2012). It refers to the wanting to improve, grow, and learn from a place of wholeness or being enough, instead of a place of perfectionism or worrying about being judged. Our study does not devalue the virtue of hard work or achievement; instead both continued to be personal values of all of the women on this research team, including myself. Instead we aimed to untangle the consequences of a hyper-focus on perfectionism and achievement (Kindlon, 2006; Robbins, 2006) and to disrupt status quo definitions of success.

Within our project, we wanted to offer alternatives to the masked affective crisis and the achievers dilemma (Caesar & Caesar, 2006) both of which are shown in quadrant two, the intersection of self-harm and high achievement. Cultivating self-care allowed

our research team to find and experience healthier alternatives even as they continued to academically achieve in school and life (through healthy striving). Therefore, quadrant one (illustrated by the yellow rectangle in Figure 7.2 above) shows the space where students can practice both self-care and high achievement simultaneously (Caesar & Caesar, 2006; Rimm, 1999).

The student researchers shared that some of the skills they needed (or thought they needed) to achieve at high levels in school, were not the same skills they would need to lead happy lives (e.g., going several nights with less than 2 hours of sleep). Through our work on cultivating self-care, the student researchers ventured new ways to practice both self-care and achievement. Prior to our study, or the empowerment group, the student researchers had not been encouraged (particularly in school) to develop self-care. Once they learned about, practiced, and experienced the benefits of a gratitude, mindfulness, fitness, nutrition, laughing, and rest, they wanted to find ways adopt a new healthy striving approach to achievement.

Connection—A Framework for Wholehearted Affective Education

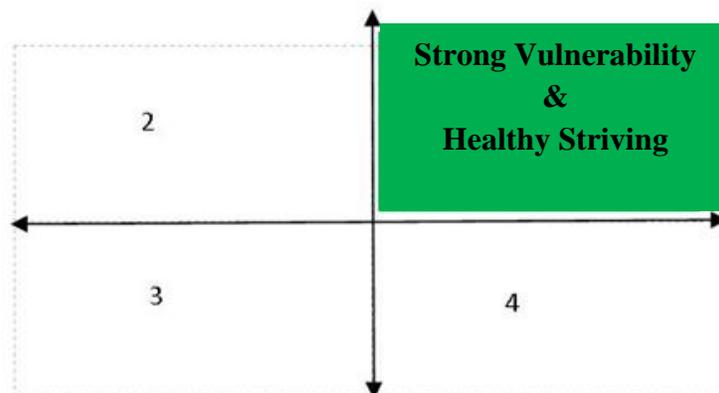


Figure 7. 3 A Framework for Wholehearted Affective Education

Figure 7.1 illustrates the importance of cultivating courage, or strong vulnerability. Figure 7.2 illustrates the importance of cultivating self-care within academic and high-achieving contexts. However, in order to fully meet the social-emotional needs of the student researchers we needed both of these themes, but we needed them in the context of a supportive community. Figure 7.3 shows the two planes stacked on top of each other (or connected) representing the importance of community, relationships, friendships, and mentors. The green rectangle in Figure 7.3 is this targeted theoretical space where courage, connection, and self-care all come together in our framework for wholehearted affective education. There were times when the student researchers questioned whether this endeavor was possible given the high stakes, high stress nature of high school, advanced placement curriculum, and competitive college applications. However, we learned to embrace the process, including our imperfections and mistakes, and to celebrate that with practice (Brown, 2010, 2012; Dweck, 2007) we were becoming more courageous, healthier, happier, and more connected to others.

Taking Action, Solutions for Schools and Stakeholders

(Y)PAR is grounded in finding solutions and taking action on issues that matter to the community of researchers (Heron & Reason, 2002; McIntyre, 2008; Taylor et al. 2006). The masked affective crisis for gifted and high-achieving young women is an issue that was a deeply personal and serious concern for all of us on this research team. We saw evidence of the masked affective crisis in our own lived experiences. Throughout our project we also continued to see evidence of this crisis in other women in our communities. For example, a few months before we started our project, two alumnae from earlier empowerment groups returned to selective colleges after taking medical

leaves for mental health. During our project, we lost a third alumna to suicide. All three of these women were in gifted programs throughout PK-12, all were high-achievers in their academic endeavors, and all were well-liked by faculty and peers. It was easy to see the student researchers in each of these alumnae.

Educational leaders, gifted education teachers, and counselors must take proactive measures to remediate the masked affective crisis. The student researchers and I suggest that these measures ought to center on courage, connection, and self-care. In the following section, I outline the ways these themes might address the masked affective crisis through teaching, advising, pedagogical planning, and student support structures.

Courage: Storytelling in Schools

Through this project, our research team discovered the political, ideological, and psychological potential of personal storytelling (Brown, 2010; hooks, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000), including in particular, the ways vulnerable and courageous stories can support healing and personal growth (Brown, 2015; Collins, 2000). As educational leaders, turn to our study to support affective education in their own gifted and advanced programs, I hope they not only attend to the specific student stories herein, but to the power that sharing such stories had on the members of our research team.

Courageous and personal stories have the potential to humanize and bring about needed change (Brown, 2010, 2012, 2015; Collins, 2000, hooks, 2000). Throughout this project, we saw the ways storytelling could be an act of social justice. Faith's story sharing around her struggles with mental health and anorexia was a powerful example. There are many places where teachers and school administrators could encourage courageous story sharing, including the classroom, in peer groups, and in large group

settings such as assemblies. We believe that these stories would contribute to the personal growth of the storyteller, more accepting school communities, and to a broader culture of inclusion and understanding in schools. In order to operationalize this kind of effective storytelling in schools, teacher preparation programs need to include courses in diversity, difficult dialogues, and creating their classrooms as courageous-spaces. These skills, more than content or standards preparation, are the heart of high-quality teaching.

As pre-service teachers learn these skills, there is an important caution in introducing courageous storytelling in schools. This caution is again related to systems of power and privilege (Collins, 2000). When Elaine came to me for advice first, on whether or not to come out to our research team and then again, to her best friend, I hesitated on what advice to give her. I wanted to believe that all of the communities and individuals she told would embrace her and say, “we love you no matter what.” However, I knew that homophobia was present in schools and that the consequences of hegemonic heteronormativity (Jackson, 2006) are real. I worried, in particular, about a group of young men at school who had a reputation for being intolerant and mean. How would they respond to Elaine’s courageous story? This is the uncertain terrain educators and researchers have to navigate, particularly while working with youth researchers and activists. I did not always have clear or certain answers to give the student researchers. Instead, I too, had to employ hope, that the advice I gave, both kept the student researchers safe and allowed them to practice courage in ways that contributed to their personal growth (Dweck, 2008) and to influencing broader systems of change.

Connection: Teaching as Relationship Work

All relationships carry a level of emotional risk, and through our research team, I learned that this risk is often what leads to the emotional rewards of connection and healing. High quality teaching rests on building meaningful relationships (Delpit, 2006; Erwin, 2010). In a meaningful relationship, the teacher celebrates, weeps, and worries with her students because she cares for them. However, teacher training (and teacher support) at both the secondary and especially the higher education level, does little to prepare instructors to build or process these deep learning relationships.

As I found myself struggling with some of the difficult and painful stories the student researchers, and other gifted youth in our program, shared with me, it occurred to me, that affective education is not only for students. Teachers, just like young people, could benefit from affective education to navigate the emotional complexities of the real and sometimes difficult stories that are shared in education. Teaching is heart-heavy and sometimes heartbreaking work. It is also tremendously fulfilling. Before this project, I did not connect how the heart-heaviness might contribute to the emotional fulfillment of teaching. I believed that both the rewards and pain (or worry) associated with teaching were significant but I had not thought of them as related. As a result of this work, with the student research team I learned that the conditions of connection: relatedness, belonging, and closeness, contribute to both the great rewards and the great emotional risk (Brown, 2010, 2012, 2015). Professional development for teachers and university instructors is discussed below.

College Transition and Support

As our project developed, I noticed we had transformed our notion of the precipice. While it was still associated with risk and fear, we now also spoke of hope and leaping into new possibilities. When I asked the student researchers about this, they shared that our research themes: courage, connection, and self-care, had enabled them to view the precipice experience with hope and exhilaration, instead of only doubt and fear. The student researchers shared that they might have had healthier and happier high school experiences if Barnwood had offered them more gifted education groups and college counseling that encouraged courage, connection, and self-care.

