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The Burdens of Capability

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I once specialized in counseling talented and gifted children. Before that, I taught these students in my high school English classes for many years, and they taught me about themselves through their writings and discussions. Motivated by what I had learned from my most memorably talented students, I began discussion groups for them when I became a "gifted education teacher" in the 1980s. I knew there was a need for affective support. I also knew that educators, coaches, and even parents sometimes forgot that these bright and complex students were more than just potential fulfillers of adults' dreams, more than award-winners, more than "stars." They were certainly more than their intellect, their talents, or their stardom. Some of them, of course, did not manage their development smoothly, did not compete and achieve well, did not meet expectations. Some had neglectful parents and came from violent homes. Some were never noticed as being "bright." I had all of them in mind when I organized the groups.

I thought I knew this population well. However, I was amazed at what I learned in the discussion groups, where I was reconvinced daily that there were significant unmet needs. The 120 students with whom I worked closely each year for 5 years taught me that the social and emotional concerns of even these "successful" adolescents are often overlooked, even though they certainly need attention. If these students had such significant social and emotional concerns, what about youth who lacked a good school "fit"? I began to consider that all exceptionally bright children are somehow at risk. I began to focus on "the burdens of capability."

Later, with counseling degrees in hand, I worked with both achieving and underachieving children and their families and with underachieving college students at a gifted-education center. I also worked with a similar population in private practice. I met highly intelligent children with extra dimensions of risk when I worked individually and in groups with adolescent children whose parents were substance abusers. Recently I have met more of them in my work with potential dropouts at an alternative school. I have been reminded repeatedly that high capability readily crosses socioeconomic and cultural lines—and so do many needs.

Ability might not be identified if dominant-culture, middle-class teachers look through only their own restricted lenses to find the "gifted." I once studied the language of teachers as they defined "giftedness" (Peterson, 1997), and being well-behaved, articulate and verbally assertive, hard working, and socially adept were among the most common themes that emerged, themes that reflect values of the dominant culture (see Spindler & Spindler, 1990). If these are the traits that teachers value when making referrals for special programs, then talented students from nonmainstream backgrounds, students with poor language skills, students who interact ineffectively with teachers and peers, and shy or discouraged students might be missed as "highly able." This phenomenon deserves more attention than I can give it here. Suffice it to say, when such qualities in young people as high potential, rare talent, keen insight, sensitivity to justice issues, and hyperawareness of interpersonal nuances are missed by significant adults in their lives, there may be an extra risk dimension. These powerful qualities would not be acknowledged. These students
might feel grossly misunderstood in the school setting, where affirmation, academic motivation, and satisfaction are probably intertwined and mutually interactive. They might also feel misunderstood at home.

They Are Not Exempt
Having exceptional ability does not exempt even individuals with comfortable middle-class or affluent homes from formidable challenges as they navigate through the school years. Just like anyone else their age, there is a good chance that their parents will have marital problems significant enough to lead to strife and possibly separation and divorce. If divorce occurs, the possibility exists that eventually they will have to adjust to a blended family, moves, changed economic circumstances, and distracted parents. These particular changes are likely to occur during the school years because it appears that, on average, marriages are particularly vulnerable at that time. In addition, close relatives may die, friends may move away, pets may be lost, peers may be cruel, parents may lose their jobs, and accidents happen. Parents may also be ill, depressed, abusive, or absent or may have problems with drug or alcohol addiction.

Hypersensitivity and Heavy Expectations
It is not just that these children are human—subject to pain and struggle like anyone else—according to many scholars (e.g., Dabrowsky, 1964; Lovecky, 1992), high ability is associated with hypersensitivity. Such sensitivity may contribute to additional difficulty when dealing with family transitions, such as those just mentioned, or with life events, change, loss, and relationship problems. Normal developmental transitions—entering kindergarten, moving into adolescence, being “launched” into adulthood, developing intimacy in a relationship, or choosing a career path—may be rough and problematic.

In fact, educated, economically successful, close, and tightly organized families may experience unique difficulty moving from one developmental stage to another, a process that less intellectually able individuals are often able to take in stride even when there is accompanying conflict. “High-functioning” parents, remembering their own developmental problems, may be anxious and may pass that anxiety on to their children. The result is a home full of tension. Highly able families can be uncomfortable talking about basic drives and normal developmental concerns, and emotions, which cannot be controlled by intellect, may be denied or intellectualized.

Another factor is stress—perhaps from burdensome high expectations for self and from others. Being able to see the complexity of situations, to anticipate difficulties, and to know “how things should be” may also contribute to stress. A deep sense of justice, intense idealism, and powerful empathy may do the same.

