

To be gifted or non-gifted – that is not the question

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To Be Gifted or Non-gifted – That is Not the Question I can distinctly recall walking down the hallway at my elementary school with a group of my friends in fifth grade, discussing a list for an upcoming birthday party that one of my friends was throwing. She mentioned that all of the girls in our class would be invited. Our class happened to be the “gifted” class, meaning that we had taken the test administered by the school counselor and had been lucky enough to pass. She kindly added as an afterthought that she was also considering inviting a few “non-gifted” kids. Even in fifth grade, that statement disturbed me, although at the time, I really could not understand why.

Now, I can understand, that the simple categorization of “gifted” and “non-gifted,” could actually impact a child for years in the future. The simple division in our school as to the smart, academic or “gifted” kids and the other, implicitly inferior “non-gifted” kids, was an institutional segregation that rang loudly. Fast forward to middle school. I auditioned for, and was accepted into a magnet school for the arts, which accepted kids from very diverse backgrounds and widespread locations, all bound by the common love for the arts. Although I was in the drama program, there was also a string program, as well as dance, photography, art, and broadcasting. For two hours a day every morning, we got to perform improvisation, dance, sing, and rehearse for performances.

After those two hours, we rotated into our typical class schedule, and the “gifted” kids were able to attend honors classes. Only six out of the thirty kids in my drama magnet program were in the honors classes. It goes without saying that my closest friends at this school were in the drama program,

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regardless of whether they were in honors classes or not. The “ drama kids” (as we were commonly referred to) were creative, inspiring, and exciting. A few of them had been “ diagnosed” with ADHD in elementary school, and many of them were simply not good test takers.

However, they were geniuses. Yes, I was lucky enough to pass a test when I was seven years old and to be categorized as a “ gifted.” But it is very obvious to me that this categorization is a disservice to the many bright and talented kids whose creative energy is squashed by the system. The proof is in the numbers, including the disturbing fact that in states such as Florida, only 60. 8% of students graduate from high school.

Everybody is good at something, but the premium placed in our system is upon people who can score well on standardized reading, writing and math tests. The academic vs. nonacademic model is simply not working, and a large percentage of bright and talented kids are getting lost in the shuffle. The purpose of education clearly should not be only to get an A on a test. It should be to emphasize and encourage creative thinking, which will result in far greater rewards for our society.

It is shameful that very little of our country’s budget is spent on education. For many bright people, pursuing a career in teaching at a public school is out of the question, simply because the salary is not sufficient to pay off student loans. The public school systems have been forced to rely on volunteers and donations. Many states provides financial awards and incentives to schools based upon the school grade, which is largely based on the FCAT scores. For this reason, the schools have no choice but to spend a

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large amount of their time and resources on preparing kids for the FCAT standardized test.

This becomes a never-ending loop, and many creative thinkers, who could be the source of positive social change one day, are not given a chance. The Florida Legislature needs to be approached by the public to change their priorities and funding. As a student who has had the opportunity to see the weaknesses in this system, I would welcome the opportunity to express my views to the legislature. The first thing that should be done is that the FCAT test should be eliminated, or if it remains, funding should clearly not be based on it. Priority in the state budgets must be given to education, which is this nation's future. I would also express that the educational system needs to be reformed to a model which emphasizes what kids are good at, and not solely based upon standardized tests.

The amazing creativity that surrounded me at middle school is a prime example. For example, our drama class had the opportunity to collaborate on writing a play which we later performed. It is likely that many of these same students had trouble focusing on, and memorizing, rules of grammar or scientific facts. Yet, how could these same students write, memorize, and perform an amazing play? Obviously, given the right motivation, these students could perform as well, or better, than any others. There is clearly a time and place to have objective standards and tests, and they obviously cannot be completely discarded. However, labeling needs to be replaced by the creation of a system more similar to my middle school, where talents and creativity, whatever they may be, are encouraged.

Not everybody learns the same way. Just consider the fact that it is commonly believed that one of the greatest thinkers of all time, Albert Einstein, was considered to have ADHD. I doubt that he would have done well on the FCAT exam. Hopefully, with enough public support, and if students make their voices heard, our system will change for the better.