Our project supported the research that gifted and high-achieving young women have intense, affective needs (Colangelo, 2003; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Kerr, 1994, Lovecky, 1992; Rimm, 1999, Roeper, 2012). It further affirmed the need for affective education in high stakes and high stress high schools in general, and gifted programs in particular (NAGC, 2014; Ferguson, 2006; Robbins, 2006). As teachers and counselors work to support students who submit to the selective college applications frenzy, our research team hopes that wholehearted affective education will provide a framework to help manage social-emotional vulnerabilities (Ferguson, 2012) and find meaning during this emotional transition. However, we hope that this support does not stop at high school commencement. Our study sheds new light on how college advisors and faculty might think about higher education transition programs for “high risk” student groups, including new indicators of being “high risk”. Instead of only looking at readiness and remediation, our research suggests that colleges ought to also put programs in place to target affective support for high achieving students.

I advocate for professional development on affective education for advisors and instructors at selective colleges and honors programs. I also support forming facilitator-led community groups, particularly for high achieving first-year women in college. It is critical that this professional development and responsibility not only be required of student support personnel. Professors and often, teaching assistants, have the most regular contact with students. However, professors and instructors are trained to be researchers, not teachers (Buller, 2010). Our project points to the powerful potential a critical teacher can have in connecting with vulnerable students. This connection does not happen by accident. I believe that all instructional faculty in higher education (particularly those at the selective colleges and in honors program) should have training on teacher effectiveness that supports both the cognitive *and* affective domains. Outcomes of this training should include best practices, resources, and a follow-up network as issues (including crises) arise in their classes.

Coaching through Crises

Adding affective education (Dabrowski, 1967, 1970; Ferguson, 2012; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, et al., 1988; Lovecky, 1992; NAGC, 2014) to curriculum and instruction planning in high school, college counseling, and gifted education programming is necessary to scale wholehearted education to the program, school, or district level. Training in affective education should be required for gifted education personnel, guidance counselors, teachers of advanced courses (particularly Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate) and administrators. Trainings and support groups should also be made available to parents and other community members who support gifted and high achieving young women.

While it was not uncommon among our team for voices to break and tears to fall, we learned a lot about ourselves and our peers through exploring those difficult emotions personally and collectively. As a feminist research team, we actively tried to practice compassion and connection, particularly during our most vulnerable times (Brown, 2010, 2012). The ways we leaned in to crisis moments to address them head on and support those working through them was an important lesson we gained through this research project. Too often, many of the crisis moments shared in this project get swept under the rug in schools. These are difficult topics and too seldom addressed, perhaps because teachers and other educational leaders do not feel like they have the tools needed to address them. Therefore these trainings and support groups around affective education are important in a school-wide support plan for high achieving young women.

As a teacher and member of our school counseling team, recognizing and then validating the crisis experiences of the young women I worked with was essential in helping them process, address and work through challenging circumstances. While each crisis experience and each individual is unique, we found courage, connection and self-care to be effective strategies for crisis. Unfortunately, as discussed, this skillset is seldom taught in schools. Instead standardization, accountability, and academic emphasis dictate curriculum and instruction in the high stakes, high school context (Robbins, 2006; Mathison & Ross, 2002). Therefore, our research team calls for increasing affective education in high stakes, and high stress, high schools.

Prior to this research, I conceptualized personal crises as those major micro-sociological disasters I encountered when I first took the position in gifted education. However, the student researchers taught me to view crisis more complexly. Yes, the

major moments of depression, disorder, loss, and abuse are absolutely (*big C*) Crises.

However, crisis, like many of the concepts in our study, exists on a continuum.

Recognizing less extreme (*little C*) crisis experiences such as arguing with a best friend or mother, an injury before a big athletic event, not getting the scholarship, needing an outpatient medical procedure, and a parent losing his job, were also crisis moments members of our research team experienced, during the course of our project. These experiences were important in helping us understanding and addressing the social-emotional needs of the student researchers.

I now believe that everyone experiences crisis moments and that they can be heightened during transition or *precipice experiences*. Below are a few examples that the student researchers shared as we worked together on this project. Some of these crisis moments, swirled out of the student's locus of control, such as the separation of parents, a parent losing his job, and medical issues for both parent and student. Three students (half of the student research team) shared isolated stories of physical or sexual abuse. Two of the students struggled with depression as diagnosed by professionals and for one of the young women, this depression manifested into an eating disorder that required emergency care. One young woman experienced regular full panic attacks, including near hyperventilation. Several of the other student researchers experienced isolated panic attacks. Another student on the research team navigated coming out about her sexual orientation in a homophobic society. Another student became so overwhelmed by self-doubt that she experienced weekly crying fits.

Academically high achieving young women deserve to have their challenging experiences validated as crises, without fear of being called melodramatic or over-

emotional. At the same time, they also should not be made to feel defined by their crisis experiences. Some of the challenging experiences the student researchers experienced were gendered (hooks, 2000) and raced (Collins, 2000; Hartlep, 2013). These included bullying, violence, discrimination, and exclusion. The different ways our multiple identities, including age, ability, religion and sexual orientation were all products of systems of advantage and disadvantage (Anthias, 2008; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). These systems of privilege and oppression are critical to making sense of the complex lived experiences of the students researchers. The more openly we talked about identity, privilege and challenge, the more complex our understanding of crisis also became. As a feminist facilitator to this team, I supported complicating and problematizing the ways the student researchers understood themselves and are understood by others.

Reflections from our Research Community

Our gifted identities (Lovecky, 1992, Kerr, 1994; Rimm, 1999) and socialization as high achieving women (Maurer, 2011; Robbins, 2006) caused us to approach this project with a pointed intentionality to find the “right” answer or solution. We knew we had three central research questions and each of us, in our own ways, wanted the algorithm to solve for x . However, instead of a “right answer” we found points of contention, blurred lines, and fuzzy definitions. This did not mean we had solved the research problem incorrectly. In fact, an important outcome of our project was a kind of unlearning (St. Pierre, 2000). We used feminist perspectives and epistemologies (particularly, Adichie, 2015; Anderson, 1995; Belsey, 2002; Belenky et al., 1997; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Snyder, 2008) and YPAR methodologies (Heron & Reason, 2002;

McIntyre, 2008; Morrell, 2004; Taylor et al., 2006) to unlearn the positivist drive of pinpointing a solitary answer. We found in this unknowing richer and more complex answers (yes, multiple answers) to our questions. We learned that in our own lives, there often is not a right answer, rather, there are infinitely many right answers. This multiplicity informed the lessons we are offering to support practice, theory, and research for high achieving and gifted young women.

As a feminist team, we worked on the personal, interpersonal, and public spheres, in that order. That is, “before women could change patriarchy [or any dominant system] we had to change ourselves; we had to raise our consciousness” (hooks, 2000, p. 7). Through teasing apart our own self-concepts, through supportive, personal story sharing, and through taking action on issues that mattered to our team, our personal and collective self-confidence increased, sometimes dramatically.

As Leslie boarded her plane for college she sent the following text to our group message:

Leslie: I’m thinking of you this morning. I’m about to board my plane to [X city] and I’d just like to wish you all the best of luck! You’re going to be so successful and I’m glad I can call you my friends. :)

Leslie’s short text speaks to the evolution of our community. She now considers the researchers “her friends.” She also alludes to the shifting beliefs our team adopted about our ability to be “successful.” I believe, the potential we found in creating supportive community groups, could be replicated in purposeful, collaborative youth action teams at schools, college campuses, and through community organizations.

Self-Reflections

During the course of this project, I was frequently surprised by the many ways I personally related to the experiences and academic pressures the student researchers shared. At the onset of our project, I had not considered how being labeled gifted or high achieving still influenced my own self-concept. I also had not considered the ways I was still a product of high stakes, high stress schooling (Mathison & Ross, 2002; Robbins, 2006) and the pressures of perfectionism (Brown, 2010; Rimm, 1999). As I found myself nodding in agreement with the student researchers when they spoke about grades and schoolwork, I reexamined my own current and recent experiences. For example, at a gifted education conference, I attended a workshop on supporting perfectionist students. After the workshop, I looked over my notes and realized that most of the strategies I had written down were tools I could personally use to manage my own perfectionism. I also remembered a phone call to my mom about a challenging quantitative methods course I was taking as part of my PhD program. I called her, in tears before the midterm, because I was afraid I might not earn an A, hence losing my “perfect 4.0.” As I too, came to terms with my own identity as a high achieving woman, the dialogues of our research team took on a personal salience I had not expected.