Bright children may feel overwhelmed and depressed. They may lie awake at night, worrying about the future and unable to “pull the curtain down.” Even at very young ages, highly capable individuals may struggle with existential questions and theological concerns: meaning, aloneness, death, and the existence of God, for example. In especially difficult economic or emotional circumstances, such perceptiveness, vision, and awareness may contribute to life-threatening angst. Even in the best of circumstances, hypervigilant “antennae” may exaggerate an already keen awareness of “differentness” and exacerbate a depressed mood. In one university town where achievement was highly valued and where ability levels were high, one third of a group of 60 junior high students who participated in discussion groups I led reported that they had felt severely depressed and suicidal; one seventh grader had experienced extreme and sustained depression and suicidal ideation as early as second grade. That percentage has been repeated in informal reporting by high-ability adolescents in other settings.

Perfectionism
Perfectionism may also be burdensome. Perfectionists do high-quality work, win races and contests, and please parents, but they may set unrealistically high standards and be unable to “enjoy the trip” if they are preoccupied with the final product, which, of course, must be evaluated, another source of constant concern. In addition, they may become stressed by mistakes they make, may become preoccupied with one “right way,” and may be unable to start or stop work on a project because of anxiety over final evaluation or their own high expectations.

Perfectionists may feel pressure in whatever they do. They may not be willing to take risks, such as enrolling in courses of which they are unsure, participating in sports in which they are not sure they can excel, reaching out socially, or being creative with assignments. In actuality, praise from others may only intensify the fear of doing less than the best. Perfectionists may become uncomfortable in the competitive atmosphere that is inherent in mainstream, achievement-oriented schools. They may opt out of the race, even becoming underachievers.

Perfectionists often are highly critical of themselves and others, which can negatively affect their relationships. They may feel more valued for doing than for being. They may expect or be dissatisfied with anything less than the perfect friend, partner, major, college, or life. In especially difficult situations, perhaps involving abuse or neglect, sensitivity and perfectionism may add to an underlying rage. Even in highly nurturing situations, such qualities may contribute to a dangerous fragility, perhaps in response to “demands” for excellence, whether real or just assumed.
Researchers Carol Dweck (1986) wrote about performance goals versus learning goals, with girls being more likely than boys to have the former. In fact, female perfectionists may be low-confidence children, no matter how high their measured intelligence. Not being able to conquer a new system of mathematical symbols, for example, is likely to call into question their abilities. They seek favorable— and avoid negative— judgments of their competence. In contrast, boys are more likely to believe that competence is enhanced by effort and experience. I saw panic in many highly able high school students— particularly girls as they began algebra, physics, trigonometry, calculus, and foreign language classes. They were convinced that they “didn’t have it,” perhaps because they were not used to bringing in no prior knowledge to a new course. Image and confidence were suddenly tenuous. Frustration, fear, self-doubt, and even depression were typical responses.

Protecting an Image

Children with high ability often have an image with family, friends, teachers, and coaches that needs to be protected. Praise and messages of expectation may contribute to a need to not show evidence of “cracks” and “wrinkles,” which in turn may mean a polished and intact facade of invulnerability, including denied or controlled emotions. The result is an inability to express these emotions to relieve pressure or seek reassurance. “Weird” thoughts and feelings cannot be shared with others, who could normalize them. In some cases, rough behavior or cynicism may keep intimacy at bay.

Image may also mean difficulty in leaning on others for support and help. It is not unusual to hear a bright, talented child or adolescent state that “I’ve got to fix it myself,” whether it is figuring out a difficult assignment or dealing with depression. In my discussion groups, too many young people were into severe depression before anyone noticed. As a high school sophomore said to me once, “No one likes being around a depressed person.” Because the highly capable youth may be especially good at image protection, suicide or suicide attempts (see, e.g., Hayes & Sloat, 1989; Peterson, 1995) often take others by surprise: The pain was not evident.

No Room to Rebel

I concluded that, with obvious exceptions, talented individuals may feel little room for rebellion. Perhaps, for example, they embody family dreams. I noticed this phenomenon in some children whose parents abused substances and who were in dire economic circumstances, but it was also common among the mostly middle-class students in my first discussion groups. For some of the latter youth— directionless, frantic, and imploding at 15— depression set in when they could not be optimistic about matching parental successes. For some of the former youth, there was pressure to succeed when others in the family had lost hope. Some minority adolescents were seen as “the one to make it,” with even their peers sometimes steering them clear of danger and trouble. Talented, bright young people often are unable to engage in typical teenage resistance to the adult world.

