Exceptional Expectations

Cathleen Pinkerton
College of William & Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/wmer

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/wmer/vol3/iss2/7

This Opinion pieces is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The William & Mary Educational Review by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Exceptional Expectations

Cathleen Pinkerton

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

Cathleen Pinkerton is a junior in the Undergraduate Elementary Education
Program at the College of William & Mary. Her research interests include
elementary education and gifted education.