I had planned for difficult conversations. What I had not planned for was how powerful it would be to share and hear those conversations. I knew that in some cases, the difficult emotions that the student researchers were processing were the product of the social-emotional vulnerabilities of gifted youth (Dabrowski, 1967, 1972; Kerr, 2005, Lovecky, 1992). As an educational leader working with gifted youth, particularly young women, I had seen firsthand patterns of anxiety and depression. Still, I was frequently

struck by the student researchers' "intensity, sensitivity, and tendency towards emotional extremes" (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 6) particularly during crisis experiences. Throughout our project we saw countless examples of Dabrowski's (1967, 1972) theory of overexcitability and the five traits in Lovecky's (1992) work: divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness, and entelechy. This intensity as well as attempts to appear "normal" and manage (or mask) anxiety typified the lived experiences of the student research team (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

Through working with these young women, I learned that being in crisis can be an experience, not a permanent condition or sentence. Toward the end of our project I personally began to recognize crisis moments as part of the life process. During this project, I lost my beloved aunt to Alzheimer's. A month or so later my golden retriever lost her battle with lymphoma. Loss is a heavy weight to bear. However, recognizing these losses as crisis moments and leaning into the emotions, even as they were painful, helped me as I processed my own grief.

A Grassroots Process

We started our project with big questions about lived experiences and social-emotional needs. We thought, in turn, that we would discover big trends. We were looking for truths about gifted young women, identity, and school. We did find significant truths, but they came in the form of personal truths. The more we learned about ourselves, our experiences, and our stories, the more progress we made on pushing knowledge and action forward with this project. A few weeks into the research project Leslie shared that she hoped our work would help her gain

Some self-discovery (which I know is already happening as writing journals is allowing me to think about myself in a metacognitive way). I think I also want to develop some better habits before I go away to college. And by habits, I mean that I want to develop a better self-esteem and self-image, because those are things I lack. I'd also like to explore why I believe some of the things I do (like why I have such a low self-esteem).

When we closed our project, I asked Leslie if she thought we had met these goals. She answered immediately, "Yes. I'm not cured. It's still a process, but I am in a much healthier place now than when we started this." The personal growth that Leslie spoke of informs those bigger truths we sought. We all learned about connection, courage, self-care and the power of storytelling, through practicing these skills in our group. Through these lessons, Leslie left the project, stronger, more-confident and healthier (all her terms) for it. As her teacher and the project facilitator for this study, I call that a success.

Academically, our study attempted to fill an important gap in both educational practice and the educational literature. In particular, we offered specific ways to support the social-emotional needs and development of academically high achieving secondary students, empowerment models for young women during the college applications and admissions process, and critiques of high stakes, high schools. Filling these gaps in the literature is important for educational leaders to better understand and support the unique social-emotional needs of an understudied yet vulnerable student population. Our project took a community and grassroots approach to addressing this issue. Our hope is that

educational leaders and stakeholders will use this deeper understanding to put new supports in place to proactively address the masked affective crisis.

Future Studies

This study allowed us to explore uncharted waters in gifted education, school counseling, and educational leadership. This study also enabled us to apply Brown's (2010, 2012, 2015) theory of wholehearted living to youth populations. The potential for future research based on this project is rich. Our study points to the imperative need for more research on affective education with high-achieving students in high school, particularly during the transition to college. This call to additional research is interdisciplinary, spanning across teaching, psychology, gifted education, counseling, sociology, and educational leadership. Most immediately, we would like to see studies that expand the educational research on: identity, equity and access in gifted programs; proactive measures to address the masked affective crisis; the affective consequences of high stakes testing and standardization; longitudinal and student-centered research on the high school to college transition; the implications and possibilities for storytelling as an affective strategy in schools; and the potential and limitations of our newly posited framework of wholehearted affective education.

1. There is an imperative need for deeper work around race, equity, and access in educational research in general, and in work with gifted and high achieving student populations in particular (Ford & Granham, 2003). This call to research is multifaceted and complex. Here I will offer two immediate suggestions based on our own work. First, I would like to see a similar YPAR study with high achieving young women who also identify as African American and Latina. These voices are critical in the discussion of US

education and were largely absent from our study. The student researchers and I did have friends and mentors who identified as African American or Latino/a and we talked to these members of our communities about our project. However our selection criteria included: AP courses, GPA, standardized tests, and sustained involvement in gifted education. These criteria resulted in a research team typical of the dominant White, Asian, and upper-middle class groups typically found in gifted programs (Ford & Grantham, 2001, Renzulli, 2011). If school leaders are truly committed to improving equity and access in their school programs, it is incumbent for them to listen to and learn from marginalized gifted and high achieving students (e.g. including African American, Latina, and Native American students). YPAR provides a powerful platform for this work. The personal stories, sense making processes, and community action that could result from this work have the potential to lead to a deeper and more complex understanding of the hegemonic structures at play in school success.

Second, while intersectionality did inform our work in this YPAR project, we did not adopt an intersectional analysis of our data. It would be worthwhile to analyze our dialogues, transcripts, and reflections through an intersectional lens paying particular attention to the ways systems of power and privilege influenced, impeded, and in many instances, gave our research team unique advantages as we navigated school and other social systems (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1998; Shields, 2008). These advantages include our social, cultural, and economic capital (e.g. being able to afford college tuition and being able to navigate and connect with high-level professionals for our radio stories including engineers and college professors).

2. It would behoove stakeholders in the education of high-achieving and gifted young people, to study affective education earlier in PK-12 education. In particular, I would like to see a study on the potential for affective education in elementary and middle school. A PAR study with teachers, teacher leaders, and counselors could be an appropriate methodology for this proposed study. Those key stakeholders have the potential to serve as powerful connections for students. Teachers and counselors have the most student contact, but are seldom conceptualized as the most important leaders in the hierarchical structure of traditional school. Our work suggests that teachers and counselors can be imperative change agents in preventing and managing the affective crisis of high school. Exploring the antecedents of the self-harm, perfectionist, and doubting behaviors our team observed and experienced could offer a valuable contribution to educational leadership, gifted education and counseling research.

2. As the debate around standardization, and high stakes testing continues in the educational policy arena including at state and national departments of education, our study points to the need for further research on the social-emotional consequences of this approach to teaching and testing. Instead of looking at the consequences for struggling students (which is certainly an important pursuit) our project suggests that there are also real and hidden consequences for high-achieving students. As we enter a new era of school reform, a better understanding of these social-emotional consequences is important research that could bring to the policy conversation around high-stakes testing.

3. It would be beneficial to conduct a more longitudinal study that follows young women from high school through their complete college experience. Our project led us to speculate on the importance of counseling and support in higher education, however, we

closed our project, and before the student researchers had fully experienced this transition. Employing the strategies in our project, including: courageous story sharing, activism, a peer support structure, and self-care practices, and then following that group through their college transition, could be incredibly informative to educational leaders and stakeholders in both high school and higher education. This study would begin to bridge the chasm between PK-12 and higher education research in a student support and student-centered approach.

4. Our project points to the power of personal storytelling as an affective tool for social-emotional development and community change. This is an area that begs for additional research within the context of student support, school counseling, compassionate teaching, and pedagogy. We would love to see additional research around the ways telling, sharing, and hearing stories affects self-concept, the development of community, and diversity education. Our project began to address the influence of storytelling and sharing, but did not look specifically at the influence hearing these stories had on listeners. How to use storytelling for personal and community growth is a rich area for qualitative classroom research.

5. Finally, we are closing our project by offering a new framework for wholehearted affective education. Our research team would like to see stakeholders, including students, apply our framework to see if it is salient in other contexts (e.g., middle school, college, women's athletics, and International Baccalaureate programs) In this way, they could identify strengths and growth areas within our theoretical framework making it a more effective theory to apply to more diverse student populations. Our ultimate hope in offering this framework, is for the practitioner knowledge to continue to

grow, so that educators, educational leaders, counselors and families are able to offer better social-emotional supports to high achieving young women.