Children growing up in particularly difficult situations— where there is abuse, neglect, or a lack of nurturance— may be no more likely to rebel. In fact, they may be functioning as adults, taking care of their siblings and even their parents. Their high ability has made them “the responsible one” in the family. They may also be first-class caretakers, jokers, and readers of moods or impeccably thorough rebels and risk-takers. The adults in their lives may have given them dangerous means to either express themselves or shut down. These needy children may begin at very young ages to self-medicate. Even if they manage to navigate the family land mines, they may still be vulnerable to substance abuse. The familiarity of drama and chaos in their lives may make sustained peace and order intolerable, and they may become discipline problems in school or elsewhere. They may find it difficult to concentrate on academics in school and impossible to concentrate on them at home.

“sensitivity and perfectionism may contribute to a precarious existence . . .”

Of course, some bright young people live dangerously. In my substance-abuse treatment work with adults, I frequently used semistructured activities to explore their family systems. I once tallied the responses of one large group on a list of 40 family roles; the profile that emerged was typical of findings in other groups. “The sensitive one,” “the one difficult to raise,” “the creative one,” “the perfectionist,” “the one not taken seriously,” and “the hot-tempered one” were the choices they checked most often as describing their own roles. We talked about being “the problem child.” Every group I led included individuals with great insights, exceptional ability to articulate complexities, nimble minds, and subtle humor. Their hypersensitive response to their complex environments may have contributed to substance use, which might also have been modeled at home by adults in their lives as a strategy for coping with stress.

Some bright young people may drop out of school; others may not be able to survive the first year of college. The lat-
ter development is not unimportant, given their ability and the assumed desirability of some day being among intellectual peers in the workplace. Eventually they may return to college, but the intervening years can be precarious. Lack of school success is almost always on lists of risk factors for poor outcomes, and students with exceptional ability are vulnerable in this regard. Ability is no guarantee of school achievement and satisfaction.

Different From the Rest—and Vulnerable
What about the highly verbal children who enter kindergarten and find that their high vocabularies actually work against them? What about bright, talented children who are shy, dependent, and awkward, who have learning disabilities or are gay, lesbian, or bisexual? The "gifted" population includes all of these. My own qualitative research with gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults is teaching me that they are particularly vulnerable during adolescence to depression and suicide. I also have met gifted adolescents with learning disabilities who had huge verbal-nonverbal discrepancies on intelligence tests but whose high ability kept them performing at an average level. Their "average" status precluded attention or special services throughout their schooling. I have counseled painfully shy adolescents who were ready to kill themselves because of feelings of social ineptitude.

In situations such as these, sensitivity and perfectionism may contribute to a precarious existence, and intelligence may not serve these young people well. They may have some of Gardner's (1983) "multiple intelligences," but this may not be recognized in the academic setting. Their high abilities may also be masked by low verbal ability or poor handwriting skills. Some may not have interpersonal intelligence. They may not be able to "read" others well. They may be lonely, and loneliness can be dangerous.

Upset Family Hierarchy
Systems theory (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991) can be applied to the idea of at-risk, gifted children. High-ability children frequently find themselves leading the household, even though no one may be aware that such leadership is occurring. Regardless of socioeconomic status, at young ages they may receive an unhealthy level of deferential treatment. Their parents may be awed by their comments and opinions and may rely on them for major decisions, advice, and "counseling." They may become the chief confidante of a single or lonely parent. They might also be given heavy domestic responsibilities. Unfortunately, the result often is that these children believe they would have to lead their families in any crisis, unable to rely on any adults around them, a belief that assumes inappropriate responsibilities and creates stress. At age 6, 8, or 10, they may be the competent cook, housecleaning expert, or laundry person because of negligent or absent parents.

Parents may be working two jobs, over-involved in a dating relationship, overwhelmed, depressed, or busy with the younger children. The "child-parent" may be taking care of the "parent-child." For these children, home life is burdensome and exhausting.

The Problem Child
Bright children sometimes also find themselves in a family triangle, another systems concept (Bowen, 1978). For example, the parents may be in conflict with each other. Divorce may be a continual threat. But Mom and Dad seem to work together when the child acts out at home or at school, or becomes ill, or is in trouble with the law. Whether or not he or she is aware of the "function" of the behavior, the child keeps parents together by promoting unity through conflict and crisis. The child's dangerous behavior may represent sacrifice for the sake of the family. While focusing on the child who is blamed for family conflict, the rest of the family may be oblivious to the fact that the broader system needs help. The at-risk adolescent's behavior may finally generate help for the family by forcing an intervention from the outside.

