

Exceptional Expectations

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I have a confession: I cheated on my gifted test. I was 8 years old and terrified. My mom had pulled me out of school with the promise of a Chick-fil-A lunch after seeing a new doctor. I remember the room was dark, with leather chairs that felt unfathomably large in my young mind. The doctor was different from other doctors. I was used to the warm feeling in my pediatrician's office and the jungle-themed examination room with "funny Dr. Ted" who always pretended I had a worm growing in my ear.

I cheated on a puzzle. I was given blocks and told that the blocks, when put together, made something I would recognize. I fumbled with the blocks for a while, and then, seeking inspiration, looked down at my pink light-up Skechers. There, under the table, was the puzzle box and the solution: a man's face. I was then able to put together the puzzle, and the doctor told me I had achieved the feat at amazing speed. After that I was gifted tracked through high school.

The first time I realized I was one of the least naturally intelligent people in my class was during a math lesson in the fifth grade, two years after I became a child conman. The rest of the class understood long division. The kids in my table pod sped through

the worksheets while I stared down at the evil, nasty math problem. I started working especially hard at school, because I despised feeling stupid or unprepared. I tried to stay two steps ahead, always finishing homework, always coming to class prepared and on time. I figured out that if I had a relationship with my teachers they would be more likely to grade my work favorably. My classmates liked me and friends were easy for me to make. I created the illusion that I too was naturally smart. I was never labeled a "nerd," even though hours were spent at my kitchen table after school attempting to stay ahead of my intelligent classmates.

In high school this pattern continued. Many teachers slipped me points here and there, just so I reached an 89.5, an A in my district. I never received a B in high school. However, I received at least five 90s, possible A's that I may not have earned. I quietly reached the top of my class through constant hard work, calculus tutors, and many nights staying up past midnight. When my fellow students learned I was in the race for Valedictorian junior year, people were shocked. I felt like a fraud knowing that many students ranked below me were naturally smarter, and others knew this too. Many students made comments such as, "Oh, I didn't realize you were book smart." Nevertheless, I earned valedictorian and was admitted to William and Mary, my dream school.

I know that my scores on the SAT/ACT were not up to par with the rest of my fellow Griffins, and I full heartedly believe that my interview is

what gained me admittance. Even today, students who work less but have higher GPAs surround me. I celebrate low B's at this school, while my close friends fret over a 93. I think back to that day where my chubby 8-year-old self cheated on a test that decided my fate. Was she gifted? I recently asked my Mom how I scored on the gifted test, information she always refused to share with me. The cutoff in my district for gifted students is an IQ of 130 and, that infamous day as a second grader, I scored just that. A few points less and my life would be completely different.

My own life situation inspired me to start asking questions. How many students in our gifted programs are actually gifted, and how many are simply performing at gifted rates due to the power of teachers' expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies? A study done at Duke University recently found that students who are taught as if they are gifted begin to achieve at gifted levels (Jackson, 2011). Project Bright Idea capitalized on this research. The program trains teachers to teach all students as if they are gifted. The group has found that 15-20 percent of students taught with

these techniques are labeled as gifted by the school district within three years. In the control group of similar children, only 10 percent are identified as gifted (Jackson, 2011).

There is power behind being identified as gifted, since the expectation to perform, paired with classroom resources and talented teachers, can boost any child's achievement level. Students like me, who are borderline cases, can reap the benefits of a gifted education and eventually succeed in highly intelligent environments. However, is it fair that only the lucky identified kids are able to secure a better education? What would education systems look like if we treated all children as gifted? I predict that students would rise to the occasion and that students' scores would steadily increase. As a future teacher these are facts I will keep in mind so that other students like me can obtain an education that forces them to push their own limits; an education that can lead to a world full of opportunities.

References

- Jackson, C. (2011, March 24). Treating students as gifted yields impressive academic results, study finds. *Duke Today*. Retrieved from <http://today.duke.edu/2011/03/darity.html>

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