Humanizing Exiting

Closing this study was difficult. We were all emotionally invested in our research project, and more importantly, in our relationships with members of the research team. Originally, I had planned an intense 8-week study. As our research cycles became more complex, our action projects more involved, and our connections to each other more personal, I revised the timeline to a 10-week period. As our tenth week came to a close, we had completed our action projects and the student researchers had stalled on their writings in our reflective journals. We were holding our final one-on-one dialogues, and the student researchers schedules were increasingly filled with tasks around leaving for college. Yet, when I shared that it was time to end our project, the student researchers balked.

Appropriate exiting is a newer topic in humanizing research (Figueroa, 2014). I recognized that closing this study, would require a careful “transitional period” (Figueroa, 2014, p. 137) and so we continued with a softer research schedule for another 3 weeks and then planned a “final” team celebration.

Kathryn’s Journal (Project Facilitator)

Written immediately after our closing celebration

8.2.15

We sit down at the table: the student researchers, my son, daughter, and husband. Elaine shows us how to wet the rice paper and

build the spring rolls up on leaf lettuce. She pours us each a small bowl of her family's "secret sauce." ...As we wrap spring rolls, we share about our hopes and fears. We talk and eat; even after we are full, we continue to dip veggies and small pieces of meat into our individual bowls of the Pho family secret sauce. It is delicious.

I ask if anyone has heard from Melissa. Leslie takes out her phone to check her messages. "She says her mom is refusing to let her come over." ...However, about an hour later the doorbell rings again. It's Melissa! She hugs everyone, even my daughter. She is visibly relieved to be at my house with her friends. I cut up another cucumber and get out some of the spring mix I have in my refrigerator. Elaine sets up next to Melissa and helps her roll several spring rolls.

...We take one last group photo in my backyard. The sun is just starting to set and it throws golden light across us. The student researchers linger after the photo, talking, not yet ready to say goodbye. It is a hot late summer day. We talk in a circle, laughing and holding on for a few more minutes. I thank the student researchers and tell them that I was lucky to work with each of them. We were all so fortunate to work and learn together. We hug and make tentative agreements for quick final updates before they leave for college. I assure them I'm always just a text, email, or Facebook message away. We hug and say goodbye for now.

It turned out that "for now" was pretty short. Two days after the final team celebration, Elaine texted me to share about her accepting coming out experience with her best friend.

Four days after our “final” team celebration Leslie texted me asking if I had any more yarn for the scarf she was knitting and so I ran some by her house. A couple days later she messaged me again asking if we could go for a trail walk together. We walked for hours talking about college, self-care, relationships, and saying goodbye. The following week, Faith asked if I would meet her for frozen yogurt. In these second “final” dialogues, Faith, Leslie, Elaine and I all talked about home. Home surfaced in the small details. The student researchers spoke of Friday night football games, their mothers’ cooking, a favorite ice cream shop, and a cup of chamomile tea with a trusted teacher. It seems that home was made of these things.

As a research team we did not practice courage by leaping off of tall buildings, instead we practiced courage by sharing personal stories. We shared things we had not shared about before. We discovered that personal stories were both humanizing and healing. We practiced connection in the positive peer group of our research team, and with trusted mentors. It is vital that young people have a support group to process, share, and celebrate with. We practiced self-care through laughter, fitness, healthy eating, sleep, deep breathing, and saying *no thank you* to adding yet another obligation to our overloaded schedules.

When I met with Leslie and then Faith for that extra “last visit” before they left for college, it was an exercise in all three of our themes: courage, connection, and self-care. I listened to more stories of: school, college, family, fear, hope, identity, and growth. I beamed with pride at their new sense of adventure, even as I empathized with their many apprehensions.

The student researchers shared that they worried their sense of home would evaporate, that as their friends scattered, or as they boarded planes, and drove away in cars piled high with clothes, blankets and rolled up posters, that they would never return to this same home again. As usual, the student researchers were right. They will never return to this same constellation of people, emotions, and experiences again.

That afternoon when Faith and I visited over frozen yogurt, I realized that truly exiting our project was kind of a misnomer. Yes, the student researchers were leaving. In fact, by the time Faith and I met, most of the student researchers had already moved into their dorms. Yet, our relationships have continued. As I write this, the student researchers have now been in college for several months. I continue to hear from them frequently, now, not only as co-researchers, but as friends.

The student researchers are looking forward to winter break and to “coming home.” I cannot wait to get together with our research team over food, to share our highs and lows, to laugh, and be together. I see this question of “home” as our next big dialogue. I am interested in how their opinions of home shift (or not) in their leaving and coming back. I know, in charting my own course through this curvy road called life, how I have experienced that home does not shrink, it expands.

Our research project, gave the student researchers the confidence to leap off the high school precipice with arms wide open. It also gave us the knowledge that such leaps in vulnerability are risky, but the risks of being closed off are even greater. I have already gotten a few calls and many texts that the student researchers are missing their friends, their mothers, and this research team. They tell me that their classes are challenging them and they continue to worry about their ability to be successful. But in these moments of

doubt and vulnerability, they tell me they are using courage, connection, and self-care to pull through. They are finding friends and mentors. They are beginning to build new connections through our most treasured act of self-care, owning and sharing personal stories. I know now that as they share these stories, even with all of their imperfections that they will find people to connect with, as well as the courage to be themselves. And when they do this, I hope they realize, wherever they are, they are home.

APPENDIX

Appendix A

Interview Protocol/Individual Dialogues: Start of project

Dialogue Protocol

Procedure:

Interviews will occur 1:1 with the student and facilitator. Interviews will take between 20-60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in a private room or location of the student's choice. Recordings and any transcriptions of the interviews will be stored in a secure location. If an answer is unclear or begs further information, I will ask appropriate follow up questions. I will also leave space for students to share their ideas on any of the topics listed below.

Lived Experiences:

What is great in your life right now?

What is challenging in your life right now?

What have been defining moments in your life since junior year?

What are you most proud of?

Is there a story you have wanted to tell?

What do you do to practice self-care?

How have you grown throughout high school?

Identity:

How does being gifted impact your high school experience?

How does being a woman impact your high school experience?

Where could you use greater support?

Who are you? What identities are most important to you?

Do you consider yourself a feminist? Explain.

College planning:

What advice would you give to a high school junior or senior about the college applications process?

Tell me the story of your college applications process.

What factors impacted (or are impacting) your college decision?

Appendix B (Two-way Journal Protocol)

Two-Way Journal Protocol

Don't feel like you need to have THE answer. Share stories, experiences, thoughts.... You can also pose questions. You can also revisit the same questions, if you feel differently over time. Share anything you think is relevant or would like me to know. Thanks!

1. Please write a bio to introduce yourself as a co-researcher on this team. You might include information from our “salient identities” conversation. You might think about the ways gender, race/ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status, religion, political affiliation, peer group, mental health, extracurricular involvement, and age impact your experiences navigate school and life choices during the tumultuous period just before leaving for college. Include anything YOU want to share or think is relevant.
2. What is your STORY? Please share your story ideas below.
3. What are YOU hoping to get out of this project?
4. When do you feel strong? Mentally? Physically? Emotionally?
5. When do you feel vulnerable? Mentally, physically, emotionally...
6. How do you practice self-care?
7. Do you think it is possible for high-achievers to practice enough self-care? Any examples come to mind? Say more.
8. How much self-care have you given yourself lately? Say more about that.
9. What does feminism mean to you? Do you identify as a feminist? Why or why not? Feel free to draw on any sources (including pop culture sources) that are relevant to your understanding of or identification with feminism.
10. How are you feeling on your last week of high school classes?
11. Let's talk about self-talk. Are you aware of the ways you talk to yourself? If not, pay attention this week and report back on the messages you are giving yourself.
12. What relationships have been most important to you in high school? Why have those relationships mattered so much?
13. How are you feeling going into graduation this week? Name and describe those feelings.
14. If you could talk to yourself before starting high school, what do you wish your sophomore self knew about the high school experience?
15. What are your hopes and fears going into graduation?
16. Do you think that “the precipice” is an appropriate term for the high school to college transition? Say more about that.
17. What supports were most helpful to you in high school?