Family Alliances
Another situation that frequently occurs in high-ability families is one in which one parent becomes highly invested in the child labeled gifted, living through the child and being excessively involved in his or her life (see Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985, and Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, for a discussion of alliances and subsystems). Perhaps the adult gave up dreams for the sake of family or for other reasons, or his or her own ability was not recognized during childhood. The partner may then feel left out and may resort to unhealthy behaviors—substance abuse, workaholism, rage—in order to provoke interaction with the family or salve wounds. It can be dangerous for such a parent to speak negatively and resentfully about "gifts," children's needs, and school advocacy. The parent who is left out risks a great deal by challenging the situation. Parents who overfunction for the child, whose absorption in the child's talents or abilities is unhealthy, or who are overly close to the child may be placing the child at risk. The adult's lack of a "life of his or her own" may put great pressure on the exceptional child to meet that parent's needs. The child may also be sad over the status of the other parent. In addition, the overinvested parent's advocacy for the child in school may be ineffective and self-defeating.

Eating Disorders
Ask anyone who manages a secondary-level gifted program about eating disorders, and they will undoubtedly say that it is a serious concern. Even pre-adolescent girls may be preoccupied with weight and appearance, paying
too close attention to comments by brothers, fathers, and male peers. By the time these young women are in high school, binging and purging may be well-established habits. Or, they may be starving themselves, driven by distorted body images in a complex, self-destructive process. No matter how aware the current culture is of these phenomena, too many beautiful, intelligent, talented, competent, perfectionistic, compliant individuals persist in these high-risk behaviors.

Responsive Strategies

Significant adults in the lives of at-risk children and adolescents need not be unprepared—there are interventions that offer support. Discussion groups (Peterson, 1990, 1995) with a focused-but-flexible format offer an opportunity for students with high ability to find commonality, meet others who share their “weird thoughts,” move at least temporarily out of the competitive academic atmosphere, and get behind the facades that protect the image of invincibility and control. In the high school program I directed, such groups became the most popular of 25 options open to identified gifted and talented students. We had worked hard to find high-ability underachievers to participate in these groups. Their articulateness and sensitivity helped to make the groups successful. Some high achievers, unused to expressing vulnerability and feelings, were in awe of the underachievers’ openness about social and emotional concerns. Attendance was stable and high. The shy, the dominant, the rebels, the disenfranchised, and the superstars all found a surprisingly common ground, and they offered each other support when times were rough.

School and agency counselors can become better informed about the affective concerns of students with exceptional ability. Counselors need to be assertive about their availability for these students, many of whom believe that “counselors are there for other kids, not me,” as one quiet, stressed junior once said. School counselors and gifted-education teachers can cofacilitate groups and work together on behalf of high-ability children in other ways as well. Special presentations can explain what counseling is, address social and emotional concerns of high-ability individuals, and normalize what may seem bizarre to those who are struggling silently. After-school lectures by mental health professionals, especially geared to those with high ability, can be helpful. Possible subjects include eating disorders, depression and suicide, sexuality, insomnia, migraines, gastric disturbances, and abuse. (I found that all of these topics generated good attendance.) Teachers were shocked when I said that 37% of the members of the children-of-alcoholics groups that I led in a middle school had had standardized test scores above the 90th percentile sometime in their school tenure. I had checked their school files, and my suspicions that many of these young people were quite capable were confirmed. What would their scores have been had they not been undernurtured? Most had experienced depression at some point or were currently struggling with low morale. They were mini-adults at ages 11 and 12—hardened by experience, pessimistic, and feeling on the outside at school. Not one had ever been considered for the gifted program. Their perfectionism and hypersensitivities usually were channeled in different directions from those of their middle-class peers. Few had good levels of concentration in school.

The problems of these particular youth were simply more obvious than those of their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. The latter, however, may have trouble concentrating. They may despair during crises, or from a grinding, chronic, and persistent sense of hopelessness and anxiety about the future. During my years as a teacher in gifted education, I was challenged repeatedly by cynical teachers who doubted that the most capable students in school needed any assistance. Many of these adolescents were stable, positive, and resilient, but many were not—at least at that time in their lives—and many others had either been vulnerable earlier or would be later. The discussion groups offered an opportunity for all of them to relax and “be real,” allowing them to articulate the stresses in their lives. Were they all at risk because of their ability? In some ways, yes. Some of them frightened me enormously with the nature of their concerns.

REFERENCES