18. How has graduation impacted your self-concept?
19. What does health and wellness mean to you?

20. What big things are you puzzling over this week?
21. What is a truth that is difficult for you to share?

22. Complete the sentence... I care about (social issue) _____ because _____
23. Share examples of the ways your various identities (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, etc.) have intersected during your life.
24. How did the college applications process impact your self-concept?
25. Where do you fall along the introvert/extrovert continuum? What are the benefits and challenges of that identity?
26. Describe your inner mentor.
27. What are the big things you have been thinking about and/or puzzling over lately?
28. How do you think the health and wellness workshop went? Highlights? Growth areas? Do you think we made a difference? Say more about that.
28. B. How might you continue to make a difference in this area? OR How else have you made a difference in this area for other young women?
29. How do you think our staying sane during the college applications workshop went? Highlights? Growth areas? Do you think we made a difference? Say more about that.
- 29 B. How might you continue to make a difference in this area? OR How else have you made a difference in this area for other young women?
30. How have your hopes and fears changed as you have gotten closer to leaving for college?
31. What is your greatest strength?
32. Any stories you haven't shared that you think are relevant to our project? I know some of you have shared other journals and essays you've written. If you would like to share more of those here, I would love to read them. If not, I wanted to give all of you the opportunity to share any other stories you might have thought of...
33. What are your thoughts on your Making Waves radio story? Do you think our stories and segment will make a difference? If so, how?
34. What are your thoughts on the precipice metaphor, particularly with the update of precipice *experiences*?

Appendix C

(Collective Journal Protocol)

We will set up two reflective journals in order to consider lived experiences, team dialogues, project concepts, and our developing effective framework, through writing. These journals are stored online within the University secured Box system. This first reflective journal is a community journal which we will all have access to in order to share thoughts with the whole team. Creating a philosophical space is precisely the objective of our reflective journals. Student researchers may also create their own prompts to use writing as an inquiry tool for our work in whatever way seem most appropriate to them. I recognize that all of us on this research team can benefit from processing time. Because we are working on an intense research schedule, I believe these reflective journals will be an important space for use to share and venture ideas that come to us after team meetings, critical conversations, and other important events.

Below are some topics I thought might be on our minds. However, feel free to add your own too...

1. Prom?
2. Making waves?
3. Social Emotional Needs?
4. College decision week?
5. AP Tests?
6. Self-care?
7. Lack of self-care?
8. Strength?
9. Vulnerability?
10. Mothers?
11. Feminism?
13. Last week of high school classes?!
14. How did AP tests and finals go?
15. What advice would you give a younger student about the college applications process?
16. How did you experience senior week (picnic, baccalaureate, pranks)?
17. Let's talk about commencement a little bit more. Tell me about YOUR experience.
18. What did you think of Ron'Zena's speech at graduation?
19. Across the interviews was an idea of **false support** or people who thought they were being supportive but actually weren't. Tell me about this.
Idea: It might help to start with what does a supportive relationship (friendship/parent-daughter/teacher-student) look like?
20. Has graduating had any impact of your sense of self? If so, how?
21. What are your hopes and fears for this summer?
22. How will you know if our workshops are successful?
23. What does it mean to be an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist?
24. What does it mean to be an activist for mental health?
25. What does it mean to be an activist for self-care?
26. Have your thoughts on feminism changed as a result of our conversations, reading and work together? If so, how?

27. One of the goals with PAR work is to take action to address issues that matter to the research team. We are doing that in a couple ways. First, I think our Making Waves Stories are an example of taking action. Second, I think our MSA workshops will help young people think differently around the issues we've talked about. Share your thoughts on activism in this project.

28. What else, if anything would YOU want to make a difference around any of the themes in this project (e.g. mental health, affective education, college applications, transition, etc.)

29. If you had senior year to do over, would you do anything differently? If so, what?

30. How would affective education fit into your plans if you were designing your own high school?

31. How is our research project impacting you?

Appendix D
Interview Protocol/Individual Dialogue
Close of project

Interview Protocol

Procedure:

Interviews will occur 1:1 with the student and facilitator. Interviews will take between 40-120 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in a location of the student's choice. Recordings and any transcriptions of the interviews will be stored in a secure location. If an answer is unclear or begs further information, I will ask appropriate follow up questions. I will also leave space for students to share their ideas on any of the topics listed below.

Lived Experiences:

What is great in your life right now?
 What is challenging in your life right now?
 What have been defining moments since graduation?
 Is there a story you have been wanting to tell?

Identity:

Who are you? What identities are most important to you?
 Do you consider yourself a feminist? Explain.
 Do you consider yourself an activist? Explain.
 Talk to me about perfectionism.

College planning:

How are you feeling getting ready to leave for college? Hopes, fears?
 How do you plan to practice self-care in college?

Lessons:

How did our research project impact you?
 What have you learned about self-care?
 What have you learned about storytelling or vulnerability?
 How do you define courage?
 What have you learned about precipice experiences?
 Best advice you have for gifted young women?

Appendix E
Sample Team Meeting Agenda
(Co-created)

Agenda 5.28.15

Kickboxing
Eat
Highs and lows
MSA Workshops
Radio Story: Affective Education
Scholarship

NORMS

Assume positive intent.
Practice active listening.
Respect that our group is safe space for sharing.
Remember that all experiences are valid.
Challenge ideas, do not attack people.
Celebrate courage.
Be kind to each other and yourself.

A. Highs and lows

B. MSA Workshops

HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN HIGH STAKES, HIGH STRESS, HIGH SCHOOLS
Monday, June 15 2015
3:45-4:50PM

Topics we want to cover...

We should talk about how bad perfectionism can be in high school, the importance of taking time to yourself that you schedule and you do NOT infringe upon to ensure that self-care is a priority, and the importance of keeping yourself healthy (sleep, exercise, diet, but NOT to an obsessive level) - Sarah

Ideas for delivering content...

STAYING SANE DURING THE COLLEGE APPLICATIONS PROCESS

Wednesday, June 17 2015

Topics we want to cover...

START EARLY

What's involved?

We should talk about the importance of finding the RIGHT school for you not the most prestigious school and talk about how good of an education you get has to do with what you put into it, not where you go (if we came with some solid examples of people we knew - not famous people because famous people are awful examples to convince non-famous people of anything - who went to "less prestigious" colleges and now are doing super awesome stuff that might help because it's really easy to KNOW this logically, but to feel it is a whole other story and having examples of other people who also did it sometimes helps the "feeling like it's okay" process if that makes sense) - Sarah

I agree that it is important to find the right school for you. You need to be happy at the college you decide to go to and reputations do not always tell you whether you would like it. That is why I think it is important to visit the colleges if you can. College visits tell you so much more about the school than just reading about it can. For example, I visited most of the Ivy League schools but I decided that I didn't like them enough to apply. Instead, I only chose to apply to Harvard because it was the only Ivy that I could imagine myself going to. At the same time, I realize not everybody has the opportunity to visit colleges, in which case you should do as much research as possible (i.e. the next topic to cover).

DO YOUR RESEARCH

What's involved?

Ideas for delivering content...

1. Story share (3 minutes/student)
2. Audio?
3. Q&A

C. Radio Story

Social emotional needs
 Achievement and self-care
 Feminism and gender
 College applications and admissions process
 Hopes and fears leaving for college

D. Scholarship

Appendix F
Sample Analytic Memo
(Co-Created)

Week 5
Analytic Memo

Research Team,

This was our first week post-graduation. It was fun to talk with and learn from all of you as you embark on your new adventures. Also, I wanted to remind you these analytic memos are living documents. Comment, question or push back on anything I write in here. I know this is just my reading of our conversations, so I really value your insights.

We had a courageous conversation in the classroom adjacent to KBIA. I reference this conversation in a journal excerpt below. As our conversation ended, Emily brought up the topics of relationships and **change**. She shared that she was worried about how her relationships would change as some of her friends were leaving for college and others were staying in Columbia. Delaney talked about the importance of making new relationships in college, so that you could have a peer group at your campus. I asked if Emily was asking if high school relationships can last past high school. She wasn't sure. Some of you know from conversations on our two-way journals that this project has made me think about my own relationships in high school and particular those close friendships I formed senior year. In fact I've gotten back in touch with my best friend from high school recently, really only as a result of the conversations I've had with you. I am thankful for our exchanges, however, there are places where our life paths have diverged, where we can listen to each other but not understand or even truly empathize. I can celebrate with her as she gets ready to release an album and she can ask me questions about what it is like to be a mother... Change is inevitable, but isn't all bad. I have also thought about the few very close friendships I formed as an undergraduate, and then grad school, and now in my PhD program. In each of these stages I've met one or two people whose friendship has had a profound impact on me. Within these friendships there are two or three relationships that instead of growing apart, we've found that over time we have grown up together.

I'm kinda bummed I missed the classroom conversation. I too have been worrying about what will become of my high school friendships when we all go our separate ways. I would've liked to hear what you all had to say!

Busy-iness and Pragmatism

These themes are separate but related. In your first full week out of high school I was struck by how busy so many of you were. I know D has been working tirelessly for her mom. I know C is working. I know J had to choose between activities associated with this project, like KBIA voicing and kickboxing or a trip with her family. I know M was

working on her China application and planning her summer trips. S has been slammed preparing for her recital this Sunday. E is training and was entertaining family. A couple of you just left for quiz bowl Nationals in Chicago. I know C is leaving from Chicago for Texas. It's a lot. And you're done with school for now.

V: Senior week was VERY busy which is what I wasn't expecting at all. I thought I would have a lot of time to chillax, but I found myself getting up early to eat breakfast, so that I could complete my workouts in time before the day began. It was better than being in school like everyone else though! I had family coming in every night beginning Tuesday last week, so that added on some stress. We had a party every night at a different house, (I have 4 other cousins in Columbia) so it was exhausting staying late at their house and then having to get up early for my workouts. Also, I was not into eat party food every night last week. My system feels uncleaned.

J: I was also surprised by how busy summer has been so far. I had a ton of obligations and it was stressing me out. Anyway, choosing to go on vacation with my family was a surprisingly tough decision, but I decided I needed a break (plus it might be the last vacation we all go on as a family for a long time). Taking the self-care route was difficult here because I felt like I was disappointing others. I think that might be one more reason why high-achieving girls don't always take the best care of themselves: because they are too busy pleasing others.

I wonder about our busy-iness. I wonder about my own. Ms. Kersha has tried to teach the RBHS faculty the art of slowing down. She tells us we live in a culture that glorifies being busy. This is a lesson I obviously still struggle with. What does all of this have to do with pragmatism? In PAR work there is an understanding that engaging in research with communities requires a commitment to respecting the lived conditions of the community. This means that planned methodologies seldom go as planned. This means that our work together is messy. Sometimes not all of you can make it to our meetings. We missed J this week. We missed S at kickboxing. It's okay; life happens. Sometimes not all of us can participate in activities, like Making Waves. Sometimes books and articles go unread or take longer to read than we planned on.

J: I read my book! I had to buy it because C and I haven't had the chance to meet up and hand it off, but I read it!

I am still thinking quite a bit about our framework. This week as I've talked with each of you and/or read your journals, I've been thinking in particular about the relationship between self-care and self-harm. It seems to me, particularly for high achieving young women, that self-care is a delicate and tenuous lesson to learn. I think about some of the things S has shared on the relationship between perfectionism and eating disorders. I think about trying to calculate the best exercise program. I think about M's formula for health. I think about the typed itineraries I write for my family when we plan a relaxing weekend. Lately I have been thinking about the ways our achievement nature and particularly our perfectionism can at best cause us to miss the point a bit and at worst contort **self-care into self-harm**. There is no judgment here. I just think it is another layer our team might want to unpack.

look forward to piecing together yet another version of our story, told in the students' voices. I begin to think about all the ways we could splinter this story. There are so many stories to tell. We have an hour of courageous conversation. How much radio time will we get? Ten minutes at most. It's a little like the college essay, students have seventeen years of experiences and they must pick a defining story they can tell in under five hundred words. I suppose all storytelling is the art of decision and precision, it is a practice in rejection and analysis. Space and time are finite, the possibilities are limitless. Each storyteller chooses a version to share. In fact, that is what we are all doing within this project.

Voices and Voicing: Agency, Authorship and Audio

Working with radio taught our student research group many important things about audio, in particular, we became more skilled at listening to each other and the natural sounds around us. In designing this project, voices were critical in a theoretical way. Consistent with PAR methodology, voice was analogous with agency and authorship. I wanted to make sure the student researchers ideas were central to the study. However, as our project unfolded, the student researcher's voices started to matter in a more literal way. Instead of only paying attention to agency and authorship, I found we were also paying attention to audio. Below is a related excerpt from my journal.

5.15.15

As a research team, we have regular dialogues (electronic and face-to-face) but this week we carved out extra time for extended one on one semi-structured interviews. I interviewed all of the students, except Michele. Michele had an AP test every day and is still working on finals, so we pushed her interview to next week. The interviews reminded me how important it is to set aside one on one time for all relationships. The student researchers and I are close, but sitting together and listening to each of them separately was wonderful. During finals week, quiet space is a scarce commodity at our school, so we had to find some creative spaces to talk. We visited in Clarissa's car, the guidance conference room, a supervisor's large office and the small annex next to the gifted center. The interviews lasted about an hour. I'll share more on the content of these interview soon, but right now I want to write how I noticed their voices: each varied and distinct but also similar in their youth and hope. They were confident and questioning, emotional, warm, full and edged with humor. I noticed new qualities in their voices. Clarissa's voice reminded me both of my sister and my dear friend Lisa, a nurse in California. I noticed the softness in Jett's voice, the warmth in Sarah's voice, the reflection in Delaney's and the clarity in Emily's voice. These were emotional conversations for all us. Eyes filled with tears. Voices cracked. For a few of the students this was the longest I had listened to them, just the two of us, uninterrupted in a very long time. We laughed easily at funny stories, we also used laughter as a strategy in empathy. For example, we laughed with empathy when a question surprised us with it's difficulty (i.e. what is great in your life right now).

One week at Making Waves we talked about voices. Kelsey played us a video about how women's voices are perceived. The video said that deeper voices are heard as more confident and trustworthy. "We seem to have this biologically driven judgement that lower pitched voices connote stronger, more trustworthy, more competent people

(Simmon-Duffins, 2014).” I took issue with this argument. I told the student researchers that I suspected that biologically humans have a preference for women’s voices. Research tells us that infants have a strong, positive preference for their own mother’s voices. In fact research has documented that this preference is evident even in utero (Dye, 2014). What the NPR video was referring to is *socialized* not biological. As a team we read Chimamanda Adichie (2014) book, *We Should All Be Feminists* based on her TedTalk of the same title. In it Adichie writes, “If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal...If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem ‘natural’ that only men should be heads of corporations (p. 13).” The student researchers and I discussed that perhaps humans aren’t biologically conditioned to trust male voices over female voices. Instead, we are socially conditioned to associate men’s voices with strength and power as defined by a narrow and culturally dominant definition. We began to consider what strength sounds like, particularly what strong vulnerability might sound like. We wondered what courage sounded like. As a team the challenge became to reconstruct the variance of what makes a powerful voice, and along the way hopefully also open up definitions of power. Our research on wholehearted affective education in general and our radio projects in particular helped us begin this work.

I thought of S’s public singing. Three times during our research project I heard her sing in front of large crowds, twice in front of thousands. She sang the national anthem at our closing assembly. We sat together as a student research team in the same section of bleachers as Sarah’s mom. When Sarah started singing, her mother and I held out breath, irrationally nervous that the somehow the sound of our breath would interfere with her full, confident voice. Later she sang with a small ensemble at baccalaureate. I was working the event, so I had to watch from the back. I took out my phone to snap a photo, but I was too far back to see her well, and so instead I listened amazed. After graduation she held her senior recital where she played piano and sang to hundreds of guests for over an hour at our church. I have long been struck by the courage it takes to sing in front of large audience, perhaps this is because I am an amateur singer and as a young woman my own singing was criticized by musical theater teaches and choir directors. Still Sarah’s warm, steady, full voice amazes me.

Looking ahead...

Remember our journals in Box. :)

June 3rd, 2015 2:00PM, Team Meeting

Meet in Memorial Union

Bring your books to trade and ideas for our MSA workshops

June 15th, 2015 3:45PM Health and Wellness Workshop

Location TBD, somewhere at MU

June 17th, 2015 3:45PM College Applications Workshop

Location TBD, somewhere at MU

As always let me know if you have questions, concerns or ideas. Safe travels to those of you traveling. Best wishes to Sarah on her recital and to quiz bowl on their competition.

All my best, KFW

P.S. I love the images we’ve amassed during our work together. I thought it would be fun to share a couple in each analytic memo. :)

P.P.S In prepping for my poetry class at MSA, I've revisited some of Sarah Kay's performances archived on TedTalks. Do you know her work? I think a lot of it would resonate with our group.

Appendix G

Student Researcher Radio Scripts

SHAME AND SAI YIFU: GROWING UP CHINESE AMERICAN

Michele | May 2015

When I was really young, I had a chore we called *sai yifu*. This meant I would lug out our wet laundry to my back patio, and hang them to dry on the clotheslines we strung up.

This was one of my favorite activities to do when I was very young. But *sai yifu* also became my first experience with shame about my Chinese heritage.

Over the years, I began to dread this chore more than anything else. I grew up in a well-off and mainly white neighborhood. Nobody else I knew had to hang their clothes to dry. When asked to *sai yifu* I would do anything to get out of it. And when that didn't work, I used to wait until nighttime to sneak out and begin. Looking back, I realize that much of my childhood was dominated by a constant, inescapable sense of shame.

It wasn't just *sai yifu*. I quickly learned to be embarrassed by almost everything about me. I wore shirts with Chinese words on them, I sometimes brought rice and seaweed for lunch, and my parents frequently clashed with everyone from PTA moms to waiters. I was ashamed of the lingering bits of my Chinese heritage I couldn't "shake off" to fit in. As I grew older, I was determined to be "truly American". I hid my heritage: I played volleyball and joined dance teams, started buying clothes from Old Navy, and brought sandwiches to eat for lunch. When the occasional joke about being Asian came up, I laughed it off with the rest of my friends.

Much of my struggle was internal because I am a second-generation immigrant. My parents faced a different set of issues.

My mom is a registered nurse who moved to America 30 years ago with my dad when he was getting his PhD in Chicago. She didn't speak English, she was taking college classes, and she had two young kids to take care of.

“Oh when we first come to America, it just feel so difficult. First, no money. And you completely turn handicapped. Because why handicapped? You couldn't talk. You become ... you know. You couldn't hear. Deaf. And you couldn't drive. Just completely handicapped. And you just have lots of time, and nothing you can do.”

When I was 15, my parents sent me to China to see my extended family. There, I fell in love with everything I had learned to be ashamed of in America. I loved the food, the language, and the people. I didn't quite fit in there either, but they accepted all my American quirks with open arms.

Two years later, I still have a complicated relationship with my Chinese heritage. But I've learned everyone has a reason to feel different or ashamed.

Dr. Brene Brown is a shame and vulnerability researcher. She says shame is the universal fear of disconnection, and shame can take many different forms. Dr. Brown also says empathy and self-compassion help develop shame resilience.

For a long time, my shame stemmed from being Chinese-American. I fight to overcome this deeply-rooted sense of shame by sharing my story. I struggle to balance the Chinese and the American sides of me. But only in this struggle am I able to create who I am today as a Chinese-American.

THE BLAME GAME
SARAH | MAY 2015

Sarah: So give me an example of a time when you really realized how out of control I was.

Shari: You had been told by your doctor that you needed to make sure you were getting enough calcium. So I had some vitamins or calcium chews or something, I don't know. But they had like five calories a piece, and I told you needed to have one. And you were like "No." I'm like, "What do you mean, no?" "It's too many calories." And I remember I was so frustrated. I probably yelled at you. Like, "You're crazy, you need this to be healthy."

That was my mom, Shari F---, talking to me about the darkest point of both of our lives. In 2014, I went from a healthy 130 pounds to a life-threatening 99 in a matter of months. A year later, I'm at a healthy weight, but the mental effects of anorexia still haunt me. Now I realize that society's misconceptions about disordered eating have harmed my recovery by making me feel ashamed.

Eating disorder specialist Beth Parker says one of the worst misconceptions about eating disorders is that they're self-inflicted.

Beth: I think when there isn't enough education, enough knowledge about it, it becomes this, "Why don't you just eat?" It just seems so easy for people to say "Why don't you just eat?" when you don't understand what the eating disorder is about.

I was ashamed of my anorexia because society was screaming "This is your fault". Sometimes I felt like my loved ones agreed, which only pulled me farther away.

Shari: I think you just feel like it's just eating, so if they get hungry they should just eat, or if they get tired they should just stop exercising. You know there's something wrong, but you think, "That's just weird. How could it be that difficult?"

I felt that attitude overwhelmingly from those around me. After you have surgery, everyone visits you in the hospital and offers to bake you casseroles; with anorexia they don't. Most people haven't experienced eating disorders close enough to know that people with mental illness deserve the same support as people with physical illness.

Shari: And then, ya know, after going through it with you, I realized that it's really no different than having the flu, right? There's certain things that just happen to your body that you really don't have any control over.

When my mom came to this conclusion I felt as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. For most of the time I was starving myself, I wanted to stop. But it took months to get the disease to loosen its hold on me because my disorder was controlling me, not the other way around. My eating disorder was not a choice.

I talked to my mom about the best way someone could've supported her when I was at my worst.

Shari: I know you were going through it and how awful it was for you, but it was pretty awful for me too, as your mom, watching you go through it. So just having people to be supportive and not to be judgmental. So not saying, "Oh, what's wrong with your daughter? Why won't she eat?" Or even, "What's wrong with you, why can't you fix this?" kind of thing.

Beth offers the best advice of all for individuals with eating disorders and their supporters.

Beth: It's really important to educate yourself, reach out, find help, and be compassionate and supportive.

It takes an educated society to end the misconceptions and allow those suffering from mental illness to get the help they deserve.

THE GENDER GAP QUESTION

Delaney | May 2015

When I was little, my parents told me I could achieve anything I set my mind to. My gender, my race, and my religion didn't matter. They told me that as long as I worked hard, I could make my dreams come true.

But I remember the first time I realized it wasn't true. I was in elementary school when I discovered my teachers always called on the boys to answer questions and hardly ever on me or my girl classmates. They didn't call on us because they unconsciously assumed we didn't know the answer. This wasn't overt sexism, but it is an example of the underlying societal structures which hold women back. Society automatically assumes that women aren't up to the job. And that needs to change.

Research shows that women outperform men academically across the board. But when we're out of school and in the workforce, women in top leadership positions are almost nonexistent.

Kathryn Fishman-Weaver is a University of Missouri doctoral student and a teacher in Columbia Public Schools. She says that in local high schools, women students have significantly higher core GPAs than men.

Fishman-Weaver: Senior males, general population, average cumulative GPA for core classes: 2.58 and for females average GPA 2.80. That's significant.

According to the US Department of Education, the national numbers yield the same results.

You would think with higher GPAs, women would hold higher professional positions.

But that's not the case. Out of the Fortune one thousand companies, only 33 are run by women.

Fishman-Weaver says even in the field of education, where most employees are women, the numbers follow a similar pattern.

Fishman-Weaver: So if you look at the superintendency, only 22 percent of superintendents are women. So go back to that 71 to 75 percent of public school teachers are women ... there is something wrong with that equation.

Dr. Jeni Hart is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at MU. Some of her research focuses on the relationship between gender, tenure and promotion. She says while the gender ratios within the Assistant and Associate Professorships are becoming more equal, there is a greater problem.

Hart: Still at the full professor rank, 28 percent of all full professors are women.

Dr. Hart's research shows women in academia don't get the same support men do.

Hart: One of the things I have found in my research, particularly about women in STEM, is that they are less likely to be tapped to go up for full [professor]. So there's really no time frame that suggests that now is the time you should go up for full professor, yet in a match sample I did with men, the men were saying "Oh yeah, my department chair said that it was time to go up for full" or "Have you considered becoming a department

chair?" and women were not getting those same messages. So this clearly has implications for their long-term earnings, but also their ability to be ... you know, to have an upward trajectory in the organization.

I asked both women how they believed these problems could be resolved. Fishman-Weaver says society needs to stop shying away from difficult conversations.

Fishman-Weaver: *I think that we need to have open and honest conversations about the way gender discrimination plays out in our world and the unspoken structures that are contributing to the glass ceiling. Which right now seems to be this masked thing that we're not discussing honestly. And so we tell girls "Achieve at high levels and you can be anything you want," and the girls are achieving at high levels, yet they're not being rewarded with leadership positions, with prestige, with the salaries of their men counterparts.*

Dr. Hart also says the change needs to be broad and societal.

Hart: *For me it is a matter of how do we change the organization so that everybody can be successful, rather than helping the individual woman be successful. Which isn't to say that I don't want women to have agency, I clearly want them to have agency, but I think this idea of collective action organizational change really is at the heart of what needs to happen in order for these problems to actually be addressed in a really sufficient way.*

Throughout my high school years I worked hard to earn a 4.0 GPA and soon I will be starting my college career at Harvard. I want to know that all of my effort is not going to go to waste. I want to be judged for my credentials and not for my gender. I believe that progress is possible, but it will take the conscious action of everyone.

ENCOURAGING WOMEN IN STEM

Clarissa | May 2015

I grew up watching my dad's graduate students in the lab. I have always known I wanted to be one of them. But in 17 years, I have seen only two women.

My dad is Dr. Randy C---, and he's an electrical engineering professor at the University of Missouri. He says women in his classes are virtually nonexistent.

"In my undergraduate classes we see less than one percent of female students."

This is not uncommon. Nationally, only about 14 percent of engineers are women.

Right now, I am the only girl in my electronics class of 20 students. I feel like I need to make them feel comfortable around me because I am a woman. I try to only talk about topics I know the guys are interested in, and I stop myself from talking about some of the things I like. I never talk to them about shoes. And I love to talk about shoes.

As I transition to college and then into the workforce, I believe it will be more of the same. Women are not choosing to go into or stay in STEM fields: science, technology, engineering and math. And my question is: Why?

According to the U.S. Department of Education, college women leave STEM programs at higher rates than their male counterparts. They cite a lack of role models, a lack of institutional support, and feelings of isolation.

Michele Yang is a high school senior who will be starting an accelerated medical school program in the fall. She says she's used to feeling like an outsider as a woman studying math and science.

"Once at a math competition and once at a programming tournament, the announcer called me up as 'Michael' instead of 'Michele' because they just assumed that I was a boy. And that was really embarrassing for me because of course I was surrounded by

boys and they were all about snickering that one girl who got called Michael instead of her real name."

Organizations like the Society of Women Engineers encourage women to enter STEM fields through scholarships, outreach and mentorship programs.

Kendra Clark is a chemist currently working at a company with only 1 other woman employee. She says her high school chemistry teacher inspired her to stick with science.

"In high school I had this really great chemistry teacher, he name's Mrs. Schmidt, and she did a very thorough job of explaining how things work and I wanted to know more so I went and studied chemistry. It was also the hardest class I took so I felt like I had to defeat it."

She also says working in a mostly male setting gives her the opportunity to prove herself.

"I don't feel discouraged that I'm the only woman in our company. That gives me more motivation to prove that I'm as smart or smarter than my colleagues, so there is motivation in that."

Increasing the number of women in engineering and physical sciences is hugely important to me, and to the generation of women who come after me.

Lilah Weaver is three years old, and one of her favorite books is Rosie Revere Engineer.

Lilah loves science, and I wonder if she will continue to pursue science throughout her life in spite of the barriers that women face.

But for now, Lilah and I are confident.

"Girls can do anything they want. They are strong, and they're brave, and they can do anything boys can do. And anything they want to do!"

STRESS, MENTAL HEALTH & COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Jett | May 2015

The college applications process is changing. An increasing number of students are choosing to apply to 10, 15, sometimes 20 different colleges. Making Waves reporter Jett explores the stress of application season and the toll it's taking on students' mental health.

I've always been told that junior year is the hardest year of high school. But for me, that was far from the case. Senior year was filled with advanced coursework, homework, internships, extracurriculars - and on top of all that, college applications. It often felt like there wasn't enough time in the day to do it all. I developed a very unhealthy schedule.

Jett: You were notorious this year for staying up into all hours of the night doing homework, working on college applications. And then you would come home after school, I think dead tired and take a two or three hour nap, and then get up and do it all again the next night.

That was my dad, Jett. But I'm not the only one spending a lot of time working on college applications.

Students have started applying to more schools than ever. According to the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, in 1990, nine percent of students applied to seven or more schools. By 2011, that number had increased to 29 percent.

Kathryn Fishman-Weaver is the Division Chair for Gifted Education at Rock Bridge High School. She says applying to more schools means more stress.

Fishman-Weaver: Many of the students in my program apply to many schools. They submit a lot of applications. And each application involves a lot of things. Students have

to write essays, students turn in their transcripts, students submit letters of recommendation, resumes, lists of extra activities.

For each school, students have to pay separate application fees and fill out separate scholarship applications, almost all of which include additional essays. Both the stress of writing extra essays for scholarships and paying extra fees take a toll on students' mental health.

Fishman-Weaver: As they're putting all this together, I see that young people often feel like, 'This is my whole identity, right here on these 8.5 by 11 pieces of paper. And I'm sending it off.' And then, and then the news that you get back isn't always positive. And here you feel like you've sent off your identity and it wasn't accepted. So what does that do to your psyche? It can be really challenging.

Rock Bridge High School senior Clarissa Curry says it was really hard for her when she didn't get into a school she had applied to.

Curry: It was soul-crushing. It was one of the only times that I had truly been told 'no' and I felt awful after that.

The anticipation of college decisions can cause so much anxiety that students' daily lives are disrupted. High school senior Emily Vu is an athlete who worried the stress of college decisions might affect her performance on the field.

"I didn't even check if I got into Berkeley. I had my friend check for me. Because it was two days before a track meet and I didn't want it to affect how I threw. Because I wasn't expecting to get in and I didn't want to be bummed."

Fishman-Weaver says the stress of college applications can lead to even more serious issues.

Fishman-Weaver: Research shows long-term stress has been linked to lots of health problems. Including depression, anxiety, stomach aches, headaches. There are very real and often serious health consequences to living a stressful life without strategies to process and decompress.

I have three pieces of advice for students to help avoid stress during the college application process.

One: Get started on your essays early - during the summer between junior and senior year.

Two: Do your research on deadlines. Make a calendar. This will help you stay organized and make sure you get everything submitted on time.

Three: Don't jeopardize your mental and physical health over college applications. Eating well and getting enough sleep are both more important than writing one more essay.

In today's society, busyness is often glorified- especially in college admissions decisions.

When teenagers are experiencing enough stress to make them sick, there's a problem.

High schools and colleges should be held responsible for prioritizing student health and well-being.

Appendix H

Precipice Art Piece

Maddy will be attending a selective college in the fall. She was also a valedictorian and peer check to the student researchers and me. Maddy was not on our team as she had spent most of her school-time in the journalism and art rooms, as opposed to the gifted education center. However, she did serve as a peer check to the student researchers and me. I asked over text if she would be willing to do a very simple sketch for me.

“I want a visual metaphor for our research on the high school to college transition period.”

She responded quickly, “Yes I would! What do you need?”

I sent her a very rough sketch done in black marker on a white index card. The sketch showed a stick figure woman standing on a mountain top looking out at a mountain range. I had labeled the mountain peak: high school graduation. Maddy and I texted back and forth. She understood the concept immediately.

She sent me a two dimensional pencil sketch of a figure on top of a very high mountain peak. She wanted feedback on how “to illustrate the leaping off the edge a bit. Otherwise it looks like you’ve reached the top once you get to graduation and I don’t get a sense of risk-taking. Or else, how can I better illustrate that there are more precipices?”

We talked about the weather in a mountain range. She asked about a sunrise or sunset to symbolize hope and clouds for fear. My phone dinged with more sketches, each further refined than the previous. After one sketch she considered, “I don’t feel panic. It seems really calm to me. Hmmm how could we add fear?”

I asked Maddy if she had thought about the figure's body language such as rising on her tip toes or clutching her chest. She wondered if that would seem "too excited" but then decided, "It might be even better than just fear because then it would be exhilaration." Her next sketch included, "fists clenched, shoulders back, chest puffed, wind blowing through her hair, ready to go!!" She continued, "That's how I feel half the time about college and the other half I'm looking off the edge in terror." A couple weeks after graduation she sent me the following full color illustration.



The student researchers felt validated that Maddy "got it" so quickly. My conversation with Maddy, followed by several student researchers' conversations with Maddy served as a peer check for us that our team was exploring common, shared experience(s). Collectively we agreed that schools had given us too little language or

skills to process the precipices and crises in our lives. Our research team used Maddy's art piece as a conversation springboard for discussing both. I am hopeful that through this project we will be able to introduce some new vocabulary around these ideas. As the project developed, I noticed we had transformed our notion of the precipice, while it was still associate with risk and fear, we also spoke of hope and leaping into new possibilities.

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VITA

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